

The Adult Learner in the Writing Classroom: Creating Value through Experiential Education

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Introduction

During my college experience as an adult learner, it was through my internship, undergraduate research experience, and in-class chances to work with clients that I gained the confidence to seek out the job I wanted and the necessary expertise to succeed in the writing and editing field. It was these experiential education opportunities that helped me receive the education I came back to get. Without these experiences, my portfolio would have been dismal, consisting only of college essays and a certificate in technical communication with little proof that I could competently write and edit in various genres. While my experience returning to college helped me build durable skills, the opportunities I enjoyed may be inaccessible to many adult learners. Also called nontraditional students, adult learners are typically over the age of twenty-five and possess characteristics that separate them from the traditional learner population (Chen, 2017; Choy, 2002; Lodewyck, 2021).

One challenge faced by adult learners in higher education is the transition from workplace writing to academic writing because it can be difficult for them to leverage their valuable work/life experiences in the classroom (Johnson, 2017). Thus, an emerging academic identity may be in tension or competition with other senses of self or identities, such as professional or personal identities. These identities affect the writing these nontraditional students do. For these learners, the establishment of an academic identity is made challenging by the different discourses and different linguistic features that may be alien to the work-based learner (Mason and Atkin, 2021). As Sacha Mason and Chris Atkin state, the “discoursal self is represented by the work-based learner as an interconnection between the academic and the professional. It is within academic writing that these emerge and interact with each other in a dynamic, and often challenging way” (p. 23). These interactions make it critical to consider how adult learners need particular support in the classroom to integrate their identities and have their unique needs met.

While all students need to develop strong writing and communication skills to prepare them for success in the workplace, this need is particularly acute for the adult learner. Adults may return to college for many reasons,

but a main factor is financial considerations: many adult learners realize that higher education can provide both economic and career opportunities (Bellare et al., 2023; Bowers and Bergman, 2016; Choy, 2002; Klein-Collins, 2011). Whether adults communicate professionally or are full-time professional communicators, advanced skills in writing, speaking, and visual design are often crucial to career success and advancement. Despite this need, many academic programs include minimal, if any, education in professional communication skills (Shriver, 2012). While some faculty do incorporate relevant assessments into writing-intensive courses across the curriculum, too often faculty fail to design writing activities that tap into the valuable workplace writing experiences that their nontraditional students bring to the classroom (Cleary, 2011; Marinara, 1997). Experiential education offers one approach to bridge this gap. Experiential education is one of the best methods to help adult learners connect their professional and academic experiences and develop skills through activities like collaborative research, writing with faculty mentors, workplace internships, and service learning (McKenzie, 2013).

The Association for Experiential Education (2024) defines experiential education as “a teaching philosophy that informs many methodologies in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people’s capacity to contribute to their communities” (para. 1). Both this association and Jay Roberts (2015) distinguish experiential “education” from experiential “learning.” Roberts argues that experiential learning is informal, while experiential education includes a broader pedagogical process (p. 24). He believes that experiential education is not simply how we learn experientially but, instead, how moments are created through the systematic process of experiential education. Research supports the effectiveness of more experiential learning approaches in teaching and learning (Roberts, 2015).

There were additional valuable experiential education opportunities I received as a result of faculty investing in me personally. The capstone professor for my associate degree referred me to a local magazine to write articles as a freelancer. My persuasive writing professor recommended me for two Presidential Writing Awards, something I knew nothing about prior to my conversation with her. In addition, my technical editing professor also referred me for multiple freelance editing jobs. All of the skills I learned through each experiential education opportunity were immediately transferable to my workplace and gave me confidence to volunteer for workgroups and writing assignments for which I previously would not have had the expertise. Immediately after

graduation, I was awarded additional hours at work, where I could apply my newly acquired knowledge and experience in numerous different areas.

