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## Higher Education, Critical Pedagogy, and Nontraditional Students

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**Higher Education, Critical Pedagogy, and Nontraditional Students**

By

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An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for Graduation from the  
Western Oregon University Honors Program

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### **Abstract**

Critical pedagogy is a way of teaching and learning that allows people to think critically about society, have an active role in their own learning, and to apply it to the real world. Recent studies suggest that nontraditional students are more likely to accept critical pedagogy in the classroom than traditional students. Interviews with professors and students at a public university also suggest that older students are more likely than younger students to be in favor of critical pedagogy. Students and professors seem to be comfortable with some aspects of critical pedagogy.

## Introduction

In 1996 the National Center for Educational Statistics performed a study with the goal of determining a definition for “nontraditional student.” It was concluded that there is no one specific definition, and that there are many factors that can cause someone to be considered a nontraditional student. Some of these characteristics have to do with age, having dependents, not attending college directly after high school, or going to college part-time. Considering all of these many characteristics, the NCES reported that from 1999-2000, 73% of undergraduate college students were nontraditional. This shows that “nontraditional” is the new traditional. Have teaching styles in colleges changed with the increased number of nontraditional students? Should they? Do methods of critical pedagogy have a different effect on older students? Older students often have very different experiences and outlooks than do younger students. Nontraditional students may have many other important responsibilities than traditional students, such as work or family, and they may have very different attitudes towards their education. With life experience, they may see their education as more valuable or they may know how exactly it will help them in a potential career. Traditional students are often still “finding themselves” when they attend college directly after high school. Nontraditional students are likely to take their education more seriously and be more active learners. With this in mind, do nontraditional students have different preferences when it comes to teaching styles in the classroom? Does the fact that they have more life experience mean that they want to learn in different ways than younger students?

## **Review of the Literature**

With more people choosing to attend college, higher education has become more diverse. Older students are no longer uncommon in higher education. Universities and colleges have had to make some changes to accommodate the new student population. Research on nontraditional students has become more common in recent years, but there has not been much done comparing the learning styles of traditional and nontraditional students and how this related to critical pedagogy. Many of the studies of nontraditional students have explored the educational attainment and what motivates them to do well in college.

Most research done on the topic of nontraditional students has been a comparison between these students and traditional ones (Donaldson and Townsend, and Eppler and Harju). Donaldson and Townsend (2007) note that nontraditional students have been overlooked in research that has been done in higher education. They also state that research that is done on nontraditional students tends to be of a similar nature, in that it compares traditional and nontraditional students in measures of academic success, different needs etc, rather than getting detailed information on the views and preferences of adult learners in college.

Kasworm (2010) explains that most studies done in the past on nontraditional students have been focused on academic achievement, rather than other aspects of the experiences of nontraditional students and that it has been found that nontraditional students perform at a similar or higher level than do traditional students. Kasworm (2010) also reports that nontraditional students are

usually more involved in their studies and seek to get the most out of their education, even more so than traditional students. In addition, Kasworm (2010) mentions that several studies have been done recently that have been based on critical, postmodern, and poststructuralist theories and have investigated how culture bias has affected the identity of nontraditional students. The implication is that nontraditional students are alienated for not fitting into the typical expectations for college students. For older students, college is a completely different experience, and many studies have been done exploring the ways in which it is different.

Since nontraditional students often have many other commitments besides school, such as a job or a family, they sometimes feel less connected to the college. As a result, it can feel like they don't fit into the setting. Sometimes, approaching college can be more difficult for older students, and in some ways, they are at a disadvantage. Bowl (2001) describes a study in which 32 nontraditional students are interviewed extensively in their processes of getting started with continuing their educations. This study asks students about the barriers that they are encountering and how they feel they are being treated as a nontraditional student. In this study it was found that the other responsibilities of nontraditional students, such as family, compete with their education in their list of priorities. The students in the study reported that they were frustrated with the process of going back to school, and that they could use more help. It has been found that most nontraditional students are somewhat apprehensive about starting college and feel that they will not fit in, but these students almost always become quickly comfortable in school (Kasworm, 2010).

Eppler and Harju's study (1997) also focused on comparing the characteristics of traditional and nontraditional students. They found that nontraditional students were more interested in the learning aspect of school, and that they had a higher learning goal orientation. Traditional students had higher performance goal orientation: they were more interested in getting good grades, rather than accumulating knowledge. This could be because the older students, who have more life experiences have more reference for how the things they are learning fit into the real world. They also may be more interested in the material than younger students, who may be just out of high school, a place where students are often taught that all they need to do is to pass tests, and not necessarily gain a deeper understanding of the material.

