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## **Playing with heutagogy: exploring strategies to empower mature learners in higher education**

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Mature learners often invest a great deal of emotional energy in starting a higher education qualification. They have complex needs which are often less to do with their ability to learn and more to do with aspects of confidence and levels of self-belief about achieving or feeling ‘good enough’ to participate. This article explores the relationship between the learner, the opportunities they have to engage with others and how learning and teaching strategies can be utilised to empower self-determined learning and development. An emerging paradigm of heutagogy or self-directed learning will be examined in the context of mature learners entering higher education for the first time. Supporting students in the process of reflective practice is ongoing, and this research provides a snapshot to determine whether students are on their way to taking control of their own learning and meaning-making about early childhood concepts and their implementation into practice.

**Keywords:** reflective practice; heutagogy; learning experiences; empowerment; teaching and learning strategies; self-directed learning

### **Introduction**

This research examines how strategies for blended learning and teaching can support mature students to take responsibility and direct their own learning. It explores from these strategies how students can develop self-empowerment and autonomy to engage in their own knowledge creation and sustainability. Hase and Kenyon (2000) recognise this process as heutagogy, or self-directed learning, where students are motivated to research their own interests within a programme of study and be able to apply their learning to practice and to their personal philosophy, and ultimately to influence a shift in thinking within themselves and those that they work with. This concept was introduced to a foundation degree in early years where strategies were implemented to facilitate students to gradually develop skills to take control of their learning. Students had traditionally engaged in a transaction of learning where the teacher was perceived as a knowledge ‘expert’, and this formed their past experiences of learning and pedagogic expectations of the course. However, the teaching and learning attempted to move beyond this and beyond andragogy, where a framework of support provides a tutor-led pathway for reflection and signposting between theory and practice (Knowles 1984). Developing heutagogy meant creating a self-directed learning environment for students to discover their own strategies for learning. It consisted of building their confidence to actively participate to share their knowledge

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and understanding of early childhood concepts. This not only supported their individual learning experiences but students also recognised how these strategies could be transferred into their every day practice of working with young children. This article explores the process undertaken to implement learning and teaching strategies to empower mature students to develop as heutagogic learners.

The students involved in the research are studying a foundation degree in early years in the south-west of England. The programme is full time, delivered through a mixture of face-to-face seminars, online learning, work-based reflection and tutor visits to settings. The programme has a high work-based learning content as all of the students are employed in early years settings, with at least two years practical experience of working with children aged 0–8 years. The programme aims to facilitate heutagogy through providing opportunities for self-directed learning and professional development, with students encouraged to take control over their own knowledge acquisition and the reflective process. This means that the programme is relevant to their personal and professional philosophies, challenges and stimulates their perceptions of early childhood, and inspires and engages them so that they develop their own understanding, motivation and desire for full participation within the programme.

The programme provides learning experiences for students, enabling them to emerge as ‘agents of change’ within the early childhood sector, to be effective in their own context, but also to be confident in contributing towards a regional and national early years agenda. In considering how this might be achieved, the programme has worked with employers to establish the local demands of an early years workforce and has recognised the complex needs of potential students in developing a programme that is flexible, yet maintains integrity and relevance for a diverse range of early childhood contexts.

### **Small-scale research**

The research consisted of phenomenological interviews with half of the students enrolled on the programme (25 students out of a cohort of 50). Phenomenology refers to exploring a subjective experience, and students were asked to explore their individual qualities, feelings, beliefs and desires regarding their own learning journey through individual feedback after sessions, tutor visits and student online discussion forums. The interviews were arranged at three key points within the first term of the programme (over a 14-week period) and consisted of particular issues to be explored.

#### ***Interview set 1***

The programme leader of the foundation degree conducted the first set of interviews in the first few weeks of the students starting the course. The interviews were carried out at the end of taught sessions and on the initial tutor visit by the programme leader to the student’s workplace. The interviews explored personal perceptions of learning and past experiences as it was important to examine where the students had come from to understand the way in which they might respond to different approaches to learning. It was also important to build a picture of their needs in facilitating a paradigm of heutagogy within the programme (McNickle 2003). Although the first set of interviews were completely subjective, drawing on the conscious experiences of the students, it was important that their voice was heard and that the research captured

the emotional process of the student in order to explore how individual learning experiences emerged and how the programme could develop to meet those needs. Interviews were conducted on an individual basis initially and then students were brought together to discuss the key themes in a focus group.

