Teaching in Accelerated Courses: The Faculty Perspective

By Carrie Johnson

This study included interviews with 18 faculty members who teach both adult accelerated and traditional courses. Participants were asked to share their experiences teaching courses in the two delivery models and reflect on the learning outcomes they observe. All participants had positive experiences with accelerated courses and most find that there is at least equal student learning in the accelerated courses.

In spite of the fact that accelerated courses have been a part of higher education for over thirty years, they continue to be criticized for their lack of academic rigor. Accelerated courses have been referred to as “McEducation” and “Drive-Thru U” to emphasize what some academics consider the inferior quality of these courses due to the speed in which they are delivered (Wlodkowski, 2003). Critics question how a quality course might be delivered in so few direct classroom instruction hours. These critics believe that such courses are too compressed to offer the depth and breadth of a course delivered in a longer format. They argue that accelerated courses are poorly designed and pack too much information into too little time (Shafer, 1995). Many college educators believe that academic rigor is being sacrificed for student convenience and higher enrollments (Scott, 2003).

Accelerated programs are designed for students who cannot commit themselves to traditional-length courses due to conflicts at work and home. Prior to the creation of these accelerated programs and courses in the 1970’s, adult students typically had to commit up to eight years of evening classes to complete an undergraduate degree (Husson & Kennedy, 2003).
In spite of the growing popularity and controversy surrounding accelerated programs, research in this area of adult education is limited. Most studies in this field tend to be modest at best. While this area of education has begun to be the subject of more research studies within the past five years, the research remains limited given the growth and popularity of these courses (Wlodkowski, 2003).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to begin to address the gaps in the literature on adult accelerated courses by exploring the perspective of faculty members who teach courses utilizing both accelerated and traditional delivery methods. While students frequently identify faculty as a key component to their learning in accelerated courses, faculty perception of the courses and student learning has not frequently been included in the literature.

Research Questions

This study was designed to answer the following questions:

1. How do faculty members perceive the instructional process in accelerated courses compared to traditional courses?

2. How do faculty members describe their experiences teaching traditional and accelerated courses?

3. What differences do faculty members perceive in the learning outcomes of the traditional and accelerated delivery models?
Methodology

The methodology selected for this study is what Merriam and Associates (2002) call a basic interpretive qualitative study. Data collection included semi-structured interviews with the participants. The first five participants were also observed teaching an accelerated course. This was done to observe classroom interaction and triangulate data.

Participants included faculty members who have taught both traditional and accelerated courses at 4-year institutions. To get a good breadth of information, faculty from a variety of academic disciplines were included. Full-time and part-time faculty members who had taught at least five classes utilizing the traditional delivery model and at least five courses utilizing the accelerated delivery method were invited to participate. The rationale for this requirement was that the faculty participants must have had the opportunity to reflect on their instruction and make and test modifications to their techniques in order to understand the differences in their approaches to instruction. These courses were all offered in a face-to-face classroom environment. Online courses were not considered in this study.

Of the 18 participants, 11 are women and 7 are men. Ten have earned their doctorate, four are ABD (all but dissertation), and four hold a master’s degree. The participant with the least amount of teaching experience has taught for five years, while the one with the most experience has taught for 40 years. The average number of years teaching for the participants of the study is 20.4 years.
Review of the Literature

In recent years we have seen an increase in accelerated courses and degree programs designed for adult learners. Accelerated learning programs are one of the fastest growing areas within higher education. There are approximately 300 colleges and universities with accelerated degree programs in the United States, with a total of one million students enrolled. In addition, almost every college offers some form of intensive course with reduced contact hours (Wlodkowski, 2003). Approximately 41% of students enrolled in degree-granting institutions of higher education are adult learners. This equates to 6 million students, age 25 and older, seeking a college degree. It is predicted that by 2011 approximately 20% of adult college students will be enrolled in an accelerated program (Wlodkowski, Mauldin, & Gahn, 2001).

The teaching structure or length of time within a classroom does not guarantee learning. “Teaching is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition to ensure that learning occurs. One need only call to mind a great autodidact like Lincoln to be reminded that so much of what we learn over the course of our lives takes place independent of teachers” (Swenson, 2003, p. 84). Those who have questioned the quality of accelerated courses have failed to question the quality of the traditional method of course delivery (Swenson). It cannot be assumed that teaching equates with student learning. We cannot assume that learning is taking place in the classroom, regardless of the mode of delivery. Scholars and public alike often have conflicting criteria of what quality might be (Wlodkowski, 2003).

