

## Inclusive Teaching: An Approach for Encouraging Non-Traditional Student Success

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### Abstract

*It is a recurring complaint among North American university teachers that non-traditional students come underprepared to university. Both universities and individual faculty members have been taking measures to help non-traditional students improve their skills and performance. Most of these initiatives are remedial in nature, i.e., they aim at equipping non-traditional students with the academic skills and knowledge of mainstream students and teachers. Not surprisingly, these actions have proved inadequate to empower most non-traditional students to succeed, as these measures neglect to acknowledge and incorporate the diverse values, beliefs, and skills that non-traditional students bring to the classroom. This article discusses a research project that focuses on the relationship between teaching models and knowledge modes with respect to both mainstream and non-traditional students. It also proposes several strategies to promote inclusive teaching in the classroom.*

Keywords: Inclusive teaching, Non-traditional student success

### Introduction

It is a recurring complaint among North American university teachers that most of today's students come underprepared to university (Côté & Allahar, 2007; Gabriel, 2008; Kuh et al., 2006; Weimer, 2002). The majority of these students are non-traditional, particularly mature, aboriginal, international, recent immigrant, first-generation, and visible minorities. Both universities and individual faculty members have been taking measures to help non-traditional students improve their skills and performance. These initiatives are remedial in nature, i.e., they aim at equipping non-traditional students with the academic skills and knowledge of mainstream students and teachers (Tinto, 2000). Not surprisingly, these actions have proved inadequate to empower most minority students to succeed, as these measures neglect to acknowledge and incorporate the diverse values, beliefs, and skills that non-traditional students bring to the classroom.

The pivotal thesis of this article is that students' preparation reflects their own cultures, traditions, and beliefs. In other words, today's students are not underprepared. Their preparation responds to a different notion of the world around them. So, instead of pushing non-traditional students to adopt mainstream academic skills, disciplinary perspectives, and processes, we should open our classroom doors to teaching diverse and non-traditional ways of approaching disciplinary content, and organizing and expressing thought. We should support this by including non-traditional pedagogies to help our students learn in a more inclusive way. This article is premised on

literature findings that show that faculty members are the ones that can have the major impact on student success (Bain, 2004; Bain & Zimmerman, 2009; Blose, 1999; Gabriel, 2008; Light, 2001). It recognizes, however, that students are more likely to succeed when in addition to inclusive classroom teaching, the college or university implements multiple programs and initiatives aimed at helping students strive in their academic endeavours (Kuh, 2006).

This article begins with a brief overview of the demographics of University students in the United States and Canada. Second, I briefly describe a project I conducted and its methodology.

Third, I examine the nature of programs and classroom strategies aimed at fostering non-traditional student success. Then, I analyze the relationship between teaching models and knowledge modes with respect to both mainstream and non-traditional students. Finally, I propose several strategies to promote inclusive teaching and to enhance learning opportunities for non-traditional students.

### **The New Demographic of Students**

Most of the so called underprepared students are non-traditional students, particularly mature, aboriginal, international, recent immigrant, first-generation, and visible minorities. Increasing numbers of non-traditional students have been entering the world of higher education in the past two decades in the United States and Canada. There are approximately 700,000 full-time and 220,000 part-time undergraduate students in Canadian universities (AUCC, 2007). 100,000 full time students and 190,000 part-time students are mature; 70,000 full-time and 13,000 part-time students are international (AUCC, 2007). 16% of Canadian students identify themselves as visible minorities and 30,000 students are aboriginal (AUCC, 2007).

In the United States, nearly 75% of all undergraduate students in both 4-year and two-year postsecondary institutions are in some way nontraditional (IES, 2009). For example, there are 11.5 million community college students. 13% of these students are African-American, 15% are Hispanic, 6% are Asian Pacific, and 1% are Native Americans (IES, 2009). First generation students represent 39% of all students. International students are 8% of the total college population. And 58% of all students fall within the mature student category (American Association of Community Colleges, 2003).

Similar trends occur in US universities, although elite research universities have lower percentages of non-traditional students. While there is some overlapping among these categories, it suggests, nonetheless, that non-traditional students constitute the majority of today's students in US and Canadian universities and colleges. And traditionally historic

mainstream students –white, Euro-Canadian, middle-to-upper class, Judeo-Christian, Western young students whose parents graduated from university—are now minority (Bowe, 1999). This profile is radically different from the one two or three decades ago, when classrooms were more homogenous, and participation of non-traditional students was marginal.

## **The Study**

I conducted a project aimed at identifying the measures needed to help non-traditional students succeed in higher education. The original hypothesis guiding the project was to examine the measures that contribute to change some of the individual pre-entry college attributes identified as determinants of success in the Tinto Model of retention/attrition (Tinto, 1994).

