

# Overcoming People's Perception of Education in a Community Learning Setting. Strategies to Help Learners Engage in Their Own Learning

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## **Abstract**

The intent of this paper is to explore how to engage reluctant adult learners who may have barriers to education. These can include language barriers, past experience, family life, and not valuing education or themselves; all which can impact learning. Some learners expect courses to be based on traditional teaching methods, for example being teacher led, and presume it will be like school. Some are also surprised at the amount of paperwork that is required, from enrolment forms to learner journals and the formalities of Adult Community Learning (ACL). This paper includes two learner case studies that explore strategies researched through reading and techniques trialled in sessions. Key findings show tutors have to build a strong relationship in a safe environment. Guidance and suggestions for tutors can be found in the strategies sourced for this paper. Adjustments to teacher practice can be shown to have an impact on engaging learners. These include understanding the learners' motivation, making learners feel safe, respected and valued, using their contexts as learning opportunities, getting to know learners personally, showing openly that the tutor learns from the learner, listening and acting on learners' opinions, building bonds between learners, sharing emotions with them, and signposting for progression. Tutors and community courses can offer opportunities for reluctant learners to engage in education, helping to lower their barriers and build self-confidence. However, suitability of venues, courses offered, and the recruitment process can be reassessed to make further impact.

**Key Words**

Community Education; Learner Engagement; Teaching Strategies; Barriers to Learning.

Adult Community Learning (ACL) in the West Yorkshire council I work for offers free ACL courses at venues around the district. I teach non-accredited courses, either based in schools or at a local sports stadium. My main course trains learners over four sessions to become volunteer readers in schools, working one-to-one with children on their reading. Ideally, learners accessing the courses, for funding restrictions, should have less than five A\*–C GCSEs, or be claiming certain benefits. From experience in recruiting learners, there are many people within this bracket who would not think about attending for personal development or next steps. Advertising courses and targeting the correct people is always challenging. Once the learners are recruited, they can be distracted by their lives and do not see the benefits to commit fully to the course. I will investigate strategies for my work so learners are ready for learning and commit their time to the course. These strategies, many of which I need to develop in my practice, are:

- looking at courses on offer, venues and how they are advertised
- understanding learners' thought processes and getting to know learners personally
- allowing learners to show any concerns or ask questions about the course before it begins
- techniques, including dialogue from everyone, the use of stimuli personal to learners, rewards, learner agreements, explaining the content of each session at the start and considering what lies beneath questions asked by learners.

*'Learning has three dimensions, all operating at the same time. It is a cognitive or mental process and involves thinking; it is an emotional process and involves feeling; and it is a social process and involves doing'* (Appleby & Barton, 2007: p. 5). This

can be a frightening proposition if someone has been out of learning, failed by the education system, or educated abroad in a very different system. It is important to consider these when understanding each individual learner.

### **What Do People Think Education Is?**

Many adults return to their own previous educational experiences when looking at courses. Burke (2016) shares Edward A Ross' view (1901, as cited in Kliebard, 1995: p. 79) that some people expect to be more than they are due to their education, whilst other areas of society feel as though they do not deserve education, or the education system is a closed book to them. I see this as still being applicable today. There are the privileged who receive education as an expected norm, and there are many in society who miss opportunities or who do not get the chance. These are the people that community education engages with. *'The Freirean educator does this by challenging the passivity and fatalism of ordinary people, intervening purposefully in their lives and enabling them to lever themselves out of "immersion" in the "culture of silence" (Kirkwood & Kirkwood, 2011: p. xviii). The different levels of Freire's conscientization (Kirkwood & Kirkwood, 2011) seem to describe some of my learners. Naive consciousness is when people think '...tomorrow is on the same pattern as today and yesterday' (p. 37), whereas fanaticised consciousness is where myths play a part in their opinion, such as '...immigrants are the source of British problems... and act on the basis of emotion rather than reason...Believing themselves to be free, believing they are making their own choices, they are in reality following prescriptions' (p. 37). It is as though people blame others for their situations and do not see that actively making small steps can change things for themselves.*

Duckworth (2014) has carried out research into learners from her community where she grew up and now teaches. From personal experience, she has insight into communities and cultures, as I do in my teaching environment. Relating to her work has been thought-provoking as she explains that community education moves away from the traditional. She speaks of an '*...egalitarian approach, whereby there is sharing of power between the teacher and the student in learning, the curriculum, its contents and methods*' (p. 13) and backs this up with work from Freire. Hence, instead of learners being told what to learn, they have the opportunity to guide where learning leads and how they evolve in learning. As a teacher, this brings excitement, as the same course in different venues with a different group can develop down very different paths, whilst still achieving the learning objectives. Learners can see the content of each objective and how it is adapted to suit their needs. This increases engagement and builds relationships as the tutor puts the learner and their learning to the fore.

