

A Lifelong Learner's Perspective: Personal Reflection on the Study Experience of an Adult University Student in Japan

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This article explores the life, experiences, and reflections of a mature international student on her four-year study experience at a university in Tokyo, Japan, from an autoethnographic perspective. After defining what lifelong learning is, it addresses the student's initial doubts and contrasts them with the actual experience. The article highlights the personal gains, perceived benefits, and challenges of studying as a mature student.

Literature Review on Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning is defined as a continuous process in which individuals become aware of their frames of reference, critically assess their adequacy, and develop more inclusive and meaningful perspectives that guide their actions (Fleming, 1997). Lifelong learning encompasses formal, non-formal, and informal learning, as defined by Tissot (2004): Formal learning is structured, organized, and often leads to certification. Non-formal learning is planned but not explicitly designated as learning. Lastly, informal learning is unintentional, arising from daily life experiences. The main distinction between these types lies in their structure and intentionality: formal and non-formal learning involves intentional planning, while informal learning is unintentional (Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2004).

Lifelong learning spans all stages of life, promoting learning from "the cradle to the grave" across diverse contexts, including school, work, home, and community (Green, 2002). It occurs across all life stages, from informal learning in early childhood, formal education in youth, to experiential and problem-solving learning in

adulthood, and continuing through age-appropriate activities and community involvement in later years (Rojvithee, 2005).

Lifelong learning provides second chances for individuals to update basic skills and offers opportunities for advanced learning, requiring formal educational systems to be open and flexible to learners' needs (European Commission, 2007). Ultimately, lifelong learning refers to all activities aimed at improving knowledge, skills, and competence for personal, societal, or employment-related motives (Field, 2001; Aspin & Chapman, 2000).

Lifelong learning is often assumed to be definable through a uniform description, but earlier works on the topic implied that a clear, universally accepted definition is achievable (Aspin & Chapman, 2007). Lifelong learning involves strategies designed to create opportunities for continuous learning, aiming to meet both individual and community needs (Abukari, 2004). It emphasizes the integration of education and vocational training across policies, allowing individuals to choose among diverse learning environments and opportunities globally.

Lifelong learning also addresses developmental needs throughout life, with older adults needing support for transitions, much like younger individuals (Fleming, 1997). Lifelong learning equips individuals with skills for daily survival and growth (Lewis-Fitzgerald, 2005), and educational institutions must adapt to offer opportunities for learners at various competency levels. Learners are no longer passive recipients but active participants in constructing and sharing knowledge (Fischer & Ostwald, 2002). International organizations have recognized that LLL should be the guiding principle across all educational and training contexts, requiring global collaboration to implement (European Commission, 2000).

Reflection on My Experience

Introduction

Returning to academia as a student in my thirties has been one of the most transformative experiences of my life. As an adult learner, I

discovered a renewed sense of focus, a passion for meaningful education, and a path that aligned with my true self. This following sections reflect on my expectations, experiences, benefits, and challenges I encountered during this journey.

Doubts Prior to Enrollment

Embarking on a new academic journey in my thirties came with its share of doubts and uncertainties. I worried about fitting in, would I be the odd, old lady among the young, hip students? The fear of a language barrier loomed large as I imagined struggling to understand coursework. I didn't want to stand out as a foreigner who struggled with Japanese. The academic rigor also felt daunting; I questioned whether I would be able to keep up. Deep down, I didn't expect to get very far, which is why I only paid the tuition for the first semester. Yet, here I am now, a graduate student.

Reality Afterwards

However, my experience quickly defied those expectations. From the very beginning, everyone I met, both students and teachers, was incredibly friendly and welcoming. Their kindness helped dissolve the apprehensions I had carried with me. I found a welcoming place in many places, including the sign language club.

One of the biggest surprises was how well-structured the academic environment was. The guidebooks and schedules made it easy to understand what needed to be done and when. I never felt lost or unsupported, which made navigating my studies smoother than I had anticipated. I have some experience studying abroad, and it was a challenging process that required me to navigate the difficulties of university life largely on my own, often without sufficient guidance or support.

