TRANSITION TO COLLEGE AND REFLECTIVE WRITTEN JOURNALS

Welcome to College? Developing a Richer Understanding of the Transition Process for Adult First Year Students Using Reflective Written Journals

Angelica Risquez
Centre for Teaching and Learning at the University of Limerick, Ireland

Sarah Moore
Centre for Teaching and Learning at the University of Limerick, Ireland

Michael Morley
Dept. of Personnel and Employment Relations at the University of Limerick, Ireland

Address for manuscript correspondence:
Angelica Risquez
MC1-106 University of Limerick
Limerick, Ireland
Angelica.Risquez@ul.ie
Phone: +353(0)61202580
Fax: +353(0)61338044
Welcome to College? Developing a Richer Understanding of the Transition Process for Adult First Year Students Using Reflective Written Journals
Abstract

This study investigates the process of adjustment among adult learners by focusing on their own perceptions as they make the transition to higher education in an Irish setting, in order to gain a richer understanding about early university experience. The analysis of the journal-based reflections confirms existing insights about the complexity of the adjustment process, emphasising that adult students seem to face particular challenges and opportunities that may not prevail among their younger counterparts. The data provides a more personal and subjective picture of adjustment issues than has typically been available to date. The benefits of keeping and using insights from reflective journals are explored and in conclusion, a ‘V-curve’ model of mature student adjustment is proposed that suggests a more extreme form of the long established ‘U-curve’ theory derived from organizational literature on adjustment.

Keywords: transition, college adjustment, adult learner, reflective journals, U-curve theory
Welcome to College? Developing a Richer Understanding of the Transition Process for Mature First Year Students Using Reflective Written Journals

Introduction

In the context of the new access oriented order in third level education, while research on attrition of university students has pointed to “dropping out” as “the culmination of a complex interactive process” (Heinemann et al., 1984; see also Terenzini et al., 1993), by far the most commonly identified factor influencing withdrawal/persistence behaviour is the degree to which students can adjust to the new academic and social demands of the university environment (Rickinson and Rutherford, 1996; Halpern and Hodinko, 1992; Johnson, 1978). Heinemann et al. (1984) found that withdrawing students have more adjustment difficulties than persisters and reported experiencing more examination stress, unrealistic academic goals, more financial difficulties and greater loneliness and isolation. Baker, McNeil and Siryk, B. (1985) obtained consistent significant positive correlations in the expected direction between the social, personal, and emotional adjustment (as measured by the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ), Baker & Siryk (1984, 1986), on one hand; and dropping out from college, on the other. Gerdes (1986) also reported a significant negative relationship between the subscale of this instrument that measures attachment to the institution and attrition. A longitudinal study by Gerdes and Mallinckrodt indicated that, six years after adjustment was surveyed, emotional, social and academic adjustment discriminated among good-standing persisters and leavers, and among poor-standing persisters and leavers. Krotseng’s (1992) investigations have also highlighted the usefulness of the assessing transitional adjustment in providing an early warning on students who are at risk of dropping out.
Moreover, McInnis & James (1995) note that, while the economic costs to universities and society are immediately evident in early withdrawals, a third or more of first year students who remain enrolled have serious doubts about their choice of course and their level of commitment to study is problematic. Indeed, the effects of negative transitions to first year are easily underestimated since they are often only revealed as discontinuation or failure in later years. For instance, Gohn, Swartz, and Donnelly (2001) identified adjustment to stress as one of the major factors relating to attrition or persistence for second-year students.

Despite the repeated calls for greater awareness of the transitional process in university settings, early investigation into areas in which difficulties are encountered is not widespread (Levitz & Noel, 1989). Where such investigation has taken place it tends only to have offered instantaneous, cross-sectional pictures of the student experience. A focus on the adjustment issues of the adult learner population is particularly important in the Irish context where their ‘minority’ status is more acute than in the North American and British universities (Higher Education Authority (HEA), 2005). In the Irish context, this term refers to students aged 23 or over at the time of registration. Ryan & O’Kelly (2001) surveyed the social and living conditions of Irish higher education students and confirmed the existence of a ‘second nation’ minority, painting a picture of a adult learner population that often struggles to manage the demands of college while also coping with more acute financial, family and life responsibilities than their younger counterparts. Research has also established the significantly higher non-completion rates associated with this particular population of students (HEA, 1999).

