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Book Review

Stepping Stones: A guide for mature-aged students at University

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Reviewed by
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This collection provides a splendid and needed resource for its target readership. The editors have chosen contributions skilfully. Readers will not experience a sense of wisdom pontificated from on high, but rather the support and encouragement of peers and an insightful provision of tools for developing ways of study appropriate for learning how to learn, how to take charge of their own learning. Developing critical capacities apt for the construction of knowledge is a focus, and a corrective against the all too common naïve view of learning as accumulating subject content.

Guidance is offered at several levels. From the start emotional barriers to participation and subversive self-doubt are recognised and addressed. The reflections on their own experience offered by successful mature age students enables normalisation of feelings of reticence or lack of self-confidence often experienced when returning to studies. In addition to this dispelling of fears that one 'does not belong' in an academic world perceived as esoteric and elite, a common perception of learning as memorising subject content is presented as a faulty view to be replaced by advocacy of a need to take responsibility for one's own active learning by questioning, critical engagement. Tools for development of effective study skills are set out without patronising or condescension, and the opportunity to capitalise on one's mature age experience and life skills to enrich the learning experience is presented positively and with enthusiasm. Tools offered range from ways to seek help or to reframe one's own attitudes to study habits, through to practical hints on coming to terms with electronic devices. Further, contributors address concerns that the mix of life's demands and one's study opportunities provide barriers by recounting personal experiences from those who faced issues of family commitment, illness, work pressures or distance learning by modifying study programmes to enable proceeding to success at individual pace. Readers are offered positive encouragement from the experiences of others.

A highlight is presentation in one chapter of the concept of baggage to be taken on the educational journey, a theme which links well with the personal accounts of students' experiences.

When the first cohort of mature-age students arrived in my lectures and tutorials they introduced a most welcome positive change in the dynamic of the classroom. An added dimension to class interactions was provided by the wealth of their life experience and more tempered judgement. This advantaged school leavers as well as enriching discussion and facilitating critical questioning. Classes in mature age programmes, where students' life experiences and willingness to question and argue the point, provided great satisfaction and stimulation.

There is a wider context, properly not the immediate concern of this book. But it suggests to me that *Stepping Stones* could with profit receive a wider audience. Contributors are well aware that in any classroom a formal curriculum is purposefully presented but there are as well informal curricula. These include teachers' social attitudes and beliefs about learning and the learning (or other) goals of students, and they shape the particular classroom

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situation, that 'continuous, albeit uncoordinated, stream of momentary experiences that students aggregate and internalize with varying degrees of awareness, protest, and satisfaction (McCaslin & Good, 1996, p.629, 622).

This informal curriculum may implicitly reinforce a dominant culture, or support negative values regarding gender, class, ethnicity (Preece, 2000, p.2; Smyth, 2000). It may also (as may the formal curriculum) provide a barrier to access by implicitly rewarding and supporting academic high fliers while subtly indicating that others do not belong. Such influences bear on how students perceive themselves and their levels of self-esteem, shaping their feelings of competence or incompetence, their social relationships and feelings of where they belong and with whom they identify themselves.

Thus I wish to commend *Stepping Stones* as valuable not only to its target audience. It could profitably be read by educators at all levels.

Feedback from students is often sought: 'On a scale of 1 to 5 mark your satisfaction...' and the like. *Stepping Stones* provides a wealth of feedback of a more significant kind: it exposes the emotional and logistic issues which aid or hinder learning and student responses to formal educational environments. Maybe more of the frustrations often encountered as students engage with administrative processes could have emerged, but great insight is provided to lecturers, tutors, teachers into student's internal worlds and their life contexts — matters profoundly affecting learning readiness and learning style and offering educators opportunities to devise interventions capable of supporting student responses leading to improved capacity to learn how to learn, and to engage in critical dialogue with material presented (and with the presenter).

Many students enter the early years of schooling with similar alienation from the new environment, having been assured by parents or others that they are not bright enough, or that their role is to be passive and obedient absorbers of the wisdom of those older and better. Not many are from the start encouraged to be active learners, questioning and critical (I don't mean querulously negative), working to make sense of the world and constructing from information presented to them knowledge which develops self-confident interaction with their world and with other people. Too often schooling inculcates intellectual passivity and emphasises issues of classroom control in ways which construe active questioning as insubordinate or subversive. For the teacher, of course, it is more demanding and challenging to deal with multiple questioning students and to develop an environment which facilitates active learning to learn. It is, however, what is needed.

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