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**Highlight:**

"A bone of contention": Reflections on the experiences of mature learners in
social work education

Helen E. Machin
PhD Candidate and Graduate Teaching Assistant
Social Work
School of Social Science and Public Policy
Keele University, UK

h.e.machin@keele.ac.uk

# "A bone of contention": Reflections on the experiences of mature learners in social work education

**Helen E. Machin**
**PhD Candidate and Graduate Teaching Assistant**
**Social Work**
**School of Social Science and Public Policy**
**Keele University, UK**

h.e.machin@keele.ac.uk

## Abstract

Research has found that mature, female social work learners often face barriers to achievement in higher education due to the demands of managing practice placements and classroom learning around caring responsibilities (Lister, 2003).  This paper, originally submitted as part of an MA programme in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, reflects on a critical incident that occurred during my teaching practice with a group of social work undergraduate students.  By reflecting on the incident and Knowles' (1968) theory of andragogy which informed my response, this article explores the experiences of mature female learners in social work education.  A discussion of the extent to which I addressed the needs of the learners and an exploration of my failings form the basis of a reflection on how to meet the needs of mature female learners with caring responsibilities in social work education.

*Keywords*:  mature learners, care, social work, education

## Introduction

Social work degree programs in the UK have historically attracted mainly mature[1], female learners.  In 2014/15, 59% of enrolments on UK social work programs were aged 24 or over, and the majority of enrolments were female (Skills for Care, 2016).  Although statistics that describe the caring responsibilities of social work students are not available, I have noticed anecdotally in my role as a Graduate Teaching Assistant at Keele University that many mature female social work students have caring responsibilities and, often, financial considerations that impact on their learning experiences[2].  Studies have indicated that mature female social work learners face a number of barriers to success in higher education, including lack of information about services and support, difficulties managing academic and personal responsibilities and financial concerns (Lister, 2003).  Additionally, mature social work students begin their degree program with diverse personal, professional and learning experiences and they may have roles as carers, employees or employers and community leaders.  Social work educators need to consider how these experiences and roles interact with the academic environment which is largely organised around the traditional young learner in higher education (Kasworm, 1990).

Universities in the UK have a legal duty to promote equality of educational opportunity for all learners with particular regard to a set of protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion and belief, sex, marriage and civil partnership, and sexual orientation (Equality Act, 2010).  This national duty has been translated into Keele University policy which emphasises the duty placed on staff members to value difference and to promote a learning environment defined by respect and responsibility (University Strategic Plan 2015-2020).  This paper explores my attempt to fulfil this duty and my failings with respect to mature female social work learners with caring responsibilities.

## Critical incident

The critical incident that forms the basis of reflection in this paper occurred prior to an undergraduate social work seminar with an all-female group of social work learners.  The seminar was focused on dissertation writing.  In preparation for the session, I asked learners to bring a paragraph of their written work to the session to use during an activity designed to support learners to practice editing writing.  Prior to the seminar, I received an email from one learner about the preparatory task.  The learner expressed concerns about the task, stating "a few of the class are not at this point as yet for one reason or another and feel this may be a bone of contention, as when others who are ahead discuss this [their written work], it can lead to an atmosphere and induces stress and panic".  A follow-up discussion with the learner revealed that several mature learners in the group felt that the "younger" students were making progress with their

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[1] In this paper, "mature" refers to learners aged 24 and above.  "Young" refers to learners under the age of 24.

[2] There are, of course, young adults who also have caring and financial responsibilities that may affect their learning and mature learners who do not.  Socioeconomic status, gender and ethnicity also intersect with age and impact on social work students' experiences of learning in higher education.  However, a detailed analysis of the intersectional identity issues that affect learners is beyond the scope of this paper.

dissertation projects at a faster rate due to having fewer personal and professional responsibilities to manage alongside their studies. This contributed to a competitive and tense classroom atmosphere for several mature female learners in the group.

The concerns raised by the learners' comments appeared to reveal four issues:

1) Learners were concerned about the progress they were expected to have made on their dissertation projects. Indeed, studies have found a considerable gap between the academic expectations of social work educators and student social workers' views about their own progress in relation to assessments and the type of support required (Worsley et al., 2009).

2) Learners felt anxious about completing their dissertation project. This experience supports the findings of social work education literature in the US where social work students were found to be extremely anxious about conducting research and engaging with research methods modules (Harder, 2010, Macke and Tapp, 2012).

3) Mature learners' anxieties were increased by comparisons with younger students in the group who were perceived to be progressing their dissertation projects at a faster rate. Although the aim of the dissertation module within the undergraduate social work programme is to develop learners' research-mindedness in preparation for practice, assessment has been found to lead to competition within groups in social work education (Singh, 2001).