Check (2001) reports on findings of the learning preferences of the adult learner, but does not do a comparison with traditional learners, as many of the other studies do. His research consisted of questionnaires filled out by adult learners of various ages, female and male, and undergraduate and graduate. It was found that adult learners largely prefer a combination of lecture and discussion from their instructors. The findings indicated that adult learners do like a lot of structure in the classroom and they like to know what the plans are for the day by receiving an outline prior to class activities. This data seems as if it would be consistent with findings for traditional learners. It makes sense that learners would prefer some information ahead of time so that they have a framework in which to put their new knowledge. In the study, most of the respondents desired that their instructors would try to give more meaning to what was being learned, rather than just

presenting abstract concepts. The respondents to the questionnaires also did not want to have to do much memorization for class. This shows that adult learners enjoy understanding more of the context for what they are learning rather than just memorizing things that they don't have a full understanding for. It is possible that traditional learners might prefer the simpler method of memorizing facts, because it is easier to pass tests based on facts in the multiple-choice form, or similar methods. It has been shown that traditional students are more interested in getting good grades, whereas nontraditional students seek out knowledge for the sake of knowledge (Eppler and Harju, 1997).

Nontraditional students usually have motivations and outlooks that differ from traditional students. Older students sometimes change the classroom setting by bringing in different kinds of experience and knowledge that the other students do not have. Chau and Good (2004) describe a study where 43 nontraditional students were interviewed on different factors in their lives including their motivations and support systems. It was found that in these students, their education was very related to other things in their lives such as their career goals. Many factors affected their experience with school including their self-efficacy and resilience. According to the students that were interviewed, having a good attitude and pride are essential in balancing different responsibilities and doing well in school. In another study (Bowl, 2001), 32 nontraditional students were interviewed extensively in their processes of getting started with continuing their educations. This study asked students about the barriers that they encounter, how they feel they are being treated as a nontraditional student, and how they balance their

different responsibilities. In this study it was found that the other responsibilities of nontraditional students, such as family, and work, compete with their education in their list of priorities. The students in the study reported that they were frustrated with the process of going back to school, and that they could use more guidance.

Merrill (2001) describes a study done in which adult learners were interviewed in depth about their learning preferences. Many of the students were at first very surprised by teaching styles in university, and were expecting something similar to what they experienced in high school, where learning was very much guided by the instructor. The respondents were split fairly equally on which style they preferred: lecture or seminar. Some of the students really enjoy lectures that are entertaining, but others reported that they felt frustration when a lecture was not organized well or related directly to a specific topic. For similar reasons, some students preferred the seminar style because it is more interactive and entertaining, but others felt that seminars are more likely to be off-topic. The students that were interviewed were also split on whether they preferred in-class tests to at-home writing assignments. Some felt that tests were too anxiety-provoking to be beneficial, and some preferred the tests because they take up less time. This difference of opinions may well be common to younger, traditional students as well, as there are advantages to both methods of assessment. One major complaint of the adult students was that they lamented the fact that college classes are paced so quickly that there is not time to dig into certain topics that interest them. Some students reported that when they first came to college, they were apt to read beyond the required reading in order to gain more knowledge on topics that

interested them. Once they realized that there wasn't really enough time to do extra reading on top of the required reading, they left off doing it. This study provided a lot of information about the views of adult learners towards their education. The study shows that there are some qualities about older students that makes them different, but in general their opinions about learning vary as would the opinions of any group.

Most professors seem to embrace the presence of adult students in their classes because they tend to speak up frequently and they have a lot of life experience to draw from when forming opinions (Merrill, 2001). According to Merrill (2001) the majority of the instructors that were interviewed said that they strongly enjoyed teaching adult students because they tend to be enthusiastic and dedicated to learning. They also reported that they don't change anything about their teaching styles in order to accomodate older learners. Some instructors said that they enjoy the adult learners because they are more likely to speak up with their opinions or to admit that they don't understand a concept, whereas younger students are not as likely to admit to this. Some instructors that were interviewed admitted that they tend to be more lenient when grading the papers of adult learners and they like to give them more feedback to help them along in case they are not familiar with writing college papers (Merrill, 2001).

Research on nontraditional students has found that they differ from traditional students in their motivations (Kasworm, 2010) and their desire to learn (Eppler and Harju 1997). These comparative studies focus on similar characteristics. Less research has been done on the specific learning/teaching

preferences of adult learners and how instructors feel about teaching adult students. Donaldson and Townsend (2007) explored the different attitudes of other students toward nontraditional ones and Merrill (2001), researched the opinions of professors on nontraditional students. None of these studies have focused on how critical pedagogy relates to adult learners specifically. Is critical pedagogy especially helpful for the learning of nontraditional students?

