

How do mature learners learn?

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Background

The 21st century is being transformed by demography and technology; both work and leisure practices are radically changing and this affects the nature of human learning and adaptability, partly facilitated by the new tools. It also appears to be true that there is a link between active learning in the later years and health, where each reinforces the other. It is generally believed that there is a reciprocal relation between learning and health: good health helps later learning, while remaining active as a learner also affects health, partly by off-setting depression and loneliness, and also by simply promoting a more satisfying and active life. For such reasons, we need to think more closely about how mature learners learn and how to teach them so as best to support and enhance their learning experiences. 'Mature learners' is a rapidly growing educational sector being distinguished from "adult learners" of a lower age, and it is clear that as a learning group these older students are successful. However, there has been little research into their learning experiences or what it is that makes this particular group thrive in an educational setting.

As they live longer, and as they look towards the traditional retirement age, they may in fact be "up-skilling" themselves in order to continue working. On the other hand, many who have reached retirement may be taking the opportunity to prepare for a different kind of work, perhaps something they had always dreamed of doing. At the same time, many others are simply enjoying their newfound freedom to learn for the sake of learning, to meet new friends, and to remain generally active.

Research that we are conducting at the Institute of Education will explore the social and individual backgrounds to older learning, considering leisure education, professional re-training, as well as academic study. In addition, we are launching a new short part-time online course called "Issues in Educating and Training Mature Adults (50+)"**

The course is intended to be an acknowledgement that the older population is playing an increasingly important role in society, and is already thriving in educational settings. We intend to make it richly

informative about the factors relevant to senior learning based on the wide range of materials and resources that we have collected. We will follow a collaborative mode of learning with the focus on discussion rather than too many lectures. Thus we hope to accommodate the variety of viewpoints and experiences of older participants, from whom we in turn also expect to learn.

Our research will of course inform our teaching, and we already have some interesting preliminary results which add to our confidence that the 600+ older learners at the Institute of Education of London University (who make up 10% of all our students) are among our very successful students. The survey questions we used were attempts to discover in what ways mature learners are actively seeking to re-skill themselves and to explore their motivations. We also sought to establish how mature learners see themselves, their pre-existing skills, and the benefits to be gained from their new skills, both for themselves and the wider society. Finally, we hope to identify the ways in which this older cohort prefers to learn and what additional learning support they would like.

Research results

We are still at the first phase - an on-line questionnaire which 124 have answered thus far – and will follow up with personal interviews of selected students.

Since there is a tendency to assume that older people cannot manage to acquire new technical skills, particularly ICT, it is interesting to note their replies about whether they felt they were effective in library and internet research. They turn out to feel more effective using the internet than the library!

	Very effective	Effective	Not very effective	Not effective at all
Library research	16% 20	58% 71	24% 30	2% 2
Internet research	27% 34	52% 71	2% 25	1% 1

We also asked: Do you often ask younger people for help with ICT? Here there were no strong conclusions, but 45% said yes and 55% said no, again showing their confidence and independence related to ICT.

In reply to the question: “Do you feel that you would like to have any of the following?” almost as many can manage without support in ICT as in a traditional library. But since this was a self-selected group that was able to complete an online survey, perhaps one should not be surprised.

	All of the time	Most of the time	Occasionally	Not at all
Learning support in extra seminars	6% 7	2% 3	44% 52	47% 56
Special study group for older learners	6% 7	5% 6	17% 20	72% 86
Learning support in IT	11% 13	12% 14	42% 51	36% 43
Learning support in use of library	7% 9	6% 7	45% 55	42% 51

As for their motivations, self fulfilment is a strong reason for studying - 95% rate it as important. Professional updating is also a strong reason for studying with 87% positive response. Both career enhancement and later life career change were much less common at 18% and 16% respectively. In fact 25% reported that the latter had no relevance at all.

One of the most significant results was in relation to learning independence. Participants thought that acting autonomously was the strongest transferable skill that they brought to their studies from their previous life experience.

	Very effective	Effective	Not very effective	Not effective at all
Time management	35% 43	50% 61	14% 18	1% 1
Organisational skills	44% 56	49% 62	4% 6	1% 1

Speed of learning	19%	68%	11%	1%
	23	83	16	1
Library research	16%	58%	24%	2%
	20	71	30	2
Internet research	27%	52%	21%	1%
	34	71	25	1
Speed of reading	26%	53%	20%	1%
	32	66	25	1
Critical evaluation	35%	52%	14%	0
	43	64	17	
Understanding new knowledge	25%	70%	5%	0
	31	86	6	
Problem solving	26%	69%	6%	0
	32	85	7	
Acting autonomously	61%	37%	2%	0
	75	46	2	

These older learners clearly prefer flexible ways of learning and a majority of 94% preferred independent work. They also value flexible ways of learning and suggest that they are comfortable with a range of methods, i.e. group work, independent work, collaborative activities and practical activities scored highly at or over 90%.

