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The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

Becoming the student again: A story of curiosity, crisis, and what higher education asks of the people it enrols

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Full-time employment, family responsibilities, and the cognitive demands of an unfamiliar discipline: this is the reality we navigated when we enrolled, out of curiosity, in an online cybersecurity microcredential at an Australian university in 2026. This paper presents a collaborative autoethnography drawing on structured reflective responses from two senior higher education professionals, a Senior Lecturer in Academic Development and a Manager of a research centre at a university, who studied together across 12 weeks of synchronous online learning while managing full-time professional roles. Framed through Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (1991), the paper examines five interconnected themes: curiosity as the entry point to autonomous motivation; the competence crisis triggered by disciplinary unfamiliarity; the critical role of peer relatedness and tutor responsiveness in sustaining persistence; the disruption to professional identity and assumptions about students; and the physical and emotional toll of study on pressured lives. The paper argues that what universities interpret as student disengagement is frequently time poverty, and that small acts of human responsiveness can be the difference between withdrawal and completion. It concludes that the most powerful insight into the student experience comes not from observing students, but from becoming one.

Keywords: collaborative autoethnography, mature-aged learners, online learning, self-determination theory, transformative learning, microcredential, reflection

Introduction and context

In early 2026, we enrolled in a 12-week online cybersecurity microcredential at an Australian university. Neither of us enrolled for career advancement. Neither of us needed the credential. We enrolled out of curiosity.

We are both senior higher education professionals in our mid-fifties. Kashmira is a Senior Lecturer in Academic Development at the University of New England; Diana is a Manager at La Trobe University. We both attended every synchronous session, four hours per week across 12 weeks, while managing full-time professional roles.

Kashmira enrolled after seeing the course title. Diana's enrolment was similarly unplanned. Neither sought a credential, a promotion, or a career change. The course was structured across two six-week blocks, separated by a two-week break, running approximately 15 weeks in total. The first six weeks covered "*Cybersecurity Fundamentals,*" and the second six weeks were "*Inside the hacker's mind*." We both found the first half very challenging and technical, to the extent that, from the very first week, we thought that we should capture our reflections.

We developed our reflections on our motivations, identity, learning and assessment experiences, peer relationships, physical and emotional challenges, and personal transformation. Our analysis is framed through two theoretical lenses. Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) identifies three core psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as fundamental to human motivation and persistence. Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (1991) frames the experience of having deeply held professional

assumptions dismantled by lived experience, and the perspective transformation that followed. This paper presents a collaborative autoethnography of what we found.

Methodology

This paper employs collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al., 2013) as its methodological approach. Collaborative autoethnography positions the personal experiences of two or more researchers as legitimate data, enabling systematic examination of shared and divergent experiences within a broader cultural and institutional context. It is particularly well-suited to this study because we were simultaneously participants in the experience being examined and researchers reflecting on its meaning.

Our data were generated through structured reflective responses to a common set of prompts developed collaboratively at the outset, derived from our shared experience and supplemented / ground-truthed by our reading on the experiences of mature-aged students. We each responded independently in writing at the end of each six-week block, producing two sets of reflections across the full course. We then analysed our responses thematically, identifying patterns of convergence and divergence across both accounts. Direct quotations from our reflections are used throughout to preserve the authenticity of each voice.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed. We each provided informed consent for the use of our reflective data. Identifying details of the course, institution, and teaching staff have been omitted to protect privacy. Institutional ethics approval was not required for this study as it employs a collaborative autoethnographic methodology where the co-authors serve as both the sole researchers and the primary subjects, involving no external human participants

Findings and discussion

Theme 1: Curiosity as the entry point – autonomy without agenda

Neither of us enrolled in the cybersecurity course for instrumental reasons. Kashmira was drawn by the course title, "Inside the Hacker's Mind": "*It ignited my curiosity, and I wanted to know how hackers think and act."* Diana's enrolment was similarly unplanned: "*I like a challenge, so I thought, why not*!" Neither of us sought a credential, a promotion, or a career change.

This positions us as intrinsically motivated adult learners, driven by what Self-Determination Theory identifies as autonomous motivation, the purest expression of the need for autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Yet this curiosity-driven entry also meant we both underestimated what we were taking on. As Kashmira reflects: "*I did not realise what I was taking on. I was excited. I did not take it seriously, and I thought that I could manage with my work, which later on proved to be a wrong assumption.*" Diana echoes this: "*I had thought that being a microcredential, it would be a fairly light touch. HOW WRONG I WAS."*

What this reveals is not a failure of preparation but a failure of expectation-setting. We were curious, capable, committed professionals, and the course still nearly broke us. The mismatch between what we anticipated and what we encountered was personal and structural. Personal, because, in Kashmira's words, "*I thought, I am an academic, and I can read and understand things more quickly;*" structural, since our expectations were rooted in how the course presented itself at enrolment and what it assumed about the people who would show up. There were no prerequisites for the course, but after attending the first week, we both struggled to cope with new concepts and ideas, let alone vocabulary.

