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Envisioning the Mature Re-Entry Student: Constructing New Identities in the Traditional University Setting

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Envisioning the Mature Re-Entry Student: Constructing New Identities in the Traditional University Setting

Lisa Given

SUMMARY. As most students attend university following high school graduation, it is not surprising that the institutional 'traditional student' discourse is one of fraternity parties and breaking free of parental control. This discourse infuses university life, and excludes mature students from the vision of those who influence students' academic careers. While educational research provides an 'adult learner' discourse, many mature students find that they are not appropriately served by their professors or reference librarians. What may help is an environment which does not presume a need and its solution based on these discourses, but one which treats all students as individuals. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.haworthpressinc.com>>]

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The promotion of 'lifelong learning,' or the idea that one's education should span one's entire life, has become a central tenet in contemporary society.

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Governments fund initiatives which promote this ideal, and universities strive to increase their offerings of continuing education programs and open their doors to adults seeking to upgrade their skills. The UNESCO report *Learning to Be* (Faure et al. 1972) first explored the concept of the 'learning society' and both the formal and informal educational activities that contribute to 'lifelong learning.' It promoted learning across the lifespan for self-fulfillment and social betterment, and served as the basis for more than two decades of research and publication by UNESCO and other internationally-recognized educational bodies on lifelong learning and lifelong education. The 'information revolution' of the last few decades has also had an impact on the rise of the importance of lifelong learning, particularly as this relates to economic change. Governments and the corporate sector encourage citizens and employees to upgrade their skills and broaden their education level to compete for jobs, promotions and success in a global economy (Hasan 1996).

This new focus on 'lifelong learning,' as both a societal and an economic good, has direct implications for the development of adult education in the next century. There are four central themes which shape society's rationale for pursuing 'lifelong learning' and which, in turn, shape the future of adult education pursuits. First, the argument is often made that regions that do not foster a 'learning society,' and individuals who do not participate, are destined to be left behind both nationally and on an international scale. Secondly, learning is crucial to all as insurance against being excluded or marginalized from social participation. Thirdly, there is a need to for constant renewal of knowledge and skills in order to keep pace with the rapidity of change that has come to typify many societies. And finally, it is important to combine productive work and learning throughout the lifespan, in order to extend the economically productive years of one's life (Hasan 1996). As more and more countries set the concept of 'lifelong learning' as a social goal with strong economic ramifications, the implications will be directly felt at all levels of education and for all students participating in educational initiatives.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ADULT STUDENTS

Many of these four points of rationalization for lifelong learning have already had an influence on adult education pursuits. In Canada, national statistics point to a participation rate of 33% of all adult Canadians (or 1 in 3) in some form of adult learning activity (Selman et al. 1998). Within this broad group of adult learners, and across a wide range of educational activities, mature, re-entry students (or those who have been absent from formal schooling for three years or more) are increasingly participating in university degree programs. Indeed, many students now recognize that their learning will not follow a traditional, linear pattern, but will continue throughout their

lives. Increasingly, educational research continues to draw attention to the problems faced by non-traditional students (including adult learners), and how their educational barriers may be overcome. In the education and library and information science literature, the focus (even implicitly) has been on the students' drive for academic success, and the role of teachers and librarians in perpetuating such success. Indeed, 'academic success' as a motivator for students' actions in the classroom, in completing assignments, and in other academic endeavours, is endemic to most of the research exploring students' academic and information-related activities.

Gloria Leckie (1996) explores many of the assumptions behind the development of undergraduate research papers which are all elements of academic success, and which continue to influence library research and practice. These include the ability to narrow a research topic, to select an appropriate database to search for information on that topic, to retrieve relevant documents from that search, and to read and analyze these documents in order to write a paper which meets the professor's concept of a 'good' paper. While Leckie's paper focuses on these assumptions in order to explore the reasons for student failure in completing such assignments, the practical components of academic success as they are defined by faculty and librarians is writ large in these pages.