In the light of these concerns and conditions, this study explores the fine-grained experience of adult learners by examining their reflective diaries; it selects the ‘u-curve theory’ as a possible vehicle for categorising and conveying the results and it provides an overview of the concept of transitional
adjustment using qualitative insights derived from a self-selecting group of adult learners. Finally, it discusses the adjustment implications for individuals and universities of using and analyzing findings based on reflective diaries.

Using the u-curve theory to categorise phases of transitional adjustment to higher education

Rickinson & Rutherford (1995) and Brett (1980) have noted that the first seven weeks of term are a critical period for new university students. It is a vital time because newcomers are grappling with a social and academic environment that is often radically different in a whole range of ways when compared with their previous experience. The necessity for newcomers to establish effective routines seems at its strongest during these early fragile weeks. So vulnerable are students at this point in their university career, that Schaetti (1996) has likened the process to such life changes as moving from one country to another, changing jobs, or even losing a loved one. Assuming the relative universality of the process of felt-adjustment, this study adopts the U-curve theory of adjustment - a model initially adopted in the organizational literature on expatriation by Oberg (1960) – to enhance an understanding of the process of sense making experienced by the first-year student entering third level education. Oberg describes four stages of adjustment: a honeymoon stage, a culture shock stage, an adjustment stage and a mastery stage. During the initial honeymoon stage, the new environment fascinates the newcomer and the experience of felt-adjustment may be satisfactory but superficial. After the initial pleasant/exciting encounter, a period of culture shock follows, characterized by disillusionment and dejection. Gradually, if effective adjustment occurs, the individual enters an adjustment phase in which he or she masters the process of transition (see figure 1):

(Insert figure 1 about here)
An exposition of an exhaustive analysis of individual contextually based narratives is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, we present a picture of the process of transition by drawing from the data and using the U-curve framework from the organizational behaviour literature, since a number of patterns of behaviour have been observed in the reflective journals that seem to comply with this model of adjustment. This represents a new way of analyzing student adjustment and highlights the links between research in educational adjustment that draws from broader organizational settings.

Methodology

*The Use of Reflective Diaries for Research Purposes*

Transitional adjustment of first year student populations has received ongoing attention at the University of Limerick in recent times (Morley, Moore and Rísquez, 2004). The focus to date has been mainly on a quantitative analysis using measured adjustment scores and mapping these onto subsequent measures of academic performance. While this quantitative, positivist approach certainly provides a valuable snapshot of the issue and a necessary exploration of the applicability of international research to a particular national and institutional context; there remains a need for longer-term explorations that shed more light on the psychological processes of students from their own perspectives as they move through their first months at university.

Reflective diaries as a longitudinal and relatively non-intrusive mechanism for recording experiences over a period of time have become popular as a research device in the last decade (e.g. Hamilton-Jones & Svane, 2003; Metzirow, 1990). By encouraging reflection on an experience, journal writing can enhance participants’ capacity to reflect and to learn from the process of reflection, helping to chronicle students’ own experiences and interpretations over the course of their transition process. This research relies on reflective diaries to facilitate reflection on the part of participants and to collect
Adult learners’ transition

rich, contextualised data, which focuses on respondents’ perceptions of the experience of transition to university and the subsequent actions emerging from these perceptions. The focus is thus on understanding the student’s adjustment from his or her own frame of reference by taking a phenomenological stance and by avoiding the imposition of externally conceived assumptions or measurements.

In addition, encouraging the participants to engage in reflective self-assessment of their early experience at university could potentially have a positive impact on how they face this period since reflective diaries may be a useful way to accentuate students’ awareness of their active role in the learning process and a way of providing self created, empowered psychotherapeutic space (Hamilton-Jones & Svane, 2003; Moon, 1999; Best, 1996). As Moon (1999: p.43) puts it:

“In writing a diary we take something from inside ourselves and we set it out: it is a means of discovering who we are, that we exist, that we change and grow”

Although not explicitly prompted to do so, one of the participants proffers her own views about the process of journal keeping emphasising that the self-examination process it induces is helpful for her:

“This feels strange writing in a book but its actually calming a bit … you can see how far you have come or if you have gone backwards in any way and learn from that.” (Respondent 11, week 12)

