

***I feel like I'm being hit from all directions:
Enduring the bombardment as a mature-age learner
returning to formal learning***

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The mature-age learner's re-engagement with a formal learning environment may be somewhat akin to the novice Paintball player who, unless well positioned and attuned to the rules of the combative game, is bombarded and worn down by constant 'hits'. For the mature-age learner, such 'hits' may come in the form of tensions surrounding institutional protocols, social interactions with other peers and personal challenges related to other life-role responsibilities. Transformative learning theory (Cranton 2006, Mezirow 2000) accounts for the often erratic and contradictory trajectories of personal change that some mature-age learners make manifest. Data from a 13-week research project with a group of mature-age learners indicate that these trajectories need to be taken into consideration by educators. A proposition is made that, through the assurance of appropriate, meaningful curricula and the promotion of learning communities (Gabelnick, MacGregor,

Matthews & Smith 1990) that build resiliency (Knight 2007, Goleman 2002, Resiliency Initiatives 2001), educators can empower mature-age learners to cope with the challenges that will inevitably confront them.

Introduction

Mature-age learners represent a unique sub-set of university students in the Australian higher education context. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2010), in 2008, approximately 1,064,050 citizens in Australia were enrolled in either bachelor programs, associate degree programs, other undergraduate programs or Enabling programs. Of this figure, students 20 years and over accounted for 860,050, approximately 6,784 of whom were enrolled in a pre-university Enabling program (ABS 2010). These figures indicate that within university settings, mature-age learners represent a significant sub-set of learners. Such learners are generally typified by defining characteristics that the world of work, community engagement, parenting, travel and other life experiences have imprinted upon them. These learners generally demonstrate a wide diversity in their learning approaches and preferences, in their idiosyncratic coping strategies and in their prior schooling histories. For some, the return to formal study after varying periods of time can elicit feelings of anxiety, stress, disorientation and even fear, yet for others it can induce great excitement and result in consequent personal empowerment. Returning to a formal learning environment, such as an Enabling program, can therefore pose as a somewhat paradoxical experience for mature-age learners in that they need both change and stability for personal growth, yet to achieve and maintain stability, they must undergo personal change of some nature.

Contextualisation, rationale and future relevance

Enabling programs

Characteristically, pre-university Enabling programs are designed to support beginning and interrupted learners from non-traditional backgrounds who are at risk of being marginalised from university study. Such programs offer those in sub-groups traditionally under-represented in the tertiary sector the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills that predispose a learner to a university experience. It would be reasonable to predict from the Australian Government's response (Commonwealth of Australia 2009) to the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education that the number of mature-age learners seeking higher education opportunity in Australia is set to rise. The federal government's initiatives have significant bearing on the future importance of the conception and delivery of Enabling education, especially given proposed increases in the number of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, Indigenous students and students from regional and remote areas in possession of higher education qualifications (Commonwealth of Australia 2009). A plethora of Enabling programs have emerged from Australian universities since the early 1970s as a means of addressing social imbalance in accessing higher education, one of which is CQUniversity Australia's well-respected STEPS program.

STEPS as an Enabling program

STEPS (Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies) is a 13-week, full-time or 26-week part-time, internal or external, pre-university preparatory program that is available to learners who are eighteen years or older, of Australian or New Zealand citizenship or to those who hold a permanent resident or humanitarian visa. It is expected that applicants have completed the equivalent of a Year 10 education, or show a propensity to succeed at the tertiary level. Offered for a period of 24 years, STEPS has to date afforded in excess of 4,900 learners an entry to undergraduate study at universities

throughout Australia. STEPS is offered to its participants free of tuition fees and textbook charges and attracts a federal government financial supplement. The target audience for STEPS are those learners from the previously mentioned equity groups that have been traditionally recognised by the Australian Commonwealth Government as disadvantaged in their access to higher education. CQUniversity's regional campuses satisfy the first two of those categories.

