

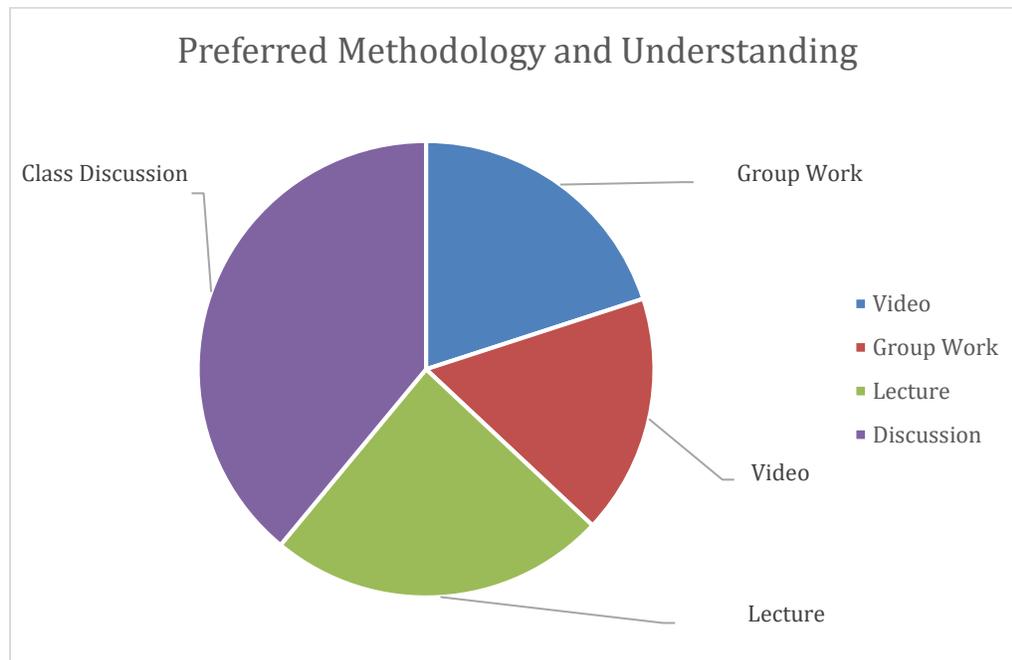
Redefining the Culture: Understanding Nontraditional College Students

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In the past, institutions of higher learning generally focused on the needs of traditional undergraduates, those who lived on campus and might have worked part time. However, according to the Institute for Women's Policy Research, the latest statistics indicate that, nationally, the number of undergraduates who hold full-time jobs, are older than 22, enroll part time in their degree programs, live off campus, and/or raise children has grown to 26 percent of the total college population (Noll, Reichlin, & Gault, 2017, p. 1). Thus, while attendance and participation are at the core of every class, students' schedules and circumstances may change suddenly, putting many at risk of dropping out. Most often, students see instructors as the face of the university, and instructors still need to maintain control of their classroom, but redefining certain limits of the classroom and creating an environment that promotes success can aid the decision students make to stay in school. Students themselves are themselves redefining the culture by looking for schools that find innovative ways of helping them succeed and still be flexible enough for outside commitments. Creating a more active learning environment by incorporating more than pedagogy in the classroom, utilizing electronics for multiple reasons and uses, and creating positive student/instructor relationships may diminish the chances of transferring or dropping out.

In 1979, Barbe, Swassing, and Milone published *Teaching through Modality Strengths*, which defined visual, auditory, and kinesthetic as the top three different ways that students learn. At this time, pedagogical styles began to reflect these learning modalities as familiarity grew, especially as visual and kinesthetic pedagogies added depth to learning. Kinesthetic and visual pedagogy like think/pair/share, small group discussions, and small group workshops bring the class together, build relationships, and create an active learning environment. Research also shows that these pedagogies prove to be successful for all learners. According to a 2014 study published by the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, specific to STEM subjects,

