



AEA DIGEST

Association for Education and Ageing

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Summer 2007

FROM THE CHAIR.....

Jo Walker

As well as spring, the AEA annual meeting and conference came early this year, as we had a chance to hold a joint event with Birkbeck University of London. Birkbeck is well known for its interest in and practice of life-long learning, especially involving mature students, and as reflected in its academic institutes and research programmes. We are grateful to Dr Anne Jamieson, who joined the Executive Committee this year, for hosting and supporting the conference. An overall two-day conference was conceived, under the title 'Learning for the Lifecourse'. Day one featured the dissemination of research on lifelong learning carried out at Birkbeck, and day two focused on older learners.

Annual conference

The day on older learners 'Expanding Horizons in Learning for Older People' modeled exactly the range of subjects and styles of contribution that AEA

wishes to promote: There was academic input, in both presentation and workshop formats; examples of good practice and reflection on them from both professional and personal learner perspectives. a 'market place' of information from a variety of later life activities; and a splendid lecture in memory of Frank Glendenning, one of the Association's founding fathers, which celebrated not only his place in later life learning, but also one of the major initiatives of the late 20th century, the University of the Third Age. Fuller descriptions of both the conference and the memorial lecture can be found respectively on pages 3 and 6 of this issue of the Digest.

Developing the Association

Our consultancy project to 'build the capacity' of the Association has made excellent progress and we will shortly be meeting again with Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, who funded the initiative,

with a view to presenting a final report and identifying next steps. With an updated strategic and business plan we hope to be in a position to approach funding agencies for support for development work of various kinds. We have been able to make some small but helpful changes already: the membership leaflet now exists in electronic form, and we have a temporary, but more accessible web presence on the Centre for Policy on Ageing (CPA) website. (www.cpa.org.uk/aea)

Scottish hospitality

Some Executive and other members of the Association were able to take part in a conference this May to celebrate twenty years of the Senior Studies Institute in Glasgow. Hosted by Strathclyde University, where SSI first grew from a small programme aimed at older learners, to a significant force within the University, the conference entitled 'A Legacy of Learning' attracted around 200 delegates, with about a half coming from the current older student population. Delegates also came from many countries including the US, Canada, Australia, Germany, Ireland, Belgium, Netherlands, Japan, China, Switzerland, Austria, Spain and the Czech Republic.

Keynote papers were given by Ron Manheimer and by Kali Lightfoot, both from the US, who head major programmes of senior learning, a subject which seems more highly developed there than in the UK. There were also plenary contributions from Gillian Boulton-Lewis of Queensland University and Jilong Zhou of Wuhan University for the Aged. Lesley Hart, the first Director of the Senior Studies

Institute, reflected on the factors in its success, which are interesting to compare and contrast with the success of the U3A movement (see summary of Eric Midwinter's lecture on *page 6*).

Lesley felt that SSI had thrived in its institutional setting at Strathclyde University because it had provided an integrated social environment for older students, had been good at networking and strategic thinking and keeping up with current and future issues. The social environment had included things such as a student association with a variety of clubs to join, volunteering opportunities which contributed to an overall sense of student involvement and commitment, the provision of dedicated social space for students' use between classes, together with free lunches and low fees! SSI had avoided being seen by the University as a drain on resources by contributing to the life of its host, and by providing a good quality and range of learning.

AEA was well represented among the free papers, with the involvement of Alex Withnall on exciting new multi-disciplinary research techniques into later life at Warwick University; Jim Soulsby on the later life learning challenges of financial education, as promoted by NIACE; Brian Findsen on the dynamics of older adults' learning in Scotland, as researched at Glasgow University and Keith Percy and Fiona Frank on their senior learners' programme at Lancaster University.

Brian Groombridge has provided a participant's account of the Strathclyde conference for this issue (*page 8*), but modesty has prevented him from saying too much about his own roles. Apart

from supplying an excellent after conference dinner speech, he also helped launch the publication of his Frank Glendenning Memorial lecture, delivered last year at our Brighton conference.