Characteristically, STEPS applicants seek to access higher education but find they lack the essential knowledge, skills and confidence to gain successful entry. Many have been hindered by both past and present educational, social or cultural circumstances, and most have serious misgivings about their academic ability and capability to succeed. In general, however, STEPS students are highly committed and dedicated learners who have a real thirst for knowledge and a determination to succeed. Most view STEPS as a starting point, an educational experience that will facilitate a tertiary entry, and thus an enhanced quality of life through improved educational standing. As such, many show great courage in their quest to achieve what was once considered too far out of reach. During their time in STEPS, it is not unusual for students to confront very challenging personal circumstances; yet, in the main, they are successful in conquering the obstacles that would once have located them on the perimeter of higher education. Thus STEPS not only provides a strategic pathway into university, but aims to instil in its students the confidence and skills necessary to enhance a successful undergraduate study experience. This is achieved largely through the design and delivery of the STEPS curriculum.

STEPS curriculum design

In general, Enabling programs have, as crucial to their design, a curriculum that addresses the challenges encountered by novice learners at the tertiary level, be they educational, cultural, social,

economic or personal (Cullity 2006). Curriculum design generally centres on the means by which mature-age learners may be assisted to gain the knowledge, skills and personal attributes to progress to undergraduate studies. However, in order to acquire qualities essential to transit to this space, it could be argued that there is a demand for a curriculum that offers far more than just an opportunity to acquire the rudimentary knowledge and skills (Cantwell 2004, Cullity 2006, Flint & Frey 2003) required in the higher education learning context. To this end, the intention of STEPS is to present a holistic curriculum that provides opportunities for students not only to learn to plan, research and write an academic essay and acquire basic mathematics and computer skills, but also to discover the value of an optimistic outlook on life and learning and come to acquire a higher level of self-confidence and resiliency. The STEPS curriculum is therefore designed to have its mature-age learners acquire a more fully developed understanding of self as learner and also an acceptance of self as capable, intelligent and capable of embarking on the tertiary experience. In such an environment, there exists potential for significant personal growth.

The STEPS curriculum caters to the diverse needs of its cultural and social groups and encourages its students to acquire the skills that will foster a resilience to study. Pedagogical frameworks and strategies, underpinned by adult learning principles (Knowles 1998, Foley 2000) and transformative learning theory (Mezirow 2000, Cranton 2006), are specifically designed to challenge mature-age learners to reformulate perceptions of themselves as learners. Critical reflection (Mezirow 2000:19) on long-held assumptions about themselves as learners and the consequences of holding such views is actively encouraged through curriculum that is structured to provide opportunities for the deconstruction and reconceptualisation of assumptions and perceptions of self as learner. This is achieved through a curriculum comprised of four component courses.

STEPS component courses

STEPS comprises four core courses. *Language and Learning* aims to have students acquire the reading, thinking and writing skills necessary for academic purposes. *Transition Mathematics 1* is a course in elementary mathematics designed to have students commence work on the foundation concepts, rules and methods of basic mathematics. *Computing for Academic Assignment Writing*, a basic computer literacy course, aims to make students aware of the fundamental operations of a computer and promotes familiarity and competency with the essentials of word-processing, report writing, PowerPoint presentation, spreadsheets and the Internet. *Tertiary Preparation Skills* aims to introduce students to the skills necessary for academic studies. As such, students are familiarised with the diversity of under-graduate university programs, courses and procedures and most develop oral communication techniques as well as organisational strategies and research skills necessary for academic success. In combination, the four STEPS courses provide a solid foundation of skills and knowledge that can enhance articulation to university studies, not to mention the significant personal growth that can be experienced through the confidence many students feel when contemplating the next phase of their formal learning journey.

Three theoretical perspectives underpin the STEPS curriculum and provide a frame for this article. First, transformative learning theory allows for a conceptualisation of the dichotomy of personal change, particularly in its acknowledgement of the physical, cognitive and emotional tensions that can accompany personal transformation. Second, the notion of learning communities (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews & Smith 1990, Kilpatrick, Barrett & Jones 2003, McKegg 2005, Tinto 1997, 1998) provides a frame to explain the need for supportive learning environments in order to enhance the learning of mature-age students. And third, theoretical underpinnings of resiliency (Knight 2007) allow for a portrayal of the capacity of individuals to transform and change, regardless of perceived or very

real risks. A brief discussion of each theoretical perspective now follows.

