

# Charting the learning journey of a group of adults returning to education

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## **Abstract**

*Using a qualitative case study method the researcher studied a group of adult returning students completing a childcare course. Methods used included focus groups, a questionnaire and observations. Using a holistic analysis approach (Yin 2003) of the case the researcher then focused on a number of key issues. From this analysis the themes of identity, education as a facilitator of positive risk taking, education and perspective transformation, and, connectedness emerged.*

This study has shown that there is a need for a wider study in the area of returners to education with implications for teaching methods access to information and student involvement in the classes.

The classroom with all its limitations remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labour for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (Hooks, 1994, 207).

## **Introduction**

Lisa's husband left her for another woman and after a while she decided to go back to education to get herself out of the rut she had got into. Sophie was cajoled into returning to education by her relatives who thought she could do better for herself. Sophie was, by the way, quite happy being a stay at home mom. Theresa spoke about meeting people from all walks of life and exchanging ideas, information and learning while Georgina thinks that being involved in education has helped her become more focused in all aspects of her life.

This study concerned a group of fifteen adult ‘returners’ (Bird, 1999) to education; and the learning journey they undertook as they completed a child care course. The study group consists of a group of women, of all ages, who undertook a Further Education and Training Awards Council Level (FETAC) 5 childcare course. Qualitative in nature this case study was bounded by time (six months) and by a single case (one college). The main themes that emerged from this study include identity, education as a facilitator or risk taking behaviour, perspective transformation, and, belonging.

Carl Rogers (1969, 1994) writes of education being a facilitator of personal growth and change, while Knud Illeris (2003) discusses the motivations that adults have to return to education. In Illeris’s viewpoint most adults do not want to go back to education but do so because of personal or career pressures. Many participants in the study said that they had learned much by attending adult education, but that much of this learning was about facilitating change and adapting to new ideas about themselves.

Malcolm Knowles (1980) sees andragogy; the art and science of helping adults learn; as ‘learner centred’ and ‘constructivist’ in nature. This study examined the role of the student in the construction of knowledge. Also significant are communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) within which learning takes place as a product of social participation. The study looked at the work of Jack Mezirow (1991, 1998) and his ideas on critical reflection and perspective transformation and how this resonated with the students. Finally the study looked at ‘women’s ways of knowing’ (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986) and discusses the relationship between belonging and learning. In addition this study examined some of the criticisms the students had about the educational process and suggests ways in which these criticisms can be addressed.

### **Context**

This small scale study concerned a group of students currently completing a child care course in a Vocational college in the South East area of Ireland. The course; ‘Certificate in Childcare’; is a FETAC level five course. The course consists of eight modules; six compulsory and two elective. The compulsory modules include; Caring for Children 0-6 years; Working in Childcare; Child Development; Early Childhood Education; Communications and Work Experience. The elective modules include; Arts and Crafts; Safety and Health at work; Social Studies; Book-keeping; Payroll; Computer Aided Design; Desktop Publishing and ECDL. The college runs a full time day course and also part time night course. This study focused on the night students.

The course is aimed at people who work or wish to work in preschools, playgroups, nurseries, private families, or, as au pairs. Some of the students on this course use it as a way of achieving a stand-alone certificate in childcare or as a stepping stone towards further study, for example, a social care or social studies degree qualification. This course also attracts people who wish to study the subject of childcare for their own personal reasons and have no career ambitions in the area, and as such they can study whatever modules they want. A further number in the class are requested by their employer to attend this course as a means of either retaining their jobs or achieving promotion within their workplace. There were twenty-five female students on the course of which fifteen took part in the study. There were no males studying the subject. The ages of the students ranged from nineteen to forty-eight years. Approximately half of the study group had no previous experience of adult or third level education. Many in the group had not worked outside of the home for many years while others in the group were working full or part time, mostly in child care positions. As the course is set up in modules there was a mixture of student and learning experience with some of the group having completed up to 6 modules while others would be starting their first module.

