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Evaluating Teaching Methods for Mature Learners: A Mixed-Methods Investigation of Learning Preferences in Higher Education

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Abstract

The increasing participation of mature learners in higher education requires teaching approaches that balance structured and participatory methods to accommodate their experiences and responsibilities. Defined as individuals aged 21 or older returning to formal education, mature students bring valuable professional and life experience but often face challenges with academic skills, time constraints and external commitments. This study examines effective teaching strategies, assessing preferences for storytelling, case studies, Socratic dialogue, didactic teaching and debates through Knowles' andragogy and Kolb's experiential learning model. A mixed-methods approach combined quantitative data from 138 Higher National Diploma students with qualitative insights from seven interviews. Findings highlight a strong preference for interactive methods linking theory to practice, while structured teaching remains valuable when integrated effectively. Using performance management principles, this research informs curriculum development and institutional policies, advocating for adaptable teaching strategies that enhance engagement, inclusivity and academic success for mature students.

1. Introduction

The educational needs of mature students have historically been neglected, despite increasing enrolment in higher education (Hashimoto, 1985). Research on mature learners became a priority in higher education policy from the 1990s onwards. Defined as individuals aged 21 or older who return to formal education after a break, mature learners bring life experience and intrinsic motivation alongside specific challenges (Uddin, 2022). Their increasing presence necessitates evidence-based teaching approaches that address academic skill development and external responsibilities (Merriam, 2001; Jarvis, 2010). Higher education policy has gradually acknowledged mature learners, but research on effective instructional methods remains inconsistent (Ellis, 2022). While these students excel at applying theoretical knowledge to practice, gaps in academic preparedness can contribute to withdrawal from programmes (Risquez et al., 2007). Mature learners frequently balance education with employment, financial obligations and family responsibilities (Nguyen & Tran, 2016; Kasworm, 2008; Uddin, 2022; Uddin et al., 2023). Without structured evaluation, institutions risk adopting teaching models that do not address the needs of this demographic (Merriam & Bierema, 2020; Trowler et al., 2021). Performance management enables institutions to assess and refine instructional approaches through measurable evaluation of engagement, retention and learning outcomes (Ellis, 2022). By employing structured performance measures, institutions can ensure that teaching methods are assessed based on their actual impact rather than assumptions about their effectiveness.

This study examines mature learners' preferences for four teaching methods: storytelling and case studies, Socratic dialogue, didactic teaching and debates. Storytelling and Socratic dialogue are explored for their ability to enhance engagement and practical learning, while didactic teaching and debates are assessed for clarity and critical thinking development. Additional approaches, including problem-based learning, reflective practices, project-based learning and mentorship, are also considered to strengthen the analysis of teaching effectiveness. By identifying preferred teaching strategies, this research provides empirical evidence to enhance pedagogical approaches for mature learners. Balancing external responsibilities with academic success is central to student retention and progression in higher education. Performance management enables continuous assessment and improvement of teaching strategies, ensuring that methods are measurable, adaptable and relevant to student success indicators. This study contributes to the development of instructional practice through the evaluation of research-based and practice-oriented teaching strategies. By integrating performance management principles, it provides empirical data to support improvements that enhance engagement and academic achievement among mature students.

2. Literature Review

Performance management in higher education has been widely examined, particularly in relation to mature learners who bring varied experiences, expectations and motivations to academic settings (Xu & Zhang, 2016). Research suggests that these learners engage well with teaching staff, relate their studies to the professional world and apply theoretical concepts to practical situations (Kenny, 2012; Quinn & Rodrigues, 2018;). However, they often encounter difficulties with academic skills and require sustained and flexible support throughout their studies (Kankkunen, 2001; 2004). To address these challenges, higher education institutions must use teaching methods that combine structured learning with interactive and participatory approaches. Studies indicate that mature learners benefit from teaching strategies that prioritise practical applications. Storytelling, case studies and Socratic dialogue have been shown to be particularly effective, as they allow students to apply prior knowledge and relate learning to real-life scenarios (Alvares & de la Rosa, 2019). However, past research has often treated mature learners as a homogenous group, failing to consider the diversity of their professional backgrounds, motivations and previous educational experiences. These approaches ensure that

theoretical material is not presented in isolation but remains connected to lived experiences, making it more meaningful. Research suggests that students appreciate these methods, particularly storytelling, which can illustrate abstract concepts through relatable examples. Knowles' (1980) theory of andragogy reinforces this point, arguing that adult learners benefit from recognition of their past experiences and self-directed learning styles (Knowles et al., 2015).

While participatory approaches are valued, structured teaching remains an essential part of higher education. Mayer (2008) argues that structured teaching provides a foundation that allows students to engage effectively with further interactive activities, including problem-solving exercises and discussions. However, a rigid structure alone may not fully address the needs of mature learners, who often prefer learning experiences that include collaboration and reflective engagement (Mezirow, 1997; Brookfield, 2005). Socratic dialogue is particularly relevant in this regard, encouraging critical thinking through guided questioning and discussion (Paul & Elder, 2007). Wenger (1998) and Bensimon (2005) argue that when students actively participate in discussions and co-construct knowledge, their engagement and performance improve. Debate has also been explored in relation to its role in education, with Hanan & Reisman (2012) asserting that it promotes analytical thinking and deeper engagement with subject material. However, research by Ouellette (2006) suggests that debate-based learning may discourage participation among mature learners who prefer collaborative rather than competitive environments. Despite these studies, gaps remain in understanding how teaching methods influence long-term academic and professional outcomes. While existing literature assesses immediate learning engagement, little research explores how these methods impact student retention, career advancement and lifelong learning habits. Their research suggests that debates require students to evaluate multiple viewpoints and refine their reasoning skills. However, not all students perceive debates positively. Some have noted that debates can be confrontational and discourage participation, particularly when collaboration is prioritised over competition. Nguyen & Tran (2016) further argue that educational environments must balance challenge with inclusivity to ensure that students feel comfortable engaging. They also highlight that mature learners often manage multiple responsibilities, including employment and family commitments, which can affect their ability to participate fully. Many students express a preference for teaching approaches that offer flexibility and adaptability. Flexible scheduling, the use of digital tools and opportunities for asynchronous learning have been identified as effective methods for supporting students with additional responsibilities.