Transformative learning theory

Transformative learning theory seeks to explain the cognitive, affective and operative dimensions of adult learning and the personal transformation process. Often portrayed as a rational, cognitive conception (Mezirow 2000), more recent interpretations of the theory incorporate the affective, emotional and extra-rational dimensions of personal change. These interpretations include a constructivist-developmental conception (Daloz 1999, Taylor 2000), an extra-rational conception (Boyd & Myers 1988, Scott 1997, Boyd 1991, Dirkx 1997, 1998, 2000, Cranton 2002, 2006) and an ecological conception (O'Sullivan 2003). Transformative learning essentially occurs when an individual's taken-for-granted assumptions and expectations supporting beliefs, feelings and judgements are unsettled, critically assessed and revised.

From a developmental point of view, transformative learning occurs when the mature-age learner constructs new meaning structures in order to make sense of their changing world (Dirkx 1997). It calls for the learner to broaden their perspectives and come to see that values and beliefs of others, though different from their own, are equally valid (Taylor 2000). However, while some individuals may experience exhilaration as a result of significant personal change, for others the experience can be 'traumatic and overwhelming' (Taylor 2000: 160). Thus, the extra-rational conceptualisation of transformative learning theory allows for the inclusion of emotion, spirit and soul, intuition and imagination in the transformative learning process. Dirkx (1997: 84) sees such a conceptualisation as 'an attempt to embrace the messiness and disorder that is adult learning'. Making sense of such disorder can be discourse, dialogue and support from others (Cranton 2006) which can be facilitated through the establishment of learning communities.

Learning communities

The notion of learning communities can be used in diverse ways, but it is its close association with lifelong learning that is of relevance in this article. More specifically, it refers to the creation of a learning environment in which mature-age learners have opportunities to experience success. While definitions of learning communities vary from context to context, the definition that best informs the underpinning philosophy of the STEPS program is that espoused by Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews and Smith (1990: 19), namely, that:

A learning community is any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses—or actually restructure the curricular material entirely so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise.

Common to the many conceptions of learning communities are two key characteristics: *shared knowledge* and *shared knowing* (Tinto 1997: 4). *Shared knowledge* is promoted through the construction of a coherent educational experience in which ‘students come to share, as a community of learners, a body of knowledge that is itself connected’. *Shared knowing* relates not only to how students come to know each other quickly and relatively intimately, but also to how they come to share the experience of trying to know or learn. Within the learning community, collaborative and cooperative pedagogies are designed to purposefully encourage students to take active roles in their construction of new knowledge.

Learning communities generate many important benefits. They provide a supportive ‘learning space’ (Tinto 1997: 13) that promotes working and learning together; they enhance the students’ learning and educational attainment; they reduce attrition; and they benefit the institution, broadening the ‘educational “repertoire” ... and the possibilities for student learning’ (Tinto 1997: 13). Kilpatrick,

Barrett and Jones (2003: 3) believe learning communities can create new knowledge that benefits both the individual and the community. The authors also cite learning communities as places in which a common or shared purpose is a focal objective; where collaboration, partnership and learning are promoted; where diversity is respected; and where potential and outcomes are enhanced. Tinto (1998) attributes learning communities as being instrumental in the development of supportive peer groups to assist students in balancing the struggles they face in the higher education context. Furthermore, Tinto (1998) claims that the learning community influences the students' desire to continue on to further studies. From an inclusive viewpoint, McKegg (2005: 294) values the opportunity learning communities provide in terms of embracing different cultural backgrounds and allowing the student to 'have a voice [and] to feel safe articulating fears and ideas'. Equally important to the establishment of learning communities and the promotion of transformative learning is the learners' resiliency to succeed.

