Going Back to School
An Open Letter to a Nurse Thinking of Returning For Further Education

by Mona Callin

Dear Friend,

I was delighted to receive your phone call last week and to learn that you are thinking of going back to school. It's a great idea and I'm all for it. As an inservice education coordinator I am often consulted by nurses on our staff when they are thinking about furthering their education and I have given a lot of thought to the special needs of mature students. As you know, I've taught in a number of "Post RN" programs, and been a learner in one as well, and while I have not done a formal research study, I have checked out my perceptions with many students in a variety of situations. You and I have talked about some of these ideas from time to time but I've never tried to pull them together in an organized fashion. This seems like a good time to try to do that.

You asked which program you should select and whether it is better to be a full-time or a part-time student. Matching student and program is a delicate matter and of the utmost importance, but I cannot offer a prescription. What I can do is suggest some issues you might wish to consider in making your decision.

One of the most important things to think about is your real reason for wanting to go back to school. What is it you want to get out of this project? Honestly determining why you want to go back to school will help you find answers to your questions and enable you to make wise decisions. It is not unusual for persons planning a midlife career change, seeking professional advancements or preparing for a second career after retirement, to enroll in an educational program. Some learners enroll for the pure joy of learning and others to escape from the home or to fill up their spare time. Knowing your personal reason for choosing to return to school will help you determine realistic expectations for yourself and the program you select.

Since you will be taking your whole self with you on this adventure, getting an education is going to involve your body and emotions as well as your mind, so my thoughts in this letter will touch on a wide range of issues. What I hope to do is make the issues and problems more visible and therefore more amenable to your control.

In thinking about the problems encountered by mature students I find two ideas particularly

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useful. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and the theory of motivation as arousal. Abraham Maslow formulated a theory of basic human needs in which he organized man’s needs or motives into five levels:

1. survival  
2. safety  
3. belonging and love  
4. self esteem  
5. self actualization

Maslow’s theory promotes the idea that lower levels of need must be relatively well satisfied before the individual can function on a higher level. Individuals usually work on several levels at a time and a number of needs may be competing for dominance in any given situation. Self actualization (i.e. self-fulfillment, self-expression and the use of one’s capacities to be the most one is capable of being) is level five. Learning, growth, and change of behavior are part of self-actualization, and as such are dependent to some degree on the satisfaction of the learner’s needs for survival, safety, self-esteem and belonging.

The other idea, motivation as arousal, comes from the concept, derived from observations of human behavior, that motivation has two components, an energizing component and a component that gives direction. The idea of motivation as arousal refers to the energizing component. As Travers says:

An organism is in a state of arousal if it shows a relatively high degree of activity and a high level of responsiveness to outside stimuli. In sleep the level of arousal is at a minimum. During periods of excitement the level of arousal is high. Excessively high levels of arousal and excessively low levels are unfavorable for learning. Moderate levels seem necessary for effective learning to take place.

Adults enrolled in an educational program where major behavioral changes are expected, at the same time that they are coping with personal and professional change of great magnitude, frequently experience stress. Too much stress causes anxiety which may raise the arousal level unproductively high. Anxiety affects an individual’s ability in priority setting, in decision making, in goal setting and in listening. Anxiety may limit an individual’s ability to learn.

The five problems which I have observed to be experienced by many adult learners, and which I will discuss, are associated with role change, learning styles, voluntary learning, problem orientation and social responsibilities. These problems seem to be present whether the student is studying full-time or part-time, is male or female, or is married or single, although the degree to which the problems are experienced varies from person to person.

Perhaps the most important problem that faces the mature student as she enters a learning experience is that of role change. This includes the transition from knowledgeable, competent, respected professional and homemaker to unknowing student. The learner may recognize and intellectually understand that it is legitimate for a student not to know but she may have difficulty allowing herself this privilege. An experienced person like yourself, for example, is confirmed in her identity as an informed, capable, esteemed nurse, wife and mother, a person with lots of answers, an identity not readily relinquished to become a person with lots of questions and few answers.

