The slow revolution: learners, learning providers and communities negotiating for change

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Background

The Community University of the Valleys Partnership Project (CUVP) and the Connecting Communities Cymru Project (CCC) are established partnerships between Higher Education and communities in South Wales. The Department of Adult Continuing Education, (DACE) University of Wales Swansea (UWS) is the lead partner in both initiatives. The projects focus on widening participation in higher education through community based developments, aiming to change both the supply and demand for learning.

Negotiation is key, with learners, organisations and communities encouraged to feed into and benefit from developments. Both projects emphasise the importance of equal partnership and community enterprises help manage the projects; influencing the development of learning appropriate to their local areas.

The CCC project, a partnership between UWS and twelve community centres provides up to date computer and video-conferencing equipment, local technical support, networked communication with the university and staff to develop on-line learning. The CUVP project, a strategic partnership of four universities and fourteen community learning initiatives focuses on developing community capacity, curriculum, quality, research, staff development and learner support. Both projects have been supported by European funding initiatives since 1998.

This paper outlines our experiences of negotiating change in organisational structures and in shaping positive attitudes to learning within disadvantaged communities. Developments have resulted from the complexity of internal and external forces for change and acknowledge the important interplay between ICT developments, pedagogical approaches, learner and provider diversity and partnership working.

Widening participation and the curriculum

There is widespread evidence (Trotman&Pudner 1998, McGivney, 1996,2001) that changes in curriculum design will be required to take widening participation in Higher Education seriously. Mason (1981) argues for 'a radical reassessment of taken for granted assumptions about subject-areas', while Trotman and Pudner (1998:54) support an approach where learning opportunities are developed which are relevant to the lives and aspirations of potential students and where learners themselves have influence over the learning experience 'through input to its development' rather than through the 'parachuting in' of pre-packaged courses. In a political climate where widening participation in Higher Education is a current buzzword, we need to review the higher education curriculum, taking account of the ways in which adults learn.

If we first examine knowledge in relation to adult learners we need to ensure the validity of the HE curriculum to the lives of people who are victims of social and economic exclusion. As McGivney (2001:p65) quotes:

> What our students knew in abundance (….) often did not count as knowledge.
> Universities as bastions of power, decided what 'real' knowledge was and

admitted to it only those who met their criteria.

Those who are excluded from mainstream provision sometimes view adult learning opportunities as irrelevant and many continue to believe that 'learning is not for the likes of us'. If we fail to develop an inclusive curriculum in which our diverse population can recognise opportunities, there will be further marginalisation and a narrowing of participation in learning. Ensuring an inclusive curriculum is, however, much more complex than simply defining curriculum as course content. A quality curriculum (CUVP, 2002) is one where the process of negotiation and learner democracy is at the heart of strategies for teaching and learning

A recent survey of Adult Participation in Learning in Wales (NIACE 2002) suggests that the learning divide is alive and well. It shows little change in levels of participation and continuing social class inequalities, with lower participation by the unskilled/semi-skilled, compared to professional groups. However, we have to resist policy suggestions that non-participation is due to negative attitudes or inadequacy (McGivney 2001, Selwyn et al 2002). It can be argued that a more likely cause is the inflexibility of educational institutions and a lack of opportunities for all.

DACE has a long history of promoting and delivering programmes of study aimed at widening participation and has strong links with local communities. It provides a community-based programme with progression to the BA (Hons) in Humanities and the CUVP and CCC projects focus on expanding DACE's negotiated curriculum approach to new community locations. A curriculum, not only negotiated between provider and learner, but at all levels: learners, tutors, community centre managers and providers. Weil (1996), McGivney(2001) and Trotman & Pudner (1998) all advocate some form of negotiation for students to achieve academic integration and to ensure students become autonomous learners, taking responsibility for their own progress.

Current policy and funding strategies in Wales are beginning to acknowledge the importance of informal learning to widening participation strategies (Swansea CCET 2002, McGivney 2001, Trotman&Pudner 1998) and a start has been made in linking learning to people's personal experience, interests and former knowledge. Trotman & Pudner (1998) describe the Penderry Project, where the availability of non-threatening, non-award bearing courses in community locations helped to demystify higher education.