Resiliency

Upon their engagement with formal study, many mature-age learners are confronted with challenges and obstacles that in one way or another hinder their potential for learning. In seeking a solution, many turn to other people for advice or suggestions on how to overcome personal adversity. However, a resilient individual is one who can draw on their own resources to enact effective interventions to find solutions to problematic situations. Although no universal definition of resiliency can be found (Knight 2007), resilience is generally associated with optimism and is based on the premise that 'we can encounter change and adversity but still find hope' (Knight 2007: 543). Goleman (2002) conceptualises resilience in terms of one's emotional intelligence and its role in facilitating one's ability to cope with change. Similarly, Greenberg (2006) asserts that

the stresses associated with learning can be better tolerated by those learners who take responsibility for their emotional state.

Risk and protective factors are fundamental concepts associated with resiliency. Risk factors, which can be internal and external, are those issues related to ‘disabling, cultural, economic, or medical conditions that deny or minimise opportunities and resources for human development’ (Resiliency Initiatives 2001: 2). Protective factors refer to particular qualities and situations that facilitate the reversal or alteration of expected negative outcomes, and it is through the provision and nurturance of these protective factors that resiliency can be promoted (Resiliency Initiatives 2001). Thus, for the mature-age learner, family networks, peer relationships, relationships with teachers and commitment to learning represent components through which resiliency can be promoted. More specifically, strengths such as self-concept, self-control, cultural sensitivity, empowerment, social sensitivity and empathy provide important internal strengths to the adult resiliency framework (Resiliency Initiatives 2001).

Methodology

Having established the three theoretical concepts on which this article is premised, the next section uses data from a doctoral thesis that examined transformations in how a group of nine mature-age learners perceived themselves as learners while engaged in the 13-week, on-campus STEPS program (Willans 2010). The participants, all of whom volunteered to be part of the research group, were typically from low socio-economic backgrounds and first in their family to attend university. During their time in STEPS, each participant partook in four interviews: two semi-formal, individual interviews and two group interviews. A case study methodology was employed to frame the research, allowing for the use of a researcher’s journal and pre- and post-documents composed by the participants. Discourse analysis was used to analyse the data, allowing for the

emergence of dominant discourses. These various discourses provided evidence to suggest that, for these nine mature-age learners, undertaking STEPS was at times akin to enduring an ongoing physical and emotional bombardment.

Enduring the bombardment

Personal change can entail degrees of uncertainty and exposure of self to possible threats of failure or fear of the unknown. This is due to the fact that maintaining our assumptions and particular worldviews provides us with a certain degree of safety, and to question them is to question our 'assimilated ways of knowing, believing, and feeling' (Cranton 2006: 23). However, in avoiding the process of personal change, the mature-age learner can potentially face stagnation, and having the courage to critique long-held personal assumptions about self as learner can be problematic. Resiliency is required to cope with not only the epistemological challenges faced by the mature-age learner but also certain forms of bombardment that may include financial constraints, job and family commitments, confusing institutional practices and protocols, and a perceived or very real lack of family support. As the following section will now illustrate, without resiliency, this constant barrage of physical, cognitive and emotional demands can significantly impact on the mature-age learner's re-engagement with formal education.

The physical

Many mature-age learners already fulfil multiple roles when they take on the additional role of 'student' (Stone 2008, Cullity 2006, Darab 2004). Embroiled in these multiple roles can be tensions related to juggling finances, paid employment, parenting, civic commitments and other life stresses. For many women in particular, becoming a 'student' can conflict with the multiple life roles many fulfil. Debbenham and May (2004) found that when women become students, they are in general still largely responsible for family care

and the majority of domestic, household chores and child-minding responsibilities. The implication of having to physically juggle so many roles was made manifest by STEPS student Ella, a 42 year old, married woman with four children:

The pressure of time, from working at night, being a wife and mother with household duties, civic responsibilities and children with sporting commitments, was hard. I found that I stuck to myself a lot, and didn't have time to give to the class. At times I even thought about pulling out of STEPS as I felt it was coming from all directions.