We are grateful to NIACE for funding this smart version of an important statement about arts, health and learning in later life. Those not online are receiving the printed version. Those who are online can download it from our

new web pages (www.cpa.org.uk/aea), but you are welcome to request additional printed copies from Carol Allen. A large C4 sized stamped addressed envelope would be appreciated. We are also grateful to Brian McKechnie, current director of Senior Studies Institute, for arranging the AEA sponsored launch in the delightful setting of the Collins Gallery.



Brian Groombridge, Eric Midwinter, Angela Glendenning, David James and William Tyler at this year's AEA conference.

Picture by Dianne Norton

More detail as promised from Jo Walker on this year's conference

'Expanding Horizons in Learning for Older People' which was held on March 23rd at Birkbeck's Malet Street building.

The conference opened with a paper **"Lifelong Learning and Older Women"** from *Sue Jackson, Professor of Lifelong Learning and Gender from Birkbeck*, which described research among Women's Institute groups in various parts of the UK and the nature and experience of learning by members.

Among her conclusions were that older women were a relatively neglected group in terms of learning and that the WI offered a particular and safe space in which to carry out personal development, if not learning itself. Policy about later life learning in general needed to be embedded in a range of agendas, not just educational ones. The research also raised questions about what is meant by active citizenship in later life.

London (later) Life

Taking advantage of being in London, the next session showcased several different initiatives that were making learning available to older Londoners:

Jenny Clark spoke about **U3A in London** and, in particular, about **Shared Learning Projects** that brought together teams of U3A members with local institutions such as museums for mutual benefit. Learning about subject matters had been enhanced by learning about research at the British, Imperial War, Science and Geoffrey Museums. U3A members' work had been ancillary to that of staff (neither cheap labour nor volunteer) and thus useful and valuable to the institutions involved, as well as to the group. It had been important to agree the time and resources available to the shared tasks. *(see Editor's note at the end of this article)*

Mark Windisch of the London Older People's Steering Group described the role of this Group in **giving strategic advice to the Mayor of London's office**. A recent policy document on culture and leisure had included adult education, but skills were still very much the priority. He observed that the Adult Education Institutes in London had always been a resource for older

learners, but the four designated colleges (City Lit, Morley, Westminster and Mary Ward) were all under financial pressure as 'personal and continuing development learning' (PCDL) is now required to derive more of its funding from learner contributions. A student-led campaign to support adult learning in London (SCALE) is arguing that a re-balance of funding sources is needed to avert institutional collapse.

Helen Leech, Director of Open Age, spoke of this well-established development in West London which offered programmes to fulfill educational, recreational, health and social aims. The seventy activities a week include an information, advice and guidance service (IAG) and all-year round availability. Learning was non-accredited but was 'tracked' and recognised by using the RARPA framework of recognising and recording progress and achievement. RARPA is a national framework developed for use by voluntary sector and other providers who do not wish to accredit. It usually involves setting aims and objectives, an initial assessment, learning plans, outcomes and achievements and celebrating and identifying next steps.

Open Age was active in applying for funding from a number of sources; Adult and Community Learning fund, PCDL from the Local Authority adult education service, Arts and Leisure sources, Primary Care Trusts, Social Service Departments and the Learning and Skills Council. A grant from the Guinness Trust had enabled matched funding from the local Borough, so that Open Age can now plan a multi-activity centre for older people in Chelsea, with state of the art facilities.

The last two contributions in this session were witness statements from learners about the value of learning later in life and what it had brought them.

Steve Newman, a London resident, spoke movingly of his time with **Ransackers**, a project which enables older learners to benefit from higher education if they have not done so before. Steve's time at Ruskin College Oxford had been a learning adventure and he observed that the process and journey involved had been as important for him as the research report he produced as a result.