Jean Piaget (1963) writes of cognitive conflicts brought about by new learning and of the disequilibrium or destabilisation of existing ideas. In order to return to a state of equilibrium the learner must assimilate these new ideas into existing thinking or accommodate “the process of changing internal mental structures to provide consistency with external reality” (Bhattacharya, K. & Han, S., 2001.). Peter Alheit (1994) argues that “living a life’ has become more problematic and unpredictable. It is a laboratory for developing skills whose usefulness is unknown” (as cited in Antikainen, 1998). In his study ‘In Search of the Meaning of Education’ (1995) Antikainen examines the meaning of education and learning in the lives of Finns and uses the term ‘significant learning experience’. This is defined as, “those which appeared to guide the interviewee’s life-course, or to have changed or strengthened his or her identity (Antikainen, 1991). Antikainen notes that significant learning experiences consist of; a certain sort of life-event, a change-event, and may include a creative achievement or a meaning which is new from the learners’ standpoint. This study is concerned with how education contributes to those significant learning experiences. It is also concerned with how the different teaching methods complemented or otherwise the various skills the students already had.

## **Rationale**

My interest in this study has come about because of my own experiences of adult education, both as a learner and a teacher. As part of a career change I returned to education after many years away. I found that I was far more interested in learning than I had been when I had first attended school/college. This curiosity has continued and led me to become a teacher. I am now equally curious why other adults return to education and what they get out of it. My role with the course is to participate in program development and delivery. I also have other tasks such as supervision and marking of papers. I teach two modules on this course; Child Development and Working in Childcare

## **Methodology**

This qualitative case study concerned a group of female adult education students as they completed a childcare course. Bromley defines case study as “a systematic inquiry into an event or a set of related events which aims to describe and explain the phenomenon of interest” (Bromley, 1990, p.302, in Zucker, 2001). Both Stake (1995) and Yin (2003) base their approach to case study on a constructivist paradigm (Baxter and Jack, 2008, p. 545). Studies show that one of the advantages of this approach is the “close collaboration between researcher and participants, while enabling participants to tell their stories” (Crabtree & Miller, 1999, in Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545). Critics of the case study method believe that the study of a small number of cases offers no ground for establishing reliability of findings (Soy, 1997). However, through case study participants are able to “describe their views of reality and this enables the researcher to better understand the participants actions” (Lathher, 1992; Robottom & Hart, 1993, in Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545).

This case study is descriptive in nature. Robson (2002) notes that the descriptive approach is used to portray an accurate profile of person's events or situations, requires extensive previous knowledge of the situation to be researched or described so that you know appropriate aspects on which to gather information, and, may be flexible or fixed design (p. 59). This type of case study is used to describe an intervention or phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred (Yin, 2003). The analysis of the data incorporated a holistic approach; as the “researcher examines the entire case (Yin, 2003) and presents descriptions, themes, interpretations and assertions related to the whole case” (Creswell, 2007, p. 245). The study also incorporates narrative approaches so as to allow the students explain their experiences. As is the nature of qualitative inquiry, findings are not representative of all women (Wrushen & Sherman, 2008, p. 460).

The first part of the study consisted of discussions with both the class and the college administration, to obtain permission to conduct the study. The second part of the study consisted of a questionnaire. This was responded to by twelve students. The questions asked in the questionnaire were:

- Since coming back to education what changes have you noticed, if anything, about yourself?
- In what way have social contacts contributed to your experience of adult education?
- What has been the impact of education on your awareness of social and political structures?
- What contribution has class discussion and group work made to the learning process?
- What teaching methods empowered you and why?
- What teaching methods hindered you and why?

The questionnaire was followed by two focus groups consisting of a total of fifteen students. These focus groups followed up on issues raised in the questionnaire and also consisted of a general discussion about the reasons for attending the course, the learning journey to date, and further expectations and hopes from the course.

In addition I also used participant observation and current literature to guide me. From this research themes of identity; education as a facilitator of positive risk taking behaviour; education and perspective transformation; and, connectedness emerged.

