

Training the trainer of the mature learner

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In Issue 5 of this newsletter, most writers mentioned serious questions about tutor qualifications and the urgent need to “train the trainer“ in the field of adult learning. I myself, coming from pedagogy and teacher training generally, am developing an approach for those who teach older adult learners, i.e. from roughly 50 years and upwards. These 3rdagers, or mature learners, or senior citizens, have rather special requirements which, it seems to me, mark them off from younger adults in various ways relevant to their training needs. For this reason I am starting a master’s level module at the Institute of Education of London University (Issues in Educating and Training Mature Adults).

My goal is to set a view of mature learning beside, or even against, predominant views of learning that have been developed in the context of children and of young adults learning within a formal educational system. Within such systems, in every country of the world, the main discussions are about how to teach classes given the well-known diversity of abilities, individual personalities, and, more frequently than ever before, of age. For example motivation and aptitude are universally applicable, but age is likely to show the influence of prior experience, especially of established literacy and numeracy [or lack of], or the effects of career success [or failure], or some decline in memory, or well established learning strategies that could hinder as well as help. As is also well-known, older learners often have a strong intrinsic motivation to learn for reasons of self-fulfilment, rather than being driven by external workplace or other needs.

Not only do we have a growing number of mixed age classrooms across our primary and secondary school sector, we also have eight out of ten students in further education colleges over the age of 19. And what is new in the present era, is the rapidly increasing numbers of mature learners. The Institute already had 760 such older students in August 2006 [11%], and I am pressing for research into their learning, especially since one can reasonably expect the percentage to rise. As highlighted in the speech by the European Commissioner for employment, social affairs and equal opportunities at a recent Brussels conference:

The important thing, in reality, is the proportion of the elderly in society. At present, persons aged over 65 comprise 16% of the European population. In 2050, they will account for 30% of the population if the fertility rate and immigration flows remain the same. ... (Špidla 2006)

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

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

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

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

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

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

There is an ever-developing provision of learning opportunities for mature adults, such as in the Oxford Institute of Ageing, or the new 'Senior Learners' Programme' at Lancaster University. But there is currently no training provision for the *teachers of* mature learners.

There have been numerous calls for action around these issues. Regrettably, LL UK does not recommend training of trainers, limiting its recommendations to:

It's an ideal we would all endorse: lifelong learning for everyone. Our fastest-growing age group, the over-50s, stand to gain from learning in later life whether for work or just for fun. The Learning and Skills Council should consider mapping existing learning provision and ensure that provision – and funding – builds on what is already in existence. (Learning in Later Life [<http://www.lifelonglearning.co.uk/lill/index.htm>])

NIACE is supportive of the development of educational provision and urges consideration of whether “older people's organisations have the necessary experience and competence to deliver their own programmes.” (NIACE [http://www.niace.org.uk/information/Briefing_sheets/Meeting_needs_older_learners.htm])

in the context:

“The employment rate for the over 50s has increased each year for the last four years. Through New Deal 50 Plus alone, since April 2000, almost 62,000 people over 50 have been helped back to work. (Age Positive [www.agepositive.gov.uk]).

I feel that the themes that should be considered in any such educational provision would cover at least the following:

- How to adapt currently used teaching and learning modes in adult education to the different conditions of mature adult learning;
- Managing the alignments between teachers and learners, teaching and learning processes, learners and knowledge or competence, etc., where the learners are older adults;
- The influence of organisational and social contexts of older learners as continuing participants in work, in community activities and/or as learning for self-fulfilment;
- Political approaches to older persons' roles in the community and the workplace;
- Competences and capabilities that mature persons may have that are rather different from those of younger people;
- Approaches to defining good practice/excellence in teaching and learning specifically for mature adults.

I hasten to add that this does not mean that mature learners should always be taught as a group separate from younger adults. On the contrary, there are many situations where all ages working together would create a stimulating mix. Nevertheless, teachers need to be aware of the factors that drive older learners and be able to adjust their teaching so that they become a positive part of the classroom process.

Clearly, this is a very new field, and – while commonsense might indicate that there are self-evident differences in teaching the young or the old - nevertheless very little is known about older learners. Any pronouncements have to be tentative at this stage.

The best that any training course can do until further research fills in some of the gaps, is to raise awareness of the significant principles of good practice in teaching generally, and ask appropriate questions for teacher reflection about how these might need to be adapted for older learners. I think it is undeniable that they will need to be adapted, but nobody can be certain of success just yet. There are too many unknowns, such as the influence of prior experience, especially of established literacy and numeracy [or lack of], or the effects of career success [or failure], or some decline in memory, or well established learning strategies and other abilities. Motivation, too, is likely to be rather different among older learners, and - as any teacher knows – it can be hard to maintain under the best circumstances. Deciding how to teach in this context is not easy.

Important factors for teaching adult or older learners is around the theories of andragogy, highly influenced by Malcolm Knowles crucial assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners, as so significantly different from child learners that traditional pedagogy needs to be replaced to take account of the fact that older people

- *move from being dependent toward being self-directed;*
- *accumulates experience as a resource for learning.*
- *develop a readiness to learn*
- *focus on immediacy and therefore shift from being centred on the subject to being interested in solving the current problems.*
- *develop intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation to learn*

There is an excellent overview of the area at <http://www.infed.org/lifelonglearning/b-andra.htm>. Useful critiques of the notion are in Tusting & Barton (2006).

Many of the current theories and approaches need to be examined in much more detail, and it is to be hoped that further moves towards the training of teachers of adult and older learners will lead not only to better practice but to funding for more fundamental research into the needs, characteristics and desired outcomes for this burgeoning social group. Yet we cannot wait; our education and training of trainers is already urgent.

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