

Learning and Understanding as a Mature Student

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Introduction

In this paper I explore what it has been like to be at the London Metropolitan University in 2003 as a mature student and working towards a degree in English, after an 18-year career in banking.

As a mature student, who had taken at least a fifteen year break from formal education, I came to this university with many ideas about studying at a university, that, in retrospect, seem very stereotypical and wrong. It is my aim to talk about these notions and to look at real life at university while also considering some ideas from the point of view of scholars.

I consider this matter of major importance as these issues can determine your approach to study and have major implications when a student is deciding whether or not to continue in further education.

As a mature student myself, I am amazed at the amount of effort that I have to put in, in order to "stand up and be counted". Because I am working part-time and studying full-time, my life has many angles. In my workplace, as the manager I am the person in charge, the one who tells the staff to go here and there and to do this and that, whereas in the university, as a mature student, I am constantly at the mercy of the lecturers. I always get the feeling that I don't know as much as the other students and often I find myself in the position where I have to tell myself to keep going and remain positive.

Comparative perspectives

In dealing with the issues of learning and understanding as a mature student, I would like to start with a point made by Knowles (1990, p. 27) when he writes:

'Considering that the education of adults has been a concern of the human race for a very long time, it is curious that there has been so little thinking, investigating and writing about adult learning until recently'.

If, as Knowles implies, the education of adults is important, then why is it so difficult for students to obtain help from the lecturers? One of the biggest hurdles that I have encountered during my time at the university is the issue of help. I find that the lecturers' approach to learning totally differs from how I feel that it should be. For instance, lecturers should realise that there are different stages to learning, and that all students may not get the point that is being made at the same time.

I also agree with the thought process of the student quoted in Gibbs (1981, pp. 66-67), who states:

'Earlier this year when I was revising... I learnt that I write better without a plan. If I just pour my thoughts out on paper, I build up a type of plan anyway. But if I try to jot down my notes my mind just goes blank'.

This seems to mirror my thoughts about learning and writing essays. The question is: How many other mature students are experiencing the same?

Another important aspect to learning is feedback. In the second year of my studies, I have been studying on a module called 'Making your experience count', in which I had the opportunity to receive feedback on the essay and presentation that I did. Not only has this helped me considerably with my academic studies, but it has been valuable in work situations as well.

Martin (1999, p. 34) uses the views of the students that she interviewed in order to demonstrate that feedback is essential to learning. She notes:

'Students need to know how they are doing before it is too late to do much about it. One of the big concerns of students is that they receive inadequate feedback; often the first piece of feedback they get is when they fail an exam or do badly in a major assignment. Giving feedback on how students are progressing is just as important as providing new information, but rarely attended to with the same vigour. This sort of on-going feedback is called formative assessment or feedback. It directs, corrects and realigns the day-to-day learning of students... and has a powerful effect on their learning'.

In my experience, I believe that this kind of 'formative assessment' is something that should be offered at the university. If the feedback is given after I have produced an essay shows that I have not read enough, then what is the point of giving that feedback when the essay has already been done? Mature students come from all walks of life and experiences, and the biggest issue for them is whether they are taking it all in, or whether they know enough. As Martin (1999, p. 36) explains: 'When students fail to learn, it is because they are unclear about what they need to know'. The 'clarity' aspect of university study is the mature student's nightmare. For the past two years it has been my biggest worry - have I learnt or understood enough? Has it sunk in? Why do I feel that essay I have just written has not made sense to me? As a mature student, I have a constant battle with knowledge and the process of learning. This is something that is 'hidden' in the university and I feel that many students, from the young to the older, need to have it unravelled to them.

One of the ideas that I have put into place to consolidate learning is to have a study group. I asked various people in my class if they wanted to participate in one. When we met, we discussed the learning tasks and tried to find the appropriate 'process' of learning that Martin (1999) talks about. I have found that my grades have increased overall because of this. But the main question that I would venture again to ask the university is why is it that students have to form these groups, sometimes out of utter frustration and desperation from either not understanding, or from receiving a low mark with very poor feedback?

It is apparent that all students have to be able to 'manage' their own learning. This literally means being responsible for meeting deadlines and putting all the effort that is needed into producing an essay or an assessment that shows that the learning has been fully understood. Over a period of nearly two years, this is something that I have

had to learn and experience, with many low grades and feelings of sheer frustration, but with the overall determination to progress and move on. Davies (2000, pp. 33-35) observes:

'The next step in managing your learning is to re-examine some of your ideas about learning.... Learning is a serious matter. Business, government, and not-for – profit organisations are aware of the new importance of learning and are responding. Learning is being recognised as the key source for continuous improvement and competitive advantage'.

I have learnt to take my learning very seriously and this is because I have seen through my work experience that, as Davies points out, learning gives you a very competitive edge in the business world.

During the time I have been at university, confidence has been gained. I now feel that I am able to learn, think and understand more logically. I have seen many of my friends drop out of university for one reason or another, and I believe that the reason for this is an overall lack of confidence.

Conclusion

It is interesting to read what Bennett (2003, pp. 56-57) says about reasons for student withdrawal, in order to compare them to my own feelings about whether I wish to stay at university. He states:

'A student's withdrawal from a degree programme may be compulsory or voluntary... Voluntary drop out is the consequence of a conscious decision to withdraw e.g. because the student feels bored or insufficiently challenged, dislikes fellow students or lecturers, does not enjoy the subject, etc'.

In my years of study, I have not been bored, and I can also say that amongst my peers who have since given up university feeling unchallenged was not a reason for their departure. However, there have been times when I would have liked to give up and go back to work full- time, especially after I received a low grade or lack of support from a tutor.

The university needs to attend to certain things that I feel will greatly assist the students of the future. The main issues are those of help and assistance, recognising that there are different levels of understanding, and doing more to acknowledge the 'experiential' knowledge that students bring with them.

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