Wlodkowski and Westover (1999) conducted a 2-year evaluation of six
undergraduate courses, utilizing summative, performance-based measures of learning in an effort to more clearly assess student learning and mastery of course content. All students were asked to self-report their learning. The attitudes and perceived learning of the students enrolled in the accelerated courses compared to students in the traditional courses was positive and similar, with averages of 93.8% and 94.4% respectively. In addition, faculty experts in each subject area designed and evaluated a summative evaluation for the courses studied. These faculty experts were unaware of the student demographics or the course delivery format the students had completed. When the accelerated courses were compared to the traditional courses, no significant differences were found in learning with one exception: Accounting II, which favored the accelerated format. While this difference was significant, the difference was small, and was thought by the researchers to be by chance. When looking at the work of the students, the faculty experts found that four out of five learners in this study met a standard of satisfactory to excellent for coursework at college level, regardless of the delivery method, traditional or accelerated.

An important indication of quality in an accelerated course is the use of effective modes of instruction. The traditional lecture and test method is often inappropriate for learning in the traditional classroom and even less appropriate in an accelerated course being taken by adults (Swenson, 2003).

Several researchers have noted that the classroom is the central point of learning for adult students. Due to the limited time they spend on campus, adult students see the classroom as their main place for engagement and interaction (Donaldson & Graham, 2002). Unlike the traditional-aged student, whose primary support and influence comes
from collegiate involvement with peers, most adult students indicate that their most powerful campus experiences take place in the classroom. In a study of 90 adult students at six different institutions, Kasworm (2003) discovered what she calls the “connecting classroom” where “adult students believe that the most powerful influence on their campus experiences is class-related learning successes and their relationships with faculty” (p.13).

Adult students seek to apply new learning immediately. Instructors who help adult learners make connections to their “real world” and previous experiences are considered most helpful by those students (Bowden & Merritt, 1995). Instructional strategies that have been found to be successful include providing examples that assist students in making connections to previous knowledge, class discussions, and small group work that calls for active student involvement (Imel, 2002). Scott (1996) found that students unanimously desire a variety of instructional strategies to avoid boredom in intensive classes. The importance of course organization is mentioned as crucial in accelerated courses since these courses progress so quickly. Students encourage instructors of intensive courses to utilize active learning strategies, including role play, problem-solving, and simulation exercises. In addition, students want the course content to be useful to them in their personal or profession lives. While students do not wish to be passive recipients of knowledge, most believe that some lecturing is necessary. They note that a good lecture provides students with essential information and allows them to benefit from the instructor’s expertise.

Adult learners desire a quality education that fits into their time schedule. What this often means is packaging the content of a semester-long course into as little as 20
classroom hours. In order to achieve this, additional independent work is placed on the learner (Bowden & Merritt, 1995). Several studies have examined student characteristics and how these impact learning in accelerated programs. In a study of 13 adults returning to college at two different institutions, Donaldson, Graham, Martindill, Long and Bradley (1999) identified factors that support or hinder students’ achievement. First, students noted the importance of experience. This includes prior experience, concurrent experience, and future experience. Future experience involves a realistic view of the future, which provides adult students with more of a sense of the importance of college than the traditional-aged student. Maturity was the second factor identified. Successful adult students regarded their maturation as a factor in their learning, as it prepares them to make better judgments and have a strong work ethic. Next, many of the subjects reported self-monitoring behaviors including effective study strategies and time management techniques. The successful adult students have an understanding of themselves as learners. Reinforcement systems also play a role in the success or challenges faced by adult students. These systems include friends, family, work, and former teachers who either supported or interfered with the students’ success.

Results

The participants of this study shared differences in instructional strategies in their accelerated classes compared to their traditional classes. Comments from participants point to the fact that they believe that the students in their accelerated courses are more actively engaged in the learning process. For the most part, these learners contribute to class discussions and are willing to take on the responsibility for learning outside of class. Conversely, the younger students in the traditional courses expect more direct instruction
from faculty and rarely engage in classroom discussion and active independent learning. Each of the 18 participants noted that they see active student discussions in the accelerated courses that is frequently lacking in the traditional courses. One participant stated that she shares control in the classroom with her students, but more so in the accelerated classes. She shared an experience in a recent accelerated class where she just sat back and listened to a group of students hold their own discussion for 15-20 minutes. She commented:

   It was remarkable what they [the students] saw; I mean because they saw what I had hoped they would see. They had connected [with the material] at a level that you’d want them to connect. That’s the kind of thing, when you back off and let control move to the student, it’s an enriching and humbling experience.