I started the project by examining the existing strategies followed to help non-traditional students succeed. Then, I conducted a series of focus groups with non-traditional students attending colleges and universities in Sault Ste. Marie, a US and Canadian border city. These focus groups included mature, aboriginal, first generation, international, recent immigrants, and visible minority female and male students. The focus groups were complemented by in-depth open-ended interviews to non-traditional students, teachers, and administrators in those colleges and universities. The interviews were video-taped, and a forty-minute DVD was produced with edited segments of the focus groups and interviews in order to provide feedback to the participants about the main ideas of the project. As a result of these focus groups and interviews, I adopted some classroom strategies which implement the main findings of the project, i.e., the need for inclusive teaching.

## **Predominant Classroom and Institutional Initiatives**

Many teachers and institutions in the United States and Canada have been adopting a series of initiatives to deal with the perceived problem of teaching underprepared non-traditional students. The predominant approach to dealing with non-traditional students has been the adoption of remedial programs and remedial teaching strategies (Tinto, 2000). These initiatives are premised on the belief that non-traditional students lack some academic skills, and that they can succeed in university if they acquire these skills. So, remedial programs and teaching strategies aim at providing these students with the necessary skills and cultural processes to place them at a par with mainstream students. These programs and initiatives vary in format. At the institutional level, they include academic support services (Crockett, 1984; Seidman, 1993; Seidman, 1995) bridging, access, and mentoring programs (Williford et al., 2000; Zeegers & Martin, 2001). Classroom teaching

strategies include using visual information in the classroom (Rees-Miller, n/d), explaining a topic more than once in the classroom or office, providing additional tutorials and practice tests (Keller, Mattie, Vodanovic & Povronski, 1991), sitting international students apart during tests (Arkoudis, 2006), avoiding jargon, and being flexible with deadlines and assignments. These initiatives have proved to be ineffective (Tinto, 2000) as they reinforce a superior value of mainstream knowledge over non-traditional ones. These programs send a message to non-traditional students that they need to adapt to a better way of thinking and expressing thought. While Canadian universities and colleges eased access of non-mainstream students, attrition rates have also increased. This shows that the strategies followed by Canadian postsecondary education institutions have not been successful in helping non-traditional students thrive in their university studies (O'Donnel & Tobbell, 2007).

### **North American Knowledge Modes and Academic Skills**

Most teachers in North American higher education institutions approach the teaching of disciplinary content, academic skills, and thought processes from traditionally Western and North American perspectives. For example, the predominant knowledge mode in North American is external, socially mitigated, and objectively measurable (Haigh, 2009) and thus subjective, relational, and non measurable approaches are considered unworthy of the mainstream university classroom. Teaching writing has been reduced to teaching disciplinary thesis-based writing, where students learn how to develop a thesis, pose questions, gather and weigh evidence, and construct arguments as members of a certain discipline (Bean, 1996). Critical thinking, which is conceived as a self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking mode in which the thinker analyzes, assesses, and reconstructs evidence, (Bok, 2006) displaced other forms of thinking, such as creative and integrative (Boyer, 1990; Clark, 2009).

These North American knowledge modes and thought processes are – very particular, even elitist– ways of interpreting the world around us. They are by no means universal. They do not coincide with ways of producing and expressing thought in other cultures. Furthermore, they have been criticized within North American academic circles for being patriarchal and for distorting the way of knowing (Bean, 1996).

These thought processes and academic skills are generally accompanied by teaching pedagogies such as lectures and seminar discussions that also reinforce this particular way of understanding reality. Again, these pedagogies are neither universal nor necessarily effective, and have also been attacked by mainstream western scholars (Bain, 2004, Biggs, 2003).

## Non-Western Knowledge Modes and Academic Skills

Non-traditional students have a way of seeing themselves and understanding the world that derives from their own cultures and traditions. This differs from the perspectives that predominate in North American universities. Like for their mainstream colleagues, this different way of seeing the world has repercussions in most academic areas. They influence the way students think, express themselves, interact in the classroom, and think in the disciplines. For example, many non-traditional students tend to see things in a subjective, inward-looking fashion (Haigh, 2009). Other students from non-Western societies are holistic in their thoughts. They tend to emphasize and value how things are interconnected. They tend to give contextual and emotional information. Some even show a tendency to digress when writing. What is important in their writing works is “seeing, feeling, and being situated in the web of relations that surround the subject” rather than developing a thesis (Fox, 1994). The dynamic of the North American university classroom also clashes with the way in which many students, particularly Asian and aboriginal, are brought up. For example, Chinese students are educated not to ever question, evaluate, or challenge their professors (Sarkisian, 2006).