### **Critical Pedagogy**

The relationship between teaching and learning is called pedagogy. Pedagogy is commonly divided into two main approaches: banking education and critical education (Wink, 2011). Some adult students desire a more straightforward style of teaching in which they know exactly what to expect and the instructor guides the learning (Merrill 2001). This would indicate a preference towards the banking education approach to teaching and learning. Eppler and Harju's study (1997) indicated that adult learners want to find meaning in what they are learning and apply it on their own. This would suggest a preference for the critical education approach to learning. Supposedly, critical education reaches more students because it involves a wider range of teaching methods and the students direct their own learning and have more input. Wink (2011) explains that a banking style of education often fails to engage some students because they are not required to participate actively in their learning. However, the banking style of teaching is what a lot of college students are used to because it is likely to be what they experienced in high school. Are adult students, who have been out of high school for a longer time and have had more life experience more likely to have a better experience with

the critical education style? Either style of learning would have its advantages, but do adult students have more of a preference for one or the other? Does andragogy (the teaching of adults) require different methods than pedagogy?

Critical pedagogy is a relatively recent concept and is constantly being changed by new ideas about education. There is no one solid definition that can explain critical pedagogy because it can be practiced in many different ways. Critical pedagogy “derives both its name and its basic conceptualizations and interests from the so-called critical theory”... “of the neo-Marxist Frankfurt school, which originated around 1930” (Wardekker and Miedema, 1997). One of the most influential theorists of critical pedagogy was Brazilian Paulo Freire, who wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. A founding theorist of critical pedagogy from the United States is Henry Giroux. Critical pedagogy is based in Marxist theory and is connected to social movements such as feminism, radical democracy, and anarchism. Critical pedagogy arose from the desire to incorporate more democracy practical application into the classroom. In critical pedagogy, what is taught in the classroom is directly connected to what goes on outside of the classroom.

One way to explain the gist of critical pedagogy is to say that it is “to name, to reflect critically, to act” (Wink, 2011:45). A critical approach to teaching and learning should involve discussion, reflection and action. Teaching critical pedagogy involves implementing four basic components: dialogue, critique, counter hegemony, and praxis (Braa and Callero, 2006). Together these components form a method of teaching and learning where everyone is involved and connects the information to the real world.

Dialogue in the classroom setting is the involvement of students and teachers in discussing and analyzing what is being learned or taught. Dialogue is very important in encouraging participation of everyone in the room. Dialogue is “talk that changes us or our context...it is profound, wise, insightful conversation” (Wink, 2011:65). Dialogue engages people and encourages them to relate the learning to their life and to explain their thinking to the people around them who can then gain more understanding from the explanations that they hear. This type of conversation allows people to connect what is being learned to themselves and to the people they are learning with. It can transform information that seems abstract into something that is concrete. Discussing material is very likely to help people to remember and internalize material rather than forgetting it a few days after they read it. There are four phases of dialogue: the descriptive phase (beginning to understand the material), the interpretive phase (relating the material to the real world), the critical/multicultural/antibias phase (noting the biases), and the creative/transformational phase (using the material for self and social transformation (Wink, 2011). These phases of dialogue allow learners to have an active part in their learning rather than just reading and memorizing and repeating, which is very impersonal.

Critique is the analysis of self and society while considering issues of inequality such as race, ethnicity, and gender-based oppression and other forms of class exploitation (Braa and Callero, 2006). Critique is the identification of inequalities that occur in society and then the exploration of how those relationships affect different groups. Critique involves looking at the big picture,

something that can easily be avoided in classrooms when a specific or narrow topic is being discussed. I have taken a nutrition class where we discussed at great length the ways in which food is produced in the United States and we saw documentaries showing examples of how people (and animals) are taken advantage of along the way. Another example of critique in the classroom would be taking a realistic view to historical events, rather than focus on the aspects that flatter the home country, as is typical in U.S. high schools.

Hegemony is “the domination of one group over another with the partial consent of the dominated group” (Wink, 2011:68). Counter hegemony has to do with exploring oppositional attitudes in order to better understand how popular ideologies affect society. Class contradictions are revealed and students are encouraged to look at how these contradictions may affect their lives and the lives of others. Also in counter hegemony there is the development of “a counter culture where oppositional values, attitudes, and behaviors are promoted” (Braa and Callero, 2006:359). In a class on gender that I took we were taught about how ideas about gender roles affect so many aspects of life and yet most people don’t stop to consider how they are being affected. We also learned about other types of society that promote different gender relations. Counter hegemony is about questioning and challenging the status quo, something that not everyone would be comfortable with. Encouraging people to observe societies’ flaws and how to respond to them is not something that is typically taught in the classroom and could be the riskiest part of implementing critical pedagogy.

