Chapter VII
Nontraditional Students and
Information Technology:
The Siren Call of the Virtual Classroom
and its Impact on Progressive
Educational Ideals

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ABSTRACT

The adult college student, caught between the competing demands of work and home, has recently become a valuable commodity in today's fast-changing American universities. The authors argue that the response of the university to the personal circumstances and credentialing needs of adult learners, accentuated by the forces of globalization and the availability of new information technologies, particularly the Internet, has been to focus upon the efficient delivery of information deemed important in our post-industrial society. This response, particularly well exemplified by the virtual classroom, is not conducive to the fluid and open-ended inquiry associated with progressive education. In the end, the authors speculate, adult students may taste the true progressive and constructivist approaches to learning better outside the confines of formal higher education.

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INTRODUCTION

For many years we have taught at a college established to meet the educational needs of adults. This institution sought to adopt for adult learners a teaching philosophy that incorporated Dewey's innovative ideas about individualization, democratic ideals, and experiential learning. When the college first opened its doors, these students were essentially outcasts in the world of higher education. Today, more than 35 years later, they have moved into the spotlight. Over this same period of time, the role of universities has become central in a society increasingly dependent upon ever-expanding technologies to support the delivery of an always growing pool of information. It is our judgment that questions about the impact of information technologies upon progressive educational practices cannot be fully addressed without considering the changing role of the university and the growing importance of the adult student.

Thus, in this chapter, we will discuss the ways these students, technology, issues of access, the commercialization of education, and the information delivery teaching model, have together contributed to a new climate of institutionalized learning. In this context, we will argue, the realization of progressive ideals in higher education is gradually drifting out of reach.

WHO IS THE ADULT STUDENT?

Much of the literature about American higher education today focuses on the characteristics and needs of what Arnett (2000) has referred to as the “emergent adult.” He proposes that this developmental stage, occurring roughly between the ages of 18 and 25, is a unique period in life that should be considered separately from “true” adulthood. It is a time when, ideally, young people can prepare themselves to take on adult responsibilities, such as marriage, serious employment, and community involvement, often through formal educational experiences that include guidance from adult teachers and mentors. Isolated as much as possible from everyday pressures, they are encouraged to explore and shape their place in the world, particularly in universities and colleges, which see themselves as providing the premiere environment in which such preparation for adulthood should take place (e.g., Bok, 2006; Hersh & Merrow, 2005; or see Magolda, 2004).

Adults who have passed beyond this developmental stage are typically referred to in higher education as “nontraditional” students. While some universities have sought to accommodate them with add-ons such as special “night” or “weekend” classes, most conventional institutions, particularly those that primarily serve full-time resident students, have been far less welcoming. Their focus on “campus life” and personal development is not particularly appropriate for these adults who have homes of their own and have already been shaped by their families, communities, and, often, regular employment. While they deserve and will benefit from advisement that helps them navigate the complex university bureaucracy and the complicated language of college curricula, they do not need an environment, or a curriculum, designed to prepare them for adult life.

Why adults seek additional education varies considerably (e.g., Cross, 1992; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2006, Pusser et al., 2007). Some see the return to college as an opportunity to make intentional changes in the direction of their lives. A small minority put their adult lives on hold in order to be full-time students, playing the role, so to speak, of emergent adults. However, most come to college because they have been forced to change directions due to job loss, escalating credential expectations, economic fragility, disruption in their family situation (particularly for women), and other life-shaking events. What they all have in common is that they are mature adults, with complicated lives and numerous responsibilities. In fairly sharp contrast to emergent adult students for whom college is expected to be their