Reflective learning is another essential component of effective teaching for mature students. Trowler et al. (2021) posit that encouraging students to reflect on their learning helps them recognise strengths and areas for improvement. Kezar & Holcombe (2019) highlight the value of shared leadership in higher education, calling for greater collaboration between educators and administrators to create inclusive teaching practices. Bensimon (2005) similarly argues that educational institutions must continually adapt to ensure equitable learning opportunities. Wenger's (1998) research supports this, suggesting that education functions best as a collaborative process in which learners engage with one another to construct understanding. Creating opportunities for reflective learning ensures that students engage more effectively with their studies, improving retention and academic performance. Assessment and feedback play a significant role in supporting mature learners. Ewell (2010) argues that assessment strategies should prioritise clear and practical feedback, helping students to improve their understanding and performance. Many participants in recent studies have stressed the importance of constructive feedback, with one noting that '*feedback helps me see where I'm going wrong and how to improve*'. This supports with research suggesting that timely and detailed feedback enhances motivation and confidence (Jarvis, 2010). Assessment methods must be designed to provide clarity while also acknowledging students' previous experiences and self-directed approaches to learning.

Experiential learning (Kolb et al., 2001) has been widely recommended as a way to improve outcomes for mature students. Boud & Solomon (2001) emphasise the benefits of real-world applications and collaborative activities, which help students to connect academic theories with their own professional and personal experiences. Illeris (2003) argues that combining structured instruction with practical activities caters to varied learning preferences, allowing students to engage more effectively with course material. Brookfield (2005) similarly advocates for reflective and interactive teaching practices that promote engagement and critical thinking. Wenger's (1998) research on learning communities reinforces this approach, highlighting the value of shared learning in knowledge development. Recent studies have explored how external factors shape mature learners' experiences. Papé, *et al.* (2021) examined the transition to digital learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, finding that while online learning increased accessibility, it also introduced challenges related to engagement and motivation. Bhandari (2024) highlights the importance of flexible learning models in helping students balance academic work with professional and personal commitments. The role of technology in higher education continues to expand but there is limited research on how digital learning affects long-term academic success for mature students.

Despite the substantial research available, several areas remain underexplored. There is little evidence regarding the long-term effects of different teaching strategies on student retention, academic progression and career outcomes. While studies highlight the

immediate effectiveness of storytelling, case studies and Socratic dialogue (Knowles et al., 2015; Alvares & de la Rosa, 2019), few have investigated how these approaches influence students beyond their time in higher education. This limits understanding of how different methods contribute to knowledge retention and professional development. Research often treats mature learners as a single category, overlooking the considerable differences within this group. Many studies have focused on general challenges, including balancing education with work and family commitments (Nguyen & Tran, 2016; Schuetze & Slowey, 2019), yet there is limited research on specific subsets, including those transitioning from vocational training or returning to education after long career breaks. A more detailed examination of these varied experiences would provide a clearer understanding of how different groups respond to teaching methods. While digital tools and flexible learning models have become increasingly relevant, there is a lack of research on how these developments affect long-term engagement and academic achievement. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of online learning (Papé, *et al.*, 2021), but there is little evidence on how mature learners continue to engage with digital education in the post-pandemic period. Future research could explore which digital tools and online learning structures best support mature students' needs. Assessment and feedback have been widely discussed (Brookfield, 2005; Ewell, 2010), but there has been little focus on how different forms of feedback, including peer assessment and self-assessment, influence mature learners' motivation and academic success. Most research has examined traditional feedback mechanisms, without fully considering how previous experiences and independent learning styles shape engagement with assessment processes.

3. Quantitative Methods

A non-experimental research design was employed to examine the teaching preferences of mature learners enrolled in Higher National Diploma (HND) programmes at a college in East London during the 2020–2021 academic year. The study utilised a structured questionnaire survey distributed to 168 participants, achieving a 100% response rate. The survey was designed to assess preferences for five teaching methods: storytelling, case studies, Socratic dialogue, didactic teaching and debates. These methods were selected based on their connection to adult learning theories, particularly Knowles' andragogy and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model. The questionnaire was structured to measure independent variables using nominal scales, while ordinal scales recorded students' teaching preferences. A 5-point Likert scale assessed the importance of each teaching method, ranging from '*Not Important*' to '*Extremely Important'*. This approach allowed for a detailed analysis of mature learners' opinions on teaching methods. To ensure statistical accuracy, the collected data was processed using SPSS Version 20, which provided structured analysis through descriptive statistics, non-parametric tests and bivariate analysis. Descriptive statistics summarised responses using measures of central tendency, including mean, median and mode, allowing for identification of patterns in students' responses.

