CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ONLINE GRADUATE SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

By: Dr. Tracey M. Phillips

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Abstract-

Online students are the fastest growing population of Graduate students in the United States. Of these, non-traditional students (Adult Learners) make up a large percentage of the online community. In the Social Work field, online Graduate programs offer a unique opportunity, particularly for the non-traditional student. This presentation will identify key factors that can contribute to the success of non-traditional online students in Graduate Social Work programs, by exploring the use of Universal Instructional Design (UID) to aid in student success

Introduction-

Currently, the fastest growing group of students in North America is the Online/Adult Learner. The number of students taking at least one online course has now surpassed 6 million (Sloan, 2011). Now nearly one-third of all students in higher education are taking at least one online course (Sloan, 2011). Between 2009 and 2010, the percentage of online students increased by 10.1% (NCES, 2012).

The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2012) identifies the non-traditional student as possessing one or more of the following characteristics:
- Delays enrollment (does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that he or she finished high school);
- Attends part time for at least part of the academic year;
- Works full time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled;
- Is considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid.

Problem Statement

Adult Learners bring unique strengths into the Academic community that most traditional students don't possess. Among these are:
- Freedom to choose what fits their needs and acknowledge they have ability to make decisions
- Authority in other areas of their lives such as home and work
- Responsibility for taking care of others as parents, caregivers and employers
- Order and Consistency that they are used to sustaining to be successful
- Positive re-enforcement as a form of feedback
- Respect for others and expectation of being respected
- Growth and development as a means to gain self-dignity, promotion and economic choices

When choosing to pursue higher education, Adult Learners also have expectations as students. They expect that the institution have a clear understanding of their particular needs as non-traditional students. For example, many adults returning to higher education do so for career advancement or personal growth (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). They expect that the coursework provide them with immediately transferrable skills that they can utilize the following workday. Many students are also concerned with the advances in technology and are feeling a lack of confidence in their ability to complete the tasks required (Bowl, 2001). The expectations of the student are that they will enter into a learning environment that will nurture and support them and assist them through the transition from adult to "adult student".

Students are attracted to online programs for a number of reasons. Online programs allow students to access a quality education while living and working in their home state/country. They allow the flexibility to complete coursework in a timely manner when it is convenient for them. Online programs allow for a Diversity of classmates and experiences that would not be found in a traditional class setting and they allow for increased technological education from a "hands on" perspective (Reardon, 2010)/

Successful Social Work Programs
- Meet the CSWE (EPAS) six value elements for education excellence by providing diversity in the classroom as well as opportunity to provide a global impact and community engagement.
- Makes SW education more accessible to students in rural and underserved areas which enables them to immediately utilize their skills in their home areas
- Helps students to improve their writing and articulation
- Helps students to make connections via classroom dialogue and Residency requirements.

How can the use of Universal Instructional Design (UID) assist non-traditional students enrolled in online Graduate Social Work programs achieve success?

Universal Instructional Design (UID) is a national trend created to explore ways to improve course instructional methods that reach out to diverse groups. UID was created to standardize physical accommodations that gave people with disabilities access to public facilities. UID was a major force in shaping the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1979 which insures that people with disabilities have equal access to public facilities. However, UID goes beyond just disability accommodations and into other methods of teaching to diverse student learning styles.

Graduate Online Social Work Programs can benefit from incorporating UID standards into the classroom because many returning students suffer from undiagnosed disabilities and aging issues, which are compounded with insufficient prior academic preparedness. Changes in student demographics pose a challenge to teaching methods and classroom pedagogy. The focus of UID is on creativity,

enthusiasm, and commitment of the faculty and administrators to make the academic experience satisfying to a wide range of students.

By engaging in a collaborative learning environment, Graduate SW students will be able to immediately translate these principles into the practice setting when working with clients. Students will increase their Knowledge, Skills and Abilities (KSA) to work with diverse populations based on their own course room experience. Students will also learn to create an environment of mutual respect with their clients based on their experience as a student.

How can Graduate Social Work Programs benefit from Incorporating UID into the course room?
- Higher Enrollment Rates
- Lower Attrition Rates
- Improved immediate connection between the classroom and the community
- Increased diversity among students
- Students who become more confident and competent Practitioners
- Promote social change from the inside out

Tools for using UID with non-traditional students
Faculty should teach particularly to Adult Learners by recognizing and incorporating participatory and collaborative leaning environments. Faculty should promote a climate of openness and respect, create an online environment that promotes learning, clearly define expectations and offer feedback, promote information access
Use cooperative learning methods and assess student's knowledge through a variety of methods

When teaching to adult learners, Faculty should know the University's adult student demographics, take the time to understand how older students think and learn and use a wide range of teaching tools and methods to reach out to adult learners who have varying styles and physical limitations.

Adult Learners:
- Adults remember 90% of learning when they say and do a lesson at the same time
- Adults remember 70% of what they say to others
- Adults remember 50% of what they say and hear
- Adults are motivated to learn and respond to new knowledge when information is transferable and integrated into their real lives/work environment
- Adults respond to multiple methods of content transference
- Adults need more time to absorb new material

In creating and environment of openness and respect, faculty must be willing to embrace the concept of divest privilege- Faculty is not a "fountain of knowledge" but rather a coach. The student is an invested partner in the learning process. Mutual learning between faculty and student is achieved in a cooperative/collaborative learning setting.

Faculty should respect the student's academic work. Feedback should be honest yet respectful and should assist the student in meeting goals. The learning environment should be safe and promotes positive interaction between the student, faculty and peers.

To clearly define expectations and offer feedback, Faculty must make sure the course syllabus is clear and that syllabus is reviewed completely by the first day of class. Be flexible in offering students an opportunity to rewrite papers. Faculty must be accessible to respond to student's questions and offer support. Faculty must be available at regular office hours at variable times. Faculty contact information must be included on syllabus including cell phone#

Use handout material to summarize key learning objectives or provide additional reference and/or reading material
Provide handouts of prepared "group discussion questions"
Use visual examples such as articles, clippings, video clips, ect as current event examples of theory application
Allow for a variety of systems to distribute information such as auditory, visual or kinesthetic methods

To promote information access, Faculty must use group-interactional methods of assessment. They should also use written assignments, encourage that they use interest based research assignments, and design methods for individual students to "explain" lessons to other students. Faculty may also allow for peer editing of essays Use "roundtable" or group learning.

To promote Information Access, Faculty must present students with optional ways to demonstrate mastery of the material, provide a grading rubric that clearly lays out expectations of performance, Provide alternative sources for reading material. Use font sizes and colors that are general and easier to read, and foster informal communication among students and faculty using various media (Skype, LiveMeeting, Chat rooms) to promote connectedness. (UIDProject online, 2009)

In conclusion, adult student enrollment in Graduate programs will continue to rise. Graduate level Social Work programs are one of the fastest growing online programs in the country. Higher Education institutions need to recognize the unique needs of the non-traditional student. The use of Universal Instructional Design will assist in creating a larger pool of online students who are empowered and skilled Social Work practitioners with the knowledge, skills and ability to advocate for social change and social justice in their home communities.

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