Making connections: a dialogue about learning and teaching in a tertiary enabling program

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This paper concerns the experiences and effects of a tertiary entrance program from two perspectives: that of a former student now engaged in her Honours program and of her enabling lecturer. The main aim of the paper is to present a literature review of published studies about mature women's engagement with tertiary study at the entry level. The authors utilise their enabling education biographies to connect the review of literature to lived experiences. The study asks: how far does the literature cover their experiences and what gaps, if any, are there? The first section briefly outlines the approach taken in the paper. In the second section the enabling experience is discussed in three parts: motivations to enter, the first assignment and course encounters. The third section examines the wider effects of participation in enabling on the self, family and friends. The paper bears out the findings of recent literature that highlighted the powerful transformative effects of such programs in all spheres of the students' lives and the importance of making connections in enabling programs. It suggests that more research needs to be carried out in a number of areas, especially gender, race and class.

Introduction

Higher education systems everywhere are undergoing significant changes, including 'massification'. This quantitative growth has also been accompanied by a qualitative shift in the perception of higher education participation as a privilege to a right, and as a lifelong learning site. In a recent study of participation and exclusion in higher education across ten 'developed' nations, including Australia, researchers identified that the participation of 'non-traditional' students, most often used as a proxy for adult students, was one of the fundamental changes occurring in higher education (Scheutze and Slowley 2002: 312). Mature age tertiary access schemes have provided one of the ways in which these far reaching changes have been achieved. The Open Foundation at the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, has been in operation since 1974. For thirty years it has provided a pathway into tertiary study for mature-age students (May 2003c). Further the Open Foundation has a unique place in Australia in that it takes over one third of the total national enrolments in such programs. Open Foundation students generally perform at a higher level than other types of entrants to the university. Cheong (2000: 79) wrote that the Open Foundation 'is Newcastle's flagship in terms of its contributions to the enhancement of the well-being of the local community it serves.'

In this paper, we examine the experience of the Open Foundation from two perspectives: those of the student and of the teacher. Our aim is to explore and test the research findings on the experience of access programs and mature age tertiary learning from those perspectives. The first section briefly outlines the autobiographical

approach employed. In the second section the paper discusses the enabling experience in three parts: motivations to enter, the first assignment and course encounters. The third section examines the wider effects of participation in enabling on the self, family and friends. The paper bears out the findings of recent literature that relates the powerful transformative effects of such programs in all spheres of the students' lives and the importance of making connections in enabling programs. It suggests that more research needs to be carried out in a number of areas.

An autobiographical approach

Researchers in adult education have embraced a wide range of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Among the latter group many have been informed by postmodern and feminist sensibilities regarding the importance of life story work, narratives and linguistic analysis (Gough & Maddock 1978; Baxter & Britton 2001; Maher 2001; Heenan 2002; Illeris 2003). Jarvis (2001) has outlined recently the 'delights and dangers' of autobiographical methods in exploring adult education. She stated that the value of such studies is that they allow marginal voices to appear (see also Tett 2000); they show how research and researcher interact; they add complexity and depth to research; and they have warmth and directness. The dangers include: self-indulgence, over-particularity, and that narrative or 'mythic' structures may construct reality for the researcher. In this paper we follow the qualitative trends while acknowledging their dangers and inadequacies.

Our approach also stands within the interpretive humanist research tradition. According to McLean, this tradition emphasises that social reality cannot exist separately from humans. Thus 'the ontological status of social life is produced and given meaning by individual actors. In effect, human beings are active creators of their worlds, rather than being passively shaped by social processes' (McLean 1999: 27). The interpretive humanist framework understands adult education is 'a series of negotiated encounters' between students and processes such as 'courses' or 'learning'.

Qualitative papers from Australia and overseas in the area of mature returners to higher education tend to be based on small samples. In Australia, Passe (1997) based her paper on two case studies; Cantwell and Mulhearn in the same year looked at the experience of seven women. In South Africa, Castle (2002) reported on three case studies while in the United Kingdom, Reay (2003) examined the adult education experiences of twelve women. These small-scale studies allow for in-depth analyses of experiential data, although they are limited in the production of generalisable data. As we do here, they rely on rich literature surveys to provide thick interpretations.

