



# 筑紫女学園大学リポジット

## INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING & WRITING WITH ADULT STUDENTS

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# INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING & WRITING WITH ADULT STUDENTS

Tamah NAKAMURA, Kathy HAIRSTON

Adult learners have a growing presence on many college and university campuses today, and many of these learners participate in non-traditional programs, which emphasize individualized learning and writing. In this article, the authors, who met during their time in a non-traditional doctoral degree program, share their own experiences as adult learners, and the work they do teaching the subject of writing to diverse undergraduate students in the United States and Japan.

## **I. The Authors as Non-traditional Students:**

Dr. Tamah Nakamura

Aesthetic expression through dance movement and performance has always been a highly valued part of my life. As an American who is a thirty-year resident in Asia, twenty of those in Japan, I live in a culture which places high value on constraint of emotional expression in the adult maturation process. I turned to dance and performance as a form to release emotional expression. I have been practising classical ballet for 14 years and Butoh dance for two years. I started practising classical ballet in my late 30's and had not studied dance formally before. Although I started late, my Japanese teacher discovered my ability to “express” and included me in many Russian folk dances and also choreographed special pieces for solo class recitals. It was through these experiences that I discovered the stage provided a safety net and boundary between me and social judgment of my actions. I could express any emotion I wanted and no sanctions were brought against me. Quite the opposite from my experience in my daily life in Japan, my ability to express was praised.

One of my personal ways of knowing is through a kinesthetic, experiential approach to learning. As an educator at the university for many years teaching intercultural communication, gender studies and second language skills, I have always preferred action-oriented, creative techniques (role play, movement conversations, etc.). I have also been facilitating discussion groups on gender and women's issues for Japanese and non-Japanese women in the community for about ten years. Gradually, I noticed that the learning of new patterns first required a shift in old patterns in order

for new ways of acting to emerge. I realized that it is important for people to shift their current habits so they can create their own new patterns from information stemming from the consciousness that arises from that movement. There is nothing I can teach them. I can only facilitate their learning. They have the capability to learn it themselves. I began to sense a need to synthesize my experiences teaching and living in Asia into a theoretical framework toward helping others. In 1999 I entered a doctoral program at Fielding Graduate Institute, Santa Barbara, California as a means of explicating that experience.

Fielding is an interdisciplinary program. It is based on a scholar-practitioner model, set in a transformational learning framework. In addition to the theoretical component for each course, an application to the student's practical/social context is required. At the orientation session, I was torn between a strongly internalized bias that research should be something 'academic', and my interest in aesthetic movement. However, when a faculty asked me, "What is your passion?" I responded from my heart, "I want to be a dancer!" I stayed with my 'passion' of movement as expression exploring it through theory in coursework and applications of expressive movement in experiential settings.

Presently, I teach in two undergraduate university programs in Japan. One is in a four-year women's university in an English department with a focus on teaching English communication skills. The English proficiency level ranges from false beginner to high intermediate across the four years. In terms of writing the Japanese students are taught grammar translation at the sentence level in high school. Writing instruction at university focuses on the formation of topic sentences, cohesion within sentences, and coherence between sentences. The ultimate writing goal is a multiple paragraph essay.

Another program with a writing component is one of the programs in the International Student Center at Kyushu University, Japan in Today's World (JTW). Started in 1995, it is a successful short-term, 10-month, 2-semester multidisciplinary program with core course offerings such as economics, city planning, law, traditional and contemporary performance arts and literature, manga, anime, and gender. Core courses are taught in English. Japanese language courses are part of the curriculum. The students are culturally diverse from Asia, Europe, North America. Current students are at approximately 50 students per semester.

Dr. Kathy P. Hairston

A highly respected, former co-worker of mine once shared a few powerful words with me,

which I viewed as divinely inspired for the next stage of my life. He said, “You write well; you should teach!” Shortly thereafter, my teaching career launched in academia and since that conversation, I have spent more than 10 years teaching the subject of writing and working with diverse adult student populations, including immigrant learners. I have taught and worked in both traditional and non-traditional schools and programs with students who have varying degrees of skill, interest and ability when it comes to writing. Much of my teaching career in higher education, which has involved teaching Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), Writing Intensive, Composition, and Basic Skills courses, also paralleled the completion of my own doctoral studies. Like most of my students, I was looking to change direction professionally, and I needed to acquire new knowledge and skills to prepare for my new and different career. With that in mind, I chose to attend a non-traditional program for the opportunity to create my own individualized degree plan while having the flexibility to balance multiple roles and responsibilities in my life. Like many of my students, I faced a steep curve as I was developing and mastering new and different academic research and writing skills.