Twenty-eight year old STEPS student Tess, a single mother of two children, experienced similar physical challenges as STEPS reached its program mid-way point:

I'm feeling pretty run down at the moment. I think it has been my son so sick and with nine lots of anti-biotics. ... I can't concentrate. I haven't been well since the weekend and that hasn't helped and trying to keep everyone happy is so hard.

The tension experienced by both Ella and Tess is not unusual in an Enabling context. Darab (2004) suggests that the volume of women's time commitments have resulted in intolerable workloads, and that the unbounded nature of family work involves significant time costs. Likewise, Stone (2008) found that lack of time, time management skills, balancing the needs of study, home and family and changes in family relationships were challenges facing the female student. Stone (2008: 279) also found that female students had to accommodate their study time around other family and domestic responsibilities and ensure their study hours did not 'impinge on family time'. Thus, similar to Ella, many women who are already fully tasked with demanding domestic and other routines can feel somewhat bombarded when trying to integrate study requirements into their existing and often very busy weekly schedules.

The cognitive

For other mature-age learners, cognitive challenges surrounding the exposure to new knowledge can make problematic their return to study. For many, the hiatus from formal schooling has left residual, distant memories of formal prose and lapses in the practice of certain higher order cognitive processing. Trying to comprehend the structure and discourse of academic writing and its associated protocols can be anxiety-provoking for many mature-age learners, and the “confusing culture’ of higher education, with its rules and regulations, word limits, language, assessment assumptions and other ‘academic’ issues’ (Askham 2008: 90) can give rise to significant tension. The difficulty of this was illustrated by June, a 32 year old, single STEPS student:

Even though for the essay I know what to say, I just don’t know how to say it. I just can’t get it out of my head on to the paper! I was yelling in my head, ‘You can’t do this’, but Julie was saying, ‘Yes you can’. I am trying to enjoy it but I am finding it so hard.

STEPS student Tara, a married mother of five, experienced a similar apprehension:

Writing is still a challenge for me. I’m still trying to get from the thought to the paper in the proper sentence and essay structure. That is what challenges me and I think I am slowly getting here.

For Bill, a single, 28 year old STEPS student, trying to synthesise the information to compile his academic essay was clearly problematic:

The research essay was a big challenge for me to start with. I could get conclusions very easily. The introduction was an absolute nightmare for me and I eventually got the introduction okay by looking at my conclusion then I looked at the body of the research assignment and... It’s not there! And I thought, ‘Oh no, what’s going on here?’

Finally, Tess’ words capture the cognitive challenge of trying to make sense of disparate pieces of new information:

I sat last night and I just couldn't get going. I can't do the maths and the language at the same time. I just don't have the head space.

The cognitive rigours demanded by the genre of academic writing can be quite disorienting for many mature-age learners. However, such events, argues Cranton (2006), can pose as catalysts for transformative learning, whereby either consciously or unconsciously, long-held assumptions about self as learner can be critiqued, tested and revised. Meyer and Land (2005: 2) refer to this conceptual territory as the 'liminal space', a 'not-so-sure' (p. 5) place of meaning making, in which personal transformation occurs through the altering of one's state to another. This space, however, is not without its tensions as the acquisition of new knowledge and subsequent new personal status can be problematic for the individual who, according to Meyer and Land (2005: 3), is not positioned 'fully in one category or another'. From this conceptual borderland, emotion can run high.

The emotional

Intricately enmeshed in the physical and cognitive challenges confronting many mature-age learners is the construct of emotion. Foremost in the formal learning context for many such learners is the anxiety and fear they experience when they step into the 'intellectual unknown', placing their 'private and public "neck" on the line' (Cantwell 2004: 12). Knowles (1998) suggests the learning experiences for adults are optimised in a non-threatening, challenging, supportive environment. However, despite the best intentions of the educator to create such, as the mature-age learner experiments with new personal identities, confronts possible mismatches between the discourses of home and the formal learning context, experiences confusion and uncertainty in light of new and diverse worldviews, and interacts with individuals from many diverse socio-economic and other backgrounds, emotions can run high. Such

tension was articulated by 48 year old STEPS student and mother of four, Rita:

I was upset with the rudeness of some class members. We had a lot of rudeness and comments that were unfair and people were very demanding. I also had trouble with thinking, well, I can't get caught up in their [class members'] stress 'cause I've got my own. That was the hardest but I handled it okay, I think.

