

*Are our perceptions of mature student learning experiences
accurate?*

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Abstract

As the number of mature learners engaging in third level education in Ireland is increasing and public policy continues to encourage further participation, educators' responsibility to engage with their students in a meaningful and productive way is broadened and poses certain challenges. Government and organisational policy needs not only concern itself with increasing access for mature learners, but also with the learning experience being provided and the pedagogical situation created. Existing literature acknowledges the differences between mature and traditional (school leaver) students with the result that much research has focused on how mature learners should be facilitated in terms of their teaching and learning. The general perception is that mature learners require higher levels of engagement and interaction than traditional students and that rote learning and terminal examinations, while undesirable for any student, are particularly unsuitable for this cohort. The assumption that the learner and not the tutor should be at the centre of the pedagogical experience has become widely accepted. However, this paper examines the experiences of mature learners at an Irish Institute of Technology which creates uncertainty in relation to this hypothesis. The study used a mixed methods approach to gain an insight into the experience of mature learners at the Institute, with surprising results in relation to how we should teach mature learners. Initially an online survey was distributed to all mature learners on two of the institutes' programmes and participants were invited to take part in an in-depth interview. Interviewees were selected at random and a number of themes were discussed, including teaching methods. All of the mature learners interviewed stated that they favour formal lecture style teaching to participative teaching methods and indicated their preference for tutor focused rather than student focused learning. This brings into question the growing trend towards student participation in the teaching process which has its foundation in the belief that learners want to be and benefit from being part of the teaching as well as learning process.

Keywords

Mature learner experience, mature learner attitudes, pedagogy

1.0 Introduction and rationale

This paper explores the experience and attitudes of mature learners at an Irish institute of technology. Broadly speaking, the author's observation has concluded that the mature student faces a number of challenges when achieving their further education regardless of whether they attend college on a full or part time basis. However, it appeared that the mature students who attend part time courses seem to develop better social networks and integrate more effectively with their peers than those who participate in full time programmes where the majority of learners are traditional school leavers. This prompted the quest to try to understand the experience of mature learners and to try to establish whether or not the experience is more positive, more negative or the same for mature learners depending on the mode of delivery. Interestingly, while there were differences in the reported experience for full and part time students on a range of various themes, it emerged that both cohorts favoured traditional teaching methods to the interactive and problem based group learning activities that they had participated in. This leads the author to question whether or not academics' understanding of mature learner's learning experiences are accurate and whether we need to ensure students enjoy the process of education or simply concern ourselves with implementing teaching and learning strategies that maximise academic performance.

2.0 Facilitation of mature students in higher education

In recent decades there has been a movement towards promoting higher education and making it accessible to a greater number of potential students especially non-traditional students. Much of the expansion in higher education in since 1990 has actually occurred outside of the universities in institutions like further education colleges, polytechnics and community colleges. Slowey (2010:1) notes that "mature students are more likely to be found on part-time, distance, post-experience and non-credit programs". Ireland demonstrates very low levels of adult participation in higher education relative to countries like Sweden and the United States where adult participation rates are highest (Schuetze & Slowey, 2003). Lifelong learning needs to be embraced by institutes; it is not acceptable for them to simply view lifelong learners as an income stream which supplements government funding. "There is the implicit danger that if mature students are perceived as objects of government

policies, the central issue of their pedagogical experiences in colleges may not be given due consideration” (Kelly, 2004: 46).

There needs to be a concerted effort at every level to ensure that lifelong learning is promoted and encouraged and does not just receive lip service. Woodrow cited in (Bowl, 2001: 157) stresses the “need to examine systematic and institutional factors which act to exclude certain sections of the population.” Often the motivation of the mature learner can be very different from that of the school leaver. Woodley & Wilson (2002) examine the non-work benefits associated with achieving a degree for mature students who often state that they are not studying for career reasons. They identified a range of factors from increased self-confidence to better health that were identified by mature learners as benefits they sought through further education. So if we accept the benefits associated with returning to education as a mature learner as given perhaps the experience of the mature learner during the process becomes less relevant.

