Lost in Transition: an Exploration of the Transition of Work-Based Mature Students into 3rd Level Education

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Abstract

The transition from the social care practice environment to a third level academic institution for the first time as a mature age student can be much anticipated, exciting and stimulating but also fraught with feelings of self-doubt, unease and difficulty. These feelings override for many mature age students the realities of commencing undergraduate study. Before commencement, most mature age students neither give much thought to issues pertaining to transition, nor believe that such issues are relevant or likely to affect them. The presence of part-time, work-based undergraduate degree programmes in social care has continued to grow stronger in recent times. However, student satisfaction with the transition has never been systematically evaluated and the quality of this learning and the evidence base to support it has not been established.

This study primarily investigates the experiences of mature, work-based social care students within a third level academic education setting in Ireland. This research aims to explore this transition and the complex difficulties, with the aim of potentially identifying the means of overcoming the challenges, specific to this group of learners. The results of this qualitative research will support academics in developing programmes which will enhance the overall quality of the pedagogical learning environment.

This study will contribute to the identification of critical barriers and relationships in current work-based social care education delivery for transformative higher education in Ireland. It begins by presenting a discussion on the transition of mature students to 3rd level education, with particular focus on the work-based student. It continues by exploring the processes involved in reconciling the transition, leading to its success or failure. Professional standards and a strong academic identity are of special value in the area of academic preparation for contemporary social care practice. Establishing the academic identity of the student whilst maintaining the role of the professional in the workplace has remained a troublesome concept as practitioners seek to identify their own role.

1. Transition of mature students to 3rd level education

There has been a steady rise in the participation of mature students in 3rd level education in Ireland; thereby contributing to the diverse population within academia (Carroll and Patterson, 2010, p.3); (Thomas, 2002, p.424); (Reay, 2002, p.399); (Tones, Fraser, Elder and White, 2009, p.506); (Fragoso, Goncalves, Ribeiro, Monteiro, Quintas, Bago, Fonseca and Santos, 2013, p.68). Research indicates that mature students come from a variety of different backgrounds with varying degrees of experience, educational achievements and career success (West, Hore, Eaton, Kermond 1986, cited in Scott, Burns and Cooney, 1998, p. 221).

It is acknowledged that the transition to tertiary education has complex implications for the mature learner (Weil, 1989; Pascall and Cox, 1993, cited in Scott, Burns, and Cooney, 1998, p. 221). These students have a wide range of roles and responsibilities, and many need support in order for the transition to education to run smoothly (Fragoso et al. 2013, p69). In comparison to school leavers, many mature students are likely to be living

with a partner, and to have dependent children (Western et al. 1998, cited in Tones et al, 2009, p.306). This type of living situation tends to come with added demands which could impede upon the mature students' academic progression (Taniguchi and Kaufman, 2005, cited in Tones et al. 2009, p. 306).

2. Conceptual Framework

There are two main theoretical foundations which will set out the contextual background for this research; Dewey (1938) and the concept of experiential education; and Pierre Bourdieu (1993) and the concept of social capital.

Dewey's (1938), topic of experiential education contends that, "there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education" (Dewey, 1997). In his writing, Dewey analysed both traditional and progressive education. His work has made a notable contribution to the study of education; he looks upon the school system as one where students become active members in their own learning. He argued that traditional education is primarily concerned with delivering an accumulation of predetermined knowledge and skills, while at the same time encouraging students' to conform to systems of authority and obedience. Within this traditional structure, Dewey noted that the material presented tended to be ensconced in the curriculum and cultural traditions. This perspective, he believes, neglects to focus upon students' actual learning experiences. His concern with this approach was, while focusing primarily on content delivery, the educator excludes any prospect for students to critically analyse and interpret the information (Dewey, 1938:9).

Dewey observed progressive education as concentrating more on the students' interests, individualism and integration (Dewey, 1938:9). Within this type of system, students are afforded the opportunity to express individuality, freedom of activity with a strong emphasis on problem solving, collaboration and critical thinking (Dewey, 1938:20).

According to his proposal, the education system must be one that encompasses an experiential element (Dewey, 1938:21). According to Bracey and Culver (2005), central to progressive education are the concepts of meaningful participation and inquiry. This perspective, involves two essential elements: (1) *Respect for diversity*, where each individual is recognised for his or her own abilities, interests, ideas, needs, and cultural identity, and (2) the development of *critical, socially engaged intelligence*, which enables individuals to understand and participate effectively in the affairs of their community in a collaborative effort to achieve a common good. For progressive educators, this practice means placing the student at the centre of the learning process (Bracey and Culver, 2005:248).

