Introduction: Adult Learners and Basic Writing

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We came to this special issue of *BWe* with several goals and several suppositions. We believed that our readers were already teaching adult learners in their basic writing classes and in some cases were also encountering adult learners around them as their graduate students, as well as learning as adults themselves in their ongoing research and writing. We also believed that while these adult learners who surround us may share many needs and characteristics with our traditional 18-22 year old students, they also have qualities that set them apart, at whatever level of coursework or expertise. And we believed that learning more about them and their unique aspects would allow our readers to better support and to better enjoy these students. Our purpose was to adopt an expansive view of basic writing education for adult learners, looking not only at adult learners in the context of regular basic writing instruction, but also at ways in which forms of basic writing instruction might be important to adult learners at different stages in their learning, even in graduate school, whether they came as ESL students or shifted careers radically and encountered new genres, vocabulary, and learning environments that stripped them of the fluency and comfort level they might have enjoyed previously. Thus, rather than portraying basic writing instruction for adult learners as a tightly bounded course-driven environment, we have sought in this issue to explore the many ways we may support adult learners and adult learning through basic writing instruction.

It is important to begin with an idea of what constitutes an adult learner and an understanding of their prevalence today. Adult learners are generally defined as students 25 and older, and statistics are usually kept regarding students 25-64 years in age (Blumenstyk, National

Center for Education Statistics). Sharan Merriam, Rosemary Caffarella, and Lisa Baumgartner, in their encyclopedic and indispensable text *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide*, focus not on age but on the specific elements of adult learning, the social context of their learning, and the many ways and places in which they learn, such as trainings and workshops, as well as traditional academic settings. However, for the purpose of most research and thus for this journal issue, we will employ the 25 years of age or older definition. Adult learners now comprise a significant segment of learners at all levels in higher education, with a 2017 report written by Goldie Blumenstyk for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* showing that approximately 27% of all undergraduates are now defined as adult learners (Blumenstyk 13), with this number varying widely depending on the type of school. While only 11% of all full-time students at public four-year institutions were adult learners, fully 69% of all full-time students at private for-profit institutions were over 25 years of age. Of the part-time learners, adult learners represented a full 45% of learners at 4-year public universities, and constituted 42% of part-time students at two-year public institutions, sites where basic writing instruction is often offered, and an impressive 60% at private not-for-profit two-year colleges (National Center for Education Statistics).

From these basic numbers, an image of the adult learner begins to take shape that underscores the need for this special issue and its focus. Adult learners overwhelmingly attend schools designed for flexibility and support of non-traditional learners. Other numbers flesh out this portrait. Nearly 60% of adult undergraduates are women, and approximately 43% are students of color (Blumenstyk 17). Slightly over 45% received Pell Grants (Blumenstyk 17). Many are also veterans, and Blumenstyk found that of the over 700,000 veterans who accessed GI education benefits in 2016, 46% of them were adult undergraduate students (17). These are

categories of students that will be familiar to teachers of basic writing classes, students for whom academic success has not always come easily. What ultimately emerges here is a portrait of a student with great potential and often some significant needs for supports, including basic writing instruction.

Another of the goals of this issue is to bring together complementary fields of study that inform an understanding of the adult learner in basic writing courses. This introduction, and the articles that follow, will draw not only upon Basic Writing research and theory, but also on theories of adult learning and educational theorists whose work has helped to differentiate how this population learns, and addressed how best to provide adults with a learning environment that supports their needs. Perhaps the best known is Malcolm Knowles, whose breakthrough work first published in 1968, now 50 years ago, helped to define our concept of *andragogy,* the theory and technique of teaching adults. He identified four assumptions, and later added a fifth:

1. As a person matures, his or her self-concept moves from that of a dependent personality towards one of a self-directing human being.

2. An adult accumulates a growing reservoir of experience, which is a rich resource for learning.

3. The readiness of an adult to learn is closely related to the developmental tasks of his or her social role.

4. There is a change in time perspective as people mature—from future application of knowledge to immediacy of application. Thus, an adult is more problem centered than subject centered in learning (Knowles 44-45).

5. The most potent motivations are internal rather than external (Knowles and Associates 12).

Specifically, Knowles' work emphasizes the active, participatory, and pragmatic motivations that inspired and supported adult learning. Merriam et al. point out that these characteristics, though, are only a beginning and are insufficient to a fully realized theory of adult learning. Peter Jarvis argues that one must recognize that each learner is situated within a social context that can either support or frustrate learning. The social role and context of the adult learner inherently affects the learning situation and dynamic, including interactions with both the material and the teacher. For learning to happen, Jarvis suggests that "disjuncture" must take place, in which people experience a challenge to their way of understanding or prior experience and must acquire and use new knowledge to establish a new understanding of the world that is again harmonious (Jarvis "Everyday Life" 25). For adult learners in particular, the act of returning to school and seeking learning can create both positive and negative sensations of disjuncture; competent and successful in many aspects of their lives, they find themselves uncomfortable with the social context and expectations of academia along with their need for skills they may not readily possess. While their learning may promote greater success outside of academia, skills that Knowles' model suggests are both desired and desirable, their anxiety may well stem from contextual pressures and a loss of identity when moving from their lives outside of school into the unfamiliar context of the classroom.

