Teaching older learners: an opportunity not a problem

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Introduction

This case study examines a module for mainly mature, 'non-traditional' students on the Early Childhood Studies [ECS] open entry degree programme at London Metropolitan University [1]. The nature of the particular module - entitled 'An introduction to Early Childhood Studies: reflecting, learning and communicating' - means that this paper will briefly consider the debate about 'skills' that is presently preoccupying many higher education [HE] institutions, especially in today's Widening Participation climate. I also argue for a change in attitudes to teaching and learning in HE as a whole, referring to current research that is taking place at the University in this area.

When asked to devise a programme that would bridge the gap for 'non-traditional' students entering the ECS programme, I did so with Access students and their experiences in mind. My role was to design a 'study skills' type unit that would enable those students without traditional academic experience to reach their potential on a degree level programme - in just thirty teaching hours. This component was to be compulsory and accredited (15 credits at level one on the Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme) in order to show universal applicability and to give it status and authority.

The ECS programme caters for workers in Early Years settings - this includes classroom assistants, nannies and nursery nurses amongst others. Students need no formal or traditional qualifications to be offered a place; the only prerequisite is that they have worked with children for at least three years. In this way ECS recruits a broad spectrum of students, including a high proportion of what are termed 'non-traditional' students - that is, students who were previously typically excluded from or not encouraged into the English Higher Education (white, male, middle class) system. Specifically, these students describe themselves as working class (Sinfield, 2000), are mainly mature and are predominantly female. Many speak of unsuccessful early school experiences (ibid.) and a high proportion has English as an additional language. Typically these students are highly motivated: they are committed to their work and their studies and to developing themselves both personally and professionally.

Student perceptions

The students who enrol on ECS typically state that they do so for themselves - for their self-development and for career enhancement. Many feel frustrated in their role at work (ibid.), the more mature students in particular being blocked at the top of their professional ladder and pay scale, say, as nursery nurses. Many of the students express a desire to become teachers - still others want to become Early Years policy makers. At the same time, students arrive on the ECS course not seeing themselves as students, definitely not seeing themselves as academics ("I couldn't believe that I would ever go to University!" [Ibid.]); and expressing deep fear and anxiety. Common words they used to describe their initial experiences were: apprehensive, nervous, inadequate, frightened, terrified (ibid.). Thus, whilst our ECSS students arguably require time to acquire an academic persona [2] they also need a safe space to explore and very swiftly acquire constituent academic skills and practices, such as successful notemaking strategies and targeted research and interactive, analytical and critical reading skills. Rehearsing these strategies does start to make the 'non-traditional' students feel that they can negotiate the alien discourse of HE.

Indeed, one of the problems for adult students is the academic environment itself and the ways that students perceive themselves - and are themselves perceived - within that academic context. (See also Burn's research into the experiences of 'non-traditional' students and staff - she speaks tellingly of how both can feel humiliated and silenced in the academic environment[3].) Negative self-perceptions can be very easily be reinforced by the unequal power relations of educational discourse, and even perhaps by lecturers who see themselves primarily as academics (keepers of the academy) rather than as educators. This can be exacerbated when students are 'non-traditional' and is perhaps felt even more keenly by adults who have previously experienced the world in powerful ways - especially when their own experiences are unwelcome, de-valued or trivialised in the educational context. Alarmingly the 'skills' agenda itself can become part of the problem when it seems to define the 'non-traditional' student in terms of what they lack, as opposed to valuing what they bring to the educational context.

The 'Study Skills' programme

The module which I designed aimed to facilitate the entry of these adult students into the discourse and practices of HE in general, and of ECS in particular (for course summary see appendix; also Burns and Sinfield, 2003). It is a course that offers students information on learning, studying and communicating practices, located within an Early Years study context. Students are introduced to a concept or method (the what, why and how of notemaking, say) and this is related to their own experiences as students of a particular discipline. They are encouraged to practice what they have learned,

and must reflect on their own practice. This is very much a programme that encourages active, reflective and creative learning strategies.

In drawing up the programme I built on my experience of 'study skills' on Access programmes. 'Study skills' - is a term that is now heavily contested (see below), but within the Open College Network study skills were and are seen quite differently. Access programmes acknowledge that 'non-traditional' student can benefit from a targeted and safe introduction to constituent academic skills and practices. This kind of introduction was termed 'study skills', it was universally delivered and it was central to the notion of Access and equal opportunities. In that context 'study skills' is not framed as remedial, and neither are the students seen as deficit.

In delivering the programme I draw heavily on Carl Rogers and his person-centred approach, so I endeavour to make the ECS students feel welcome in the academic environment. I adopt a mixed teaching style that utilises lectures, discussion, groupwork and student presentations. The final assessment consists of a portfolio of student work: one part demonstrating the acquisition of study and academic skills and practices, and the other consisting of an essay.