## **Themes**

### *Identity*

For many in the study group, who have worked as child care workers for years and have much life experience, the classroom situation may seem to hold little value. Knud Illeris (2003) writes of most adults approaching education in very ambivalent ways. Their motivation is closely related to the need to keep their jobs or improve their possibilities of getting one (p. 14). In some stories the social motives are dominant, “but they are always mingled with other motives for qualification

or personal development and with elements of passive resistance and perplexity” (p. 14). What they conceived of as stable factors in their lives have become uncertain or simply no longer exist. They have to find new life orientations in addition to the ones that already exist. In addition the development of a new identity means discarding parts of the old and the latter is often a painful process (p. 16).

Sophie, a participant in the research, explained this identity dilemma:

This is my second year attending adult education classes. I do feel better about myself and for some reason feel more acceptable to other people, because I'm doing more than just staying at home. I feel these classes have given me an awareness of life outside my little world. I'm mixing with people other than my friends and family. I know nothing about my classmates and they know nothing about me. Nobody has an expectation of me, it's nice to be unknown(ish). I really did feel pressure from members of my family to go back to work or education and although I resented this I nevertheless enrolled in this course. I feel that working in childcare would give me the type of hours in which I could still be there for my kids. I consider this to be the first step of my return to work, but not until myself and the kids are ready. The funny thing is that now I am back at college I feel under more pressure because the same people are asking me what I am going to do next!

A number of the students spoke about the changes that had taken place to their personal situations so that along with attending adult education other changes had occurred simultaneously. Some developed more friendships outside their normal circle and talked of engaging in deep conversations with people who they had not previously known. Others spoke of 'thinking about things differently'. Many spoke of a growth in confidence and self-belief and of having more focus. Still others spoke of feeling more knowledgeable and independent and of having a better sense of their own worth. One or two of the group spoke of being nervous before classes, and of feeling overawed initially by the class, the subject and the other students. Dolores put it this way;

I was shy and nervous about coming to class but as weeks went by, seeing the same faces, the hello's and "see you next week", I felt welcomed and now look forward to coming each week.

### **Education as a facilitator of positive risk taking behaviour**

Carl Roger's sees the role of education as being one that facilitates change and learning, and writes of two types of learning (1969, 1994). The first, learning by rote, or as Rogers puts it, the learning of nonsense syllables (1994, p. 35), has no meaning in their lives and is therefore quickly forgotten. Such learning involves the mind only. It does not involve feelings or personal meanings. It has no relevance for the whole person (p. 35). The second type; significant, meaningful or experiential learning takes place in everyday life and has personal meaning. Roger's defines experiential learning as involving the whole person, both feeling and cognitive aspects. "While the impetus or stimulus to learn comes from outside the sense of discovery and comprehending comes from within" (p. 36). Another element is pervasiveness, that it makes a difference to the behaviour, attitude or personality of the learner. Yet another is the learner's evaluation of the event. "The locus of evaluation, we might say, resides definitely in the learner. Its essence is meaning. When such learning takes place, the element of meaning to the learner is built into the whole experience" (p. 36).

Malcolm Knowles developed the theory of andragogy in the 1970s and 80s; and noted that andragogy is "learner centered and constructivist in nature because it assumes that the defining feature of adult education is the meaning that individuals attach to their learning" (Jordan, Carlile and Stack, 2008, p. 130). Knowles (1980) writes of three ultimate needs and goals of fulfillment of individuals; the prevention of obsolescence; the need of individuals to achieve self-identity through the development of their full potentialities, and thirdly, the need for individuals to mature. Abraham Maslow (1943) arranged human needs in a hierarchical order. He proposed that gratification of one need, starting from the lower level; survival or physiological needs, frees the person for higher levels of gratification; esteem needs or need for self-actualisation. Furthermore healthy persons are those whose basic needs have been met so that they are principally motivated by their needs to actualise their highest potentialities (Knowles, 1980, p. 29). Knowles writes that this concept implies that the role of the educator is to assist the learner in learning what is required to satisfy that need at whatever level they are struggling.

