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Widening participation: addressing barriers to higher education

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Post Graduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education

The issue researched

The aim of this teaching cycle was to research barriers to higher education and to look at possible methods for attempting improving access to learners of all ages and background. Admittedly, breaking down barriers to learning is an enormous task and far beyond the scope of this teaching cycle! However, this is an issue which much of my work has engaged with and it is one which I wanted to incorporate into and explore further as part of the PGCTHE.

The cycle is also informed by the current (and evolving) context of adult student engagement in HE. It relates as well to the 'hard to reach' adult student which HE widening participation initiatives attempt to provide for. This is the type of student which a University of Glamorgan report identifies as those who:

[H]ave lower than average aspiration, personal confidence and attainment. The majority of the students know little about higher education as neither their parents, siblings nor friends have studied at this level.

(Williams and Shewring 2003)

On a personal level, my work is also underpinned by a belief in the transformation potential of HE, which can be realised at any stage of a person's life, regardless of his or her history or experience in education.

This work is also informed by what I perceive as a possible disconnect between widening access and LLL provision and the rest of HE (which I have observed in a local context and suspect is symptomatic of a national-scale issue). To put it another way, within AU there appears to be a is a shortage of 'bridges' between widening participation events, and to a lesser extent, lifelong learning courses and the wider world of HE. Where these opportunities do exist, they are often limited in scope. For example, in AU, LLL modules can in theory add up to a degree, but they do not offer
a transferable direct access route to those students who might wish to use their module points to access other degree courses, within or beyond the university.

This work has also grown out of my 15 years of experience of teaching in LLL, as well as my work as a lifelong learning development officer at Aberystwyth and Penparcau Communities First, a Welsh Assembly Government programme aimed at tackling social disadvantage in Wales's poorest communities.

The political Context

The Welsh Assembly Government is, on paper at least, committed to a widening access agenda in Wales. The Assembly's policy objectives in Transforming Education outlines these principles:

'We expect all learning transformation to improve opportunities available to people and groups who are more likely to experience discrimination and have access to fewer opportunities [and to develop] management and governance arrangements to promote and sustain equality and diversity.'

(2008: 14/12),

Similar aspirations are outlined in the reports 'For Our Futures' (2009) and 'Skills that Work for Wales' (2008a: 63). Both these reports promote greater equality and diversity in accessing higher education, combined with the need to develop a wide and diverse skills base, equipped to respond to the challenges of the future.

Is the achievement of these aspirations being threatened by the major structural changes and associated spending cuts in HE which we are currently experiencing?

On a more optimistic note, the recent restructuring of student finance means that part-time students will soon be able to access student finance on the same basis as full-time students. This could possibly have the effect of widening adult student engagement with higher education.

Related scholarship

Preparing for this teaching cycle gave me the opportunity to review some theories on barriers to HE.
As McGivney observes, these barriers can be as simple as a lack of information. She also identifies a number of other barriers to adult learning.

**Perceived barriers to learning**

These can include situational barriers, institutional barriers or dispositional barriers.

**Situational barriers** can arise from someone’s personal situation, such as:

- a lack of money - the cost of studying, the cost of child care and so on
- a lack of time, for example, because of job and home responsibilities
- a lack of transport to study venue.

**Institutional barriers** are those practices and procedures that exclude or discourage adults from participating in education, such as:

- inconvenient course schedules or locations
- a lack of relevant or appropriate courses
- a lack of opportunities for part-time or flexible study.

**Dispositional barriers** are related to attitudes or perceptions someone has about themselves as a learner, such as:

- feeling ‘too old’ to learn
- a lack of confidence due to ‘poor’ educational achievements in the past
- feeling ‘tired of school, tired of classrooms’.

(McGivney 1993: 17)

I also became interested in the ‘chain of response’ model (Cross: 1981), which identifies a seven-stage process, beginning with the individual and ending with external factors. Each stage - viewed as a link in a chain - influences the next link. Although cross herself concedes that the process is not as linear as her analysis would present it, it is still a useful tool for identifying and evaluating stages of adult participation in learning. As McGivney observes:

*The more positive the learner’s experience at each stage, the more likely he or she is to reach the last stage - the decision to participate* (1992: 27).
Patricia Cross's 'chain of response' model (1981: 125)

1. Self evaluation

2. Attitudes to education

3. Setting goals and the expectation that these will be met

4. Life transition

5. Opportunities and barriers

6. Information on educational opportunities

7. The decision to participate
Teaching practice and intended outcomes

As mentioned above, this experiment grew out of my work as a LLL tutor at AU's School of Education and Lifelong Learning. It was also informed and enabled by my role with Communities First in developing community learning opportunities.