Peter Avery, Tessa Brewer and Jeanie Deane, members of the theatre company **First Framework** recalled their beginnings as drama students on a programme for older learners at the Mary Ward Centre. Their amateur experience had now led to a professional performance, rehearsal space and Arts Council funding. Their devised and scripted pieces were in demand and innovative work with sound technology was being explored. Reflecting on the learning involved, they saw the rehearsal room as a 'safe yet dangerous space' and a possible metaphor for life.

Anne Jamieson then led an interactive session on **Quality of life and learning**

- the role learning plays in the quality of life of older people. She wove observations and findings about older learners from her research at Birkbeck into feedback on a series of questions given to the audience. These questions had prompted us to explore thoughts and feelings about what makes for good quality of life, what makes it less good, and what differences it could make. We were then invited to consider the value of learning in this context. As with many deceptively simple processes, this proved to be quite profound and revealing for some, as witnessed by enthusiastic small group discussion and feedback.

The day concluded with *Eric Midwinter's* lecture in memory of Frank Glendenning, which is summarized below. We were delighted to see so many old and new friends among the fifty or so who attended and felt that the day had illustrated well the excitement and range of current work that is being carried out with and for older learners.

(Editor's note: The full text of Jenny Clark's presentation is available. Just e-mail Carol at: aeasecretary@googlemail.com stating whether you would like it as an MS Word attachment or in a plain e-mail.

COMING VERY SOON!!!

**BIRKBECK LIFE COURSE DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION
ANNUAL CONFERENCE**

Sunday, 10 June 2007

Friends House, 173 Euston Road, London

(opposite Euston Station)

For details see page 11

Dr Eric Midwinter's Frank Glendenning lecture was entitled "U3A-ology; the thinking behind the U2A in the UK", which is summarized below. The full text is available on our website: <http://www.cpa.org.uk/aea>

Dr Midwinter recalled Frank's professional and social concerns as a combination of 'careful scholarship, burning conviction and active participation' and was pleased to number himself, along with others present, among those who had also campaigned in the cause of a more positive old age.

His theme was to be the ideological construct of the U3A and its intellectual antecedents, as a tribute to Frank who was an illustrious advocate of older age learning and involved in contemporary developments at the University of Keele and the Beth Johnson Foundation.

Now in its 25th anniversary year, what thoughts had guided the founders of the 'peculiar stylings of the U3A in the UK'? The first national committee, comprising Michael Young, Peter Laslett, Dianne Norton and Eric Midwinter himself, had set about trying to apply to the UK the exciting development of the French Université du Troisième Age. They found themselves not so much setting up institutional arrangements and relationships, but establishing a self-mobilising mesh of learning circles.

Founding ideas

By way of explaining the contribution of the founders to this peculiarly British evolution, Dr Midwinter identified their particular understanding of gerontology and of politics at the time. Peter Laslett's groundbreaking analysis of a

'third age' rested on his observation that 'blocs of inhabitants' were "surviving the normal chores of adulthood, that is work and family raising, and enduring into that phase for lengthy periods". What could be done "to foster the 'new' old person, positively as active citizen rather than negatively as social casualty"?

Michael Young and Peter Laslett were both involved in other social initiatives of the time, including the Open University, the National Extension College and the National Consumer Council. Eric Midwinter had joined them at NCC to deal with public affairs and was enjoined to tackle 'the real coming issue of old age' - which he did by subsequently leading the Centre for Policy on Ageing. Thus the late seventies were bustling with later life learning activity. Charters, theories and conferences abounded. Other familiar names were involved, including Frank. So the scene was set for an educational foray into the field of later life.

Acknowledging their English Ethical Socialist roots, Young, Laslett and company identified fraternity (and sorority) as the missing virtue of the revolutionary agenda (as in *liberté, égalité* etc). Being politically alert, they were careful to preach the emerging U3A gospel to labour authorities as 'mutual aid' and to conservative ones as 'self-help'. The true goal was the application of the cooperative principle of learning to its process and organisation. The vision was that ordinary people would thread their educational activities into the general fabric of their communities, using both public amenities and private homes. This de-institutionalisation of education

was not a pragmatic, second-best resulting from minimal resources; rather it was the development route of choice.