The retrieval of relevant documents, particularly using electronic databases, is one of the many elements of academic success that is explored in countless studies in library and information science (see Jacobson and Fusani 1992 or Nash and Wilson 1991). The creation of complete and appropriate bibliographies is another element of academic success which has been a research focus within this discipline (see Engeldinger 1988 or McInnis and Symes 1991). Yet for many students, particularly those with competing family and/or work demands, academic success may be defined simply as completion of an assignment or taking only a small penalty on the late submission of a paper. While Jane Keefer (1993) points to the "time limitations" (336) that can affect a student's level of success, this factor (and other, similar factors) rarely sits as the marker of success itself. Instead, such elements are pushed to the periphery of the student's broader experiences of academic success, as challenges to be overcome. The concept of academic failure then, is often marked in the literature by the creation of incomplete bibliographies, the inability to find relevant citations, and the inability to properly narrow a research topic. Yet both success and failure are frequently examined with traditional undergraduates or, at least, with the presumption that a group of students have common skill levels and perspectives (see Fister 1992). Mature re-entry students, if they are included within these studies, are not usually identified.

If a learner-centered ideal is to become a reality within educational circles,

it is imperative that adult learners be at the heart of this initiative. While 'lifelong learning' presumes a form of education (formal or otherwise) that stretches across the lifespan, it is the adults themselves who must alter their view of education and find a place for themselves within this new social structure. Historically, formal education has proceeded in a linear fashion and with a clear end-point: from kindergarten and elementary school, through high school, and (for some) to postsecondary programs, and (finally) the world of work. Thus, the argument was made to many generations of elementary, high, and postsecondary school students that if they stayed in school, they would be rewarded with permanent employment and security for their retirement years. While many adults have been forced to alter this view of the world in light of job cuts through corporate downsizing, or reorientation due to a change in their family lives, there are many adults who are only now waking to the harsh realities of having job skills that are obsolete or who are in need of additional programs of study.

Yet, while many adults are now beginning to reevaluate their educational pursuits in the face of new economic and social realities, the typical student at university remains the traditional student who has followed a linear educational path. Indeed there is a discourse which surrounds the persona of the 'traditional student' at universities, and informs institutional policies and practices. Prior to an examination of that discourse, its implications for adult learners, and its influence on reference service in academic libraries, a brief discussion of the nature of discourses and their influence on the social construction of identity is warranted.

DISCOURSE AND IDENTITY

In their discussion of the social construction of self, and the relation of social discourse to this process, Davies and Harré (1990) note that

a discourse is to be understood as an institutionalised use of language and language-like sign systems. Institutionalisation can occur at the disciplinary, the political, the cultural and the small group level. There can also be discourses that develop around a specific topic, such as gender or class. Discourses can compete with each other or they can create distinct and incompatible versions of reality. To know anything is to know in terms of one or more discourses. (45)

Discourses work to create portraits of people or groups of people, and to define these people in particular ways. Discourses manifest themselves in texts, in books, conversations, visual images, and other media. Indeed, as virtually no aspect of human life is exempt from meaning, almost anything

can be read as text. Discourses, then, serve to construct the phenomena of our world through texts. As Vivien Burr (1995) notes,

People's identities are constructed out of a variety of components or 'threads,' including those of age, class, ethnicity, gender, and so on; these 'threads' are woven together to produce the fabric of a one's identity, and they have implications for what we can (and should) do in society . . . Discourses address us as particular kinds of persons (as an old person, as a worker, as a criminal, and so on), and we cannot avoid these descriptions; they provide us with our sense of self, the ideas and metaphors with which we think, and the self-narratives we use to talk and think about ourselves. (51-54; 153)

Being a student is simply another of the 'threads' or roles in one's life and thus being a student is a component of an individual's identity, which "is constructed out of the discourses culturally available to us, and which we draw upon in our communications with other people" (Burr 1995, 51).