### **Recruiting Learners Onto Courses**

It is education that can impact on the thinking of the learner in terms of perception around attending courses, but how can learners be enticed to the classroom to see this? The courses on offer, venues, and how they are advertised are part of the package to encourage learners to attend. On reflection, are the venues, when based in schools, suitable for learners who feel school originally failed them? Does the wording on course advertisements appeal to learners that Adult Learning is trying to reach? For both of these questions, other Community Learning providers can help by sharing their experience, and further reading material sought to offer advice and

alternative approaches. Following Adult Learning professionals on Twitter can also bring different perspectives.

Census data shows there has been an increase of 106% (45,000) from 1991 to 2011 in the ethnic minority community population in the area I work (Jivraj & Finney, 2013). This may be a distorted figure due to the wording on the census form altering from 'descending from', to 'cultural background', which can be interpreted differently. Hence, a trickle of eastern European learners (a third of the 5% 'white other' stated they were Polish in 2011) are attending courses as well as those from Asian countries who have English as a second language. Lack of English skills can stop people attending courses, but those who do attend appear to be disciplined, willing to do well and are grateful of the opportunity.

### **Introducing Two Learners to Help With Examples**

Using examples, this paper seeks to give an insight into the barriers these learners had and how they overcame them. The learners I meet have so much to offer and learning can open up opportunities. For me, it is important to help each individual to complete the courses and know about their next steps, supported by impartial careers advice. The examples here are typical of learners I often come across in my teaching. It is important to enhance knowledge of techniques for increasing confidence, self-esteem, self-belief, attendance, developing vocabulary both verbally and through written work; hence, putting the learner at the centre rather than just achieving the course objectives. It gives learners the ability to achieve the objectives of the course whilst breaking down their barriers to learning.

Learner One was a female who brought a 'to do' list, such as phoning the doctor, going to the dentist, or going to the post office. She was not in the right frame of mind for learning, clock-watching; wanting to ring people; wanting to leave early. She was out of work with no qualifications.

Learner Two was a young, stay-at-home mum relying on relatives whilst she attended. She was apprehensive, particularly with regard to childcare and needing to ensure her baby was safe. As a mother, I understand and can relate to this learner. However, for three hours once a week for three weeks, she was distracted and wanted to be elsewhere. She had no English qualifications and English is not her first language.

### **Looking At Demotivation**

Wallace (2007) places students' demotivation into four categories. The first one is fear: of the teacher, of being too clever or too stupid, of not being able to do the work, of not fitting in with the rest of the group, of failure or fear of the attention.

Some of these I had considered before, but I had not realised they might be frightened of me. Within my teaching, I share parts of my life, giving examples, helping to create bonds with the learners. I tried to ensure that both Learners One and Two could relate to me, for example, through what we are experiencing bringing up our children. Showing an interest in their personal lives and understanding them brings mutual respect. Through this, both learners took that respect into their learning. Having all the fear factors as a list puts it into perspective as to why learners can behave as they do.

Boredom, Wallace's second demotivator, might also be an issue, so having additional extension activities for learners to keep them engaged proved to be a good strategy, particularly for keeping Learner One engaged.

Wallace's third demotivator is previous negative experience and, fourth, loss of hope. I aim to give my learners hope and encouragement through learning. This can be worked on through communication, time spent on the individual, and getting to know learners more personally, which I did with both Learners One and Two, making them feel valued. Paired and group discussion also brought deeper understanding of others on the course and the likelihood of appreciating another's point of view once knowing more about the person. This helps extinguish loss of hope and show things have moved on from their experience/perception of education.

### **Strategies to Involve Learners in Building the Curriculum**

Through reading, there are strategies I could put in place to help learners be in the right frame of mind for learning.

