Returning to Learning: What are the academic development needs of mature and part-time students? What works to support and retain these students?

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This paper considers issues around the support and retention of mature and part-time (MaP) students. It analyses the specific academic development needs of MaP students based on Wenger's model of learning (1998) which puts the academic learning needs of students into three broad categories; the first is academic confidence and learner identity, the second is the need for MaP students to integrate and build a sense of community and the third is for these students to overcome anxiety through practice and practical considerations. Then an Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros, 2008) approach is used to examine the extent to which the University of Kent's Student Learning Advisory Service (SLAS) supports MaP students through a programme of self-assessment of needs, one to one advice and targeted study skills sessions. The conclusion points to the positive responses received from MaP students about the programme but also acknowledges that more could be done; perhaps through reflection on students' prior knowledge, a stronger emphasis on building social learning networks and the increased use of technology.

Key words: mature and part-time students, identity, community, practice

Introduction

As an outcome of the UK government's Widening Participation agenda, a 'new constituency of learners' (MacDonald and Strutta 2001, p205) has emerged. Two of these constituencies are mature and part-time students, who are now significant minority groups within the UK student population. At the University of Kent there are a total of 16,463 undergraduate students of whom 3,286 are part-time, of these more than 85% are also mature (over 21). The focus of recent government policy has been on improving non-traditional students' access to University, but there has not been the same government drive to ensure these students participate, achieve and are retained at University. There are significant factors which inhibit mature and part-time students' full engagement with higher education, such as paid employment, family commitments and low levels of academic confidence due to interrupted education. In addition mature students often find it difficult to integrate in classes where the majority of students are school-leavers. They may also feel less academically capable having left school some years previously or having undergone work-based learning which they perceive as academically inferior to a three-year university degree. Younger part-time students may feel less integrated since they are not entitled to on-campus accommodation and therefore find it harder to build up a social network amongst their peers. These factors indicate that the support and retention of MaP students should be targeted to meet their specific needs. The Student Learning Advisory Service (SLAS) has responded to this by developing and devising the VALUE MaP (V MaP) Programme as a series of academic development sessions specifically aimed at MaP students registered on University of Kent courses. In line with other specific retention and support initiatives developed by SLAS, the Programme was given the VALUE label (**V**alue **A**dded **L**earning in **U**niversity **E**ducation).

Methodology

For this study data has been gathered in three ways; the age, gender and programmes of study for which the students are enrolled has been collected from the university's Student Data System. Information about the academic development sessions and levels of participation in these workshops has come from SLAS' records. Finally, qualitative information about mature and part-time students' academic development needs and evaluations of their experiences has been gathered through unstructured interviews before and after the start of the VALUE MaP programme. Formal and anonymous feedback was taken after the last of the workshops in the Autumn Term and then again after the Spring Term sessions. Further feedback was taken via Moodle, the SLAS BOS online survey and the Tonbridge centre online survey.

Profile of Mature and Part-time students at the University of Kent: The context for Academic Year 2009-2010

Total number of undergraduates at Kent	16,463
Full-time under graduates	13,177
Part-time undergraduates	3,286
Total number of under graduate new entrants	6,096
Full-time	5,119
Part-time	977
Undergraduate part-time new entries by gender	
female	483
male	494
Undergraduate, part-time new entries by faculty	
Sciences	5
Humanities	331
Social Sciences.	141
other	500
Undergraduate, part-time new entries by age	
< 21	107
21-24	169
= and > 25	693
NK	8
Undergraduate, part-time new entries by campus	
Canterbury	770
Medway	338
Tonbridge	18
Associated Colleges	285

Students' academic development needs

1. Perceptions of identity

A major concern for mature and part-time students is lack of confidence in their academic ability. This often has a lot to do with the students' sense of self identity: MaP students tend to see themselves as parents or employees but not as students,

> 'I've been working for 12 years already so I think of myself as a youth worker not a student.' (Student interview, 2010).

Anxiety over the resumption of learning is also a common feature: many MaP students will report a long gap, often of many years, since their last formal learning experience. This is not entirely surprising, given that the average age of a VALUE MaP student is 41, with over half the students in the 30-49 age group and another 25% over the age of 50. Sitting in a classroom that feels as if it is full of 18-20 year olds, therefore, can seem like being back at school. Some mature students may have left formal education prematurely because of personal circumstances – for example, one student reports

> 'I had to give up studying when I was 19 because I got pregnant.' (Student interview 2010).