Due to the international environment of the English Department, many students had international backgrounds. I always felt safe when I didn't understand something or couldn't read a Japanese character because there was a good chance that others didn't either. Additionally, the age gap didn't affect my student

life as I had expected. Since studying at an older age is so rare in Japan, none of my peers assumed I was much older, they thought I had maybe taken a gap year or two. Even when I told them my age, although initially surprised, there was no awkward exclusion or negative response.

Personal Growth and Academic Development

Finding Focus and Structure

Before embarking on this academic journey, my life lacked structure and clear direction. I was a free spirit, traveling the world, experiencing different things, and being spontaneous. This was nice at the time, but I felt it was time for something different. University studies introduced a daily rhythm that brought welcome discipline. The responsibility of attending classes, managing assignments, and engaging with academic communities instilled a sense of order in my days. Having a daily routine gave me more maturity, clarity, and stability.

Passion for Alternative Education

When I started my studies, I had no idea what I wanted to specialize in. However, throughout the course, I discovered my passion for homeschooling and alternative education. The plight of *futoko* (children who refuse or are unable to attend school for various reasons) resonated deeply with me. I became intrigued by their motives, what kind of people they are, how they study, and what they do later. I felt a strong calling to research homeschooling in Japan, with the hope of raising awareness about it, especially for families in desperate need of alternatives they may not be aware of, particularly in light of the continuing rise in *futoko*, bullying, and suicide rates. Through conversations with affected individuals, volunteering, and building deeper connections, my passion to make a difference has only grown stronger. My hope is that by offering an alternative learning method, I can provide them with the opportunity to thrive and excel in life.

Future Path

As my studies progressed, pursuing a master's and now a PhD felt like a natural progression. Continuing my studies to become a university teacher in the future has been a smooth and organic transition, it didn't even feel like a conscious decision, but rather a natural flow of events. Professors and fellow students often mistook me for a professor, which gave me a sense of belonging and reinforced my calling for this profession. This recognition fueled my motivation to become a university professor, a role that aligns perfectly with my specialization in education.

Perceived Benefits of Being an Adult Learner

Greater Focus and Dedication

Compared to my younger peers, I found myself more focused and dedicated. Life had already taught me valuable lessons about responsibility and resilience, which translated well into academic success. Many students were busy experiencing life: partying, traveling, and having fun, which is understandable because they had just turned 18 and wanted to experience the world. I had done those things when I was younger, but now, I no longer felt the need. This allowed me to dedicate more time to my studies than others. While most students usually complained about not having enough time to complete their homework, I easily found the time to do even extra work. I feel that this was a major advantage in allowing me to proceed smoothly.

Emotional Maturity

As an adult learner, I stayed out of unnecessary student quarrels and often acted as a bridge between students and teachers. This maturity allowed me to build meaningful relationships with both groups, fostering a supportive academic environment. Our seminar groups or classes were always lively and positive, and peers stayed in contact even afterward. When students felt uncomfortable asking

questions, they would come to me. I saw students having small fallouts with friends over minor issues, where I could easily intervene as a middleman. I always felt a strong sense of responsibility, in a positive way, for the group.

Confidence

I felt no hesitation in approaching older senpai students or professors. Connecting with more experienced students gave me valuable opportunities to learn from their experiences and inspired me to achieve similar accomplishments. They often helped me review my articles or provided insightful advice on my graduation thesis topic. These interactions gave me unique experiences that many others may not have had. Additionally, when attending the graduate classes, I already had a big circle of friends and it felt like a big family, while my peers told me they were too shy and scared to talk to their seniors. Additionally, building strong relationships with professors allowed me to receive valuable information and advice, participate in conferences, and publish articles, precious opportunities, for which I am incredibly grateful. Both the students and my professors now feel like a large, extended family to me. Having this sense of security and comfort has significantly expanded and elevated my learning, learning experience, and achievements.

