

**FURTHER EDUCATION RESEARCH ASSOCIATION
Conference, 2002.**

Motivating and empowering adults returning to study

Presenter: Dr. Stephen Bigger. 24th January 2002

Research: Stephen Bigger and Jean Bigger.

Abstract

This is a qualitative study of students in FE who have attended ten cohorts of Return to Study courses over the past five years, using questionnaires and interviews. This involves people who have done a varying amount of prior study, and includes asylum seekers, ESOL students as well as those aiming for HE. It examines the development of their confidence and motivation through their experience of FE. It evaluates the provision they have been given and draws out examples of effective practice from their views. The study examines the obstacles that these students feel that society, relationships and the education service places in their path. The title reflects the degree of disadvantage that many have to overcome. The research should FE institutions develop the culture to support these students effectively in order to underpin widening participation.

A Radio 3 interview explained how difficult it is for the working class and women to get into orchestras given an entrenched elitist male-dominated culture anti-pathetic to their progress and promotion. We are not in a position to judge whether or not that is so; but it seemed a useful metaphor for groups seeking to access education and subsequent jobs, to make progress through it and to secure appropriate progression. In the race for advancement, some people have advantages of upbringing, supportive networks, physical fitness, and sufficient money. These have the tools for a fast run towards graduate jobs. Those discussed here did not go to the right schools, so do not look right or talk right. They have to negotiate many obstacles, mental as well as physical. Their lives are filled with trauma and emotional 'baggage'. The wonder of it is that some succeed and even overtake the swimmers with advantages. Some obtain good degrees. The sadness is that many don't.

This paper focuses on a pilot study on a Return to Study 15 week part-time programme in an FE College, now operating with its tenth cohort. The Return to Study programme (RtS) consists of a wide range of people ('students') with various motivations – for example to pick up further study after a failed schooling, to return after a period of child rearing (usually women) or unemployment (men). Some of the earlier cohorts progressed to HE qualifications. A number have a fair amount of chaos in their lives - medical, social and emotional problems, or learning difficulties of varying severity which complicate their study: providers need a great deal of empathy to support them through these, and some have. Progression may have many routes – some to basic skills, many to access and later degree courses.

What is Return to Study?

The Open College Network (OCN) Accredited units are:

- Advice and guidance
- Study skills
- Reading & writing
- Maths and
- ICT

This includes Library and information search, Referencing, Note taking, Essay writing and Academic support.

Confidence

The students generally have problems in confidence which have to be attended to as the first priority. Their personal relationships may inhibit their initial attendance and affect their progress. Sometimes something as simple as affording the bus fare to come may be a barrier to participation. Men have the greatest problems. Those coming from broken relationships are most likely to find themselves homeless and cashless. Getting supportive but critical feedback on the first assignment is crucial.

The teaching of adults ('andragogy' was a term reinvented by Malcolm Knowles) requires a particular active and informal style, facilitating learning and empowering a growing confidence (emphasised for example in the work of Carl Rogers). It stems from **relationship** and is destroyed by anonymity. The formation of 'buddy' peer support groups is crucial and these continue to operate long after the course is over. If this style still seems unconventional, it is because not all adult educators achieve it. 'Andragogy' seemed to sum up the feeling that teaching adults is different from teaching children: and in a sense it is, but it is a difference of degree and not of form. Teachers are facilitators of learning, starting from where the student currently is and building upon current knowledge and skills: that individual foundation will differ according to development, age and ability, but the process and the relationship remain the same. At any age, formal teaching may be one helpful strategy among many. We may find the term 'andragogy' useful, not it cannot be held as distinctly different from 'pedagogy.'

Susan Weil (1992) asks whether students are being helped to learn how to learn. She introduces a process of DISJUNCTION, INTEGRATION, EQUILIBRIUM and SELF-VALIDATION. Or in other words:

- CONFUSION,
- GETTING IT TOGETHER,
- ON AN EVEN KEEL, and
- TAKING OWNERSHIP.

To achieve this, Teachers of adults should, in her view,

- Reveal something of themselves
- Remember that they, as teachers, are also adult learners
- Not pretend to be the fount of all knowledge
- Create stimulating discussions of real life circumstances
- Make connections, and encourage students to do this constantly
- Remember that people learn from arguments and disagreements
- Speak in language that students can understand whilst not demeaning them.
- Remember that on some things they know more than us and we can learn from them. Learning then becomes a partnership.
- Remember that some students, especially women, have to "unlearn not to speak"
- Remember that students have a life outside the classroom and should be treated as individuals
- Assess the various personalities, knowing who to encourage and who to prod

That these students sign on for higher level courses is a longer term recruitment benefit.