### ***Interview set 2***

The second set of interviews were conducted at the midpoint of the first term, seven weeks into the course, again by the programme leader of the foundation degree. They were conducted with individual students and in small focus groups arranged after taught sessions. They explored any shifts or awakenings in ideology relating to the knowledge and understanding developed through the modules students had been studying. Students were also asked about the mix of strategies used to support them to begin to experiment with different ways of knowing. These strategies consisted of:

- online forums for module-specific discussion – play and development;
- online forums for social networking;
- setting visits where tutors discussed students' progress in linking knowledge to practice;
- face-to-face group activities of work-based reflection where students were able to share their professional development, with examples of linking what they had learnt to the changes they were making in their practice.

It was interesting to explore the emerging processes students were beginning to recognise in how they were using course material signposted by the tutor (elements of andragogy) and their own interests and self-directed research (elements of heutagogy) to impact and transcend into their practice and how they were beginning to influence their setting and other colleagues.

### ***Interview set 3***

The final interviews in week 14 of the course at the end of the assessment for term 1 considered students' reflection on the whole experience of heutagogical strategies employed to support them becoming empowered and autonomous learners. At this point in the research students were able to apply greater objectivity to their learning experience and use critical reflection of their learning preferences in assessing how that had supported them in engaging with a heutagogical paradigm. Students expressed the importance of social processes being developed through learning, especially in the early stages of a new experience. The individual feedback from interviews highlighted the shared anxieties of the cohort along with the need to be valued as an individual and to be recognised as undertaking a new experience and challenge.

Throughout the research period students were able to engage in activities to support their reflective practice. The interviews explored personal learning and development as a result of engaging with strategies to support a move towards heutagogy. The outcomes evaluated how these strategies supported students in their personal autonomy and empowerment in terms of their desire and struggles to become self directed in their learning and to influence change in their practice. This is discussed in the next section.

### **Pedagogy to andragogy**

From the first day of the programme, tutors encouraged students to enter into a process of developing a community of open discussion, sharing experiences and supportive networks to facilitate the beginnings of self-directed study and motivated learners. To undertake such a challenge, appropriate foundations had to be established and the lived experience of the students needed to be monitored in reflecting on the ability to embed a heutagogical paradigm.

In the first weeks of the course learners entered into a transaction of information exchanges, a process which they were familiar with and recognised from previous pedagogical learning experiences. This involved a didactic teaching and learning approach, well within most students' comfort zone, recognised from school, college and professional development training experiences. The transmission of knowledge allowed learners to be led through a structured process, scaffolding a knowledge exchange. Parker (1997) suggests that although in pedagogical interactions learning occurs through applying linear logic where the tutor presents concepts efficiently and effectively, it is predominantly a passive view of the learner and does not consider them engaged in a continuum of development. Nevertheless, students commented:

In that first session, although we were doing pretty standard things like form filling and getting to know you activities, I still felt in the pit of my stomach, can I actually do this? What am I doing here? I just had to keep telling myself to give it a go and I tried to follow all of the tasks and then the first day was over and I was so relieved, but also pleased to have done it and wanted to come back. (Interview set 1)

This demonstrates how initially the course needed to contain traditional elements of pedagogy that students remembered from previous learning experiences. They were anxious about a new experience within an expected approach of a transaction of knowledge (i.e. 'Please tell me what to do and what I need to know!') (tutor visit from Interview set 1).

The course quickly introduced the concept of online forums, starting with a social-networking forum for students to share personal and professional information, stresses, anxieties and achievements. This helped them to co-construct knowledge about their experiences, without the pressure of assessment or achieving outcomes. Once students were regularly contributing and confidence had grown in their ability to access the forum, an online forum for the module being studied was introduced. This forum posed questions from the tutor to initiate debate and encouraged students to challenge each other's assumptions and ideas not only towards early childhood, but also towards learning. It provided an informal space to experiment with new ideas, but also began to develop professional dialogue where students could debate concepts and co-construct shared meaning.

