Chapter 1

Understanding Accelerated and Intensive Courses as Excellent Learning Experiences

> "The biggest obstacle to innovation is thinking it can be done the old way."
>
> JIM WETHERBE (2001, p. 3)

BECAUSE ACCELERATED AND intensive learning formats reduce the amount of time to earn a credential or degree, working adults prefer these compressed formats for their efficiency in reaching such important goals (Aslanian, 2001). Today, we know that four out of five of high school graduates will be attending college within eight years of graduation (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, and Levey, 2007). Most of these college students will be nontraditional learners, working adults who commute to school and often are married with children. Accelerated and intensive programs offer these adults a flexible and advantageous means to a postsecondary education and a greater opportunity for satisfying work and economic security.

Before 1980, if you were a working adult—especially a working-class adult—a college education seemed impossible in terms of accessibility. At that time, with courses only available in a sixteen-week time frame, adults could usually only schedule one course a semester. Even with summer school, it would take roughly ten years to complete a degree. Now, taking an accelerated or intensive course every five to eight weeks, a working adult can expect to complete a degree in four to five years (Wilson, 2010).

This is a significant benefit for the individual and for society. Higher education has learned that it can serve many more people, often without the added expenses of huge residential halls, large bodies of full-time faculty, and restrictive selection criteria.

Quality of Accelerated and Intensive Courses

Because of their shortened duration, both accelerated and intensive courses can be reasonably critiqued as being overly compressed; sacrificing reflection, breadth, and depth; and resulting in crammed and poorly developed learning (Wolfe, 1998). However, as with conventional academic courses and programs, we cannot make a general assessment that fits all the accelerated and intensive courses and programs in postsecondary education. Quality in higher education is a conundrum, a perplexing question rife with the conflicting values, standards, and criteria of scholars and the general public alike.

Of the two formats, accelerated learning is the more unconventional because it requires fewer contact hours with an instructor than do conventional and intensive courses. Instead of completing forty to forty-five contact hours, an adult can finish a three-credit course with as few as twenty contact hours in a term of five weeks. Given this shortened interaction between the learner and the instructor, it is prudent to ask, what do standard barometers of quality in higher education indicate about these courses and programs? We have applied five criteria to answer this question: accreditation, learning, student attitudes, alumni attitudes, and student persistence and success.

Accreditation

Regional accrediting bodies, such as the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, assess accelerated learning programs as part of their accreditation process for colleges and universities. These accreditation reviews generally suggest to the public that an accredited institution has met acceptable academic standards and has the resources to provide a satisfactory college education. Colleges offering accelerated programs generally receive accreditation in accordance with the applied norms of conventional college standards (Commission for Accelerated Programs, 2009).

Learning

Herbert Walberg's synthesis (1988) of the research investigating student time spent on learning concluded that time is a necessary but insufficient

condition for learning. Time, in and of itself, is only a modest predictor of achievement. Other factors that influence learning as much as or more than time spent on learning are learner capability, the quality of instruction, and students' personal motivation (Wlodkowski, 2008). Further, there is evidence that the neural networks that make up long-term memory, the part of learning that lasts, fade unless the learning is used in relevant future work or life situations (Ratey, 2001).

Studies of accelerated courses have generally found that adult student learning meets a college standard of satisfactory to excellent (Wlodkowski, 2003). Pass rates of students from accelerated programs on the national registered nursing exam, for example, indicate that these students do as well as or slightly better than students from conventional nursing programs (Korvick, Wisener, Loftis, and Williamson, 2008). The evidence thus far suggests that adults in accelerated courses and programs learn satisfactorily and in a manner that meets the challenge of conventional college course work. Characteristics of adults, including personal motivation, desire for career advancement, work experience, and a history of self-directed responsibilities, fit readily with such aspects of accelerated formats as pragmatic courses, efficient academic progress, and experiential teaching methods. This symmetry and interaction may catalyze overall learning. Studies of accelerated courses commonly require adult learners to demonstrate writing skills, critical thinking, content mastery, and application of a knowledge base. Most of this research has been directed toward the disciplines of business management, nursing, teaching, and computer science. Investigations of the effectiveness of accelerated and intensive formats need to be expanded to the physical and natural sciences, medicine, and engineering to understand how widely applicable these approaches to learning are.