Financial Security

Unlike many younger students, I enjoyed a degree of financial stability. Many of my peers had to work hard at part-time jobs, with some juggling three jobs just to finance their studies. I saw how this affected their health and academic performance: some got sick, overslept, or couldn't complete coursework. Some students even passed out on the train or expressed uncertainty about being able to continue their studies due to financial concerns. As a mature student, I had the advantage of a small financial cushion, which allowed me to devote my time and energy solely to my studies, a privilege I am grateful for.

Challenges I Faced

Family Responsibilities

One of the most difficult aspects was managing my health issues while balancing the emotional burden of having aging, sick parents. I often felt guilty for focusing on my education, worrying that I was abandoning them. On the other hand, I felt that returning home meant missing out on important academic opportunities. I found myself torn between the two, uncertain whether I was making the right choices at the time.

This appeared to be a common issue among other doctoral students, who tend to be older since it is quite common in Japan to come back to University to finish your doctoral degree at a later point in your life. Many shared stories about caring for parents who are terminally ill, and could no longer walk or handle funeral arrangements and estate matters after their parents' passing, time-consuming issues rarely faced by younger students. Some students mentioned that they could only take one or two classes per week because being a caretaker is so time-consuming.

Biological Clock

As a woman in my mid-thirties, I began feeling pressure about motherhood. Although it wasn't a concern when I first entered university, by the time I finished my bachelor's degree, the fear of "running out of time" had become more prominent. The "what if" question lingered in my mind. I believe this dilemma can be compared to the challenges faced by career women in their thirties in Japan, where balancing maternity leave with a career is difficult in a society that does not provide adequate support for both parenting and professional advancement. In contrast, in the United States, even universities offer childcare services for the children of students, providing valuable support for a diverse range of individuals pursuing higher education.

These concerns led me to undergo egg freezing, which was a challenging decision to make while attending university. The

process required frequent hospital visits, usually multiple times per week. There were instances when I would leave the surgery table after the procedure, once the anesthesia had worn off, and go straight to class without missing a beat. Fertility issues further compounded the challenges, making everything even harder both physically and emotionally. I should give myself credit for managing through such a difficult time.

Limited Career Opportunities

Additionally, the reality of outdated beliefs such as ageism and xenophobia in Japan made it clear that corporate job opportunities would be limited for me. It was clear to me, that even if I did my best it would not be good enough to overcome these stigmas. It was sometimes disheartening to watch my younger peers pursue various career paths while knowing that my options were restricted from the start. At times, it felt like I was racing against a clock I could never win. However, staying calm and rational allowed me to gain clarity, helping me shift my focus from traditional nine-to-five corporate jobs to a career where I could thrive and be appreciated by my workplace.

Health Issues

I clearly felt the difference in physical stamina between myself and the younger students. While they effortlessly juggled classes, club activities, part-time jobs, internships, job hunting, social outings, and even travel, I quickly realized that this pace was not feasible for me. I had to prioritize what was most important, which was my studies. Unfortunately, this meant cutting back on other enjoyable activities. When invited to gatherings, I often had to decline, knowing I would likely be unwell the next day due to exhaustion. Being a severe migraine sufferer further complicated things, every day became a balancing act. With age, I learned that preserving energy required both hard work and strategic decisions. It was no longer about doing everything but about doing what truly mattered.

This mindset taught me to value quality over quantity in both studying and life.

Conclusion

Despite some small challenges, returning to academia as an adult has been an incredibly fulfilling experience. I've discovered focus, passion, and a path that feels authentic. Deciding to research homeschooling to help struggling children by providing them with alternative educational opportunities, as well as pursuing an academic career as a university professor in the future has given me a sense of purpose and belonging that I never imagined possible. Lifelong learning as an adult student offers distinct advantages, but it also presents personal challenges that are shaped by the realities of age. Ultimately, my journey underscores the transformative power of lifelong learning and the importance of following one's passion, regardless of societal expectations or age.

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