The 'deficit model of knowledge - processing and bespoke instruction' was not to be preferred over a 'credit model of dialogic, knowledge-sharing and reflective problem solving'. The tutor / student relationship was to be translated as group leader and group membership, with the leader as steward not dictator of the process. There was belief that there was no genuine education without enjoyment, preferably in good social fellowship.

At the same time, a small national focus was established, leading to a national framework that related to a confederation of largely autonomous groups. As numbers of groups grew, the energy of older people to develop the U3A surprised even those who had 'let free the genie of self-mobilised learning from the bottle'. Inevitably, collaborative learning on this scale was seen as a threat by a few of the various interests involved.

Then and now

Was the U3A a victim of its own success? Eric recalled that, even early on, enthusiasm for the idea led to unrealistic expectations that it could be all things to all people. The original vision was in fact bigger than an educational one and included third age initiatives and organisations of many kinds - new bodies for a new older age - such as in the fields of health, broadcasting, housing, finance, arts, etc. However, it was later life learning that had taken off.

Since 1982, numbers of U3A groups have grown and now stand at 621, involving 168 thousand members. An estimated 400 thousand have been members of British U3As over the period. There are 33 regional / area networks, 40 subject networks and 14 thousand interest groups (some people attend multiple groups).

Noting that there are currently 12 million people in the third age in Britain, Eric estimated that about half to one million could benefit from U3A practices at any one time. So the number of groups is about right, even if membership could be higher. This still leaves many unmet needs and challenges within the third age citizenship generally. U3A cannot be the answer to all and 'benefits those whom it benefits'. Are other third age ventures still absent?

So, in forming the U3A in the UK, the subject had been education, the client group had been third agers, but the driving force had been the 'de-institutionalising motif of social mutuality' with the 'laity forearmed to negotiate with the professionals and the professionals forewarned to transform themselves into confidence-boosting facilitators'. In its idealistic beginnings, the founders yearned firstly for U3A principles to be adopted by the education industry, making education a service not a system. Secondly, they envisaged agencies and initiatives beyond education to be founded on similar principles. Third, there was a utopianism that hoped for a society based on social, cultural and economic principles of mutuality.

Summary prepared by Jo Walker



Frank Glendenning (photograph courtesy of NIACE)

*Last year the Frank Glendenning Memorial lecture was delivered by **Brian Groombridge** under the title “**Extra Time: Arts, Health and Learning in Later Life**”. The full text of that is available on our website: <http://www.cpa.org.uk/aea> and copies of the published version are available from the secretary Carol Allen (for address see AEA contacts box page 9). A large C4 postage paid 40p envelope would be appreciated. Brian was in Strathclyde however not just for the publication launch but to enjoy the conference in celebration of the 20th anniversary of the Senior Studies Institute (University of Strathclyde), 9 - 11 May 2007. The conference theme was “**A Legacy of Learning: Sharing global experiences of***

***learning in later life**”. Brian reports on his impressions of the event:*

Glasgow City Council formally recognised the SSI’s anniversary with a Civic Reception in the City Chambers. We were welcomed warmly by the Lord Provost’s representative and proudly by Professor Andrew Hamnett, Principal of the University. Two co-founders of the SSI opened the conference itself: Lesley Hart, now the University’s Director of Lifelong Learning, summarised the SSI’s growth and the different strands of its programme; Sir Graham Hills (former principal), recognising that the University had taken a risk, rashly called his witty speech, ‘Always say Yes!’.

There were well over 200 participants at the conference, academics, practitioners and several students, including some of

the original men and women who'd been part of the 200 or so at the start (there are now up to 3 - 4,000). There were seven other outstanding keynote speakers, from the USA, China and Australia as well as Scotland. The hard part was choosing between the 23 workshop/seminars on offer, each run by two participants, including three AEA members (Brian Findsen, Jim Soulsby and Alex Withnall). Topics on offer ranged from older adults learning (fourth as well as third age), older women learners, intellectually disabled adults; to the underlying physico- and psychological factors in learning, the arts and making music, financial education, civic involvement by older people in policy and planning. Workshop leaders came from all over Europe as well as the UK.