However, finding and taking part in experiential education opportunities can be difficult for nontraditional students, who may be full-time working professionals, caregivers for children or other family members, disabled, or neurodivergent (Klein-Collins, 2011; Remenick, 2019; (Woldeab et al., 2023). Unfortunately, faculty and university program structures may fail to create equitable opportunities in which adult learners can fully participate, or faculty may fail in their communication by not inviting adult learners to writing activities. Experiential educational opportunities should support the success of adult learners in the classroom and allow them to gain desirable writing skills and expertise that are transferable to their career paths (Woldeab et al., 2023). In addition, universities need to utilize creative new ideas to ensure these opportunities are made available to traditional and nontraditional students alike and to increase retention rates (Cleary, 2011). Due to various barriers encountered by both students and faculty, adult learners often miss out on valuable chances for experiential education. To address this issue, writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) faculty can aim to create more equitable access to these learning opportunities. This article will review the typical adult learner experience with writing in higher education; explore student, faculty, and university barriers to incorporating writing in experiential education opportunities; and provide recommendations for improving access to these opportunities for this student population.

What Writing-Focused Experiential Education Can Provide for Adult Learners

While all students need opportunities to connect writing in the classroom with what they would do as professionals, adult learners in particular want to know that their courses will lead to improvement in their income and career prospects (Leggins, 2021). Nontraditional students are more likely to value experiential education opportunities that include writing and communication assignments that teach valuable skills transferable to the workplace. Karen Shriver (2012) explains that while there are parallels between communication in classroom and workplace settings, three requisites of professional communication make it unlike most classroom experiences:

1. The need to orchestrate writing knowledge and strategy with visual design knowledge and strategy
2. The need to engage multiple stakeholders with a given body of content
3. The need to negotiate the social, political, and cultural landscapes of the workplace (p. 281)

Writing is a necessary form of communication that is vital to any profession. Having excellent writing skills can make an employee indispensable to their team or company. These writing skills are also one of the best ways to remain consistently employable, be more attractive to prospective employers, and advance in existing careers, regardless of the profession. Technical knowledge about workplace writing conventions, company-specific style guides, and formatting for different rhetorical situations is valuable to employers (Solomon, 2021). Neil Urquhart (2022), a veteran communications trainer, coach, and facilitator, says that “knowing how to write well and with impact is an essential skill to flourish in the professional world” (para. 1). But these writing skills, which support business and professional goals, take time and experience to master (Solomon, 2021). However, once learned, these skills can fast-track career success (Oliveri et al., 2021). Although there is widespread agreement that advanced skills in writing, speaking, and visual design are crucial for career advancement, do current pedagogical approaches meet the communication and writing needs of adult learners? Why would adult learners particularly benefit from experiential education?

Returning to the university with eighty previous credits as a working mom in my thirties, I chose to enroll in the Interdisciplinary Professional Studies (IPS) program at Boise State University that is designed for adult learners. Because this program accepted my previous credits and allowed me to tailor my degree to earn specific certificates in chosen areas, it was the best value for my money. This program targets adult students and allows them, depending on their degree emphasis and elective choices, to complete their degree completely online (Boise State University, 2024). My desired emphasis (technical communication), however, was outside of the online options offered by the program. The disconnect between the required courses and skills learned in my certificate program versus the overall degree program meant that I was on my own for researching any experiential education opportunities in the field of technical writing and communication. I didn’t even know what kinds of opportunities were possible until my technical editing professor, Heather Smith (pseudonym), offered to complete an independent study with me. This idea had never been shared with me by advisors as an option within my degree plan.

This experiential education opportunity afforded me an enormous amount of valuable writing experience, taught me best practices for research methods, and provided multiple chances to publish my research. In addition, my faculty mentor told me about a paid research opportunity (which I was awarded) and helped me apply and be accepted to share my research during the undergraduate poster presentations at two conferences (one at my university and one in another state). These presentations taught me how to design an effective research poster and describe my research and gave me ample practice at public speaking. Additionally, my employer now

wants me to show my poster, along with other research done for the organization for which I work, during a presentation at a department-wide meeting. I was also fortunate to complete an internship with the company where I work by making connections within the department and, prior to applying for the internship, scheduling a meeting with the director to ensure compatibility. The director was willing to have me intern in his department, and he completed all the necessary paperwork and assisted me with the application process. This internship was instrumental in helping me improve my writing and editing skills in multiple genres. It also provided me with a portfolio of over forty published articles in both internal and external company communications, and gave me an amazing network of professionals with whom to stay in contact, all while earning college credit.