Recruitment of Participants and Collection of Data

Voluntary participation was sought among a cohort of first-year students across the Business, Nursing, Engineering and Computer Science disciplines during the first week of the autumn semester. It was decided that all participants should be full time students, given the established and substantial differences in the educational background, personal and professional circumstances of mature part-time students in the Irish context (Ryan & O’Kelly 2001). Students were recruited in class settings, after the authors explained the initiative and outlined its potential benefits for self-awareness and adjustment. A
first meeting was organized in the second week of the semester in which the researchers met with the students, introduced them to the project and outlined its associated aims (i.e. studying transitional adjustment and enhancing participant reflection). Then they were requested to raise their concerns about the demands of the task and assured of the confidentiality of the data provided. Participants were encouraged to write on a weekly basis about their thoughts and feelings, aided by four prompts (relating to academic, social, emotional and motivational adjustment issues), which broadly reflected the multidimensional nature of adjustment as conceptualised by Baker & Siryk (1984):

The reasons why I feel I am (or am not) achieving my academic goals this week are…

The reasons why I feel I am dealing well (or not dealing well) with the social demands of university this week are…

The reasons why I am (or am not) feeling psychologically and physically well this week are…

The reasons why I feel (or don’t feel) committed to my course and/or attached to this institution this week are…

Two other meetings were held during the course of the study, with the purposes of cultivating participants’ relationships with one another and with the lead researcher and to explore as a group individual and shared motivations or concerns. Frequent additional meetings took place with individual students, so students’ particular time constraints would not be an impediment to the project as a whole. A social meeting took place at the end of January to close the project and acknowledge the participants’ involvement and effort.

Thirty-six students initially volunteered to participate in the study. Fourteen dropped out at the very early stages of the project and did not proceed to keep or submit reflective diaries. This is not surprising, given the relatively long time frame and the initial clarity with which the ongoing commitment required was explained. In addition, participation was not incentivised through economic or academic reward. Conversations with the participants revealed that that those students who did proceed
to participate were mainly driven by an interest in writing and reflecting about their own lives. This group seemed to obtain a sustaining level of internal satisfaction from the experience. In contrast, some of the students who decided to drop out of the programme explained that their involvement felt like an extra chore, or that they had not fully understood the nature of the experience when they first volunteered. Nineteen of the twenty-two students who continued their diaries until the end of the semester were adult learners, and our data analysis will focus on these.

Methodological Constraints and Limitations

Some of the inherent limitations that the participant conditions and profiles imply should be taken into consideration. The relationship of the researchers (a research associate of the Centre for Teaching and Learning at the University of Limerick, its Dean and a lecturer in organizational behaviour) to the participants was independent, since there was no other social or academic link involved outside the context of the research. However, the unavoidable social barriers that the observers’ position - as outsiders from the student community- involve, and the possible observer effects should be taken into account. The researchers made every effort to minimise that psychological distance by creating a friendly and informal atmosphere with the students, and by meeting them in common spaces outside their office environment. On the other hand, the potential distortion of the product of reflection was explicitly raised and discussed in all of the meetings.

It is necessary to emphasize both the highly self-selecting nature of the participant group and the limited time frame within which this group’s reflections were gathered. The reflections of this group may not be representative of adult learners in general and the time frame may be deemed too short for students to have experienced the full range of adjustment stages as described by Oberg. However, we argue that the depth and the range of experience conveyed through this data provides an initially rich pool of potential insight that has the capacity to shed further light on the nature of the transition process and of the organizational implications that such processes imply. The data, though limited by the factors
outlined above, have revealed both individual differences in the nature and pace of adjustment and patterns that conform broadly to the U-curve theory of adjustment, marked by initial stress and subsequent development of coping skills.

Results

It seems clear from the participants’ feedback that a number of common patterns appear relating to their interpretations of the experience of transition. The U-curve theory emerges as a useful metaphor of the ‘adjustment-to-university’ processes associated with this group of participants.

*The Culture Shock Phase*

The initial feeling of fascination and superficial adjustment characterising the honeymoon stage that has been found to be associated with general adjustment in other settings (Oberg, 1960) appears in a few cases but even where respondents do express excitement and positive anticipation, their insights are always accompanied by at least some reference to a sense of fear or anxiety. By the time the respondents had started to keep diaries, it seemed that even those who did identify positive early experiences, had already entered a period of disillusionment or even shock – suggesting that the honeymoon period, if it existed at all for the adult learners, was very short lived:

‘Excitement! It did not take long to change - to what? I am asking myself…. I am going mad. My lack of knowledge in five of the subjects is amazing and the pressure starts to build up’ (respondent 1, week 4).

The symptoms of a culture shock phase are much clearer from an early stage in contrast with the expected “honeymoon” phase; and can be categorized as academic, social and emotional in nature.