When students met face to face they were encouraged to celebrate their immediate level of cognitive understanding through socialising and sharing concepts. This alongside the module-specific online forum supported sustaining and developing motivation and strategies to access further understanding and critical thinking. These strategies consisted of engaging in independent reading, seeking support from others through checking their understanding, expressing ideas for changes in practice, asking for advice and seeking reassurance. The tutor also contributed to these online discussions, posing questions to guide the further engagement and moving the debates forward when they became stagnated.

The tutor’s engagement with the online forums provided a move away from pedagogy towards andragogy, supporting students with a framework for developing their own learning – for example, signposting relevant reading, websites, journal articles or video clips. The tutor supported students to see links between the subject area of the module and professional practice experiences, building a pathway for reflection and the ability in students to recognise the relevance and importance of learning to their practice (Knowles 1984). Andragogy recognises that learners need to see the relevance of what they are studying and that making meaningful connections with practice is a predominant motivating factor (McNickle 2003). This also supported the individual learning experience as not only were the students able to relate new knowledge to their practice but they also felt able to share their ideas with others:

I have learnt so much already and it has been amazing for me to hear other people’s ideas and approaches to their learning and how it has impacted upon their practice. Being a childminder I have never had that network so it is great to be able to share and think about things in new ways. (Interview set 2)

However, to get to this point a substantial part of the initial sessions involved working with students to identify their own inhibitions and beliefs about learning. It was then important to explore triggers to behaviour and emotional reactions that a learning situation provoked and to work with students to explore alternative perspectives. Locating the student at the centre of the learning process enabled reflective strategies to be utilised at every stage of the individual learning experience. Barnett and O’Mahony (2006, 501) define reflection in a learning process as ‘examining current or past practices, behaviours, or thoughts in order to make conscious choices about future actions ... reflection is a combination of hindsight, insight and foresight’. Therefore, acknowledging past learning experiences, reflecting on their impact and being aware of how they may influence future learning provided a starting point in the move towards a paradigm of heutagogy.

**Students’ needs**

In early childhood a central philosophy is to celebrate children as individuals, developing their confidence and sense of self (Kalliala 2006). In the same way the

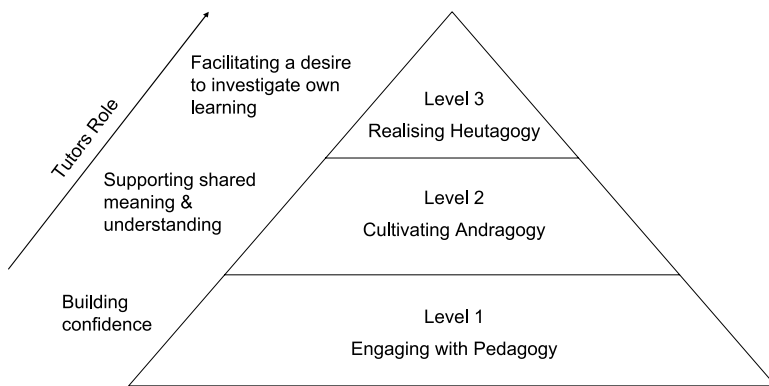


Figure 1. From pedagogy to heutagogy.

programme was conscious to provide a combination of learning and teaching approaches to enable widening participation and to foster a culture of inclusive and supportive relationships. This provided a foundation for students' confidence and allowed a sense of empowerment to emerge out of Level 1 – engaging with pedagogy whilst supporting individual learning skills and strategies for constructing knowledge (see Figure 1).

However, before this process could begin, it was important to recognise and deal with initial fears of the students. These included:

- Am I good enough?
- Will I be able to keep up?
- What if everyone knows more than me? – I don't want to make a fool of myself.
- Will I be supported?
- What if I can't do the assignments? (Interview set 1)

These fears were balanced by a desire and motivation to want to attend the programme and succeed. On exploring this further, motivation for the programme originated from an intrinsic aspiration to develop professionally, improve practice, inspire their setting and influence positive changes. In Interview set 1, students were not able to clearly articulate this; however, the issue was revisited in Interview set 3 where they were able to apply reflection to their initial motivation.