Speaking as a conference-jaded very senior citizen, I must say that this was an exhilarating occasion, with a heady enthusiastic atmosphere, much mental stimulus - and multiple networking. Thanks again to programmes manager Brian McKechnie and his team.

Talking of networking: some time ago I'd made email contact with one of the plenary speakers, Robert Rae, Director of the Scottish Futures Forum, and was glad to meet him in person. I believe the UK needs a parliamentary select

committee to vet all government initiatives by what we expect in the future (e.g. climate change, ageing populations). The Scottish Futures Forum, responsible to the Scottish parliament, is the nearest the UK gets to that. He focused well on the overlap between the conference theme and his political terms of reference - sensitive that we were meeting at a time of uncertainty in Scotland (the Scottish Nationalists had won the Parliamentary election - by one vote, and could only form a minority government). I believe that could make Scotland still more democratic and some of the SSI's older learners would be well placed to undertake non-partisan research, older learners making a real contribution to a learning society, of benefit to us all.

I must end by thanking AEA, NIACE and Better Government for Older People'. Jo Walker, supported by Jim Soulsby, hosted the launch of a well produced 3000-word version of my 2006 Frank Glendenning Memorial Lecture (Arts, Health and Learning in Later Life). The location was very apt: an exhibition of attractive paintings and dramatic quilting by SSI students in the art gallery next door to the main conference centre. (*See picture next page*).

The Association for Education and Ageing

Patrons: Baroness Sally Greengross, Mr Derek Legge, Professor Arthur Stock

President: Professor David James

Chair: Jo Walker, jo.walker@cofeguildford.org.uk

Secretary: Carol Allen, 132 Dawes Rd, London SW6 7EF aeasecretary@googlemail.com Tel: 020 7385 4641

Treasurer: Currently post vacant

Elected members:, David Crossan, Mervyn Eastman, Brian Findsen, Anne Jamieson, Carlie Newman, Jim Soulsby, Glenys Tuersley, Dr Alex Withnall



Brian Groombridge and Jo Walker in the Collins Gallery, Strathclyde University for the publication launch of Brian's Frank Glendenning Memorial lecture, delivered last year at our Brighton conference
Picture by Valerie Bissland

*On a recent visit to Ireland Alex Withnall discovered that, when it comes to challenging outdated attitudes to ageing, there is a great deal to learn from the Republic. She writes here about **Growing Older in Ireland**.*

Age & Opportunity based at the Marino Institute of Education in Dublin is the Irish national agency working to challenge negative attitudes to ageing and to promote greater participation by older people in society. In recent years, it has co-ordinated a whole range of activities for older people including Go for Life – the national programme for sport and activity for older people; the Arts in Care Programme established in partnership with the Midland Health Board and Laois County Council; and the exciting Bealtaine Festival held across Ireland throughout the month of May in association with the Arts Council. Bealtaine is the Irish word for

May and also the name of an ancient Celtic festival celebrating spring so that the Bealtaine Festival celebrates later life as a time for renewal, creativity and growth. From the opening ceremony held on Duncannon beach and sea front in County Wexford, May 2007 saw literally hundreds of arts events taking place from the National Gallery of Ireland's Drawing Day to dozens of musical events, film screenings, talks, poetry, intergenerational activities, art and craft workshops and reminiscence sessions. No-one is left out – active retirement groups and care centres are involved alongside public libraries, museums, galleries and various other arts organisations.

Let's hope other organisations will be inspired to follow Ireland's lead!

Further information is available from www.olderinireland.ie

Education News

Birkbeck Life Course Development Association – Annual Conference

On Sunday afternoon 10th June the Birkbeck Life Course Development Association will be holding their annual conference at the Friends House, 173 Euston Road, London, which is opposite Euston Station. Anne Jamieson, organiser of the conference writes:

The Association was set up by the graduates of the MSc Life Course Development, to provide a forum for debate and information about topical issues related to mid and later life, ageing and the adult life course. They organise an annual conference as well as seminars and social events during the year, and produce a termly newsletter. Anybody interested in ageing and life course issues is welcome to join. The annual fee is £15-00.