## North American Teaching Model

The North American knowledge mode is neither better nor worse than other modes of knowledge. But, it is generally presented as the only “correct” way of generating, organizing, and expressing thought in our universities (Bowden & Marton, 2004). When a student or teacher from a certain tradition, who lacks experience and education in appreciating knowledge diversity, crosses knowledge and thought traditions, she tends to judge different knowledge modes in a very negative way (Haigh, 2009). Thus, non-traditional students tend to perceive North American academic writing as inferior, arbitrary, and disrespectful of the audience. For example, according to a Chilean student reported in Helen Fox’s (1994) book, when he “reads something written by an American it sounds so childish.” Other non-Western students consider that North American writers belittle their audience by making explicit their arguments and by making explicit connections between different arguments. Another example quoted by Fox shows that for non-North American students it should be the responsibility of the audience –not the writer’s- “to do the analysis, to draw meaning from the context. [The writer does] not [even have the] responsibility to make sense.” (Fox, 1994). In most cases, non-traditional students, particularly non Western, feel that

following North American conventions is against “what everything inside you is telling you to do” (Fox, 1994).

At the same time, mainstream teachers –and those minority teachers educated in mainstream Western higher education institutions- perceive non-mainstream student writing and other academic skills as signs of unpreparedness for university studies (Côté & Allahar, 2007; Gabriel, 2008). For example, when non-traditional students write an essay where they do not cite a few sentences they borrowed from an author, or when they digress instead of supporting the thesis with arguments and evidence, most teachers do not understand that these students are responding to the way in which they have been brought up to see and understand the world. Teachers tend to believe that these are signs of lack of academic preparation.

When students and teachers came to university from the same privileged and homogeneous social backgrounds, they shared similar values and principles. So, there was no difference of perspective between teachers and students (Bowden & Marton, 2004). The lack of success of individual students was interpreted as individual failures, generally explained in terms of lack of application and effort on the part of those students (Côté & Allahar, 2007). Since today, non-traditional students make up a large percentage of North American classrooms, what was once an explanation in terms of individual students, today is a generalization about underpreparedness.

### **Strategies for Inclusive Teaching**

The deepest degree of learning –and the highest rates of student academic success- takes place when university teachers encourage, include, and value the cultures of both minority and mainstream students and incorporate them into their classes, i.e., inclusive teaching. As put by Bowden and Marton, “by becoming aware of other people’s ways of seeing various phenomena one’s understanding is enriched and therefore becomes more powerful; one can see one’s own way of seeing exactly as a way of seeing (rather than ‘seeing what something is like’) and individual awarenesses are linked to each other, forming a *collective consciousness*” (Bowden & Marton, 2004).

In practice, this entails teaching disciplinary content and academic skills from a wide array of diverse traditions so that every single non-traditional student will feel included and will see that her knowledge modes are acknowledged and recognized. In an inclusive teaching classroom, non-traditional students strive as their ways of understanding the world are a central part of the course. At the same time, they are more willing to learn mainstream North American- ways of thinking and expressing, as these are presented as one among many alternatives of interpreting reality and creating and expressing thought (Bowden & Marton, 2004). For mainstream

students, learning about non-traditional values, skills, and processes also opens up new ways of apprehending reality, which enriches their academic experiences and skills at a level which cannot be achieved when being taught within a single worldview paradigm (Bowden & Marton, 2004).

While ideally inclusive teaching should be part of teacher's education and development, there are some strategies which we as teachers can try in order to open up our classes to non-traditional views, values, and skills. The following are some suggestions which derive from both the literature and inclusive teaching practice, which I implemented as a result of the main ideas arising from this project.

Place student learning of diverse knowledge modes, and ways of generating, organizing, and expressing thought at the forefront of the curriculum. Include this within the course intended learning outcomes. And make explicit to your students that they will learn to approach the discipline and to generate, organize, and express thought from multiple traditions. For example, in a Criminal Law course, help your students interpret the notion of crime from different legal traditions, such as Islamic, Talmudic, Aboriginal, and Soviet. Help your students think and communicate about Criminal Law as scholars would do in these traditions.

Align your course so that the assessment and teaching and learning activities match your intended learning outcomes (Biggs, 2003). Teaching an aligned course means making your intended learning outcomes consistent with the teaching and learning activities and the assessment tasks. So, the teaching and learning activities will help your students engage in thinking and expressing in a wide array of knowledge modes. And the assessment tools will evaluate whether they have achieved these outcomes.

Change the preconception that non-Western ideas are exotic. Introduce non-Western knowledge modes, academic skills, and disciplinary content as something usual. For example, if you teach a course on Business, explain your students that Japanese businesspeople have a unique way of negotiation deals. Or discuss with your students the important societal consequences of Islamic attitudes about interest and usury.

