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LEARNERS IN MIDLIFE: GRADUATE EDUCATION AND WORKPLACES IN CANADA

Jo-Anne H. Willment. Detselig Enterprises Ltd., Calgary, AB, 2008, 208 pages.

Learners in Midlife offers a thoughtful assessment of the unique needs and concerns of adult learners who return to university as graduate students. The author, who herself left the workforce to return to graduate school in midlife, has used this book to feature the very real and personal experiences of adults as they meet the challenges of part-time graduate study, many while continuing in their workplaces in some capacity.

The book begins with an introductory chapter that presents the reader with a series of demographic and other data to establish an argument for the four dimensions that can be applied to learners in midlife. These dimensions—personal, workplace, community, and educational—are then used to create an effective framework of understanding. The author argues that for learners who can adapt this framework to their own needs, graduate school will provide an unparalleled learning opportunity.

The book then builds on this framework by illustrating, from several different perspectives, many of the issues midlife learners must confront. In Chapter Two, H. K. Morris Baskett, a pioneer and teacher in adult education, offers a lively description of the trials that most part-time adult learners face in graduate school. While his initial intent is to assist the reader with some useful criteria for selecting the most appropriate graduate program, Baskett, having supervised many graduate students, spends the majority of this chapter providing wise counsel on the graduate school experience itself.

Willment's book then takes on a different focus. Personal narratives by a series of midlife learners who have completed their graduate degrees in education are featured. The daunting tasks of deciding to return to school, finding a suitable program, and then somehow making it all work are described in detail. Most of the writers graduated with their bachelor's degrees some years earlier, and had been in the workforce for several years. For women with the added responsibilities of child-rearing, taking on the demands

of graduate school meant finding a program that would allow them to work from home. One narrative describes the experience of attending graduate school while working and being a parent as wearing a series of interchangeable hats. Another writer working in the field of adult education tells of her surprise in finding a graduate program in adult education that was able to offer her such a comprehensive learning opportunity. Together, the five narratives describe intensely personal and unique experiences of individuals who chose graduate education in midlife, and all effectively demonstrate the four-dimensional theme that Willment describes in her early chapter.

Part 3 of Willment’s book reflects upon some new directions for graduate education. A workplace-learning practicum, the transformation of a small rural college into a college-workplace model, and some results of research specific to online training of trainers are addressed. Unfortunately, Part 3 loses some of its reader appeal, mainly through a failure to connect in truly meaningful ways as the earlier sections do. Gone are the mainly personal stories that make the previous chapters so engaging. However, that said, the book purports not just to be about learners in midlife, but also about graduate education and workplaces in Canada. With a less narrow topic, the author allows others some freedom to write about areas that may be relevant to midlife learners or to those working in the field of continuing education.

The book concludes with the author attempting to place the three main perspectives (adults, learners, narratives) within her established four-dimensional framework. While the detail is admirable, a more concise or simplified presentation of the data would have been easier to read and understand.

Overall, Willment’s book contains a myriad of useful information designed to inspire and encourage learners in midlife. Anyone considering a return to part-time studies at the graduate level would benefit from reading this book. Additional beneficiaries could include, to a lesser extent, adults entering part-time programs at the undergraduate level, as well as those working in the area of continuing studies. Families of potential part-time graduate and undergraduate students may also gain considerable insight from the experiences outlined in this book.

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