Discussion of Data

1. Something new and challenging

The majority of students undertaking Return to Study are women. The most common reasons they give for returning to study through this route are:

- Children are at school
- Time is now available
- They are bored with work
- And they need a challenge.

There are a number of issues here: it seems to them the end of a period of confinement, and for the first time there seems to be the chance to do something more interesting and meet other people. There is a feeling that they have been treading water, and they need to get on with their lives. In some cases the need for money led to boring jobs which they want to get away from.

"I needed something new and fresh"

"I was at a low point in my life and felt I need a challenge"

"Because my children have all gone to school I now have time for what I want to do"

These adults want the challenge. Is the work they do challenging?

2. People persuade

That it is part-time is important as a transition to further study. The decision to study was normally made in conversation with advisers, friends, or partners. In some cases, the College enquiry desk was the first port of call; teachers in school or other professionals involved with children sometimes gave encouragement. A husband or partner also studying could provide the trigger; or a friend: "My friend Brenda pushed me into it and the time was right".

Marketing needs a personal approach.

3. Worries

The three main worries are:

- Coping
- Age
- Fitting in
- Financial – many receive benefits which restricts their return to paid work

One response put these neatly together:

"My biggest concern was 'fitting in', and thinking 'am I too old?'. I was also concerned about being 'clever' enough."

Coping raised questions of what to expect and how much needed to be covered. Most wondered 'whether or not I was academically able'. This is a barrier they have to cross if they are to progress, and is the biggest self insight they receive: they are able.

Age is an issue because of the assumption that 'students' are young: "I didn't know whether the classroom would be full of younger pupils". Most of the sample were late 20s or 30s: "I was very worried about being so old (36)...". The early sessions are hugely relieving, seeing that one's fellows are the same age.

'Fitting in' is linked with both issues and is a natural response of people who have been confined to the house.

4. Barriers from the past

"I had always struggled at secondary school with the academic subjects"

"my brother was a grade A student and I was expected to be and I was not"

"I had never completed a course before..."

Attitude of teachers to youngsters was highlighted as a barrier – talking down, telling students what to do.

They recognised that adults are not subject to the same responses: “not like now where I will listen”. But autocratic teaching styles will not produce the best responses (either in school or in College). One said that at school “I found the learning and taking in of information very hard”.

This suggests a priority should be given to making learning accessible, facilitating learning, getting away from information giving to facilitating understanding.

Teachers of adults are facilitating learning, which implies an andragogy distinct from autocratic models of pedagogy.

5. First impressions

“a very scary first day”;

“nervous”

“quite apprehensive and anxious as it had been so long since I had stepped foot inside a classroom and I wasn’t sure how I would cope”

“I felt I wasn’t as good as everybody else and initially felt that I was trying to do school work again”

“Scared, would I fail? Would I like and be liked by the people on the course”

Even what to wear causes anxiety. However, the students found they were very similar in age and situation “which helped us all form very strong bonds academically and socially”. “I really enjoyed going after the first day” “I felt a lot happier”.

The first day is vital. The teacher has to facilitate bonding and set up a peer support philosophy. The first assignment is vital.

6. Support: the tutors and the group

Discussion was easy and students felt that by sharing their concerns they realised that others had worked through the same worries. Talking to someone who had been through this process helped. ‘Chatting’ was important. This gave the reassurance “which in turn gave me the confidence to go forward. The group was crucial: “our group instinctively knew if a student needed help whether it be for college or at home”. They solved problems “by being friendly and working together as a group, having things explained.”.

It was important that the style of teaching was adapted to the adult learner and that the tutors were approachable with concerns and requests for support. “The help was the best I’d had and they talk to you like adults and they put you at ease.”

Tutors need to think through what being supportive might mean with these adults. Support can be time consuming. The formation of the group is a significant early step.

7. What is most effective?

Building confidence

I now know I can do it

Talking through things with my group gave me confidence and let me sound out my ideas.

They let me bring my children into college and into class. Without this, I would not have returned to study.

Openness and flexibility encourages confidence.

8. Barriers

Money: cost of coming to college can be difficult.

Childcare arrangements: can be difficult and unpredictable.

Time management: assignments, part-time work, family.

No barriers within FE were noted: “you have helped all the way through”.

The logistics of returning to study for women are substantial. The Access Fund can be a lifeline – but has limits. Institutions need to handle this fund well and sensitively.