*Academic shock.*

The academic challenges that third level education poses for adult learners are well established. Results found in this study reiterate and extend findings by Walters (1997), Bean Uí Chasaide (1997)
and Young (2000). Adjustment literature refers frequently to the difficulties involved in becoming an independent learner; translating skills and study habits into the higher education environment; concentrating; managing time; prioritizing academic goals; and facing uncertain academic demands. Like in the case of respondent 5, who tries to juggle her science degree with her part-time job and a demanding family. One of her journal entries reads:

“I seem to be losing the battle of the books. I have read and re-read and seem to be remembering nothing. After years of doing 100 things at a time, it seems impossible to concentrate on just one!!!” (week 6)

This statement hints at the difficulties associated with the need to ‘shift’ ones patterns of behavior in ways that are both unfamiliar and challenging.

An unexpressed, private fear of failure seems to reflect many of the observations of the adult learner diarists. On repeated occasions they express their feeling of under preparedness for the educational demands imposed on them, and the sneaking suspicion that everyone else is doing much better. One respondent highlights his working class background and emphasises in the course of his journal reflections that he never thought that he would get a chance to go to university. His difficulties adjusting to this alien environment are expressed as follows:

“I believe being out of the academic system for nearly 10 years could be the problem. I don't seem to remember anything from school. Everything I do at college is a first, no matter how easy it is I seem to find it harder. I feel I am the only one who is having this problem.” (respondent 15, week 4)

Participation in credential-based education generates high expectations of performance that can lead to early disappointment if participants do not get some immediate sense that they are beginning to fulfil their potential in this new and often challenging environment. As suggested by Young (2000), a student’s entire sense of self may be at stake especially for those with lower levels of self-esteem.
Another participant who left her full-time job to come to university states her fear of exams in the following way:

“Had an exam this evening, just a class one. My mind went completely blank. …And that exam didn't even count towards the end of term. …I am dreading the end of semester exams; I am totally stressed out over these …I know I have an habit of doing at exams what I like or know, and instead of trying the other questions I just look at them and think “you know you can’t do this, you know you should have studied this section better, everybody else is flying through it” instead of reading over the question and trying to make an attempt at it.” (respondent 4, week 5)

About the same time, respondent 5 starts feeling that the pressure is building up so much that she can barely cope with it:

“I must admit about two weeks ago I broke down into a crumbling mess because all my fears were getting the best of me. I really fear as a adult learner that this is like a last chance for us but in doing this there is so much excess of pressure.” (week 6)

Bean Uí Chasaide (1997) suggests that if such examples of initial anxiety persist over time, students may engage in self-worth protection by finding reasons to obtain assignment extensions rather than submitting work, dropping out of subjects, or not showing up for examinations despite having the capability to pass.

Later in the first semester, some complaints about insufficient or late feedback on performance are evocative of Knowles’ (1988) claim that nothing makes an adult feel more childlike and dependent than being judged by another adult. As in Young’s (2000) study of adult learners’ feelings about feedback on assignments, most of the students experienced at least some sense of anxiety and ambiguity with regard to their first assignment. One adult learner diarist (respondent 14) expresses her disappointment as follows:
“Results were promised this week but apparently deadlines are only for the likes of us. After all our work, sweat and tears, it seems that it didn't really matter at all.” (week 10).

In any case, it seems clear from these selected comments that students express anxieties associated with academic demands in a way that strongly suggest the phenomenon of ‘academic shock’ which can broadly be described as negative responses to unexpected academic demands.

Social shock.

Social aspects of adjustment as revealed through the students’ reflective journals generally suggest that feelings of isolation and alienation are common, although most of the participants do eventually seem to succeed in developing a sense of community with other adult learners relatively early in the semester.

More interestingly, their experience of social struggle as adults surrounded by traditional age students was often translated into a “them and us” attitude, a subjective experience of being very different from their younger counterparts that created feelings of seclusion, rejection or insecurity. Respondent 1 often makes comments about her younger colleagues in a way that highlights perceptions of distance and difference:

“I am in a class sometimes with 527 students (500 still in nappies) talking about the party, when is the next one, five nights drinking …do they get time to open a book?” (week 3)

While respondent 4’s observation reproduced below indicates a tendency to subjectively place mature and younger students into two clearly separate behavioural categories:

“The younger students seem to be so confident and assured of themselves! …We should be a bit more proud of ourselves!” (week 6)