The authors have known one another since 1996. The paper grew out of a series of meetings by the authors over coffee and by email. The process has been joyful but it has also been disorderly, risky, experimental and undertaken over distance. Productive collaboration, according to Kamber and Thomson (2001), arises from play and 'flourishes when both serious and playful'. Our main aim was to survey and test the literature about enabling in general, and about the Open Foundation in particular, in the light of our experiences. The Open Foundation Program has been subject to steady research since the 1990s (see Collins & Penglase 1991; Penglase 1993; Bourke Cantwell & Archer 1998; Cantwell, Archer & Bourke 2001; Cantwell & Grayson 2002; May 2003abc). As two mature-age women returners to formal education, we present research on our own adult education encounters in the Open Foundation Program, one as a former student and the other as a lecturer in Australian History in the program. Our narratives are subjected to reflexive critique in comparison with a sample of the literature about mature-age women returners and the enabling experience. This paper, then, is not 'about' but 'by' adult returners: the research and the researcher are fused. We recognise the limits of this approach, yet hold that this exploration of our

own stories in the light of the literature about women returners may yield worthwhile knowledge. The next section examines the enabling experience in three parts, beginning with re-entry. Each part is preceded by a review of the relevant literature, followed by our stories.

The experience of returning

Re-entry

Researchers have noted a number of reasons why women return to formal education, and the emphasis varies depending on the site of the study. Fulmer and Jenkins (1992), in their evaluation of a bridging program offered at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia, cited personal enrichment, the need to retrain for the workforce, a desire to change present circumstances and to develop new interests. Kaziboni (2000) studied women pursuing further studies at the University of Zimbawe and the emphasis there was mainly economic, arising from changes in their family situations, but also as Australian Passe (1997) and British Reay (2003) found in the case of working class female returners, included the desire to act as role models for their children. For the Open Foundation Program, Cantwell and Mulhearn (1997) found that re-entry primarily concerned self-improvement and identity generation.

The process of re-entry to higher education for mature-age women has been characterised as 'problematic' (Reay 2003). Macdonald and Stratta (1998: 70) show that returning to education for adults includes a change in power relationships. Adults 'go back' to a 'state where others have control'. 'Going back' for many also includes memories of low quality educational encounters, often in secondary school. It has also been noted that women experience 'extra rather than redistributed workloads in the domestic environment' as a result of re-entry (Cantwell & Mulhearn 1997). Jenni's story illustrates the maxim that there is usually more than one reason for taking an

action. Adult education theorist Mezirow said that transformative learning occurs most often as a result of a 'disorienting dilemma' triggered by a life crisis or a major life transition (see Imel 1998). Both Jenni's and Jo's motivations to enter included such a dilemma, and the desire for escape from it into an area of challenge and self-growth. For both women, the rhetoric of 'self-improvement' seems not to be present as an overt motivation and financial considerations did not figure at all, although Jenni mentioned retraining as an aim.

Jenni's re-entry – a conjunction of events

My motivation for going to university resulted from a conjunction of events. My husband and I had wanted to start a family, with many years of no success. We decided to adopt and in due course we became parents. Our second child, another girl, arrived sixteen months later. I did find it very difficult to cope with the girls; they were very demanding. In retrospect, the lack of coping was probably associated with not really fitting into the motherhood mould as snugly as some of my peers did. In the following year my husband took the opportunity to work overseas for a year, however, on our return, I had real problems settling back into my old life and feelings of being at odds with my peers seemed to be intensified.

I decided a change was needed and took the opportunity to enrol at Macquarie University as they had a special admissions year to celebrate their jubilee. Would you believe it – I fell pregnant! I did not cope with this turn of events at all. Despondently, I scrapped the university idea to cope with the impending arrival. As noted above, Mezirow (1997) suggested that a 'disorienting dilemma, which is triggered by a life crisis or major transition, although it may also result from an accumulation of transformations in meaning schemes over a period of time' (Mezirow 1997: 50) is significant in the process of mature-aged students returning to the educational process. I experienced the 'accumulation of transformations' over time of

feeling at odds with the motherhood stereotype, and the 'disorienting dilemma' of a totally unexpected pregnancy.