Initially students came with a willingness to listen and saw the programme as a chance to embrace new ideas. In the same way that children engage in new play experiences, the students were at first apprehensive and tentative in their initial contact with others (Kalliala 2006). The programme provided group presentations as a vehicle for strengthening relationships with others, contributing to existing knowledge and developing shared meaning. Through this medium students discovered that they were not alone in their apprehension and found that they actually could contribute equally to discussions and begin to co-construct knowledge at Level 2 – cultivating andragogy (see Figure 1):

When we were first set the task of presentations I was really worried that I wouldn't know anything or be able to contribute. But after our initial meeting I discovered that I did know quite a bit about play and development and I could give examples from my practice. I felt comfortable with my group so this helped me to say what I thought and I was pleased that others encouraged me. That helped my confidence and now I feel more able to say what I think and to share articles that I have read with the rest of the group. (Interview set 2)

Students found the presentations a challenging concept to engage with. On reflection they were able to see the relevance and how they supported their sharing of knowledge with others (Interview set 2); however, the presentations also caused a high level of anxiety and stress whilst the students were in the process of doing them, and they required a high level of positive regard and confidence boosting from tutors:

We wanted to know that we were doing the presentation 'right'. I knew there was no right or wrong answer, but I wanted [the tutor] to tell me that it was right. I also knew that having no right or wrong answer was part of the process of developing our knowledge and working together as a group, but it didn't help at the time. Now that it is over I realise the importance of the process and I have made some really strong links with



people that I may not have got to know otherwise, but it didn't make it any easier at the time – I was so stressed! (Interview set 2)

When explored further, the level of stress was intrinsically linked to wanting to achieve, wanting to be accepted by others and wanting to be able to contribute in the sense that what they had to say would be valued by the rest of the group and that they would feel confident enough to express their point of view (Interview set 3). From this, students were asked to reflect on how their anxieties (before starting the programme and during the presentations) were parallel with children attending a setting for the first time. One student responded that for children the parent or carer usually prepares the child for the transition into a new environment, but as adults there is a perception that new experiences or change will be easily assimilated into an already busy routine.

As practitioners, the students recognised the importance of the transition period for children to adjust and settle into a new environment, meeting other children and accepting that their comfort zone was being extended into the new experience. The students recognised the similarities and accepted that the programme had supported a process of preparation and development of social and learning relationships, through face-to-face interactions and the online forums, yet some had not allowed themselves to reflect that it was 'OK' for anxieties to emerge, or for the presentations to be celebrated as an opportunity to extend their knowledge. In a tutor visit a student reflected:

I wanted to be there, wanted to be accepted and gain reassurance that I was a valid person not only for me but for my practice and confidence in what I do with children, but I was scared and initially put pressure on myself that I had to be the best. It was only after discussion with [the tutor] that I realised that this was a new experience and that I should give myself a break – go with the flow and try and enjoy the experience and not worry so much about the assignments (although I'm still worried!). (Tutor visit M)

The issue of validity has been a central theme throughout the research. Being accepted onto the programme satisfied a superficial level of validity, recognising students' existing practical qualification and experience. However, the complex web of emotions attached to undertaking a new learning experience emphasised the importance of supporting an inclusive, participative and confidence-boosting environment to affirm to students the importance of their existing childcare knowledge and how through extending that knowledge they emerge as 'agents of change' influencing quality practice in the early years. Usher, Bryant and Johnson (2002) suggest that learning is a process whereby knowledge and understanding is not only created but extended through the transformation of experience. Subsequently, although students responded positively to this learning environment, it was also important to offer a mix of modes of learning, recognising individual learning attitudes where some 'came alive' when using the online forums whereas others preferred more intimate face-to-face group work.

In a process of reflection with the students on the initial transcripts of their feelings when commencing the course (Interview set 1), they admitted that the idea of undertaking a degree, although a daunting prospect, would provide them with a greater sense of validity within their profession. Students felt that they were not recognised for the work and knowledge that they already had and that a foundation degree would provide them with the piece of paper to prove to others and to themselves that they were a fundamental part of children's early childhood. Many of the students are lead



practitioners, but hold the perception that the qualification will provide them with additional confidence in their role as well as eventually leading to Early Years Professional Status (CWDC 2006). Through this discussion students fluctuated between Levels 1 and 2 (pedagogy and andragogy) where the shared understanding they were creating had to be supported and encouraged by others within the group. When students received positive regard their confidence was boosted and co-construction of understanding would move the debate forward (see Figure 1).

