Bigger pictures, broader horizons: widening access to adult learning in the arts and cultural sectors

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Introduction

The paper outlines findings from a research project funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and carried out by the authors, along with colleagues David Sims, Robat Powell, Louise Dartnall and Thomas Spielhofer.[1]

Policy context

The research contributed to a number of policy areas currently being addressed by the Government. These include widening participation, promoting the contribution that the cultural sector can make to learning and addressing social inclusion.

Widening participation

Widening people's access to learning is at the core of educational policies in the UK and other European nations. In 2001 the Government published, *'Education and Skills: Delivering Results – A Strategy to 2006'*, which set out its rationale for enabling more people to participate in learning. In it, they suggest that:

> *A sound education opens doors, not just to increased earning power, but also to the enjoyment of art and culture…Better educated and more highly skilled people are more likely to be in work, earn more money and contribute to our economy and society.*

A Government consultation document, *The Learning Age* (1998), emphasised that increasing access to and participation in learning is a formidable challenge that requires contributions from all parts of the education and training systems, including providers working in the voluntary and community sectors. Museums, art galleries, archives and libraries (sometimes referred to as non-traditional providers) have their part to play and in recent years that role has been highlighted. For example Anderson (1997) discussed the relationship between more formal learning and the informal learning that takes place in the cultural sector. He reported that the cultural sector:

> *offers opportunities for personal (informal and self-directed) learning that differ from, and complement, the learning provided by the formal education sector. Education provides museums with a renewed purpose and enables them to contribute to cultural development in society.*

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[1] Lines, A., Sims,D., Powell, R., Mann, P., Dartnall, L. and Spielhofer, T. (2003) BIGGER PICTURES, BROADER HORIZONS: Widening Access to Adult Learning in the Arts and Cultural Sectors. DfES Research Report RR 394.

Social inclusion
The Government aims to encourage these non-traditional providers to reach out and engage the whole community. For example, the DfES and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) have been working in partnership to take forward the Government's response to *Empowering the Learning Community* (2000), the report of the Library and Information Commission's Education and Libraries Task Group. They are also collaborating with organisations such as Resource (the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries) and CILIP (the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals).

In its report *Centres for Social Change: Museums, Galleries and Archives for All* (2000), the DCMS pointed out that the educational work undertaken by museums, art galleries and archives could also help address social exclusion by increasing recognition that learning can take place outside of the classroom. It acknowledged the large contribution that the cultural sector could make through providing informal learning which, it reported, *'has a key role to play in broadening people's understanding and awareness, and providing them with a first step on a learning journey'.*

Informal Learning
While various texts have made reference to learning that is 'non-formal' or 'informal' and to its significance, particularly in relation to widening access to learning, it is clear that authors may have different views about what constitutes informal learning. It seems, however, that there is no universal definition of informal learning. McGivney (1999) writes that:

> *Informal learning is difficult to pin down in an exact definition; it has variously been described as unpremeditated or incidental learning; explicit learning which does not have a prescribed framework; learning which is informal in style and delivery but which includes a teacher and a structure.*

However, Cullen *et al* (2000) pointed out that engaging in learning may mean significant changes for individuals and can involve, *'the active engagement by citizens in the construction, interpretation and, often, re-shaping of their own identity and social reality'.*

Arts and culture
Resource (2001) in its Strategic Plan for Action noted that, although there is no common agreement on what is meant by 'learning' in museums, archives and libraries, *'learning in these contexts is often informal and experimental, with impacts on feelings and attitudes rather than leading to the acquisition of concepts'.* It goes on to make the case for learning in these environments, which can stimulate and inspire learners and, *'provide people with answers, interpretations and experiences which enrich, make sense of and change their lives'.*

The Research
The overarching purpose of the research study was to inform policy development on widening and improving access to learning. The research aimed to ascertain:

- The ways in which different adults perceive informal learning

- The potential role of non-traditional providers and venues in offering learning opportunities.

The study was exploratory in that it was intended to investigate a range of issues that are critical to widening adult participation in learning. Qualitative research methods were used to explore

such factors as the motivators of, and barriers to learning and to consider the meaning that informal learning has on people's lives and their preferred learning styles. Learners' opinions of the venues were also explored in order to discover which features they valued and to ascertain what distinctive contribution they made to reducing barriers to, and take-up of, learning activities. The research was carried out in a range of venues with a wide geographical spread, across England only. The 29 venues selected included:

♦ Museums

♦ Art/exhibition galleries

♦ Community/day centres

♦ An historic house

♦ Outside/open air locations

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using three schedules of questions, designed for staff, learners and non-participants. Where possible, the same questions were used for both learners and non-participants, so that the views of the two groups could be compared. This was particularly the case for questions about the suitability of the venue as a learning environment. All the interviews were audio recorded and the transcripts, which were used for analysis, formed a rich data set. Interviews were carried out with:

♦ 131 learners, these were people participating in courses or activities at the venues

♦ 46 non-participants, who were people visiting the venues but not participating in the learning activities being provided and who had not participated in learning at the venue during the previous 3 years

♦ 28 staff, including organisers, curators and tutors.