For example, Lisa is a separated woman in her early forties. She has four children. Throughout the term Lisa said very little. When asked to contribute to the class discussions she would be nervous but would contribute. Lisa however did enjoy the group activities and made a real effort in group situations. When I spoke with Lisa I was quite surprised that she had so much to say and had enjoyed the class

so much. I feel as an educator that Lisa was definitely engaging with the subject on a personal level and that her experience of adult education was involving, as Rogers would put it, the whole person. Furthermore I feel that Lisa was well aware of her needs, was seeking to have them met and was coming from a perspective of not having her needs met for a long time, and believing that this was her lot. She describes her situation and the changes she experienced in the following way:

I felt nervous when I started; I've had a horrible few years on my own. My husband left and moved in with a younger woman. Today I am a stronger woman, memories will always be there ... I decided to make a life for myself and the kids. Do course, get job and be happy. I picked child care because I love kids. I enjoyed the course, found it difficult but enjoyed it ... My tutor did a great job. I think it's about the teachers too, how interesting they make it for you ... Adult education, yes, is brilliant for the likes of me; a mother who wasn't able to get education in earlier years. To have every type of person, young or old, to come and learn and to socialise with others and get an education. I'm socialising with people my own age and older. I'm more confident. I feel my brain hasn't shrunk and I'm waking up and believing there is life as well as rearing children. I liked getting into groups, meeting other women and discussing topics. I'm delighted I started this course and I hope to get a job from it.

In addition Lisa spoke about the setting in which the learning was took place. Antikainen (1998) writes that with each significant learning experience, personal and social relations that support learning are easily detectable, and, "that the attempt to link learning in its social context led us to notice that learning has both its local environment and distant environment ... The former are always concrete human beings, the latter are often symbolic or representational images" (Antikainen, 1998, p. 231).

Jane Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) put forward the 'situated learning' model of learning. "Rather than asking what kind of cognitive processes and conceptual structures are involved, they ask what kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place" (in Hanks, 1991, p. 14). Learning is not seen as the acquisition of knowledge by individuals but as a process and product of social participation. Lave and Wenger's model of situated learning proposed that learning involves participation in a 'community of practice'. Lave and Wenger argue that we are all part of various communities of practice be it in the home, in social circles or, in our civic or leisure interests. In some groups we are the leaders and in others we are at the margins. At the core of communities of practice are



three characteristics;

- **The Domain:** A community of practice is something that has an identity defined by a shared interest.
- **The Community:** In pursuing their interest in their domain members build relationships that enable them to learn from each other.
- **The practice:** They develop a shared repertoire of resources, experiences, stories, tools and ways of addressing recurring problems. This takes time and sustained interaction (Wenger, 2006).

Theresa, a woman in her late forties with an almost grown up family, expanded on this subject of communities of practice and collective learning:

The social contacts have made it easier to attend class. When you know the people and having completed many of the modules with the girls we talked, gave out and helped and supported each other throughout the course ... It has also given me a greater awareness of social structures. Many different types of people do these courses. Some are unemployed, some single mothers wishing to go back to work, but all hoping to achieve one goal ... Having discussions and group work helped me understand the topic better. It was easier for me to learn the subject by remembering the stories that I heard when we discussed the topic than during the actual class work.

### **Education and perspective transformation**

Transformational learning is defined as “learning that induces more far-reaching change in the learner than other kinds of learning, especially learning experiences which shape the learner and produce a significant impact, or paradigm shift, which affects the learner's subsequent experiences” (Clark, 1993, in Cooper, 2009).

The study of transformational learning emerged with the work of Jack Mezirow (1978). Transformation theory maintains that human learning is grounded in the nature of communication; to understand the meaning of what is being communicated requires critical reflection of assumptions (Mezirow, 1997). The theory of transformative learning has “evolved into a comprehensive and complex description of how learners construe, validate, and reformulate the meaning of their experience” (Cranton, 1994, P.22). Common themes in Mezirow's theory include centrality of experience, rational discourse and critical reflection (Mezirow,

1991). For learners to change their beliefs, attitudes and emotional response to situations they must engage in critical reflection of their experiences, which in turn leads to perspective transformation.