THE INSTITUTION AND THE 'TRADITIONAL STUDENT' DISCOURSE

Burr, and Davies and Harré note that for each 'thread' of our identity, there are a limited number of discourses on offer from which we might fashion our identities. In addition, there are prevailing discourses within this limited number which seem to 'ring true' (and prevail) in our society. The 'student' thread is no exception to these rules. At postsecondary institutions, despite the growing influx of vast numbers of adult learners, a 'traditional student' discourse shapes and defines the student's identity. Further, this discourse is offered as the prevailing norm, and forms the basis for many of the institution's documents and policies. One text which offers examples of this normalized, 'traditional student' discourse, is a report on undergraduate life commissioned by my own university (Kuh 1995). In the report, no mention is made of the ages of undergraduate students, let alone how many are mature, re-entry students. The authors point to the stereotypes that surround the university as "a party school" (1995, 15), and they note that there is evidence to support such a notion. The students are described for their propensity for binge drinking, for their experiences in the residences, their exploits during orientation week, and for their involvement in student clubs and student government (1995, 15-17). There is no mention of spouses, day-care needs, or other traditionally 'adult' pursuits. Here, the 'traditional student' discourse is privileged to such a degree that there is only a cursory mention of minority groups of students—and then, only visible minorities; there is no mention of

mature, international or other nontraditional groups. While one could argue that this report's apparent 'tunnel vision' is due to the fact that mature students were not included in the study's mandate, this exclusion itself is only another example of the way that the 'traditional student' discourse is normalized and perpetuated.

Another document which provides a glimpse into student life across Canada is the *1997 Graduating Student Survey at Nine Canadian Universities*, compiled by the Canadian Undergraduate Survey Consortium. In the summary of the report's major findings, the authors note that "Some prospective graduates started undergraduate studies as early as 1957 [while the] modal year at which respondents first started their present programs was 1993" (1997, 4). Apart from this admission that clearly some of the respondents were mature (and possibly re-entry) students, this group of learners is conspicuously absent from the remainder of the report. Indeed, the most striking finding of the report, as far as issues of identity are concerned, is that 46.8% of all students were dissatisfied with the measure of "concern shown by the university to you as an individual" (1997, 15). If universities continue to foster the idea of a homogenous undergraduate student body, particularly by perpetuating the 'traditional student' discourse, such findings may never be altered.

The discourse of the 'traditional student' infuses virtually every aspect of a student's life, and forms part of the hierarchical hegemony of the university, which encourages the 'normal' status quo and discourages any questioning of prevailing 'norms.' Usher et al. shed some light on this notion, by stating that

A norm works by excluding; by defining a standard and criteria of judgement it identifies all those who do not meet the standard . . . Normalisation is not a neutral process but its significance and impact lies precisely in the fact that it appears to be neutral. The seeming 'objectivity' of a norm makes normalisation appear to be simply a neutral procedure for scientifically ascertaining people's inherent 'natural' capacities. (1997, 80)

As universities present, and reinforce, the 'norm' of the traditional student, mature, re-entry students find themselves existing outside of the norm. University orientation programs frequently include time and/or financial management workshops for those students who are away from their parents for the first time, or seminars which encourage responsible drinking practices. While these are valuable sessions, and ones which arguably meet the needs of the majority of university undergraduates, there are few equivalent sessions on offer which discuss daycare or family time management strategies, or other concerns which decades of research show to be of vital importance to mature students. For mature, re-entry students who do not fit the typical

profile, they must not only fight the academic, financial and other struggles that all students face, they must also find a place for themselves within the normative practices of the institution.

MATURE, RE-ENTRY STUDENTS- WHERE DO THEY FIT?

Yet such an enterprise is not necessarily that easy to fulfill. As Usher et al. note, “Even though diversity and difference may be valued, education in the modernist mode converges on the same, endeavouring to make everyone alike. Notions of progress, rationality, privileged knowledge and values, and normalisation is in-built into the educational event” (1997, 23). Activities in which adults engage, particularly as part of a formal, university degree program, fit with this process of normalisation. While universities may speak of the importance of ‘lifelong learning’ and have special admissions procedures for mature students, the discourse of the ‘traditional (normal) student’ reigns supreme. This normalization process occurs in the form of common assignments, policies, and practices, which expect (and dictate) a level of sameness, and which were created with the ‘normal’ student in mind. As long as institutions continue to privilege existing, ‘normal’ discourses, despite any claims to embrace diversity, mature students will continue to have difficulty in forging their own ‘student’ identities.