Praxis is using knowledge to make a difference in society. It is the culmination of theory and practice. This method of learning and teaching involves people working together to make important changes. Knowledge learned in the classroom is taken out into the community and applied. In praxis, students use the knowledge that they have gained and they then go beyond the classroom and take action within a community. Praxis can be defined as “collective efforts at social transformation” (Braa and Callero, 2006:359). People work together towards a common goal that will affect many people. This separates it from volunteer work because it is a focus on people working together towards changing something within a larger system, rather than just addressing the needs of a few individuals. The practical application of knowledge in the real world is not likely to occur in a regular college class where basic concepts are often just explained and not usually demonstrated. Praxis has the ability to make learning real for students because they are able to see how their learning can make a difference for the world. Doing lab activities inside or outside of class is an example of praxis. In a class such as biology or archeology, it is possible for students to apply their learning outside of class as they identify species or unearth artifacts. These types of skills can be introduced in the classroom and then taken outside of it.

Another part of critical pedagogy which fits into all the above categories is problem posing. Problem posing “brings interactive participation and critical inquiry into the existing curriculum and expands it to reflect the curriculum of the students’ lives” (Wink, 2011:75). The idea is to encourage everyone to question the way that things are and to not accept ideas without critiquing them. Problem posing

also has to do with asking questions about the hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum is “the unexpressed perpetuation of the dominant culture through institutional processes” (Wink, 2011:69). Questioning the hidden curriculum can be controversial and can make some people uncomfortable because many are used to accepting it. An example of hidden curriculum would be how in high school American history textbooks, America is put in a more positive light than may be fair. Atrocities that occurred in history such as slavery and genocide are downplayed in order to make Americans look more righteous than they were. Information in a textbook should be something that can be relied upon, and it may seem strange to some to question what is said in the book. Problem posing asks questions like ‘Why is this historical event portrayed unrealistically in this textbook?’ The answer would have to do with how institutions are meant to teach everyone specific viewpoints and not to question the way things really were or are.

Wink (2011) gives many examples of how critical pedagogy is composed of using varied, creative ways to help people learn because no one approach is going to reach everyone in the same way. Critical pedagogy allows for the incorporation of real-world application that isn’t always possible in more traditional teaching methods. Critical pedagogy also encourages students to take control of their own learning and to ask their own questions. Would older adults be more likely to prefer this style of teaching more than traditional-age college students?

### **Research Question**

How do nontraditional students’ preferences concerning teaching styles differ from the preferences of traditional students? Do different teaching styles

affect the learning of younger and older students in different ways? Are nontraditional students more open to methods of critical pedagogy? Are principles of critical pedagogy more consistent with the interests, needs, and learning preferences of nontraditional students? How do college professors use critical pedagogy in the classroom? My hypothesis is that nontraditional students are more likely to accept methods of critical pedagogy in the classroom because they likely have more experience in the world outside of school. I think that since they likely have a wider experience base that they will be more open to varied methods of teaching.

### **Data Collection Strategy**

**Student Interviews:** I interviewed ten university students. The interviews were approximately twenty minutes each. These students all considered themselves nontraditional students and had a variety of majors. Five were female and five were male. Half of the students attended one university and the other half attended another. They were all asked the same set of questions. (See appendix 2.)

**Professor Interviews:** I interviewed twelve university professors; most were face-to-face interviews, but two of them were done via email. These two professors teach at a different university than the other ten. The interviews were approximately twenty minutes each. The professors were from a mix of different departments. Five were male and seven were female. They were all asked the same set of questions. (See appendix 3.)

**Student Questionnaires:** I handed out questionnaires to three different classrooms in the same university that had a mix of traditional and nontraditional

students. Each class was in a different discipline. Twenty-seven of the students were nontraditional and twenty-six were traditional (were over 25 or had children). Thirty-six were female, sixteen were male, and one was 'other.' Sixty percent were White, 17 percent were Latino, nine percent were Asian or Pacific Islander and five percent were Native American. I collected 53 completed questionnaires. (See appendix 1.)

### **Data Analysis Strategy**

I performed a statistical analysis on the quantitative data I collected from my student questionnaires. Qualitative analyses were performed on the interviews with students and faculty.

### **Results**

**Qualitative Results: Characteristics of Nontraditional Students:** All of the professors that were interviewed said something about nontraditional students being especially responsible. Seven of the professors interviewed mentioned that they had noticed that nontraditional students seemed to be more likely to do their homework and to be prepared for class. One professor explained that this is because nontraditional students want to make the most of their time in school because they are more likely to be paying for their own schooling than traditional students are. Another professor thought that nontraditional students are more engaged because they "made a conscious choice to change their life" and that they "have a goal in mind" more so than traditional students who are more likely to have enrolled in college without knowing what exactly their end goals are. It is easier to commit to something if the payoff can actually be envisioned. One professor explained that

older students are more likely to have well-defined goals than younger students because they can put their education in the context of their lives and that they can see how their degree will benefit them in the future. Another professor said something similar: that nontraditional students put in “a greater effort” because they are “more committed and invested, literally and figuratively.” Kasworm (2010) also found that nontraditional students are likely to devote extra time to their studies and to actually care about what they are learning.

