

Exploring the links between informal learning and social action campaigns: a public broadcasting case study

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Abstract

This article presents a case study based on a four week intensive media campaign within Wales. The campaign addressed the dangers of testicular cancer, and targeted young male adults aged 18-30 years. The authors emphasise that social action campaigning has much relevance to informal learning, and suggest that market research data can allow for inferences about the extent of informal learning through a change in subsequent observable behaviour within a large viewing population.

Introduction

Social policy has repeatedly emphasised the power of education in helping individuals to anticipate and engage with economic, social and personal change (MacFarlane et al 1992, Metcalf 1997, Roebuck et al 2000, HEFCE 2001, Longworth 1999). A unique era of consultation for policy making can be identified within this context (Daugherty R et al 2000, Humpheys and Saunders 2000). Primary, secondary, tertiary and higher educational sectors have been subjected to detailed reviews leading to widespread recommendations based on an agenda of change and transformation. These reviews make informed comparisons based on resourcing, teaching practices and outcomes. They search for an all-embracing framework, which brings these issues together, leading to a new and all embracing educational perspective that views critically the numerous learning and teaching experiences as students go from the cradle to the grave. It is no

surprise therefore that contemporary educational jargon is dominated by words like ‘partnership’, ‘renaissance’, ‘innovation’, ‘connecting’, ‘revolution’, ‘transition’ and ‘participation’. The leading vision is that of *lifelong learning*, which is well summarised by Fryer et al (1997):

“it should inspire and engage the imagination, commitment and energy of people in all walks of life, making the case by explaining the changes in work, the community and technology” (paragraph 1.6: *Learning for the 21st Century*).

The vision will inevitably have varied applications within different societies. In Wales, for example, recent devolution has led to lifelong learning policy which is dedicated to an immediate and continuing concern with increasing educational participation by under-represented, disadvantaged and marginalised populations (Welsh Office 1998, 1999; Davidson et al 2001, 2002). This contrasts with the access pattern of the 1990s: a dramatic expansion in full-time student numbers based on recruitment of school-leaver populations from socio-economic groups A, B and C1. Woodrow et al (1998, 2002) argue that much more needs to be done for groups D and E as well as disabled learners and people living in remote rural environments.

When exploring learning within such diverse contexts it is important to locate various initiatives within a set of values that guide implementation. Within Wales, the declared principles for lifelong learning listed in the Welsh Office Green Paper *Learning is for Everyone* (1998) are therefore important: education and training should be a cardinal priority for policy making, social inclusion is paramount, the valuing of standards and outcomes is crucial, good practice should be recognised and promoted, productive partnerships have priority, and where possible a national agenda has to be addressed.

The above principles offer invaluable guidelines for practitioners and providers, especially when the lack of participation by older learners within formal educational systems is observed. A recent survey of Welsh students in higher education (HEFCW 2002) noted that over four-fifths of full time undergraduates were under 25 years of age, with consistently more females than males being represented across all age groups for the years 1997-2000.

Despite laudable principles and 'motherhood and apple-pie' policy statements, there are also some notable policy paradoxes when lifelong learning recommendations for the widening of access are considered at more detailed levels. Three illustrations are offered, beginning with the introduction of fees and the abolition of grants whilst simultaneously trying to recruit more learners. Complex packages of loans, individual learning accounts, and bursaries cannot recover a situation where the possibility of incurring debt for a long term and invisible benefit is viewed with suspicion by populations which have no money in the first place.

Second, there is the expectation that computer-based technologies will lead to the efficient provision of educational opportunities which appeal miraculously to new student populations through the phenomenon of eLearning via broadband communications. We argue that disadvantaged students often live in areas which have poor connectivity and relatively little access to computers. The real potential lies with the combination of interactive broadcasting technologies (specifically television) and on-line communications.