Provision and staff perceptions

Interviews with the 28 staff in the venues were the source of information on the various activities required to promote and provide the learning opportunities. A variety of methods had been used to market learning activities and courses, including newspaper advertisements, mailings and information placed in locations such as libraries, museums, galleries, community centres and tourist information centres. The personal recommendation of learners (word of mouth) was also considered to be a valuable way of publicising the opportunities available.

While the majority of activities were open to all, irresponsive of qualifications or experience, some providers also targeted particular groups, including ethnic minorities, homeless people, registered carers and people with physical disabilities.

The activities undertaken by learners were very varied and were interactive and practical, though in some cases background content and theory were also provided through talks, demonstrations and guided tours of gallery displays. Occasionally activities were linked to museum special exhibitions. They may be grouped under the following themes:

♦ **creative arts and design**, e.g. stained glass painting, corset making and African dance

♦ **local history**, e.g. reminiscence workshops and archaeology trails

- ♦ **photography**, e.g. courses on photographic techniques, digital imaging and video editing
- ♦ **collecting and collections**, e.g. sessions on how to take care of objects and photographs
- ♦ **culture and heritage**, e.g. black history events.

Staff in about half of the venues reported challenges in setting up and running learning activities. The challenges, which related mainly to resourcing and organisation, included a lack of resources to develop new learning activities adequately, dealing with the logistics of arranging transport for learners, and recruiting and training freelancers who had the flexibility to deliver sessions when required. A curator in one of the galleries explained that:

> *We don't have a dedicated educational space so we normally use the entrance hall downstairs but that is a public space and some* [learners] *don't want people looking over their shoulder'.*

Activities and participants' perceptions

Participants' interviews included questions about the accessibility of the activities and asked them to comment on what, if anything, had made their learning a positive experience and about the ways in which they felt they had benefited. Activities and workshops that took place over a limited number of sessions or weeks and that did not require too great an initial commitment attracted most participants. Learners also greatly appreciated activities and courses which were offered at no cost. However, where charges were made, learners generally felt that the cost was reasonable. Although most of the venues were centrally located with good transport links, people with disabilities or those belonging to disadvantaged groups experienced some difficulties in attending activities unless special transport or other arrangements were made for them to access the provision.

Participants identified two main areas, apart from the practicalities associated with the delivery of activities, such as sufficient lighting, space and technical equipment, which made learning successful. These were:

- ♦ The pivotal role played by the tutor delivering the activity. Many learners identified the activity with a particular tutor and it was often the expertise of tutors that gave the provision credibility in learners' eyes.
- ♦ The link or relationship between the learning venue and the learning activity. Museums and galleries were found to be particularly suitable for art-related activities. Learners reported feeling inspired by the exhibitions on display and the general atmosphere within the museum or art gallery.

For example, when asked to identify the features that made the venue a good place for learning, one person attending a water-colour and painting workshop expressed a view echoed by many, saying, *'if you're in an art gallery, it's just like one of those old painters standing at your shoulder egging you on'.*

Participants reported a variety of ways in which they benefited from the learning activity, ranging from gaining specific theoretical knowledge of a subject to acquiring practical and technical skills. In addition, they reported gaining interpersonal and social skills and increasing personal confidence as the following quotations illustrate:

A young homeless person attending a photography workshop appreciated the social nature of the activity, pointing out that, *'Its made me feel more a member of the community'*.

The mother of two small children who had travelled some distance to take part in a ceramic arts workshop also enjoyed the sociability of the group, *'The workshop was an absolute lifeline, because it provided the only adult company I have'*.

A man in his early forties, participating in a water-colour painting workshop said the workshop had improved his confidence, *'I think doing things like that sort of gives you more confidence. For life in general really'*.

Finally, a young woman who attended an African Dance workshop had enjoyed the practical way she had been learning, explaining that it was a *'fantastic way to learn something that one had never tried before'*.

Non-participants' views and perceptions

Non-participants (i.e. those visitors not participating in the courses or activities) were asked their views on whether the venue they were visiting would be a suitable place in which to learn and about their views on learning. Most of the interviewees considered the venue suitable for activities and workshops. Elaborating on their responses, the interviewees highlighted the excellent resources that cultural establishments could draw upon to make activities or courses interesting and informative. In their view, such venues could provide a better learning environment than either colleges or adult education institutions, especially for activities related to history or art.