Nontraditional students may prefer a discussion-based class over a lecture-based class because they prefer to learn in an active way rather than a passive one. The students that I interviewed all reported that they learn more when they hear the opinions of others and when they get to share their own opinions. According to my individual student interviews, nontraditional students learn more when they get to participate in their learning via discussion. Six of the professors interviewed agreed that nontraditional students are more likely to speak up in class. One explanation for this was that they are more likely to be prepared for class by doing the reading etc, so they are more familiar with the material and therefore more prepared to speak. Another explanation suggested was that nontraditional students often have applicable stories that they can share with the class since they have more life experience. One professor thought that nontraditional students are less vulnerable to social pressures and are less likely to be nervous and self-conscious when sharing with the class whereas a younger student might be more concerned with what their peers think of them.

Four of the professors mentioned that they felt that nontraditional students are more respectful in class. One professor said that she frequently asks students to put their cell phones away, since she thinks having them out is disrespectful, but that she can't think of a time where she had to ask an older student to do this. Another professor thought that "social distractions" are more likely to be a problem for younger students and can prevent them from being focused in class. Another professor said that she has noticed that nontraditional students in her classes are very rarely absent and that they are more likely to respect due dates rather than request extensions as her other students do.

The student interviewees reported that they felt that older students are more equipped to take school seriously and to put forth their best effort. One student said that he took some college when he was younger but that he wasn't as focused or successful as he is now. He attributed this to the fact that at present he knows exactly how his work in college will benefit him later on. Another student thought that nontraditional students are likely to be more serious about school because it was likely their own idea to come and that they weren't being pushed into it by parents or other adults. Four of the professors that I interviewed thought that nontraditional students are more responsible as far as classroom expectations. One professor thought that this was because people are more likely to have a better work ethic once they have been out in the 'real world' for awhile because it is expected of them. Another professor thought that nontraditional students tend to have better time management skills and that they are more likely to turn homework in on time. One professor thought that the reason for this is that older students are

apt to have had more experience managing their time with different responsibilities such as work and family commitments. Another professor noted that younger students are not near as likely to visit office hours to ask questions or get extra help. This professor explained that going to office hours requires personal responsibility and the ability to take advantage of helpful resources, something that younger students aren't as likely to be comfortable doing. Another professor lamented the fact that younger students are sometimes willing to ask questions of the professor immediately after class ends, but that they were too shy to ask during class, when the answer to their question could have benefited other students. Older students seem to be more comfortable with themselves and more willing to share. Chau and Good (2004) interviewed nontraditional students and many of them reported that having pride and a positive attitude were essential to being successful in school.

Two professors mentioned that nontraditional students are more likely to become very focused on a topic in class when the professor doesn't have enough class time to devote to just one topic. In one article that I read, (Merrill, 2001) it was explained that some nontraditional students who are just returning to school do a lot of reading on class topics because they are interested or want to gain a better understanding of the material. Later on, they realize that they are going above and beyond what is required for class and that there really isn't enough time during the term to take on a lot of extra reading or give special attention to any one topic. Eppler and Harju's study (1997) also showed that nontraditional students are likely to devote more time to learning more of the material than is necessary to do well in class. This study also indicated that traditional students are more likely to be

motivated to get good grades, rather than to gain a real understanding of the material. One interviewed student said that it would make sense if the grade obtained and how much was actually learned should be the same, but that that is usually not the case. This student said that knowledge is more important because it will mean more later on than the grade that was obtained. Traditional students may prefer to get the good grade because they have been shown in high school that the grade is all that matters. Grades are how people compare each other and how a student might earn financial aid or get into the honors society. A nontraditional student with more experience outside of school may be more able to see how knowledge is power, and that it's possible to gain important knowledge rather than just achieve a grade.

One of the professors explained that it can be challenging to move on when a student becomes very interested, and wants to continue discussing a topic. Another professor said that sometimes nontraditional students seem to dominate conversations simply because other students feel that their comments are more valid because they have more life experience and examples to share. This professor said that it's the professor's job to balance things out and facilitate a good discussion.