Third, national objectives for student achievement are cast first and foremost within the context of vocationalism and employability, epitomised through the use of NVQ targets. It is very difficult to achieve or even explain these qualifications to potential students who are unemployed or retired, and who see themselves as marginalized by society. Lifelong learning which leads to credit, qualifications and employment is only a part of the educational picture. It offers a view based on the work of formal educational institutions wherein further education colleges and

universities have to continually justify their provision through head counts, enrolments and student credit returns.

A more complex and colourful scenario is apparent when non-assessed and non-accredited activity is recognised, and it is this interest which dominates the remainder of our paper. As explained by McGivney (1999), this kind of engagement can be unpremeditated. It can be initiated by outside agencies which have very different interests to colleges and higher education institutions.

A distinction is therefore made between *formal* and *informal learning* (Elsley 1974, Fordham 1979, Rees et al 1997, McGivney 1999, 2000). Learning outside of formal contexts includes accounting for environmental differences (there may be no classrooms), process factors (there may be no clearly defined 'teacher', 'learner' or 'pedagogy'), and outcome statements (there may be no documented curriculum). The latter point is particularly challenging because the results of informal learning may be apparent in non-educational settings. They may, for example, impact on housing, family, community and health. At no point is there a course enrolment, academic credit point, or a qualification.

Given the vagueness in definition it is not perhaps surprising that informal learning is omitted from strategic planning and objective setting. The consequence is an absence of dedicated resources and funding streams. Informal learning is relegated to a twilight world illuminated only by temporary project grants. Informal learning practitioners have to constantly justify the worth of the educational experience through bureaucratic tracking exercises in order to prove that there are beneficial outcomes. One illustration involves demonstrating eventual progression from non-assessed to assessed provision.

Informal learning is also difficult to measure. One significant contribution has come from a 2001 survey of 6310 adults who were asked about their engagement in sustained activity which involved ‘practising or studying at any time over the last three years (Aldridge and Tuckett 2001). Forty-six per cent confirmed such involvement, although there was a noticeably lower participation amongst social classes D and E and with marked regional variations throughout the UK (Aldridge and Horrocks 2002).

These proponents of lifelong learning are seeking connections between informal and formal learning contexts. A keyword is progression (FEDA 1995, Fordham 1979, Adkins 1997), and the task is that of discovering what happens once informal learning reaches a more advanced level of understanding. Fascinating examples include adult learning in museums (Chadwick and Stannett 1995) and the public understanding of science (Carlton 2001). It is vital that educationalists who attempt analysis of these complex learning pathways think outside of their conventionally defined sectors. McGivney (1999) stresses that progression does not have to be from one college to another, or from one module to a course. Instead, the progression can be at personal, social, economic, and educational levels – and often these overlap.

All of which obscures the panorama of learning happening outside of education. We point to one vast arena of activity exterior to a school, further education college, or university. We argue that informal learning is often linked with educational engagement through entertainment associated with mass communication industries, and television in particular.

Educational research has been less successful in gauging and analysing the extent of involvement and participation within informal learning by media audiences. This is in contrast to a large body

of knowledge within social psychology and cultural and communication studies (O'Sullivan et al 1994), associated with persuasive media and advertising campaigns and their subsequent effects on audience behaviour (Aronson 1992, Howitt 1982). In many instances changes in consumer behaviour or attitude systems have been noted, and therefore within the context of the present discussion informal learning can be inferred. Media audiences – be they viewers, listeners, users or readers – have developed a new understanding based on the assimilation and interpretation of information, and this is reflected in a range of observable reactions.

From the lifelong learning perspective, a media campaign is of more interest when it extends beyond a single advertisement or newspaper article. This is where sustained health promotion campaigns (Egger et al 1993, Tones and Tilford 2000) by broadcasting authorities, news-agencies and the public sector have particular relevance because of their adoption of a multi-agency model when constructing what is essentially a public information strategy for influencing attitudes and behaviour through creating new learning agendas. Within this context, health education becomes an obvious and important arena for a detailed understanding of not only social action, but also informal learning.