Research undertaken by Brooks (2005) found that when queried about the age difference between students in further education, many respondents thought “chronological age was less useful than work experience in explaining differences between students” (2005: 61). In addition there was a very strong stereotype which indicated that adolescent learners would be less responsible and have indifferent attitudes to learning, whereas older learners were perceived as self-motivated and strongly committed to their studies (2005: 59).

The onus falls on all education providers, but particularly to the front line academic staff to ensure that the interaction with mature learners is engaging and helps them to achieve learning outcomes that will benefit themselves and society. Some existing research would validate and almost encourage the apprehension that mature learners have regarding undertaking further education, as there is a body of work that suggests that eyesight, balance, reaction speed and strength all deteriorate from the mid twenties onwards, which would suggest an uphill struggle for the mature learner relative to the school leaver. However, there is little evidence that any of these potential deficiencies will actually impact on the performance of mature learners in further education. Berger (1998) argues that “variation in intelligence and cognitive ability does not matter a great deal until 65 or older” (cited in Muir et al, 2007: 118), thus minimising the impact that any of the previously mentioned deficiencies are

likely to have on performance. In addition it is important to acknowledge that “there is a tendency for social skills and strategic thinking to improve with age” (Collis et al, 2000 cited in Muir et al, 2007:118) thus providing the mature learner with an advantage over their school leaver classmates.

3.0 The experience of mature learners

Adult learners must overcome a number of challenges, not all of which are exclusive to their cohort but which are commonly quoted as hurdles they experience. The most significant factors involved include “financial issues, relationships with partners... other external commitments, the support [or lack thereof] they received at college”. (Murphy and Fleming, 2000: 82). Stevens (2003) notes that students experience anxiety, guilt and shame particularly during the early part of their studentship. However, this doubt in ones ability is common for virtually all students; “it must be a rare scholar or student who goes through his entire college course without feeling many twinges of doubt about his ability to complete it” (Cleugh, 1972: 81). Jordan (1997) believes that “challenges arise for adult learners as the administration, resource allocation and, most importantly teaching, are primarily focused on younger students” (cited in Kelly, 2004: 47). Yet it would seem logical to conclude that if mature learners have no cognitive deficit and in fact have the benefit of life experience and self motivation beyond that of their school leaver peers we would expect that they would want to be more involved in the learning process. Toynton (2005) argues that the presence of mature experienced students among less experienced traditional students can result to dysfunctional groups due to the significant difference in level of prior experience in problem-solving. His research of interdisciplinary study concludes that while mature students might find the approach “initially discomforting [it is] outweighed by the learning and empowerment it provides” (2005: 106). This raises the question as to whether the enjoyment of the education process and the experience reported is more or less important than the learning outcomes and achievement of academic objectives. Should academics really concern themselves with student experience or should we simply focus on maximising academic performance?

One could argue that by creating a more positive learning experience for the mature learner a better overall outcome could potentially be achieved. In order to maximise the learning experience the tutor must be aware of how the ways in which mature

students learns differs from the traditional student. Kelly argues that the mature learner is more “orientated towards deep learning” and that “learning which is based around the memorizing-regurgitation cycle does not appeal to them” (Kelly, 2004: 51). However, a very practical challenge then exists for the lecturer or tutor who must deliver a module to a group of students who comprise both traditional and mature students. Perhaps the positive learning experience is diminished for full time mature students if the tutor is trying to facilitate both traditional and mature learners in the one lecture or tutorial.

4.0 Methodology

In order to explore the experience of mature learners and to try and establish whether or not the attendance of a full time or part time programme affects their experience, primary research was conducted on mature students undertaking the Bachelor of Business Studies and the Bachelor of Applied Social Science degrees at the participating institute, which are both offered on a full and part time basis. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed for this research. The quantitative research focused on the general experience of the mature learners and the qualitative research focused on the actual experience of selected willing participants.

The study assumed a phenomenological approach as the primary research was intended to give an understanding of the meaning that studying as a mature student has for the participants. No formal research question was explored and as student experience is best measured through words as opposed to numbers, the main bulk of the research focused on the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews which were then analysed using open and axial coding. The mixed methods approach was intended to increase the validity of the findings and allow greater potential for theory generation following data analysis and was founded in the “pragmatic philosophical worldview” (Creswell, 2009). A mixed methods approach to the inquiry was used involving the use of an online survey ($n=75$) to gather quantitative data followed by semi-structured interviews ($n=3$) with willing participants to gather qualitative data.

