

The York Association for Mature Students

a refuge for York's "brave, enduring heroes"



by Margaret Barcza

Returning to university as a mature student, after spending several years in the workforce, can be a humbling experience. Take it from one who knows.

When it came to attitude, I was absolutely ready to immerse myself in the educational environment. I had purchased all the required texts even before classes had started, bought some new school clothes, and even worked out a study schedule. In essence, I literally did everything I could to make sure my transition back into school life would be smooth. Or, so I thought.

The one thing I hadn't anticipated was how taxing school would be in terms of social adjustments. Considering most of my fellow students are close to 15 years my junior, it really should have come as no surprise.

Within the first couple of weeks, I started to become increasingly self-conscious about the age difference. I wondered how we could have wound up in this common space. Surely I was already thinking about getting my driver's licence when they were just being born. Or maybe I'd babysat some of these students?

To make matters worse, the "kids" couldn't seem to relate to me either. In desperation, I tried talking about this problem with some of the faculty. That proved even more futile. To these unabashed elitists, I was simply another first year student trying to get good grades. Besides, some of the male profs seemed so paranoid about sexual harassment charges they wouldn't even say hello, let alone join me for a coffee.

Shunned by students and administration alike, I resigned myself to spending the next few years in virtual solitude. One bright day, a nice, "mature" lady in the library suggested I seek help from YAMS. Being extremely sensitive about my old age, I assumed she was prescribing a holistic diet for brittle bones. What I soon learned was that YAMS are not vegetables. To the contrary, they are the brave, enduring heroes, more commonly known as the York Association for Mature Students.

Comprised of approximately 300 mature students ranging in age from 21 to 70-plus, YAMS make its home in a nice, quiet lounge inside Winters College.

On first entering this lounge, I immediately felt calmer and more at ease. Casting a glance around, I realized why. Everyone in the room was over 21! I was soon engaged in a fascinating discussion with six YAMSers, some of them hardened to the cruelty of the world outside the lounge — where smoking is still highly glamorous — others who were like myself, novices.

Nevertheless, I found each of them had a unique perspective on their situation and different reasons for joining YAMS. There's the grad student who feels good about being in a room designated for mature students. Then there's the sociology major who comes in for a short snooze whenever he has a chance; and the woman who's been coming in for five years so she can talk to people with the same concerns as her.

It all began in 1977 with Ian Macdonald — president of York at that time — who established the lounge in response to an angry letter from a woman who claimed

mature students were lost on the main York campus.

Space was provided for a mature student lounge in McLaughlin College, and in '78, staff of the Status of Women's Office set about decorating the space. Early that same year, the lounge was officially opened as a place for York's mature students to gather and socialize.

According to Marie Miller, long-time YAMS member and former chairperson, "The initial opening set a friendly, relaxed tone which carried over to the use of the lounge. It became a quiet oasis where people would meet regularly to chat for a few minutes and do assigned class work before leaving the campus to resume heavy outside responsibilities."

Eventually, YAMS was forced to move from McLaughlin. Thanks to Maurice Elliot, recently-retired Master of Winters College, YAMS now has a more permanent residence in 138 Winters.

Today, the lounge is used by many of the mature students on the main campus. Some drop by daily to meet friends, others come by more sporadically for a few hours of quiet relaxation.

As it turns out, YAMS members quite clearly reflect a cross section of the real world. There are housewives, mothers, fathers, grandmothers, and all the other "mature" titles you can think of, in hot pursuit of higher education. But while everyone leads a distinctly individual existence outside school, the common ground they all share is the need for an informal support structure on campus, to provide refuge from the youth outside.

Why would they seek refuge? Many of the older women students find undergrads turning to them for advice and mothering. Quite frankly, when you've raised your own kids and return to school to fulfil your own needs, the last thing on your mind is mothering 18 year-olds.

Unfortunately, like other clubs at York, YAMS is faced with the yearly task of fighting for funds through the CYSF to stay alive. It looks as if this year they've managed to survive. As for the future, who can tell. One thing's for certain, thanks to YAMS, many mature students at York have found that sense of belonging they initially didn't feel.

This year, the YAMS executive is comprised of six nominated and elected volunteers. Early in the new year, they will be planning a social get-together for York's mature students.