Testicular Cancer: a case study

A case study is presented in order to explore the links between television and radio broadcasting, health education and informal learning. It is based on a sustained campaign by BBC Wales in March 2002, in collaboration with the Welsh Assembly government. The campaign topic was testicular cancer; the most common cause of cancer for males aged 18 to 35. The campaign stressed the importance of self examination in the detection of the early signs of the disease. It therefore raised awareness about cancer, and the need to be proactive in seeking medical help before the development of advanced malignant tumours. This necessitated complex strategies and sensitive programme planning in order to draw attention to a socially taboo topic amongst a

defined audience – young male adults – who are normally unconnected with health issues. It also involved teaching viewers self-examination techniques, and an explanation of the need to establish regular checking routines. Within these contexts a testicular cancer campaign had as its overall aims the changing of existing opinions, the formation of new attitudes, and the creation of behavioural repertoires within a very large media audience.

A social action campaign goes beyond a single medium when reaching a large section of society . The methodology included five television ‘shorts’ (five minutes duration) and one 30 minute drama, plus extended television news features on BBC1 and BBC2 Wales. Additionally, very brief promotional advertisements (termed ‘promos’) lasting 30-60 seconds were extensively broadcast throughout the campaign. These promos were the first education programmes in BBC Wales to use the I-bar for interactive digital information. The television campaign was supplemented by promotional radio broadcasts which were completed along with the creation of a dedicated on-line web site and a help-line. Full page stories were published in local, regional and national newspapers and magazines, and the campaign was accompanied by the distribution of beer mats within bars and clubs as well as posters in bus-stops throughout Wales.

A novel feature within the campaign included the use of ‘stress balls’ which were distributed to all students unions in Wales as well as in health clubs, leisure centres and prisons. The campaign therefore involved close partnerships with public sector bodies such as NUS Wales, the Prisons Health Promotion Unit, and local authorities. Famous names and celebrity images were incorporated within the diverse programming content, and a key component involved an on-going soap-opera style drama.

The television output was screened across BBC1 and BBC2 Wales, and it was scheduled during a four week period around ‘male’ programming – for example, boxing, rugby and football

coverage. The shorts were a mixed genre, ranging from drama to documentary, animation, comedy and even cookery. The 30 minute drama was entitled “Facing Demons” and told the story of a young valleys policeman who developed testicular cancer. The aforementioned advertisement ‘promo’ featured a contemporary pop star and this was regularly screened in both pre and post watershed versions.

The reach of the campaign was calculated using the standard media industry audience estimates. These are provided by BARB for television and RAJAR for radio and supplied to all broadcasters by using long-established methods of in-home television set meters and self completion listening diaries respectively¹.

Results for selected broadcasts and activities are provided in table 1.

Table 1: Estimates of Television Reach

Shorts 5 x 5 mins			Audience
March 15	20.55	BBC2Wales	80,000
March 16	23.15	BBC1Wales	119,000
March 17	18.15	BBC2Wales	80,000
March 18	23.20	BBC1Wales	54,000
March 20	00.00	BBC1Wales	95,000
March 19	23.05	BBC1Wales	87,000

¹ Detailed accounts of audience sampling and measurement can be obtained from <http://www.barb.co.uk> and <http://www.rajar.co.uk>

Additional results are provided in table 2 for other output associated with the testicular cancer campaign.