A distinct method of verification is extremely difficult to establish when dealing with qualitative data, as this mixed methods research did. The post-interview contact with the participants to give them the opportunity to review how their opinions were represented allowed some level of confidence that the meaning and intentions of the interviewees had been fairly and honestly reported. Verification could not even be

guaranteed if the process were repeated in an identical manner as experiences which are based on emotions are transient and dynamic. Equally we cannot assume that the students should or would report the experiences of mature learners that have been identified in previous studies. The best possible verification for this research was the integrity of the researcher and her undertaking to conduct the research in an authentic, truthful and ethical manner.

5.0 Findings and discussion

The findings from the quantitative data will be briefly summarised for the purpose of this paper, as the qualitative data is much more relevant in trying to understand the mature student learning experience.

5.1 Findings from the quantitative research

The vast majority of the respondents reported having a very or somewhat positive experience in relation to their interaction with other students (90%) and their interaction with lecturing staff (89%). The majority of respondents (58%) felt that the content of the course was a little more difficult than expected and 21% believed that it was exactly as expected. The fact that most students had somewhat underestimated the difficulty of the course content is in contrast to the findings presented by Phillips (1986) who ascertained that “all mature students anticipated encountering more problems adapting to higher education of an academic nature prior to their studies than were actually experienced” (1986: 289). In this instance it would appear that many underestimated the academic standard that would be required. The area of most concern for the mature learners was time pressure, followed by financial issues, personal relationships and ability to succeed.

The vast majority (over 89%) of respondents believed that time pressure was of major or some concern. Only one respondent each believed that it was of little or no concern. While time pressure is an unavoidable part of most activities in the academic or working environment, academic staff should not neglect this major concern that students have. Every effort should be made to avoid overloading students with deadlines. Time pressure of course is also an issue when it comes to the mature learner trying to establish some reasonable work/college/life balance. The interviewee who was attending college part time appeared to be the one who struggled most with the time pressure. The two interviewees who were attending college on a full time basis did not have the same level of concern in relation to time pressure.

This number of respondents who felt that ability to succeed was of major or some concern (a combined total of 61%) is to be expected given the literature that exists. Many students worry about how they will be able to keep up never mind succeed. This fear was re-iterated during two of the three interviews that were undertaken. The financial issues were of more concern to one of the interviewees who attended college on a full time basis than either the interviewee who attended part time while working or the other full time student who reported having financial support through grant assistance and a back to education allowance. It is important to note, that although government financial assistance is available to some mature learners that does not necessarily alleviate the concerns associated with financing a return to education. For the majority of respondents personal relationships were of no concern.

5.2 Findings from semi-structured interviews

Three semi-structured interviews were undertaken to gather qualitative data in relation to the experience of mature learners. Two of the interviewees had attended college on a full time basis and the other one had attended on a part time basis, unfortunately there were no willing participants from the Bachelor of Applied Social Studies who attended on a part time basis.

Table 4.2 outlines the details of the interviewees:

Student Name	Programme of Study	Full/Part Time
Farah*	Bachelor of Applied Social Studies	Full time
Edward*	Bachelor of Business Studies	Part time
Caroline*	Bachelor of Business Studies	Full time

Table 5.2 Details of interviewees

*Participants names have been changed to protect their identity.

A number of themes which emerged from the data are presented below. Data gathered from the interview to support these themes are presented in Appendix A.

Mature learners' attitude towards self

The attitudes of the mature learners' towards themselves differed quite significantly. Farah appeared to have quite a low level of confidence in herself prior to her return to education, and described having missed the opportunity to attend third level as a school leaver altogether. She also feared that she may not be capable of keeping up with the course on her return to education. Caroline was more positive in terms of her

belief in herself that she would be able to succeed and while she had some concerns about returning to education after six or seven years out of the system she was much more casual about any concern she had than Farah had been. Finally, Edward displayed the greatest level of confidence in his own ability to succeed and he did not dwell on having any concerns in relation to how he would get on at college.