Participants find the students in their accelerated courses to typically highly be highly motivated and self-directed. One of the faculty participants stated, “You cannot waste their [the students] time with lectures… They are going to do it on their own, although you’re going to lead them.” Several participants stated that they refrain from delivering lengthy lectures in their accelerated courses. They also mentioned that they have to give up the role of “expert” and share the stage with the adult learners in their classroom. The faculty also noted that they believe it is important for the instructor to assist the students make connections between the classes they are taking. They noted that due to the accelerated nature of these courses, it enhances learning if students do not see each course as an isolated unit, but as a series of courses that build on each other. One participant articulated this by stating, “The teacher is the so called golden thread and saying, ‘I am going to weave you through these courses’.”

Each of the 18 participants felt positive about their experiences teaching both the traditional and the accelerated courses. While several mentioned their pleasure in having
an impact on the lives of their traditional students, they also noted the connection they 
had with their adult learners. Many of the participants described a collegial relationship 
with the adult learners in their accelerated courses. One faculty member described the 
differences he observes in his traditional and accelerated courses, stating,

The traditional students, they’re more relaxed. I think the atmosphere is more 
relaxed because they know that there’s only going to be three-quarters or half a 
chapter covered. Where I think in the accelerated, they come in fired up and they 
stay fired up and I try to keep them fired up.

Several participants mentioned the intensity that stays with the students 
throughout an accelerated course, compared to the peaks and valleys they see throughout 
a semester. They also commented on the higher attendance rates of the students in the 
accelerated courses.

Each of the 18 participants felt overwhelmingly positive about the adult students 
they worked with in the accelerated programs, frequently noting their dedication to 
completing their education and their desire to be academically successful. It was the 
strong belief of each participant that the adult learner brings several things into the 
classroom that their traditional students typically lack. Personal characteristics include a 
genuine interest in learning and high intrinsic motivation. As learners, the students in the 
accelerated courses are typically self-directed and engaged in the learning process. In 
addition, the adult learners are able to relate course content to their lives. Their ability to 
make such connections appears to enhance their understanding of the course content.

Fourteen of the participants stated that the students in their accelerated courses 
earn grades as high or higher then those in their traditional courses. In addition, several 
participants expressed their belief that not only do the students in their accelerated
courses tend to earn higher grades, but they do so because of their desire to master the material and not simply for the grade itself. Faculty participants believe that this is in contrast to most traditional students who do not personally connect with the material, but earn the grade simply for the act of earning a high grade.

Not one of the 18 participants of this study felt that they were compromising academic quality by offering courses in an accelerated delivery format. In fact, they each noted that they all believe the student learning is at least equal, and sometimes greater, in the accelerated courses. Study participants frequently mentioned the experience the adults bring into the accelerated courses that allows them to connect with the material more quickly and on a deeper level. They often noted the deeper learning and the ability of the adult students to go beyond the textbook information and practically apply the knowledge they are gaining. One participant stated, “I think in the accelerated [courses] the experience that the students are bringing in helps them see things more quickly than the traditional undergraduate.”

Not only did participants state that they are satisfied with the learning that takes place in their accelerated courses, several stated that more learning was taking place in these courses than the traditional courses. One participant mentioned that he feels he is able to challenge and push the learners in the accelerated courses more. He stated, “I find myself watering down the content for the younger students—those in the traditional course. I add a lot with the older students. I add from other books.” This participant, along with others, mentioned the lack of interest many of the traditional students have in studying and reading the material. Several of the participants noted the fact that the
students in their accelerated courses typically read the material prior to class; this is not typically the case with their traditional students.

Several of the faculty members participating in this study discussed the demonstration and application of knowledge as a significant learning outcome for the adult students in their accelerated courses. One participant stated,

Because quality to me is did that student really learn it. Are they able to take it and not just memorize it and feed it back? But are they doing the deep kind of learning that they need to be doing that will have an impact on their entire life. And I firmly believe that’s what’s happening in the accelerated program and it’s not necessarily happening in traditional… I have traditional students that come in and they may not remember what they had in the class before.