Dr. Nakamura and I met as non-traditional doctoral students while attending Fielding Graduate University, once known as the Fielding Institute, based in Santa Barbara, CA, USA. Fielding’s programs are suited to mid-career professionals who develop their own individualized programs with their own academic, professional and personal goals in mind. Both of us discovered that we possess natural connections anchored in our work with students, and in teaching the subject of writing along with a love for learning and non-traditional ways of knowing. As our doctoral studies and common interests continually evolved at Fielding, we chose to serve as student readers on each other’s dissertation committees. Much like our time at Fielding, our friendship grew personally and professionally, so we sought out future opportunities to collaborate together on writing, teaching and other projects as we navigate through our academic positions as administrators and professors.

Shortly after completing my doctoral studies, St Mary’s College of California offered me the opportunity to facilitate a PLA course as part of its LEAP Program in New York City. LEAP, short for Liberal Education for Arts Professionals, was founded in 1999 to create educational access for a particular underserved population, that of diverse adult dance professionals from ballet, modern, jazz/tap, multicultural dance companies, musical theatre, television, and film (Lamoreaux & Taylor 2008, Winter-Spring). Since its initial beginnings in San Francisco, the program has expanded to include dance communities in Los Angeles, New York City and Las Vegas. One primary goal of the program is to assist diverse adult dance professionals with transitioning into new careers as they individualize and complete their own Bachelor’s degree programs. To accommodate the schedules of these dance professionals, classes are held either on Sunday or Monday evenings, when most

theaters are closed, and in locations near the dance community instead of a college campus (Lamoreaux & Taylor 2008, Winter-Spring). Also, class schedules are often set to accommodate performing and touring calendars of major dance companies.

My experience as a non-traditional doctoral student at Fielding along with my teaching experiences with adult students has certainly prepared me for my current position as Director of Academic Review (DAR) at Empire State College in Syracuse, NY. In my role as DAR, I work with diverse adult students, and have reviewed over 1200 of their degree plans and the portfolios that accompany them. I see common themes that exist with our students, some of which are similar to what I experienced as an adult learner. These include balancing multiple roles and responsibilities, navigating career transitions, and mastering new academic skills such as academic writing.

With more than 35 locations, Empire State College has been part of the State University of New York (SUNY) system of colleges and universities within New York State since 1971. Similar to graduate students at Fielding, students at Empire State College (ESC) design individualized Associate and Bachelor degree programs under the guidance of their faculty advisors referred to as mentors. Specifically, this formation of a “mentor-based approach to student academic planning and evaluation and an administrative ability to bring precisely the necessary academic resources from the multi-campus SUNY System, or from the community to the service of a single student’s educational needs (Hall, J. & Bonnabeau, R., 1993),” signifies Empire State College’s niche in nontraditional education.

## **2. The Presence of Adult Learners and Their Impact in Higher Education**

Prompted by the changing landscape of higher education, a growing number of programs are now catering to the needs of adult learners, who have an ever increasing presence on college and university campuses. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), students who were 25 years and older comprised nearly 40 percent of all college and graduate students in 2009 (NCES, 2009). This figure is projected to grow to 43% by 2020 as 9.6 million older students choose to attend college (NCES, 2009). This comes at a time when the number of traditional learners in the 18 to 22-year age group is dwindling within colleges and universities.

In fact, some institutions have been formed with adult learners in mind, including Empire State College, Fielding Institute, Regis University, and, more recently, the University of Phoenix and several other institutions within the for-profit sector (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Many of these new institutions recognize that adult students who choose to pursue a college education don’t fit the

traditional model. They work and have families, so they don't have time for the typical face to face classroom experience, and/or have different scheduling demands as a result of their roles and responsibilities. In addition, they often need assistance as part of the process of acquiring new skills while navigating career transitions, and industry changes. Furthermore, these students bring knowledge with them based on their work experience, but need an academic credential to validate it, and confirm eligibility for any future promotions. Unlike non-traditional students, the typical traditional student pursues an education full time while not yet having acquired much professional experience.

