

School Daze Redux

How adult students discover untapped learning power

BY LARA WILLIS

Many years ago I entered a full-time nursing assistant program in London, Ont. I was the youngest student in the class at the age of 16, and felt somewhat anxious and intimidated among classmates who were, on average, more than double my age.

The concept of adults - with children and established careers - returning to school and changing the direction of their lives was difficult to grasp at the time. I realized the value of this varied dynamic as the program progressed, and that I was learning as much (or more) from my classmates as I was from my instructors. The knowledge I gained was immense and invaluable.

Today I am in their shoes. I am returning to an educational institution to completely change the path of my life and I am among the oldest in my class. I'm viewing the grass from the other side of the fence, so to speak. As I do so, I realize that I am also learning from my younger classmates and colleagues, as much as they are, I hope, learning from me.

In today's economic climate and fluctuating workforce, adult learning is becoming more commonplace. Mature students are considered to be one of the fastest growing demographics of students in North America and are enrolling in programs at vocational schools, community colleges and universities at an expanding rate. As the number of mature students increases, institutions are focusing their marketing and support systems on this particular group and terms such as 'mature student' are being replaced by 'adult learners' or 'non-traditional learners' to attract enrolments. The Lakeshore campus of Toronto's Humber College houses programs that include theatre, film, advertising, and police foundations. During a tour of the campus as a prospective mature student, liaisons for Humber are quick to point out that approximately 65 percent of students attending the campus are returning to school, while the remaining one third are recent high-school graduates.

It was once a commonly held belief that brain function decreases with age. This remains true, insofar as the chemical and physical changes that occur with



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age – often beginning as early as our 20s – are still believed to cause a decrease in short-term memory function and shorter attention spans. However, recent studies by the University of Illinois have concluded that semantic memory remains unaffected by or often improves with age. Semantic memory comprises recollection of facts and figures, vocabulary, verbal ability, problem solving, and “expert knowledge” obtained from our past careers, hobbies and interests. In addition, researchers at Sydney University have shown that emotional stability improves with age, allowing us to better control our responses to negative stimuli and adapt to stressful situations.

Despite biology being on the side of the mature student, many people returning to school can feel overwhelmed at the prospect of returning to a learning environment. Zarina Khan is the director and an instructor at the Leaside branch of Grade Expectations, a learning centre that provides tutoring to school age children, vocational training for return-to-work programs and academic preparation courses for students returning to post-secondary education. Khan recognizes that anxiety about returning to school often stems from a fear of being out of touch with younger peers, a feeling of intimidation regarding new technologies, and worry about the chances for success. She says that anxieties are worsened if previous experiences with school were not successful or pleasant, but feels that mature students often don't give themselves enough credit for their life experience.

“[They have] experience they take for granted,” Khan says. “They don't see [their skills] as something that could apply to a job that's completely different from what they've done before.”

The experience of teaching mature students is a benefit to instructors as well. Khan says that mature students are often punctual, reliable, and offer a greater amount of life experience to their learning. Many educators share these views, and academic courses such as the Corporate Communications certificate program at Humber College utilize part-time instructors employed in the field to relate to students more as colleagues and collaborators rather than the traditional pupil/teacher relationship model. Instructors are quick to recognize the value of having mature students and cite them as being more diligent, disciplined, and autonomous. Khan identifies motivation as a key difference between mature students and her younger pupils. Younger students, she says, have goals that are more immediate (such as passing the next test) and are less focused on long-term success. As a result, they don't take an active role in their education.

“Adults are preparing for a goal when they come here,” she says. “There is motivation because [the skills they learn] are going to help them get a job.”

Educators are learning from mature students as well, and are becoming students themselves. With the proliferation of continuing education in community colleges and universities, educators are being taught methods to use in an adult classroom. Some of these methods focus on identifying barriers that mature students face in their learning, including child-care, home responsibilities and conflicting work schedules. Other modules deal with differences in learning styles, and emphasize a mature student's need for course material to be practical and relevant to their situation. Some teachers express concern that their students will be older than they are, and therefore less likely to accept them in a role as an educator. Others recognize that mature students are often paying the tuition fees to obtain a learning experience, not simply a grade or a certificate as is the common focus of younger students.

“Generally what I see in adults is a strong commitment because they are starting something new,” Khan says. “They often excel at learning.”

Personally, success is not about having another framed diploma on my wall or honour-roll transcript. It's about the experience gained while learning from and teaching those around me, whether they are twice my age or over a decade younger. And when my mature brain forgets an assignment due date until the last minute, I'll rely on my emotional stability and expert knowledge to calm myself and problem solve.