The teaching and learning process is itself facilitated by the interest and motivation of the students. Generally, the adult students want to understand their subject (ie to engage with its epistemology and the contested nature of knowledge-claims), and to do well. Thus they are interested in strategies that will facilitate their learning and studying. This interest and engagement helps them to transfer relevant strategies to other study or learning contexts. Furthermore, the emphasis on active, reflective and creative learning helps the student to move from surface to deep learning.

The impact of the ECS module

I find teaching this module one of the most rewarding and inspiring things that I do. The students themselves respond very positively to the module and repeatedly report back that it has improved their self-confidence, their ability to study and learn, and their grades. The external examiners also observe that the course has practical effects on the students' work, and that it considerably develops their self-confidence [4].

Coda: the 'skills' agenda

There is currently a debate in HE as to whether programmes should be based on 'study skills', 'academic socialisation' or 'academic literacies' models of (teaching) practice (see Lea and Street, 1998); and as to whether or not they should be semi- or fully integrated, generic, add-on or remedial (see Warren, 2002). Those concerned with teaching and learning in HE argue for a resolution that acknowledges that entering HE means embarking on a journey that is emotionally charged and academically challenging - for everyone. 'Universal'

programmes that are concerned with introducing students to, and rehearsing them in, constituent academic skills and practices can benefit all students and work to redress the deficit model of the 'non-traditional', adult student. Such programmes will necessitate staff development if the emphasis is indeed to fall on the facilitation of significant learning. Moreover, it may also require a paradigm shift in universities themselves, such that lecturers on all programmes are valued for their prowess as educators, as well being judged as academics.

Conclusion

In the process of offering this case study I have argued that teaching adults is definitely an opportunity - not a problem. Harnessing the adult student's motivation is probably easier than working with younger, perhaps more academically inducted, but less-motivated students. However, arguably not only 'non-traditional' students but all students can benefit from programmes like 'Introduction to Early Childhood Studies'. It is becoming increasingly acknowledged that students benefit from teaching and learning strategies designed to facilitate effective learning by making transparent the forms and processes of academic enquiry. Now the onus is seriously on HE to foster an inclusive and empowering practice that can facilitate education for 'social justice', as aspired for in our University mission.

NOTES

[1] A full version of this paper has been published on the website of the Adult Teaching and Learning Group of The European Thematic Network in University Continuing Education [THENUCE] - see case studies section of www.wmin.ac.uk/sshl/theg9

[2] As argued by Len Holmes. His particular field of research explores the notion that graduates, rather than acquiring 'skills', go through a process of evolving a graduate identity. For information on the notion of the identity-practice model of learning and the "claim-affirmation model of emergent identity", see:

www.re-skill.org.uk; www.graduate-employability.org.uk; www.odysseygroup.org.uk

[3] Elizabeth Burn researches and writes on the experiences of non-traditional students and staff in Further and Higher Education - see Burn and Finnigan (2002).

[4] Examiner's comments: "[The students] respond with enthusiasm, commitment and gratitude - and they also learn a great deal...". "Once again I must record my admiration for this tutor who has such an extraordinary impact on your students - on their lives ... not just on their study skills...". "Once again I am full of admiration for the way in which this encouraging and enthusiastic tutor generates confidence and commitment in her students." (Mary Jane Drummond, Cambridge University)

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APPENDIX
Programme Outline of 'Introduction to Early Childhood Studies'

1. Introduction to the module - discussion of aims and learning outcomes. 'Good and bad Learning' exercises - designed to promote discussion about factors that promote or impede learning. Learning Contract - designed to get students to own their learning by setting personal goals. Introduction to a detailed learning log system - to begin the process of reflective learning. (Learning logs to be completed every week - and to go in the assessment portfolio). Note: issues of epistemology

and of how knowledge claims are constructed within disciplines - notions of academic communities raised.

2. Introduction to notemaking: brainstorm to identify students' own thoughts and knowledge; discussion around linear and pattern notes. Practice lecture - to start the key word, pattern notemaking process (active and creative learning). Discussion and review of notes. (Notes to be taken in this way every week of the module - notes from lectures and written sources to go in assessment portfolio.) Discussion of organisation and time management issues - when, where and how to study.

3. Introduction to active research and interactive reading strategies - theory and practice.

4. In-depth library induction with subject librarian.

5. Introduction to presentations theory - what, why and how of the academic presentation. Lecture and discussion on positive thinking - and the role of self-confidence in the academic environment.

6. Practice presentations - self-evaluation and tutor feedback.

7. Introduction to academic writing - stressing the notion of 'writing to learn' as opposed to learning to write. Consideration of argument and evidence - and what this means in relation to the subject. Consideration of writing as communication - notions of 'writing as dialogue;' and the paragraph questions considered.

8. Introduction to memory and learning styles - related to current learning situation - and how these issues might have affected previous educational experiences. Students in groups to prepare group presentations on assignment topics.

9. Group presentations - with self-evaluation and group feedback.

10. Summarising lecture - drawing whole programme together. Course Evaluation. Student tutorials - formative feedback on draft writing.
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Biographical note

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