Despite varying levels of anticipation and excitement experienced as a result of their return to formal learning, lack of self-confidence is experienced by many mature-age learners. Cullity's (2005: 1) findings substantiate self-doubt as one of the most common causes of anxiety for mature-age learners, manifested in a complex interplay of 'attitudinal, academic and social' dimensions that affect such learners as they prepare for undergraduate study. This was clearly the case for Tara who articulated a lack of confidence in her writing ability:

Low self-esteem with my writing is still a major thing. It's still there. I just can't get over the line 'cause I don't know if it will be right or not. And I don't want to look silly or anything like that.

Prior educational learning failures and negative schooling experiences can adversely impact the mature-age learner's study potential by clouding the perception many of them hold about themselves as learners. Cantwell and Grayson (2002) suggest the impacts of prior experiences of educational failure for mature-age learners can have a negative impact on perception of self as learner, and that different types of learning demanded in the university environment can fuel the notion of personal inadequacy. Cantwell and Mulhearn (1997) note that most of the Enabling program women in their research expressed feelings of alienation from aspects of the learning environment, manifested by their sense of inadequacy and anxiety, as well as fear of possible humiliation. This was illustrated by June, who, despite proudly sharing previous accomplishments with the class, perceived herself as a less than capable learner:

Although I have travelled the world and owned three businesses, I was hopeless at English at school. I never was a good writer. It has always been a downfall of mine. My spelling is hopeless, too.

Feelings of guilt and regret can also be emotional factors that negatively impact the mature-age learner on their re-engagement with formal learning. Evidence suggests that when mothers return to formal study, many can feel their familial roles are compromised (Debbenham & May 2004). This was evidenced by the guilt expressed by Tara as she lamented the time not spent with her toddler:

My two year old is talking a lot more just with me being away and it has been a bit heart-wrenching. She's about twelve months behind with speech with talking and she's actually putting three and four words together when she's talking. She never did that before. I'm sorry that I'm not there seeing it. A couple of weeks ago she went through a stage where she cried every time I left, which made me feel guilty, thinking 'Should I be doing this? Should I be here?'

Sonia, a 35 year old, married mother of two, alludes to the emotional upheaval that being a student entailed for her:

Juggling work, children, sport, husband, time management skills... The pressure has at times played havoc with my emotions. I don't have the time to spend with the family or do the other things I used to do. I even went downstairs to study last week and didn't even cook tea!

Lack of family support can compromise the success of the mature-age learner who re-engages with study. Abbott-Chapman, Braithwaite and Godfrey (2004) note that changes in family circumstances and the level of family support can have a serious impact on the mature-age learner's motivation and academic progress. The authors suggest that strong family support is one of the most important factors outside the university in ensuring persistence and success in higher education studies. Likewise, Cantwell and Mulhearn (1997) suggest that lack of family support can impact negatively on the ability of some mature-

age women to cope in the formal learning arena. This appeared clear for Gina, a 25 year old STEPS student:

The family and friends that I thought would support me and be happy for me were a little bit jealous and envious and wanted to see me fall flat on my face ... I found out who was for me and who was against me.

Lack of support from family can also be manifest in the low aspirations that some family members have for their parent, partner or sibling-turned-student. Cullity (2006) perceives that this attitude can discourage some mature-aged students from attending university, for to do so can risk being ostracised by family and friends who send 'ambivalent messages' (Spreadbury 2007: 77). This was clearly the case for Bill, who spoke of the family tension surrounding his decision to undertake STEPS:

I told my father what I was doing and why I was doing it and I thought he understood at the start of it, but I got a phone call from him last week telling me about a job being a priority. I told him, 'This is a priority'! He will come to understand it as time goes by.