Student Attitudes

Historically, college student evaluations of conventional courses have been positive (Astin, 1993). This trend also holds true for adult student perceptions of accelerated and intensive courses and programs: adult students appreciate their effectiveness and the strong interest they cultivate (Scott, 1996; Wlodkowski, 2003).

Alumni Attitudes

Because alumni have hindsight and have been in the workforce after completing their accelerated programs, their perceptions are tested by time and actual work experience. Evidence to date is from business

management programs, whose alumni found their courses to be well taught, effective, and motivating (Wlodkowski, 2003).

Student Persistence and Success

We know that persistence and success as measured by graduation rates vary widely among universities and colleges. We also know that today's adult learners are intermittent students who stop out, often leaving for more than a semester to take care of family, work, and financial obligations, but eventually returning to obtain their certificates or degrees. For example, 28 percent of bachelor's degree recipients earn their diplomas more than six years after enrolling in college (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, and Levey, 2007). Today's adult students are people whose education has fit into the rest of their lives. With this context in mind, researchers have found that in accelerated programs the undergraduate degree completion rate for adult students averages close to 40 percent within six years (Wlodkowski, Mauldin, and Gahn, 2001). Nationally, the six-year graduation rate is 38 percent for undergraduate students, regardless of age, in large urban state colleges and universities (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 1997).

As reported as early as 1996 (Scott), and with respect to the more recent standards of quality in postsecondary education, accelerated and intensive programs continue to effectively educate and accommodate nontraditional students. Yet these programs are confronted by the same issues that face their conventional counterparts: how to provide a high-quality education for *all* students, and how to be agents of equitable social and economic improvement in a global society. In the pages ahead, we will focus on how instruction can contribute to meeting these challenges.

How Intensive and Accelerated Courses Differ from Conventional Courses

Adult participation in postsecondary education has reached unprecedented levels within the last decade. Due to online learning and flexible educational programming, colleges are more accessible to working adults. Working in tandem with this transformation is the fact that most adults are now aware that advancing their education is the vehicle to career enhancement (Ginsberg and Wlodkowski, 2010).

Working Adults

When you teach accelerated or intensive courses, you will likely teach working adults who are going to school part time, unlike eighteen- to

twenty-one-year-old, full-time residential students. Looking beyond this distinction, our experience indicates that community colleges and universities are significantly affected by their regional placement, with urban institutions varying dramatically from residential colleges in smaller towns away from large cities. One of us is a tutor at an urban community college, at which the students tend to be younger adults (twenty to thirty-five years of age); working-class or low-income; first-generation college students; and representing a racial and ethnic mix that includes at least fifty different nationalities, mostly students of color. Also, one of us teaches graduate courses in a large urban university, at which most students are white, over thirty-five years old, work full-time in professional roles, and earn in excess of sixty thousand dollars per year. We do not believe that using a description of "the average adult student" or any stereotypical label—such as the "millennial student"—will adequately serve the vast majority of readers of this book (Hoover, 2009). Regional differences are too particular. But we do know that the cultural experiences and life responsibilities of working adults affect them motivationally, and make them likely to have the following characteristics in formal learning settings (Wlodkowski, 2008):

- *Working adults want their experience, perspectives, and opinions to matter to their teachers.* For example, they may have a very different opinion about the results of a research study because people like themselves were not part of the sample investigated. Although their opinions may vary from the findings, adult students want their teachers to appreciate their perspectives.
- *Working adults use relevance as the ultimate criterion for sustaining their interest.* They may become bored with a topic because it does not concern them or relate to their experience, and, just as easily, they may become energized because a topic does concern them or relate to their experience.
- *Working adults are critical and self-assured about their judgment of the value of what they are learning.* They are living lives with real responsibilities, and they know what is important or useful to them. Such pragmatism influences their acceptance or rejection of course assignments and requirements.
- *Working adults respond to respect from their teachers as a condition for learning.* Learner opinions and perspectives need to be authentically acknowledged and integrated in course discussions, because they offer insights and opportunities for further learning. If learner opinions and perspectives are ignored or diminished by the instructor, adult learners are likely to feel offended or patronized.

- *Working adults want to actively test what they are learning in real work and life settings.* For example, adults appreciate assignments that offer them opportunities to apply what they are learning in their jobs or communities.
- *Working adults want to use their experience and prior knowledge as consciously and directly as possible while learning*. For example, an instructor might introduce a topic with a discussion focusing on what learners in the course already know, and might publicly list their perceptions, skills, history, and wisdom regarding the topic at hand.