As one non-participant, visiting an art gallery, remarked, *'the main advantage is that artefacts and paintings can be easily accessed at the venues and can enhance learning in ways in which an illustrated book with pictures cannot provide'*.

Participants and non-participants were asked a question about their preferred ways of learning and a majority of both groups said that they would prefer to learn in informal ways, in which they could take a more practical and 'hands-on' approach. They would also seek opportunities for discussions with fellow learners and to learn from each other as well as from the tutors.

Barriers

Insufficient marketing and publicity was one of the main barriers to taking up learning activities identified by the non-participants. Many of the visitors were aware of the educational activities organised by the venues for children but very few seemed to know about the activities provided for adults. For others, time, work pressures and family commitments were most often presented as reasons for not being able to attend. The research also revealed that some people still found institutions, such as museums and galleries, rather forbidding. Related to this was the belief that one needed to have some sort of experience or background in the subject area of the workshop before one attended. As one female interviewee pointed out, she was more likely to attend if it was made very clear that the workshop was for beginners and if she was assured, *'nobody was going to laugh at you'*.

Increasing participation

Both learners and non-participants identified some key messages on how cultural venues might improve take-up of learning. These included creating demand, ensuring accessibility of provision and targeting under-represented groups.

Museums, art galleries and other cultural venues were found to be inspiring, especially where participants could have access to exhibitions and draw connections between the exhibits and what they were doing in their workshops. However, it was suggested that more could be made of these valuable assets by highlighting the unique learning experience they could offer.

Participants generally appreciated the relaxed atmosphere engendered by the tutors and venue, with no overtones of more formal learning. Since many of the non-participants were unaware of the activities, it was clear that wider publicity of workshops and events was needed. This publicity needed to go beyond the immediate community and traditional places where such activities were usually advertised. For example, regional newspapers and local radio were identified as key media through which information about activities in the arts and cultural sectors could be broadcast. Outreach work through partnerships with community organisations could also help to publicise activities to the hard-to-reach.

It was suggested that venues should consider providing a more flexible public programme in order to widen participation. Flexibility in the timetabling of events and workshops, and perhaps offering the same workshop more than once, and at different times, could make them accessible to more people. Putting on taster sessions would enable potential learners to try out a new activity without having to make to great a commitment and, unlike educational establishments, cultural venues were in a unique position to offer this flexibility. Consideration could also be given to the location of the venue, and its accessibility. While many venues were in a central location in towns and cities and seemingly fairly accessible, some potential learner groups, e.g. senior citizens and disabled people, may have trouble getting onto public transport and therefore find access difficult.

Participants were motivated to take up activities that related to their lives and to the history and culture of their communities. This was especially the case in encouraging participation among ethnic communities and senior citizens. Targeting activities at specific groups and providing them with opportunities to share their history and culture with the community was also suggested by interviewees.

Messages and implications

The paper concludes by presenting the main messages and implications of the research findings from this study of the arts and cultural sectors.

Cultural venues, such as museums and galleries, have unique collections on which they can base learning opportunities. They are more likely to maximise the part they can play in widening access to learning if they identify and draw on their distinctive contribution to attracting and engaging adults in learning activities. An advisory group, comprising representatives of local networks or interest groups, could help to identify priorities in marketing, outreach and provision that could aid the planning process. There may also be merit in staring with small pilot courses, or in setting up short taster workshops to stimulate demand and gain people's interest.

Enthusiastic and knowledgeable tutors who can relate well to adult learners are essential to successful programmes. Many providers have to rely on freelance tutors, since their budgets do not allow them to employ such staff permanently. Finding ways of ensuring tutor availability (perhaps through partnerships with other institutions) could provide venues with the opportunity to plan a regular, ongoing programme of events. It is also important to ensure that good facilities and adequate resources are available to provide learners with a fulfilling and memorable learning experience.

Targeting specific interest groups and community organisations can help providers in the arts and cultural sectors to extend their reach to additional users. Venues could arrange activities for particular clubs e.g. local history and archaeology groups. They could also provide activities for clubs for people with special needs.

Building partnerships with other local learning providers could offer access to additional expertise. For example, linking with a more traditional educational institution could provide help with identifying tutors able to support basic skills needs and could also lead to progression opportunities for learners. Such partnerships, which could be brokered through local Learning and Skills Councils, Local Learning Partnerships or New Deal for Communities partnerships, could strengthen the role of cultural venues in the provision of adult learning.

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