Like Jarvis, Jack Mezirow positions significant adult learning as a process of destabilization, change, and internalization of new knowledge upon which to act. This process he terms *transformative learning*, suggesting that true learning exists when we not only acquire new knowledge or experiences but through reflection realize their implications and incorporate that new knowledge into our understanding of or perspective of ourselves and the world. He argues that such transformative learning is both natural and essential in adulthood: "An essential point .

. . is that transformation can lead developmentally toward a more inclusive, differentiated, permeable, and integrated perspective and that, insofar as it is possible, we all move toward such an orientation. *This is what development means in adulthood* [italics his]" (155).

As Knowles originally argued, the needs of adult learners demand a shift in the ways teachers approach them as learners and design curriculum. The teaching of adult learners is essentially a Freirean endeavor, wherein the active role of the student in co-creating knowledge and influencing the curriculum is matched by the role of the teacher as the facilitator who enables learning through reflective practice. Stephen Brookfield, in much of his work, exhorts teachers of adult learners to recognize and foster them as self-directed learners: "The aim of facilitation is the nurturing of self-directed, empowered adults" (11). In *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning: A Comprehensive Analysis of Principles and Effective Practices,* he lays forth six principles of facilitation of adult learners, at the core of which is the recognition of adult learners as the primary actors in their own learning. While basic writing students may need support to become proficient writers, it is their life experience and competence as adults that can empower them to take on that task, if those assets are acknowledged and capitalized upon by their teachers. At the heart of adult learning theory and andragogical practice is the understanding that adult learners can and need to be co-creators of their learning in order to reach their potential. Our role, as their teachers, is to help them access that capacity.

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Adult learners were enrolling in college in increasing numbers at the time the first basic writing programs began to emerge, and their unique experiences and needs have been addressed in many of the field's foundational publications. Examples include Mina Shaughnessy's groundbreaking 1977 work, *Errors and Expectations*, in which Shaughnessy describes students

in her classes who juggled college and heavy work schedules; Mike Rose's still very relevant text from 1989, *Lives on the Boundary*, which includes an account of the students Rose encountered while tutoring and teaching in a college transition program for veterans; and a set of essays devoted to adult learners in Susan Bernstein's edited collection *Teaching Developmental Writing: Background Readings,* published in 2001.

Basic writing researchers have often sought a better understanding not just of adult students' writing but of how adult students' lives outside of school interact with their studies. For example, Marilyn Sternglass's 1997 longitudinal study of basic writing students, *Time to Know Them*, substantively addressed how work and family affected students' academic endeavors over the six years of the study, and Anne Aronson, in a 1998 article for the journal *Research and Teaching in Developmental Education*, reported on findings from her survey- and interview-based research into "material barriers to composing" (6), focusing especially on work and family responsibilities that imposed constraints on the amount of time adult basic writing students could devote to writing. Aronson's essay concludes with recommendations for instructors, such as allowing time for writing during class meetings and building motivation with a curriculum that "addresses adult interests and concerns" (13).

Finding and developing materials for adult learners has been an ongoing challenge for basic writing instructors. In a 1985 essay for *The Journal of Basic Writing* (*JBW*), Irvin Hashimoto analyzed "motivational devices" (64) employed in textbooks marketed for use in beginning-level courses, calling attention to how ineffective—perhaps even alienating—such devices would be for an audience of adult learners. A rare example of an introductory writing textbook developed with adult learners in mind is Karen Uehling's 1993 text, *Starting Out or*

Starting Over, which was explicitly directed to returning adult students as well as younger peers with whom they shared many characteristics, such as work and family responsibilities.

Over the years, many of the models and approaches that have emerged from or been of central interest within the field of basic writing have been adapted for use with adult learners. Some examples:

- In the 1980s, instructors in the University of Pittsburgh's evening program developed approaches to basic writing instruction that were grounded in the course described by David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky in *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts*. Elaine Lees, in "Building Thought on Paper with Adult Basic Writers," and Nicholas Coles and Susan Wall, in "Conflict and Power in the Reader-Responses of Adult Basic Writers," explain how they adapted the curriculum for their adult students.

- In their 1999 *Second Shift: Teaching Writing to Working Adults*, Kelly Belanger and Linda Strom describe adult-oriented writing programs in which under-preparation is addressed with a range of approaches tailored to older students, including Freirean problem posing, cooperative learning, and theme-based curricula developed for specific adult-student cohorts.

- Barbara Gleason and Mary Soliday developed a mainstreaming curriculum for adult learners at CUNY's City College. This curriculum is described in Gleason's contribution to the 2001 collection *Mainstreaming Basic Writing*.