Furthermore, they feel that being an older learner is a major advantage and did not want any specialist learning support such as extra seminars. In fact they claim to see major benefits in being in mixed aged classes with younger students. Happily, 86% feel that people respect them and their prior knowledge.

Perhaps we have to consider the reasons behind their responses and preferences. For example, their negative response regarding learner collaboration is likely to have been influenced by a bad example. Also, we can wonder whether they would feel different when working in groups of mature experienced older learners like themselves, rather than with younger students.

To stimulate further research ideas, I asked an informal discussion group: Are older learners so different from younger adults that they need special teaching methods? Nobody knows the answer to

the question, but they produced a tentative list of factors that may make them significantly different. They suggested that older adults may be:

- more complex as well as more variable in their complexities
- stronger though slower [because so much more experience is brought into learning]
- reflective
- critical
- confident/self-assured/'liberated'
- elective as learners
- stubborn
- creative
- involved
- able to apply and integrate their learning into thought and behaviour
- likely to have strong preferences about how to learn.

The wider context

One of our significant findings - that self-fulfilment plays a paramount role - is increasingly being acknowledged in the world at large. Until recently, it was mostly achieved in informal, special interest learning. But now, even formal institutions such as the University of Strathclyde are offering older people training and support towards employment and further study, as well as a range of personal interest leisure courses. Lancaster University is inviting older people to explore the campus, attend lectures and seminars and to find out what the university can offer them. It also offers a Senior Learners' programme with ideas they believe will be tempting, such as

- visits to places of interest around the university
 - a weekly computing club, with support from student volunteers
 - Painting with Acrylics
 - Science in the 17th Century: Galileo in Context
 - Introduction to Information Technology and Computer Animation
- and so on.

We now have various centres for the study of ageing in the UK, such as the Sheffield Institute for Studies on Ageing, the Centre for Research into the Older Workforce, and the Oxford Institute of Ageing, all of which study the effects of older age on health, employment, and education. Yet, there has until now been no concern about or provision for the education or training of the teachers of the older cohorts. That is why we are launching our new course. We have categorised the main issues as:

- The specific conditions of mature adult learning
- Relationships among older peer learners and with their teachers
- Prior knowledge and competencies
- The influence of organisational and social contexts older persons' learning
- Older learners seen as continuing participants in work or in community activities
- Learning for self-fulfilment
- Political approaches to older persons' roles in the community and the workplace
- Notions and perceptions about competence and capability of mature persons.

Some interesting straws in the wind are:

On 23 October 2007, the European Commission adopted a Communication "Adult learning: It is never too late to learn" which states:

Member States should invest in older people and migrants, through education and training that matches the needs of the learner, while raising awareness about the important role of migrants and older people in European society and economy.

http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/lll/adultcom_en.html

Professor Kirkwood head of the Department of Gerontology, University of Newcastle, commented in his fifth lecture in the 2001 Reith Lectures:

Market forces, particularly in the area of employment, will very soon wake up to the fact that there is going to be a shortage in the work force that can only be filled by recruiting and retaining older workers.

Work patterns will have to become more flexible and attractive in order to retain older staff. Jobs and the workplace will require redesign. It is ironic to realise that in all probability it will be profit that will drive the attention to well-being of body and mind in old age that could so easily have been perceived as a priority with less blinkered eyes. It was shortage of male labour during the First World War that provided the first real advance in the drive to recognise women's rights. It may be the shortage of young labour that will win the first significant battles in the fight against ageism.

In March 2005, the Department for Work and Pensions published *Opportunity Age*, its strategy for "a successful ageing society".

The strategy aims to promote a culture change; end the perception of older people as ‘dependent’; and to ensure that longer life is healthy and fulfilling, with older people playing a full part in society. We set out how all parts of government, central and local, are organising themselves more effectively to deliver a wide range of initiatives – not only to improve financial security and extend working life, but also to combat discrimination, promote active ageing, and improve services to promote the well-being and independence of older people.

We look forward to the high hopes being realized.

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**** Issues in Educating and Training Mature Adults (50+)****

More information is at www.ioe.ac.uk/courses/ietma