Non-parametric tests, including Chi-square tests, were used to determine whether associations existed between independent variables (e.g., age, ethnicity, prior education) and dependent variables (teaching method preferences). Given the ordinal nature of the primary data, non-parametric techniques were employed rather than parametric alternatives, ensuring statistical validity without assuming equal intervals between response categories. Bivariate analysis was conducted using cross-tabulations and reduction-in-error measures to explore associations between categorical variables. One such measure, Lambda (λ), was used to determine the strength of associations between demographic factors and teaching method preferences. Directional measures further examined the degree and direction of these relationships. These analytical techniques contributed to a detailed understanding of whether specific teaching methods appealed to particular student demographics.

From a performance management perspective, the methodological approach ensured structured evaluation of teaching preferences, allowing institutions to assess instructional effectiveness systematically. By using quantitative methods, the study provided a data-driven approach to understanding the role of different teaching strategies in engaging mature learners. This analysis enabled evidence-based adjustments to teaching practices, ensuring that instructional methods were assessed based on measured engagement rather than subjective assumptions. Performance management in education requires measurable indicators to evaluate teaching effectiveness. The application of quantitative analysis allowed for a systematic approach to gauging student engagement, helping educators identify which teaching approaches resonated with mature learners. The absence of reliance on qualitative interpretation alone ensured that the study's conclusions were grounded in quantifiable trends rather than anecdotal observations.

The use of descriptive statistics provided a clear summary of teaching method preferences, while bivariate analysis enabled the examination of relationships between different variables. This structured approach provided reliable evidence to inform teaching strategies for mature learners. By measuring patterns of engagement, the study supported the application of quantitative tools in performance management, ensuring that decisions about teaching effectiveness were based on empirical data rather than subjective judgments. Despite its methodological strengths, certain limitations were acknowledged. The study relied on self-reported

preferences, which reflect perceptions of effectiveness rather than actual learning outcomes. The ordinal scale, while suitable for ranking preferences, did not capture the precise magnitude of differences between responses. Future studies could enhance these findings by integrating experimental research or longitudinal tracking of academic performance to establish a stronger link between teaching preferences and learning outcomes.

4. Qualitative Methods

Following the quantitative analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted to examine mature learners' teaching preferences in greater detail. Seven participants, representing various stages of their studies, were selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity. This phase adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, which seeks to understand participants' lived experiences and the meanings they assign to them (Polkinghorne, 1996). The interview guide was developed using semi-structured open-ended questions designed to encourage detailed responses about students' motivations, challenges and preferred teaching methods. The questions were structured to allow participants to explain their views in their own words, ensuring that the data captured their individual experiences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Probing techniques were used to encourage further elaboration and clarity, ensuring that responses provided deeper reflections on their learning experiences. A three-stage coding process was used to analyse the data. Open coding was applied to identify key themes and concepts, followed by axial coding, which established relationships between these themes. Selective coding was then used to synthesise categories into a core narrative, ensuring that the study's objectives were addressed (Charmas, 2006). Pre-set codes derived from the survey instrument were applied to maintain consistency between the quantitative and qualitative phases. This integration strengthened the methodological validity of the study, allowing for cross-verification of findings and reinforcing the credibility and reliability of the research (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010).

Performance management in education depends on evaluating teaching strategies beyond statistical patterns, ensuring that qualitative feedback is incorporated into decision-making. While quantitative analysis identifies trends in teaching preferences, qualitative methods provide detailed explanations of why students engage with particular teaching approaches. By including student perspectives, performance management can be refined through a structured review of direct experiences, allowing institutions to make evidence-based adjustments to teaching practices. The application of qualitative methods in performance management ensures that teaching effectiveness is assessed through student engagement and perceived relevance rather than relying solely on numerical indicators. By capturing the rationale behind teaching preferences, this approach allows for a continuous review of instructional quality, ensuring that teaching methods are reviewed in response to student experiences rather than assumptions about effective practice. To enhance the accuracy of data interpretation, recurring signals, proxy words and key phrases were identified within the responses to determine the significance participants attached to specific teaching methods (Cohen et al., 2007). The study maintained methodological consistency by integrating qualitative findings with the quantitative phase, ensuring that student feedback was examined in a structured and systematic manner.

5. Quantitative Findings and Analysis

Table 1 summarises the demographic details of the 168 participants in the study. The majority of respondents (82.1%) were students, while the remainder included teaching staff, including lecturers, personal tutors and academic support staff. Most participants (71.4%) were pursuing Level 5 studies, with smaller proportions at Levels 4 (16.1%) and 6 (12.5%). The majority (76.8%) completed their prior education in the UK. Participants ranged in age from 21 to over 60, with the largest groups being those aged 31–40 (38.1%) and 41–50 (26.8%). Ethnic representation showed the highest proportion identifying as white (45.8%), followed by British Bangladeshi (31%).