In Interview set 3, students reflected that their perception of validity was intertwined with their prior learning experiences, as these were a significant factor in their perpetuating anxieties and confidence levels within the programme. Throughout the first term students recognised how they reverted back to a ‘comfort zone’ of learning depending on those prior experiences. This potentially stopped them from moving completely away from Level 1 (engaging with pedagogy), limiting their ability to establish their learning in Level 2 (cultivating andragogy) and beyond to a paradigm of heutagogy (see Figure 1). In exploring this further it emerged that the students’ individual learning journey – their personal intellectual and confidence growth between where they started and where they finished – was determined by them and their level of autonomy and feelings of empowerment within the learning process. They identified that this was directed by them regardless of the strategies employed by the teaching team as it was an individual decision to fully participate in the concepts and modes of delivery being offered. Students recognised that the level of engagement they chose to submerge themselves in was intrinsically linked to the web of emotions learning provoked (Interview set 3):

It’s a bit like being on a trampoline. When I read something that really inspires me, I have the motivation – the bounce to fly up into the sky as far as I can and explore that concept from lots of different angles and I really enjoy it. When I let my own fears take over, like ‘I can’t do this’, I have no bounce and then I don’t even want to try. (Tutor visit C)

Nevertheless, the student recognised that she gained some of her ‘bounce’ back when supported through face-to-face seminars or online forums, and that her peers experienced similar anxieties and apprehension about their ability to undertake the programme. One student commented:

I look forward to the face-to-face sessions. It is a good opportunity to network with other early years practitioners but also to share our struggles and fears. In a way it is reassuring to know that everyone is going through the same thing and it is interesting to hear how they deal with that. (Interview set 2)

### **Relationships with learning**

From the start of the programme there was a high level of student participation within the face-to-face sessions. This stimulated the discussions and provided a rich experience for both students and tutors. Rogers (2002) stresses the importance of active learners as their actions create and maintain the learning situation. The ability the student develops to reflect upon their experiences of learning and how that experience links to their everyday practice is important to sustain their motivation and to continually demonstrate the relevance of the programme to their practice. The reflection that students are asked to engage in arises from natural learning episodes within their

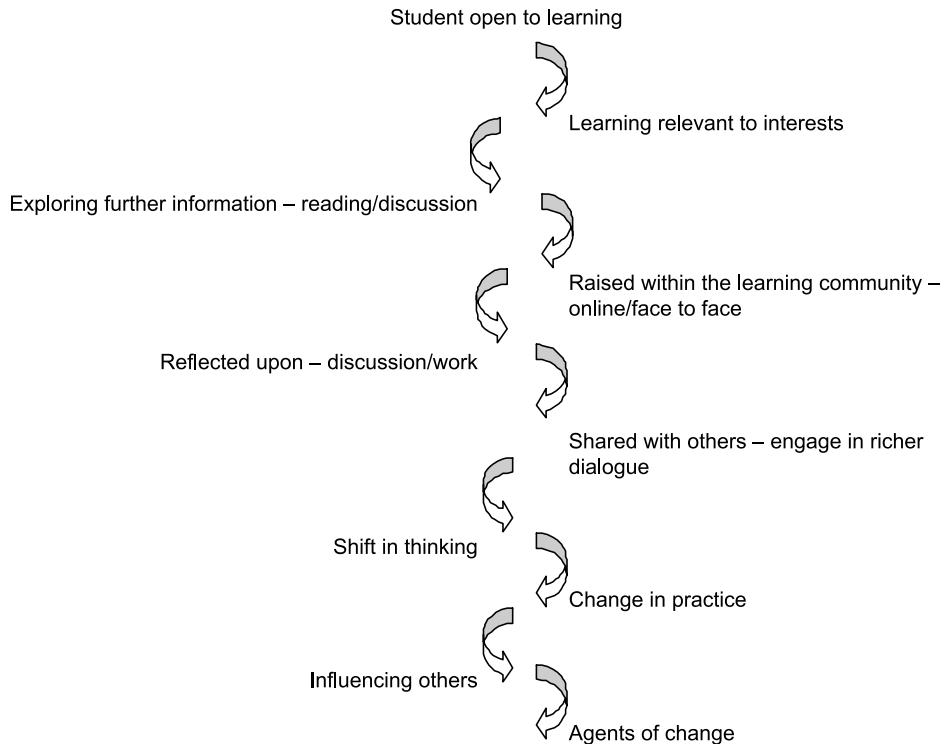


Figure 2. Student at the centre of learning and reflecting.

setting where they are able to identify practice that matches the concepts they have been studying. Through a portfolio-based reflection students are able to engage with their learning, directed by them and presented in their preferred learning style.