Many of those returning to study have a sense that they are being required to move outside their 'comfort zone' and will talk about the loss of control they felt when they first started in higher education – they may feel personally 'de-skilled' as they move back into what they see as the role of the student-novice. The key issue for all these students is about building up levels of confidence and enabling them to navigate a path successfully through these perceived changes in status and self-identity, precisely so they can see the transition into HE as a positive achievement that will enhance and not diminish their sense of self-worth.

2. Community of learners

Belonging to a community of learners has been demonstrated to be instrumental in students' success. Wegner (1998) talks of the 'social phenomena of learning' and goes on to say that the most transformative learning is social learning. Tutors thus need to be aware of the importance of this social dimension and their own role in the social network. Tutors should also be aware of the part they play in the creation of a supportive environment for peer-group learning.

Wenger suggests that there are three key components in a functioning community of practice these are illustrated in the diagram below.
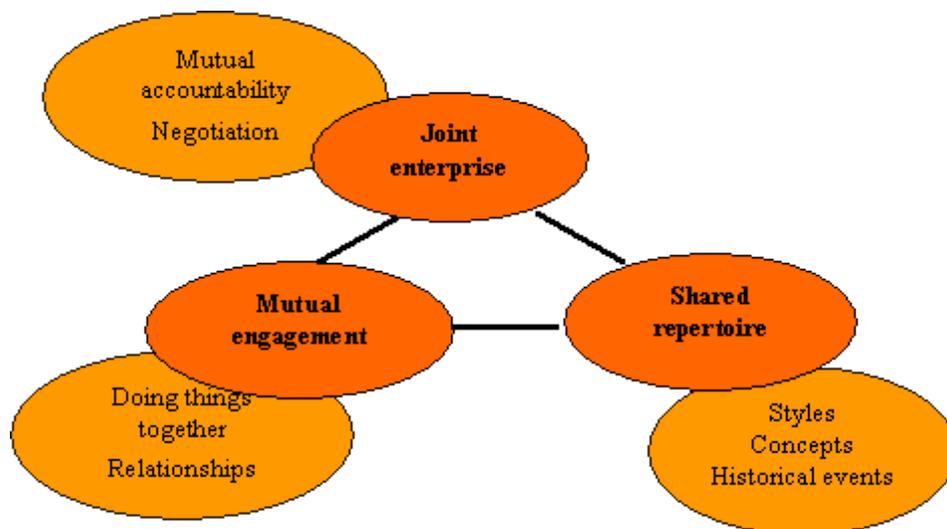

Figure 1. (Wenger 1998)

One major issue with this model of community of practice, however, is that MaP students frequently report feeling isolated from other students on their programme of study. Mature students cannot or maybe do not want to get involved in the same social activities that attract the majority of younger students.

'I don't really want to talk with the younger students about what they did last night...they can't relate to me and my experiences of life they just treat me like their mum!' (Student interview, 2011)

All of the mature students interviewed were living away from campus, so they had little or no informal contact outside the classroom with other students who live in university or share student accommodation. MaP students feel that this puts them at a distinct disadvantage because they are not able to access informal learning with the same ease as younger, full-time students.

3. Overcoming practical barriers

Another significant consideration for many mature and part-time students is their capacity to overcome practical barriers to learning. Timing, travel arrangements, other priorities and responsibilities loom large for this group of students. Interviews with MaP students at the start of their degree programme are frequently dominated by their anxieties about balancing these competing responsibilities often compounded by the complications and costs of travelling into a campus which could be some distance from home.

> *"It takes me nearly two hours to get into University. I can't just come in for one session. I have to take everything with me and camp at the University for the day to make it worthwhile."* (Student interview, 2011)

Issues of child care are especially important for student parents. Mothers, in particular, often have to re-negotiate household responsibilities with their partner and older children. This can lead to tension as old habits are often hard to change.

> *"I've always done everything at home so it's hard to get them [her family] to help."* (Student interview 2010).

Further pressure may be put on part-time and mature students by the demands of balancing paid work with study which can mean that they are less able to

access some of the extra support and personal development experiences available at university. Even issues as seemingly peripheral as the lack of adequate IT training can place these students at a further disadvantage as they are quickly confronted with the need to gain access to internet resources. For some of these students, something as mundane as a routine trip to a modern IT-focused library can feel utterly overwhelming.