As demonstrated by my experiences, adult learners benefit from the personalization of learning and an emphasis on practical utility (Chen, 2017). Unfortunately, many traditional methods used for classroom writing assignments are overly prescriptive and don't draw on skills that students can transfer to the workplace (Hendrickson and Garcia de Mueller, 2016). Adult learners desire meaningful coursework that develops usable professional skills (Woldeab et al., 2023). Reflections are one way for students to draw valuable connections between coursework and career. However, writing assignments that ask students to reflect on an experience, merely to encourage writing in the course, create busywork rather than a beneficial assessment that can provide skills for advancement in the workplace. Michael J. Michaud (2013) argues that "[a]s students, [adult learners] would be well-served by literacy instruction that takes as its starting point not those things teachers and institutions perceive such students to be lacking but, instead, the complex and evolving role that literacy already plays in such students' lives" (p. 91). In other words, adult learners may be more motivated to learn when the knowledge they receive directly relates to their needs (Bowers and Bergman, 2016; Woldeab et al., 2023). Ashley J. Holmes et al. (2022) describe how WAC programs could benefit from using an approach called Lifewide Writing Across the Curriculum, which helps WAC programs and administrators better understand the diverse roles in students' multiple spheres of writing. An understanding of the diversity and complexity of students' lives outside the classroom should inform the approach of writing-based initiatives across the curriculum. This lifewide approach validates students' writing experience and their experiences in the various spheres they inhabit, such as professional and internship spheres, and uses this knowledge to inform writing-intensive pedagogies (p. 53). Reflections are one assignment often used in writing instruction to help students become more knowledgeable and better equipped for future writing tasks, leading to increased college success (Taczak and Robertson, 2017).

For example, I experienced great variations in the value of writing assignments in courses that sought to include reflective learning for their adult students. In a course on emotional intelligence, students were assigned to write reflections regarding how the week's content could be applied to their personal and professional lives, which was a positive experience. Writing about considering others, putting yourself in their shoes, and thinking about why someone may react in a certain way are valuable practices that have immediate relevance to the workplace. Kara Taczak and Liane Robertson (2017) note, "As reflective writing practitioners, students learn to develop the repertoire of integrated knowledge useful for future writing situations (whether that situation is for another college course, everyday writing practices, or a current or future job)" (p. 214). Additionally, reflective assignments are valuable if they "allow learners to bring in all parts of self: motivations, emotions, goals, previous knowledge and experiences, and world views, to integrate them, creating a space where they can communicate their growing competence" (Galeucia et al., 2023, p. 7). However, in some required classes for my online program, I was assigned such overly prescriptive writing assignments that I sometimes failed to understand what was expected of me. In these cases, I frequently found myself frustrated with "writing just to write" rather than having authentic assignments that clearly outlined their purpose and benefit. Thus, for the adult learner, authentic writing assignments and assessments are crucial to learning because these assignments allow students to reflect on and replicate writing styles that occur outside of the academic context (Wargo, 2020). This kind of writing is more likely to occur within experiential education opportunities, such as internships where students can be asked to write critically about their own performance and ways to improve.

Student Barriers to Accessing Writing-Based Experiential Education Opportunities

While we see that adult learners can particularly benefit from opportunities to develop writing skills through experiential education, they face barriers to getting those opportunities. In an email interview, an adult learner who completed an internship through her degree program at my university said that because students invest so much money and time pursuing a specific career path, they would greatly benefit from learning essential skills directly in that industry via internships. She argues that students who are equipped with such skills will be more successful, especially when transitioning out of college (personal communication, October 31, 2023). The National Association of Colleges and Employers (2023) describes internships as

a form of experiential learning that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application and skills development in a

professional workplace setting (across in-person, remote, or hybrid modalities). Internships provide students [with] the opportunity to gain valuable applied experience, develop social capital, explore career fields, and make connections in professional fields. In addition, internships serve as a significant recruiting mechanism for employers, providing them with the opportunity to guide and evaluate potential candidates. (para. 1)

Thus, internships help students get experience that supports their future success. However, students in my online program had to find their own internship opportunities and then figure out how to incorporate them into their degree plan.