Bourdieu (1993) provides us with a framework to consider education as a mechanism for enhancing students' social capital. Social capital describes the resources that people may have through their relationships with families, communities and wider social networks (Bourdieu 1993:68). Educators have the opportunity to develop social capital in a bid to improve learner

achievement. Hargreaves and Fullan, (2012) argue that through social capital, both teaching and learning are enhanced. They go on to say that *"in collaborative cultures, failure and uncertainty are not protected and defended, but instead are shared and discussed with a view to gaining help and support"* (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012:113).

At the core of teaching is the notion of helping people; facilitating and assisting students in developing connections and relationships with others thus establishing a shared purpose and mutual learning. As Duhigg (2012) suggests, "There's something really powerful about groups and shared experiences. People might be skeptical about their ability to change if they're by themselves, but a group will convince them to suspend disbelief. A community creates belief" (Duhigg, 2012:85).

3. Challenges for Mature Students

It is widely accepted that mature students encounter a broad range of opportunities as well as challenges upon entry into tertiary education (Steele, Lauder, Caperchione, and Anastasi, 2005, p. 574); (Watts and Waraker, 2008, p. 106). Studies indicate that the younger 'traditional' student builds up support networks, both social and academic, around their college life, whereas the 'non-traditional' student, particularly those with children, cannot afford to locate education at the centre of their lives (Edwards, 1993, cited in Bowl, 2001, p.155).

Focusing on the work-based learner, many struggle to view themselves in the student role while continuing to fulfil the role of employed worker (Watts and Waraker, 2008, p.107). Hafford-Letchfield, (2007) argue that where students have additional priorities such as childcare, family and career, taking on the added responsibilities attached to the student role can perplexing to say the least (Hafford-Letchfield, 2007, cited in Watts and Waraker, 2008:107).

Given the pressure and stress that many students face, particularly those juggling college, family and work commitments it is important that students take time out to care for themselves. Self-care is a concept that requires individuals to take responsibility over their own health and well-being. There is much emphasis placed on the idea of self-care and self-managing abilities. Many interventions have been identified to deal with stress and anxiety including mindfulness, exercise, yoga, meditation and support groups to name but a few (Soliman, 2013, p.31).

4. Institutional System

Bowl (2001) portrays the mature student as a *'frustrated participant in an unresponsive institutional context'* (Bowl, 2001, p.152). In recent years there has been a notable shift towards student-centered learning (Rust, 2002 cited in Retna & Cavana, 2009, p.1). Studies have found that mature students are confronted by obstacles within the learning environment itself, such as, difficulty understanding the expectations and comprehending the academic culture and conventions in addition time management, reading and structuring assignments (Bowl, 2001, p.156).

Research highlights the importance of exploring the challenges, in addition to coping mechanisms that students possess (cited in Fragoso et al. 2013, p. 70). In an effort to improve academic performance and maximise retention, it is important to understand the support systems, ambitions and perceptions that mature students have towards their study, work and family lives (Bhatnagar and Rajadhyaksha, 2001 cited in Steele et al. 2005, p.574). Boud and Solomon (2001, p. 31) claim that we cannot underestimate 'the considerable challenge for learners ... [when they] have to deal with the complexities of being both a worker and learner'. Bearing this in mind it is vital that educational institutes operate systems of support to enhance the learning experience for the mature, work-based student.

Burton et al. (2001) found that institutional systems can in fact alleviate potential anxiety for students by making contact in the early stages of their academic journey (Burton et al. 2001 cited in Fragoso et al, 2013, p. 70). Common concerns within the undergraduate population, include "financial burdens, new and increased academic demands, family and social issues, and adjustment to academic life" (Votta and Benau, 2014, p.675).

5. Methodology
A group of work-based mature students were selected for semi-structured interviews using purposive sampling, "qualitative researchers employ purposive, and not random, sampling methods as they seek out groups and individuals where the processes being studied are most likely to occur" (Silverman, 2001, p.141). These students are currently enrolled in a Level 7 Degree Programme in Applied Social Studies in Social Care.

6. Preliminary findings
As this research is in its early stages, an in-depth analysis of the findings is not within the scope of this article. The data gathered thus far is the based on the accounts of three work-based students and will be presented in a narrative form illustrating the initial themes that have emerged.

Wendy's Profile
Wendy is 50 years of age and lives alone. Wendy has been working with young people for 10 years. Wendy began by reflecting on her current work practice and spoke of the anxiety around not having a social care qualification as well as recognising the transition as an opportunity:

> *"I came from nothing, with no qualification and I always have this thinking that somebody will tip me on the shoulder and say; what exactly are you doing here? I've always felt behind others* who *had the social care degree".* *"The opportunity was afforded to me, it would have been a foolish decision not to do it, we will never be so lucky to have it supported and paid for".*

Although Wendy viewed this opportunity as positive, it did not come without its challenges. Wendy described the transition as being difficult and stressful:

"I really struggled very badly. I don't feel academic. I think I'm an imposter, I'm like the scarecrow from the Wizard of Oz and I'm waiting for somebody to tell me I have a brain. There's a mass hysteria among our group, hysteria about assignments, stress. I can't tell you how much I cried last term, it was ridiculous".