In our society a person’s identity and self-concept is closely tied to her work role. When a person leaves her job, even when she does so voluntarily and for a short period of time, she loses, if only temporarily, part of her identity. In “From Somebody to Nobody,” Janet Awtrey gives a very amusing but realistic account of her transition from Associate Professor to doctoral student. As Awtrey discovered, the person in transition leaves behind her achievements, her recognized competence, her reputation, her status and her prestige. The loss of these attributes may cause a threat to the learner’s self-confidence and create a feeling of inadequacy. If the adult’s self-image is severely threatened, if only temporarily, it may limit her ability to learn, for a time. One way, of course, to deal with this problem, is not to relinquish all the roles from which you derive your identity, to continue to work and to study part time or to relinquish your professional role but maintain, relatively unchanged, your role as wife and mother.

There is another very positive side to this crisis of transition to unknowing student. The crisis provides the opportunity for another form of role change to occur. Most experienced diploma nurses have been socialized into characteristic role behaviors. They have acquired and been rewarded for values, norms and standards which may vary from and may even conflict with those expected of baccalaureate graduates. Yet it is often assumed that an RN in a baccalaureate program will, like the generic student, absorb and learn to value these new behaviors and incorporate them into her way of doing things. This change of behavior which the generic
students experience as role development is experienced by the RN as role change. For her, prior values, norms and standards must be rejected before new values and behaviors can be assumed. This is often a difficult and painful task but the identity crisis which occurs in the transition from knowing professional to unknowing student can be used to facilitate this resocialization process. In my own personal experience I found being a full time student helped, because it encouraged the identity crisis, and promoted the relinquishing of the old values and the resocialization process. I was free from the constant reinforcement of old values and behaviors that would have occurred if I had been at work. I was fortunate in my program because the crisis and conflict necessary to enhance role change was anticipated and encouraged by faculty who were prepared to provide support and reinforcement during the resocialization process. This was a difficult experience but ultimately one of the most significant for me.

One group of behaviors which is central to role change and the resocialization process involves thinking patterns. Leininger has explored the culture of nursing and has identified two contrasting clusters of behavior which she has called the traditional culture and the emerging culture. She perceives the traditional culture to derive from the hospital based educational programs and the emerging culture to derive from the university-based programs. Both of these cultures exist side by side in the health care system. The traditional culture is greatly influenced by the medical profession, and in my experience, because of the power, control and dominance of physicians in health care organizations, in the basic culture commonly seen in hospitals. This culture rewards the nurse for being other-directed and guided largely by the beliefs, actions and norms of outside reference groups, especially physicians, for following prescribed patterns of nursing care and carrying out doctors' orders, for being dignified, self controlled and passive and for maintaining harmony in the system. In contrast, the emerging culture, often centered in the nursing leadership, encourages nurses to be more autonomous in their thinking, practice and behavior, to read extensively, to base their actions on scientific principles, to think critically about new approaches to nursing problems, to question practices, to challenge the ideas of others, to use problem solving skills in arriving at new solutions and to be highly expressive.

Lovell, writing in a similar vein, notes that modern nursing emerged at a time when Victorian society believed that the role of women was to serve men's needs and convenience. Nurses actually assumed widely duties in caring for doctors, and medicine became the principal consumer of nursing care. This concept persists in the traditional culture, and is advantageous to physicians who protect and promote the idea by rewarding nurses for being subservient, by encouraging nurses to take over medical tasks which are no longer prestigious or profitable enough for the physician and by censoring nurses who do not subscribe to this model of behavior. Many nurses find this subordinate position secure, comfortable and desirable, have no wish to be more autonomous and are not eager to have the boat rocked.