The students that were interviewed thought that having a mix of ages in the classroom benefits everyone. One student explained that people of different ages will have different experiences and strengths and that this can be helpful to other students. Someone who has had a similar class, or a similar work experience can help other students benefit from their experience as well. Six of the professors said

that having a mix of ages in the classroom furthers learning because everyone gets to hear a larger variety of viewpoints and real-life examples. Only one professor mentioned that there could be a few disadvantages. This professor said that the different age groups can feel inadequate when they compare themselves. This professor said that older students sometimes get discouraged by the bureaucracy of university, or “getting used to the flow” of school and they might feel like all the other students know exactly how things work and they are the only ones that don’t. On the other hand, younger students might feel like they aren’t “getting the bigger picture” when discussing issues in class and that only the older students actually understand the implication in the real world. Another professor mentioned that it seems like some older students seem to be a bit frustrated to have to be around younger students all the time, but that they get used to it shortly. One professor explained that having perspectives from older students is indispensable in personal finance classes. Older students are much more likely to have experiences with things like car or house loans. Having them discuss their experience makes the issue come alive and seem more real to students who have not experienced them before, and would have been dealing with a more abstract issue without the personal account of what it’s like.

**Critical Pedagogy in the Classroom:** Two of the professors explained that if it were possible, they would love to administer oral exams instead of written exams. One professor said that doing so would be challenging and would take up too much time. The other professor said he would do oral exams if he “ever had the guts” but that students would probably be very uncomfortable with the format and that there

isn't enough time in the term to do too many of those types of activities. These same two professors said that they feel pressure to use power points and other online resources for class but that they are uncomfortable doing so. One professor explained that professors are expected to use technology in the classroom and that sometimes students are dismayed or uncomfortable when it is not used. The other professor explained that students are very used to power points and having information put into friendly, easy-to-process bullet points, but that the information isn't always suited to that type of format. The students that I interviewed said that they preferred a professor to not use power points because though they are easy to follow, the format sometimes makes the information too dry to be really interesting.

Five of the professors said that they commonly use group activities to help students learn. Group work could be a part of the dialogue component of critical pedagogy because everyone is more encouraged to share, rather than in a larger group where shy students are unlikely to speak up. One professor who is very fond of small group activities explained that in smaller groups, people feel that they are taking less of a risk in sharing, that there is more room for everyone to get to share, and that actual up-close eye contact encourages people to talk to each other. She also thinks that people ease into sharing in smaller groups are more likely to share with the larger group in the future. Another professor said that group activities need to be implemented at just the right moment, or students won't be receptive to participating. This professor said that it can be challenging and risky to use group activities, which is why some professors are reluctant to do so. One professor said that he has tried to implement group discussions, but the students have a hard time

directing their own conversations. Another professor explained that when students work with each other it “makes a deeper impression” on their memory because they are connecting their learning with other people who are learning the same material. One professor of history uses role-playing and debate to get students involved in the material. This professor said, “I cannot overestimate how important these activities are for learning.” A political science professor does similar activities in class and says “Rarely do I have a student not take it seriously. They really own it.” This professor explained that the students do a lot of research for these activities and that they are motivated to do a good job because other people will be listening to them. Also the students sometimes have to represent attitudes or opinions that they don’t necessarily agree with, so they learn to identify with other peoples’ positions and gain a greater understanding of the issues. One interviewee explained that when everyone discusses together, more perspectives are seen and the material becomes more memorable. This student also said that he is more likely to come prepared to class if he knows that he will be expected to discuss the material. Another student reported that they like to get to hear different viewpoints that are different from their own and that less is learned if just one person presents the material. Another student mentioned the possibility that traditional students might prefer a lecture-based class because they are less accustomed to sharing their opinions.

By talking with the professors, I could tell that there were some elements of critical pedagogy in all of their teaching styles. Some professors seemed to have a stronger connection to critical pedagogy than others. One professor said that he

valued having the students write down their reactions to activities so that he could gauge whether they were useful or not. Letting students comment on how they are being taught lets them have more of an influence over what happens in the classroom, which is a part of critical pedagogy. Other teachers who said that they use group activities are using critical pedagogy because they encourage dialogue in the classroom. Professors who said that they promote group projects and performances and role-playing are also encouraging students to apply their knowledge in a variety of ways.

A professor of health education that I interviewed seemed to have the highest level of critical pedagogy in class. Dialogue, critique, counter hegemony, and praxis, all four components of critical pedagogy seem to be present in this professor's classes. Most students get involved in discussions, and nothing is too personal to share as long as it relates to class. Students are encouraged to analyze their self individually and within society and how society affects behavior. Issues of race, ethnicity and gender within society are discussed as well as inequality. Real-life situations and how to address them are common themes for discussion. Finally, students are encouraged to help change the world through participation in clubs as well as making a difference on their own by standing up and speaking out against the maltreatment of others.

Some of the professors that I spoke with seemed like they would like to use more elements of critical pedagogy in their classes if they could. The professors who said they would like to have oral exams don't do so because they are hesitant to take up too much class time or to make students uncomfortable. Some of the professors

also said that they feel pressure to stick to a basic format so that students know what to expect. Though not all the professors seemed to incorporate dialogue, critique, hegemony and praxis into their classes, they all had at least one of these, and I think that they would incorporate more of them if they didn't feel pressured to stick to a basic teaching format. The students that were interviewed said that they liked a professor to use a few different methods but to mainly stick to a routine so that everyone could follow along more easily. One student said that it is distracting for a professor to use too many methods and that it takes away from everyone understanding the material. This might explain why the professors that were interviewed also said that they try not to use a huge variety of teaching: because students don't respond very well to it.