"I prefer to come to work. I use it as an excuse - I have to go to work today so I can't do any study. I think figuring out what is expected and what is wanted from us in terms of continuous assessments and exams - a clearer understanding, clearer expectations".

Wendy also noted difficulty in achieving a balance between college, work, and her social life as well as struggling to maintain her level of self-care:

"*Again I beat myself up about this because I should have the balance. My life is mine, I can do whatever I want, if and whenever I want, yet I've begun to eat, sleep, and drink it [college]. I've become college and work, that's all I've become. It impacts on my social life, I'm losing my friends, most definitely. I've become more isolated". Exercise has gone considerably; I am not exercising as much. I barely sleep anymore".*

In terms of support systems that existed for her, Wendy remarked:

"I think they [work] have supported us, just purely from a finance side. They paid for it and have given us the time off. When we were preparing to come here they said that we could have group chats about it [college] and I don't think any of that has come into play".

Liam's Profile

Liam is 50 years of age and lives with his wife and young daughter. Liam spent a number of years working in the public service before joining the social care sector where he has spent the last 13 years working with young people in secure care. Reflecting upon his previous educational experience, Liam felt content working within the field without a social care qualification; however this began to change when his colleagues began to attain their qualifications:

"*I didn't think I needed a qualification until I saw people around me going for third level and when the opportunity came up for me to go, I jumped at the chance".*

Liam spoke of his work practice and his confidence as a practitioner and how this differs to his student role:

"It's a completely different state of affairs, we're in charge over there [work]*, you know your job, and you know exactly what you're doing. I'm very confident in what I do. I know that no matter what happens throughout the day that I'll be able to deal with it, whereas here* [college] *you don't know what you're facing day to day, and sometimes I find that difficult. I'm not confident yet and it unsettles me, it makes me feel inadequate and I think God maybe I am too old to do this".*

Through further exploration, he feels that although there have been certain challenges; overall it has been a positive and supported experience:

> *"It's a new lease of life for me. My wife is very supportive, my family are very supportive. We get time off work which is great but I have to put in extra hours* [for study] *and neglect the family to some extent. I'm not there as much when I'm needed. I think in work there are huge supports there, we are given time off, we are offered any resources that are there; we can print, we have everything at our finger tips. I have no problems, or no insurmountable problems should I say".*

Moving onto the topic of self-care and achieving a college-work-life balance Liam spoke of strategies that he utilises:

> *"I try to balance my time between family and college life. I took up yoga, I found that very helpful, I walk a lot, I do things that calm me, I love going to the beach, and the sea had a very calming effect on me".*

Grace's Profile
Grace is 38 years of age and lives with her husband and young son. Grace is currently working with young people in secure care. Although overwhelmed to a certain degree, Grace also regarded her experience as a positive opportunity:

> *"I am 13 years working in social care and I don't have the paperwork to back it up. I could never afford college before, so when this opportunity came up, it was like wow! I wanted to give myself more opportunities. It's a gift and I see it as that".*

> *"At the start it was shock……how do they expect us to do all this work?" At the beginning we did not understand the level of work that was required from us. I think the pressure is phenomenal. When I'm playing with my son, I'm thinking, the ironing needs to be done, the dinner, study, I'm always somewhere else, I'm never just in the moment and that spoke volumes for me".*

It is understood that family support is vital for a positive transition to education; this is especially true for the work based student. In spite of the challenges that Grace has experienced, she also has a range of supports available to her:

> *"Work has been brilliant, so supportive. They want us to do well, and they will support us as much as they can. I'm very fortunate; I have very good support and a fantastic husband. He understands how important this is".*

The topic of self-care and achieving a college-work-life balance was examined. Grace explained what this meant for her:

"*My self-care, my time, - it's gone. Nobody worries about me, I worry about me. It's just getting on with it. I've always felt, you dust yourself off and you get on with it. For me, to relax and wind down, it doesn't happen Monday to Sunday, I can't stop, I'd love to be able to stop". "My home life I need to balance, I haven't mastered it yet"*

7. Conclusions and Future Work

It is important to reiterate that the results presented within this paper are 'preliminary' and that additional data needs to be analysed. Nonetheless the preliminary results presented thus far are undeniably important and will potentially lead to greater student satisfaction, learning and retention.

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