Perspective transformation is the process whereby we become more critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand and feel about the world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating and integrating perspective, and, finally making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167).

Many of the students spoke of being more connected with the world in general and of having a better understanding of their experiences of childhood and parent-hood through a process of critical reflection. Mezirow (1998) describes reflection as “a “turning back” on experience, a simple awareness of an object, event or state, including awareness of a perception, thought, disposition, intention, action or of one’s habits of doing things” (Mezirow, 1998, p. 48). Critical reflection on the other hand “may be either implicit, as when we mindlessly choose between good and evil because of our assimilated values, or explicit, as when we bring the process of choice into the awareness to examine and assess the reasons for making the choice” (p. 49). Through critical reflection of our world and the way we interpret our experiences, transformative learning occurs when new meaning schemas or meaning perspectives are constructed. This critical reflection causes people to redefine and re-evaluate experience from new frames of reference (Mezirow, 1991).

Georgina, a married woman in her late twenties, describes her experience of critical reflection thus:

I feel I have more educated arguments and thoughts on certain issues. I also realise the depth of topics once considered easy or uncomplicated ... I feel more focused on this course in all aspects of my life ... I feel that the interaction with all age ranges in adult education allows for a build-up of respect for different generations in terms of thoughts feelings and self-expression and of the idea of no wrong answer and of different points of view ... I wouldn't say this course has made me more aware of social issues but it has heightened and enhanced my feelings and opinions about these issues.

Tom Inglis's (1997) article on 'Empowerment and Emancipation' makes the point that since the appearance of 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (Freire, 1970, 1983) learning to challenge existing systems of adult education has been a dominant issue. Freire is adamant that freedom from oppression can only take place through theory and praxis (Inglis, 1997, p.7). Freire defines praxis as "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1983, p. 48). Inglis writes that when it comes to people becoming empowered Mezirow closely follows Freire. Mezirow stresses that praxis is necessary for transformative learning, arguing that transformative learning all too frequently remains at the level of individual development and does not move into the task of "learning to successfully overcome oppressing power in one's external world through social action" (p. 7).

There was much evidence of increased critical reflection and perspective transformation among many in the study group. In addition the students who were in their second year appeared lot more confident than those in their first year. They questioned and debated and are engaged in a high level of critical thinking including both critical reflection and critical self-reflection (Mezirow, 1998). Somehow the fear the students had in first year had been replaced by a curiosity and confidence. They questioned the way the classes were presented, asking for less reading of notes and more group work and class discussion, as one student put it "we can read at home". They were effectively contributing to their own learning by being open and correctly reasoned that group work, especially in the context of a child care course, was the best way for them to learn. A significant criticism voiced by the group was that there was not enough cross referencing between modules, and that tutors were not "teaching from the same page". Others spoke of being overawed by too much information being squeezed into a twelve week module, while another student remarked that some of the modules were too long, "we were looking for things to do", and others too short, and that if there was more communication between tutors this would not have been the case

Antikainen (1998) notes that, "we discovered also that rarely or hardly ever, had a significant learning experience event taken place when an interviewee was studying in a compulsory school or in general education" (p. 222). Many in the group spoke of how nervous they had been at school and of how intimidated they had felt at the notion of questioning the teacher. The move to adult education, and the freedom and increased confidence to challenge both the teaching methods and the subject matter, was keenly felt. Many of the students were surprised to be so involved in their own learning having half expected adult education to be similar to school. Grainne, a mother of one expanded on this:

I like when a topic is discussed and people disagree, unlike in school when we all just went with the flow! (sheep!). I enjoy when people argue their case. I don't enjoy speaking out myself, but feel a sense of accomplishment when I do. Although I may not know the person, when someone who doesn't normally speak up, does speak, I feel a sense of pride in/for them.