Some time later, I read an article in the local newspaper about the Open Foundation Program at the new regional campus of the University of Newcastle at Ourimbah. The location of the campus on the Central Coast nearby made it much more accessible than the Macquarie option. Regarding adult participation in Zimbabwe, Kabazoni (2000) has noted 'the tendency to locate universities in urban centres limits access to rural women', and this is no less true for Australia. My husband encouraged me to go to the Open Foundation information session. I did not want to go. What was he thinking – me undertake university studies in my state of dysfunction? I still was not coping with the children. I was also already anticipating what the literature has since confirmed, that 'for many mature-aged students, the experience of university involves significant impositions on family life and relationships' (Cantwell & Mulhearn 1997: 4). How was I going to cope with more pressure and deadlines? Still, I was having a really bad day with the children so I decided I needed some time out and ended up at the meeting and was enrolling before I knew it – it all sounded so wonderful and liberating.

Connecting Jo's re-entry and teaching in the Open Foundation

I returned to higher education in my early thirties. The act of applying for a university place after many years away from formal study was the result of a process that I still do not fully understand. Like Jenni, the causes for my return were many, but mainly were of an existential character. My 'disorienting dilemma' was a brush with death from which I had recovered with all of my old certainties shaken, and with a growing understanding that if I was to realise my potential, whatever that was, I had better get cracking – time was clearly awasting. My re-entry was filled with self-doubt and nameless fears that persisted for many years, although lessening as I went along.

When I look at a new group of Open Foundation adults, I assume that they have decided to try to gain a place at university for many different reasons, some known and some unknown. Further, I assume that all are nervous about their decision. I always begin therefore with my own story of re-entry. I do not attempt to massage away the complexities and contradictions in the telling. I am often surprised at how powerful this story is when students from many years ago recall this opening self-revelatory monologue, as Jenni demonstrates below. Telling stories about the past is also a powerful way of making connections and can be empowering for students (Chase 2000; Hartford, Morgan & Watt 2003).

The first assignment

From our experience, the first milestone in an enabling program for both students and lecturers is the submission and return of the first assignments. Little has been written about these pivotal events in enabling programs from either the teacher or student perspective. Rickwood and Goodwin (2000: 52) have noted in their longitudinal study of eleven students in an Open University program that:

> assessment is certainly an important justification and in the eyes of our respondents the most important one … it was clear that assessment generally helped motivate, reassure and sustain the students, as well as affording them proof of achievement.

It can be asserted, however, that the first assignment is surrounded on all sides by anxiety.

In general it has been found that initially students are threatened by 'academic work' and feel 'different' from traditional school-leaver students whom they perceive as 'advantaged'. The initial stages of their studies are concerned with learning 'the rules' and much of this hinges on the return of marked work (Macdonald and Stratta 1998). Moreover, students entering enabling programs often have low

self-efficacy beliefs with regard to academic performance (Cantwell, Bourke and Archer 1997; Hartford et al. 2003). Castle (2002) reported that the mature-age women returning to higher education 'confronted a new teaching style … [and were] required to observe and question former constructions and practices, to find a voice and to take personal responsibility for their views'. This learning trajectory demanded from students has been characterised as the move from concrete to abstract styles of thinking (Fulmer et al. 1992), moving from passive to active modes of learning (Castle 2002) and engaging in deep rather than surface learning (Cantwell and Mulhearn 1997).

The anxiety surrounding the first assignment is clear in our stories. As a lecturer, Jo's concern about returning the first assignment centred on her knowledge of its importance as a stage in the creation of scholarly identity. She understood that, for some, the first marked assignment would be a positive affirmation, while for others, a disappointing mark would pose a challenge that some would choose not to meet. In order to manage her anxiety about the first assignment, Jenni adopted what could be termed a 'harm minimisation strategy' in which performance at the first assignment would guide her regarding further participation – or not.

Jenni and the first assignment – making connections

For one of my subjects, I think I was fortunate to have a lecturer with whom I connected from the start. 'The teacher's role in establishing an environment that builds trust and care facilitates the development of sensitive relationships among learners and is a principle of fostering transformative learning' (Taylor 1998, cited in Imel 1998). She was open and truthful about what lay ahead (Wilson 1997, in Cantwell & Mulhearn 1997: 3). As she was speaking, it was as if I was the only person in the class. I was hooked onto all the possibilities and what I might be able to attain. Nevertheless, failing to matriculate in high school reinforced my anxiety about my 'worthiness' to be at university, even though I felt I had arrived at a place that had

meaning for me. So at the outset I decided to set myself some short-term goals, that in retrospect were quite dangerous. I decided to see how I went with my first assignment and take action depending on the outcome.