Table 1
Demographic background of the respondents (n = 168)

Variable	Values	N	%
Role	Student	138	82.1
	Student Support Lecturer	12	7.1
	Lecturer	4	2.4
	Non-Academic staff	14	8.3
Level of HE	Level 4	27	16.1
	Level 5	120	71.4
	Level 6	21	12.5
School education	UK	129	76.8
	UK and overseas	10	6.0
	Overseas	29	17.3
Age	21–30 Years	43	25.6
	31–40 Years	64	38.1
	41–50 Years	45	26.8
	51–60 Years	11	6.5
	60 + Years	5	3.0
Ethnicity	White	77	45.8
	British-Bangladeshi	52	31.0
	British-Indian	1	0.6
	British-Pakistani	12	7.1
	British-Asian background	5	3.0
	Black British-African	7	4.2
	Black British-Caribbean	3	1.8
	Other Black background	1	0.6
	Information refused/Unknown	2	1.2
	Other	8	4.8

Table 2 shows participants' preferences for various teaching methods. Socratic dialogue and storytelling/case studies were rated as 'very important' or 'extremely important' by 62.5% and 60.7% of respondents, respectively. Confrontational debates and didactic teaching received lower but still significant ratings, with 55.7% and 53.6% indicating these methods were 'very important' or 'extremely important'.

Table 2
Perceived importance of different teaching methods

Teaching methods	N	NI	NVI	SI	VI	EI
Storytelling / Case Study	168	0.6	0.6	16.7	60.7	21.4
Socratic dialogue/questions	168	0.0	1.2	12.5	62.5	23.8
Confrontational and Debate	168	0.6	2.4	16.8	55.7	24.6
Didactic teaching (slides/notes)	168	0.0	3.0	16.7	53.6	26.8
Note: NI = Not Important, NVI = Not Very Important, SI = Somewhat Important, VI = Very Important, EI = Extremely Important.						

The measures of central tendency in Table 3 demonstrate a high degree of consistency in participants' preferences for the four teaching methods examined. The mean, median and mode values for storytelling, Socratic dialogue, debates and didactic teaching all cluster at 4 on a 5-point scale, indicating strong agreement among respondents. This suggests that mature learners regard these methods as effective, with no substantial divergence in preference levels. A key novel contribution of this study is the equal valuation of interactive and structured approaches. The median value of 4 across all methods indicates that mature learners do not favour one type of teaching over another but instead see practical value in both interactive and structured delivery. While storytelling and Socratic dialogue facilitate engagement through discussion and application, didactic teaching remains useful for clarity and structure and debates support the development of analytical reasoning. This contradicts prior research (Illeris, 2018; Brookfield, 2019; Merriam & Bierema, 2020) that suggests mature learners prefer participatory methods over traditional instruction, demonstrating that a balanced integration of methods is necessary.

Table 3
Measures of central tendency for perceived importance of teaching methods

Teaching methods	Mean	Median	Mode
Storytelling / Case Study	4.02	4	4
Socratic dialogue/questions	4.09	4	4
Confrontational and Debate	4.01	4	4
Didactic teaching (slides/notes)	4.04	4	4

The absence of statistically significant associations between independent variables (age, ethnicity and prior education) and teaching method preferences is a further novel insight. The findings suggest that mature learners across different backgrounds evaluate teaching effectiveness in similar ways. This challenges the assumption that demographic characteristics influence teaching preferences, instead supporting the idea that effective instructional methods can be applied consistently across diverse learner groups. The ordinal nature of the data limits the interpretability of mean values, as the intervals between scale points are not equal. The median provides a more reliable summary, as it reflects the most central response without assuming equidistant gaps between preference levels. The mode confirms the median's validity, showing that the most frequently selected rating for all teaching methods was four (4). These measures confirm widespread recognition of the value of multiple teaching strategies, without clear differentiation between them. The low variability in responses contradicts the expectation that mature learners exclusively favour interactive learning. The findings show that didactic methods retain relevance when used alongside experiential approaches. This supports the argument that educators should not replace traditional teaching entirely but rather integrate structured content delivery with participatory techniques. The data suggests that lecture-based instruction remains effective when combined with engagement-focused strategies.

6. Qualitative Findings and Analysis

Analysis of Teaching Methods and Preferences Across Respondents

The qualitative analysis provided detailed insights into mature students' preferences for various teaching methods. These preferences were ranked and scored based on participants' responses, as summarised in Table 4. Each teaching method was evaluated on a scale from 1 to 10, with higher scores reflecting stronger preferences. The table also includes a narrative summary elaborating on respondents' viewpoints.

Table 4
Qualitative Ranking

Student	Storytelling / Case Study	Socratic Dialogue / Questions and Discussion	Confron-tation and Debate	Didactic Teaching (Slides/ Notes)	Problem-Based Learning (PBL)	Reflective Learning Practices	Project-Based Learning	Mentorship and Peer Learning	Narrative Evaluation
St2	7.5 (Rank: 4)	9.5 (Rank: 1)	5.5 (Rank: 7)	3.0 (Rank: 8)	8.5 (Rank: 2)	8.0 (Rank: 3)	7.0 (Rank: 5)	6.5 (Rank: 6)	Prefers a mix of interactive methods, especially Socratic dialogue. Reflects on life experience, dislikes passive methods.
St3	8.0 (Rank: 2)	8.5 (Rank: 1)	6.0 (Rank: 6)	4.5 (Rank: 7)	7.0 (Rank: 4)	5.5 (Rank: 5)	7.5 (Rank: 3)	6.0 (Rank: 6)	Prefers group study and teacher interaction. Values real-life examples and collaborative learning.
St6	7.0 (Rank: 3)	8.0 (Rank: 1)	6.5 (Rank: 4)	5.0 (Rank: 5)	7.5 (Rank: 2)	6.5 (Rank: 4)	6.0 (Rank: 6)	7.0 (Rank: 3)	Emphasises clarity from teachers and Q&A sessions. Enjoys active discussions and case-based examples.
St4	8.5 (Rank: 1)	7.5 (Rank: 2)	5.0 (Rank: 5)	4.0 (Rank: 7)	6.0 (Rank: 4)	6.5 (Rank: 3)	5.5 (Rank: 6)	6.5 (Rank: 3)	Prefers engaging real-life examples, introductory and recap segments, with less emphasis on passive learning.
St5	7.5 (Rank: 2)	8.5 (Rank: 1)	5.0 (Rank: 6)	6.0 (Rank: 4)	6.5 (Rank: 3)	6.0 (Rank: 4)	5.5 (Rank: 6)	6.5 (Rank: 3)	Strong preference for Q&A with teachers. Values joint responsibility in learning and prefers reflective discussions.
St7	9.0 (Rank: 1)	8.0 (Rank: 2)	8.0 (Rank: 2)	4.0 (Rank: 6)	7.5 (Rank: 3)	6.0 (Rank: 5)	7.0 (Rank: 4)	6.5 (Rank: 5)	Combines storytelling and debate. Thrives in collaborative, peer-led learning but critiques unengaging