Indeed, the education literature shows that for many adults, returning to life as a student is not as easy as the purveyors of ‘lifelong learning’ would have us believe. Research conducted by Ernest L. Boyer shows “that non-traditional students—those who are older and part time—do, in fact, have an especially bumpy introduction to campus life. [They] have complicated schedules—they work and have family obligations—and yet, orientation activities and even college office hours often are not arranged conveniently for them” (1987, 49). As much of the education literature makes clear, adult learners face a number of institutional, dispositional, and situational barriers within postsecondary environments that traditional students need not overcome (Knowles 1990 and Boyer 1987). Indeed, research which explores the particular needs and problems of adult learners dates back to the early twentieth century. In 1926 the founding of the American Association for Adult Education marked the beginning of what has been a continually evolving field of academic and professional study in North America, and worldwide. In the early years, the works of Edward L. Thorndike and Eduard Lindeman spoke to the two major streams in the literature: the former, that of the ‘scientific’ stream, which demonstrated scientifically that adults could learn; the latter, that of the ‘artistic’ stream, which concerned itself with the processes governing how adults learn (Knowles

1990). The early research examined a variety of adult education pursuits, including correspondence courses for adults, continuing education and training, and citizenship study for new immigrants.

ANDRAGOGY- THE THEORY OF ADULT LEARNING

While many elements for a theory of adult learning were emerging worldwide by the 1940s, these remained scattered and isolated until the 1960s. At that time, and after incorporating research from psychology, philosophy, and other disciplines, a unified theory for adult learning developed in Europe. This theory, known as 'andragogy' (or, the art and science of teaching adults), arose as an alternative to 'pedagogy,' or the theory of youth learning (Knowles 1990). The pedagogical model of learning assigns full responsibility to the teacher for making all decisions about what will be learned, how it will be learned, when it will be learned, and if it has been learned. It is teacher-directed education which leaves the learner in the submissive role of following a teacher's instructions. Andragogy, on the other hand, explores the learner's ability for self-directed learning. It elevates the role of experience in the adult learner's schooling, documents the high level of responsibility and motivation that adult learners bring to the learning environment, and explores the potent internal and external pressures that set these students apart from their younger student peers (Knowles 1968, 1990).

Based on a 'scientific' psychology of adult learning, andragogy professionalised and scientised adult education, and turned the adult learner into a site for study and professional intervention (Usher et al. 1997). Over the last three decades, andragogical principles have become entrenched in the educational literature and in practical approaches to teaching adult learners. Studies in education which explore andragogical principles offer highly descriptive accounts of the learner's experiences within the educational context. Helen Astin (1976) presents a number of papers which explore the barriers that women face in education, the role of family in women's educational pursuits, and the goals of women engaged in educational activities. Lewis C. Solmon and Joanne J. Gordon's (1981) study of adults in postsecondary education is also typical of much of the andragogical literature; here, the authors present demographic breakdowns of the adults in their study, explore the life goals and educational plans of these students, and document the implications that these elements will have on the educational experience. As with many similar studies, these texts document the various (and often, conflicting) life-roles of adult students, list the barriers to effective learning which these students face, and recommend changes based on their findings.

THE 'ADULT LEARNER' DISCOURSE

Indeed, there are numerous elements which have been extensively documented in the literature over the past three decades, and which have become entrenched as markers of the 'adult learner.' These markers include the following, where an adult learner is known to be a person

- a. who has a wealth of 'real-life' experience which can enhance the learning process
- b. who is self-directed, knows his/her own learning needs, and has a self-concept of being responsible for his/her own life
- c. who strives for a high level of autonomy in learning
- d. who needs to know why something is necessary prior to learning it, and how it will fit with his/her life experience
- e. who is an active learner who comes to the educational experience ready to learn
- f. and, who is highly self-motivated in the learning process and is particularly driven to succeed by internal pressures (Knowles 1990, Boud 1989 and Usher et al. 1997).