Coming to this point, I had made three important connections. The first connection was with my lecturer. Unknowingly, she had triggered within me what Cantwell and Mulhearn (1997: 2) refer to as the 'deep or achieving approach'. Drawing from the discussion they present, it could be suggested that this approach to learning, by their rating, needs to be in the positive for the student to succeed (Cantwell and Mulhearn 1997: 15–16). In another study, Harford, Morgan & Watt (2003: 75) found 'students identified that their level of connectedness [with the lecturer] enhanced a belief in their ability to succeed'. The observations made by these studies suggests the positive connection between student and educator is strongly linked to the establishment or enhancement of the deep or achieving learning experience being in the positive mode (also Cantwell and Mulhearn 1997: 3).

The second connection was with the Learning Skills Centre at the Central Coast Campus, which was a vital part of my learning experience. There I was taught how to write an academic essay. Until the first assignment was due, I had very little confidence that I had any ability to put two words together that made any sense. Understanding sentence structure, key signal words and mapping out a coherent argument have made me a better student and able to achieve an academic level beyond my imagination. Kamber and Thomson (2001) have suggested that 'academic writing is very strongly tied to the formation and negotiation of scholarly identity'.

The third important cluster of connections I made was with my fellow students. Sitting in the classroom was very threatening. However, when you finally pluck up enough courage to talk to your classmates, you realise everyone feels that way. Cantwell & Mulhearn (1997: 3) construed this adjustment period as one of asserting a

'sense of self-agency', but perhaps there is a period too when the 'group-agency' must also be affirmed. One of the gaps in the research literature concerns the nature of the identity of groups of learners. I tended to gravitate to the people who were positive about their learning experience and eager to take up the challenges this process presents. The interactions with other students helped toward resolving new and strange feelings of social isolation brought about by attending university (Cantwell and Mulhearn 1997: 4).

When I received my first assignments back, I could not believe what I had achieved, especially when I was considering that a pass would be great. I was ecstatic since this was not just the case for my History subject but for the distance learning one as well. I was amazed when they contacted me for permission to copy my first essay as an example for other students to follow. I thought: hey, maybe I could do this after all? Cantwell and Mulhearn identify the enhancement of self-efficacy as part of the process that students experience when adjusting to the formal learning process (1997: 2) which also supports the findings of Youlden and Chan (1994) and Cholowski and Chan (1992). Having those first successes was fortunate for me. It made me realise I could achieve and did belong at university. If not for my early successes and the connections made between the lecturer and the Learning Skills Centre people, I very much doubt that Open Foundation would have been such a great experience. University became the release I desired from my domestic roles and a confirmation of who I was. Some studies have noted that it was 'only whilst they were at university that they felt they could be themselves rather than somebody's mother or partner' (Hughes 2002: 419).

Jo and the first assignment: a crisis of expectations

As a lecturer there is nothing I dislike more than handing back the first assignment. Even though I spend a great amount of time marking these assignments, I know that the marks are going to hurt some, disappoint others, anger still others and create the most joyous

emotions in the few who gain high distinctions or any result beyond their heartfelt expectations. This is because adults entering higher education usually have not been tested formally for many years. They carry with them ideas gleaned about their level of skills and ability from many sources. From my own experience I know that some also carry with them an idea that goes something like: 'the amount of effort should equal the amount of return'. Taras (2003) has found that this situation 'is external to the actual standard of their work and their awareness of this'. Further, students' self-worth is often deeply implicated in their written work – they feel that they, and not their work, are being marked in what Ilott and Murphy (1997, in Hawe 2003) described as 'the destructive association between failure on a prescribed task and as a person'. Sometimes the return of the first assignment is crunch time and some will leave at this point. This 'personalisation of the outcomes of assessment' applies not only to students but also to assessors. Hawe (2003) found that assessors have difficulty assigning a fail grade and that doing so is accompanied by 'anxiety, distress, self-doubt, guilt, regret and relief'. In my experience of teaching in a tertiary enabling course, the assignment of a pass or indeed a credit grade can also provoke such anxiety. Many adult entry students regard less than high grades as inadequate given the imposition of 'returning' to their personal lives. They also recognise that high grades are necessary for their purpose of gaining a place at university within an increasingly competitive market. Unfortunately they are right.