- Linda Stine, in a 2004 *JBW* article, identifies challenges and opportunities associated with teaching basic writing in an online format—a format that has been of particular importance to adult learners—and describes a hybrid basic writing course she developed at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania for a student cohort with an age range of 25 to 64.

- "Writing Workshop" at DePaul University's School for New Learning adapted the studio approach described by Grego & Thompson for students in DePaul's adult program. Michelle Navarre Cleary describes Writing Workshop in her 2011 *JBW* article "How Antonio Graduated on Out of Here: Improving the Success of Adult Students with an Individualized Writing Course."

- Daniel Wuebeen adapted multimodal writing pedagogy for use with underprepared adult writers and presents his approach in *BWe*'s 2011/12 double issue devoted to multimodal composing.

The essays included in the current volume all contribute to the ongoing project of identifying better ways to serve adult learners. Taken as a whole, the articles within this issue of *BWe* contend with concerns that challenge many teachers of basic writing to adult learners across multiple levels of instruction. Our authors address the needs of adult learners from both theoretical and pragmatic perspectives, suggesting new ways to understand these learners as well as to create curriculum that supports their learning. An underlying premise in much of the scholarship on adult learners and basic writing is that teaching basic writing to undergraduate adult learners is controversial because it makes these students doubly vulnerable. Universities and colleges are structured in large part for the ever-shrinking body of traditional students who take classes during the days, often live on or near campus, and are primarily students, with jobs helping to support their studies. Courses, curriculum, and services continue to be designed with these traditional students in mind, leaving the adult learner with less access and support when they attend their night or weekend classes. Our authors offer ways in which teachers, and

thoughtful administrators, can ameliorate the situation through well designed resources, courses, and assignments.

Approaching "all students as writers who sometimes struggle," Michelle Navarre Cleary, Kamilah Cummings, Stephanie Triller Fry, Kenya Grooms, and Nicholas Alexander Hays describe the ways in which the School for New Learning at DePaul University has developed innovative curricula in the form of five non-course-based resources for their adult learners. From internet based options such as an online Writing Guide and teacher-led web hangouts to discuss projects underway, to boot camps for students struggling to complete an incomplete course while overwhelmed by life demands, these solutions suggest creative ways to offer adult learners access and community that are otherwise unavailable to them as commuter students. In their article, Navarre Cleary et al. also highlight the ongoing ways in which small administrative decisions can interrupt and unwittingly discriminate against the adult learner, from the shift of the popular Writing Guide to an internal and permissions-based server location, which resulted in a significantly less user-friendly site and a corresponding drop in usage, to the limiting of hours of writing center staffing to daytime only, when working adults are unable to meet with tutors.

Recognizing the multiple ways in which academic writing can be intimidating to adult learners who may feel alienated by the technological changes since they last attended school as well as the different expectations from their work writing, Ashley Hall and Kim Stephens argue that a genre-based pedagogy can better prepare adult learners in basic writing courses for writing both within the academy and in the other contexts of their lives. Hall and Stephens explore the implementation of genre-based pedagogy in Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) courses through a detailed examination of several assignments, tracking how the assignments in their initial designs both failed to capitalize on adult learners' life experience and capacities, and also

failed to help them explore multiple genres, as opposed to the opportunities offered in the revised assignments. This comparative analysis offers a guide for examining assignments to assess their design in regard to adult learners.

Two other authors in this issue address a specific subgroup of adult Basic Writing students, those who are English Language Learners (ELL). This group is also quite diverse, as noted by both Emily Suh, in her theoretical examination of immigrant Adult Basic Writing students, and Melissa Watson, in her discussion of the needs of ELL graduate students in American universities. Students who are ELL often transition into Basic Writing courses after achieving a demonstrated level of proficiency in English while still struggling as writers, yet Suh argues persuasively that the background knowledge of both conventions and genre will differ significantly between the traditional aged Generation 1.5 student often seen in community colleges and four-year public universities and the Generation 1 adult learners who have immigrated as adults and are learning English along with entering higher education, perhaps for the first time in an American school. She also argues that, unlike international students, who are often economically privileged and arrive with strong academic if not always strong English skills, Generation 1 learners have often immigrated to the United States in search of economic and social opportunities unavailable to them in their home countries. Thus, she contends, we must see them as a unique group of adult learners with a distinct identity.

Also addressing the needs of adult ELL learners but from a different perspective, that of the needs of international graduate students, Melissa Watson describes the triumphs and perils of creating a basic writing course for graduate level students. Within her article, Watson also traces the myriad bureaucratic and administrative obstacles to the delivery of such a course, from the financial barriers for students for whom the course either bears no credits or does not fulfill a

program requirement, to the question of where the course should be housed and whether a

faculty member or graduate assistant should be selected to teach the course. Watson confirms

both the need for this resource and the difficulty of negotiating the obstacles to its success,

reflecting a common theme of the marginalization of adult learners of all types and at all levels.

These adult learners, ever more present in our courses, come to us with great gifts and

great needs. We hope that these articles and book reviews offer new ways of understanding

them, and new ideas for curriculum and services that will support both students and teachers.

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