Enrollment in a baccalaureate program is likely to move you toward the emerging culture in nursing and you may wish to consider whether or not this is the direction you wish to take, and whether or not you will feel comfortable with this outcome. If you already feel some dissatisfaction with the status quo and espouse the norms and values of the emerging culture and if you want to be more autonomous, you will find study at the baccalaureate level will encourage and support you in the development of new behaviors, and if you are fortunate, will help you deal with the frustrations and conflicts which are an inevitable part of a process of change.

A second problem related to re-entry into the academic scene is associated with the learning style and learning skills of the student. If the learner draws on her past experience as a student and attempts to assume the role of student, as that role last was defined for her she may find the skills, knowledge and abilities she acquired as a youth learner no longer appropriate. For example, if you were to enroll in an educational program based on learning through discussion you would probably find your competence in taking lecture notes is no longer as useful as it once was. This learning problem may be manifest in another way. The adult learner may experience some discrepancy between her image of the student, based on the other-directed student she once was, and her current image of herself as an autonomous person with her own established ways of learning. In whichever form this problem presents, the student experiences role conflict, and her sense of identity is in a state of flux until she can develop a new set of behaviors and relationships. Universities and colleges are beginning to recognize this problem as adults
continue to enter institutions of higher learning in ever increasing numbers. In choosing a nursing program you may wish to inquire about services for mature students (such as study skills courses specifically designed for the adult who has been absent from formal learning environments for a number of years or counselling services).

A third problem experienced by the mature student arises from the voluntary nature of her decision to enroll in the program of study. The mature student is usually a volunteer for learning. She chose to enroll in the program of her own free will. It was a voluntary decision and she has to take full responsibility for her actions and its outcomes. This responsibility is exciting and energizing when things are going well. When she is feeling low and discouraged it may be hard for her to accept that she made the decision freely and brought all this discomfort and aggravation on herself. At this time she may question the wisdom of her decision and also her decision making ability. Lacking any other person or force to share the responsibility for her predicament or to relieve her doubts, the student’s self confidence and learning potential may be at risk until equilibrium is restored. Family and peer group support at this time is invaluable.

A fourth problem evolves from what Knowles describes as the problem orientation of the adult learner. To adults, education is a process for improving their ability to deal with problems they face. A mature student usually enters a learning experience to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to solve a current problem. She enters the learning experience with a positive outlook, expecting the learning experience to solve the problem, and expecting to succeed. In her early attempts to use her new knowledge and skills, perhaps during her first field experience, the student may not meet her own expectations, which may or may not be realistic. Failure can be very demoralizing as well as disappointing, especially if the learner has tried out her new skills in a sphere in which she used to consider herself competent. Failure of this kind may cause the learner to question her previous achievements and her image of herself as a competent professional. If the experiment with the new skills has been carried out in her original work setting (the setting she left to enter the educational experience and to which she expects to return), she may feel embarrassed that her failure has been visible to her peers. Embarrassment may inhibit the learner’s willingness to continue taking risks and experimenting with new behaviors. In selecting your school or program you may wish to consider where you will be assigned for your clinical practice and assess whether or not you would feel comfortable taking risks and trying out new behaviors in that setting.

The fifth problem is a social rather than a psychological one and may be the most critical. For the youth learner, the educational experience is often part of the process by which she separates herself from her family and becomes a free agent. She is permitted (indeed expected) to relinquish some of her roles and functions within the family and develop new ones within another social system. You, on the other hand, as an adult learner, are a stable part of an established social system. You belong to other people and other people belong to you. You are not a free agent and you are not expected to become one. But you will be expected to assume some new roles and this necessitates relinquishing or modifying some of your existing roles. After all you are not Wonder Woman. You can continue to play all the roles if you wish but don’t expect to play them all effectively.