This lack of guidance can be particularly burdensome to adult learners because their time is limited and strained due to numerous obligations outside of the classroom, including working and caring for dependents, sometimes as a single parent (Choy, 2002; Woldeab et al., 2023). The process of searching and applying for internship opportunities may be prohibitive for some adult learners due to these other responsibilities and demands, such as working long hours and then transitioning directly to caring for children. In addition, students may receive little to no guidance on where to look for specific kinds of internships but are nonetheless expected to inquire at companies where they would like to be considered for acceptance. Despite the clear benefits of such experiences for students, employers are sometimes reluctant to extend internship opportunities, which creates another barrier for many applicants. When I spoke with the director of the program for which I was interning, he confided that he would like to have more interns but was skeptical of opening that door to the university since he had heard many horror stories about terrible interns (D. Mediate, personal communication, September 18, 2023). I was selected for my internship due to my previous interactions with the director, but students shouldn't have to rely solely on existing connections to gain access to these kinds of opportunities.

In addition to structural factors that create barriers, individuals may have misunderstandings about what opportunities are available to them. Many adult learners are unable to take part in experiential education opportunities that would benefit them because they didn't know they could ask—they believed that these opportunities were not for them since traditional students tend to receive the majority of resources from colleges and universities (Chen, 2017). In an interview for an IRB-approved study of adult learner experiences with experiential learning, a nontraditional student said that he always thought internships and experiential education opportunities were meant for traditional students, not adult learners: “We were not thought of as the core audience for the current opportunities and the times they are available. If I saw I was considered in the creation of those opportunities I would feel like I could consider taking it on” (personal communication, March 12, 2024).

While students need to accept responsibility for steering the direction of their own education, they also need to be made aware of what is even possible. After all, how can one be self-motivated to take part in opportunities that one doesn't know exist? Another adult learner said that they tried to look up possible opportunities on the university's website, but you'd have to think of every possible way to search since the website organization is poor and makes it extremely hard to find things. The student also stated, "You're on your own, so much is word of mouth. They may not want to publish all opportunities if they're trying to be selective, but that creates further inequity" (personal communication, March 12, 2024). Adult learners in online courses are especially at a disadvantage when it comes to the communication and offering of these experiences: they often miss communications that are physically posted around campus, designed to catch the eye of students as they go from class to class (McDaniel, 2017). Clearly communicating the availability of experiential learning opportunities to all students from the start of their college education helps provide equitable access to these resources. Once students are made aware of what opportunities are available and who can pursue them, then they can take the initiative to determine how they might participate. Students should also be encouraged to speak to faculty to see if there are flexible options, since considerable responsibilities and obligations already sit on the shoulders of adult learners (Chen, 2017). Faculty can then ensure higher levels of participation from adult learners by taking the time and effort to work with these students to create flexibility (McDaniel, 2017; Remenick, 2019).

Another barrier to accessing experiential education opportunities that adult learners face is the difficulty of building relationships with faculty. Due to their unique circumstances, not all adult students have the opportunity to make these valuable connections. Because of the relationships I formed with multiple professors, they singled me out for experiential education opportunities. These professors believed that I excelled in writing and knew my background and work experience, so I received attention and opportunities specifically related to this expertise. These experiences were deeply impactful for me as a writer. However, handpicking students for these learning opportunities creates a clear inequity because these opportunities are only being offered to a select few who perform well because they are not struggling to balance commitments and/or have the time to build strong relationships with faculty. Some adult learners cannot allocate as much time to their studies due to extensive demands from their work and home life (Choy, 2002), which may negatively affect their classroom performance—they do not perform to their full potential because of competing demands on their time. These students are not less deserving of these learning opportunities but may appear less committed (Campbell, 2016), and thus they are less likely to be selected for internships or offered a chance to do an

independent study. Adult learners would be greatly served by having experiential education opportunities that are designed to help them reach their goals, scheduled at times when they can participate, and clearly communicated so there is no confusion as to who can join.