**Quantitative Results:** From performing univariate analyses on my data I found some interesting percentages and averages. Only 43.4% of the questionnaire respondents considered themselves to be nontraditional though more of them would be considered nontraditional according to their age. The majority of respondents had a job, but fewer of them were married or had children. The large majority said that they learned more from in-class discussions than they did when studying on their own. Also most of them said that they would prefer to not take online classes. (See Table 1.)

Table 1 Univariate Analysis

Average Age	24.5
Percent Male/Percent Female	30.2/67.9
Percent Employed	62.3
Average Hours Worked	13.35
Percent Married	20.8
Percent With Children	17
Percent Learn More From Lecture	71
Percent Prefer to Not Take Online Classes	62.3

From performing bivariate analyses, I found that there was a significant correlation between age and liking to participate in class discussions. There was also a significant correlation between age and preferring to obtain good grades over knowledge. Another significant correlation was having kids and the preference of take-home tests over in-class tests. These correlations all indicated that age does have some effect on what type of teaching formats will appeal to someone. (See Table 2.) The only other significant correlations besides these ones were ones to be expected such as correlations between considering oneself a nontraditional student and having children.

Table 2 Bivariate Analysis

Correlation Coefficients	Significance Level
Age/Liking to Participate in Discussions	-.314
Age/Preferring Knowledge Over Grade	.299
Having Kids/Preferring Take-Home Over In-Class	-.288

From my interviews and questionnaires, I found that though traditional and nontraditional students are not on completely different ends of the spectrum as far as learning preferences, they do tend to lean towards some specific behaviors and

preferences in the classroom. The students that were individually interviewed reported that they prefer a mostly predictable and routine teaching style. The professors that were interviewed seemed to agree that there are some clear differences in approaches to learning between traditional and nontraditional students. However, they reported that in general they did not feel that they had to alter their teaching style at all to include different learning styles. This is consistent with what Merrill, 2001 found when having professors fill out questionnaires. All of the professors that I interviewed seemed to show some signs of using critical pedagogy in their classrooms, but to different degrees. There was also a consensus that nontraditional students tend to have different strong suits in the classroom than their traditional peers. In general, the professors did not seem to think that older students prefer different learning methods than do traditional students.

### **Discussion**

Overall I did not find a very distinct difference between the responses of the traditional and nontraditional students towards methods of critical pedagogy. More nontraditional students did indicate that they prefer classes to teach them to think critically and that contain controversial material. Nontraditional students were also more likely to desire good grades over knowledge and to like participating in class discussions. These results were similar to some of the findings in the studies that I mentioned in the literature review. The professors seemed to believe that there is some difference between younger and older students as far as behavior in classroom. Professors thought that older students are more responsible, respectful, and serious about their education. However, they did not think that older students

would want to be taught in different ways than younger students would. Though there was some variance, I thought that the surveys would show a greater difference between the preferences of traditional and nontraditional students as far as teaching styles. It's possible that a different set of questions would result in different findings. My findings from the professor interviews were pretty consistent with what I expected: they saw some difference between younger and older students but not a hugely significant one. They also all seemed to include some aspects of critical pedagogy in their classes, but in different ways and to different extents. To get a bigger picture on this topic, more detailed interviews and surveys could be conducted with people from many different colleges and universities, public and private. Also more research could be done on whether or not critical pedagogy is present in college classrooms and to what extent.

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**Appendix 1**

This is a confidential survey.

Please do not write your name.

Participation in this survey is completely voluntary.

All responses are anonymous.

The data will be used for a student research project.

1. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What is your gender? \_\_\_\_\_
3. What is your ethnicity? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Are you employed? \_\_\_\_

If yes, how many hours per week do you work? \_\_\_\_

5. Are you married? \_\_\_\_
6. Do you have children? \_\_\_\_

7. I consider myself a “nontraditional” student.

- 1. Strongly Agree**
- 2. Agree**
- 3. Neutral**
- 4. Disagree**
- 5. Strongly Disagree**

8. I prefer professors to stick to a basic teaching style rather than using a variety of methods.

- 1. Strongly Agree**
- 2. Agree**
- 3. Neutral**
- 4. Disagree**
- 5. Strongly Disagree**