Theme 2: The competence crisis – when expertise becomes irrelevant

We both entered the course carrying well-established professional identities, decades of expertise, and, in Kashmira's case, years of experience teaching university students. Neither of us was prepared for how completely that expertise would become irrelevant within the first week of study.

The vocabulary of cybersecurity was, as Kashmira described it, "*like alien to me*," and the casual reassurance from lecturers that the content was "very basic" deepened rather than relieved the sense of inadequacy. Failing a quiz for the first time in her life produced a response she had not anticipated: "*I never failed in tests in my life, and it made me temporarily depressed*." What troubled her most, on reflection, was the disproportionality of that response. Passing had never been the point. Yet the failure struck at something far more fundamental than a grade. Competence, she came to understand, is not merely a professional asset. It is part of identity.

Diana's experience mirrored this in texture if not in precise form. She described feeling "*old and stupid"* in the early sessions, surrounded by younger students who moved through the technical content with an ease she could only observe in the synchronous lab sessions. Her imposter feelings were persistent and specific: "*I felt like a fraud, really.*" The invigilated exam crystallised this most acutely: "*My brain seemed to empty, reading a question, thinking, I have no idea what OTP means...PANIC!!!"*

Both experiences reflect a profound disruption to the need for competence, one of the three foundational psychological needs identified by Ryan and Deci (2000). Critically, neither of us lacked motivation or effort. What we lacked was a prior framework for navigating genuinely unfamiliar disciplinary territory while simultaneously managing the weight of fully formed professional identities that offered no foothold in the new domain. Crawford et al. (2022) note that online learning environments can intensify feelings of isolation and invisibility for mature students navigating competing demands, and our experience of disciplinary alienation compounded this acutely.

What saved Kashmira at her most vulnerable point was a single act of unconditional responsiveness. When she called the unit coordinator to withdraw in week one, the coordinator encouraged her, expressed confidence in her ability, and reset the failed quiz without condition or paperwork. Kashmira subsequently achieved 80%. That one human decision was the difference between withdrawal and completion.

Theme 3: Relatedness as lifeline – the study partnership that made survival possible

If the competence crisis threatened to end our participation, it was the human connection that sustained it. After week two, Kashmira made a deliberate decision: "*I knew that working alone would not be effective, so I proposed to Diana to prepare and do quizzes together to increase accountability*." What emerged from those sessions was considerably more than accountability.

Diana reflects on what the partnership meant: "*Kashmira kept me from going into panic mode. She encouraged, she listened, she shared everything, not just course stuff. Otherwise, I think I would have felt a lot more isolated and lost.*" When another similarly aged student joined from week three, the three of us formed a small, sustaining community characterised by the complete absence of competition. "*We all wanted each other to excel, and we did everything we could to support each other"* (Kashmira).

This quality of peer relationship felt distinctly connected to our life stage. At 55, with nothing to prove and no credentials to compete for, collaboration was not a strategy. It was a natural expression of who we had become. Our quiz sessions regularly evolved into something richer: "*While we were doing the quizzes, we often got into discussions and shared experiences about cybersecurity breaches and almost forgot that we had a time limit to complete the quiz,*" Kashmira mentioned.

The tutor's relational presence was equally significant. Kashmira noted: "*My tutor maintained respect for me and my circumstances and was unfailingly kind to me, which I will never forget*." Ryan and Deci (2000) identify relatedness as a foundational condition for intrinsic motivation, and our experience illustrates this with precision: none of the connections that sustained us came through formal institutional mechanisms. It came through human kindness and a study partnership we created for ourselves.

Theme 4: The house of cards – premise reflection and identity disruption

This theme represents the paper's striking realisation. Both of us are experienced higher education professionals. Both of us believed, before this experience, that we understood our students. Both of us discovered we did not.

Kashmira articulates this with devastating clarity: "*I always felt that I was a good lecturer and I care about my students a lot. I came with the assumption that I understood my students very well. My experience of being a student defied my belief*." By weeks three and four, something shifted: "*All my wisdom and knowledge and research as an academic felt like a house of cards that collapsed by the reality I faced as a student.*"

The emotional weight of this realisation arrived unexpectedly. Kashmira said that one night after class, exhausted, she opened old student emails: "*It was around 11pm, and I was sitting on my sofa crying for a very long time reading my students' old emails*." What she felt was not guilt alone, but sudden, embodied understanding: "*I felt how exhausting it is to study full-time, work full-time and have a family. Even though I was always compassionate with my students, it felt cruel to expect deeper engagement from students when they are doing four units at a time and working and balancing families.*"

Diana, though not an academic, arrived at a parallel realisation around her interactions with students she encountered in her professional role: "*I really liked that I had a much better understanding of the challenges they face and regularly told them [when I met students in the cafe] I was in awe of them*." This is Mezirow's (1991) "premise reflection" fully realised, the examination and revision of the deepest assumptions upon which professional understanding has been built. We did not merely learn new content. We fundamentally restructured the frame through which we understood the people we work with. That restructuring did not come from research or professional development. It came from sitting in the student's chair.