My response to this critical incident was implicitly guided by the principles associated with adult learning in Knowles' (1968) theory of andragogy. According to Knowles, andragogy, separate from pedagogy, is "the art and science of helping adults learn" (1980, p.43). The theory of andragogy assumes that adult learners: 1) have an independent sense of self and can direct their own learning, 2) can draw on a rich array of life experiences to support learning, 3) have learning needs that are related to changing social roles, 4) are focused on solving problems and applying knowledge, and they 5) have internal rather than external motivation to learn. I used these principles to develop a response to the learners' concerns during an open discussion at the beginning of the seminar where I emphasised three key points;

1) I acknowledged that many learners in the group, regardless of their age, have family and professional responsibilities that affect their learning. By acknowledging learners' non-academic responsibilities, I was accepting the principle that an adult's learning needs change in accordance with their changing social roles (andragogy principle 3).

2) I explained that all members of the group are likely to have different learning styles and approaches to assessments. I stressed that these approaches are non-hierarchical and encouraged the learners to have confidence in their own approach which had already brought success. In this respect, I was appealing to the learners' independent sense of self and their ability to direct their own learning (andragogy principle 1).

3) I applied the issue raised to social work practice by explaining that practitioners, too, have different approaches to case work and comparing these approaches can lead to anxiety in the workplace. This was an attempt to emphasise the importance of managing comparisons with others in a situation applied to practice (andragogy principle 4).

## Evaluation of my response

In the short term, the open discussion at the beginning of the seminar appeared to reassure the group about my expectations of their progress and to reduce mature learners' anxieties. Although mature and young learners were physically divided on two sides of the classroom during the seminar, I observed positive and cooperative class dynamics between both groups of learners and most students contributed ideas and raised questions. Mature learners in the group were open about their progress on the dissertation project and the difficulties of managing their research projects alongside practice placements, continued employment and family responsibilities. Younger learners also appraised their own progress honestly and discussed which aspects of the project they found challenging. In sum, my response and my use of the principles associated with andragogy appeared to resolve the immediate feelings of anxiety and the potential competition between mature learners and young learners in the group.

To further evaluate my approach to the incident, Merriam's (2001) criticism of Knowles' theory of andragogy provides a useful starting point for reflection. Merriam has criticised andragogy for focusing too narrowly on the psychological aspects of learning. Merriam argues that andragogy fails to account for the social and structural factors that shape adult learning environments and affect adult learners' development. This criticism of andragogy can also be applied to my approach to the critical incident. Although I addressed the presenting anxieties and the immediate issues around learner dynamics during the seminar, I failed to address how the traditional structure of the social work programme may affect mature learners with caring responsibilities at Keele and how this structure may have been affecting their academic progress and contributing to their anxieties. There is general agreement in the empirical literature about the measures required to improve access to and experience of higher education for mature learners with caring responsibilities. For example, improved student finance, good transport and child-care facilities (Powney et al., 1997), accessible information about learning opportunities and flexibility in programme design are recommended to meet the specific needs of mature students with caring responsibilities (Lister, 2003). Keele provides a range of services targeted to meet the specific needs of mature students, including a dedicated contact for mature students, a mentor scheme, a range of personal and academic support services and childcare provision. However, programme design within social work is inflexible and it does not necessarily accommodate family responsibilities. Although issues relating to programme design and the timing of assessments could not have been resolved during my immediate response to the critical incident, an exploration of how the structure of the programme intersects with other responsibilities for mature learners with caring responsibilities could have led to a wider programme-level discussion and evaluation of the student experience for mature learners.

## Conclusions & implications

This critical incident relating to mature female learners in social work education has highlighted several areas for development within my own teaching practice that may be applicable to other social work educators. First, the incident has underlined the importance of recognising the challenges that mature learners with caring

responsibilities may face when enrolled on social work programmes that are designed around traditional academic structures which fail to account for mature learners' wider responsibilities.  Secondly, the incident has revealed how an understanding of mature learners' "bone[s] of contention" can help to improve group dynamics between young and mature learners and reduce anxieties about assessments.  Knowles' theory of andragogy provides a useful structure to address mature learners' concerns about their progress and their comparisons with others.  Finally, the incident has revealed that a full understanding of the experiences of mature learners on social work degree programmes must involve consideration of the wider structural issues that affect their experiences of social work education.  Although individual educators may not be able to resolve these wider issues alone, discussion of the issues with learners creates opportunities for the traditional structures of academic social work programmes to be challenged.  Given the importance attributed to developing student social workers' ability to challenge social structures in social work discourses in the UK (Dominelli and Campling, 2002, Thompson, 2016), it seems logical that social work educators should also be involved in understanding and challenging the structural barriers that affect mature learners.  Rather than addressing mature learners' "bone[s] of contention" in isolation, the incident has revealed that educators must consider the whole skeleton of issues that can affect mature female social work learners in education.

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