The main speaker for the afternoon will be Andrew Blaikie, Professor of Historical Sociology at the University of Aberdeen. His topic will be: "Picturing the Life Course: the joys and limits of visual sources". Professor Blaikie was Lecturer at Birkbeck until 1991, and developed the gerontology programme as well as the MSc in Life Course Development. Since 1991 he has been at the University of Aberdeen, where he is Professor of Sociology. Much of his research on ageing issues has centred around visual images of ageing. The talk on 10th June will explore such visual images, their uses and limitations for an understanding of the impact of age on our experiences,

attitudes and perceptions at different points in the life course.

Arrival and registration is from 1.30 pm with Professor Blaikie's presentation at 2.00 pm. After a tea/coffee break there will be an open discussion forum, with the proceedings concluding at 4.30 pm. Conference fee is £15-00 (includes tea and coffee), but if you would like to become a member of the association, this can be converted into your first year's membership fee for the current year, giving you access to the association's other activities.

Contact: Martin Goffe, Treasurer, 48
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Adult Learner Awards

Congratulations to AEA member **Tony Carter**, who was recently voted London Senior Learner of Year in the Adult Learner Awards. Tony picked up his award at the event for London winners at the Victoria and Albert museum. The previous day the National Awards were held also here in London, where AEA was represented by Carlie and Stephen Newman. For a full list of winners go to the NIACE website

<http://www.niace.org.uk/ALw/2007/learners/winners.htm>

Free Online Learning

Carol Allen has been doing some online detective work to unearth the wealth of FREE tuition and information that's available out there to help beginners get to grips with computer technology.

Those of you who don't have access to a computer may well be getting a touch irritated by number of references your

editor makes to websites and such. Maybe you think learning to use a computer is going to be both intimidating and expensive and anyway you don't have access to one. To deal with the last point first, although the price of computers has now come down dramatically compared to a few years ago, the cost is still beyond the reach of most people on low or fixed incomes. However many public libraries now provide free computer access for local residents. Computer users who are updating are often looking for a home for their old computer, which is still perfectly ok for a beginner, so put the word around family and friends. And if that doesn't work, there are charities, which recycle old computers to give away.

But once you have computer access, then comes the challenge of learning how to use it. Again there are some authorities and organisations, who provide free tuition. Hackney Silver Surfers for example have drop in centres for the over 50s, which is great if you happen to live in Hackney. <http://hackneysilversurfers.org.uk/> There is however also a wealth of free online computer courses, which you can take at home at your own pace.

One which has just been brought to my attention is ALISON – first bit stands for Advanced Learning, not sure about the rest. ALISON is the brainchild of Irish businessman Mike Feerick, who develops computer training courses for businesses and other organisations to train and track the progress of their staff members. For this he charges but he is using the fruits of that to make those same courses available free online to everyone who wants to learn. ALISON

is currently offering the ECDL/ICDL course in the essential elements of computer use, which if you wish can lead to a qualification, but you don't have to do the tests – you can just do the course for your own use. They also offer the e-Citizen course, which is on using e-mail and the internet. And they really do start at the very beginning with how to switch the computer on!

Like many computer users, who had no access to workplace IT training either because like me they are freelance or their job didn't involve such matters, I am self taught with a little help from my friends. Which means there are yawning gaps in my IT knowledge. Have those of you, who receive this digest in printed form ever wondered for example why the envelope it comes in is hand written? It's because I don't know how to use the computer to print out all your names and addresses on labels! I am hoping that ALISON is going to help me with that. I will report back in a later digest and meanwhile, if you want to have a look at the courses for yourself:

http://alison.com/?utm_source=sg05&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=sg05

ALISON is not however the only source of online computer tuition. The BBC learning webpages provide free tuition in computer basics

http://www.bbc.co.uk/learning/subjects/information_technology.shtml or

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/computertutor/computertutorone/> and indeed links to

information on learning opportunities and online courses themselves in a wealth of other subjects from creative writing to languages to science, cooking or gardening.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/learning/subjects/information_technology.shtml

The door's wide open. Walk through, take your pick, good luck and enjoy.