Students also highlighted examples from personal experience; variety in classroom instruction, the use of handouts, group work and the use of the computer among their favoured teaching methods. It appeared that the students felt much more involved in the learning experience by their involvement in group work and were able to recall the information far better as a result. In addition the group of students I spoke to all seemed to agree that they were a support to each other in times of distress. Patricia, a mother of two in her early thirties, spoke of finding the class difficult and of contemplating giving up and of finding support in knowing that she was not the only one who was having difficulty;

I have come back numerous times (*to adult education*). I am a bit more outspoken now; a bit more confident ... social contacts at least there always a second-hand back up. You always feel stupid in some classes but then you say "I don't get that" and find out that half the class don't get it either ... It's enjoyable, it's great to know people and it's like a sounding board so we can bounce ideas off each other ... referring to everyday life, the life of the person helps understand the point being made.

### **Belonging**

Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, in their 1986 study, 'Women's Ways of Knowing', set out to understand why women, (a) spoke so frequently about problems and gaps in knowledge, and (b), doubted their intellectual competence (Lunney, 2005, p. 1) The researchers evidenced that ideas of knowledge and truth have a male-dominated bias and that a male dominated emphasis was evident in perspectives on thinking (p. 1). Belenky et al. were influenced in their writings by Carol Gilligan's book 'In a Different Voice' (1982). Gilligan writes of male and female approaches to morality; that the male approach is that individuals have certain rights and you have to respect the rights of others. So morality imposes restrictions on what you can do. While the female approach is that people have responsibilities towards others. So morality is an imperative to care for others (Gilligan, 2009).

Belenky et al. (1986) examined women's ways of knowing and describe five different perspectives from which women view reality and draw conclusions about truth, knowledge and authority. These are silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge and constructed knowledge. Each phase is a unique training ground in which problems of self and other, inner and outer voices and silence can be worked through. Women experience transitions from one phase to the next (Lunney, 2005).

Jeela Jones in her 2007 article 'Connected Learning in Co-operative Education' describes a connected learning approach where knowledge is gained by connecting with other people and things and writes that, to enter this sphere of self-development learners must engage in relationship and relationship building, feel emotion and perceive the other as "a person on the same level with different but equally valuable experiences and perceptions" (Jones, 2007, p. 264). Significantly learners must value real-life experience as a tool in building knowledge. "With each of these elements in place learners have the opportunity to enhance their personal growth and development and, therefore, gain more than a support system" (p. 265). Relationships among the students and a mutual support system emerged as key factors in this study. Students spoke of the cultural differences between some of the students and of this being a significant learning experience for them while reference was made to the age differences frequently. A majority of the students spoke of their experience as being enhanced through the forming of friendships and mutual support systems. Jennifer spoke of these friendships;

It has made it easier to attend when you know the people there. The class are a lovely inspiring group of women from all social and opinion holding groups and there was a sense of being in it together.

While some of the students stayed apart from others and worked independently a much greater percentage formed groups. Also significant is that of the students who dropped out of the course all tended to stay by themselves and did not align themselves to one group or another prior to leaving. However two women who declined to take part in the study and pretty much kept to themselves also attained distinctions in the modules that I was teaching on. Of note was the fact that both had had previous third level (university) experience.

## Discussion

It appears that the strength of relationships was a key factor in many of the students enjoying their learning experience. Belenky et al. (1986) describe this as “connecting rather than separating from others” (Jones, 2007, p. 269). Many within this study spoke of the comfort of the group, and spoke of ‘looking forward to going in to see the girls’, of the support they got from each other, of comparing themselves to others in the class and realising that they were just as clever as the next person, and of this being a catalyst for them to achieve academically. Some spoke of lasting friendships being made, others of having discussions and an openness they had never imagined previously, and of their sense of pride in this. Also it became clear that it was the ‘community of practice’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991) that existed within the group that was a huge support for many in the class, with some students saying they may have left without it. For us as educators there appears to be an onus on us to promote this sense of community more through listening and the involvement of the students in the teaching and learning process and curriculum design.