The freedom that this process allows enables students to engage in a richer dialogue with theory and practice, and from this, their ability to ultimately become ‘agents of change’ is developed through their own confidence and extended knowledge and understanding. The process also supports students reaching their own level of critical and reflective thinking where they can review their understanding with others and make meaning from their own practice experience in relation to the concept being presented.

Students are equipped with skills to support this process in a structured context through directed reading, tutorial and email support, face-to-face session content and tasks which link with the modules being studied. They follow the programme structure initially with a limited concept of the reasoning behind the programme organisation, and some question the process with anxieties of not ‘doing’ enough. However, at the midway assessment point (seven weeks) there was an opportunity for them to reflect on the reading they had engaged with and sessions they had attended and consider ways in which their practice had developed. A student commented:

Until this point I was doing the readings and looking through the information on Learning Space [student web page]. I was worried I wasn’t doing enough, but now I realise that I needed to do that preparation work to set me up for the assessments that are

coming. Although I still feel scared of undertaking the assignments, I feel that I am a bit more prepared than if I hadn't trusted in the process of just reading and taking down notes in the first few weeks. (Interview set 2)

### **Blended learning**

From the outset the programme was organised to offer support to students yet also encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning experience. Emphasis was placed on students starting to make links between the readings they were directed to, the discussions taking place in taught seminars and online forums and the impact these had on their practice. The online discussion forums supported students in sharing their understanding of readings and reflecting on their practice through interjections in the discussion from tutors and other students, posing questions and suggesting matching that practice with research papers they had just read. One student posted on the online discussion forum:

I wanted to say that I am enjoying the course so far. I found the session on 'Theory of self esteem' particularly interesting this week – as my 16 year old son, now at college, whom I always thought of as quite a shy type not wanting to draw too much attention to himself came home on Sunday evening sporting a home done 'Mohican' hair do!! I thought a few minutes before I reacted and put it all into perspective then very calmly said 'well its your hair – if that's the haircut you want that's fine'. He obviously is finding his own personality and is much more confident about himself than I gave him credit for.

This extract exemplifies ways in which transformative learning is being introduced into students' thinking where there is a gradual shift in a person's frame of reference (Mezirow 1978). Transformative learning centres upon the ability to develop critical reflection in learners; however, the immediate challenge requires expanding existing understanding to create capacity in an individual's disposition towards learning (Gunnlaugson 2007). This has been a central theme of the programme. As the philosophy of the course centres on starting from the child and exploring the influences upon children's development, the learning and teaching has reflected the same approach.

Students have been encouraged to adopt a thinking process which will eventually move them beyond a reflective discourse, informed by memory and the past, to 'presencing', a contemplative practice which involves learning from attention to what is emerging – knowledge that is sensed but not yet embodied in experience (Gunnlaugson 2007). Scharmer (2001) suggests that self-transcending knowledge also emerges as the learner builds capacity for presencing. The multi-layered approach adopted by the programme in the form of blended and flexible learning provides a foundation for emerging shared meaning through supporting creative possibilities for unfolding new knowledge from a range of ways of knowing rather than purely relying on discursive reasoning.

Schugurensky (2002) and Mezirow (2003) acknowledge that to create such a learning community that is open to transformative learning, critical reflection needs to support unexamined assumptions and expectations that learners and tutors hold. Therefore the process of transformative learning has to also support a spoken discourse in which learners can reflect on their actions and uncover insights from the meanings, experiences and opinions expressed by others (Gunnlaugson 2007). Wenger (2002, 173) identifies that when learners start to build connections with others they not only progress learning capacity but also begin to develop a personal identity

as a learner. He states that ‘learning from interactions with other practices is not just an intellectual matter of translation, but of opening up identities to others ways of being in the world’:

Now I have reached the end of the first term I can really see how my thinking has changed in relation to my practice. I am now questioning everything and actually feeling quite dissatisfied with my settings approach to children with additional needs. I am not sure yet how to challenge this or whether I am strong enough to do so, but it has certainly made a big impact on my thinking. (Interview set 3)

### **Towards a paradigm of heutagogy**

Through considering different types of interactions (face-to-face seminars, online learning and discussion, work-based reflection, tutor visits to settings) leading to different ways of knowing, the programme facilitates a flexible heutagogical approach developing and encouraging not only the production of knowledge but a collaborative understanding through distributed formal and informal networks (Singh 2003). The work of Hase and Kenyon (2000) places heutagogy with the student where they are not only able to engage in a process of knowledge creation, but also have the opportunity to determine their learning experience from the influence of their professional practice.