Background information about VALUE MaP

The aim of the VALUE MaP programme is to help all of these students feel at home in a higher education environment so that they can develop the effective learning strategies needed for successful completion of the course. VALUE MaP is specifically aimed at students who are returning to study or are entering higher education via non-traditional routes from a wide range of academic, cultural and social backgrounds. These sessions are not discipline-specific but concentrate on 'learning to learn' and how to best function in an academic environment.

More specifically, the Learning Outcomes for VALUE MaP aim to enable students to:

- Operate effectively in different learning and teaching modes commonly used in the academic learning environment at level C.
- Develop the necessary learning strategies for the assessment requirements of their chosen programmes of study.
- Express their study strengths confidently and be able to work in a study network that supports the effective study of the chosen subject.
- Have a greater understanding of the University environment, structure and assessment procedures.

Students are able to choose a number of VALUE MaP sessions most appropriate to their self-identified learning development needs. The minimum number of

sessions recommended is four, in order to give a broad introduction to study in higher education.

The VALUE MaP sessions aim to familiarise students with the environment, processes and expectations of University and is underpinned by principles of supported learning, meta-cognition, developing autonomous learning and providing the study tools to help build up academic confidence. Session tutors are aware of the needs of this particular cohort and thus select suitable materials and teaching methods to help students settle into university life.

The VALUE sessions are timetabled to run for three consecutive weekends at the start of the Autumn Term and then a revision and exam planning session at the end of the Spring Term. The workshop days comprise a number of sessions delivered across three campuses: Canterbury, Medway and Tonbridge. For further details, see Appendix 1- Module specification. The sessions offered in 2010/11 were:

Day 1 Sessions	Getting started at university, Time management, Introduction to e-learning and Moodle, Learning from lectures
Day 2 Sessions	Note taking skills, Research and reading skills, Critical thinking skills, Making the most of IT
Day 3 Sessions	Understanding assignments, Essay writing, Using sources and referencing, Writing a comparative literature essay
Day 4	Learning from feedback Revision Skills Essays in exams Exam Strategies
Anytime	Study clinics (bookable 1-2-1 sessions)

The class size at each session is negotiated with the session tutor and limited by the size of seminar room available. A minimum booking of 5 students is necessary for the sessions to run. In practice, the greatest number of students in any one session was 15 and in 4 cases only one student actually attended the session despite bookings of 5 to 7. Sessions are delivered on 14 different days

(mornings and afternoons) during the Autumn and Spring terms across 3 campuses. At least three or four workshop sessions are offered on the same day, to make the journey and any child-care arrangements worthwhile. Some sessions are concentrated in during the first few weeks of the Autumn Term to catch the students' early anxieties. Most workshop days ended with 'study clinics' to give those students who find it difficult to access the Student Learning Advisory Service during normal office hours the option of meeting with a learning advisor and of discussing their own individual learning needs.

How VALUE Map addresses identity

The VALUE programme addresses these issues of time-lapse in education and interrupted study through the, 'Introduction to University', session. This session places heavy emphasis on discussion of students' previous experiences and takes a 'strengths based' (Staron, 2011) approach to reviewing students' academic skills. Cowan (2011) describes this as,

> '*enabling learners to experience, feel and appreciate themselves as a knower*'.

This helps students to focus on areas where they have some experience or expertise, such as time management, meeting deadlines and being prepared to ask questions. The programme focuses on building academic confidence for students who may not have participated in formal learning for some time recognising that,

> "*students entering into these programs without having learned the skills of self-directed inquiry will experience anxiety, frustration, and often failure, and so will their teachers.*" (Knowles 1975: 15).

At the same, time, however, these initial sessions also enable participants to work at the process of establishing a confident new self-identity as a student. As Wenger cogently argues, (1998, p56) this is most effectively formed through

active participation: in this case, mature students form a new peer group to support each other as they explore shared concerns.   Often it is enough simply to articulate these hopes and fears to start the process of transition into the first year of Higher Education, moving gradually from dependence to independence. This provides a starting point for integration into the university learning environment, as students mix with other like-minded individuals and develop a stronger sense of academic confidence. This is absolutely essential for academic success if mature students are to build on their initial motivation and ultimately complete their studies.