Many of the students spoke of ‘feeling differently’ about themselves. Illeris (2003) writes of ‘Identities at risk’ (p.16), while at one level the students have managed to build up a stable identity accompanied by a strong identity defence, on another level many of the students spoke of the changes that have been brought about by their entry into higher education and of the challenges this posed to this very identity. Illeris write of students trying to use elements of their old personality in circumstances where it no longer fits. “The problems of identity are part of the baggage participants bring with them into adult education institutions” (p. 16).

A number of the student’s spoke of the positive changes they were experiencing in relation to their feelings of identity while others spoke of this change as being ‘scary’ as they now had to live up to what they perceived as other people’s unrealistic expectations. One student was clear when she spoke of using education as a stepping stone to change her identity; “do course, get job, and be happy”. Another woman spoke of feeling aggrieved as she had been perfectly happy with the identity she already had only for others to influence her to return to education. She said she had not changed but during discussions it became apparent how aware she had become of some of the changes; from loving being away from the home and family in order to attend college; “they’re there so I’m here!”; to realising that she had become a strong ‘voice’ within the class. This study shows that while the group acknowledged changes to their identity many

within the group find this a troubling change with increased expectations and the fear of stepping out of their comfort zone. However over time this 'fear' lessens as the new identity takes root. At the level of 'returners' to education tutors need to be aware of the complex shifts in lifestyles and challenges to identity that many of the students are experiencing. Being available and honest as well as encouraging and listening to the students is essential to aid this process. What did become clear during the study was the significant learning (Antikainen, 1998) the students experienced was not confined to education alone; that identity shift, peer group relationships, thought processes, self-confidence and decision making were all affected. Pieterse (1992, in Antikainen, 1998) describes the core of empowerment being found in a participatory approach; "transformation in the individual's self-identity and transformation of social environment through participation (p. 221).

Studies show that many mature students are in periods of transition and use education as a stepping stone towards some kind of recovery (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980). For many of the students returning to education is the catalyst that supports the taking of significant personal and professional risks. For many of the study group this was the first time they had been in a classroom situation in a long time, and a number of them had negative feelings around education received in school and were initially nervous about the teaching methods employed. Almost all of the students were suspicious of behaviourist approaches of old which "views the mind as a 'black box' in the sense that response to stimulus can be observed quantitatively, totally ignoring the possibility of thought processes occurring in the mind" (Mergel, 1998, p, 3). Vygotsky (1978) highlighted the importance of the 'more knowledgeable other' and proposes that learning is a social event and that we need people around us who can scaffold our experience of learning (Kelly, 2009). This study shows that for many of the students it was important to their own learning processes that they be involved in the construction of their knowledge. Consequently class discussion and group work were by far the most favoured teaching methods. Many of the students spoke of these as being of great educational value.

### **Conclusion**

This study looked at learning journey of a group of adult returning to education. Certainly the role of 'others' is significant with many in the study group suggesting that they not only enjoyed the company of their colleagues but at times needed them. Relationships and their place in the teaching and learning process was highlighted by this group as was the role of education in the area of positive risk taking.

Rogers (1994) writes of experiential learning as not being about the end product but about the conditions for learning and of learning involving the 'whole' person. Identity issues were significant with many in the study group saying they enjoyed the changes but had struggled with them. These changes included a renewed confidence and self-belief in themselves and their abilities.

The study showed that many in the class had engaged in a high level of critical thinking and this had in turn led to a high level of debate and subsequent learning in class. It was notable that the perspectives of many in the class had changed as their confidence grew. The students' initial fear in their first year of adult education had by the end of the second year been replaced by a curiosity and high level of critical thinking and reflection (Mezirow, 1991). Also of note were the students' criticisms of teaching methods employed and of their need to be heard in this regard. The tutor meanwhile has a role beyond imparting information to others. Particularly with a class where there is quite a wide range of educational experience it is imperative that the tutor is mindful of Knowles' concept of assisting the learner satisfy the educational need, at whatever level they are struggling.

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