Because these motivational characteristics of working adults are so essential, we suggest that you take a few moments now to reflect on them and to consider this question: How do your experiences as an instructor (or an adult learner) relate to the previous list of characteristics? In the chapters ahead, we will build upon these characteristics and use them to develop a motivational framework for guiding instruction.

Large Instructional Blocks of Time

When you teach accelerated or intensive courses, you will likely teach classes in blocks of time ranging from two to eight hours rather than from fifty to ninety minutes as in conventional courses. The advantages of longer classes are more opportunities for immersion, enrichment, and gaining in-depth experience in a topic or subject area; a more relaxed learning atmosphere; greater chances for developing inclusion, rapport, and collaboration with and among students; and the opportunity to include interactive and student-directed learning. Although there are significant benefits of longer classes, there are also necessary adjustments that instructors must make. Combining our experience with findings from studies that have explored intensive learning formats, we suggest the following critical modifications for instruction scheduled in large blocks of time (Scott, 2003).

Careful Preparation for Student Absenteeism

This planning includes both creating needed rules and offering empathetic and professional assistance to students. Students will inevitably be absent from class. In a five-week course that meets for four hours once a week, two absences equal 40 percent of the contact hours for that course. Most postsecondary schools have policies for dealing with student absences, and being familiar with these regulations will facilitate making any additional rules or choosing which ones to emphasize. We have found that

only allowing for absences that have been excused either prior to or after the student misses a class prevents miscommunication and sustains respectful relationships with adult students. We have also found it helpful to be clear and consistent, and to publish any rules we have about absenteeism in the course syllabus. Because individual student circumstances and course content vary markedly, it is often informative to talk with colleagues about how they handle this issue.

Assisting students who are absent is definitely a part of effective instruction for accelerated and intensive courses. We like to create partnerships or cooperative learning groups in our courses. If a member has to be absent, these structures allow students to share notes and information. In addition, these groupings provide a means for practicing any skills that may have been learned in the class from which the student was absent. We also encourage you as an instructor to make yourself available by e-mail, phone, or appointment in order to respond to the absent student's possible questions and requests. Sometimes adults feel self-conscious about being absent, and a warm welcome back goes a long way to dispel such feelings.

Guidance for Independent Study Outside of Class

With fewer class sessions, a shorter term for the course, and possibly fewer contact hours between students and the instructor, the instructor has greater reliance on students reading, studying, and practicing outside of class for their learning to occur. Although some adult educators have come up with a formula for student independent study, such as five hours of study outside of class for every contact hour in class, we have not found a comparable algorithm in our own work. However, there is no doubt that the quality of accelerated and intensive courses *depends* on student independent study, a process that is enriched by student collaboration outside of class. For example, when students are individually responsible for teaching different parts of an assigned reading to one another in a small cooperative group that meets prior to or after class (see the jigsaw method in Chapter Four), they can reduce their reading time and increase the depth of their learning. Such shared responsibility can lead to better learning and, just as significant, to enjoyment of learning. Clear, calendared outlines for readings and assignments with students being held accountable for this work in-class (see Chapter Five) and, just as importantly, receiving instructor or peer feedback on it as well (see Chapter Seven) can stimulate and sustain student work outside of class. In general, for every outside assignment, there needs to be a clear path for the student that makes this work worthwhile, either through a connection to a classroom

activity, such as a discussion or simulation, or through some form of assessment, such as a project or test.

Planning and Organization for In-Class Learning

In her research, Patricia Scott (2003) found that students regarded organization as one of the most important factors influencing a successful intensive course: "Because intensive courses progress so quickly, instructors need to be organized and present the material in an easy-to-follow manner. Without organization, intensive courses quickly become overwhelming and chaotic. Moreover, students recommended that instructors organize intensive courses to emphasize depth over breadth of learning. Too often, students said, intensive course instructors try to cover too much material, which creates information overload. Students preferred to delve into fewer areas in more depth and concentrate on major concepts rather than learning large amounts of seemingly inconsequential information" (pp. 32–33). On all counts, we heartily agree with Scott. We need to be selective, focusing on the powerful, central ideas and skills of a given topic or discipline (Donovan, Bransford, and Pellegrino, 1999). This approach helps adults both to develop understanding of a given subject and to create networks of meaning for future use and long-term memory. For example, the idea of *patriarchal power* in the study of history also has meaning for psychology and the social sciences, as well as for political theory and cultural studies. Discussing and exemplifying this concept in depth through relevant learning activities is far more important than asking students to remember the date when a particular monarch used his patriarchal power.