The aim was to carry out an experiment in widening access to higher education, through organising degree-level access events to members of the local community. The events would be free of charge and open to all. The initial idea was that they would be held in a venue which was based in and easily accessible to the local community, rather than in a university building (which in McGivney's terms could present an institutional barrier).

The event consisted of a widening access to higher education day, called Learning is for Life. This was held on Saturday, 5 March 2011 at the Morlan Centre, a venue which was easily accessible from the centre of Aberystwyth.

This event was open to the wider public and consisted of tutor led workshops and, a lifelong learning fair with representatives from a number of learning and training organisations, including AU’s Centre for Widening Participation, the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, the Welsh for Adults Centre, the Open University, Antur Teifi (which provides advice and training for people considering going into self-employment) and Want2Work (which provides advice on funding on education and training for people on sickness related benefits and other groups).

I was involved in this event in three separate, interconnected roles:

- Developing and planning the Learning is for Life event.
- Developing and delivering an access to higher education workshop, titled What Kind of Learner are You?
- Compiling a signposting booklet, Go On Give it a Go! / Ger amdani, rho gynnig aml! which lists LLL opportunities locally.

The Learning Styles Workshop - What Kind of learner are you?

This workshop consisted of a combination of theoretical information, reinforced by practical activities. Through the use of an interactive quiz, the intention was to enable
participants to gain some insight into the different ways that people can learn and also to evaluate their own learning style or styles. (This relates to the first stage in Cross’s ‘chain of response’ model. Closely linked to this was the underlying aim of offering a ‘window’ onto potential choices in HE and to signpost attendees to possible routes into HE learning (relating to the sixth stage in Cross’s model).

Content of workshop

I decided to adapt the Honey and Mumford model of learning styles as a basis for this workshop. This model identifies four dominant learning styles; those of Activist, Reflector, Theorist and Pragmatist (2006). The relative accessibility of this model (and the accompanying questionnaire methodology, which I amended slightly) meant that it was easy to apply and understand and could, I felt, work well in a relatively brief learning situation.

Although there are, of course, a range of other models for learning styles (e.g. Felder and Silverman, Kolb etc., see Entwistle 1998), I felt that to introduce too many different theories to a two hour workshop could be confusing and unhelpful.

The workshop also consisted of an introduction to learning styles (and associated strengths and weaknesses) as well as plans of action for continuing to engage with higher education in the future.

Aims of the workshop

- To enquire into ways of facilitating the engagement of ‘non traditional’ learners in HE.

- To look at ways into developing new access to education courses, including outreach courses, to engage with adults in the wider community.

Learning tools

As mentioned above, the Honey and Mumford learning styles questionnaire played a central role. This was introduced early on in the workshop and immediately created an interactive situation. This was followed by the related score sheet, plus feedback on the results, strengths and weaknesses of various styles etc. It was also emphasised that the exercise was not intended to ‘define’ anyone, but was only
meant to be a light-hearted way to encourage people to think about how they learn and to look at types of learning that have worked well and not so well in the past (addressing dispositional barriers).

This also led on to an introduction (through the signposting booklet) of routes into HE (in Cross’s terms, addressing lack of information to educational opportunities).

Go On Give it a Go! / Cer amdani, rho gynnig arni! - A guide to community learning opportunities in Aberystwyth and Penparcau

This is a signposting booklet, which I had produced around a year ago for Communities First. The booklet provides listings for a range of organisations which can provide courses, information and advice to guide potential students into higher education (as well as vocational training, volunteering or self-employment). On this particular occasion, the booklet was used as a teaching tool and was distributed and referred to at the end of the workshop. This reinforced the message that this is very much a signposting session and that there are a number of 'next steps' to higher education that attendees can take following the workshop (and addressing points 7 and 8 of Cross's model).

