



Dialogue (EUCEN) Case Study: “Research and practice in adult return to study”

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Summary of Research/Practice Dialogue Potential of the Case Study

This case study shows how researchers and practitioners came together to investigate the experiences of adult returners to full-time education, and specifically students in a Pre-Entry Access Course at the University of Strathclyde. A qualitative interview-based study provided insights into the learners’ perspectives on a range of issues including approaches to learning, information literacy, engagement and their perceptions of teaching and learning methods used on the course.

The next stage in progressing the work is to hold an internal seminar for lecturers teaching on the Pre-Entry Access Course, with invited participants from the local Lifelong Learning community, to present findings and engage in dialogue. This is being scheduled for March/April 2012. Since the research seeks to illuminate the student experience of the pre-entry course the findings should offer opportunities to improve on current/baseline practice by discovering the key links between practice and research in pedagogy for such courses by drawing on empirical findings about student experience. Key areas for consideration include: relationships between theories of adult learning and theories of undergraduate education; student transitions; relationship to the first year of undergraduate study; professional development of staff; and course re-design. It is anticipated that wider discussion of the case study could entail: *dimensions of dialogue* e.g. researcher/practitioner relations, organizational development at micro/intermediate/macro levels, and any wider social connections; also *characteristics of dialogue* e.g. reciprocity of needs and interests of researchers and practitioners, relative power relationships, criteria for evaluating research in relation to practice. An important issue for debate at the seminar will be the questions – *What is possible in dialogue? What are the optimal bridges between research and practice? What are the potential barriers to change?* The work has been presented to several



conferences and may be of interest to national networks e.g. Scottish QAA, NIACE, AONTAS and others.

Purpose

The purpose of the research is to find out more about non-traditional adult learners. Given that the concept of a 'job for life' is becoming more and more a term of the past, adults are expected to change their skills and enhance their prospects at increasingly varying points in their lives. The Centre for Lifelong Learning has been offering the Pre-Entry Access course for almost 25 years and throughout that time the motivations, goals and experiences of students have changed considerably. The recent work has been concerned with capturing the beliefs and motivations of current students with a view to identifying how they perceive themselves as learners, what is of importance to them as learners and how we can better understand and meet their needs as a learning provider. Part-time learning is increasingly vital to give those who need to re-train or to gain an opportunity post-school to fulfil their potential and learning ambitions. It must be robust and fit for purpose and do all it can to encourage learners to maintain their engagement throughout the lifecourse.

Context

The broader context in which the pre-entry course might be viewed is in terms of its relation to the undergraduate degree, and in turn the relation of the latter to lifelong learning more broadly conceived, in the particular sociohistorical, economic and political context of the United Kingdom in the early 21st century. There has in recent years been a good deal of political rhetoric on the need for lifelong learning, acquisition of skills sets that render individuals competitive within rapidly changing employment markets, the expectation of career changes across the lifespan rather than stable single careers for the duration of the working lifespan, and a general occupational 'agility'. This emphasis on occupational adaptability raises major implications for public policy, educational theory and practice. Is the undergraduate degree (and by extension, access courses designed to feed into it) primarily a specialized academic/professional qualification, with its beneficial side effects of the development of certain 'graduate attributes', mainly of interest in terms of human capital and individual economic success? Or does it have power to channel personal development in many other ways, including a presage to further lifelong learning?

The Scottish Bachelor-level degree is relatively unusual within the UK context in that it takes four years rather than three for students to complete an Honours degree. Another relatively unusual feature in a UK context is that Scottish Bachelor degrees, particularly but not exclusively those in the Arts, Humanities and the Social Sciences, are initially broad-based.



Thus, the student may commence his or her studies with the intention of graduating with a single honours degree in a specific academic subject, but he/she will have to study three academic subjects including their desired subject during first year, followed by two subjects including the desired subject in second year, before concentrating solely on the desired subject for the third and fourth years. This same degree structure (initially broad, but more narrow in the later years of study) is true for degrees in all academic subjects in the above group of degrees (except in the case of joint honours degrees, where two subjects continue to be studied in third and fourth years). This broad curriculum in first year has implications for the design of any access courses; in the interest of letting the students know what first year is going to be like, breadth of coverage is advisable.

The study that we undertook examined the experiences of students on a particular access course, the Pre-Entry Access Course in Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Strathclyde. This course offers potential adult returners the opportunity to study part-time a variety of arts and social sciences subjects as a prelude to possibly re-entering full time education as an undergraduate student in either arts subjects (typically languages), social sciences, some business subjects, and the LL.B degree in Law. A sufficiently strong performance on the pre-entry course is recognised as meeting entry requirements for admission to undergraduate degree study; at the time of writing, entry to all of the undergraduate courses listed above is highly competitive and good marks (60%-70% average across the pre-entry modules studied) are required for admission to the courses listed.

