

Last week I attended what I consider to be a quite momentous occasion. It was the launch of a book put together by the Jewish women in London group entitled *Generations of Memories: Voices of Jewish Women*. The launch was not just the usual celebratory party – although it was that, too, with the Kletzner group playing the most wonderful, catchy Yiddish tunes. It started as a group of women, whose interviews appear in the book in conversation with Francesca Klug.

Despite the rather noisy and uncomfortable surroundings in the children's library at Swiss Cottage, the conversations were completely riveting and absorbing. Five of the eight women whose accounts were retold in the book discussed aspects of their own lives, their attitudes to children, their mothers, being mothers, their politics and personal identities and how it felt to be involved in this piecing together of a most fascinating history of women living here towards the end of the 20th century.

One of my lasting impressions will be of the dramatic social and economic circumstances wrought in their lives: the oldest woman having been born just after the turn of the century. All the women were born in circumstances that are now virtually unimaginable, (despite the poverty that lives on with us), because of technological shifts and changes especially in the domestic economy. One of my other lasting memories is of the pride of these women in their abilities not just to cope but to grow and learn from their challenging experiences. Asked if they had one thought that they wanted us to take away from the evening, one woman answered briefly – a belief in oneself.

I had been looking forward to this publication since the project was conceived over five years ago and funded by the GLC. Indeed, I would love to have been involved because I'd often played with the idea of interviewing my female relatives who had also lived through such momentous changes – from pre-capitalist Russia through to post-modernist

A mature attitude of self-belief

England or the USA. These women's lives, like those of most women, have tended to be invisible and yet have had a significant influence on our society if only through childrearing.

This kind of record – feminist biography or autobiography – together with a judicious mix of sociological insight seems to me to be a very important source of our piecing together and trying to understand how we become the people we become. Of course, this is not the first book of its kind: it is part of a growing genre of reflective personal experience. But it is probably the first to have been able to range so widely over social and economic changes in the 20th century and their effects both on the individual women and the wider political system.

I was particularly struck by these women's personal quests for self-improvement and self-education, and the corollary, their lack of formal education, especially further and higher education. Indeed, one of the women, in response to a question, said she had entered university at the age of 60 and had had a marvellous experience. She would encourage all women to follow suit, not in going to classes such as in the university of the third age, but in going into traditional higher education degree courses.

She did also see herself as experiencing her first childhood in her sixties, so how mature a student she was is something perhaps of a moot point. Other women had not opted

for formal higher education but for writing and political involvement. Interestingly most of the women in the celebratory discussion (and those absent but whose accounts are in the book) had been involved in a political party or political activities. Many had been involved in politics about women and in creating a feminist politics.

The discussion left me reflecting on how nice it would be to have all of these women taking my courses at the polytechnic and wondering what this would do to the student groups. I also wondered what we had to offer them, given their vigorous personal pursuits. Teaching "mature" students or those who are now known as "non-traditional" students is not new to me nor to South Bank as an institution. The HMI saw us at the forefront of this recently when they were considering ways of widening access to higher education for women and ethnic minority students. However, it is still an open question as to whether the issue is only about opening up courses to students other than the traditional 18 year olds or about wider issues about the form of educational provision and pedagogy.

At a conference on the future of social policy teaching some of these issues were gently aired. A number of people were concerned that the ways we teach 18-year-old men and women may not be appropriate for more mature and experienced students, especially women.



**MIRIAM
DAVID**

Indeed, several people questioned the viability of "comprehensive" higher education in its traditional format. One person put the issue succinctly. She said that 18 year olds could write but not talk and the converse that mature students can talk but not write. She elaborated this point as being that 18 year olds were relatively well schooled and able to produce the requisite essays and examination papers but were lacking in experiences relevant to applied social science.

On the other hand, mature students tended to be very experienced and articulate about their personal knowledge but not able to express this in the requisite written format. We all shared our anecdotes that the younger students tended to be frightened of or threatened by the mature students' articulacy and experience. Mature students tended to be threatened by the 18 year olds' fluency in scholarly things. Is this pedagogical problem resolvable? Can we find ways of teaching so that all our students can learn from each other and help each other develop those aspects of their abilities that are as yet unformed? Can we find appropriate ways of assessing students and their achievements that do not only rely on the traditional

scholarly works?

These are exciting and challenging problems, but I feel we are being forced to deal with them in the wrong context. We are being encouraged to woo mature students into higher education at a time when there is a demographic downturn in the numbers of 18 year olds seen as able to benefit from higher education. It seems to be the need to tap new markets for student clientele which is behind this recent policy to widen access rather than any liberal or humanitarian aim to spread the benefits of education more widely. So would we in fact be really offering new opportunities if we merely add-on mature students to our intake or do we have to refashion our courses, our teaching and assessments to accommodate a more diverse group of students? Can we really afford to change our teaching styles in this current financial climate?

An even more pressing problem for some mature women students is the need for the course offered to be organized around their "family" obligations – to children, to dependent elderly or handicapped relatives. We here have made a start on altering our teaching to fit in with some of these commitments. We try to have a reading week to coincide with the school half-term, to enable mothers of school age children not to have too many conflicting commitments.

But sometimes this conflicts with a balanced term. That has just happened. As a result some mature students have been unable to attend all their classes. Is this necessarily disadvantaging them? Should we be more flexible for such students or do we assume that they are mature enough to organize themselves?

These are difficult questions, not made any easier by the harsh economic climate in which we have to solve them. But I, for one, would not want to abandon the search for an appropriate pedagogy for such non-traditional students. As the book launch confirmed for me, such women are the most exciting and challenging people to try to teach.