9. I like working in small groups during class.

- 1. Strongly Agree**
- 2. Agree**
- 3. Neutral**
- 4. Disagree**

**5. Strongly Disagree**

10. Doing group projects helps me learn the material better.

**1. Strongly Agree**

**2. Agree**

**3. Neutral**

**4. Disagree**

**5. Strongly Disagree**

11. I like participating in class discussions.

**1. Strongly Agree**

**2. Agree**

**3. Neutral**

**4. Disagree**

**5. Strongly Disagree**

12. I like classes that teach me to think critically.

**1. Strongly Agree**

**2. Agree**

**3. Neutral**

**3. Disagree**

**4. Strongly Disagree**

13. I learn more when controversial topics are discussed in class.

**1. Strongly Agree**

**2. Agree**

**3. Neutral**

**4. Disagree**

**5. Strongly Disagree**

14. In-class discussions help me learn more than studying on my own.

- 1. Strongly Agree**
- 2. Agree**
- 3. Neutral**
- 4. Disagree**
- 5. Strongly Disagree**

15. Applying new concepts to the real world helps me learn more.

- 1. Strongly Agree**
- 2. Agree**
- 3. Neutral**
- 4. Disagree**
- 5. Strongly Disagree**

16. I prefer discussion-based classes over lecture-based classes.

- 1. Strongly Agree**
- 2. Agree**
- 3. Neutral**
- 4. Disagree**
- 5. Strongly Disagree**

17. I prefer professors to have a formal teaching style.

- 1. Strongly Agree**
- 2. Agree**
- 3. Neutral**
- 4. Disagree**
- 5. Strongly Disagree**

18. I prefer take-home tests over in-class tests.

- 1. Strongly Agree**
- 2. Agree**

- 3. Neutral**
- 4. Disagree**
- 5. Strongly Disagree**

19. I prefer short-answer questions on exams rather than essay-style answers.

- 1. Strongly Agree**
- 2. Agree**
- 3. Neutral**
- 4. Disagree**
- 5. Strongly Disagree**

20. Getting good grades is more important to me than obtaining knowledge.

- 1. Strongly Agree**
- 2. Agree**
- 3. Neutral**
- 4. Disagree**
- 5. Strongly Disagree**

21. If given the option, I prefer taking online classes.

- 1. Strongly Agree**
- 2. Agree**
- 3. Neutral**
- 4. Disagree**
- 5. Strongly Disagree**

## Appendix 2

### Questions for Students

1. Do you attend college full-time? Do you work? Do you have a family?
2. Is there something about college that you don't like/is there something particularly challenging for you?
3. What is something you really like about college? Can you describe a class that you particularly enjoyed?
4. What would make college better for you?
5. Do you like professors to stick to a basic teaching method or do you like a wide variety?
6. Do you prefer a lecture-type class or a seminar? Why?
7. Do you like it when professors encourage small group activities? Are they helpful in learning?
8. What are the advantages/disadvantages of having a mix of ages in the classroom?
9. Would you prefer classes where everyone was near your age?
10. Do you like participating in group discussions?
11. Which helps you learn more: class discussions or studying on your own?
12. Do you prefer in-class exams or take-home exams?
13. Do you prefer short answer questions or essay-style questions?
14. If given the option would you prefer to take online classes?

15. How important do you think it is for professors to relate information to how it applies to the real world?
16. How important is it to obtain useful knowledge in a class vs. get a good grade?
17. Do you enjoy classes that take a critical approach to society and examine societal problems/issues?
18. Do you like classes that present controversial views or material? How could this be helpful for learning?
19. Do you prefer a professor to have a more formal or a more informal teaching style? Do you like the professor to lead the class or do you prefer it to be more democratic?
20. Can you think of a teaching method that you really liked/ that helped everyone learn more?

### Appendix 3

#### Questions for Professors

1. College students may prefer different methods of learning depending on their age. Can you explain why you think this is true or untrue?
2. How do you think the challenges of meeting class requirements differ for younger and older students?
3. What characteristics if any do you think older students share as far as behavior in the classroom?
4. Are there any advantages to having a mix of ages in the classroom? Do you have any examples?
5. Are there any disadvantages to having a mix of ages in the classroom? Do you have any examples?
6. In your experience are older students more or less likely to participate in class discussions and other activities?
7. Does having students work in groups sometimes help them learn more? Do you have any examples?
8. In class do you think it's important to have students discuss and analyze concepts? Why?
9. In class do you think it's important to have students apply new concepts to the real world? If so, is this important for real learning?
10. In class do you present less popular or controversial views?
11. In your class do you present any critical assessments of society such as issues of inequality?
12. Is your teaching style more formal (hierarchical) or more informal (equal?) Is the class setting more democratic, or do you tend to take a leadership role?

13. What method of assessing students' knowledge is the most effective? Why?
14. Which teaching methods do you think help students take charge of their own learning? Do you think these methods would be likely to differ based on the age of the student?
15. Are there any other methods of teaching you think help everyone learn more?