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## A socio-cultural perspective on understanding learning as experienced by mature students at university

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### Abstract

The article introduces an analytical approach to understanding mature students' stances on learning in an arts university based program. Focusing on the language and tools mature students employ in exploring in interviews their orientations, satisfaction and outcomes of learning at the university, this analysis proposes a socio-cultural perspective to forming an understanding of how they experience learning and form an understanding of themselves whilst at university. To this end, reference is made to the analytical tools provided by Davis and Harré's positioning theory (1990) and Bloome's chronotopical analysis (2009) developed from Bakhtin's notion of chronotope (1981).

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A growing body of literature is paying attention to increasing participation of older students in higher education. Either returning to the university or passing its' doorsteps for the first time in life, older students form increasingly larger cohorts among the student body at the university and make up for a noticeable diversity of groups of adult participants to the educational activities at the university (Lorentsen, 2007). Research has yet to produce comprehensive, deep understandings of what the dynamics of learning and identity making processes are for adult participants present in the university campus later in life (Feldman 1994; Graham & Donaldson 1999).

### 1. Situating the proposed problem-space

So far most studies have focused on exploring the differences regarding aspects of participation to learning and their possible correlation to academic performance and success, between groups of participants to higher education defined by age. In this divide there is no consensus over the denomination of either groups, studies proposing younger vs. older students (Pascarella & Terenzini 1991), traditional vs. non-traditional students (Rautopuro & Vaisanen, 2001). Here we shall address the group of people enrolling the university courses of study later in life as

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*mature students* and thus refer to students past 23-25 years of age, whose experiences at the university may be concurring other life experiences such as being or having been employed, having a family, children and/or grandchildren etc.

As literature indicates, there is a significant body of research paying attention to what differentiates the experiences of younger or more mature students at the university. As a result there are indications that mature students differ from their younger counterparts in ways often divided between negative and positive differential aspects. As Rautopuro and Vaisanen (2001) remark, based on their reading of research, on the negative side, mature students report difficulty in integrating into student life and other campus activities (Graham & Donaldson 1999), while on the positive side, they report a strong sense of commitment to the goal of obtaining a university degree (Bradley & Cleveland-Innes 1992) and have better academic facility than their younger counterparts (Cleveland-Innes 1994). Some research on academic achievement (Kuh, 1993) suggests that mature students do as well or better than traditional students on many different performance measures. However, with respect to achievement-related variables, the findings have been inconsistent (Donohue & Wong, 1997). Furthermore, some data indicate that the older groups of students reveal tendencies to be more positive in their self-concepts, may be more internally oriented, and perceive less anxiety in learning, and may be oriented more to goals and achievement, require more formal learning methods, prefer to learn in a variety of ways, may be less impulsive, and perceive themselves to be more abstract in their thinking (see Rautopuro & Vaisanen, 2001). Whilst informing on descriptive aspects of learning in a rather generalized and de-personalized manner, this type of research findings do not provide us with any insight into *how* mature students experience learning, its various moments of tension, how they position in the specific contexts of learning and make sense of who they are, why and how they are doing things in a particular manner whilst engaged in academic endeavors alongside more or less experienced others.

It is thus proposed here that the perspective be shifted from a cognitive understanding of learning to a socio-cultural perspective, placing focus on understanding not so much the possible differences between abstract categories making up for a cognitive representation of the learning experience and proposing possible discussions from a quantitative perspective. What it is proposed here is an approach to understanding how mature students experience learning and form an understanding of themselves whilst at university, by focusing on the language and tools they employ in exploring in interviews their orientations, satisfaction and outcomes of learning at the university.

## 2. Method

The findings presented and discussed in this study come from a small-scale, interview-based study conducted in December 2013-January 2014 in a vocational arts university in Northern Romania. The researcher was familiar with the campus life and curricula at this particular university, as for the past five years she is working with the students taking a bachelor and/or a master degree and pursuing simultaneously the pre-service teacher education program offered by the university. Being familiar to the institutional level of discursive practices of learning and education informed the researcher in her proposed analysis exercise, placing focus on the language of mature students exploring their learning and identity affirming opportunities in the educational setting at the university.

Six participants, four majoring in Music Interpretation and two in Visual Arts Pedagogy, four male and two women, with ages ranging from 25 to 70 have agreed to take part in this small scale study asking them to take part in semi-structured, voice-recorded interviews. The invitation to this study was extended to large year-groups formations attending lectures in Pedagogy at the university. The invitation included an explanation of the purposes of research, which was to explore how mature students experience learning at the university of arts. The six people who accepted to take part in the study were second and third-year students in bachelor degree programs. During the interview participants explored why they came to the university and how they were experiencing learning throughout the years. Interviews were voice-recorded and transcribed at a later stage.

Analysis of language data employs the conceptual tools of chronotopical analysis (Bakhtin, 1981; Bloome et al, 2009) and those of positioning theory (Davis & Harré, 1990). These analytical tools have also been employed in a previous, larger analysis engaging with identity affirming issues and language that beginning and experienced

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