Table 2: Estimates of non-television reach	
Radio coverage	25,000 listeners (Radio Wales, March 14 th 2002, 2.30 p.m.)
Poster campaign	400 sites, covering 800,000 people: Adshell formula = 15.9 million hits in 4 weeks
Beermats	50,000
On-line website	17,000 page impressions
TV promo	10 per day reaching an average audience of 550,000 in peak viewing
Stressballs	20000 distributed to young male adult venues

Discussion

The social action campaign aims to change existing beliefs, develop new attitudes, and prompt action that leads to consultation with professionals as appropriate. Within the context of testicular cancer this means challenging misconceptions (such as cancer only affecting much older people), forming new opinions and practices (self-examination can save lives if completed on a regular basis) and then initiating positive behavioural responses (performing such examination and going to see a doctor). With reference to the latter point, it is worth emphasising that self-examination and self-referral is notoriously difficult for young men. Media audiences – 18-30 year old males and possibly their partners – are effectively educated about dangers and remedies over a prolonged campaign period; in this case four weeks.

The results thus far are descriptive and no confident inference can be made about the extent of attitudinal or behavioural change – and therefore in the amount of informal learning amongst

young adult males. Fortunately the campaign included two further follow-up measures which offer a limited reply to this criticism.

First, NHS Direct (the national helpline for patient enquiries) created a testicular cancer contact number which operated throughout the 4 weeks, and they received a dramatic increase in such enquiries as compared with the previous month's statistics for testicular related enquiries to NHS Direct. Second, BBC Wales themselves received feedback from viewers and listeners. The following example is taken from an email sent to the BBC Wales office

My next door neighbour's nephew saw your recent campaign and was prompted to go and see his doctor the next day. He was admitted into hospital immediately and had his testicle removed due to it being cancerous. The doctor told him that many young men had been to see him that day (the day after your first programme was broadcast) with the same concerns.

This follow up feedback suffers from its anecdotal status, but it also points to key considerations for measuring the impact of future informal learning through media based health campaigns. In the above examples a more empirical conclusion can be reached through coding the precise number of relevant enquiries and comparing these with a control period within which no campaign takes place. Furthermore, a sample of general practitioners can be contacted in a the critical period following a campaign in order to accurately gauge the frequency and extent of relevant consultations and referrals. An ultimate measure for informal learning would be to assess the degree of information seeking behaviour associated with a viewing public's search for knowledge and understanding about (in this case) testicular cancer. This could be achieved

through indirect means: the use of libraries, web-site hits, and approaches to adult education providers who specialise in health information courses.

Conclusions

A public health campaign for the detection and treatment of testicular cancer has used a variety of media in order to reach a large target population of 18-30 year old males. The campaign was the first of its type in Wales, and it used interactive technologies associated with modern television as well as internet communications. The campaign deployed standard but sophisticated market research procedures in order to demonstrate considerable reach and impact within Wales.

The case study reviewed in this paper also presents challenges for lifelong learning practitioners and researchers. Media campaign analysts and public health theorists do not normally consider informal learning associated with their deployment of mass communication. It is therefore worth emphasising the need for inter- disciplinary and cross- professional partnerships which bring together media and health experts as well as educationalists. Within this context the testicular cancer campaign captured the interest and imagination of the cross-sector *Education Broadcasting Council of Wales* because of the insights it gives to lifelong learning enthusiasts who observe educational benefits through the use of technologies that are normally associated with entertainment rather than learning.

The case study does not succeed in defining any kind of formally defined educational content in terms of addressing a health education curriculum. The study only offers indirect evidence. Any learning which does occur can only be inferred through the most dramatic form of behavioural action; it would be dangerous to assume that simply watching a programme or advertisement leads to learning per se. The most obvious kind of behavioural action includes the use of physical self-examination which leads to a call to a helpline or a medical visit. There may well be other

more invisible learning processes and outcomes based on information searching by people exposed to the campaign - such as reading specialist literature, searching out websites, or discussing related issues within peer groups.

Finally, the case study does not offer any data which details the relative impact of individual media on learning. The effectiveness of television compared with radio or poster advertisements would be an important consideration for further research. Similarly, the effectiveness of soap-opera drama techniques on awareness raising and informal learning remains a fascinating area for future analysis. Despite the limitations of the present research, it has generated valuable information about informal learning for a target population notorious for its lack of participation in adult education: males aged 18-30 years.

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