

# “Try this!” the sometimes-overlooked “older” student

Distance Learning

131



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Distance learning is a huge plus for many folks who may not fit the usual demographic of the traditional college student – often referred to as ‘the non-traditional student’: perhaps with physical limitations that limits travel to a brick-and-mortar school . . . individuals living around the globe for military, other employment, etc. . . . moms and dads whose time is very limited by work, children, other responsibilities. And, yes, there is another demographic: the person who has been out of school for a number of years – for a variety of reasons – and has decided to return, using online learning as the educational approach. This is a class of students who might require some special attention . . . and the more we know the ins and outs of the so-called ‘older student’ the better we can make the student’s classroom experience.

These suggestions will help (and you will find me giving specific examples of what has worked for me) . . .

**Many online classes have a Week1/Unit 1 “Let’s Get to Know Each Other” type of discussion thread – note any students who mention an older age or long time since in school.** Often, in these types of discussion threads, students who are older and/or have not been in school for some time will tell the class. Always respond to these students with very motivational and encouraging words (as an example: I will always tell these students my mom took her first online course at age 90!). This not only lets them know you are in their corner but also can make them feel more relaxed. Also be sure to jot down their name and any relevant info for later use in the class.

**Send a general email to the class asking for anyone with circumstances that could use a bit more attention.** No student should ever be singled out in a class email, of course. But asking all students to respond might result in this student coming into your “net” of responses. I have had many students “confess” their perceived limitations in taking an online class, which has allowed me to offer more specific suggestions and resources to assist them. These will not be the only students responding – an email such as this can result in an overall more targeted approach to many students, thus making the course ahead easier for success.



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**It's not unusual to find older students with rudimentary knowledge of computer use.**

In teaching a distance learning course, it can be easy to assume all students in the class are familiar with computer use. But as nearly every online learning instructor has discovered, this is not 100% true. And with the older student taking an online course – especially if it's the student's first time – can be especially challenging if computer knowledge is limited. The basic items are easy to assume all students know, such as how to attach a file, where to submit an assignment and how to find a professor's feedback; yet, for the older student or student not in a classroom for many moons, these may be unknowns. An item to keep in mind: they might be embarrassed to admit this, so an added paragraph in a general welcome to the class asking folks to contact you if they need input in these areas can make it much more comfortable for students with these weaknesses to share.

**Be aware of students taking a course that is a same-subject one years earlier – and find that what you teach is not in sync with what was learned in the long-ago course.**

Depending on the course and teacher from long ago, the older student might find what you teach and what is in the class texts might be at odds with what the student originally learned. This could result from updates or changes in the subject matter or a previous instructor giving incorrect or outdated (now) information. Always assure all students that what you teach, the feedback you give and the course resources are all current – and all can be depended on. Added to this: always invite students to contact you with any confusion they find in these items. The more an instructor reaches out giving clarification to students, the better the class for all.

**Lack of confidence in doing well in the course can be heightened by students who are older and/or have not been to school in quite some time.** When one is not used to being in a classroom, it is an easy leap to know these folks may not have much confidence, feel heightened stress and simply be worried about taking a new class and especially (perhaps) a course where computer knowledge comes into play. Again, the more motivation and “don't worried – I've got you covered”-type messages that come from the instructor, the more confidence can be had. A big plus is also making sure to point out – with enthusiasm – any discussion posting or assignment item an older student presents that is golden: this goes a long way in building confidence.

**As much as possible, learn about these students' backgrounds: they may have much not considered that could be beneficial in the course.** It can be easy for a student to not take into account out-of-school experience that can nicely lend itself to the course and course subject. With an older student, there can be much greater experience, yet they may not have thought about it in terms of the course. As an example, I teach English, and I've had students in their 40s, 50s and 60s who were years earlier involved in helping with church bulletins, company newsletters and block party letters. Until I reminded them of the writing they did then and what is expected now, they had not considered – or, in two cases, remembered – their past writing experience. This knowledge gave each a bit more of a confident smile. The bottom line to this suggestion: this type of student has tools that may be rusty but are still quite useful in the course.

**The older student at times could have health issues or more urgent family matters than younger students.** No matter the age of a student, various problems, challenges and “unexpecteds” can interrupt an otherwise smooth “career” in an online class. However, the older student could possibly have more of these due to age: family deaths or hospitalizations, illness to the student, family situations that must be addressed and employment promotions or relocations. While not every one of these might be capable of working around or through in the class, they should try to learn as much as possible when they occur so assistance can be tried. Again, in the opening welcome email, be sure that this point is made, i.e. to reach out if any of the mentioned items occur.

**If the class setup is such that mentoring between students is possible, ask the older student if there is an interest.** “I get by with a little help from my friends,” the Beatles sang – and such is true in any online class beyond the input from an instructor. Many older students have been made to feel more comfortable in a class by being paired with a student who seems

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to handle the class setup and work quite well. Be sure your school allows this, but whether the answer is yes or no, remind students to always reach out to one another during discussions to assist fellow classmates who might seem a bit lost.

**When the school allows reaching out by phone to these students, big plusses can result.**

A phone call can be an online instructor's best friend when it comes to learning about and being an asset to the older student. Overwhelmingly in calls I have had with older students and/or students who have not been in school for quite some time, I not only learned valuable info that better prepared me to work with them during my courses but also created an important instructor–student bond that helped keep these students engaged and motivated. It's important to jot down info from these calls – the memory of them might fade after a week or so, but the writings will not.

**Keep a record of items found to be helpful in teaching future like students.** The more info a distance learning instructor has to teach and interact with an older student/a student out of school for a longish time, the better experience that student will have in the class. Keep an online file of bits and pieces of info you found helpful instructing these students. The file I have is nearly three pages after my many years of online teaching, and I list the items under categories, such as “teaching tips,” “useful background info” and “career/life connections.” When I learn about this demographic student and somewhat of the student's background, I go to this file – and always find one or more items that have matched with the student.

REMEMBER: Grandma Moses was 78 when she began painting, Julia Child wrote her first cookbook at 50, Ray Kroc founded McDonald's at 52 – and each struggled in the beginning, but stayed the course for success.

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