The self doubt expressed by Farah and Caroline is more typical of the emotions described in the existing literature. In fact Cleugh (1972) surmised that it is probably more unusual for any student not have doubts about their ability to succeed at college regardless of their age or status. Feelings of guilt also emerged during the interviews particularly for the respondent who had two small children to consider. This is a theme that often emerges in the literature related to mature learners.

Mature learners' attitude towards other students

The attitudes towards other students was different for each of the interviewees, however, there were definitely more perceived issues in terms of other students with the interviewees who were attending their course on a full time basis and therefore classmates with the traditional school leaver students.

Edward who was attending college on a part time basis did not describe any particularly close relationships with other students in his class and he suggested this was mainly because they did not have the time to socialise together rather than for any other reason. In terms of the relationship that he had with his fellow students during class time or group work interactions he was very positive. He believed that there was a good mix of people taking the course and that generally the students had a positive attitude. In fact he felt that there was a supportive environment among his peers. He compared the fact that the other students, like him, were very focused to the experience he had had in college as a school leaver and he believed that that type of focus among students did not exist at that time.

Caroline identified a similar personal experience and viewed herself as very different now as how she was when she first attended college as a school leaver. She also felt that she was now at a very different stage in life than the traditional students. Caroline did not feel that she integrated well with the other students in the class and suggested that she would have spent approximately eighty percent of her time at college on her own as she had no interest in interacting with other students who she believed she had nothing in common with. Like Edward she felt that the mature

learners were there to be educated while the priorities of traditional students were more based around the social aspect of college.

When it came to group work Caroline's attitude towards the other students became quite clear. She felt that she had to take on the responsibility of leading any groups she worked in as other students could not be trusted to complete the work correctly. While Caroline says she would be a natural leader anyway an air of discontent with the situation was evident from the interview. She took on additional responsibility above and beyond what would be expected of a team member and perhaps may have been a source of frustration to the other students as much as they were a source of frustration to her. From the data provided by Caroline it would appear that she really did not feel that she could trust her classmates. She feared that if she did not control their work, if not them, then she would suffer through low grades being awarded to the team.

Farah was also aware of the difference between her as a mature learner and the traditional students in her class group. However, her attitude towards them was very different to Caroline's. Farah really admired the younger students and felt that some of her fellow mature learners were very unfair in terms of how they perceived the younger students. She felt that there was an air of jealousy from some mature learners who resented the fact that the younger students were able to manage an active social life and still perform well academically. Initially she found herself clustering with the other mature students in the class, but she found their attitude very negative which she believes was based on the fear they had of returning to education and not being successful.

Initially she had felt excluded by the younger students but she believed that as time went on she found them very supportive and less competitive than the other mature learners. She believes that if she had been in a class of all mature learners that her experience would have been more negative and that she would have missed the enthusiasm and ingenuity of the traditional students.

The attitudes expressed by the interviewees were very diverse and there is no conclusive evidence that the mature learner's attitudes towards other students are affected by the mode of delivery of the course. The theory advanced by Brooks (2005) that adolescent students exhibit less responsibility and older students are more self-motivated was represented. Both of the full time students who were integrated

with traditional students had a very different opinion of their younger classmates. Farah did however, consider herself the exception to the rule and she suggested that many of the mature learners she was in class with had a negative opinion of the traditional students which would be in line with the opinion expressed by Caroline. Edward, who studied part time with all mature classmates, did report a supportive peer environment although this did not extend to strong social relationships being formed. The stereotypes of the existing literature are reinforced by these findings but it would appear that the attitude towards fellow students is more dependent on the individual forming them than any variance in the mode of delivery of the course.

Mature learners' perception of lecturing staff

All three of the interviewees talked about the support that lecturers provided in a positive light. Caroline believed that she had enjoyed a very good relationship with the lecturing staff which was improved further by the fact that she was mature and therefore had the confidence to ask questions and approach the lecturers.

Similarly Edward felt that the lecturing staff “help you as best they can” (Edward). Farah was much more emphatic about the amount of support that she felt was provided by the lecturing staff. In fact, she was surprised by the amount of support that they provided. Later in the interview she returned to this topic reiterating how supportive the lecturing staff had been.