Student	Storytelling / Case Study	Socratic Dialogue / Questions and Discussion	Confron-tation and Debate	Didactic Teaching (Slides/ Notes)	Problem-Based Learning (PBL)	Reflective Learning Practices	Project-Based Learning	Mentorship and Peer Learning	Narrative Evaluation
									didactic approaches.
St8	8.5 (Rank: 2)	9.0 (Rank: 1)	8.0 (Rank: 3)	5.0 (Rank: 5)	7.0 (Rank: 4)	6.5 (Rank: 5)	6.0 (Rank: 6)	6.5 (Rank: 5)	Prefers face-to-face, interactive learning with a focus on group study and discussions over passive lecturing.

The scoring system ranged from 1 to 10. Scores of 9–10 indicated a strong, explicit preference with repeated emphasis and detailed reasoning. Scores of 7–8 represented a positive inclination with moderate elaboration, while scores of 5–6 suggested neutral or conditional acceptance. Lower scores, ranging from 1 to 4, indicated a clear dislike or criticism of the method. Respondents' preferences were then ranked based on their scores across different teaching methods. Methods with the highest scores were given priority in the final rankings.

Each respondent's scores were accompanied by clear justifications, reflecting their preferences for various teaching methods. St2 rated Socratic Dialogue highly at 9.5, praising its interactive and engaging qualities, while Didactic Teaching received a low score of 3.0 due to its passive nature and lack of engagement. St3 preferred Group Study, which scored 8.5, emphasising the benefits of learning collaboratively with both peers and teachers. However, Confrontational Debate was rated 6.0, as its intensity and limited relevance to his learning environment made it less favourable. St6 expressed a preference for Questions and Discussion, scoring 8.0 and Case Studies, which received 7.0, while demonstrating less enthusiasm for methods with limited interaction, like slides, which scored 5.0. St4 valued Storytelling at 8.5 for its real-life relevance and the opportunity for periodic recaps, while Reflective Practices were rated 6.5. Debate was scored lower at 5.0 due to challenges related to timing. St5 prioritised Questions and Answers, giving it 8.5 and highlighting the teacher's depth of knowledge as a significant advantage. Group Discussions, while still appreciated, were rated lower at 6.5, as they offered less direct interaction compared to Q&A. St7 gave high ratings to Storytelling (9.0) and Debate (8.0), appreciating their practical application and ability to encourage critical thinking, while Slides and Notes scored 4.0, perceived as monotonous. Finally, St8 highlighted Interactive Discussions (9.0) and Group Studies (8.5) as preferred methods for their collaborative and engaging qualities, rating Didactic Methods lower at 5.0 for their lack of interaction.

In the qualitative analysis, direct quotes were highly valued, as verbatim statements provided clear insights into preferences. For instance, explicit comments like *'I like discussions, they make me learn better'* were given greater weight compared to vague or generalised preferences. Additionally, qualitative detail played a role in scoring; for example, St4's preference for storytelling was strongly associated with its motivational value and relevance to real-life scenarios, warranting a higher score. Efforts were made to ensure consistency across responses by adjusting scores to reflect broader patterns in adult learning preferences.

Analysis of Teaching Methods

Storytelling and case studies were highly regarded for their ability to connect theoretical concepts with practical applications. St4 described them as *'practical and encouraging,'* highlighting their motivational impact, while St7 emphasised their relevance to real-world scenarios, stating they *'demonstrate how concepts work in practice.'* St3 appreciated their usefulness in understanding essay-based topics, noting their ability to anchor abstract ideas in tangible examples. St2 valued their capacity to make lessons memorable, stressing the importance of engaging content to sustain interest. These methods were consistently praised for helping students link academic theories to real-life situations, making them a preferred approach for promoting both understanding and engagement. Similarly, Socratic dialogue and structured discussions emerged as a favoured method for their interactive and clarifying nature. St2 described the participatory element, stating, *'The conversation goes on and you learn a lot from that,'* while St5 found them effective for delving deeper into lessons with expert guidance. St8 highlighted their role in promoting lucidity, remarking, *'Questions and discussions clarify complex topics.'* St3 observed that group discussions fostered collaborative understanding through collective

input. These interactive methods were particularly valued for encouraging active engagement and creating opportunities for shared exploration of ideas.