Faculty Experience in Teaching WAC

If these writing skills are so vital to career advancement and success, then how can WAC faculty help adult learners find experiential education opportunities to gain these skills? If faculty take the time to develop experiential education activities and practices that reflect the diversity of students' experiences, then adult learners can relate their personal knowledge to the classroom (Remenick, 2019). For many adult learners, faculty play a key role in making college a deeper, more successful learning environment, as in my experience. Experiential education experiences are engaging and effective for adult students as they tend to be immersive, requiring students to have close interaction and collaboration with faculty (Roberts, 2015). It is at the intersection of these relationships with faculty and experiential education that adult learners derive a great deal of value from their education.

Developing special relationships with faculty often provides adult learners with additional support and can help them feel more successful. Adult learners who don't have the opportunity to build such relationships are often frustrated and may feel marginalized (Kasworm, 2010). Furthermore, adult students bring a wide range of literacy histories and workplace literacy practices with them when they return to higher education and pursue their degrees (Michaud, 2013), and faculty often miss the chance to tap into these valuable professional experiences. Michaud (2013) explains that "for those who work with adult students pursuing bachelor's degrees, it may be important to get a sense of the relative value and investment such students feel towards workplace literacy practices" (p. 91). Peter Felten and Leo M. Lambert (2020) explain how decades of higher-education research have found that "student-faculty relationships are a primary factor in learning, belonging, and persistence. . . . Faculty are central to relationship-rich education" (p. 2). Faculty are vital in helping students integrate classroom learning with their experiences outside of the classroom (p. 14).

If faculty take the time to get to know adult students and develop activities and practices that reflect students' diverse experiences and skills, then it can allow adult learners to relate their personal knowledge and experiences to the classroom (Remenick, 2019). High-impact practices, such as active learning and collaborative learning—both of which can take place in experiential education—are as important for adult learners as they are for traditional learners (McDaniel, 2017). Research has

shown that when faculty help students practice and complete assignments as though they were in a professional role rather than only having writing assignments that are embedded in coursework, students more effectively develop valuable communication skills that are applicable to future careers (Paretti, 2008). These situated learning practices can be a form of experiential learning and can take place during internships, independent studies, research projects, and more.

Faculty cannot remove all situational barriers faced by adult learners, but they can assist in mitigating dispositional barriers (e.g., fear of failure, low self-efficacy, etc.) and provide learning opportunities that support the learning environment (Howell et al., 2023). Professors should understand the power their words and actions hold for their students, and they should endeavor to build their students' potential and provide opportunities for adult learners to gain necessary expertise in various aspects of writing and communication. As Mason and Atkin (2021) assert, "[e]motions surrounding writing affect academic identity and self-efficacy both positively and negatively[,] and these can be equally empowering or paralysing where 'fear and anxiety can cripple early writing endeavours'" (p. 17). One way to assuage these fears is through building faculty relationships during experiential education activities. Marie C. Paretti (2008) found that students made the greatest progress when engaged in meaningful participation and interaction in the desired areas of learning. A requirement for effective situated learning is that faculty create assignments that not only function as a vehicle for a grade but also encourage mediated social interaction and design creativity, leading to a deeper understanding of the work and how it translates to the real world.

However, constraints faced by faculty can limit student access to the types of relationships and educational opportunities that are most valuable. An associate professor in the department of writing studies at my university, Heather Smith transparently shared how she sees structural inequities affecting even her ability to choose which students to involve in experiential learning opportunities, like an independent study. She explained, "Since I'm working under resource constraints, I try to approach who I work with cautiously. If a student has developed a relationship with me and I know they are able to work independently, I'm more inclined to grant a request for independent study" (personal communication, November 13, 2023). During the IRB-approved study previously mentioned, I was able to learn that Armand Gunderson (pseudonym), also a professor in the department of writing studies, likewise believes that experiential education opportunities are important and that when students can take part, they are so much better for it. Professor Armand explained that if he is looking to research a subject that a student is also interested in or working on, he will consider asking them to collaborate to publish work together. He says this kind of collaboration has been a positive experience for both him and

the students involved, allowing the students to get some publications under their belt before they even graduate. Faculty like Heather and Armand are drawn to collaborating with student researchers, which means they look for opportunities to write and conduct research with a student that not only supports learning but also earns them another publication. Heather has already published two pieces with students and currently has one out for review that was collaboratively written with a team of students from a course she taught. "I am [all] for a mix of benefits to the students that they may not otherwise have available as well as benefits for my own work," she said. Faculty should consider how they may also benefit from writing collaborations and see if this gives them more chances or freedom to extend experiential education opportunities to more adult students.

