

How a learning skills course addressed transition, diversity and inclusion, and a sense of belonging for mature students seeking entrance to university: reflections of a Canadian learning specialist

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Presentation abstract

Universities across Canada offer bridging programmes for mature students who would not otherwise have access to post-secondary education. The College of Arts at the University of Guelph developed their Academic Transition Program to support these students, with the cornerstone of the programme being a learning skills course, launched in Autumn 2022, that students must complete in order to be accepted into an undergraduate programme.

In the Canadian context, it is unusual for a learning specialist to act as course developer for the creation of an undergraduate credit course. This presentation shares a reflection on the theories that underpinned the course creation, most notably Kolb's (1984) theory on experiential learning, Baxter-Magolda's (1999) theory of self authorship, and the learning gained after wearing many hats – learning specialist, course developer, and sessional instructor.

The presentation explored:

- The tripartite arrangement developed to create the course.
- Ways in which the course addressed students' transition to university.
- Considerations around diversity and inclusion.
- How the coursework supported a sense of belonging.
- Feedback from the students' experience of the course.
- What was learned when the course was made available to traditional undergraduate students from first through fourth year.
- How this course intersects with the Canadian model of learning support.

- Sharing examples of course content, including weekly reflection questions.
- Lessons learned and plans for the future of the course, including alternative formats.

Making learning strategies explicit can support mature students' level of success in higher education (Erb & Drysdale, 2017). This course combined theoretical and practical learning skill applications and opportunities to develop a sense of belonging for a diverse cohort of mature students.

Keywords: course development; mature students; belonging.

Community response

There was a variety of community comments in response to this session, what follows below is a selection of comments taken from participants:

This session captured the different facets those working in learning development can undertake, in this instance acting as course developer for a Learning Skills Course for adult learners. I enjoyed the reflection that designing the course was a learning opportunity for yourself and that the findings from this intake will go on to support future iterations of the programme.

Reflection was a strong theme in the community response, with further comments developing discussion on this theme:

The reflective questions positioned throughout the design prompted students to consider their own experiences of the course through various lenses. For example, asking 'Do you use error analysis to improve your performance on school assessments? Why or why not?' prompts students to take a more active role in studying and positioning the reflection on different aspects of the course. I wonder if the reflections on the course to date from your student findings and yourself would prompt you to alter the blended nature of the course: do you feel some elements would be better delivered online that were designed to be in person originally? Or

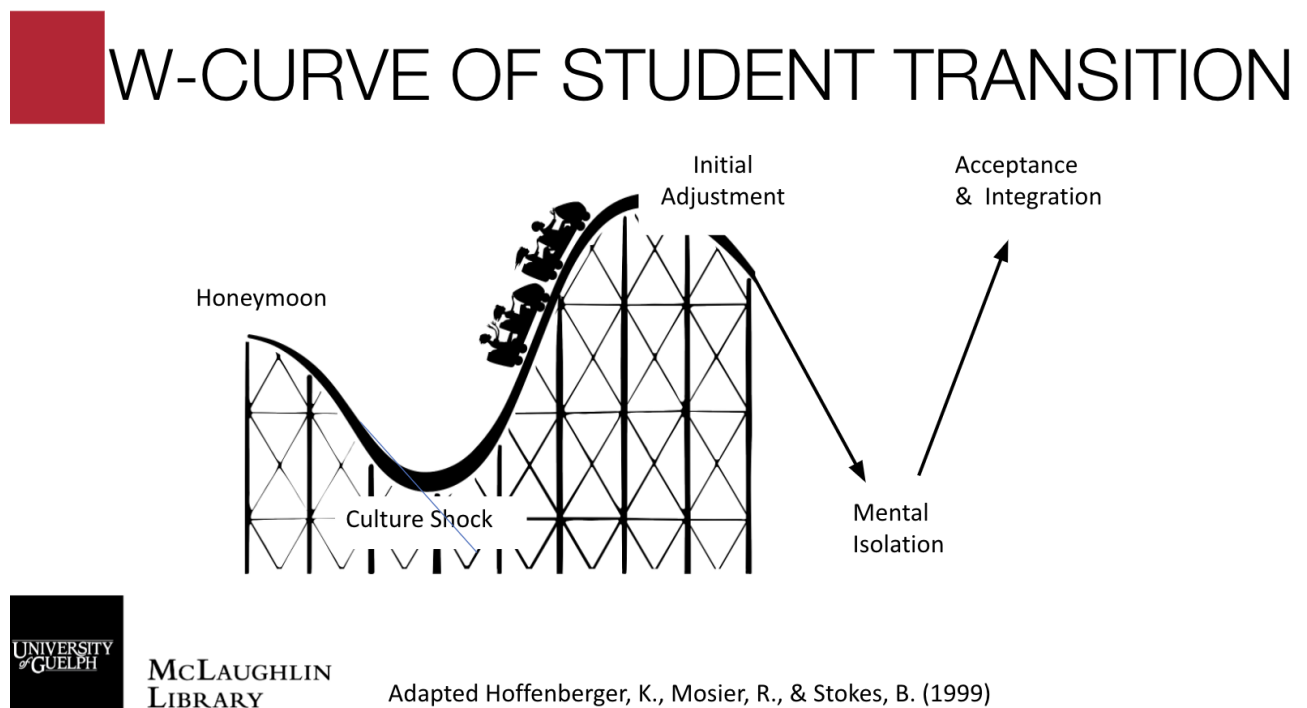
vice versa? Are there any changes you would make to increase the sense of belonging for future students?