The course is open to adult returner applicants, a group who are defined as having been away from full-time formal education for a period of at least three years (which means that this group of students are typically at least 21 years old, and in effect are the group formerly referred to as 'mature students'). In practice, a range of individuals of different ages and from equally varied backgrounds apply to this course. At one extreme, this includes young adults who are either unemployed and who perceive a degree as a route into a career, or individuals who are already in occupations but who would like to obtain a degree as a vehicle for effecting a career change. At the other extreme, it includes retired individuals who are fulfilling a long-harboured ambition to undertake academic study that circumstances had in one way or another denied to them earlier in their lives. Like many equivalent access courses run by other institutions, the Pre-Entry access course at Strathclyde allows students to sample the higher education experience and if they wish, to use the course as a vehicle for getting onto a full-time degree course, either at Strathclyde or at any of a number of other universities that recognise the pre-entry access course for admissions purposes. Equally, having sampled the higher education experience, pre-entry



course students are free not to proceed forward to undergraduate study if they wish. As a part-time course taught by evening study, it is particularly attractive to individuals who are in full-time work who wish to tentatively explore university-level study without committing themselves to a full-time access course, with all the implications of sacrifice and financial hardship that the latter might entail.

Like the first year of the undergraduate degree to which the Pre-entry course feeds in, it involves the study of three academic subjects. These are taught in a series of three modules of seven teaching weeks' duration, interspersed with generic sessions on study skills, applying through UCAS, and so on, meaning that the three subjects chosen are covered in succession (unlike the undergraduate degree proper, where the three subjects are covered simultaneously). The course therefore strikes a compromise in that the breadth of subjects studied in the first year of the degree proper is replicated, but in a less demanding timetable that allows exclusive concentration on one academic subject at a time, as befits a course which is preparing individuals who have not been engaged in full-time study for some time, for the subsequent more intensive undergraduate first year. The range of modules on offer draws upon the range of subjects taught within the BA (Arts and Social Sciences) curriculum and in many cases involves the same teaching staff as the students will encounter if they proceed forward to first year full-time undergraduate study.

Links between research and practice

One of the authors (TA) is a psychologist with teaching interests in cognitive psychology and research interests that include student learning, particularly within the context of peer interaction, and student critical thinking; his major administrative responsibility is admissions officer for all subjects within the BA degrees in Arts and Social Sciences. Another of the authors (BJ) is an educational developer who worked in the University's Centre for Academic Practice and Learning Enhancement, with research interests in the student first year experience and information literacy. He has an interest in the potential for synergies between literature and research on pedagogical thinking around undergraduate learning and the equivalent body of knowledge around adult learning. These two authors have a long-standing collaborative history, for example, writing guidance notes on study skills and information literacy for Learning and Teaching Scotland (see http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/studyskills/Images/overview_of_researchv2_tcm4-285566.pdf). Convergence of research interests led these two authors to discuss a possible joint research project on information literacy with particular reference to critical information literacy, i.e. students' critical appraisal of the academic worth of retrieved items of information. At this point, the idea of examining access students in particular was very



appealing. As mature students, they would have a wealth of wider life experience that might inform their critical information literacy, and as a group they are more varied in age and background than school leaver undergraduates typically are, which made them more representative of the population at large. At this point, though, the researchers' other interests in access and the first year experience led to a broadening out of the questions of interest to encompass a more general concern for the access students' perception of learning and being a student, and an approach to Ray Thomson, at that time Head of Department of the Centre for Lifelong Learning. His enthusiasm for the proposed research led to a joint bid for internal funding from the university (which was unfortunately unsuccessful) followed by the release of a small amount of funds from the Centre for Lifelong Learning itself to support the research by paying for postgraduate students to conduct the research on our behalf, and to transcribe the resulting interview protocols. Ray's retirement led to the involvement of the third author, Alix McDonald, being involved in the data analysis and dissemination. As a result of the restructuring of the Centre for Lifelong Learning, Alix McDonald was appointed as Community Engagement Manager. This new post combined responsibilities from both the previous Deputy Director, Raymond Thomson and the Manager of the Senior Studies Institute Programmes Manager, Brian McKechnie. One of these responsibilities was the managing of access provision delivered through the Centre and Alix was keen to continue this research to expand both the Centre's research activity and equally to gain a better insight into out students with a view to future course design.

We conducted interview with 18 volunteer pre-entry class students. The interviews were designed to shed light on three aspects of adult learning: a) study skills, b) information literacy and c) transformational learning. In respect of study skills, participants report using fairly rudimentary study techniques, which typically involve multiple readings of textbooks. E.g. to quote one student,

'I don't know if what I am doing is right, I just read the information, I write it down, I read it again, I write it down. I just try and write it down and read it as much as possible so that hopefully some of it sticks'.