Armand believes that courses in technical communication tend to attract adult students who may have already tried out an academic major or career change and are coming back to college after an extended break. Being aware of the strengths adult learners bring to the classroom primes Armand to build in opportunities for students to write in ways that build on their experiences outside the classroom. Additionally, he understands that traditional students probably don't have a wealth of work experience or life experience, so it is not always on their radar to pursue some sort of experiential education, like an internship, working closely with faculty, etc.; in contrast, some nontraditional students step back on campus already looking for such valuable opportunities. This approach to education leads the adult learner to think about how they can make a connection between what they're doing to make money and what they're studying in the classroom. In over thirty years of teaching adult learners in a college setting, Armand has observed the value of experiential education for this population, as well as barriers faced by faculty: "[E]ven though I may think, hey, this is a good idea, this is a good student to work with. The workload is crushing. There's no way I would say yes to experiential learning right now. I don't want to say yes to something and then the student disappears for a month at a time, and I'm just trying to finish this darn thing up and get it off the books. Now it's a hassle."

Structural university barriers are also an issue for many faculty like Armand. He explained that to become tenured and promoted to associate professor, faculty must produce a lot of scholarship and peer-reviewed work. Armand says that while the university does value these experiential education experiences, he does not see those values represented or rewarded in promotion or tenure meetings. No matter how many students he's worked with, what the university cares about is how many peer-reviewed publications he's produced or how much outside grant money he's brought in. If he is working with students and not producing scholarship, then it's going to affect his chances of promotion. As a university faculty member and administrator, Emily Henderson (pseudonym) agrees with Armand: "[W]hat we say we value

and how we allocate our resources are not in alignment.” Emily believes that the university needs to make a concerted effort to help faculty understand the current population of students and their needs. She says that having a clear understanding of who students are and what their needs are can help create an infrastructure with support built in, and faculty need acknowledgement by the university that experiential education is a rewardable way to exert energy. Additionally, she says there are important questions to ask: How do we reach these adult students who would specifically benefit from experiential education? Which departments are teaching writing that isn’t programmatic? Where is writing taught, and where and how is it included in the curriculum? The university concentrates on traditional student experiences, but it needs to look at nontraditional students and design experiences for these students, too. University culture should value engagement with students over prestige (Felten and Lambert, 2020, p. 62). Faculty can only do so much, and the institution needs to build structures that support their efforts.

How WAC Programs Can Respond

Individual faculty can only do so much, but programs can tackle structural barriers through WAC approaches. A challenge shared by WAC faculty is addressing “the need to build a foundation upon which consultants and disciplinary faculty members can work together, honoring both their own and the other’s disciplinary traditions.” There is a universal need to build a way for WAC faculty and consultants to have their expertise valued and used by faculty across the curriculum (Vrchota, 2015). Furthermore, partnerships between campus programs are needed to create experiential education opportunities for adult students to gain expertise in writing and communication. These partnerships can provide writing support for faculty across campus, allowing them to share ideas and discuss what is and is not working in the classroom. Additionally, developing and offering credit-based career development courses/programs helps create more opportunities for adult learners to obtain the skills and expertise they need to achieve their career goals (Albertson et al., 2013).

Despite the barriers faced by faculty and administrators, there are numerous programs across the country that are successfully implementing experiential education and raising the retention rates of adult learners. University programs can enhance what they’re already doing to incorporate writing in a valuable way for adult learners by learning from these examples. If the university retains more adult learners by ensuring that its offerings meet the needs of these students, then the institution earns more money. Programs must demonstrate to prospective adult learners that their time spent at college will result in better career opportunities, or there will continue to be those who dismiss college education as a waste of money (Albertson et al., 2013, p. 2).