In addition to these learner characteristics, the experiences of adult learners are frequently defined in terms of the negative elements of their academic lives. Usher et al. note, for example, that the adult learning process

is characterised as one full of blockages and barriers, things which impede or hold back the self-as-learner from attaining various ends, such as efficacy, autonomy, self-realisation or emancipation which [the adult learning] tradition posits as the goal of learning. For the self-as-learner the learning process is one beset by distractions, restrictions, barriers and oppressions—all varieties of negative and feared 'otherness' which have to be overcome. (1997, 94)

The discourse of the 'adult learner' which arises from these descriptions, as reflected in years of adult education research, sits in opposition to that of the 'traditional student.' Here, adult learners, unlike their traditional counterparts, are highly motivated students who bring their 'real-world' experience to the classroom. Their separation from the institution has shown them the value of higher education, so they tend to work harder and participate at a higher level (Vakili 1993). While these findings may solve some of the institutional and situational barriers that adult learners face, this new discourse obscures our understanding of what it means to live as an individual adult learner. While the existing research is valuable for its insight into the challenges that traditional students face, many of these findings have led us to

merely exchange one discourse (and social 'type') for another. Such studies do little to reveal the daily experiences of adult learners within an academic environment which does not envision them as individuals with a separate identity from that of the typical undergraduate.

In jumping from one 'student' discourse to another, the problems that adult learners face with regards to identity construction within the institution remain the same. Indeed, the mature, re-entry student must not only construct an identity for him or herself within an institution that caters to the 'traditional student' and assumes him or her to be the typical 'adult learner,' but the mature student must also battle the other identity constructs at work in his or her life. Indeed, our social group identifications (based on race, gender, age, and the like), do not presume a singular perspective based on that group identity; rather, each individual within the group "will hold a myriad of perspectives due to their different histories" (Schick 1994, 24). Thus, the mature, re-entry student, who is returning to academia after a period of separation from formal schooling, comes with his or her own, pre-formed notions of their identity. These notions have been formed through the discourses of 'parent,' 'spouse,' 'employee,' and other traditionally adult pursuits. These pre-formed 'threads' of identity have been shaped by the adult learner's interactions with his or her spouse, children, friends and colleagues, based on those persons' views of that adult's role in their lives. Thus, the addition of the 'student' thread must not only be negotiated with the institution and other students (both 'traditional' and otherwise), but also with the purveyors of all of the adult's pre-formed identities.

As well, once in the academic setting, and upon facing evidence of the 'traditional student' discourse, the adult student must grapple with feelings of conflict and discontinuity in his or her attempts to fashion an identity out of a discourse with which he/she may not identify. The adult student may, for example, feel excluded from certain clubs or social functions due to his/her age or conflicting family commitments. In the library, instruction programs which presume that undergraduates have used OPACs or CD-ROMs in high school, for example, may also exclude the adult student's experiences. At the same time, the adult learner may have to combat others' pre-formed notions of the 'adult learner,' in order to come to an identity with which he or she can abide, and to reconcile this new 'student' identity to his/her other identity threads of spouse, parent and employee. Much of the andragogical literature speaks, for example, of the adult student's high level of motivation in the undergraduate learning environment. Yet, for every student who fits such a description, there may be one who is prone to procrastination, and who will not benefit from programs and services which assume him/her to be motivated. At the same time, institutions that create programs to overcome procrastination in the 'traditional' student body (and which often presume that

this problem is the result of separation from parents who kept that student motivated through high school), may not appear welcoming to the procrastinating adult.

THE 'TRADITIONAL STUDENT' DISCOURSE AND THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY

In the academic library too, it is the 'traditional student' discourse which prevails. Instruction sessions are commonly geared to those coming directly from high school, and tend to presume that most students have used computers, and even the Internet, in their prior studies. At the reference desk, librarians may presume (often without realizing that they are doing so) that a particular student fits (or does not fit) with their vision of a 'typical' student based purely on appearances or the type of question being asked. Indeed, the library and information science literature reinforces these approaches to service by frequently referring to the generic 'undergraduate student' (see Nash and Wilson 1991 or Fister 1992). Explicit mention of mature students, or other non-traditional groups, are not made, but are instead relegated to those few articles which examine these users in isolation from their traditional peers (see Coughlan 1989 or Keenan 1989). While these latter articles do expand the field's knowledge of the special needs of nontraditional undergraduate students, they also form a larger part of the normalisation process at work in universities by placing these students as 'other' to the 'traditional norm.'