Debate was acknowledged for its ability to stimulate critical thinking, though it elicited mixed reactions due to its intensity. St8 noted that debates *'helped us understand the topic better by seeing different sides,'* and St7 appreciated their role in *'challenging misconceptions and encouraging peer learning.'* However, St2 expressed a preference for less confrontational formats, favouring reflective discussions over adversarial debates. Despite its analytical benefits, the intensity of debates made them less universally favoured. Conversely, problem-based learning (PBL) was commended for its focus on collaboration and practical application. St4 valued group tasks for *'reinforcing learning and receiving feedback,'* while St7 noted that *'collaboration helped address misunderstandings and strengthened understanding.'* St8 highlighted PBL's ability to *'connect theory with practice through structured discussions,'* recognising its relevance to real-world applications. Respondents found PBL an effective approach for fostering deeper engagement, teamwork and practical problem-solving skills.

Reflective learning practices and project-based learning were also appreciated for their emphasis on meaningful engagement and retention. St2 noted that *'reflecting on experiences helps in understanding better,'* while St5 emphasised questioning concepts and exploring them beyond the classroom. St4 recommended *'regular recaps to reinforce learning and clarify key points.'* These reflective approaches encouraged students to link prior knowledge with new material, promoting deeper understanding. Similarly, project-based learning allowed students to collaborate and actively participate. St3 highlighted the dual benefits of *'gaining knowledge from both teachers and peers,'* while St7 observed that *'group members challenge each other and learn together.'* St2 noted the importance of inclusive participation, which enriched the overall learning process. Mentorship and peer learning complemented these methods, with St7 observing, *'You can learn from peers who might excel in specific areas,'* and St8 highlighting *'collective problem-solving or teacher guidance.'* St2 stressed the importance of active listening, stating that *'careful attention to others' contributions facilitated significant learning.'* These methods fostered a supportive learning environment, enabling students to enhance their understanding through shared knowledge and collaboration.

Key Themes

The analysis of students' preferences for teaching methods reveals three interconnected themes of collaboration, feedback and encouragement. These elements dominate the learning experiences and aspirations of the respondents, shaping their perceptions of effective education. While other aspects, including questioning, case studies, group participation and practical application, enriched the discussion, they serve to illustrate the significance of the three principal themes. Together, these elements form a cohesive understanding of what mature students value in their academic journey.

Collaboration was consistently highlighted as both a method and an outcome of effective education, with students emphasising the value of working together to share ideas, compare progress and learn from one another's experiences. St3 noted, *'Group study is best [for] gaining things, not only from teacher but also from other students, [and] I can gain knowledge'.* Group activities were seen as offering a mix of competition and cooperation, where students could measure their understanding against that of their peers while benefiting from mutual support. This competitive yet cooperative environment motivated students to engage deeply with their studies. St5 remarked, *'I prefer being taught in class in a group of people having a group discussion, to see how much each of us understands the topic'.* Others valued the cooperative aspect, where peers contributed to collective understanding, as expressed by St7 *'The group should help the group members to understand… I learn from my colleagues who are far better students and I picked up a lot of sources from them.'.* This interplay of cooperation and competition illustrates the multifaceted benefits of collaborative learning, with students frequently mentioning how they gained insights from their peers' experiences.

The value of collaboration was closely linked to the role of feedback, which emerged as another critical theme. Students identified feedback as a fundamental aspect of their academic progress, valuing it most when it was specific, timely and actionable. Immediate feedback during activities was particularly appreciated, with St4 sharing, *'I enjoy it when they gave us a task and we wrote it down on a note and before the end of the class, we presented what we learned so [the teacher] could realise actually we learned something from today's class'.* This practice not only reinforced learning but also instilled confidence. Feedback was also seen as a mechanism for improvement, helping students identify strengths and areas for further development. St6 emphasised the value of teacher-led feedback, stating, *'I prefer the teacher taking [and giving] the feedback'.* The preference for formative feedback underscores its role in guiding continuous improvement and providing assurance during the learning process. In collaborative settings, peer feedback complemented teacher input, offering students an additional perspective on their progress. The combination of peer and teacher

feedback reinforced the importance of interaction in the learning process, with students appreciating how it enhanced their understanding and confidence. The emphasis on actionable feedback highlights its dual function as both a motivator and a guide, enabling students to navigate academic challenges effectively while recognising their achievements.

Encouragement, closely tied to feedback and collaboration, was seen as essential in maintaining motivation and engagement, particularly for mature students balancing multiple responsibilities. Respondents described how positive reinforcement and a supportive atmosphere boosted their confidence and willingness to participate. St4 remarked, *'I'll say encouragement and a friendly environment I was expecting from a teacher'.* Encouragement was particularly important in building trust between students and tutors, with some likening effective educators to mentors. St6 described the ideal tutor as, *'like a parent who explains things step by step'.* While mature learners often value their independence, this analogy reflects a desire for structured guidance and clear explanations. Encouragement was also seen in the practice of providing summaries at the end of lessons, which reinforced understanding and demonstrated the tutor's commitment to ensuring comprehension. St4 suggested, *'Like 20 minutes at the end, if he gave us a recap about, that is what he's done well'*. These synopses provided clarity and serve as a reminder of the lesson's key points, supporting retention. Furthermore, the ability of tutors to adapt their teaching style to individual needs was seen as a form of encouragement, offering additional support where necessary without undermining students' independence. By balancing structured guidance with respect for students' maturity, tutors created environments that were both challenging and supportive.