Knowing all this is complicated for me by the importance assessment had in my own academic career. Despite the fact that my first assignment in history was in my view 'a nightmare' (I 'only' received a pass), I gained high marks consistently in my studies. 'Success' propelled me forward. Despite my growing scholarly confidence, however, the memory of the first mark and the 'only a housewife' identity I had embraced in my years away from study, encouraged me to sometimes think that the marks I was receiving might be some sort

of mistake – or worse, kindness. Soon I would be uncovered for the incompetent fool I really was – it was only a matter of time. I don't know when exactly this feeling of being an impostor receded, but thankfully it has, although remnants appear from time to time like some reptilian artifact of a less evolved self.

The course

Having survived the first assignment, mature-age students will settle to a level of commitment and engagement with their courses as suits their abilities, temperaments, commitments and needs. In general adult learners can be distinguished from other types of learners by their characteristics. For example, according to Jerram (2002), adult learners engage in self-motivated learning; they have a wealth of experiential knowledge and an ability to transfer knowledge from one area to another. Adult learners exhibit commitment to the requisite work for learning. They also have pre-determined limits imposed by other serious commitments such as families and jobs. Adults need to link learning to a meaningful life application and finally, they have an awareness of life-changing ramifications of learning (Jerram 2002).

Research on adult learners' experiences of tertiary access programs show a fairly consistent suite of problems that they encountered. Time availability and management appeared to be critical factors (Castle 2002, Rickwood & Goodwin 2000, Kaziboni 2000, Cantwell & Mulhearn 1997, Scott, Burns & Cooney 1996, Fulmer *et al.* 1992 and so on). Other factors were level of family support, workload, economic pressures, and academic challenges, epistemological and institutional. However, the research presents a more complex picture with regard to learning outcomes. Cantwell and Mulhearn (1997) charted a decline in students' self-efficacy over the course of their access program, and an increase in surface learning and self-blame. On the other hand, Fulmer *et al.* (1992) noted a significant movement from concrete to abstract styles of learning in their sample. At the same time, most qualitative studies affirmed the positive outcomes of their

learning experiences, whatever the learning outcomes. Rickwood and Goodwin's (2000: 51) case studies exemplify this statement: 'the general conclusion of all the academic journeys was very positive. By the time the students had reached the end of their courses, and before they knew the results, they were recording very strong feelings of worth and achievement.'

Jenni

So much of the Open Foundation experience has been to a large degree the interaction with specific individuals. Each student is sure to have a different experience based on their expectations and willingness to achieve. Assistance and the openness of Open Foundation lecturers play a vital part in the learning process for mature-age students. Loughlin (1993) sees the responsibility of the teacher is to create a 'community of knowers,' individuals who are 'united in a shared experience of trying to make meaning of their life experience' (Imel 1998). Cranton (1994, in Imel 1998) said that 'the teacher also sets the stage for transformative learning by serving as a role model and demonstrating a willingness to learn and change by expanding and deepening understanding of and perspectives about both subject matter and teaching'.

Many students have negative memories of previous education experiences. I think the hardest thing for students is conquering the fear of feeling foolish when asking questions. Many times I would wait until after the class to ask questions. Being given the confidence to ask during the class was enabled by sensitive and intelligent responses from the lecturers – even to the bleeding obvious and the downright ridiculous.

Jo

As the research has asserted, time was without doubt my greatest problem as an adult student. My experiences concerned the isolation I felt. Firstly, from the general academic life of the university and secondly, isolation from other students and inability to 'waste' time

pursuing extra curricula activities. Like a thief in the night I attended lectures, 'hit' the library for photocopying sessions in short loans, then home to my duties as wife and mother. I worked after my children's bedtime and sometimes after my spouse's bedtime. These experiences have shaped my teaching practice in the Open Foundation. I am careful that workloads are testing but achievable, and that submission dates are well understood and flexible if needed.

The effects of returning on personal worlds

The consequences of the changes that occur to the individual in their enabling program move beyond acquiring academic skills and knowledge. The 'regeneration of identity' through engagement with academic study (Cantwell & Mulhearn 1997: 4) is also identified by Rickwood and Goodwin (2000) and Baxter and Britton (2001: 87). The latter refer to Giddens' idea of 'elective biography' that implies a proactive process of a re-representation of the student's identity. Additionally, Maher (2001: 11) has identified that for many women 'it isn't just about career, it isn't just about the pursuit of knowledge, but about a new way of being in the world'. Further, Imel (1998) has identified that 'transformative learning occurs when individuals change their frame of reference by critically reflecting on their assumptions and beliefs and consciously making and implementing plans that bring about new ways of defining their worlds'. While this body of literature is mainly about women returners, we would like to believe it is a similar experience of many men, though the literature is largely silent on issues affecting mature-age male returners.