Mature learners' perception of teaching methods used

All three of the students believed that the formal lecture was the teaching method that best suited them. Despite the fact that these mature learners felt they had more opinions and confidence by virtue of the fact that they were mature learners they still expressed a desire to receive information from the lecturer directly, rather than engage with their fellow classmates. The researcher found this quite surprising given that mature learners in her experience generally engage very well with open discussion that is facilitated during lectures or tutorials. Despite the willingness of the students to interact and take part in discussion they were more interested in what the lecturer had to say rather than discussing it with their peers. Caroline felt that for her the teaching method was irrelevant as she was so focused that she would have learned no matter how the information was presented to her.

These findings are in contrast not only with the researcher's expectations but also with the research of Kelly (2004) which suggests that mature learners are not interested in

learning that is based around the memorizing-regurgitation cycle. It would appear that for these participants the formal lecture which is inevitably going to lead to a memorizing-regurgitation cycle was the preferred method of learning.

Overall mature learner experience

All of the interviewees concluded that their experience as a mature learner had been a positive one. Caroline really did not feel that she had anything in common with the traditional students however neither did she feel that she fitted in with the more mature learners. She felt that there was a subgroup of students who were in their early twenties and were more mature than the traditional student but equally did not fit in with the other more mature students who had family responsibilities and very different lifestyles also. This did impact on her overall experience in that she spent a lot of time on her own but says that this did not bother her as she was focused on getting her qualification.

For Edward the most important aspect of his experience of being a mature learner was time management. Continuously throughout the interview he referred to the difficulty of managing time and he believes that learning to manage his own time more effectively is one of the most important skills he has developed. He appears to be very pragmatic about the whole experience and he displayed a very logical approach to overcoming any issues he had. Overall he seems to be happy with the experience he had as a mature learner but the undertone is that this is something that he has achieved by himself, for himself.

The most positive experience was described by Farah, as the only social studies student it this may account for her describing the most positive experiences but as only one student from social studies participated this is impossible to verify, as it could just be down to individual personalities. Interestingly Farah did not really identify with the other mature learners in her class as she felt there was a degree of jealousy displayed by the other mature learners towards the younger classmates. In her opinion this jealousy and lack of tolerance was mainly founded in the mature students' own fears about their return to education and the difficulties that it posed in terms of maintaining a healthy work/college/life balance.

Both of the students who attended college full time recalled how they felt that they had to supervise or mother the younger students in the class, however, their perception of this phenomenon was very different. Caroline appeared to view it as an

inconvenience and tended not to mix with the younger students, thus isolating herself to a certain extent. Farah on the other hand spoke about the fact that initially she did feel somewhat excluded by the younger students, but over time she developed good relationships with them and found them to be very supportive and in many ways just as mature in terms of their attitudes as the students classified as mature learners. To some degree it is fair to say that both the full time students experienced a feeling of isolation at some stage during the course but this was not a theme that emerged from the interview with the part time student.

6.0 Conclusion and future work

This research was undertaken to try to better understand the experience and attitudes of mature learners at an Irish institute of technology. The qualitative data gives an insight into the method of learning that is most desirable to this small sample of mature learners but is at odds with the current ethos of learner-centredness that exists in third level education. Reflective practice is an important part of the academic's role, and in better understanding how mature learners prefer to learn, we can tailor our teaching to improve their experience which would be a reasonable objective provided academic standards are maintained. The researcher's own pedagogy has been adapted to include an increase the number of formal lectures delivered to mature learners, the use of very structured problem based learning approaches and an increase the amount of individual assessment conducted.

One could argue that providing direct lectures and individual assignments represents a regression rather than advance in terms of pedagogy practice in the Institute of Technology sector, and brings the institutes more in line with the university system of assessment. However, if the more traditional method is more effective for mature learners surely it is better to admit having been wrong to change a system that was not flawed than to continue to impose group work and peer discussions on mature learners which they find a source of frustration and inconvenience.

If the educators and policy makers of this country are truly committed to increasing the number of life long learners and therefore mature learners it is important that they are facilitated in a way that will help them to learn and achieve the best possible outcome from the time and effort they commit to further education. The only way in which we can try to meet those needs is by understanding how they experience third level education and ensuring that the pedagogy used is relevant and productive.

