

For Mature Students by Mature Students: Navigating Virtual Learning Through a Global Pandemic

Virtual Learning...How am I Coping?

By: Meshanda Phillips - FYE Senior Peer Mentor

My name is Meshanda Phillips, I recently graduated with honours from the Bachelor of Science - Criminal Justice program from Humber College. My time at Humber during those four years was amazing, and I could not say goodbye, so, here I am back doing my postgraduate in Alternate Dispute Resolution (ADR). If I am being honest, this will be my seventh year with Humber, I previously did another program. I started as a mature student and went back to school after almost a decade away. It was hard, I thought I was going to fail, and at times I felt like I did not belong. However, the Humber College community became my strength.

You know what, let's go to one of the "hot button questions" that I have been getting and I know many of you have been trying to do successfully, "How are you handling virtual learning?" Let me begin by saying that none of us could have predicted these unprecedented times we have found ourselves in, but as they say "when life gives you a lemon, you make lemonade" and that is what we are all trying to do. For me, not only am I learning virtually, but also working virtually. Oh, and did I mention that I am also a mom of two and they are also doing virtual learning! I will digress for now from the topic of working from home and my children's virtual school, because we will need two more blogs for that.

I must be truthful: during the first week, let me just say I HATED it (and that is a word I try not to use). Before class started, I went out and got myself a desk, printer, bookshelves, and the whole nine yards. I remember saying to myself, "I do not have to fill up my presto card," "I can keep my PJs on and I don't have to even comb my hair," and "this is going to be so easy!" To be very transparent, I suffer from anxiety, so for me I thought this was the best way to not only save money but to reduce my anxiety levels. However, I was wrong because as someone that desired in-person learning and that human contact, I struggled the first week. But guess what, by week two I figured it out and I am loving it so much.

Firstly, for my program, we are in a block and mine is exceedingly small and involves some form of connection with each other. We have created a Facebook and WhatsApp group to keep connected and to also put a face to the name we see on our computer screen. Secondly, I took the time to create an environment that is conducive to my learning. You may ask, what do I mean by that? Well, as you can see in the picture, I made my learning area my own, I put pictures of my children on my desk, and a flag of my home country. Essentially things that I find comforting and that brings me great peace. I also keep my space well-organized, even on my mini bookshelf the books are placed according to my timetable schedule. Another thing I do is that I dress like I am going to class because I learned that

keeping normalcy is important, some days I even put a little makeup on. I should also mention that I get myself in the mood by praying or listening to music that feeds my soul and I just dance. Another good thing is that every Wednesday I have a bible study group on Zoom and it really helps to centre me and to keep going. Also, as I mentioned I do have children so I am very open with my professors concerning test schedules, if a test is scheduled for the daytime, I will ask them for a later time to complete because my children are in school and I am back and forth all day. Another thing that helps me as a mature student with children is that I create a schedule and we are rarely in the same room during school hours (I will expand on it in the next blog).

As for my anxiety, every day is a struggle, but I never want it to get to a place where I cannot pull myself back up. Therefore, I have been in counselling and I have been journaling. I have a journal for monthly expectations, a free writing journal, a self-care journal, and a mental health journal. There are still days when it tries to impact my learning, but I keep telling myself, “Meshanda you have anxiety, anxiety does not have you!” If I can leave some unsolicited advice concerning the current unprecedented time we are in and how our lives have been impacted: learning is about being strong and fearless. You must remember that not all season is going to be perfect, but you must find ways to make it work for you. You have what it takes to keep going and to not only conquer this “new norm” of learning but you also have what it takes to conquer all aspects of your life, be strong, be courageous and always be YOU. Also, listen to your body, do not forget to take care of yourself, especially in these times self-care is so important. Know that it is okay to not be okay all the time, but at the same time do not suffer in silence. This is a tough time for everyone around the world, but you can push through, we are going to get through this, one second, one minute, one hour, and one day at a time.

Rediscovering Inner Patience and Kindness

By: Erika Szabo - FYE Peer Mentor

My name is Erika Szabo, I am a part-time SSW student at Humber College - Lakeshore. In just over two semesters I will have graduated (slated for graduation end of summer semester), and I’m so happy with my experience returning to school after a 10-year break and change in career. There’s without a doubt a lot of stress that comes with being a mature student and the preconceived notion that there’s a timeline that goes along with attending college or university, but I firmly believe that there is no one way to make that journey, and that by taking it at our own pace we can find something meaningful and worthwhile every step of the way.