Some participants also note the tendency of many of adult learners to form homogeneous clusters, thereby missing out on the positive opportunities for knowledge sharing and cooperative
learning that mingling with younger students may provide. By week 4, respondent 2 has made friends across the age divide and writes:

“I have made a conscious effort not to stay within the adult learner cliché. ... This works for me as I feel that we share information more effectively….I think most of the adult learners are afraid to move outside their circle and….they are cutting themselves off from a fantastic source of support.” (week 4)

The sample comments presented suggest that that for the adult learner, anxiety levels can be extremely high in the initial stages of engagement with university life. Such experiences suggest that, while developing a sense of community with other adult learners seems necessary to gain social, academic and emotional support; the lack of interaction with the majority student community implied by many of the journal reflections can be accompanied by significant drawbacks and may reinforce self-fulfilled prophecies of isolation and inadequacy.

*Emotional shock.*

An individual’s capacity to understand and handle a new situation can be eroded by the loss of previous roles and contact with a real world that provides with no feelings of control (Torbion, 1982). For example, respondent 4 expresses the disorientation she experiences as follows:

“To go from being an independent member of a workforce with your own methods of work to being told what, where and how to do things. To go from being a leader or trainer to being a student. It takes a lot of adjustment particularly on your outlook on life.” (week 4)

Several participants expressed a sense of unreality, numbness, emptiness, detachment and even boredom. Respondent 6 explains these feelings in the following ways:

“I am getting suspicious about reality. The college is getting big, open and a void. Trying to find my place on every level. (...) Seem to be stuck in a routine. Is life really this banal and unexciting? Must be more out there.” (weeks 5 and 6)
As the individual feels helpless to cope with the new environment, self-centred worries and exaggerated behaviour are commonly expressed. Respondent 7, recently separated, describes his year before coming to university as ‘a slow climb back from the depths of despair’, and begins to express awareness that his perceptions of the challenges may be somehow distorted. He shows an awareness that his recent life stressors may be having an influence on how he is adjusting to university:

“Found myself feeling confused and isolated over the last few weeks, not sure if I could cope with the workload and then thinking that actually I am capable and it is the fear which is the problem.” (week 7)

These symptoms of emotional distress and disorientation frequently combine with a certain disenchantment and disillusionment with college and what it offers. Early literature has found consistent support for this phenomenon, which has been termed the “fresher myth” (e.g. Baker, McNeil and Siryk, 1985). For the adult learner, this discrepancy between the reality of first-year experience and prior expectations often worsens as a result of the inter-role conflicts that accommodating education-related responsibilities involves. Many of the participants in this study comment for example on the lack of affordable/adequate childcare; lament having to encounter role conflicts associated with the need to attend lectures and to study that lead to their absence from family occasions; and emphasize their need to make the appropriate changes in household management to facilitate study. Respondent 8 acknowledges that having the support of her family and the other students is a great advantage that other adult learners don’t always appear to share, yet she still highlights key difficulties in meeting demands when her child falls recurrently sick:

“My son has been sick again, I was up all Saturday night. I did not go to college today, I have arranged to take notes. … I am just too tired to open a book today. (Four days later) I have been off all week. I have so much to catch up on I don’t know where I am going to start. This is so hard; kids and college do not mix well.” (week 8)
Students also express guilt, which seems to be broadly associated with their own non-compliance with prescribed social roles. Respondent 10, who left her full-time job because she felt that “no matter what, she would always be at the end of the ladder”, finds herself divided between her two worlds:

“I arrived home from college on Tuesday to two sick children. I had to bring them to the doctor, which took two hours. God love them, but all I could think of was wasted study time.” (week 6)

Coveney O’Beirne (1999) states that the ideological beliefs linking femininity with family remain very influential in Ireland. This phenomenon may also be in evidence in the experiences articulated by the participants of this study. This self-reproaching orientation however is not only found among students who have moved away from the role of stay at home parent, but is also reflected in the journals of those who have traditionally fulfilled the role of breadwinner. As respondent 9 puts it:

“I feel guilt at the fact that my family has had to take a significant drop in income in order for me to return to full-time education. As a result I choose to work whenever possible. Of course this in itself results in stress and strain for the family” (week 5)

Interestingly, restricting or limiting attention to their external ties can lead to the attendant danger of distancing themselves from their significant others who do not share their academic experience. Bean Úi Chasaide (1997) alluded to this phenomenon as a form of “cultural suicide” that manifested in 80% of the participants of her study on Irish adult learners adjusting to second level education. Respondent 5 explains how her new role as student gives rise to negative responses from her family, who have expectations associated with her role as carer that she can no longer fulfil:

“Although my family circumstances were never very helpful, I have taken a nosedive. I find the children have become so demanding, and my husband pretends to the world that he is behind me but in private he is so jealous and unhelpful. I honestly feel that he can’t bear to think that maybe one day I will have a life of my own.” (week 6)
The estrangement can also occur outside the family, with regards to communities and previous social circles. Talking to a friend, respondent 6 feels somehow alienated:

“… it seems that because I am living outside the box or away from the norm, I have left "normality,” slip by” (week 7)

Other insights on the challenges to be surmounted by the first-year adult learner relate to the pervasive effects of commuting, demanding part or full-time jobs and financial constraints on their own sense of adjustment. The barriers experienced by low-income working-class students to both accessing and succeeding in higher education have been examined in Ireland by Lynch & O’Riordan (1998) and Ryan & O’Kelly (2001). The participants in this study raise these issues on numerous occasions in a variety of different ways. The two most robust conclusions that we can draw from the insights collected on the diaries in this regard are that (a) parents entering higher education express serious concerns about their ability to cope with the high costs associated with adequate, flexible childcare and (b) that the absence of and/or delay in receiving financial aid gives rise to one of the most common sources of anxiety expressed by adult learners in this study. Respondent 11’s journal entries gravitated for the whole semester around a grant that repeatedly failed to arrive:

“I am having a lot of sleepless nights with worry in relation to the grant (…) I can't afford to stay in college without it.” (weeks 4 to 11)

*The Adjustment Phase*

Evidence of the progressive adoption of cultural norms of the new environment and a gaining of confidence starts permeating in the second half of most of the reflective journals, generally from week 7 of the 15 week semester. Changes in the individuals’ ability to function effectively in the new culture appear to take place across the different domains of adjustment as outlined below:
Adult learners’ transition

Academic adjustment.

The literature on university adjustment generally focuses on the positive effect that having frequent and informal contact with faculty – lecturers, tutors, administrative and support staff – has on student academic success (Amenkhienan, 2000). In our study, the adult learners seemed willing to approach faculty members to ask for help and information, and often refer to this as something that differentiates them from their younger counterparts. Indeed, readiness to seek support may be one of the most valuable assets that adult learners have in enhancing their attempts to meet the challenges associated with succeeding in college. Respondent 3 voices this orientation in the following way:

“My advice to a student would be not to be afraid to ask [the tutor] a question or to seek advice concerning the subject they are teaching; they are only students like ourselves and they don't bite.” (week 7)

As the semester progresses, the focus of many of the reflective journals shifts from early apprehension towards academic demands and generally takes a more positive, goal-oriented approach. Students chronicle their progress by referring increasingly to the mastering of specific techniques such as those associated with memorizing, note-taking, discovering the most productive times to study, distributing time evenly between subjects and learning how to research using the library or the Internet. For example, respondent 4 tries to overcome her shock after her first mid-term mathematics exam but also reveals the development of more perspective and confidence by commenting:

“I have to keep things in perspective, this term was more or less revision for anyone who did honors maths but I am on a very, very steep learning curve … at this stage I have decided to walk at my own pace. I go to lectures, I take the notes, see what I can understand and then I work on my own.” (week 7)

In relation to this, there is also strong evidence of a process of sense making on the part of participants about how motivation is generated and maintained. These comments are three times as
likely to appear during the second half of the semester, coinciding with mid-term exams and deadlines for essays. At this point, most of the students start indicating views that motivation stems from activity, achievement and derived feelings of self-efficacy. It is at this time that Respondent 3 starts to approach History, his most dreaded subject, in a different manner:

“I have learned not to judge a book by its cover, in the literal sense of the words. I now look and approach subjects in a different way and that has helped me.” (week 7)

The challenge of the first assignment as a significant inaugural hurdle is something that is highlighted by many of the diarists in this study. Young (2000: 418) argues that the stumbling block of the first assignment ‘should be got over quickly with minimum delay in providing feedback, and without too much importance attached’. Respondent 10 provides some insight that illustrates the same point:

“We got the results of our first lab report on Wednesday and I got 100%; maybe I am not such a fool after all. I know that, when broken down, it only means about 1% but still it gave me confidence. Some of the know-alls only got 70%.” (week 6)

A comment from respondent 4 exemplifies the centrality of comparative performance in which equity issues and peer influence have an important impact:

“I talked to a few people today; they all did terribly on the exam also. I really have to have more faith in my own ability. I thought everyone else was flying through it and I was the only one in trouble.” (week 7)

*Social adjustment.*

The feedback from the participants of this experience paints a picture of social terrain that is diverse, multi-layered and often fragmented in nature. The importance of finding students in similar circumstances with whom the minority student can develop a sense of community is evident in one of respondent 4’s remarks:
“For the first week or two I did not know any other adult learners and I felt very isolated. I thought I was the only one that had no idea what was going on. But I soon found out there are quite a few of us around. … I find it helpful to talk to other adult learners so we can reassure ourselves that it all will be worth it.” (week 6)

Respondent 8 seeks support at meetings for parents organized by the Student Union:

“…is an excellent way to get to know new people who are like you …So when you give out about loading the dishwasher or bathing the kids before you can open a book to study, the person who you are talking knows what you are talking about.” (week 6)

This growing sense of empowerment and empathy is aided by a sense of connectedness to other adult learners on the university, and is especially noticeable in the reflections of the female participants, according to widely accepted views that women have unique patterns of growth that involve intimacy and relationships (Gilligan, 1982). In relation to this, Jones (1997) noticed that women students had difficulty talking about their identities without referring to themselves as someone’s daughter, mother or wife. However, seven weeks into the course some of our female participants seem to show evidence that they consider their role as a student to be at least as important as the other roles they play in their lives. This suggests, in the same way as Coveney O’Beirne’s (1999) study has done, that there is some shift from their traditional self-definitions towards the development of a greater sense of entitlement to pursue their studies at university. As respondent 5 puts it:

“The first four weeks were the most difficult time in every way, from sorting out time in every way, from sorting out children (3); husband; and last me. I need to, yes, educate them. I am not at home any more during the day. The wife, the mother is not in. Now, I have another title, ‘student’” (week 7)

*Personal and emotional adjustment.*
Latham & Green (1997) claimed that the problems in personal adjustment arise not so much in the transition itself, but rather in the ways in which change is perceived. The manner in which opportunities and losses are balanced is crucial to the individual experience of transition. Respondent 12, the only non-Irish student participating in the study, has confronted not only linguistic barriers but also the differences between academic systems. Past the half way mark of the first semester, the examination of her aspirations is helping her to overcome her frustration and self-defeating attitudes by finding value in the learning experience that is beyond notions of academic attainment:

“Now I am aware that it is very likely that I fail the course … But I also know that this is not 100% certain. So I am making an effort every day, I work hard, study and open my eyes, ears and mind to learn about everything. I am also being reflective, and thus I am not only learning stuff, but I am also learning about myself and about other people. I will be satisfied with my learning experience, which so far has been great, no matter the result on paper.” (week 8)

In relation to this process of reassessment of internal motivations, the participants in this study generally reflect that their commitment to higher education is not the product of a sudden decision. They refer to regular experiences in their past that drew their attention to the drawbacks of lacking higher education, and to the fact that many have made significant sacrifices in order to attend university. Expressing their feeling that the personal stakes are high, they tend to approach their academic problems early, looking proactively for solutions instead of ignoring or deferring them. This willingness to take proactive responsibility for problems is often expressed as an advantage and a source of self-respect, as respondent 9 noted:

“I feel that I had been an 18-year-old straight from school I would not have made the extra effort involved in sacrificing my ‘free’ time to attend the optional maths tutorials – even though it is far more precious now than it would have been then! This is one of the benefits of being a adult learner: if there is a problem with a subject you are more likely to deal with it rather than ignore
it until it becomes much worse. I guess this is due to the level of maturity and also the greater realization of the importance of your course and the personal sacrifices made to be here in college.” (week 9)

Overall then and despite the difficulties and challenges that they have encountered, the adult learner diarists express both an awareness of and a pride in the experience that their multiple identities have provided them. They tend to see themselves as possessing a distinctive cultural capital that permits them to survive, succeed academically and become culturally empowered even in the face of the demographic and psychological obstacles that they have identified.

