

Ivan Brown

Student at sixty plus

In both 1978 and 1979 I sat a three hour University written examination and was successful. The last time I had done so was in 1939. Friends, although interested in the study course, had said the attempt was ridiculous. As the examination was part of the University of London's newly introduced Extension Diploma in Psychology, notes of personal experience may be of interest.

Psychology was new to me as an academic subject. My interest had begun at age 47 with an illness which kept me off work for five months. At that time Donald Mather introduced me to the writings of C. G. Jung, which enabled me to make sense of what was happening.

An advance note from Routledge & Kegan Paul of 'The Brain Book' (Russell) comments that the book dispels the notion "that we are bound to deteriorate mentally from middle age onwards." However, earlier studies based on the work of Welford and others suggest that there is a gradual and cumulative decline in mental skills (Bromley) but this varies with individuals. Most of us retain plenty of capacity to cope with a study programme. My main problem was in unloading the concept that I would be too old, especially as regards memory. However, my own experience accords with another of Welford's findings quoted in 'Memory' (Hunter) that much difficulty is due not so much to problems of recall but reduced ability initially to comprehend.

After a lifetime of local government service (apart from six years in the Army), the stresses and comforts of family life, the time from sixty onwards might seem particularly suited to study. Retirement is a time of taking stock, and criteria for a successful retirement include Alistair Heron's list (Kemp & Buttle):

1. *Good physical and emotional health*
2. *Adequate income, substantially above subsistence level*
3. *Suitable accommodation*
4. *Congenial associates and neighbours*
5. *One or more absorbing interests*
6. *An adequate philosophy of life.*

On local government reorganisation in 1974 (when my local authority was abolished) I officially retired, and moved into part-time lecturing and writing, still mainly on local government. So I had not completely given up work requiring intellectual application.

The student over sixty will have had more years in which to learn, and to practice skills in communication. Perhaps at the conscious level there may be fewer blockages and obstacles than in youth although there may be much

to unlearn. The unconscious mechanisms may be more firmly rooted and by definition less observable. (These will include unstated assumptions, attitudes and prejudices.)

Strengths and benefits of learning and communication in later years depend much on previous life pattern and experience. What I am today is the sum of my experience up to this point. What comes today will be tested against the present store and rejected, or accepted and digested. Today is the first day of the rest of my life.

Some difficulties are physical. I observe ageing processes affecting eyesight, hearing and mobility. Vitality is diminished, and at time energy needs to be husbanded. However, there are severely handicapped young people, including those blind or spastic who achieve academic success; and there are contemporaries of mine who make little effort to learn. Individuals have a wide range of ability and achievement.

In working life I used daily to read dozens of documents and had many discussions; what was immediately relevant was extracted, the rest discarded. There was thus no attempt to memorize most of the daily work content. Books and files were available for reference, with staff to prompt memory. In studying, especially for an examination, I need to focus attention so as to retain what is studied - not just the 'interesting' bits.

In youth, learning and study usually came from an older person, whose authority as teacher was accepted. After 60, one's teachers are generally much younger. There is less acceptance, greater scrutiny of content. I want to have a receptive mind, but hold on to my faculty of discrimination.

As physical difficulties and incapacity can affect all age groups, so can learning take place at all ages. The older person can surely accept the authority of a much younger person who possesses obvious expertise (whether car mechanic or tutor). I have learned from life generally that there are many opportunities of learning from others irrespective of age or background.

Most University study courses are by talk and note taking; supplemented by reading and essay writing. Often there is little discussion beyond putting questions to the lecturer. Other older students may share my failure to be attracted to these methods because in working life times given to education or training were mostly based on seminars, working groups and projects.

Work on study skills is usually geared to examinations, although in one account (McKeown Kemp and Webb) Rogers has been quoted "Where threat to self is low, experience can be perceived in a differentiated fashion" stressing the need to decrease what has been called the influence of threat in learning.

Another problem: how far do we need more information. Do we rather need new ways of looking at what we already know? We need to learn how to make distinctions, and to relate our study, our learning, and our activity to clearly

defined goals. Clear up the inner confusion!

Having completed the first half of the four year course, in August at Summer School I found a new definition of learning. This was given to a dozen of us on a week's course "Barriers to Learning" which Charles Shernow ran as a skilfully led seminar. For me this effected a welcome and beneficial change in outlook and learning. His definition: "Learning is discovering that something is possible." It really is - whatever our age. Learning, growth, development continue indefinitely. Wonderful!

References:

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Kemp & Buttle *"Focus on Retirement"*

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Osborn, Tom "Planning a student-directed learning programme" 'Self & Society', June 1979

Russell, Peter *"The Brain Book"*

Walker, S. *"Learning and Reinforcement"*