When librarians take on these approaches, by creating special programs for these students or by creating a different personal level of service to these students in answering daily reference requests, they also run the risk of perpetuating normalizing stereotypes. This is further complicated by the fact that many librarians and library and information science researchers have privileged the educational (specifically, the andragogical) literature in their approaches to serving these students. By replacing the 'traditional student' discourse with that of the 'adult learner,' librarians risk ignoring the needs of individuals at the expense of accepted types. As Sara Fine (1995) points out, once "librarians make assumptions about their own or their users' behavior and act on those assumptions as though they are true, the reference process and the flow of useful information are impeded" (17).

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE IN REFERENCE SERVICES?

Whether either of the 'traditional' or 'adult' learner profiles is a true characterization of undergraduate students is a moot point; as theorists and

practitioners accept them as true, they reinforce such descriptions in their research, teaching and academic policies. Indeed, if the disciplines of education and library and information science continue to accept these learner profiles, and place the adult learner in opposition to their traditional counterparts, the competing 'adult' and 'traditional' student discourses will themselves continue to be a barrier to adult learning. This leaves mature students in a position where they must grapple with their student identities in the face of a prevailing discourse with which they do not fit, in addition to struggling with matters of academic success.

Carol Schick points out that universities dismiss liberatory education and feminist philosophical points of view which encourage difference (and discourage normalisation), as these approaches run counter to the institution's inherent elitism (1994). The result then, in the context of adult learners in the university, is that the "learner-centred characteristic of adult education practice is replaced by a compliance with the structurally imposed requirements faced by both teachers and learners. The capacity of the university to dictate practice and norms is a power which it does not even pretend to share with those involved in the institution" (1994, 23), but a power with which all university participants must comply. The education and library and information science literature of the past two decades, points to evidence of disruption in the acceptance of the 'traditional student' discourse where adult learners are concerned. The lifestyle and everyday existence of the typical undergraduate has been shown to be problematic given the adult learner's 'real-life' experiences within the institution. In the research literature, the response to this clash between the adult student's world and that of the typical undergraduate has been evidenced by particular characteristics: studies which produce vast lists of barriers that mature students face, and even longer lists of how libraries (and other student services) may best serve these students. We know, for example, that the Registrar's office closes too early, that day-care is a problem, and that writing long essays after a 40 hour work week is a challenge (see Keenan 1989). And, we think that we know how to solve these problems by reacting to these findings: by extending service hours, by offering library help via e-mail, and by creating after-hour classes and tutorials for the adult learner. But is this really addressing the problem, or merely reinforcing the stereotypical beliefs that education and library and information science have clung to for decades in their search to serve these students?

WHAT STEPS DO WE TAKE IN DESIGNING EFFECTIVE REFERENCE SERVICES FOR MATURE STUDENTS?

In order to combat the perpetuation of discursive 'types' with which few (if any) students may actually identify, library researchers and reference

librarians must strive to privilege and serve the interests of individual students. The following points may serve as guiding principles to best serve the needs of mature undergraduate students:

1. We must embrace not only the existing andragogical literature, but also the newer educational literature, which questions some long-held beliefs in order to understand the experiences of individual adult students. Briton (1996), Collins (1998), and Duke (1992) provide the basis for new explorations in the theory of adult learning which library and information science cannot ignore.
2. We must question our individual assumptions related to mature students, and move away from perpetuating the 'adult learner' and 'traditional student' discourses. If we treat all users as individuals, with individual needs and problems which cannot be easily pigeon-holed for 'appropriate' reference services, we will serve all users in the best and most effective manner.
3. We must continue to implement open and neutral questioning in reference interactions. Asking questions about the information need, and not jumping to conclusions about the 'type' of user or the 'type' of question, is the best way to avoid the perpetuation of misplaced discursive practices.
4. We must strive to treat all users as individuals. While the educational literature may outline common problems and be very instructive for setting reference policies which best serve the special needs of mature, re-entry students, we must recognize that not all users will fit one profile.

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