Building on this experience, the CUVP and CCC projects focus on negotiation with community centres and learners to identify needs and interests and to develop appropriate curriculum. At one of the community centres in the Amman Valley, the CUVP project facilitated a working group focused on community based higher learning opportunities for the locality. The centre had a well-established community education programme but limited options for progression. Bringing together university and community staff over many months and listening to learner feedback a customised curriculum was developed, providing non-accredited HE Taster courses, Introduction to Degree and Introduction to Community Development courses and Learner Information Days.

With ongoing review and input from learners, tutors and community workers, these curriculum innovations produced very positive and often far-reaching results. The working group, led by the CUVP project evolved into a provider forum directed by the community enterprise, focused on a joined up response to community needs from community, further and higher education providers. The DACE BA (Hons) in Humanities Degree was established at the centre in September 2002, with 15 undergraduates now studying part-time in the community and new intakes expected over the coming years. In line with learner demands, a Level 0 accredited Foundation Degree year will be available at the centre in 2004. Participant feedback from the Introduction to Community

Development course influenced the curriculum content of UWS' new HE Certificate in Community Development Studies; currently delivered in the community of Blaenymaes, Swansea and an accredited Introduction to Community Development Studies course is in negotiation.

Community based ICT and university networked library facilities facilitated by the CCC project were core to these developments as were supportive and negotiated teaching methods, effective partnership working and a clear understanding of learner and community diversity.

Teaching and Learning methods

Introducing negotiation to curriculum development not only results in changes in course content, but also in transformations in teaching and learning methods. If we value adults' input to the course content, we automatically invite their changed position in the classroom.
Teaching and learning strategies should reflect the continuously changing world, where knowledge acquired today will be obsolete tomorrow, as described by Rogers (2002) 'Changingness, a reliance on process rather than on static knowledge, is the only thing that makes any sense as a goal for education'.

We also need to consider changed views about learning: from the symbol-processing view of mind which argues that thinking is an internal process to situated theories, in which students actively construct knowledge while building an understanding, linking learning to personal experience (Cobb 1999), to the socio-cultural variety advocated by Lave and Wenger (1999) who view learning not just as receiving knowledge about the world, but as an activity in which a person interacts with the world and the learner, the activity and the world become inextricably intertwined.

DACE's approach to learning is influenced by the socio-cultural context. The development of curriculum is viewed as a process of negotiation, of engaging with learners and communities to identify needs, of exploration of options and of linking learning to issues facing communities. Learning is seen as having an impact on the community and equally, the wider world as having an impact on the learner and learning. If we really want to engage those excluded from learning we can no longer justify the University lecturer who 'pours out knowledge over students who passively receive it'. Tutors must encourage active participation in the learning process, in either a set or negotiated curriculum.

In a world where knowledge is at the touch of a button for anyone with access to technology, it becomes even more important for tutors to encourage communities of learners; to facilitate learning by helping students structure and make sense of information and link it to daily life and changing society. As Rogers (2002: 26) states, the role of the teacher as facilitator is: 'to free curiosity, to permit individuals to charge off in new directions dictated by their interests; to unleash the sense of inquiry, to open everything to questioning and exploration, to recognise that everything is a process of change'.

A negotiated curriculum demands a great deal of preparation, interaction and reflection and there are challenges in changing teaching and learning strategies to actively engage learners. Changing the tradition of curriculum planning by providers is, however, crucial to widening participation and requires investment in staff development and changes in organisational systems. The CCC and CUVP projects support such ongoing developments at DACE through collaborative working, stimulating debate and supporting skills development through training in equal opportunities issues and the use of ICT for teaching and learning.

It is not only the tutor who requires new skills and attitudes. Students need to actively participate and accept that learning is not as it was in school; gaining subject knowledge and grades for essay writing. Active participation in the learning process will develop key skills for employment and individual growth and help develop the community in which they live.

To truly embrace a learner's curriculum, institutions need to commit to structural change. It is no longer acceptable for Higher Education Institutions to be the ivory towers of the past giving opportunities for the few. To play a full part in peoples lives, it should be in the heart of our communities.