The programme is driven by weaving capacity for heutagogy into the foundations of the course. It promotes knowledge sharing rather than knowledge hoarding (Wenger 2002), and through linking this with experiences and reflection on practice, new understandings are developed and created amongst clusters of students. Ashton and Elliott (2007) promote learning as dependent upon a range of life experiences where educators can only guide the formation of ideas and not force feed the ideas of others. The online forums generate a sharing of knowledge and experience from practice and students then engage in self-reflection which triggers others within the learning community to respond and add to the co-constructed learning that is taking place.

Ashton and Newman (2006) acknowledge that heutagogy places power in the hands of the learner. Within the foundation degree this has attempted to be a gentle and secure process where the student is supported in every aspect of knowledge development and critical reflection. Tutors ensure that sessions generate rather than answer questions and that the intellectual frustration that this then perpetuates is facilitated:

It was quite a shock to be posed the question ‘what is play?’ and then left to thrash it out between us. I think we were all expecting the answer to be given at the end of the session, but it never came and now I am still thinking when I’m at home with my own kids or in [the setting] ‘What is play? What am I doing in my practice?’ (Interview set 3)

Singh (2003) recognises that although flexible and blended heutagogy encourages the production and collaborative flow of knowledge, it also appears in distributed formal and informal networks created through tutors and through student learning interactions. Singh considers educators to be ‘knowledge brokers’ linking the migration of knowledge with embedded knowledge in communities of practice, and then sharing it. Reflective accounts which emerge from students’ practice and links with concepts introduced within sessions demonstrate how students are able to recognise embedded knowledge and transport it into an arena where it can be examined and explored through different perceptions of practice.

### **Conclusion: emergent meaning makers**

The foundation degree uses a blended approach to learning where the key elements of the programme relate to developing reflective skills and thinking independently and critically. Ultimately this will support students to become agents of change within the early years sector, to develop constructive thinking and practice for every child.

The ability to be reflective and critical of practice comes from the desire to contribute to best practice in the setting and to skill development of the individual, in order to be effective in implementing change from a sound knowledge base. Within the programme the learning process is supported through an integration of both social and academic experiences, and the mix of these experiences foster independent, critical skill development and motivation to be immersed in ideology of early childhood (Beder 1997).

Usher, Bryant and Johnson (2002) consider this process to support an ultimate goal of self-awareness where active personal involvement provides self-direction and autonomy in one's learning. Learning is a process where knowledge is created through the transformation of experience and the control of that experience comes from the individual learner. In the early sessions of the programme, students tentatively entered into a process whereby they understood the need to commit themselves in terms of sharing their life and practice experiences with others, but self-consciousness or a fear of what others may think of them stopped them from fully engaging in the process (Interview set 1).

At the end of term 1 students recognise themselves now as individual professionals joining together to enhance their knowledge and practice skills, which has given them confidence to share their backgrounds, acknowledge gaps in their understanding and seek out ways in which they can use the learning community that they have engaged with to support them in developing that knowledge (Interview set 3). Field (2002) recognises that attitude is at the heart of an individual's success in sustaining personal growth and development in the learning process. To emerge as meaning-makers and agents of change, students have to possess the desire to share and reflect on their practice. To sustain a paradigm of heutagogy students have to embrace this and feel confident and empowered through their own motivation to create learning opportunities, and they have also to embrace a learning culture of openness to exchange with others. Only then will students become their own regulators of reflection, developing new meaning for their own understanding and empowerment.

### **Notes on contributor**

Natalie Canning is a lecturer in early years at the Open University. Her background is in playwork and social work, particularly supporting children to explore their personal, social, and emotional issues through play. She has undertaken research in the area of children's empowerment in play and is currently involved in research on developing children as autonomous learners. She has previously taught across a variety of early childhood undergraduate and post graduate programmes and is passionate about supporting mature students entering higher education for the first time.

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