*One AEA member who's been at the sharp end of learning for the last few years is our former treasurer **Paul Joseph**. He describes what it's been like to be **Swotting at Seventy Seven**.*

I completed my BA (Honours) degree in Business Studies with the Open University in my seventy-seventh year. Made it at last! It all started as a lark in 2003. But midway it became a very serious issue. Why? Because of a challenge from my ten year old grandson (one of ten – five boys and five girls). “Grandpa, you won't complete the course. You don't even know how to boot up a computer or log on”. Cheeky brat! That spurred me on. I'll show this son of a gun what calibre I am. So I first attended a crash course in Basic Computing run by the local library, then slowly mastered the intricacies of Word and Excel. It was a hard and exhaustive exercise but I am now fairly competent on the computer

At 77 I consider myself young but of course my co-students were spring chickens, around half my age. There were the six of us listening attentively, if not plain bored, to our tutor, also some two score years younger than me, banging on about externalities, value-added chain, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

The Open University is very supportive. They begin with the assumption that students are novices, supplying them

with copious notes, lessons, DVDs and course guides both in print and on line. The OU also provides notes on physical activities which, believe me, have improved my study skills, calmed my nerves and left me with a positive outlook. I was bombarded with “Suggestions To Improve Concentration & Control Panic”, “Revision and Examination Checklist”, “Exam Strategy List” etc - all giving valuable tips.

Then there are the tutorials where the tutor guides you through the assignment. And at the end of the course there is a written exam which I usually dread, because by the end of it I am physically and mentally exhausted.

There is plenty of interaction among students who log on as Study Buddies on the First Class Conferencing site at each stage of the course, where one can chat with one's peers and the tutor. Believe me, this really boosts one's confidence. Why? Because we all have same anxieties, problems and stress.

Studies of how memories form suggest that old dogs may find it hard to learn new tricks. University of Oxford scientists say that adults may find learning more difficult than children because their brains store memories differently, while a study in the journal *Neuron* looked at nerve cell activity which is the basis of learning and memory. Experts said younger brains may learn things more easily but older brains may store information more efficiently. So it is never too late to get back to one's books. Further proof - last year in the exam centre I met, a retired army officer, eighty three years of age, sitting the exam in Geology. And I thought I was the oldest OU student.

Meanwhile Alex Withnall has had her nose in a good book again - Michele Hanson's record of "Living with Mother – Right to the Very End".

Regular *Guardian* readers are probably familiar with Michele Hanson's column in which she detailed life in her seemingly chaotic household when her 88-year old mother moved in with her, her partner and daughter Amy. Now she has brought the columns together in this book that provides a hilarious but also very poignant account of the years that Mother dominated family life until her ultimate decline into bedridden frailty and death at the age of 99.

Judging by the photo of Mother (Clarice) in her youth, she was a beautiful and vibrant young woman whose strong personality and considerable wit has always had an enormous influence on Michele's life. After the death of her husband, Mother makes the difficult decision to move from her flat in Hove to Michele's North London house; she has considered sheltered accommodation but sensibly concludes "I might as well be miserable here for free". Thus begins Mother's new life, as the matriarch ruling the lives of her daughter and granddaughter, who are trying to manage their own lives while also learning to deal with Social Services, hospitals, carers, the physiotherapist, the intricacies of stair lifts, bath lift salesmen, cleaning ladies and the upkeep of the house. As Michele wryly comments "The house is often mobbed with people".

