

Back to school

By Anne McDonagh

The first day of school in September conjures up memories of new beginnings for most of us not just for the current crop of school children. It suggests the excitement of childhood and growing up, of learning new things, of good resolutions (for this year), and of buying pristine school supplies and new school clothes. For many the first day of school also recalls a time of confusion and failure.

For adults, going back to school almost certainly brings back these memories; however, their conscious intentions are primarily to upgrade skills in a chosen career or to take advantage of a second chance to get a diploma or degree that will usher in a new career and a new way of life.

Whether you are taking one course to upgrade your job skills or taking the brave leap of attending school full time or part time in order to change your life, as an adult there is a lot more to consider than the first day. By preparing well for the times of discouragement and boredom as well as for the excitement of encountering new ideas and meeting new people, you will have a better chance of succeeding in your goal. Here is a list of preparations you can make:

What are your strengths?

First of all, you have life experience. In many ways, you can see the purpose of what you will be learning better than a younger learner because you have lived in the “real world”. You have asked some of the questions philosophers have asked. You have met many people who exhibit some of the problems raised by the study of psychology. You know that the economy is something which is beyond your control but which very much affects you and your family. You know that a good command of English and an understanding of mathematics are essential in running your life. Much more so than when you were a child or adolescent, you understand what is being taught. Above all, you know that your employment opportunities decrease when you do not have “that piece of paper.”

Second, you know why you are in school. You really want to learn what you have signed up for. Unlike many young people, you are primarily interested in learning, not in meeting the opposite sex and not in going to school because your parents insist on it.

Finally, each of you has the self-knowledge, which you can only have gained as an adult, to use your individual strengths. You may be one of those people who says, "Once I start something, I finish it." Others of you may be very good organizers, a quality that will come in handy as you juggle the conflicting demands of your new life. You may have gained more confidence in your learning ability because of your success in life outside of school. You may be so determined to change your life that nothing can stop you.

Make a list of your unique strengths and refer to that list when the going gets tough.

What are your priorities

It cannot be business as usual when you go back to school. To have a successful learning experience, you need to set your priorities. Setting priorities, however, is about more than doing your homework. It is about taking an overall look at how, where and with whom you spend your time and money. If you go about this task properly, you will be taking a long, hard look at your life and at what and who are important to you.

Begin by writing down in as much detail as possible, why you have decided to go back to school. You might want to write down the advantages of a new career such as more interesting work and more money. Perhaps you want to set an example to your children or create better opportunities for the whole family. Maybe it is a matter of getting some Canadian credentials. You might just want to prove you can do it. Whatever your reasons, this list will sustain you during moments of discouragement and stress, which are sure to occur.

Then ask yourself what your goals are. Consider your long-term goal whether it is to get a university degree or successfully master a particular skill like Microsoft Office. Break down the goal into smaller goals by the month or even by the week. By breaking down the big goal into manageable bites, you will be less likely to get discouraged. Then write down how you are going to achieve these goals, especially what changes in your life you are willing to make in order to succeed. Making good choices now will protect your health and peace of mind when the assignments and essays pile up. In effect, setting priorities is a major stress management tool.

Even if you are taking only one course, you have to find time for study. Thus, time management is a crucial component of setting priorities. What can you spend less time on and who can you spend less time with for the

sake of your education? Watching television and talking on the phone spring to mind, but you yourself will know how to waste a little less time once you examine how you spend your time now. Can you sacrifice some of that wasted time in order to study—not all of it, just some? Remember you need some time to relax every day too!

If you are responsible for running a home, you probably feel, for example, that your housekeeping standards cannot be lowered, and you certainly don't regard your labours as a waste of time. However, there is some timesaving to be done here. Can you enlist your family to relieve you of some of the burden? Could you wash the kitchen floor less frequently? It will pay off in the end if you recognize that doing your homework is more important to your family's well being, as well as to yourself, than doing the housework.

How will you finance your education?

It isn't easy to juggle family responsibilities and school. On top of it all, you have to economize as well. Again, it is a matter of deciding your priorities, this time in spending. Can you cut back on your discretionary spending? Making a lunch or snack and taking it to school or work can save you a surprising amount of money. Five dollars is little enough to pay for lunch but it amounts to twenty-five dollars a week, \$100 a month and \$800 for two semesters. If you smoke, you don't need to be reminded what an utter waste of money that is and how much easier your cash flow would be without that expense.