For instance, Michelle Navarre Cleary (2011) describes how DePaul University's School for New Learning (SNL) has been saving the university money by working on perfecting their Writing Workshop, which serves students from across the curriculum:

Students use these assessments to develop and implement a plan to build upon their strengths, address their most pressing challenges, and find resources for their ongoing writing development. As a result, rather than having set assignments, students work on writing tasks that are important to them. Thus, by encouraging students to write about what engages them and giving them the tools they need, Writing Workshop builds on the research of Carroll, Sternglass, Herrington and Curtis, and Beaufort and exemplifies SNL's commitment to personalized, lifelong learning. Because it is individualized and focused on developing writers rather than pieces of writing, Writing Workshop works for students with a broad range of learning styles, prior knowledge, goals, and needs. (p. 43–44)

Cleary explains that even though DePaul's Writing Workshop students tend to be weaker writers than those in a writing-intensive program, the retention rate for these students is higher than national averages. The Writing Workshop also found a unique way to balance its small class size, capped at ten students every quarter, with financial and teaching challenges. The group started by asking, "[H]ow can a tuition-dependent university afford to run classes with ten or fewer students and still pay instructors enough to make it worth their while to teach these classes?" (p. 46). The university saves money even running small classes when more students are successful, even if only one student is enrolled. How is this possible? The university found that if that one student dropped out in their first year, the university would lose an estimated three thousand dollars. In order to raise the retention rate of students and save money, the university offered the flexibility necessary to support the increasingly diverse population of students and worked to help them develop as writers. The Writing Workshop also provides a teacher's tool kit to new faculty, who are observed during their first quarter and provided with feedback and assistance. DePaul has found that the Writing Workshop improved support for struggling writers, who are now being retained at higher rates, and is also attracting other students from across the curriculum who seek assistance with improving their writing skills. "If universities wish to retain and graduate the growing majority of 'nontraditional' students, then we need more such experiments," Cleary concludes (p. 47).

Just as DePaul's Writing Workshop raised retention rates by implementing a program that helped struggling students improve their writing skills, Louisiana State University's holistic Communication across the Curriculum program created an

initiative called the Distinguished Communicator (DC) Medal program to improve communication education through mentoring, in-depth coursework, and leadership training (Galeucia et al., 2023). This program helps students develop their ability to communicate who they are, what they are capable of, and how their classroom experiences are relevant to their career goals. Galeucia et al. explain that “the process DC candidates use to construct their ePortfolio is a student learning experience, to help students reflect, frame, and integrate their disciplinary learning with intention” (p. 5). The portfolio work also provides students with opportunities for learning valuable skills, such as metacognition and audience analysis, that are related to their goals. This program believes that the lessons and structures it has outlined “can help other institutions reflect on the role of a highly customized showcase or signature ePortfolio and correlated mentoring model amid concerns about institution-wide assessment versus programmatic assessment, the utility of developing rubrics that focus on higher order thinking and communication concerns, and faculty/staff bandwidth” (p. 5). The program’s criteria allows each student to showcase their skills and knowledge by using multimodal forms of real-world communication (p. 6). “We’ve also worked to create greater transparency about the reasoning behind the prompts and guidelines, which gives us the opportunity to connect with students on a more effective level than simply providing hoops to jump through and the promise of a reward at the end,” program leaders stated (p. 24). The adults in this program are finding value in this approach, whereby they develop communication skills to demonstrate their professional skill sets. The program’s leaders hope to inspire other colleagues to be more comfortable using a process like this as a springboard to explore other concerns:

For us, this reflective experience has cemented that much of what we did because we felt it streamlined work also led to streamlined, deep, and meaningful learning experiences for students that transcended a single project or degree. One might suggest, in fact, that by modeling backward design in portfolio development we were able to identify prompts and rubrics that nudged us closer to higher-order concerns for our students. (p. 25)

Programs designed specifically for adult learners are an excellent place to start when looking into what kinds of experiential education writing are successful in helping this population. For example, the Interdisciplinary Professional Studies (IPS) program at Boise State University was designed to help adult learners utilize the credits they’ve already earned from previous colleges (Boise State University, 2024). The IPS program recognized the need for more experiential education opportunities for its adult learners. To address this issue, the program is implementing a new course in the fall of 2024 called Work Integrated Learning. This course is designed to connect students’ professional experiences with classroom readings and assignments on

workplace topics in order to promote writing transfer (Felten and Lambert, 2020, p. 90). This experience allows nontraditional, working students to turn their workplace into a laboratory of experimentation and observation, and it empowers students to apply theory to the workplace situations that they encounter each day. By writing reflections about how they might implement the things they learn each week, students are encouraged to grow their career through active experimentation. This model asks participants meaningful questions to help them make immediate connections between classroom learning and the workplace.