9. Career plans

The sample were set on entering nursing, midwifery, social work, often via university.

"the help you get to know what you need to do to get where you want is great. I am more determined to get where I want to be."

Students are motivated by personal objectives and aspirations.

10. Progress

100% said "I have made good progress".

"I have surprised myself. I look forward to going to college and generally enjoy the whole experience. My skills have improved..."

"I am more confident of myself and my experience"

"I couldn't write an essay when I started and now I can; I couldn't give a presentation and now I can".

All would agree that "there is still a long way to go!".

There is a can-do philosophy here which values and celebrates the skills that the students acquire and enables them to reflect on what they can now understand/do. This produces a sense of driving forwards.

11. Other comments...

- Full time (access Course) is draining but I feel more relaxed.
- "I would encourage anyone to 'have a go' at a college course. You definitely gain in self worth, confidence, friends, knowledge and a great sense of achievement. It's certainly been one of my better ideas! Well worth the trouble."
- "I have grown confidence and I am willing to learn, unlike my days at school. It's because the time I'm taking to do this is for me, I feel it's down to me to do my best. Thank you"
- "The Return to Study acted as a great 'taster' course. Many students who I have talked to usually commit themselves to 1 or 2 year courses and therefore they are faced with all the personal changes that college brings, along with coping with the course itself. With the Return to Study you are already familiar with these changes and can prepare yourself for your chosen course appropriately. I would highly recommend it."

"With the help and support you receive from the tutors and the friends you make you can do anything you want at the end. I couldn't ever think about going to uni but now I can see myself there now."

Men...

Men generally have greater problems and give up easier. Those with broken relationships can find themselves on the streets and in hostels and find it difficult to get back. They are easily exploited and very difficult to help. They may be less expressive, less able to explain their feelings and talk through their plight to resolution.

One dyslexic student wanted to progress. He moved from RtS through Access to university. He is coping because of a particular skill in note taking and the belief that he can do it in spite of an admitted learning problem. He uses a tape recorder to help. Transcribing assuredly uses up a great deal of time. But **no handouts are given out** – HE have not thought through the implications of having a dyslexic student around. Indeed, they have not thought through how adults learn, where the combination of having a record of the issues to take away, and time to discuss and explore the issues are more likely to embed real learning than simply transferring the notes from the lecturers sheet to the students by imprecise handwriting. This is tying the short arms behind the swimmer.

The Tenfold Path: Ten Commandments for tutors and managers

1. **Treat these students as adults** ... a distinct teacher/learner relationship.

1. Break down status, assumptions, and barriers. Have conversations about normal things.
2. **Confidence:** Generate a positive 'can do' philosophy to build up self confidence. Confident students progress to other courses and so should be seen as a recruitment strategy.
3. **Study skills** Show them **how to** write an essay. There are huge implications for assessment. The first essay in particular is crucial. Insensitive handling can destroy them. Uncritical praise will hold them back.
4. **Immediacy** .. sort out problems, or they will go away and never return. This implies **student friendly procedures** and **responsiveness**.
5. **Procedures** - some are needlessly unhelpful. E.g. inflexibility in hand-in dates; requiring students to do things in person rather than by post or email – when they can't afford bus fares.
6. **Self esteem and Motivation** – root out demotivators, build them up, make them special. Human relationships are a key energiser.
7. **Be baby friendly.** The women often have young children and have timed this effort so that they can progress when the child goes to nursery. Can they feed the baby? Can they change them cleanly and safely? Can they bring children into class?
8. **Subject first or people first?** The aim and object of education is for students to progress. Some staff are too precious about their own subjects. The learning going on is holistic. Students need to make connections – so do the staff.
9. **Experienced staff** – it requires highly skilled reflective teachers, not novices. This is not a job to give to an underused tutor short of teaching. This, and tutorial time needed, has funding implications. The system however encourages marginalisation. The widening participation agenda needs to rectify this.
10. **Continuity** - the students build relationships with each other and the staff and return both for advice and to bring news year after year. The casualisation of staffing in the sector can threaten marginalized courses such as this.

References

- Rogers Carl R and David E. Russell, 2002, *Carl Rogers, the Quiet Revolutionary: an Oral History* Roseville, Ca: Penmarin Books.
- Weil Susan, 1992, 'Access: towards education or miseducation? Adults imagine the future' in Thorpe M et al., 1992, *Culture and Processes of Adult Learning* Routledge/Open University.

Postscript.

These courses were cut by the College in 2005 as an economy. However, former students still maintain contact with the tutors.