We acknowledge that there are many instructors who are intimidated by the need to cover everything in the course text. That is how many of us were taught or trained, recalling facts and demonstrating knowledge through multiple choice tests. However, such an approach keeps learning at the surface, a level at which it is easily forgotten and seldom applied. Intensive courses are an ideal format for applying what we have learned in cognitive science: take more time for students to deeply learn principles that cross disciplines and provide relevant knowledge for future learning (Wlodkowski, 2008). Chapter Eight offers methods and examples for designing lessons that can accomplish this goal.

Creation of Learning Activities to Engage Students During Longer Instructional Periods

Patricia Scott (2003) found that students preferred activities and assignments that allowed them to synthesize learning, and to apply or experience

the subject matter personally as they might with in-class collaborative assignments. This finding dovetails with a major purpose of this book: *To provide instructors of intensive and accelerated courses with a motivational framework and related teaching strategies that engage adult learners for extended periods of time to deeply learn relevant knowledge and skills.* Chapter Two introduces the Motivational Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching and Chapters Four through Seven comprehensively describe and exemplify specific motivational strategies to engage adults in continuous learning. An important advantage of this motivational framework is that because it is organized according to four motivational conditions—inclusion, attitude, meaning, and competence—you can use it to effectively pace a variety of learning activities across a longer block of instructional time.

Reading and Writing Assignments Prior to the First Class Session

The requirement that students read textual materials before their first class session is probably more important for accelerated than intensive courses, but it is relevant to both. When students have a background and familiarity with the subject matter through prior reading, they will find the first meeting's activities more relevant, useful, and memorable, leading to a productive initial session and worthwhile learning experience. Many instructors accomplish this goal by sending welcoming letters and e-mails as soon as students register for the course. (Please see Exhibit 4.2 in Chapter Four for an example of such a letter.)

It may also be necessary to require students to complete writing assignments prior to the first class session. Having an early chance to assess how well a student can respond to the writing expectations for a course allows for prompt feedback (see Chapter Seven, Strategy 39). Students generally appreciate being given as much of a chance as possible in the beginning of a course to understand what they need to do to plan for or revise their written work. This also gives the instructor an opportunity to suggest—where necessary—possible tutoring or other forms of assistance for the learner.

In our own work, we have found that early writing assignments need to be relevant and immediately applicable—not some form of test or standard assessment that may convey low expectations or mistrust. For example, we have asked students to write responses to case studies to be discussed at the first class meeting. We have also used students' essays on their personal theories of motivation as preassessments, which we then ask students to compare to their theories of motivation written at the conclusion of the course.

A Modular or Standard Syllabus for Course Instruction

For most accelerated courses and for many intensive courses, colleges have teams of faculty create a standard course syllabus to be used by all faculty who teach the course. This centralized version of the course syllabus or learning module has common elements, which usually include the course description; appropriate learning outcomes; prior-knowledge requirements; goals and objectives; required learning resources, such as texts and readings; designated assignments; evaluation forms and procedures; and a guide for each class session with suggested activities. Choosing which suggested evaluation procedures and class activities to use is often left to the discretion of the individual instructor. A major goal of this book is to increase the options for instructors regarding possible assessments and activities, which may also include assignments, giving both the teacher and students an approach that elicits students' intrinsic motivation.

For the prewritten modular activities for each class session in any course we teach, we can choose alternative activities to those modular activities based on the motivational framework and strategies discussed in this book. In general, planning or substituting with strategies from the motivational framework allows instructors to be more creative and feel less constricted by the activities in a standard module whose design may be limiting, given their particular students and their prior knowledge, diversity, and experience. The *superimposed method* of instructional planning found in Chapter Eight provides a means for selecting motivational strategies and activities from this book that may be preferable to what is provided in a course module for deepening student motivation and learning.

Because many of the instructors for accelerated and intensive courses are adjunct faculty, a centralized course syllabus offers consistency of purpose, content, and outcomes among different instructors that might not otherwise be present (Husson and Kennedy, 2003). The modular design can enhance quality control while allowing for faculty members' own creativity. In addition, with a standardized syllabus, students can review the learning module before they take the course and can identify the necessary books and materials for study prior to the first day of class, making the most efficient use of their valuable time. In Exhibit 4.2 in Chapter Four, we offer an example of a syllabus for an eight-week, accelerated Introduction to Research course conceived, developed, and taught using the Motivational Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching and its related strategies.