While taking perspective and developing an understanding of the process of transition, some respondents highlight their need for more formal arrangements in which mentor students can discuss and transfer their experiences to benefit newcomers. They also provide reflective evidence that suggests that they are already in a position to act as beneficial mentors themselves:

“The first week I was here I was seriously contemplating packing it all in and going back to my job … The rest of the people I know feel the same so at least I am not on my own. A suggestion I think that would work is that if I met somebody like myself who was in second or third year who had done the course. Until this happens I will keep talking to the people in the course with me.” (respondent 11, week 4)

Conclusions

The insights collected in this research serve to paint a complex picture of the adult learner adjustment process in which academic, social and personal challenges interact. When examining attrition rates and adult learner dropout in the university sector, such insights could be invaluable in helping to develop policy, practice and action in the area of learner support and in facilitating the progression of students in this category. Despite the increase in the share of new entrants accounted for by adult learners in our particular context (which rose from 4.5% in 1998 to 8.7% in 2003 according to
HEA, 2005), the claims made about widening participation are in danger of being short-lived if the detailed experiences of the adjustment difficulties faced by adult learner entrants are not more comprehensively understood and addressed. To provide a comprehensive exploration of the best ways of supporting students is beyond the more limited scope of this research, but undoubted this will revolve around two main themes: flexible models of learning and assessment and effective, proactive support mechanisms for students. The detailed personal insights provided in this study have the potential to enrich and substantiate such suggestions.

It must be noted that important differences may prevail between this Irish sample and those that might be encountered in a US setting, due to both institutional and cultural factors. However, we also assert, as other researchers have done in the past, that there are many similarities between Irish and American cultures (e.g. Hofstede and Bond, 1988) that could enhance comparability between these different populations. In addition, the University of Limerick has, from the very beginning of its existence, adopted a more American educational model than those of the more traditional Irish universities (e.g. modularization, continuous assessment and credit accumulation system), making this particular context possibly more relevant to American audiences than might otherwise be the case.

This being said, we want to note that this qualitative data, while highlighting many emotional, social and academic difficulties associated with adult learner adjustment, also contains a number of key positive messages. It seems clear that there are inherent learning and adjustment possibilities associated with the cognitive and emotional reflection that was facilitated by participants’ use of reflective diaries. Students who participated in the reflective diaries’ project, upon which this paper is based, seemed to value the reflective potential that this activity contained. Of course, the self-selecting group of participants may be an unrepresentatively reflective group anyway, and the keeping of reflective diaries may not be beneficial for all adult learners. However, there seems to be enough positive insight from these participants to suggest that it could have beneficial and sometimes transformative effects on some
students’ capacity to engage with and adjust to the requirements and challenges of university. This is in line with Moon’s (1999) view that the use of reflective journals can help the individual to learn to act, react and come to terms with a new environment by exploring changes in motivation during the progression of the study program, building up confidence by increasing understanding and enjoyment of the transition to college, promoting active involvement and ownership of the learning experience, and developing critical thinking and a questioning attitude.

The need for positive role models who can help to explain that early negative experiences do change, may be particularly important for adult learners, especially when they are (or feel that they are) in a minority. Access to the recollections and insights of more experienced adult learners either through the availability of the reflective diaries of others, or through candid ‘adjustment stories’ of students who have successfully adapted and progressed at university, is something that universities should consider integrating more formally into the adjustment process for mature newcomers. Almost every diarist in this project provides reflective evidence suggesting that initial difficulties do pass, and that a sense of competence and confidence does emerge – usually within the first semester - despite early shocks and pessimism.

Data from the reflective diaries in this project also suggest that there may be particular attributes associated with adult learners that make it more likely that they can find and utilise certain kind of persistence strategies. Such attributes would be useful to explore further both to test the robustness of their existence among adult learner groups and to find ways of developing them among other subgroups both within and beyond the adult learner category.

In the context of these insights, a general awareness of a U curve model of adjustment, as outlined earlier may be a useful framework to pre equip students for the initial shocks that may be an inevitable part of early student life. In fact while the insights provided do suggest that this model is applicable to the student experience, some of the data indicates that the adjustment model for mature
newcomers may be experienced in an even more extreme form. Evidence shows that the appearance of confidence and competence is not gradual, but sudden, often coinciding with one or two critical incidents, for example, receipt of feedback from mid term evaluation and a subsequent deliberate change in self-perception. Adult learner experiences provided by participants in this study suggest that their adjustment journey may operate more like a ‘V curve’ with faster and sharper drops associated with early ‘shocks’ followed by quicker subsequent identification of problem solving and coping mechanisms (figure 2). It is important that this phenomenon is understood more fully and managed more actively not just by individuals but also by the educational institutions in which they have put their faith.

Insert figure 2 about here

Disclaimer: direct quotes from study participants have been adapted for US spelling.
References