Several participants discussed the fact that they often seek depth over breadth in the delivery of content in the accelerated courses. They noted the exposure that they are giving students to their discipline, with the hope those students will continue to learn more about this subject on their own. One science teacher mentioned that she is not creating scientists, but making students aware of the science around them. Similarly, a math instructor noted that she was introducing students to a language and a way of problem-solving. These strategies are consistent with the reported needs of adult learners. Donaldson and Graham (2002) recommended that educators working with students in accelerated programs should focus on depth over breadth, stating, “Adults tend to be motivated to learn at a deep rather than a superficial level” (p. 9).

Brookfield (1990) agrees that adult learners seek less breadth in their courses, noting,

One of students most frequent lamentations after finishing a course or program is that the richness of the experience was reduced so drastically by their being forced to do too much in too short a time. They speak of information overload or of the danger of exploding from the amount of knowledge crammed into them (p. 51).
Brookfield indicated that he attempts to err on the side of depth over breadth in his classes, asking students to examine one concept, theory, or research procedure in depth rather than numerous ones superficially. Seeking deep reflection on what is studied, he notes that his reading lists have decreased substantially over the years.

It appears that the participants of this study have the same idea about teaching adult learners. By seeking depth of learning, they are introducing their students to concepts and encouraging them to incorporate this new knowledge into their lives. Participants noted that they clearly examined the content of their courses, seeking to ensure that learning was significant, meaningful and necessary. Several participants mentioned that they are very strategic in determining the content of their accelerated courses. They realize that they do not have time to cover extraneous details and they clearly identify learning outcomes they desire for the students in their accelerated courses prior to the beginning of each course. In fact, many faculty members stated that they have found their experience teaching accelerated courses to assist them in clarifying the goals they desire for the students in all of their courses.

Summary

Comments from participants point to the fact that they believe that the students in their accelerated courses are actively engaged in the learning process. For the most part, these learners contribute to class discussions and come to class prepared. In addition, they are willing to take on the responsibility for learning outside of class. Conversely, the younger students in the traditional courses expect more direct instruction from faculty and do not engage in classroom discussion and active independent learning as
consistently as the adults enrolled in the accelerated courses. Participants frequently noted the willingness of the adult learner to challenge him or herself. That coupled with the real life connections that the adult learners are able to make to the course content, made many participants believe that there is deeper learning going on in the accelerated courses. Since adult learners are able to utilize course content outside of the classroom, in their personal and professional lives, some participants believe that learning may be retained longer. Each participant maintains that the learning that takes place in the accelerated courses is sound and sees such courses and programs as supporting the educational process for adult learners who could not commit the in-class time necessary to a complete a traditional degree.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The participants of this study have overwhelmingly positive opinions about accelerated courses and the students that participate in them. Each of the 18 faculty members studied see accelerated courses as a positive addition to higher education, serving a real need for the adult learner.

In spite of the positive experiences these faculty members have experienced, it is important to note some of the concerns that were expressed. The most frequent concern is the fact that adult learners and the faculty who choose to teach them are often marginalized within their institutions. One participant who began her career in higher education teaching traditional courses and now teaches only accelerated courses stated,

The traditional model [in higher education] is still the majority model. The majority model is the culture and therefore all the things that go along with that culture are unquestioned and anything that falls outside of that culture is called into question and is marginalized; which is where accelerated education and adult education have been forever.
Other participants noted the heavy reliance of adjunct instructors in the accelerated programs which add to the suspicion and controversy surrounding such courses.

Another concern was the marketing of the accelerated programs. While most of the participants felt that their students were highly motivated and willing to take on the responsibilities associated with enrolling in an accelerated course, two participants worked for universities that encourage students to register for multiple accelerated courses at the same time. This practice detracts from the time the learner has to commit to their studies and is not advised by the participants of the study. In addition, some accelerated programs admit young learners with minimal work experience. Study participants advise against this practice, noting that this is difficult for the younger students to make connections to course content and their participation in these courses detract from the educational experience of all learners in the classroom.

While this study suggests that accelerated programs are a viable alternative for adult learners seeking a degree, it is important to recognize that the participants of this study have taught at least five accelerated courses. Many faculty members who are successful teaching traditional courses attempt to teach accelerated courses, but choose not to continue after teaching less than five sections. In addition, other faculty members choose not to teach accelerated courses at all. Future research should be done with these educators to gain their perspective and their reasons for not wishing to teach students in adult accelerated programs.
References