Workshop feedback and evaluation

Only four people attended this workshop. This was disappointing, especially as there had been a strong marketing campaign, involving adverts in the Cambrian News and wide distribution of posters and flyers. Yet it was not totally unexpected. As low attendance rates in a drop-in community learning event such as this (and indeed, in any community-based drop-in event) are common.

All four attendees completed the feedback form, which I had designed specifically for the purpose of collecting student feedback on this teaching cycle.

The results were as follows:

- All 4 said they found the Honey and Mumford learning styles questionnaire useful
- All answered 'yes' to the question 'Would knowing your learning style affect the way you approach learning in the future?'
- Two were considering enrolling for a HE course within the next two years, one delegate was undecided and another was already studying for a HE course.

- Two delegates were considering part-time study and one was considering part-time distance learning. The person already in HE was studying a LLL course at AU.

- Delegates were asked to list one or more subject areas which they were considering for further study. Each one chose one subject area only, as follows: 'social studies', business studies, 'therapies', Welsh.

- Two delegates responded to the question, 'Which level do you think would be most appropriate to you?', with one choosing foundation level. The other delegate replied 'Depends on what the subject is and what I already know of it'.

Delegates were asked if they would be interested in attending a short (around 3 to 5 days) 'return to learning' course. One replied 'yes', two replied 'maybe'. The attendee already in HE replied 'Not for me'.

The three delegates who had expressed an interested in attending a short return to learning course were asked to rank, on a scale of 1 (very relevant) to 5 (not very relevant) their interest in seeing various skills included in the course. In the event, two responded to this section, as follows:

- Study skills
- Finance for higher education
- Introduction to arts and humanities
- Introduction to a science degrees
- Introduction to social sciences degrees
- Postgraduate study
- Teacher training
- - Introduction to other vocational degrees and qualifications,
  e.g. law, medicine, nursing, social work etc

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study skills</td>
<td>1, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance for higher education</td>
<td>1, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to arts and humanities</td>
<td>2, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to a science degrees</td>
<td>5, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to social sciences degrees</td>
<td>1, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate study</td>
<td>5, 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher training</td>
<td>5, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Introduction to other vocational degrees and qualifications, e.g. law, medicine, nursing, social work etc</td>
<td>1, 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Delegates were then invited to draw up a plan of action, listing up to three points. Two responded. One replied 'to finish my Welsh for Early Years vocational course, the other delegate replied 'Welsh'.

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In the next question, delegates were asked to identify their current mode of employment: one replied that he was working full-time, two identified as job seekers, while another delegate described herself as both a 'job seeker’ and 'homemaker or carer’.

In response to the question on current highest qualification held, three said they were educated to GCSE level and the other to postgraduate level.

One of the four had dependent children.

Two were in the 45-55 age group, one in the 55-65 group and one delegate did not answer this question.

There were three female and delegates and one male.

Interim modifications

Learning Styles Workshop at Rhoserchan Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation Centre, Penrhyncoch, near Aberystwyth, 16 March 2011

Less than two weeks later (through a meeting a resident who attended the Learning is for Life event) I was to deliver the same workshop to a group of residents of Rhoserchan drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre, which provides residential rehabilitation for people who need help to stop using drugs and alcohol. The workshop consisted of a mixture of residents who were currently undergoing either the 'stage one' programme (which follows on from the initial 'detox’) or 'stage two' (for those with some experience of drug or alcohol free living, but who need support in maintaining their recovery)

Rhoserchan workshop: feedback and evaluation

Rhoserchan was a new and challenging environment for me as a teacher. Although my roles in lifelong learning and community development had equipped me to deal with a wide range of people, I came to this with no experience of working with people recovering from drug and alcohol addictions in a residential rehabilitation environment.

While all delegates were helpful and responsive (and importantly, all had chosen to attend), the level of interest in considering higher education as an option appeared to
vary greatly. Unlike in the earlier workshop, I felt that some may not have been wholly engaged with the topic. I also felt that with the benefit of hindsight I could have sharpened up my presentation and responded more directly to the particular needs of this client group, who must have been preoccupied with the enormous challenges of getting and staying 'clean'. For example, it occurred to me towards the end of the workshop that I could have made more use of narrative techniques to illustrate the different learning style characteristics; that I could have used an 'Ikea flatpack' example to illustrate this. (Before attempting to assemble an Ikea flatpack bed, for instance, the reflective learner would read the instructions thoroughly and then sleep on it, while the activist would throw the instructions away before throwing themselves into the task, and so on). I did in fact improvise this example, after a fashion, but I felt it was a case of too little too late. In future, I would plan and make more use of this kind of narrative technique in all kinds of teaching situations.