The CCC Project is one example of such institutional change. Following feedback from communities on the lack of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) resources in isolated communities, European Funding was sought to provide community based ICT suites. This development enhanced the infrastructure for community learning, and strengthened partnerships between communities and their universities. However, change in community learning motivations and institutional practices have not been quickly achieved.

The CCC project developed at a pace and style appropriate for communities; recognising that it takes many years for developments to be embedded. Initially the project provided local IT facilities and options to gain confidence in basic ICT skills. More sophisticated learning opportunities were later introduced; using Internet and multi-media capabilities and a HE accredited Foundation in Technology (FIT) course was established at the centres. To date, over 2000 learners have used the facilities and as James and Preece (2002) suggest in recent research, the ability to take part in a well-designed FIT course in their local community changed learners' experience of education.

ICT as a driver for change

The CCC and CUVP projects have helped assess the benefits of ICT as pedagogic tools to enhance the learning experiences of excluded adults. Halal and Liebowitz (1995) believe that ICT is revolutionising the learning process, allowing almost anyone to learn almost anything from anywhere at anytime. Selwyn and Gorard (2002), however, suggest that to view the role of technology in lifelong learning as the remedy to all educational problems is short-sighted and that to do so ignores wider barriers to learning. Fox (2001) and Clarke (2002) argue that ICT learning materials should be tailored to the needs of specific groups of learners, while Mayes (2002) emphasises the importance of the socio-cultural aspects of ICT-assisted learning. Irrespective of the debate around ICT, technology is continuously developing and we need to ensure that the 'learning divide' (NIACE, 2001) is not exacerbated by technological change. (Thorpe 2000, Clarke 2002). As a new form of literacy is created, it is imperative that the most marginalized people have access to the technology and that they also have the ICT skills to take full advantage of new communication and learning methods.

Pilot research undertaken on an Introduction to Sociology course delivered via video-conferencing from UWS to a community centre in the Neath Valley (Trotman & Kop 2002) showed that some learners were attracted by the use of new technology, while others found flexibility more important, with ICT enabling community access to higher level learning. The combination of face-to-face teaching, video conferencing and virtual learning environment (VLE) support in a community centre, provides exciting opportunities for increasing engagement. It removes disadvantages of distance learning such as isolation and individualisation, while avoiding high costs to the learner. It broadens choice and accessibility, enabling delivery of a wider range of learning to smaller groups within isolated communities. Dedicated learner support through VLE backup also provides a structured, informed learning environment, allowing easy

access to course materials, communication with tutor and other learners and on-line pathways to information and research options.

This blend of strategies creates a social group with which the learner can identify. The students with tutor as facilitator are able to engage in collaborative activity to stimulate learning. As one of the students suggested: ' it is better to be together with the others. You have to be very disciplined to do it on your own. We have to get together in a little huddle (group) to find out what we are supposed to do'.

With careful preparation the use of new technologies can widen participation in higher learning. It will require a curriculum relevant to the learners' needs, as with other learning approaches, and tutors and development staff with ICT, community outreach and mentoring skills.

Conclusions

The ability to present new learning opportunities for socially excluded groups is crucial to widening participation. Adult education needs to be open to 'needs based analysis' and delivery through negotiation with organisations and participants. Education providers should respond to needs expressed by local communities and pre-packaged programmes should make way for a negotiated curriculum, relevant to people's lives.

Changes in teaching and learning strategies are required to progress from a teaching curriculum, where the tutor is the expert, to a learning curriculum (Lave and Wenger 1999) where active participation in the learning process, by the learners, will develop essential learning skills, such as questioning and problem solving, acceptance of responsibility, searching for information, team working and self-reliance.

There is need to increase flexibility within the resourcing of Higher Education, ensuring that valuable informal learning opportunities are widely available for first step learners, with options for accessible community based progression. Responding flexibly to the needs of communities will require change on the part of funders and policy makers. It will also require commitment from providers to improve evaluation and to provide evidence of benefits in terms of widening participation, learner satisfaction, retention and progression.

In this respect, current government drives to widen access to HE will provide a force for change in institutions but stronger and longer lasting change will come from the introduction of new perspectives and standpoints brought forward by diverse groups of learners.

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