More rarely, such reading is combined with integration of other materials. More rarely still a variety of learning strategies is selected among, with reference to the demands that particular academic disciplines place on learning. For example:

'Well Sociology was just re-writing notes that I had taken in class about the relevant material and reading books. In Spanish I put my words on cards and labelled everything in my house and put signs up on my wall. For Law again I just wrote out quotations and did

mind maps for the little Acts and quotes. I've been in education for some time so I've picked up a few things along the way'

These study techniques appear to be used very much in the service of a memorisation approach to learning, with frequent reference to getting information to 'stick' in the mind. As might be expected of beginning students, they drew a strong distinction between material that was seen as more reliable and other material that was seen as less reliable, or as they often put it, between 'facts' and 'conjecture'. One side effect of this was a reluctance to engage in peer interaction, because fellow students' knowledge was perceived as less valuable than tutors' and students failed to see the point of hearing about their fellow students' views.

In respect of information literacy, the interview data suggest that these respondents subscribe to a 'sources' concept of information, with a strong sense of reliance on the authority of staff and published texts, which fits with the distinction noted above between facts and conjecture. This led to students cautiously 'sticking to the rules' about what is legitimate information activity, and these rules in turn were inferred from what staff said about information searching. Interviewees' responses suggested that they had a developing sense of how to form judgements about subject-related sources of information for study purposes. This tended to be somewhat rudimentary, relying substantially on consensus across sources and the notion of 'authority'. For example:

'Well the internet I was a bit wary about because obviously on the different websites and things if its published in a book then you're a bit more confident thinking that this is actually kind of true information, whereas when I was looking at different websites, I mean there were some that were just wacky and I was just like I'm just not even going to let that sink into my brain in case I start talking about it'

In respect of transformational learning, the interview data provide evidence of transformation in learners' perceptions of themselves as a function of having undertaken access course study. For example, interviewees reported becoming more analytical in their day to day thinking, and of coming to see the learning process, and not just the end product, as important for them; such changes in perspective fit very well with Mezirow's notion of transformation. To quote one interviewee:

'It has really changed me though in the way I think about uni it was more the idea of doing, getting a degree but now its more I actually can learn something and I can I don't know do more with the whole uni experience I think that it has changed me that way, it's given me more commitment and you know I'm more focused and I'm more disciplined in a way



because you only had seven weeks to get something down and you had such a short time span to learn so much things so in a way you had to discipline yourself if you wanted it..... I think it's definitely been beneficial and it's changed me a bit'.

The interviews also reveal that the students had held specific presuppositions regarding study in higher education, which were contradicted by the actual experience, in that the access course provided a more diverse range of teaching and learning experiences than the anticipated lectures, and in not involving sarcasm toward or belittling of students during teaching sessions:

'Well before I was, before I was coming here I was rather apprehensive just about whether or not this was a good thing or a bad thing, but you forget how open people can be especially those who are teaching to those who are wanting to learn. There's a sort of informal, unwritten rule that you're not going to be made fun of because you're learning we all want to learn...'

The overall picture of the access course student at the end of their access course that emerges from this sample of interviews is one where typically the individual has fairly rudimentary study skills and information literacy skills, allied to a realist epistemology in which there are right and wrong answers to academic questions. They see it as their task to learn the 'right' answers rather than opinions or conjecture and therefore focus on learning from textbooks on the grounds that, being published in book form, their contents have been vetted and are more dependable. These students expect to encounter mainly lecturing-based teaching and learning experiences. This sample of access students typically report feeling academically under confident and have anxieties about looking foolish before their peers during the course of teaching and learning. Nevertheless, these interviewees report having been transformed in significant ways by the experience of having taken the access course.

Considerations

The research conducted to date suggests that there are a number of innovative and interesting reflections which can be made:

The importance of social interaction between students was not rated as highly as anticipated. Many students indicated they were treating their participation as a 'dry run' at university level study to find out if they were 'up to it'. Several expressed the view that is they were successful in gaining access to a university course that it would be at this point they would seek to develop bonds with peers.



The way students interact with study materials also proved interesting. Many viewed the rote learning of material as the most effective way of learning and absorbing information. Several students suggested their preference was to almost physically involve themselves in the learning process by making it tangible. Examples of this were students who would stick notes up around their home or write information out repeatedly before perceiving it to have 'sunk in'.

There was a general suspicion of the internet as a resource and an overwhelming sense that the printed work (i.e. books) could be relied upon for fact. The inference here being that the printed word need not be questioned.

There were also some issues which emerged as a result of the study:

Several participants felt they were not 'part' of the university. There is, however, a question over how much anyone can feel part of a university when they attend only one evening for week.

At the time students were not able to borrow from the university library (although they had read-only rights) and this was seen as a significant disadvantage. However, students did show a disposition to study in their local libraries rather than make the trip into the university library to access resources. Many also opted to purchase their own texts.

Many respondents were unconvinced by the use of groupwork and discussion in class. Rather, they preferred a lecture style format.