I enjoyed hearing about the reflective nature of the course, the difficulties the presenter faced trying to keep up with student contributions was a familiar experience. I would have really appreciated hearing/reading about some of those reflections in more detail, but the time constraints did not make that possible.

Student transition was also a focus within the community response:

Assessment of learning materials and activities were chosen to suit the needs of students at that particular point in time, with the W-Curve of student transition providing a good model to consider the experiences of those students transitioning. I had not seen this model previously and feel it aligns also with the experiences of those transitioning from in person study to fully online. This model really highlights the impact considered design plays in supporting student success and I can see why you used this to inform your own work on the Learning Skills Course.

Image 1. Slide from presentation.



In addition to the reflections on practice above, there were also general comments praising the approach to the project and the incorporation of student voice:

This session illustrated the collaborative aspects of working in higher education succinctly. It was evident that the presenter demonstrated willingness and engaged with the project in a proactive, explorative way. They demonstrated the tensions between expectations put on educators and how they are rewarded for their work. The premise of the course is certainly one that could, and should, be adapted for a British context. Mature students are often forgotten about and would benefit from making these kinds of connections early on. I thought that it may be possible to build a mature student network following a course like this.

I was intrigued to discover that the presenter had involved students in the theory of their learning. Involving students in theories around learning and metacognition is something that I have always tried to avoid as I personally feel that it is unnecessary and may be a distraction alongside the content they are learning on their course. These can be implicitly integrated into the course. This presentation made me question whether I should provide examples of more educational scholarship to support students' understanding of how they learn. Perhaps, mature students are interested in the 'why' of learning as well as the 'how'!

I thoroughly enjoyed hearing about this project and look forward to finding out about how it develops in the future.

Questions and considerations for the Learning Development Community

In the presentation, Grierson posts two core questions for practitioners to consider:

- Is this relevant for your institution?
- How could a comparable course be implemented in your institution?

Author's reflection

This post-presentation opportunity to reflect is the perfect ending to presenting on the development of a class designed around the reflection process.

Presenting internationally for the first time, the author appreciated the participants who reached out to say how valuable such a programme would be for the mature students in their institution who often get overlooked.

What appeared to be of great interest to the participants was the structure of the course:

Unit 01: Ecological Systems Theory

Unit 02: Written Communication

Unit 03: Visual Communication

Unit 04: Introduction to Learning

Unit 05: Metacognition including

Procrastination

Unit 06: Test Taking & Error Analysis

Unit 07: Group Dynamics

Unit 08: Presentations

Unit 09: Error Analysis Part 2 - Midterm Review

Unit 10: Academic Integrity

Unit 11: Wellbeing

Unit 12: University Culture

Participants indicated that more examples of the reflection questions posed to the students would have been helpful and are included below:

- What does it mean to read critically and why is it important for your note-taking?
- What aspect of this unit is most relevant to you, your studies and/or future career?
- What does it mean to read critically and why is it important for your note-taking?
- What did you learn in this unit about presentations, accessibility, or copyright that (a) surprised you, and (b) that you will use in future classes or in your career?
- How is Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle like and unlike Transformative Learning Theory?
- Which article from Unit 4 did you find the most relevant to your own learning and why?
- Using Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, describe a past challenge with motivation, procrastination, or perfectionism and how you could attempt to overcome that challenge.

- What three practical metacognitive strategies will best serve you in your academic career?
- Could intentional error analysis change your perspective on assessments? Why or why not?
- How do you think understanding Tuckman's model can help you: in this group activity and in your career?
- What presentation skills would you like to improve before you present again?
- Choose one of the six fundamental values of academic integrity and share how and/or where this shows up elsewhere in your life.
- Is academic integrity important for society? Why or why not?
- What challenges to any of the seven dimensions of wellness do you expect to experience while studying in future semesters?
- Using Semper and Blasco's (2018) article for this unit, reflect on and describe what aspect of the hidden curriculum in higher education has impacted you the most.

When reflecting on the experience with the students and with the participants, what showed up for the author were individuals who were thinking deeply about learning and metacognition and the possible practical application in their unique circumstances.

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