

## The International Student and the Challenges of Lifelong Learning

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Although few people would oppose the view that lifelong learning is intended to be a positive experience, it should be borne in mind that an ageing student body might require the development of additional tools and skills for the online educator.

In this short paper we present two cases of challenges faced by international learners who brought with them into the learning environment some issues that were the product, not only of the age of the learner in question, but also of the geographical environment in which they studied. The names of the learners have been changed.

### 1. Learner in India

Khan worked in India, in a similar practice to British General Practitioners. He wanted to obtain his Masters but found it hard to be among a younger online group, who were academically able; furthermore, his knowledge of using a computer was very limited, and he knew nothing about academic skills such as referencing or a literature review.

At the start of course, while students were making friends and links, it was discovered that there was a very bright young Indian student called Mohammad, who by chance came from the same area as Khan, and who would understand the customs and the respect which would be given to the older professional. Mohammad agreed to offer his services, and this example of peer assisted learning turned out to be a mutually beneficial pairing. They spent many hours working together to achieve a set of agreed skills. Khan's first term assignment grades fell in the middle band, which was admirable considering his starting point.

Khan did not feel comfortable in the initial discussion groups, and this was partly because of the technology and partly (it turned out) because of the mixed-sex groups. The tutor explained the place of women in British society, and Khan was open and honest, saying that in his family women were seen as subordinate to men; their presence on the course, however virtual, was totally unexpected.

As time passed and Khan became more relaxed, he helped facilitate discussion groups by offering his experience. In this way he gained respect from the class as they could see him as a professional person. Life seemed to be going smoothly until he became upset while listening to presentations in which he was made aware of how women felt about some of ways that they were treated. This led to some (non-curricular but extremely useful) time spent exploring how the modern woman was being educated, and Khan was unaware of the impact of mobile phones, the Internet and Facebook. Helped by Muhammad, Khan assessed these opportunities and how they would alter understandings in the next ten years. It helped him to question what his expectations of social involvement using new technologies really were.

Muhammad gained a distinction and Khan surpassed his expectations and gained a commendation.

### 2. Commentary

We conclude that this particular learner brought very specific challenges to the group, partly because of his age and partly because of the attitude to women that are prevalent in his part of India (particularly among the ageing population). Via the employment of a younger peer learner, we were able to empower this learner to question his own beliefs and his own doubts about his abilities.

### 3. Learner in Africa

A female learner named Hilary expressed dissatisfaction when the tutor asked her how the course was going so far. She also said that once she had finished her Masters, she wanted her staff to look up to her. She felt downtrodden by her organisation; she had no confidence in her ability, and felt her team members were laughing at her behind her back. All in all, she was a very unhappy person.

Hilary considered the younger group members rude; she would ask, "Whatever happened to respect?" Taking on something of a pastoral care role, the tutor informed her that respect needs to be on both sides, with which she did not agree. She went on about young people respecting their elders. So, trying to and move the situation forward, the tutor asked her to lead an online discussion group on a subject area with which she was well acquainted.

At the start of her second year the tutor asked if Hilary had had a good break and if she was looking forward to the year. The answers led the tutor to believe that she had moved on a little. One Canadian student was an out-and-out feminist, and discussion groups were both interesting and sometimes fun. During one discussion, the Canadian student called Hilary 'hen pecked' - and this became a lesson that the tutor could use, the message being that pejorative comments would not be tolerated in the learning environment.

The ironic thing was that the Canadian student had taken Hilary under her wing; in effect she had assumed the role of the online pastoral tutor. Their friendship developed during the writing of their dissertation, which resulted in Hilary re-assessing her future. After graduation she changed her job, and she was happy with her new challenges. Approximately two years later, the tutor received a letter from Hilary, saying that the course had been a turning point for her...and that she was moving to Canada and felt ten years younger!

### 4. Commentary

For Hilary, the course was a life-changing success, but the whole situation had needed to be handled extremely carefully. Although there was an element of peer assistance to this matter, it seems apparent that e-learning was also used in a pastoral context. One student showed empathy for an older member of the virtual group, empowering her to strive for her goals in the meantime.

### 5. Brief Discussion

We hope that these two simple examples have indicated a few of the ways that technology-enhanced communication and e-learning have improved the learning experiences of two learners who happen to be older than the more 'traditional' student. (Here is not the place, perhaps, to debate what is meant by 'traditional' in this context anymore. As with most other things, the Internet has made us challenge what we mean by a 'traditional' learner; arguably, he or she does not exist any longer: but this is an argument for a different paper!)

However, the course has done much more than to improve the quality of learning: it has improved the quality of life for these learners, and has prompted them to consider other opinions, other choices – and other countries. The experience has been transformational.

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