We to get a very full picture of life with Mother as she settles in - her cooking, devotion to daytime television ("They're talking about sex again" she

says, thrilled to bits'); constant health scares ("One bloody thing after another," she croaks. "I'm fading fast!") from which she inevitably recovers; and disapproval of any visiting males ("I'd better not say anything. *I might say too much.*") Over the years, Michele's daughter comes and goes; she and her partner separate; the dog needs veterinary attention; the house is falling apart. Then Mother has a stroke and wants to die. Nevertheless 'feeble, speechless and almost completely bedridden, my mother is still defiant'. And to her annoyance, 'the telly has been blanket Pope, Charles and Camilla', her three least favourite persons'.

Sadly, Michele eventually comes to recognise that her mother almost certainly has liver cancer. After the final harrowing weeks, she quietly records her mother's death and its aftermath - going into her room with its reminders, scattering the ashes, dealing with formalities and the gradual realisation that she finally has freedom in her sixties and the prospect of Christmas alone. Meanwhile, Amy covers the house with pictures of Mother in her heyday 'so we don't have to remember the final shrunken littler person who wasn't really her at all'.

This is a wonderful read that will have you alternately laughing and crying; and a very moving tribute not just to a brilliant, spirited and formidable woman but to all mothers everywhere - and the offspring who care for them.

"Living with Mother – right to the very end" by Michele Hanson is published by Virago Press: London, at £9.99 ISBN-13: 978-1-84408-384-8

On Screen

Carol Allen

There is disappointingly little in the way of big summer movies of interest to grown ups. “*Harry Potter, Order of the Phoenix*” in July promises to be a good treat for taking the youngsters to and I had mad hopes from its title for the still to be screened “*Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer*”. But the latter turns out to be not an older person getting to grips with the internet but yet another comic book super villain with special powers. Could have been a great new twist on the comic book genre though to have a real silver surfer!

Top of my summer list is a charming and touching little movie called “*Grow Your Own*” dealing with the very English passion for gardening and allotments. It does though have a contemporary twist in that writer Frank Cottrell Boyce has taken as his inspiration a real life project in Liverpool to assist traumatized asylum seekers by giving them an allotment plot to grow their own food and through that regain their hold on life. The film’s full of interesting, well drawn characters and the interaction between the conservatism of the locals entrenched in the traditional working man’s refuge and the ethnically mixed newcomers is stimulating and fun. British Chinese actor Benedict Wong is outstanding as a refugee rendered mute through his tragic experiences with a delightful child called Sophie Lee as his young daughter, taking on responsibility beyond her years in caring for her dad. The strong cast includes Alan Williams as the grumpy, elderly rebel Kenny, who has something of the Richard Briers about him, and Philip Jackson as the self interested leader of the old guard, who epitomizes British suspicion of

foreigners. This is a genuinely heartwarming film, often very funny and never soppy.

There are some good French films opening in the next month or two. In “*La Vie En Rose*” Marion Cottillard gives an amazing performance as Edith Piaf in an interestingly structured film which intercuts between the first part of her life and the last. There are some odd omissions from the Piaf story, especially in the war years, but plenty of those well loved songs and Cottillard is particularly impressive as the older Piaf, whose frail and disintegrating body, which makes her appear much older than her 44 years, is unable to match the strength of her spirit.

The French do costume drama particularly well. “*Molière*” deals with the year the seventeenth century playwright disappears from the record books, after which he reappeared to write his masterpieces. This witty and handsome fiction purports to explain the inspiration for “*Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*”, “*Tartuffe*” and others. Romain Duris plays the young Molière and Fabrice Luchini is both funny and touching as M. Jourdain.

Playwright Alan Ayckbourn and director Alain Resnais combined forces several years ago in a two film version of Ayckbourn’s play cycle “*Smoking, No Smoking*”. That retained its Yorkshire setting though with the characters speaking French! In Resnais’s new film of Ayckbourn’s “*Private Fears in Public Places*” he retains the complex Ayckbourn web of characters, whose lives cross each other in a series of short but telling scenes, but has reset it quite comfortably in Paris. Not as funny as a lot of the playwright’s other work, but still very sharp in its observation of people.