Learning Strategies, Skills, and Experiences of Mature Students
2010 Version

External forces such as structural changes of societies, global economies, and personal inquisitions, have led to a need of lifelong learning and the learning of skills and qualifications, which not only is an adaptation to change but also the developing of autonomous agency generating change for one's self (Chappell et al, 2003; MacFadgeon, 2007). Resultantly, many traditional age students treat university like a leisure activity, whereas many mature students treat university as a necessity to better themselves, yet they are not being admitted or, while in university, they are experiencing numerous difficulties (Marks, 2002). However, by adjusting teaching moments to, for example, moments of transformative learning as well as involving "participation in constructive discourse to use the experience of others to assess reasons justifying these assumptions, and making an action decision based on the resulting insight," returning students could be better poised to maximize their learning potential (Mezirow, 1991, pp. 7, 8).

Key Points from Literature

- Basic adult learning principles to consider for returning students on campus: a) *Learner's need to know –* why, what and how; b) *Self-concept of the learner –* autonomous and self-directing; c) *Prior experience of the learner* - resource and mental models; d) *Readiness to learn –* life related and developmental tasks; e) *Orientation to learning –* problem centred and contextual; f) *Motivation to learn –* intrinsic value and personal payoff (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998).
- Mature students use learning and study strategies more appropriately and frequently than traditional students. Mature students are able to process information and select key points that are relevant to their learning, select self-testing strategies more so than traditional students and perform significantly better on exams, since because returning students do not need as significant amount of guidance and direction as traditional students (Devlin, 1996; Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Shacklady et al., 2009; Sheard, 2009).
- Mature students frequently disclose that they possess 'rusty study skills', low self-confidence and apprehension around re-entering college. Despite, mature students do just as well or better than traditional students in higher education (Brodie et al., 2009; Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Kasworm, 2010).
- Prior to returning to school, mature students tend to take inventory of personal assets and skills that could be helpful in successfully navigating through a renewed schooling experience (e.g., work ethic, previous schooling experiences, optimistic and resilient attitude) (MacFadgeon, 2007).
- Mature students experience financial, relationship and learning stress (Fleming & Murphy, 1997; Kallar & Ó hAodha, 2008; Kinser & Deitchman, 2008; McGivney, 2004). Resultantly, they might study on a part-time basis, and therefore, prolong their experience at university. Further, mature students are more likely to attend a local university, regardless if it is the best or most appropriate fit for their aims. Qualifications might be out of date and they lack confidence in their ability to keep up in the coursework (McGivney, 2004; Ramsay et al., 2007).
- Mature students enjoy their courses, academic life, and being a student; however, they might be unhappy about the amount of time they have with lecturers, the amount of guidance they receive, and general awareness of mature students' special needs (Inglis & Murphy, 1999).
- The specialized knowledge that mature students bring to the classroom situates them as "experts," which, in effect, causes them to restrict alternative approaches to knowledge. There are anxieties over whether they are doing the right thing, (re)learning how to study, working though math and science, and how outside commitments affect their student life (Knights & McDonald, 1982).
- Mature students centred on their beliefs and actions as a learner in consideration of other competing life roles to a) become a goal-oriented learner, b) being self-reliant and persistent, and c) valuing one's active learning engagement (Kasworm, 2010).

- It is important to learn how to learn, and in what ways the mature student learns. Learning strategies and styles are diverse (Hoult, 2006). For instance, there has to be greater emphasis on reflective learning for mature students given the busy circumstances that they work in (Brodie et al., 2009).
- Mature students should expect a degree of anxiety in between completion of their studies and the start of new employment (Drury et al., 2008).
- In regard to library assistance, mature students are more likely to require additional assistance when searching for specific information, despite having received library instruction. Furthermore, mature students are more likely to access library resources during the weekend (Ismail, 2009; Kallar & Ó hAodha, 2008).

Recommendations

- Faculty members need to develop classes with a comprehensive pedagogy to cater to their students learning differences (Brodie et al., 2009; Justice & Dornan, 2001; Philbert et al, 2008; Tardiff, 2006; Tovar, 2008).
- The face-to-face small group tutorial is important in the first year, as this increases the likelihood of receiving the desired support, sharing information and providing companionship (Barton Pernal, 2009; Ramsay et al., 2007; Ritenburg, 2006).
- Mature students need to make adjustments and ensure their emotional and physical wellness continue on into their education. Eating well, exercising and keeping an upbeat spirit are crucial elements to success (Hoult, 2006).
- Recruitment strategies should include relevant policy instruments instead of recruiting mature students as a means to meet students' moral and social obligations (Dæhlen& Ure, 2010).
- Provide a comprehensive, multi-modal orientation that takes place through distance learning and face-to-face meetings in order to ensure a more successful transition among mature students (Wozniak et al, 2009)
- Adjust classrooms for the required physiological comfort that is a part of the aging process (e.g., providing larger television screens, using larger signs, speaking with a loud and clear voice, etc.) (Barton Pernal, 2009).