#### a) At the beginning – student voice

Strategies should start before the course is ready for learners. Kirkwood and Kirkwood (2011) give an example of a project, how it was built, and why it was successful. When setting up a curriculum for the Adult Learning Project (ALP) in Glasgow, the participants were asked if they had any questions/concerns. Learners can be really apprehensive when starting a course and to add queries about apprehensions, questions, and concerns may encourage learners to share their opinions and views, pointing out to them that they matter and indicate that they can



succeed if they commit. Responses from questions can differ greatly in a first session. Some learners may not contribute, especially those who have not experienced education for a while, or had bad experiences at school. Hence, I have realised it is my responsibility to tease out concerns or questions, such as putting them on Post-it notes and reading them out anonymously.

I encourage dialogue to include all, '*...which Freire calls a mutual search for truth*' (Kirkwood & Kirkwood, 2011: p. 13). However, I have realised I need to improve my technique as some learners are more timid and I want to work with them to find their voice. Once they have a voice and a purpose, they will be more committed. '*To be present with learners respectfully, I consciously choose to make a place within my being for the rhythm of heartfelt listening*' (Cueva, 2010: p. 80). Techniques include thinking about the speed of conversation, invite speech instead of questioning, and allow pauses, thus giving time to think. The managers where I work have encouraged the use of 'pause, pounce, bounce' as a questioning technique. I know, as a learner, this would make me uncomfortable and possibly freeze and become embarrassed. Yet, I have tried this with my learners and for some groups it is fine, but others are groups of learners who may not have been in the classroom for several years and have very low confidence in their own ability. With these groups I can feel the awkwardness in the room. In this situation, I allow the confident ones to speak, share my thoughts, and then ask a quieter learner if they agree or have any other thoughts. I have become aware that when I and the learners hear and value each other fully, people open up, become more confident, and are more willing to share their view. In my questioning technique, I also never say "no that's not what I'm looking for" but may say "that's a really good angle to take" or "I've not thought of

that in this way” and talk about the wrong answer before discussing the answer I was looking for. This gives those with less confidence the environment to learn without worrying about others’ reactions. Learners worry about failure, but it is from failure that people grow. Exploring wrong ideas can open discussions and have a positive impact on the classroom. *‘When we fail in safe ways, we want to learn more. Our frustrations in the face of failure can help us to develop the grit we need to succeed’* (Miller, 2015: p. 3). Some of this overlaps with Kline’s (2015) thinking, for example her thinking circles and making sure everyone is present in the room. Scenario cards work really well for learners to express themselves, as I get them to work in pairs, then one of the pair will feed back. Before moving on to the next pair, I always ask the learner that has not spoken if they would like to add anything else. Even if they say “no”, I always thank them and move on. Every learner must feel they are as valued in the group as the next person.

#### b) Engage with their locality

Adapting from Kirkwood and Kirkwood (2011), when first meeting learners it is important to get to know their context and their community, so that my sessions start with their familiarity, locality and what matters to them. Freire did this in his work, giving learners a voice and understanding their constraints and views as learning begins. This can be nurtured whilst covering the learning objectives as a deeper understanding of the learner is reached. Along with stimuli such as video clips, photographs or text, asking for learners’ thoughts and allowing different views gives people the ability to express themselves and build confidence in learning from others. I have found visual aids help with interpretation with learners with English as an additional language, such as Learner Two. However, language used in some of

the TED Talks or YouTube clips means I have shown learners with English as an additional language very challenging sources. This could have the detrimental effect of panic rather than stretch. Thus, a bank of resources covering the objectives but helping with the language barriers is important and being aware of this is important as a teacher.

c) Share experiences and views

Cueva (2010) explains the importance of allowing the course to be open to different perspectives, again linking to Kline (2015), stating that conflict and disagreement is good. I am aware that I struggle with conflict, but now see it in a more positive light and feel I can embrace it and show learners how to deal with it too. Using scenario cards with topics to provoke reaction in a controlled environment can also bring respect, appreciation and a thought about why others may think differently. Some of the cards have scenarios such as 'the pupil uses the word "gay" in the session' and 'my dad says people from different countries should go back to where they come from'. These cards give the learner the opportunity to reflect on how they might manage difficult conversations that may arise once they are volunteering in school. Discussion can show opinions and views that may not have been considered by individuals, hence, the group can open up or introduce new thinking on the subject matter. At first, I was apprehensive about some questions but learners responded well and built up group respect and understanding of others' values, which is a fantastic way to embed British values, one of the requirements of the curriculum.