Theme 5: The body under pressure – age, energy and the physical reality of study

What the literature on mature-aged online learners rarely captures is the physical cost of study. We can speak to it directly.

Both of us maintained full-time professional roles throughout the course. Kashmira's working days are regularly extended to nine or 10 hours. Into this, the course added four hours of synchronous attendance each week, plus readings, quizzes, and assignments in an entirely unfamiliar discipline. Diana protected her exercise routine as essential infrastructure and took four days of annual leave during the final assessment period simply to meet submission deadlines.

The physical toll was real and cumulative. Kashmira describes settling into a synchronous session with her back aching, intending to lie down and listen, and waking 15 minutes later to find the class continuing without her: "*I slept in the process*." Diana describes waking at 2 a.m., turning assessments over in her mind, dreaming about cybersecurity concepts, and arriving at weekends with no energy for anything beyond the bare minimum.

Both of us were explicit that these experiences were not primarily age-related. They were the predictable consequence of lives with no slack left in them. What age did bring, unexpectedly, was a different relationship to competition and a deeper capacity for peer generosity.

The most significant insight to emerge from this theme is the reframing of student disengagement. Kashmira articulates it with precision: "*I always thought that when students are not engaging deeply with learning, they are not interested in learning, and they just want a degree. My belief was broken as a result of my experience as a student. I now understand that students who can't engage with content as much as I would want them to, it's not that they don't want to engage. They do not have that much time.*" We both had been sincere, curious, committed students who attended every class and genuinely wanted to learn. Our circumstances simply did not allow for the depth of engagement our own courses had expected of students. Waterhouse et al. (2022) confirm that competing life responsibilities, not lack of motivation or capability, are the primary drivers of non-

completion among mature-aged online learners. Our experience did not just validate that finding. It made it personal.

Implications

Our experience is not generalisable. Two people, one course, one moment in time. But autoethnography does not claim generalisability. It claims honesty and the particular authority of experience (Chang et al., 2013).

What we can say with confidence is that the challenges we encountered – the competence crisis, the time poverty, the physical exhaustion, and the collapse of professional assumptions – are not unique to us. They are well documented in the literature on mature-aged online learners (Crawford et al., 2022; Stone, 2022; Waterhouse et al., 2022). What we want to add to these accounts is our intensely felt personal experience: the inside view, the texture and weight of what those challenges actually feel like when you are living them, and what a difference small acts of human responsiveness can make when they arrive at the right moment.

For course coordinators, learning designers, and institutional leaders, we would simply ask this: design for the learner who is actually in the room. Not the assumed student with available time and an unencumbered identity, but the one who arrives at a 7 p.m. synchronous session already exhausted, who fails a quiz and feels it as a personal collapse, and who stays because someone was kind enough to reset it without asking why. That learner is not an exception. For a growing proportion of Australian higher education enrolments, that learner is the norm (Australian Universities Accord, 2024).

Conclusion

We began this paper as two curious professionals who enrolled in a cybersecurity course because the title caught our attention. We end it as two educators whose understanding of their students has been permanently and irreversibly changed.

What we did not expect was how quickly expertise becomes irrelevant in an unfamiliar domain, how deeply a failed quiz can strike at identity, how much a study partnership can mean when everything else feels precarious, and how profoundly exhausting it is to be a student while simultaneously being everything else that life requires you to be. We knew these things intellectually, but we did not know them in our bodies. That is the gap this paper is attempting to close. Not through recommendations, not through a new framework, but through the simple and radical act of telling the truth about what the student experience can look like from the inside.

Mezirow (1991) describes transformative learning as a fundamental restructuring of the frame through which we understand the world. Both of us completed the course. Both of us passed. And both of us emerged not merely having learned something about cybersecurity but having learned something we could not have learned any other way: that the students we design for, teach, and sometimes judge for their disengagement are, in the main, doing the best they can with lives that have very little slack left in them.

Universities that wish to genuinely support mature-aged online learners must begin where this paper began: by taking seriously what the student experience actually feels like and designing their responses accordingly. The most powerful professional development we have ever undertaken did not come from a workshop. It came from becoming a student again, at 55, in a discipline we knew nothing about, and staying long enough to let it change us.

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