Jenni

In a personal sense, the goals with which I started university are different from those I have now. These changes have occurred largely due to an evolving realisation of what I could achieve. I have an increased self-confidence, however, at numerous times I still seem uncertain of my ability. Like Jo, I keep waiting for someone to 'find

me out' and to be excluded from the learning process at university. I have become more critically aware of media reports and other sources of knowledge (see Katie's story in Baxter and Britton 2001: 90). This is what Mezirow calls 'a perspective transformation' (1991: 167, cited in Imel 1998). This transformation on numerous occasions has made me feel socially at odds with my friends and family; sometimes it is just not worth voicing my viewpoint due to any friction it may cause. Again, Baxter and Britton found that many mature returners found their social activities 'involve[d] them in the quite stressful strategy of concealing aspects of their new selves in certain situations' (2001: 92). Other researchers such as Wakeford (1994: 224) noted that mature returners feel the need to segment their lives 'or to wear different hats' to cope with the disparities between their university and social worlds.

At other times, I seem to have been so absorbed in achieving my academic goals I have been unaware of the needs of family and friends. Kaziboni (2000) related how the opposing roles of student, mother and wife have to be constantly negotiated in order to achieve further education in conjunction with the 'cultural expectations with which they have to abide' (2000: 7; also Maher 2001: 17). I have had the 'luxury' of having a supportive partner. Many other students, especially women I have met through university, have been actively and passively sabotaged during their studies. Still I sometimes feel guilty about the amount of time I spend on university work (Kaziboni 2000: 7). It has been observed in some of the studies that one of the arguments for women returning to education is that they provide a positive example to their children (Kaziboni 2000, Paase 1997, Hughes 2002). This reason seems to be a minor one however. It may be suggested that this rationalisation is being used by a number of returners to justify their decision and/or to resolve feelings of guilt associated with the changes in domestic priorities returning to formal education may entail.

As I progressed in my studies, it became more difficult to bridge the gap between my old and new friends. Baxter and Britton (2001) have identified that fragmentation and compartmentalisation is accentuated by 'new forms of cultural capital'(Baxter & Britton, 2002: 89). Ultimately, the friends I met at university have become very important to me. I have developed some long-term friendships, which have helped to redefine me as a person. The friends I have kept from before I started university have been my greatest assets. Their encouragement and acceptance of my 'growth' has cemented strong bonds.

Jo

When I returned to study, I knew that what I was doing was potentially disruptive to my life as it was lived. I knew that my relationships would change – I hoped for the better. My close and wider family network were almost unanimously helpful in my quest for education. Like Jenni, I was fortunate to have a partner who supported my changes. I believe that my children were beneficiaries of my tertiary study in that I was happier and more fulfilled. I am sure that they might have other recollections, including perhaps my short temper around assignment or examination times, or my general absentmindedness. For my part, I was determined that our quality of life would not be affected by my decision to study. Nevertheless changes did occur and I gradually became a less careful housekeeper – this was absolutely necessary since I had been unrealistically clean and tidy for years. Meals were not always as attractive as once they had been and I sometimes was not available for social functions. There was guilt, but it was more than outweighed by growing sense of personal mastery and achievement.

This process of individualisation has paradoxically enabled me to contribute to my society in a previously undreamed of capacity as educator, and must also been seen within a collectivist framework that is not just about being a good role model for my children, the

'good mother' and 'the acceptable face of femininity' as suggested by Reay (2003). For me it is also about citizenship, the opportunity to provide a modest form of leadership, and participation in the reproduction and generation of knowledge. The gains of this transformation have been real, although as Hey (2003) has noted, 'it has not been cost-free'. My own journey has paradoxically been a 'coming out' from the working class with its restrictive gender norms and 'a no going back' (Hey 2003: 320).