References

Barton Pernal, N. (2009). *Reentry women students who are seniors: An important university subpopulation.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

Brodie, J., Laing, S., & Anderson, M. (2009). Developing enterprising people through an innovative enterprise degree: An analysis of the students' evolving perceptions and attitudes. *Industry & Higher Education, 23*(3), 233-241.

Chappell, C., Rhodes, C., Solomon, N., Tennant, M. & Yates, L. (2003). *Reconstructing the lifelong learner: Pedagogy and identity in individual, organizational, and social change.* London, UK: RoutledgeFalmer.

Dæhlen, M. & Ure, O. (2009). Low-skilled adults in formal continuing education: Does their motivation differ from other learners? *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *28*(5), 661-674.

Devlin, M. (1996). Older and wiser?: A comparison of the learning and study strategies of mature age and younger teacher education students. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *15*(1), 51-60.

Drury, V., Francis, K. & Chapman, Y. (2008). Letting go and moving on: A grounded theory analysis of disengaging from university and becoming a registered nurse. *Nurse Education Today, 28*, 783-789.

Donaldson, J. & Graham, S. (1999). A model of college outcomes for adults. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *50* (1), 24-40.

Fleming, T. & Murphy, M. (1997). *College knowledge: Power, policy and the mature student.* (Maynooth Adult

and Community Education Occasional Series, No. 143). Ireland: National University of Ireland.

Hoult, E. (2006). *Learning support: A guide for mature students*. New York: Sage Publications.

Inglis, T. & Murphy, M. (1999). *No room for adults? A study of mature students in University College Dublin*. (Adult Education Office Rep. No. 110). Dublin, Ireland: University College Dublin.

Ismail, L. (2009). What they are telling us: Library use and needs of traditional and non-traditional students in a graduate social work program. *Journal of Academic Librarianship, 35*(6), 555-564.

Justice, E. & Dornan, T. (2001). Metacognitive differences between traditional-age and non-traditional-age college students. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *51*(3), 236-249.

Kallar, V. & Ó hAodha, M. (2008). *Library and information literacy for 'non-traditional'/mature students: Some aspects of the Irish third-level experience.* Paper presented by at the Genealogy and Local History section at IFLA General Conference, 193-202.

Kasworm, C. (2010). Adult learners in a research university: Negotiating undergraduate student identity. *Adult Education Quarterly, 60*(2), 143-160.

Kinser, K. & Deitchman, J. (2008). Tenacious persisters: Returning adult students in higher education. *Journal of College Student Retention, 9*(1), 75-94.

Knights, S. & McDonald, R. (1982). Adult learners in higher education: Some study problems and solutions from Australian experience. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, *13*(3), 237-246.

Knowles, M., Holton, F. E., and Swanson, R. A. (1998). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development* (5th ed). Houston, Texas: Gulf.

Marks, A. (2002). A 'grown up' university? Towards a manifesto for lifelong learning. *Journal of Education Policy*, *17*(1), 1-11.

MacFadgen, S. L. (2007). *Mature students in the persistence puzzle: An exploration of the factors that contribute to adult learners' qualify of life and retention in post-secondary education*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada.

McGivney, V. (2004). Understanding persistence in adult learning. *Open Learning*, *19* (1), 33- 46.

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Philibert, N., Allen, J. & Elleven, R. (2008). Nontraditional students in community colleges and the model of college outcomes for adults. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 32*, 582-596.

Ramsay, S., Jones, E., & Barker, M. (2007). Relationship between adjustment and support types: Young and mature-aged local and international first year university students. *Higher Education*, *54*, 247-265.

Ritenburg, M. (2006). *A good place to be: An arts-based exploration of my experience as a mature student in the arts education program at the University of Regina*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Regina, Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada.

Shacklady, J., Holmes, E., Mason, G., Davies, I., & Dornan, T. (2009). Maturity and medical students' ease of transition into the clinical environment. *Medical Teacher, 31*, 621-626.

Sheard, M. (2009). Hardiness commitment, gender, and age differentiate university academic performance. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 79*, 189-204.

Tardif, S. (2006). *A formative evaluation of "Humanities 101 A Lakehead University Community Initiative:" The perspective of the students.* Unpublished master's thesis, Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada.

Tovar, L. (2008). Learning how to learn: Implications for nontraditional adult students. Paper presented at the *Academy of Human Resource Development International Research Conference in the Americas* (Panama City, FL, Feb 20-24, 2008). 1-8.

Wozniak, H., Mahony, M., Level, T., & Pizzica, J. (2009). Stepping through the orientation looking glass: A staged approach for postgraduate students. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology, 25*(2), 221-234.

- Compiled by Robert Mizzi & Arpi Panossian (2008)

-Updated by Robert Mizzi (2010)