

Can We Still Do Business as Usual?: Adult Students and the New Paradigm of Library Service

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ABSTRACT

Adult students are the newest clientele that many of us have noticed in our libraries over the past three to five years. As demographics declined for the traditional eighteen to twenty-one year old college students, more adult students; people who in the 1970s and 1980s were called "non-traditional" students became patrons in our libraries. Librarians need to be aware of how adult students work and study as well as characteristics of adult learners. They need to pay attention to hours of service, access to services from off-campus, and students' understanding of technology. Finally librarians need to market their services and seek feedback from adult students about additional needs.

Adult students are the newest clientele that many of us have noticed in our libraries over the past three to five years. As demographics declined for the traditional eighteen to twenty-one year old college students, more adult students; people who in the 1970s and 1980s were called "non-traditional" students became patrons in our libraries. Some of these students are back in school to start or finish a bachelor's degree but many are returning for certificate programs, master's degrees or selected courses to retool their job skills in order to keep pace with today's workforce requirements. As Speer (1996, 34), points out, "Ten years is more than a lifetime in some fields. The half-life for knowledge in the electrical engineering field is five years; for computer sciences, two-and-a-half years. It's increasingly difficult for many people to kid themselves that four years of traditional "front-loaded" education will suffice for an entire career."

Adult students have different lives and priorities than traditional students. They have family and job responsibilities and their lives are not centered on a campus. Lawler (1991, 12) lists the following characteristics of adult students:

Adults have many roles and responsibilities in their lives, education being only one, and usually not the major task at the time of its undertaking . . . Adults are usually motivated by a pragmatic desire to immediately use or apply their knowledge or skill, . . . Adults are usually prompted by a transitional event in their lives to seek education. Events such as divorce, job change, death, or moving, can be cited as reasons for learning, . . . Most adults attend an educational event voluntarily.

The expectations that adult students have from libraries in institutions of higher education are very different than those of traditional students. In addition, adult students are consumers who will be vocal about their

needs and will go elsewhere if a library can not supply the services they demand or materials they require. This is applicable not only to the library but also to the larger institution of higher education.

What can libraries do to accommodate adult students? Librarians should become knowledgeable about adult learning and adult education. They should begin to think about how policies, services and procedures interface with the needs of adult students.

As we look at how to better serve adult students, librarians should first consider the characteristics of adult students and how they interface with what the library currently does.

1. Adult students have other priorities in their lives beside education. Do librarians expect students to come to us for services? Do we give students the ability to access services at locations closer to their homes. The Penn State Great Valley Library has joined the Tri-State College Library Cooperative to help students who may travel an hour or longer have access to libraries closer to their homes. On a Saturday a student may find themselves needing to visit the library in between running children to soccer practice, grocery shopping and other responsibilities. An hour long trip to the Great Valley Library to spend time doing research is probably not practical. The consortium membership allows them to do their research close to home.

2. Adult students are pressed for time. The time limitations of adult students mean that libraries need to be available when students can use them. This is especially important for times just before and after classes as many students only come to campus on the night they have class. At Penn State Great Valley, a graduate only campus, the library is empty during most daytime hours. From 8:30 AM to 4 PM there may only be ten patrons in the library at anyone time, however, from 4-6 PM, just before class, all seats are occupied and any number of students can be found at the Information Desk, in the stacks looking for materials, or sitting at a LIAS terminal or CD-ROM workstation searching the online catalog or databases. In addition, the library does not close on holiday weekends as many adult students consider these long weekends as a chance to catch up on school work. For example, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays of three day holiday weekends such as Memorial Day weekend are times for hours as usual at Great Valley with the only day the library closes being the holiday itself. Finally, library instruction classes take place from 5-6 PM at night, just before classes start as well as on Saturday mornings so that students can attend.

3. Adult students want to access the library from outside the campus. Can students access the online catalog and databases from home or office so that they can do research at times that match their schedules? Penn State Great Valley students have access to the LIAS online catalog and databases through dial in and INTERNET. We often get reports of students who dial in from their hotel room on the road to do their papers or who access the catalog late in the evening after children are in bed. It is for this reason that the Head Librarian has created web-based library instruction which includes a library tour and an online searching tutorial. In addition, the individual reference consultations are conducted at times that fit the of the student, mostly in late afternoon or early evening. Finally, we are in the process of implementing faxing and email of interlibrary loan requests so that students can make the most of their time off-campus.

4. Adult students want credit for what they know. When teaching library instruction classes librarians should try to get a feel for the background of our students. What are their majors? Do they have extensive library experience and just need to have some specialized training or are they novices who last attended school when card catalogs were current technology? Instruction should be geared to the level of the students and to their interests and needs. It should link to the knowledge that adult students have already acquired. In addition to regular library instruction, reference consultations can be used to give one-on-one in depth instruction for those who have specific needs for an individual search.

5. Adult students are self-directed. One of the goals of the library is to teach students to use the online catalog and databases so that they can do at least most of their basic research with a minimum of assistance. This is especially important if students wish to use library resources from home or other off-campus locations. At Great Valley library instruction workshops often take the form of Doing Library Research From Your Home or Office.

6. Adult students learn differently than traditional students. Librarians need to learn about Malcolm Knowles and his theory of andragogy (Knowles, 57) as well as other trends in adult learning. In the andragological perspective the librarian becomes a facilitator rather than the giver of all knowledge. Students learn by methods such as collaborative learning and link what they already know to newly acquired skills

7. Adult students will have wide ranges of familiarity with computer and other technologies. On one hand, librarians may find themselves faced with students who have never worked on a computer, requiring them to take a step by step approach as they train patrons. They may also find students in the same class who are highly technology literate. This second group of patrons may extensively use technology in their workplace. These students will expect the best INTERNET connections and other services. They may be impatient they have to wait for slower students to catch up on technology. It is for this reason that library instruction classes at Great Valley often have a library assistant as well as the librarian who can assist those who are not familiar with technology and allow them to keep up with a moderately paced class.

8. Adult students are consumers making it important for the library to market their services and to be responsive to patron feedback. At Great Valley, information about library instruction is passed out in classes. The Head Librarian writes information pieces for the student newsletter and the library publishes its own newsletter called Know News. For students who prefer to access the library over the web, the Great Valley Library Homepage is an important resource. Solicitation of feedback includes student representation on the Library Advisory Committee, informal conversations with students, inclusion on Center-wide post-graduation questionnaires and a suggestion box in the library. The Head Librarian gives out her work phone number and email address to students at each library instruction session along with assurances that we want to know how the library is doing in serving adult student needs. Finally, key staff members have been given business cards and along with those of the Head Librarian, these are placed at the Information Desk so that staff can immediately give students information about who to contact for a needed service.

In summary, we need to make libraries more user-friendly for adults. We need to be aware of how adult students work and study as well as characteristics of adult learners. We should be cognizant of adult learning theory and understand andragogy as opposed to pedagogy. We need to ask ourselves some important questions: Do we have hours before and after classes so the students can stop in and to do quick research or pick up books? Can students access the online catalog and other services from off-campus? Are we aware of the diverse abilities that students have with regard to technology and are we doing something about it? Finally, are we marketing our services and seeking feedback?; for it is only by listening to adult students that we can we know how best to serve their current needs as well as how their demands will change in the future?

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