The interconnection of collaboration, feedback and encouragement demonstrates their collective importance in shaping the educational experiences of mature learners. Collaborative activities often provided opportunities for peer feedback and shared encouragement, fostering a culture of mutual support. Feedback reinforced collaborative efforts by ensuring students understood their contributions and could build on them. Encouragement, in turn, maintained motivation and engagement, enabling students to navigate their studies with confidence. Together, these themes reflect the students' aspirations for an education that values interaction, supports their growth and recognises their contributions, creating a foundation for meaningful and effective learning experiences.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

The study demonstrates the importance of considering the unique strengths and challenges of mature learners in designing teaching strategies. Methods that connect theory with practice, encourage collaboration and provide timely feedback and encouragement are particularly effective for this group. While participatory methods are widely preferred, structured approaches, when combined with interactive elements, remain valuable as foundational tools for learning. Findings indicate the necessity for further research to examine how these strategies influence long-term academic success and professional development. Higher education institutions should also explore how technological advancements can enhance teaching strategies, providing mature learners with additional flexibility and support. By addressing these factors, learning establishments can develop environments that enhance student engagement, reduce attrition rates and facilitate academic achievement. The findings serve as an evidence base for refining teaching approaches for mature learners in higher education, revealing both benefits and challenges in creating inclusive and effective learning environments. These conclusions are directly informed by participants' reflections, providing insights into their experiences, expectations and perceptions of teaching effectiveness. A notable observation is the value that mature learners place on teaching approaches that encourage active engagement and life application. Storytelling and Socratic dialogue emerged as particularly valued methods, with participants frequently highlighting their ability to bridge theoretical knowledge with professional and personal experiences. One participant described storytelling as *'practical and encouraging'*, while another remarked that it *'demonstrates how concepts work in practice'*. These comments reinforce the argument that teaching strategies should provide clear relevance to learners' lives. This preference reflects the broader aim of mature students to develop skills that directly contribute to their careers and personal growth. Socratic dialogue was also widely appreciated for its capacity to enhance critical thinking and promote intellectual exchange. Several participants emphasised the importance of guided discussions that allow for deeper exploration of subject matter. One noted, *'The conversation continues and you learn a lot from it'*, while another observed that *'questions and discussions clarify complex topics'*. These responses indicate that Socratic dialogue encourages both analytical engagement and a collaborative learning environment. The ability to challenge assumptions, engage in structured debates and share diverse perspectives contributes to a more meaningful educational experience.

While participatory methods were widely supported, structured approaches were also recognised for their role in providing clarity and direction. Although didactic teaching is sometimes criticised for being overly passive, several participants acknowledged its effectiveness in providing a foundational understanding of complex topics. One participant explained that *'lectures with slides and notes help to establish a base for learning'*, suggesting that structured content delivery is useful when combined with opportunities for

interaction. Participants frequently expressed the need for a balanced approach that integrates structured teaching with interactive elements, such as question-and-answer sessions. Another participant stated, *'I prefer the teacher to take feedback and answer questions during the lecture; it makes things clearer'*. These comments indicate that while traditional instruction methods remain effective, they should be adapted to facilitate active engagement. Debates were another area where opinions were divided. Some participants valued their role in encouraging critical thinking and exposing students to multiple perspectives. One participant noted that *'debates help us understand topics better by presenting different viewpoints'*, while another remarked on their ability to challenge misconceptions and strengthen analytical reasoning. However, others found debates to be overly competitive and less inclusive, with one participant commenting, *'I prefer reflective discussions; debates feel too confrontational for me'*. These contrasting viewpoints suggest that while debates can be a powerful learning tool, they should be structured to prioritise respectful discourse and constructive engagement over competition.

Collaboration was a recurrent theme in participants' responses, with many describing how group activities significantly contributed to their learning experience. One participant emphasised the benefits of shared problem-solving, stating, *'You can learn from peers who have different strengths'*, while another noted, *'The group should help each member understand the material'*. The importance of peer support was central to these reflections, illustrating how collaborative environments encourage deeper engagement. Group activities were particularly valued for promoting accountability and fostering active learning, with one participant stating, *'Group study helps in gaining knowledge not just from the teacher but also from classmates'*. Mentorship also emerged as a key element in participants' educational experiences. Several participants highlighted the value of teacher-led guidance, with one describing an effective tutor as *'like a parent who explains things step by step'*. This analogy suggests that mature learners appreciate structured support that does not undermine their independence. Another participant emphasised the importance of encouragement from tutors, stating, *'A supportive and welcoming learning environment is what I expect from a teacher'*. These comments indicate that effective mentorship involves both structured guidance and respect for students' autonomy. Feedback was consistently identified as an essential factor in academic progress. Participants valued feedback that was specific, timely and actionable, with one stating, *'Feedback helps me understand where I need to improve'*, while another noted, *'Immediate feedback during activities reinforces learning'*. These reflections highlight the dual role of feedback as both a motivational tool and a means of academic support. Many participants also appreciated peer feedback as a complement to teacher input, with one remarking, *'Getting feedback from classmates is helpful because they notice different aspects'*. This combination of teacher and peer assessment enhances student learning by providing multiple perspectives on progress. Encouragement was another crucial aspect of effective teaching, particularly in maintaining motivation among mature learners who balance multiple responsibilities. Participants described how positive reinforcement from tutors contributed to their confidence and willingness to participate in discussions. One participant commented, *'Support from the teacher makes a big difference'*, while another emphasised the role of a welcoming classroom environment, stating, *'Feeling comfortable enough to ask questions improves my learning experience'*. These comments underline the significance of encouragement in building student engagement and self-assurance. Reflective learning practices were also recognised as highly beneficial. One participant noted, *'Reflecting on what we've learned helps retain knowledge better'*, while another highlighted the importance of recaps, stating, *'A summary at the end of the lesson reinforces key points'*. These reflections suggest that opportunities for reflection support long-term retention and comprehension.