In addition, on November 29 and 30, YAMS will be holding a Skills Fair in the Winters Senior Common Room. Guest speakers will discuss stress management, daycare, the job search and a number of other issues relevant to mature students. The YAMS office is also interested in hearing suggestions from mature students on other topics they'd like included in the fair.

As for me, my life has become somewhat more tranquil just knowing there are students on campus older than me, who have endured what I'm enduring.

And the YAMS lounge? I have a feeling it might become my home away from home, and be it ever so humbling, there's no place like home.

Perfect essay, con't.

chance to feel good about their best academic work. There is a fantastic feeling of having a creative idea. The thrill of education is wonderful when you push your mind and come up with your own creative insight. The real reward of the essay writing process is that feeling.

His one piece of advice to students is to "push yourself to the limit. Too many students settle for mediocrity. Students should take risks in their essay writing and be creative."

'written for the audience'

One of the great assets for York essay writers is the Writing Workshop located in room 208 of Stong College. Michael Mitchie is currently working as a tutor in the workshop and helps students with their writing problems. Mitchie specified four problems most students have in writing an essay and their solutions.

Mitchie feels that students have problems determining where to start, how to organize, how to write in their own words and grammar and spelling.

Before starting an essay, Mitchie believes it is vital to be absolutely clear about the directional signals of the question. Before beginning the research, a student should make sure whether the question is asking for a comparison, description, discussion or an analysis.

Too many students, according to Mitchie, choose their essay topic and rush off to the library to find all the books

on that topic. At the end, they miss the point of the assignment. Then the worry is, "I can not start before I have a thesis."

"Before you come up with a thesis," suggested Mitchie, "you need to have a general draft describing the content of your essay. If we can talk about essay writing in stages, then there are two big steps a student should go through when writing.

"During the first stage, you are writing for yourself, not paying attention to grammar and style, and just getting out your thoughts on paper. At the second stage, you are writing for the audience, where you clean up your first draft, correcting mistakes and structuring your thoughts in a presentable way. I don't think," added Mitchie, "students can combine these two steps together. And when they try to do that, it often produces a feeling of being stuck at the beginning.

"When a writer is trying to see the final product of the essay at the beginning," Mitchie emphasized, "it is often difficult to brainstorm. If you absolutely can't start, then start writing about the process of writing like, 'I am writing about this topic and there are the following problems and questions I have . . .' By putting a pen to the paper, it may get those ideas going.

"When the draft is finished, then a writer should summarize it and derive a thesis. I would define a thesis as a brief summary of the answers to the question," he added.

The second problem students at the Writing Workshop have is organization. Mitchie stressed that, in the introduction, a student should give the reader essential information of what is in the essay, what position of argument they are going to take and how the essay is going to be organized. It does not matter what faculty you are writing for, you have to do this service for the reader.

"In the body of the essay the research of the topic should be demonstrated," said Mitchie. "Again, it is not

enough to just restate what one source said and what the other source said, but compare the themes within the two arguments. The conclusion should be the restatement of the thesis but not in the same words," he added.

The third problem of 'how to write in my own words' is very common, especially with first year students, Mitchie explained. "It is important to realize from the start that, inevitably, you will have to work with other people's views and opinions and you will have to footnote these ideas in the essays you'll write. One way to learn how to write in your own words is to take notes in your own words. If you take notes word-for-word directly from the text, you will end up with pages of information that you will have to turn into an essay.

"And, by the time that is done, it is too late to write in your own words. By taking note during the readings or summarizing what you have read in the margins, it will help you write in your own words," Mitchie concluded.

As for the fourth problem of grammar and spelling, Mitchie suggested reading more carefully with a dictionary and a thesaurus close by.

"An A paper needs to answer the question, the argument must be clear and it must follow a logical progression of thoughts. The fewer errors you have, the better mark you are going to get," Mitchie stressed.

He encouraged students to take advantage of the Writing Workshop. "It is not often in the university environment that a student can sit down one-on-one with a tutor for an hour and discuss his or her own work. The Workshop is a teaching centre, and it is there to help students with all their writing problems. For evening students, there is a Writing Workshop on the seventh floor of Atkinson College.

The Writing Workshop is currently producing an essay writing manual which will soon be available for students to purchase