Appleby and Barton (2007) show that if the students explain their experiences, relating them to the course, it builds confidence rather than assuming where and why

people are at a certain starting point and allows student enquiry. *'A social practice approach enables us to see that things from everyday life are important to support learning in the classroom'* (Appleby & Barton, 2007: p. 10). All learning needs to reflect the learners, what it means to them, and how it can relate to them. Starting a course or session with what a learner already knows can build confidence first, and then activities and discussions can introduce and develop learning for the objectives to be completed. *'Where people see the value in and connect with what they learn, they are more engaged and motivated'* (Appleby & Barton, 2007: p. 27). Learner Two was supported by other learners, encouraging her to complete the course. From this, she saw the benefits and, once given her certificate, was so thankful and felt elated in her achievement.

#### d) Adding learner ideas to sessions

At the start of the course and each session there is an inclusive discussion of what learners would like to get out of the session. If, during the session, this cannot be fulfilled, a 'Park it here' sheet is displayed on the wall, where learners put their Post-it notes of what they want to cover. Learners can add to this at any time when something has triggered interest. Learner One responded to this particularly well and was more engaged knowing her interests would be met. For Learner Two, a word wall for spelling, unknown words or acronyms and time spent repeating meaning of words appearing on this wall helped her feel more included and increased her understanding as a learner with English as an additional language. This gives time for further research and activities to be developed before the next session.

#### e) Building relationships

Rogers (cited in Wallace, 2007) believes in '*...unconditional positive regard*' (p. 34). This builds relationships, allowing the learner to feel safe and more confident to do well. The teacher must act in a professional manner however they feel personally about a learner. The teacher has to be present as themselves and not hide behind their tutor role. People have to feel safe and pain-free before they can put themselves in a place ready for learning. As a tutor, I cannot get them to this place, but be there when they do. It is important for teachers to know '*...a sense of safety is a precondition for learning... Where teachers are able to understand what the issues are for learners, they are more able to create a safe environment for learning*' (Appleby & Barton, 2007: p. 29). These conditions can be achieved by getting to know learners, by building rules and agreements together, by showing and explaining confidentiality, and by giving the learners structure. It is easy to make assumptions and be annoyed if people break the rules set by the group. By removing assumptions and stereotypes through activities, learners find common ground, interest in each other, and are more open to learn from each other as well as learning from the tutor. '*By giving voice to our stories we bring what is on the inside out. Each person's story is alive with the potential to broaden our lived experience*' (Cueva, 2010: p. 86). To make a group agreement, I get the learners to work on certain questions in pairs and then bring that to the whole group. These questions include: "When do you feel valued? "When are you listened to?" The answers are brought to the table in a group and it is a great way for learners to express their opinions, find similarities, and build their rules together. The learners sometimes name these 'agreement', 'pact' or 'rules' – each group has their own interpretation. It is also a great way to assess who are the more vocal members and those who need more encouragement in discussion. It also builds bonds between learners and myself. On occasion, it has not been as

successful among those who attended the course as a means to an end to volunteer in school but, in the main, starting a course with this exercise builds a firm foundation of respect and support in a safe environment for learning to occur.

Cueva (2010) believes in laughter. This breaks down barriers, finds similarities, is good for mental health, energises, and brings interest and a thirst for more; something really positive to bring into practice, for the benefit of both teacher and student. In my sessions, there is a lot of laughter which I found relaxed Learner Two and engaged Learner One in discussion. To feel included in the session and relating to other learners or situations, they were able to focus on their learning and be less distracted by outside events. Keeping the learners engaged in their learning enabled them to successfully complete the course, and be proud of their achievements.