When one member of a social system makes a role change, a new set of developmental tasks is thrust upon everyone in the system. Becoming a student is a major role change and if the student is not to feel guilty, selfish and irresponsible, the change must have the approval and support of the whole social system. What do your husband and daughters think about your going back to school? How will your mother-in-law respond if you cannot join her for lunch on Tuesdays? The implications for the other members of the family must be understood and accommodations made. For example, when a working wife ceases to be a wage earner and goes back to school, many adjustments have to be made. An obvious one is the reorganization of the family finances from two incomes to one. But have you thought about who is going to pay for your education? Have you considered how it will feel to be financially dependent on your husband after years of relative independence? Another implication of a wife’s role change involves her husband’s need for companionship. He is used to having his wife’s company (especially during the evening and on weekends). Now he has to compete with her homework for attention. Have you talked this over? Have you thought about how your usual holiday schedule will be affected by the academic timetable? Skelhorn concludes that this particular social problem probably creates more
difficulty for female students than for male students and probably increases with the age of the learner. The difficulties appear to be least when the student is under 30 and single and greatest when the student is female, over 30 and a wife-mother or single parent. You appear to be in the high risk group, but that does not mean the problems are insurmountable, only that a thoughtful approach is required. You will need the support and encouragement of the family.

These five psychosocial problems have different dimensions according to whether or not the student has to leave home in order to study. If the mature student has to relocate she may have guilty feelings about leaving her family. She is likely to miss them and feel lonely. Relocation deprives her of her customary support system and crises may arise before she has had time to develop an alternative comfort group. Relocation, however, makes the role change obvious and apparent and this visibility has some advantages. For the student who commutes and does not have to relocate, the role change is less visible and may not be fully recognized by the social system. The student may attempt to assume the new role without deliberately and selectively modifying the old role and associated lifestyle. This can lead to role overload and exhaustion.

Having identified these re-entry problems commonly experienced by mature students I have a few suggestions to offer. If the five re-entry problems are examined in the light of Maslow's hierarchy it is readily apparent that they have the potential to frustrate the student's basic impulses for self-esteem. A closer examination reveals that the problems have the capacity to increase or decrease the student's ability to meet her needs at all levels within the framework.

At the first level in the hierarchy are the physiological needs including hunger, sex and thirst, as well as the need for sleep, relaxation, exercise and bodily integrity. The mature student who has to change her lifestyle and assume a new role frequently has to find new ways for gratification of her bodily needs. For example, the student who is used to meeting her exercise needs by going to the community center three times a week to jog and swim may have to develop an alternative plan. Meeting her need for exercise is a common problem for the mature student, particularly if in her professional life she is fairly active. A nurse returning to study often finds the sedentary aspect of student life a problem. It is a real problem, but it can be overcome with a few simple measures like walking to school, or if that is too far by getting off the bus one or two stops before the university, or by parking the car on the other side of the campus. You already know how important it is for your intellectual and emotional health to keep your body exercised and in good shape. Find some enjoyable ways to keep your body active, otherwise your mind and spirit will probably freeze up too.

Maslow's second level of need is identified as safety and is centered around a predictable and orderly society. Changing her lifestyle and entering an educational program brings the student into a strange environment where there are lots of unknowns. The unknown, while exciting, can cause feelings of insecurity. The design of the learning experience can provide the student with some sense of stability and protection, so that the arousal level does not become unproductively high. Initially you may seek experiences that promote a sense of stability and security such as small learning groups with stable membership and the same tutor throughout the semester, or a timetable which is basically the same week by week, or a course outline that identifies coming events. Later when you are settled into the student role you will be better able to handle the unpredictable and unexpected. Stability in one dimension of your life will enable you to manage change in other aspects with more ease.

The third level in Maslow's hierarchy involves the need for affiliation (ie, love, affection, warmth and "a place in the group"). Small group activities help students meet their need for affiliation and you may wish to select courses that are conducted in this manner to ensure that you feel a sense of belonging. Those students who have relocated in order to study seem to make more intense bonds with other students than those whose affiliation need is still being met through established channels, such as the family. This group cohesiveness and attachment promotes learning, but at the end of the course separation may be difficult. Some courses are designed to include strategies to facilitate the early development of group cohesion and other strategies to help the learners deal with the breaking up of the groups. You may find this design helpful. If you are not sure how you would feel learning in a small group setting, you might want to consider taking a course in group process before enrolling.