The role of technology and the changes within it have widened the options available to students who wish to obtain a degree. The internet and WIFI, computers and other mobile devices such as laptops, phones, tablets along with a wide variety of networks and software programs like SKYPE and other forms of video chat, Course Management Systems such as Moodle and Blackboard, allow students to enroll in programs that are not bound by location or schedule. Moreover, sources and delivery of course content have expanded. In addition to traditional classroom learning, adult learners can take advantage of Pre-Evaluated College Learning, and Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) as well as group, online, traditional, and individualized studies.

The flexibility of technology and the diverse options available to adults for acquiring a degree certainly contribute to the growing number of new programs for adults, and students in higher education. These options can potentially shorten the timeframe and costs for securing an academic credential, whether it's an undergraduate or graduate degree or certificate program. It also contributes to a growing and changing body of research involving adult learners. Mezirow, Kegan, Knowles, and Erikson represent just a few scholars who have studied adult learning and development, thereby contributing to this research (Merriam, S. & Caffarella, R., 1999).

In spite of the advantages that non-traditional programs and individualized learning offer, one challenge most adult students face in completing their degrees includes sharpening their academic writing skills. Becoming adept at academic writing often poses many challenges for adult learners. For instance, students may bring substantial knowledge that can be applied to their degree programs, but they may need assistance articulating that knowledge to others. In addition, writing in an academic environment generally differs from the writing that students may be exposed to in the work world, and with social media as its purpose, goal, style, use of language, and audience vary. Moreover, many students have been away from school for several years, and out of practice with writing, so they may need refresher courses and coaching to polish up those writing skills.

Needless to say, this process is not an easy one, and many adult students struggle with it, not always feeling confident despite the knowledge, experience and expertise that they possess. Such a struggle may negatively impact their confidence, especially if students are feeling ill-equipped to handle this challenge, and in their ability to manage other pressures in their lives. For these reasons, diverse student and academic support systems and resources need to be in place to enhance the likelihood for student success, particularly as it relates to their writing. Students who take advantage of available coaching and writing workshops along with other tutorial services and resources can often boost their performance academically and their confidence.

### **3. Selected Examples of Individualized Learning and Writing**

As previously mentioned, mastering the skill of academic writing often poses many challenges for students, especially if they are returning to school after being away for several years. As a result, this can affect their confidence and their performance in school. However, some of the benefits of individualized learning and writing, particularly knowledge that involves Prior College Learning, can help to counteract some of these potential issues. Some of these benefits will be discussed in this section as the authors share selected examples that reflect student-centered learning and writing based on their own experiences in teaching and working with adult learners.

Prior College Level Learning refers to knowledge gained outside of the traditional college classroom, generally from life and work experience. Typically, this kind of knowledge is verified with such forms of documentation as transcript credit; standardized exam reports; pre-evaluated learning for various structured programs, trainings and licenses and Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) essays written by students. Much of the discussion in this section will concentrate on PLA essays written by students along with other written work.

#### St Mary's College of California

Securing PLA credit signifies only one of the benefits adult learners gain when they enroll in the *Personal and Professional Assessment (PPA)* course as part of St Mary's LEAP Program. In PPA, these dance professionals study adult development and learning with a particular focus on "the exploration of the learning cycle, from reflection on experience to construction and application of knowledge. This analytical and self-reflective process is recorded in an Experiential Learning Portfolio, a collection of essays and supporting documentation, which may be further evaluated for transcribed academic credit (St. Mary's College of California, n.d)." Students receive 3 credits for the PPA course and could receive up to 30 credits for writing PLA essays.

At the beginning of this course, students work with the Director of the LEAP Program to determine PLA topics for their essays. Although the essays are written individually, students work together in peer review groups, providing feedback to each other on their essays. Instructor feedback is given as well. Such feedback helps students in mastering the structure, content and format of the essay, which entails a discussion of the student's background and experience in writing the essay, key points and content along with documentation that accompanies the essay. This process allows students to see, explore and reflect on the diversity in approach, content and perspective of a given PLA topic. Students often write on dance culture, teaching, the care and prevention of injuries along with other non-dance topics like death and dying, personal finance, and world cultures.