Can you work part time and go to school part time? Can you share your living quarters and cut the rent in half? If you have a family, enlist them in the project of saving money.

Where you decide to economize is up to you; that is why you need to know yourself well enough to set reasonable priorities that you can live with. But make no mistake, unless you are wealthy, you have to give up some things in order to survive economically as a student. Knowing where you can go for student loans or loans from family and friends is essential, but budgeting, economizing and living frugally are equally important.

Post secondary education in Canada is becoming increasingly expensive. According to the Canadian Federation of Students, in the past ten years, university tuition has increased 135% and the average student debt has risen from \$8,000 to \$25,000, a daunting burden to face upon graduation.

Basic college tuition fees have increased by about \$600 in the last few years, less of an increase but still requiring good money management. Therefore, it is important to know how you are going to afford tuition fees, books and living expenses.

All of these issues are dealt with on a Government of Canada website: www.canlearn.ca. Among the tips are to exhaust other avenues first before going into debt. However, if you have to borrow money, invest as much as you can in a short term GIC or in a bank that gives a little interest and has no fees or service charges. Apart from student loans like OSAP, there are grants available for students with disabilities and students with dependants, which do not have to be repaid. Find out about the many bursaries available; you might be eligible for one. There are many more specific suggestions on living frugally as well as the details for obtaining OSAPs, grants and bursaries on the canlearn website.

What is the right program for you?

The first matter to deal with is at what level you should start. Not finishing high school the first time does not mean you have to go back to high school now, although you may want to. You can be assessed as a mature student at college or university if you have been out of school for three years and are at least nineteen years of age. You may have to take an upgrading course after the assessment or you may be eligible to enter a post secondary program immediately. If you need upgrading in math and English, it is cheaper to do it in an adult high school—in fact, it is free. Adult high schools usually provide a close knit, supportive community, too, so you may wish to launch your new academic career at this level.

Ideally, if you are starting college or university, you should have researched your program thoroughly and perhaps attended an orientation session at the institution you are attending before you registered. However, if you haven't done the research or even if you have and decide after a few days in the program, that it is not what you expected nor want, what can you do?

The first thing to do is talk to some of the teachers. If you are going to make a change, it needs to be done quickly, but a few days is not always enough time for you to make a good decision. Talking to your teachers about your expectations of the program may encourage you to stick with it (or not).

If you still feel it is not the right program, go to the career counselling department of your institution and find out what else might suit you better. If there is no solution, get your money back. Perhaps you will have to wait for the next semester to get into a more appropriate program at another institution. (You can see why thorough research ahead of time is so important.)

If after a semester, you decide this is not the program for you, you may be able to use some or all of the courses successfully completed in another more suitable program. So, don't quit half way through a semester. You may be able to rescue some of the time and effort already expended.

As a mature student, you will probably want to get some credit for your life experience. If your claims are validated, you may be able to cut as much as a year off a course by being given credit for work or learning you have done outside a traditional learning institution.

Can you forget the past?

If you were not the brightest light in the classroom the first time around, you may lack confidence in your ability to achieve academic success this time. How can you deal with your lack of confidence? Now is the time to read your list of strengths.

Remember you are a different person now from the one you were ten or fifteen years ago. You have gained some wisdom and maturity; you know why you are going to school; you have had some successes as an adult; hormones and the agonies of adolescence do not distract you. If you are in the right program and managing your time and money well, the stage is set for you to succeed. Practise positive thinking. You can choose to be optimistic and ignore the critic in your head who says you cannot do it. A few successes in school will encourage you, and soon the importance of your youthful failures will recede.

How can you fight boredom?

Inevitably, boredom and lack of motivation will set in, usually about half way through the term. How do you maintain motivation? After all, it was your motivation, your determination to make some changes in your life that got you back to school. If you give in to these destructive feelings, you could sabotage everything you have gained so far to say nothing of losing your self-respect.

Read your list of why you came back to school. Remember how you felt when you wrote it. The reasons are still valid. So, grit your teeth and keep going.

You can do more though. Take a break; for instance, go to a movie, read a book, watch television, go out with a friend. Later you will come back to your schoolwork with renewed energy. And remember, the more you put into your work, the more you get out of it. Hard work is the best medicine for boredom. You know, of course, that all of life has its boring moments. It is a measure of our maturity how well we deal with them.

It is not easy to go back to school as an adult and succeed. However, you can be well prepared for the challenge by remembering why you are there and what your goals are; by managing your time and money; by choosing the right program; and by maintaining a positive attitude.

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