On a more positive note, a 'core' of four people were very engaged and extremely interested in moving on to HE and were both responsive and enthusiastic in exploring options. This was very exciting for me as a teacher, as I could see first-hand the transformational nature of widening participation in HE. There was a sense of 'pioneering' and engaging with people considered 'hard to reach' and who may not have had that insight at that crucial point of the drug or alcohol rehabilitation process (this also relates to 'life transition', stage 4 of Cross's 'chain of response' model).

**The feedback questionnaire**

Out of the 10 people attending, 7 chose to complete the research questionnaire. The answers were as follows:

- 4 people said they found the learning styles questionnaire useful. 2 said they found it 'okay'.

- 4 answered 'yes' and another 4 answered 'no' to the question 'Would knowing your learning style affect the way you approach learning in the future?'

- 4 out of the 8 people who completed the form said that they were considering enrolling for a HE course within the next two years.
- 2 people were considering part-time study, one was considering part time distance learning and another was considering full-time study.

- Attendees were asked to list the subject areas they were considering studying. The replies were as follows:

- music
- psychology
- counselling, alternative medicine, yoga
- English, maths, science

- 3 people responded to the question, 'Which level do you think would be most appropriate to you?' with two choosing foundation level and the other choosing degree level.

In answer to the question 'Would you be interested in attending a short (around 3 - 5 days) 'return to learning' course?', 3 said they were, two were undecided and three said it wasn't for them.

The three who answered 'yes; or 'maybe' to the above question were asked to rank, on a scale of 1 (very relevant) to 5 (not very relevant) their interest in seeing various skills included in the course. Four attendees responded to this section, as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study skills</th>
<th>4*, N/A, 2, 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finance for higher education</td>
<td>5*, N/A, 1, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to arts and humanities</td>
<td>5*, N/A, 2, 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to a science degrees</td>
<td>5*, N/A, 5, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to social sciences</td>
<td>5*, N/A, 5, 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate study</td>
<td>5*, N/A, 5, 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher training</td>
<td>5*, 5*, 1, 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Introduction to other vocational</td>
<td>5*, N/A, 3, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>degrees and qualifications, e.g.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>law, medicine, nursing, social work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Due to time constraints, the question inviting attendees to draw up a plan of action was skipped.
6 attendees identified their current employment status as 'job seeker'; with one identifying her job status as 'self-employed / retired'.

Of the 6 who responded to the question concerning their level of education, 2 said they were educated to 'NVQ/City and Guilds level'; one was educated to GCSE level, 2 held degrees and one was educated to postgraduate level.

None of the respondents had dependent children.

2 were in the 26- 35 age group, 2 in the 36 - 45 age group and t2 in the 55-65 age group. One respondent did not answer this question.

Possible future developments

Education, as my own experience has taught me, can have a transformational effect and can help to turn people's lives around by giving them the means by which they can gain confidence and self esteem and also the means to lift themselves out of poverty or destructive lifestyles. My experience of working in community and LLL has also taught me that there is a huge demand for HE from learners of all backgrounds and ages, including those groups who may be considered 'socially excluded' or 'hard to reach'. I also believe that there is still much to be done in order to provide a more accessible, universal and transparent route for 'non traditional' students to enter HE.

In the future, I would welcome the opportunity to play a role in developing 'taster' or 'access' or 'return to learning' courses aimed at building skills and confidence and helping to break down people's perceived barriers to HE. Although in the current climate, it is difficult to see many openings for practitioners in this field. If this is the case, the real loss, of course, would not be mine, but the people who would miss out on the opportunity of HE at any stage in their life.

On a more positive note, as a result of this teaching cycle, I have developed a widening participation workshop. This alone is something I could offer, perhaps on a freelance basis, to various HE and other institutions. It is also a start: something I could build on in order to possibly develop other workshops, events and publications.
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