Regarding friendships, I have kept many of my old friends but we rarely see one another. I seem to have spun off into another world. Still our orbits cross at pivotal moments and I regard myself as their friend for all weathers. I have not discussed with them how my changes have impacted on our relationships, although perhaps my 'busyness' over the years has rankled. If it has, they have been too kind to mention it. Being a scholar by nature and now by profession means that I love the company of words and ideas and can cheerfully rattle around on my own with little need beyond my family circle who accept what some might regard as my social isolation as part of my identity.

My embrace of the academic life has affected two other important relationships: to knowledge and to the university. I am now a confident, lifelong, passionate and respectful learner. My relationship to knowledge has above all been a personally defining one. Similarly my relationship to the university has been defining as well, but less unequivocal. I have never felt completely comfortable within the middle class, WASP, masculinist culture of the institution and attribute this to my sex and, more self evidently, to my working class background – I am the first person of any gender in my immediate family to go university. The term 'class' in this sense is not a materialist but a cultural category, comprised of shared information about the world. Hey (2003: 235) alludes to the consequences that come from leaving working class culture behind for the feminist

academic who is then subject to 'ambivalent attitudes to academia, feelings of guilt, fraudulence and alienation'. Sometimes I sense a secret code that I cannot quite break – a kind of taken-for-grantedness about what is acceptable or possible within this context that I do not have. In losing my working classness economically and socially by becoming an academic, it is paradoxically intensified as a lived experience. The irony is, as Skeggs (1997) has noted, that working class female academics 'try to fit others into a system from which we feel alienated'.

Conclusions and recommendations

Using our learning and teaching enabling biographies as sounding boards, we have reviewed a range of literature about enabling and mature women's return to higher education. We examined the problematic nature of return, and the often painful dilemmas that occasion it. While the research canvasses a range of motivations to resume formal education, our experience shows that no one reason predominates. Instead, there is a cluster of reasons that accumulate and lead to action. We then examined the research about the first assignment after return. This event is of great importance to students, either confirming or challenging their efforts. We found that more work needs to be carried out on lecturers' attitudes and practices regarding assessment. Hawe (2003) has made a valuable start. The section on course experiences revealed that mature women potentially face a wide array of problems in their engagement with higher education, although time is the critical factor. It is also clear that the journey is positive and worthwhile, no matter the outcome. Further, the effects on the personal worlds of the students are far-reaching. Relationships to self, to knowledge and to others, undergo change. The overall heuristic of both the literature and our stories concerns the metaphor of *movement*. Mature women's engagement with enabling is variously about embarkation, challenge, change, growth, journey, initiation, transformation, making new connections,

opening up, re-birth, coming into self, and leaving the old behind. The emotional tenor of the movement seems to involve polarities of negative and positive states: doubt and confidence, joy and grief, fear and bravery. The mythic element seems to flourish in this type of context where movement occurs within the self and where energetic polarities exist (see the work of Seary & Willans 2004).

Hughes (2002) provides the most satisfying understanding of the woman who returns to (and stays in) higher education. She suggested that the woman returner is 'an exemplary case for the study of subject-as-process' (p.413) who can be understood in terms of two metaphors: the exile (drawn from the work of Benhabib 1992) and the nomad (from Braidotti 1994). The exile has moved 'beyond the walls' of their old culture and attained a 'critical perspective'. The exile is simultaneously 'connected and disconnected' in relation to both the host and the home society (p.416). Through our encounters with higher education, we have evolved from exiles to become members of that other 'luscious' category, the 'nomad'(Hey 2003: 326). The metaphor of the nomad lends agency and autonomy to the woman returner. Nomads make purposive choices to move from one place to the next. Nomadism is not about grieving for a lost homeland as the exile does, but in higher education, it emphasises the pleasures of academic life. According to Hughes, the metaphor of the nomad moves away from the woman-as-victim focus of much of the literature on mature-age women and concentrates on the sheer pleasure of intellectual pursuit and what women *become*.

Overall we found that, while our experiences were recognisable in the literature, more research needs to be carried out in a number of areas, especially with regard to experiences and effects of teaching in tertiary enabling programs about which the literature is almost silent. Some investigation into the dynamics involved with early assessments needs to be undertaken. Another gap in the literature concerns gender, especially the experience of male students, and of

male and female students together, and of groups of learners, in these programs. Further, multi-class and race perspectives need much more work. Finally, small studies need to be followed up with larger, longitudinal research. The massification of higher education and its interface with the current emphasis on lifelong learning means that, more and more, universities will be called on to deliver education to mature students.

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