At the fourth level in the hierarchy, esteem is the core need. The individual needs self-esteem, self-respect, self-confidence, a feeling of strength and adequacy and the respect and esteem of
others. This is an area of need which may be severely threatened when a competent professional becomes an unknowing student or experiences some other form of role change. If this happens the arousal level becomes unfavorable for learning and the student may doubt her knowledge, her ability to learn and her past competence. In terms of Lewin's change theory, this "de-skilling" experience can be seen as part of the unfreezing stage and as such is useful and probably cannot and should not be avoided. Learners can be helped to cope with this "de-skilling" experience by a curriculum which anticipates this student response, that recognizes the importance of past experience and includes activities which can be expected to ameliorate the students' discouragement, and by a faculty who understands the process of planned change and resocialization.

The experienced nurse does not need to have the esteem problem compounded and her self-concept further stressed by having her past experience denied and by being required to enroll in a four-year basic degree program. Fortunately there is increasing acceptance across the country that most registered nurses want and should receive some form of credit for their basic nursing education and professional experience, and many schools now offer one form or another of advanced placement. There are also Second Step programs available in most states. These Second Step programs are patterned after the program developed at California State College in Sonoma, which offers two years of upper division studies, with emphasis on self-directed learning. These programs provide a unique opportunity for students to reflect on and work through the problems associated with going back to school, as well as analyzing relevant interactions evolving from their current practicum experience. There may be such a program in your area.

Success at the fifth level in Maslow's hierarchy depends on a satisfactory degree of need gratification at the preceding levels. As a problem oriented mature student who has enrolled in a program of study as a means of self actualization and personal or professional growth you will be able to work toward your goal and explore your undeveloped capacities if your other needs have been met to an appropriate degree.

As for the question of full-time or part-time study, that's a hard one. Of course you may not have the luxury of choosing, but if you do, here are a few thoughts to consider. Full-time study is a total experience and as such provides something unique which cannot be obtained through part-time study. If you want to change your perspective on nursing, if you want to achieve a role change, if you want to change your way of thinking, in other words, if you want to focus on the processes of nursing, full-time study is very facilitative. On the other hand, if you want to focus on the content of nursing, if you want to gain more knowledge or advance the skills you already have, part-time study is very appropriate. You may be able to work out a plan which combines full-time and part-time study, in which case the important thing would be to select the most suitable courses for each phase.

Post-basic study is very demanding and some nurses prefer full-time study because they feel they can cope with greater stress over a shorter period of time. Other nurses choose to go to school on a part-time basis because although it takes longer, it is not so disruptive to their personal and professional lives. But part-time study is a toughie. Doing a full-time job and then going home to write papers or attend night courses takes iron will power and dedication. Taking a couple of years off can be tough but taking pieces out of five or six years can be even tougher.

It is also necessary to consider the impact further education will have on your career. Most post R.N. students change as a result of their educational experience — and they often do not want to go back to their old jobs. Study leave may be just the thing for you if you are considering a midlife career change, but part-time study may be more appropriate if you want to continue pretty much as you are.

At this point I would like to say again that it is important to try to honestly determine your reasons for wanting to return to school. Then try to think about the consequences of going or not going to school. Keep in mind that both you and your family life are likely to change if you go back to school. Realize that you are going to lose some things and gain others but life will probably never be quite the same again. Then having carefully thought this through, go to it and have a great experience. Let me know from time to time how the adventure goes for you.

One final thought, in becoming a member of a university community, you have joined a system. The task of getting an education involves making the system work for you rather than

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against you. So you must study the system and operate intelligently within its structure if you are to get the maximum benefit from it. 

With best wishes for your success and happiness.

Affectionately,
Mona

References