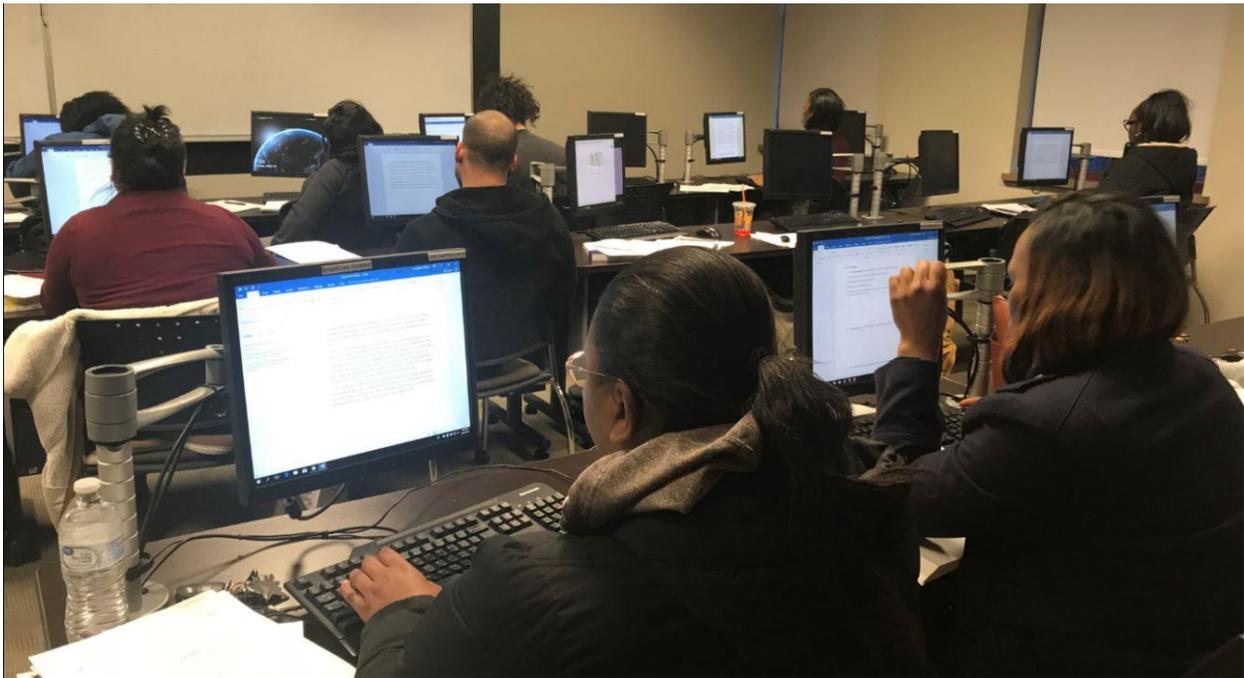
active learning increases exam grades by just under half while lecture-based classes actually increase the failure rate to 55% (Freeman et al., p. 8412). Comparably, when I look at the research I completed in my classrooms at Bryant & Stratton, I see that 39% of students prefer class discussions, followed by lectures, videos, and group work.



The mixture of methodology expands the conversation and deepens the level of comprehension. Students become part of the classroom, learning through exercise, conversation, and different lab exercises. They retain more information through individualized learning and learn the process much faster because they see the results from their own actions.

Not only are students actively learning through different modes of methodology, they also use electronics productively for research in the classroom. In the classrooms I surveyed, 96% of students own a smartphone, 65% own a tablet, and 61% own a laptop. While smartphones can be distracting in a classroom, instructors can create lab time for research or ask students to use their phones to look something up. The Pearson Student

Mobile Device Survey (2015) found that 90% of college students use a laptop at least once a week, 88% own one, and 85% own a smartphone (p. 9). In addition to having textbooks online, students enhance their learning experiences by viewing various websites and exploring new apps. If instructors make electronics their ally in class by utilizing them for different methods of research and learning, students will be less distracted by their Twitter and Facebook accounts.



Instructors who accept new technology often find that it helps their students research the most current information in real time. The same Pearson Student Mobile Device Survey found that 68% of students feel they perform better in class using an electronic device (p. 15). Similarly, 71% of the students in my own classroom felt that a computer or laptop was necessary to performing better in class. In electives, there is a greater student interest, but in required, core classes like English, instructors can create enthusiasm by connecting their lessons to this student-conducted research. For example, instructors can create universal assignments requiring students to use their

devices to research information specific to their major, which allows for collaborative work. Students thus become more connected to their work when their interests are the baseline for their assignments.

This connection not only strengthens their knowledge. It also creates a deeper connection to their studies and helps develop their personal relationships, which are important in school because transferring is becoming more commonplace. The latest data from the 2015 National Student Clearinghouse Research Center Transfer and Mobility report shows that 37.2 percent of college students transfer at least once within six years (Shapiro, Dundar, Wakhungu, Yuan, & Harrell, p. 9). There are many different reasons, including switching majors or moving to be closer to family for supportive and financial reasons. Often, students complain that they don't feel close to instructors or feel that the school understands their needs. In my own classroom, 79% of my students report that they have a close relationship with at least one of their instructors. The core of any successful student/instructor relationship is to have students feel comfortable. An overwhelming 91% of my students feel they learn more in class when they have a positive relationship with their instructor, and 92% want to perform better when they have a positive teacher/instructor relationship. While students create relationships with fellow peers, instructors play an important role because they are often the only university staff that students communicate with in a given day. Without creating valuable relationships, students can feel a disconnect, making the choice easier to transfer or to stop attending completely.

In a culturally rich landscape, it's important to recognize that there is more than just one defining set of rules. In addition to creating vital relationships with students, changes to the classroom include learning to adapt to electronics and different styles of teaching, and researching in new and exciting ways. It can be overwhelming for instructors to keep up with an ever-changing culture by fulfilling course objectives and reviewing material. Like students, instructors need to be adaptable. This means becoming comfortable with different methods of pedagogy, electronics in the classroom, new ways to research, and accepting alternatives to the traditional student. If an instructor utilizes all the new tools at his or her disposal, the level of learning in the classroom will rise

exponentially. Presenting material in a useful and interesting manner in core classes that aren't usually sought after can become more interesting, and students will retain more information. This level of retention will transfer to the workforce, and students will be more competitive as employees. With more access to new information and different pedagogies than before, the amount of information instructors can teach their students is truly unlimited.

References

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