### **Thinking From The Perspective Of The Learner**

*'Both learners and teachers use methods of inquiry inside and outside the classroom as part of their everyday practices'* (Appleby & Barton, 2007: p. 7). I need to think from the learners' viewpoints and not just about the objectives and sessions to be delivered, for example, they may be asking questions such as 'What will I get from the course?' 'How will this course benefit me?' *'When someone asks a question, consider what lies behind the question. Perhaps it is a way to invite their perspective to join the conversation. Often, I am too eager to share an answer that closes the door on a more valuable learning opportunity'* (Cueva, 2010: p. 88). Once these dynamics within the group are mastered, I can work on their focus to stay on the course or not be distracted. The level of engagement and the reason learners are present will differ tremendously, thus considerations around locality, social circles,

cultures, economics, and religion should be regarded. Teachers should personally know each learner for them to develop. It should not be seen as prying and learners' pasts may surface. This has made me realise that I need to be ready to deal with, or be open to, many situations I will not have experienced myself. For each cohort of learners, I complete a learner profile consisting of background, qualifications, goals, and how to engage them. This gives me a great overview when planning activities. I felt at first I was asking for information that was none of my business but found that learners are open and willing to share. Now I find it a great resource to help me understand my learners further.

### **Incentives**

To keep Learners One and Two in the classroom, Wallace (2007) suggests prizes and possibilities of jobs can be seen as a motivator, described as '*...extrinsic motivation...based on the hope of an externally offered reward*' (p. 33). Finding the right reward for that learner is an important part of the effectiveness of this strategy. For some, cakes and biscuits are a suitable and effective reward. Others might want to be offered a voluntary role or a certificate. Learner One had not received a certificate for many years and was very proud of their achievement, whilst it was Learner Two's first certificate since being in the UK. Even on a non-accredited course, a certificate is something to aim for and has great value.

Rather than me doing the motivating, I would ultimately like it to come from the student. This motivation that comes from the individual and their attitude is referred to as '*...intrinsic motivation*' (p. 33). It is where I want my learners to be once having

tasted education. Wallace (2007) goes on to say: '*Some psychologists argue that it's possible to locate and nurture the sense of intrinsic motivation in all learners*' (p. 34).

### **What Determines The Courses That Run?**

Kirkwood and Kirkwood (2011), when explaining their ALP in Glasgow, described how workers were completing surveys on the streets to gauge what courses the potential learners would attend. The Kirklees Adult Learning team work towards '*...improving health and wellbeing and building economic resilience*' (Kirklees Council, 2016: p. 4), aiming for '*...rounded, resilient and ready residents*' (Kirklees Council, 2016: p. 3) (Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2014–2020; Kirklees Economic Strategy, 2014–2020). Courses run on Digital Inclusion, Personal Development, Volunteering and Wider Family Learning. However, they may not be attractive courses to the learners. As a tutor, I would ideally like to go into the community I serve and find the courses the community want and teach appropriately. This is really difficult when there is no multi-agency working, such as job centres signposting individuals to courses, or working alongside community venues to encourage people to become learners. The structure and systems in the council need to align so the target groups in the community can be reached and benefit from the services on offer. As a tutor, I feel I do not have the resources to do this on my own and find this frustrating. Furthermore, I am challenged by managers as to why specific targets have not been met. I understand the importance of this due to funding implications, and managers also find this frustrating. However, we need to undertake research into local demand within the community and this should ensure that new courses run.



## Conclusion

In conclusion, I have found that there needs to be re-evaluation of the courses on offer (i.e. is it what the local residents want?), the venues (are they accessible to the learners targeted?) and how they are advertised, especially the language that is used. Also, on reflection I have realised I need to understand better how my learners learn, and what motivates them so they feel valued and encouraged to learn.

Furthermore, I will make time for concerns or questions about the course before it begins, so apprehensions are diminished. Techniques shown to be very important include dialogue from everyone, using stimuli personal to the learner alongside improving rewards, delivery of learner agreements, and making sure the content of each session is explained at the start. Analysing and considering what lies beneath questions will also help with engaging with learners and putting them in the right frame of mind for learning. Engaging Learners One and Two kept me constantly thinking and trying new ideas, which may or may not be successful with others. Each learner should be seen as an individual and not as a group in order to engage in and encourage Community Learning.

Nevertheless, *'We must continue to practice with humility, foolishness, and fearlessness, within a dynamic cynicism and hope. We must be willing to make mistakes and model our own humanity to the students...it is valuable to start where the students are and let conversation ... develop'* (Burke, 2016: p. 53). As well as tutors looking from the learners' points of view, I believe it is the tutor's role to get the students to see from other perspectives and not be encompassed in their own bubble. It is then that change and progression can happen.

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