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Appendix A – Direct Quotations from Mature Learner Interview Transcripts

Table A1 – outlines the mature learners’ attitude towards self

Farah	<p><i>“college was just not for me...there was only a handful of students at the time going for college... because we were working class...it just never occurred to me that I could go to college”</i></p> <p><i>“my main concern was that I would be sitting in a classroom and everything I heard would be completely over my head... I’d feel left out of the joke...”</i></p>
Caroline	<p><i>“They do have that mature summer school towards the end of August so that kind of weaned you in a small bit... I didn’t know if I’d be able to get back into the swing of things again.”</i></p>
Edward	<p><i>“I’m learning all the time at work...so basically it was to have something to show for it. Everything I was doing I had taught myself... I just wanted to formalise what I had learned... I figured I’d be okay”</i></p>

Table A1 – Direct quotes from interviewees relating to their attitude towards self

Table A2 – outlines the mature learners’ attitude towards other students

Farah	<p><i>“I found them [mature students] very negative...some of them were extremely critical of the younger students. The things they would be criticising, I would admire them for...”</i></p>
Caroline	<p><i>“When you are 23/24 and you are speaking with 17/18 year olds that are away from home for the first time... you know... you’re on different wavelengths altogether”</i></p> <p><i>“My experience of fellow mature students has been that they are very focused...they are there to get an education”</i></p> <p><i>“Most of the groups that I went into I would end up leading it... you just felt like you were mothering them the whole time...”</i></p> <p><i>“I would probably be a bit of a control freak...I’d go round checking that everyone had their work done... I would re-check it and even sometimes I would have back-up work prepared in case people didn’t have their bits done.”</i></p>
Edward	<p><i>“There’d be no social interaction between us... nobody has any time for that...”</i></p> <p><i>“People shared information ... gave advice and stuff... everyone was focused and wanted to get on with it”</i></p>

Table A2 – Direct quotes from interviewees relating to their attitude towards other students

Table A3 outlines the mature learners' perception of lecturing staff

Farah	<p><i>"I was absolutely amazed when I started at number one how into it I was and number two how supportive the lecturers are..."</i></p> <p><i>"I needn't have worried, the support I have to say from the lecturers is above and beyond... you cannot highlight enough...how supportive the lecturers are...it's a very supportive environment, they'll bend over backwards."</i></p>
Caroline	<p><i>"They'd always make time for you... just the fact that you'd have a bit more confidence... you wouldn't be afraid to ask questions. I feel I got on with every lecturer... I never had any problems with any of the lecturing staff."</i></p>
Edward	<p><i>"They help you out as best they can."</i></p>

Table A3 – Direct quotes from interviewees relating to their perception of lecturing staff

Table A4 outlines the mature learners' perception of teaching methods used

Farah	<p><i>"I wanted to hear the lecturer...I did get very frustrated at times where I wanted people to shut up and I wanted to hear what he or she (the lecturer) was talking about... you are lapping that up but it's not too diluted with interaction."</i></p> <p><i>"maybe the grass is always greener on the other side but my sister would talk about lecturers in [a national university] and sometimes I envied, I craved that because the lecturer would talk... and then it was interactive with us talking. I didn't want to hear the other students half the time, I wanted to hear the lecturer."</i></p>
Caroline	<p><i>"When you are focused, it wouldn't matter what they'd do you'd listen to them anyway. You just want to take in as much as you can, whatever way it's done, I was just going to accept it"</i></p>
Edward	<p><i>"Do you know the lecture itself slides and then talking through it, there's no better way I can think of than to do that."</i></p> <p><i>"I prefer the lecturer to tell me everything and then I can learn that and I find sitting in a group with your peers and trying to discuss things... you don't know if you are right or wrong..."</i></p> <p><i>"I prefer to be told what's right, what's wrong and then make up my own opinion on that."</i></p>

Table A4 – Direct quotes from interviewees relating to perception of teaching methods

Table A5 outlines the mature learners' overall experience

Farah	<i>"... I think overall a very positive experience"</i>
Caroline	<i>"Overall I would say that it has been a positive experience, do you know, going back to college probably was one of the best decisions I have ever made because you cannot put a price on qualification and especially in these times".</i>
Edward	<i>"Time is the biggest pressure I found. You needed to make the most out of all your time".</i>

Table A5 – Direct quotes from interviewees relating to their overall experience