Help your students see the intrinsic value of acquiring diverse, non-traditional ways of seeing the world. Include a wide array of non-Western and non-traditional worldviews and values, even if you do not have students from a certain culture. For example, even if you do not have aboriginal students, teach your students how to transmit knowledge through stories as is done in aboriginal communities (Charter, 1996).

Show your students how useful it is to be prepared to live and work in different cultures. In a globalized society, people have the opportunity to move to and live in other countries. Even if your students do not plan to move to another country they may have to work for foreign corporations or international organizations in their own city. These organizations and

corporations will have a different culture, which students need to learn about during their university studies.

Teach multiple ways of writing instead of restricting writing to North American academic styles. For example, teach your students how to organize thoughts and express ideas as is done in Chinese culture. Ask a Chinese graduate student who acquired his or her undergraduate education in China to show you how Chinese scholars write academic papers, or invite that student to your class to talk to your students. Then, ask your students to write a short paper in English following an academic Chinese structure and organization.

Vary pedagogical methods, i.e., teach as is taught in other cultures and traditions. For example, resort to story-telling, organize circles, potlucks in – or ideally outside- the classroom to acknowledge aboriginal traditions. Or base part of your pedagogy on notions of Dharma, which emphasize personal introspection, self-awareness, self-realization, and self-improvement (Haigh, 2009).

Include texts in foreign languages that some of your students speak as alternative or supplementary to texts in English. Even if you do not read in a foreign language, as disciplinary expert, you are probably familiar with the text and the author, or you probably read an English translation. Most foreign language journals bring an abstract in English. So, it is not very difficult to know the content of an article in your discipline even if you do not speak that language. Invite the students that read those articles to comment them in class. Unilingual speakers will see the value of reading the discipline in other languages.

Invite guests from non mainstream traditions, such as an aboriginal elder, a visible minority professional, or a foreign religious leader. They can discuss topics related to your course, and your students can gain insight into their worldviews. For example, if you teach a course on Political Science, invite an aboriginal elder and ask him to discuss with your students the way decisions are made in his community. Then, students can compare and contrast it to the other decision-making processes discussed in the course.

Organize student presentations where students discuss a problem from their own tradition. A variation of this activity is to ask students to present a topic from a tradition that is different from their own. As a way of illustration, you can ask students from a non Hispanic origin, to give a presentation following digressing communicative styles predominant in Latin America.

Discuss disciplinary content that interests diverse groups of students. For example, recent immigrant students want to see issues related to immigration, assimilation, and heritage discussed in class. If you teach US literature you can include Chicano authors' short stories dealing with problems faced by Latino immigrant families, such as stories by Francisco

Jimenez. If you teach Contracts, you can include the notion and formation of contracts found in legal traditions outside North America.

Mature students have very rich life experiences. Make room for them to share their experiences with the rest of the class. For instance, in a Cognitive Psychology course, ask your mature students to discuss how they raised their children and what conceptions of learning underline the education they gave to their children.

Assess whether students can generate, organize, and express thought in a multitude of diverse ways. Assessment is the component in the aligned teaching system that most greatly influences the approach students take to learning (Gibbs, 1999). So, if your assessment actually evaluates whether and how well students have mastered a wide array of knowledge modes, diverse academic skills, and non-traditional disciplinary perspectives, students will be likely to achieve your intended learning outcomes (Biggs, 2003).

Design assessment tasks that are representative of different cultures and traditions. Do not restrict your assessment tasks to exams, multiple choice tests, research papers, and group presentations. Adopt assessment tools used in other cultures, such as informal dialogues, holistic evaluation of student performance throughout the course, or self-evaluation. Another alternative is to ask your students to gather evidence that is customary in their traditions to show how well they have achieved the intended learning outcomes. For example, students from South America can organize a dialogue between different teachers –not just the one that teaches the course– and students as is done in some universities in Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile.

## Conclusions

The demographic of today's classroom has changed drastically in the last two to three decades. Today, non-traditional students have significantly gained access to higher education in North America. This increase in participation has not translated into student graduation and success. Teachers perceive non-traditional students as academically underprepared. In fact, students' preparation reflects their own cultures, traditions, and beliefs. Non-traditional students have been prepared to see the world and express thought in ways that differ from those of North American mainstream teachers and students. The predominant approach to dealing with this perceived lack of preparation of non-traditional students has been to provide these students with remedial strategies so that they can acquire the academic skills and thought processes of North American mainstream scholars.

Inclusive teaching is an alternative approach. It acknowledges and incorporates diverse knowledge modes, thought processes, and expressive styles into the classroom. It prepares both mainstream and minority students

to succeed as interculturally knowledgeable citizens in today's globalized world.

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