Based on student comments, writing PLA essays proves to be an affirming and validating experience. Often, students do not realize much knowledge they possess until they begin articulating it. Although initially uncomfortable at first, students come to appreciate the small group, peer review process. Receiving feedback from and delivering it to other students who experience and understand dance culture without having to explain it goes a long way toward validating and valuing their own knowledge. It also proves helpful to students in working through assorted writing blocks, and tackling difficult subjects. Furthermore, students share that they feel more confident in their writing abilities and in their knowledge as a result of studying adult development and learning, writing the essays and collaborating with other students.

### Empire State College

*Individualized Prior Learning Assessment or iPLA* at Empire State College differs considerably from St Mary's. Much like the students in the LEAP Program at St Mary's, students at ESC meet with their mentors to figure out how PLA will fit in with their degree plans. Unlike the LEAP Program, students at ESC rarely enroll in a facilitated course on PLA, but participate in an interview with an evaluator as part of the process for verifying credit. For this reason, essays tend not to be as structured and rigorous. In addition, more diversity and flexibility in iPLA course content is available as students can have up to 93 credits of iPLA as part of a degree plan (Empire State College, 2013-14). Studies in Deaf Culture; Crocodilian Biology; Aerial Hoop Technique; Apiary Farming; Organ, Eye and Tissue Recovery; Cherokee Language, Golf as Social Capital, and Belly Casting represent some of the diversity of topics in which students have pursued iPLA.

Another form of individualized writing that students must complete as part of their degree program portfolio involves the *Rationale Essay*. In this essay, students demonstrate their

understanding and awareness of the education that they are receiving while attending Empire State College. Often, this essay is viewed as a logical argument that substantiates the design and validity of the degree plan, along with the structure, processes, decisions and reasons behind creating it. It also represents the student, and serves as the tie that binds together all of the documentation that is submitted in the portfolio in preparation for the review process.

Specifically, the Rationale essay includes a discussion of the student's personal, professional and academic goals; how s/he meets the educational expectations, guidelines and requirements of the ESC along with the professional expectations in a student's field of study (Empire State College, 2016-17). This essay is crafted under the guidance of the student's mentor or faculty advisor in a course entitled Educational Planning. In the Educational Planning course, the mentor and student work together in researching and developing the degree plan, determining how prior learning fits within it and identifying courses needed to complete it. ((Empire State College, 2016-17). This essay accompanies the portfolio when a student submits his or her degree plan for review and approval along with several other items that are attached to it, such as the degree plan, transcripts, PLA documents, and the SUNY General Education document.

Military and veteran students represent another underserved population with whom Empire State College works closely. In 2014-15, ESC had 1,536 military and veteran students along with their dependents enrolled in its degree programs, comprising about 7½% of the approximately 20,000 students enrolled in ESC (Empire State College, 2014-15). Like many other students, military students who often experience multiple deployments, value the option of pursuing individualized learning and instruction not bound by schedule or location. Students also have access to the Office of Veteran Military Education (OVME), a central office for information, services and resources for veterans and military families. This becomes especially helpful for active duty soldiers who receive tuition assistance, and veterans who are taking advantage of the GI Bill for educational benefits.

Similar to all ESC students, military students can apply their military knowledge to their degree programs. Specifically, they can choose to share their experiences and subsequent knowledge in their coursework as well as in their Rationale and iPLA essays. One colleague from the Fort Drum, NY location said that she does not press her students to write about the trauma of war, but often they find it helpful to process their experiences, particularly if they are transitioning back to civilian life. Others do not and some may struggle, eventually withdrawing from their ESC studies if they are feeling depressed.

As part of the writing component in the International Student Center at Kyushu University,

international students from all over the globe, and Japanese students whose English proficiency level is extremely low come together. In terms of writing, the Japanese students are used to doing grammar translation at the sentence level in high school so they do not even know what a paragraph is when they enter university. I prefer to focus on the international students who do ISP (Independent Study Project) writing who choose to do this special project with me. Fear is the biggest factor in getting them started - they are afraid that they cannot write 'academically'. My approach is to use the feminist research writing technique of bringing their personal voice into the material, and have them write in increments, paragraph by paragraph. I also encourage them to experience their topic by doing online surveys, or a field experience. I think this fits into the student centered idea and also the current perspective on ethnography which encourages participatory research strategies since we are part of our research context, and not 'objective observers'.

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(中村 テーマ：英語学科 教授)  
(キャシー ハーストン：ニューヨーク州立大学 博士)