How the VALUE programme addresses community

The VALUE programme aims to create a sense of community through classroom activities for example, session plans are negotiated with students at the beginning of each class. Sessions begin with a review of students' previous experience of the activity under discussion such as note taking, academic writing or reading. Students are encouraged to reflect on their successes in these areas, and build up in this way a *'shared repertoire'* (Wenger 1998) of transferable academic skills. In addition, students are given in class activities such as comparing notes from reading, discussing speed reading techniques or designing a poster with their top tips for essay writing. These activities require discussion with other students and so help to build up a sense of community through 'mutual engagement' and 'joint enterprise' (Wenger 1998). Some of the work that students have produced during these sessions has been of high quality therefore it has been made available for other students via the SLAS resources website (e.g. revision notes for sports studies). These sessions provide the opportunity for MaP students from across departments to mix and develop informal socio-educational peer support networks.

How VALUE MaP addresses practical barriers

Sessions on time management tend to be popular and produce a high level of debate amongst the students. This is often an area of where students can contribute freely from their own expertise and this experiential knowledge is captured in an exercise where students are asked to produce posters on time management.

The need to combine adult responsibilities with the practical constraints of formal study lead on to another key area for negotiation; research carried out by Koch (2010) finds that MaP students are most likely to attend extra academic development sessions on Saturday. However, they are unlikely to make the journey for just one hour therefore sessions are scheduled for four consecutive hours so that students can set aside a whole morning for their study, making childcare and travel arrangements worthwhile. However there remain students for whom these times do not suit; they have the option to attend the standard SLAS workshops open to all students either on Wednesday afternoons or twilight sessions on Monday evenings.

Discussion and conclusion

The VALUE MaP programme has been deemed successful as sessions are mostly well attended and student feedback is positive. Despite the increased number of applications and bookings in 2010, only 90 students selected the suggested 4 or more study skills sessions. About half (47) of the students were based at Canterbury, 26 at Medway and 17 at Tonbridge. All three faculties were represented with 37 students from the Faculty of Humanities, 37 from the Faculty of Social Sciences and 16 from the Faculty of Sciences. About a quarter of the students continued to use the various initiatives and programmes offered by SLAS i.e. workshops, one-to-one appointments, resources and the Value Programme,

and most of the students reported that they appreciated the opportunity to 'brush-up' their skills as well as meet other MaP students. Overall, therefore, students were very happy with the content, structure and timing of the sessions.

Feedback received from the participants has provided valuable insight on each of the three areas discussed in this paper. In particular, students noted that their levels of confidence had increased significantly – as one student said

> *"I think that the sessions help to give confidence and provide valuable information about studying."* (BOS survey 2010)

Another student made specific reference to her feeling of empowerment as a result of the VALUE MaP sessions: she said it was *"Extremely useful. Very empowering!!"* (BOS survey 2010.) Many students also commented on becoming a member of a learning community through engagement with VALUE MaP. As one student put it,

> *"I attended all of the Saturday sessions at Medway in October/ Feb/ March. Found them very useful and also it was good to meet other mature students from different courses."* (BOS survey 2010)

Students particularly enjoyed meeting students from different disciplines and backgrounds; as Wenger (1998) suggests, diversity is a key element in the formation of a strong and dynamic community

> *"I enjoyed mixing with other students from other courses."* (BOS survey 2010)

This element of confidence and identity is vital to the future academic success of the programme.

Students responded well to the practicalities many students found it useful to have sessions bunched,

> *"It is good to have the sessions timetabled together as it makes my arrangements easier"* (student interview 2010)

Students also commented positively on the practical sessions such as IT skills,

> *"The IT session told me things I had never heard before; marks went up afterwards"* (BOS survey 2010).

VALUE MaP is a supportive and developmental learning intervention for mature and part-time students, offering a means by which they can establish a positive student identity and a sense of belonging to an academic community through participation. Recognition of students' prior experiences and existing skills are valued and built upon. The anxiety which MaP students experience at the start of a programme of study is countered by targeted practical sessions, sensitive tutors and a supportive environment of peers. Furthermore students' academic confidence grows through joint enterprise and mutual engagement in class based activities. The VALUE MaP programme will continue next year and there are plans to improve it. Firstly, through strengthening reflection on students' prior knowledge to enhance students' positive identity with learning, also by putting a greater emphasis on building social learning networks, and finally with the increased use of technology, such as e-portfolios for maintaining contact between students and enabling them to record a wider range of their achievements.

Acknowledgements

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