A great example of a writing-specific course that incorporates experiential learning is Consulting with Writers, a three-credit course at Boise State University. Students in this course engage with evidence-based instructional practices, including, but not limited to, the following:

- Writing Center pedagogy and tutoring theory
- Language acquisition theory
- Foundational rhetorical theory
- Genre theory and writing in the disciplines
- Cognitive learning theories
- Inclusivity and diversity studies
- Rhetorical grammar

Students also complete professional development workshops throughout the year, giving them opportunities to participate in experiential education. Some students in the course are also chosen as writing consultants for Boise State's Writing Center. This one-credit internship takes students' learning to the next level, helping them make immediate connections between classroom learning and the workplace. Writing consultants are chosen from all majors across campus, allowing for a variety of educational backgrounds and identities and for breadth of knowledge. The peer-to-peer consultations not only help the writers seeking feedback but also allow the consultants to practice with fellow students the strategies they learned in the classroom. Research shows that this kind of one-on-one interaction with peers and faculty positively influences the level of student learning, retention and graduation rates, and students' development of critical thinking and communication skills (Felten and Lambert, 2020, p. 5).

The above examples show how change can take place at a departmental level. For example, if a large number of adult students are enrolled in a program, then faculty in that department should collaborate on curricula, being intentional in thinking deeply about the needs and strengths that returning adult students have. Faculty across the curriculum should be encouraged to "purposefully creat[e] opportunities for eliciting students' lifewide writing knowledge and experiences" (Holmes et al.,

2022). Drawing on lifewide writing knowledge, faculty are encouraged to assign meaningful writing assignments related to a diverse range of genres, purposes, and audiences; this way, students have the opportunity to compose academic writing as rhetorically complex as the forms of communication in their other spheres of experience. Holmes et al. believe that being transparent about writing complexities and challenges helps students understand how they learn and can reduce systemic inequities (p. 55). Other efforts, though smaller, can have a significant impact; for example, McDaniel (2017) suggests that faculty hold office hours outside of the typical nine-to-five schedule in order to make time for adult learners outside of the classroom. Evening office hours, including virtual options, can help adult learners connect with faculty since they are often working or picking up children from school during typical office hours.

By breaking down the barriers to experiential education opportunities for the adult learner population, WAC programs can retain more learners and raise graduation rates. Administrators and faculty can target issues of communication, accessibility, and unproductive assignments to meet the needs of nontraditional students and provide them with an education that prepares them for career advancement. The university must support and reward faculty and value student experience over prestige.

Conclusion

To make WAC more equitable, WAC directors and faculty should think critically about their practices and respond to the needs of nontraditional students. To alleviate the financial constraints of universities and the workloads of faculty members, creative “experiments” and open, ongoing discussions should take place that focus on relevant topics and the current needs of the growing adult learner population. Adult learners need to be informed of the opportunities that are open to them and, considering their work and family obligations, whether there is flexibility that makes these experiential education opportunities possible. This communication helps encourage adult learners to take responsibility for their education and enables them to find appropriate experiential education opportunities that best align with their personal and professional goals. Faculty cannot be held responsible for resolving each situational barrier that adult learners face, but they should understand the role they can play in mitigating dispositional barriers and creating writing assignments that help learners make connections between classroom learning and the workplace. There are numerous examples of successful experiential education programs at universities across the country, and administrators can support faculty by encouraging and supporting the implementation of such programs and practices. If adult learners are shown how experiential education opportunities during their college education can lead to better economic outcomes, then they are more likely to remain in school and

prevent the university from losing money. These better retention rates help alleviate costs related to improving access to these opportunities for nontraditional students, creating a better situation for all involved. While I would have probably remained a student and graduated due to my own motivation and to meet my family's needs, I was far more motivated to continue my studies and to do my best work because experiential education opportunities bridged the gap between classroom learning and gaining workplace skills. I saw the value of my education and its direct connection to what I wanted to do after graduation, and my education is now more powerful because it has prepared me for the work I want to do.

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