I know for myself, taking time to heal and process through past trauma with the support of individual therapy, group counselling, and close friends I was able to build resilience, self-awareness, and a myriad of grounding strategies to firmly assess my needs and boundaries. I had always envisioned returning to school, but was unsure what or where. It wasn’t until I took several large, slow steps that I confidently found the path I wanted to take my future -- one so close to home and familiar to me, I couldn’t imagine pursuing a career in

any other field.

After several semesters of developing that patience within myself to pursue this self-realized dream, another hurdle hit us all harder than we ever could have imagined - the COVID-19 pandemic. This stopped much of the world in its tracks and had us re-evaluate how to best navigate our once simpler lives. I remember how disappointed I was to have to cut my student placement short in the spring semester, after having already spent so much time honing in on my future at a non-profit organization supporting survivors of sexual violence. That commitment never changed, I am still volunteering my time there, but the format in which we collaborated shifted focus. Even as someone who considers themselves relatively tech savvy, the transition was difficult - quite possibly because change is rarely welcome when we are so comfortable with our routine! But there was no going back to the lives once lived when we continue to face what feel like insurmountable challenges whether regarding health and safety, politics or social action - they are all interconnected, and deeply affect one another.

It was at that point when I had to find my way back to that patient, kind, non-judgmental voice I strived to hear when I first returned to school at 30-years-old, a voice I seldom acknowledged. The collective stress and anxiety weighed down on my future expectations, but by taking a moment to truly listen and make space for the discomfort and overall vulnerable feeling I have been able to find a path that works for me in both my personal and academic life. Online learning isn't as bad as I had originally imagined it to be, so much so that I'm looking to pursue the rest of my education in this format! The freedom to study and tackle assignments at my own pace is most appealing to me, but I never would have known that had we not experienced hardships along the way.

I think through everything, it's important to remember that it's necessary for us to navigate those uncharted territories to find true belonging within ourselves, and adapt to our surroundings in a positive and meaningful way. It would be naive of me to say that the journey is a smooth trek; sometimes it's incredibly messy and full of hurdles, but also full of personal growth and strength. Perhaps we might find out more about ourselves during that journey, or maybe we better understand what it is we need from those close to us. The journey is ever-changing, always-growing, full of learning, and that's the real beauty we can take away from even the most difficult of times.

By: Zainab Qamar, FYE Senior Peer Mentor
Making the most of at-home learning

Studying online due to COVID-19 has been a whirlwind of emotional experiences this semester! As a 4th year mature student, I thrive on networking at my job on campus as an FYE Senior Peer Mentor. I was very disappointed initially when I found out that I would not have the opportunity to attend the campus in-person this year. However, I have found myself pleasantly surprised and moved by the resiliency, creativity, and motivation of my fellow

students and colleagues! They continue to make the most of the technological tools that are at our disposal and showcase their adaptability to the challenging times.

Think of the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic. People had to quarantine without phones, emails, access to television, computers or iPads. Can you imagine how difficult it must have been for them to communicate with family and friends or even stay in touch with the news updates? We are blessed to have access to modern technology that gives us access to innovative ideas of working together, facetimeing and talking to our loved ones, or home-schooling our children while staying safe in our homes. Many international students have access to Humber College programs that are completely online now. We do not have to worry about the time and money spent on travelling to campus and back. Home-schooling allows us so much flexibility with work and family. So, friends, let's make the most of these times and strive for the best in our studies!

Here are some tips on staying healthy and motivated as a Mature Student doing virtual schooling:

- Plan your week every Sunday according to your classes and assignments and set reminders on your phone for important deadlines.
- Call your friends once a week and get in touch with them about how they are doing. Check-in on each other and support one another.
- Play online games with them to have a good laugh and strengthen bonds in these tough times.
- Go for a walk with a family member, even if it is for a half-hour. Trust me, it can do wonders for your mental health.
- If you are a parent, make a schedule for your children's homework and extracurricular activities.
- Take out a day of the week to relax and de-stress when you do not focus on school or work.
- Participate in FREE FYE events that are hosted throughout the year and learn new innovative ways of staying in touch with your student community.
- Attend learning skills workshops that are designed to help you succeed this year.

All the best for the year 2020-2021! :)