Cohorts and Collaborative Learning

A characteristic of many intensive and accelerated programs is that they feature *cohorts* of students who enroll at the same time in a program and proceed through their courses as a cohesive group, beginning and ending their required courses together. This structure provides for stronger social connections among students, increased student interaction inside and outside of class, and greater collaboration for learning. In addition, when students can integrate their social and academic activities and feel a greater sense of belonging to an on-campus community, this often positively affects their capacity to persist in their courses and in their programs overall (Tinto, 1987).

Collaborative learning is an effective and motivating strategy for working adults (Barkley, Cross, and Major, 2005). Adult students can learn from the diversity in their groups, benefiting from one another's different cultural perspectives on matters ranging from economics to history. Their work and their life goals require cooperation. More broadly, whether in regard to something as personal as raising one's children or as global as safeguarding the environment, we need to learn how to foster mutual goodwill. The way we learn in groups in college can profoundly develop these skills. This book provides instructional methods to effectively implement collaborative and cooperative learning, which we describe in detail in Chapter Four.

Course Quality and the Instructor

Whether a course is conventional, intensive, or accelerated, although its quality relies on the institution that sponsors it, it only truly exists through the instructor who teaches it. Institutions provide regulations, standards, resources, monitoring, and instructors—and it is the instructor, online or in the classroom, who makes this entire enterprise come alive. The essence of quality is in the relationships, interactions, and learning that take place among a teacher and students over the period of a course. The possibilities are many. A course can be a charade with little offered, less expected, and a guaranteed acceptable grade. Or it can be a form of oppression with irrelevant subject matter that is taught as absolute truth, for which students are tested on their retention of little other than trivia. Or, possibly, it can be what this book is written to support: an experience in which all students feel respected, the subject is relevant, and students are engaged in and competently learning what they consider authentic and valuable in their real world.

Because intensive and accelerated courses require less time to complete than conventional courses, a necessary criterion by which to judge them is by how well they generate learning. Today, probably more than ever before, we rely on postsecondary education to produce student learning. Politically and socially, this goal is primary, with how we teach students being appraised by how well they learn (Tagg, 2003). Yet in this process, students are integral and communal beings, not simply recipients of instruction. We see the focus on academic learning as a necessary—but not the only—needed emphasis. The fundamental criteria for assessing the quality of a college experience are both the growth of students' knowledge and the broadening of their humanity. Ultimately to what kind of world does a college education contribute? As instructors, the values we encourage and reflect permeate every learning experience we foster and, therefore, are a fundamental component of anything students learn with us.

We propose careful assessment of the students' mastery of the learning objectives for any course, a process we discuss in depth in Chapter Seven. Measures of academic learning tend to be straightforward. When it comes to the values of a course, the degree to which it contributes to the moral empowerment of learners, and how their learning matters for a more just world, most measures of academic learning are insufficient. We have yet to discover a valid assessment for how much a learner cares or how that person will contribute, as a consequence of a particular course, to a more equitable social order. In fact, there is considerable debate within adult education about how much this field of study has actually contributed to transforming individuals or society (Wilson, 2009).

Our approach is to offer instructors a way to make the value of diversity a pervasive part of any course, a characteristic of quality that can be planned and implemented throughout a course. To accomplish this, we provide the Motivational Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching to consistently create learning experiences that allow learner differences to be mutually understandable, safely communicated, and avenues for building trust and collaboration (Ginsberg and Wlodkowski, 2009). The essentials of this motivational framework are that it (1) respects diversity; (2) engages the motivation of a broad range of students; (3) creates a safe, inclusive, and respectful learning environment; (4) derives teaching practices from across disciplines and cultures; and (5) promotes equitable learning. We offer this framework as an instructional compass and at the same time realize its limitations: the complexity of our human family eludes a single set of educational principles. This realization requires us as instructors to

appreciate how a healthy amount of humility and doubt can guide our teaching, arousing our empathy in order to understand the truth that views unlike our own also bear. With this understanding in mind, the next chapter explores what motivates adults to learn and how the motivational framework can guide the teaching of intensive and accelerated courses in ways that apply this knowledge.