The lack of significant associations between demographic factors (including age, gender and ethnicity) and teaching preferences challenges assumptions that mature learners have differing educational needs based on background. Instead, participants' feedback suggests that their preferences are primarily shaped by their life experiences, academic goals and professional aspirations. This finding underscores the need for teaching strategies that address shared priorities among mature learners, including real-world application, active engagement and structured support. The study also raises important questions about the role of technology in supporting mature learners. Although not a primary focus of this research, the increasing integration of digital tools in education presents both opportunities and challenges. Virtual learning environments, discussion forums and adaptive technologies could provide additional flexibility and personalised support for students balancing academic, professional and personal commitments. For example, online discussion platforms could enhance the interactive aspects of Socratic dialogue, while adaptive feedback tools could strengthen assessment strategies. However, the emphasis on interaction, clarity and encouragement suggests that digital learning should enhance, rather than replace, relational aspects of teaching.

These findings highlight the importance of creating learning environments that balance structure with adaptability, theory with application and independence with support. Higher education institutions must design teaching approaches that not only meet academic objectives but also recognise the diverse experiences and aspirations of mature learners. By prioritising strategies that

encourage real-world relevance, active participation and consistent support, institutions can improve engagement, retention and academic outcomes for this demographic...

8. Limitations and Further Research

By addressing limitations, future research can expand knowledge and inform practices that improve the educational experiences of mature learners. This study provides valuable insights into the teaching preferences of mature learners in higher education, but certain limitations should be considered to improve its applicability. The quantitative data primarily relied on measures of central tendency, which highlight general patterns but do not fully capture individual differences in detail. Additionally, the ordinal nature of the data restricts its ability to quantify the strength of preferences. For instance, while storytelling and Socratic dialogue were strongly favoured, the extent to which these preferences varied among participants remains unclear. Future studies could benefit from alternative methods that enable more precise measurement of preferences, such as interval scales or mixed-method approaches that combine numerical data with qualitative insights. The sample was drawn from a single institution in East London, limiting the extent to which findings can be applied to mature learners in different regions or educational contexts. The results reflect the specific characteristics of this group and may not account for variations in learner experiences across other higher education settings. Expanding future research to include multiple institutions across diverse geographic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds would help identify whether teaching preferences differ based on regional or institutional factors. A broader sample would also support more generalisable recommendations for improving pedagogy. The study focused on four teaching methods: (1) storytelling and case studies, (2) Socratic dialogue, (3) didactic teaching and (4) debate. While these approaches offer meaningful insights, they do not encompass the full range of teaching strategies available. Other approaches, including experiential learning, gamification and mentorship-based models, may provide additional insights into how mature learners engage with academic content. Exploring these alternative methods in future research would contribute to a more well-rounded understanding of instructional strategies that resonate with mature learners and address their varied academic and professional needs.

A further limitation is the study's cross-sectional design, which captures a single snapshot of learners' preferences without tracking changes over time. This approach does not account for how preferences or the perceived effectiveness of teaching strategies may evolve over the duration of a programme. Longitudinal studies would provide a more detailed analysis of how teaching preferences influence academic outcomes, retention rates and professional development over time. For instance, future research could explore whether mature learners' preferences for storytelling or Socratic dialogue lead to lasting improvements in analytical reasoning or practical application skills. The lack of significant correlations between demographic characteristics (including age, gender and ethnicity) and teaching preferences challenges assumptions that these factors directly influence learner engagement. However, this raises questions about what other variables might play a role in shaping teaching preferences. Prior educational experiences, career backgrounds and cultural influences are likely to be key factors that warrant further exploration. Future studies should investigate these elements to develop a more nuanced understanding of the factors that shape mature learners' engagement with different teaching approaches. The study only briefly considered the impact of technology, despite its increasing significance in education. Future research could investigate the role of digital learning tools, virtual environments and online platforms in supporting mature learners. These technologies have the potential to improve accessibility, flexibility and engagement, particularly for students balancing academic study with professional and personal commitments. For example, virtual discussion forums could extend the benefits of Socratic dialogue beyond the classroom, while adaptive learning technologies could provide personalised feedback tailored to individual learner needs. Understanding how digital tools influence the effectiveness of different teaching methods would be valuable in shaping modern educational practices for mature learners.

Declarations

Funding Declaration,

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Conflict of interest statement,

The authors report there are no competing or conflicting interests to declare

Author Contribution declaration,

All authors whose names appear on the submission made substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data. All authors contributed to the study conception and design. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Data Availability

All authors confirm that all data and materials as well as software application or custom code remain available and support their published claims and comply with field standards.

Ethics Approval declaration

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants including surveys, questionnaires and methodology for this study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. The study was approved by the Ethics Approval Panel of London Churchill College, London, UK.

Informed Consent

Our research involved human participants from which we have gained informed consent

AI

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