Minimal aspirations due to low socio-economic backgrounds and low status employment can be a negative factor for some mature-age learners who re-engage with formal learning. The transition away from low socio-economic background status through education can entail a fragile balance between the mature-age learner's realisation of their potential and 'maintaining a sense of an authentic self' (Reay 2002: 404). Reay (2002) argues that some can even feel like impostors in the higher education context and this influence their choices about future direction. Twenty-seven year old STEPS student, Andy, reflected this tension:

Well, I came into STEPS to do teaching but then all the ideas that have come into my head ... I might not be a teacher. I might just be something else like a health and safety officer.

Imposter syndrome was also made manifest by Tess in her comparison between past career and identity as student:

When I started STEPS, feelings of doubt filled my head ...
I wondered, would anyone notice that I was just a lowly
shopkeeper trying to masquerade as a higher, more intelligent
being? I kept waiting for someone to say, 'You can't do this'.

Implications

The articulations of the mature-age learners presented in this article indicate that re-engagement with formal study can be physically, cognitively and emotionally challenging as old identities clash with new and previous perceptions of self as learner are contested. From the spaces where such collisions occur, tensions related to multiple life roles and new roles, such as that of 'student', can occur. Thus from an educator's perspective, awareness of this tension necessitates that certain pedagogical practices must be adopted in their work with mature-age learners in Enabling programs. First is the creation and maintenance of a stimulating, responsive, intellectual learning community wherein the mature-age learner, regardless of previous schooling experiences or socio-economic background, is empowered through shared knowledge and shared knowing (Tinto 1997) to engage in collaborative relationships with peers and educators. Additionally crucial is the educator's establishment of learning spaces (Tinto 1997) in which opportunities are created to foster social connections and promote transformative learning. In such an environment, mature-age learners can be encouraged to 'safely' deconstruct long-held negative perceptions of self as learner that have hindered potential, and allow for the conceptualisation of new perspectives about self. Additionally, educators must acknowledge the diversity of life role challenges that confront the mature-age learner and take such into consideration when designing and implementing curriculum through appropriate and meaningful pedagogical practices, assessment regimes and more flexible time frames.

Of vital importance is the educator's acknowledgment of the multidimensionality of learning, that it is comprised of physical, cognitive and emotional dimensions, and that each dimension can significantly impact the success of the mature-age learner who re-engages with formal learning. In the enhancement of a successful educational experience, through the discussion of risk and protective factors (Resiliency Initiatives 2001), Enabling educators can also strive to promote resiliency as a way for their mature-age learners to address the challenges they confront as 'student'. Furthermore, through an open door policy and the encouragement of various networks and relationships with family, peers and others, support from the learning community can be readily available. Of equal importance is the development of a holistic curriculum that encapsulates frameworks and self-management strategies that successfully develop self-regulated and engaged learners. Alongside this would be the gradual acquisition of skills, knowledge and confidence that, in a scaffolded way, would help prepare mature-age learners for the physical, cognitive and emotional dimensions of their future undergraduate studies.

Conclusion

Enabling programs across the higher education sector provide a much needed pathway for those under-represented at the tertiary level; however, to be truly effective, such programs should aim to foster more than just skill acquisition. To address the unique needs of the mature-age learner who wishes to prepare for a university education, Enabling programs should look to the whole person and the myriad of factors that have bearing on the success of the learner. Over the duration of the STEPS program, most mature-age learners acquire the knowledge and skills deemed essential for success at the tertiary level. However, more importantly, STEPS provides them with the opportunity to develop a sense of their own power to confront the many obstacles that may stand in the way of success. In a new

learning context that is typically accompanied by a degree of chaos, confusion and uncertainty, many mature-age learners gain the confidence to endure as they are 'hit from all directions'. The process of enduring the struggle, and successfully overcoming the obstacles that have previously blocked the learner's progress, results not only in academic progress and the development of resiliency, but also in personal transformation for those who persist.

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