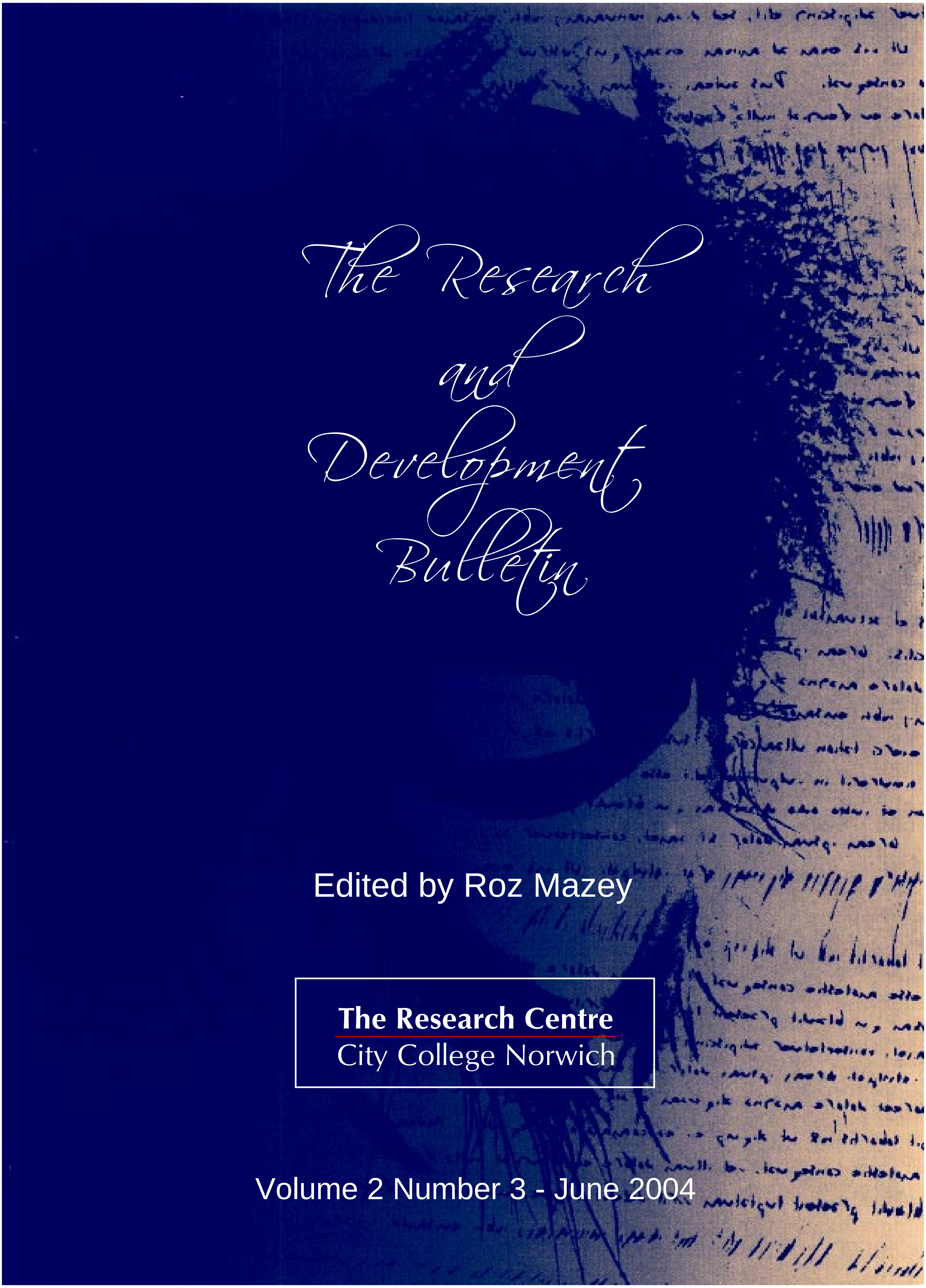

The Research and Development Bulletin

Edited by Roz Mazey

The Research Centre
City College Norwich

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By Roz Mazey, Research and Development Co-ordinator, The Research Centre, City College Norwich

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the sixth issue of the Research and Development Bulletin produced by City College Norwich. Once again I have the pleasure of presenting a diverse range of research articles, demonstrating the wide variety of research undertaken at City College Norwich. I would like to take this opportunity to give my thanks all the contributors to this issue of the bulletin.

The Research and Development Bulletin is a great way to disseminate research findings as it is distributed to FE/HE Colleges and Universities throughout the UK, so if you are currently undertaking research and would like an opportunity to publish an article in the Research and Development Bulletin, please contact me on 01603 773478 or rmazey@ccn.ac.uk.

Although diverse in nature, the eight articles in this issue have been divided into two general themes, each containing four articles; 'Methodology and Practice', and 'Literary Review'.

Methodology and Practice

The first theme, 'Methodology and Practice', starts with an article by Ruth Webb. This article follows on from her submission to the last bulletin, 'Towards a shared ethos: Setting out on a voyage of discovery', the two articles, represent the findings of an MSc project which uses action research to find answers to the questions:

'How do I improve what I am doing?', and 'How do I live my values more fully?', in respect to teaching practice.

Next, is an interesting look at the use of interviewing as a research methodology, written by John Cockburn and is based on research which contributed to his PhD thesis.

The final two articles in this section concern the assessment methods used in National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). The first, by Karen Castle, describes research comparing the traditional NVQ assessment method with new methods of portfolio building, induction and the production of a workbook to ease students into their NVQs. The outcomes of this research have been very positive in enhancing the students experience, retention and achievements. The second is a guest article by Chris Devereux, who has been consulting City College Norwich on the possible use of collapsed standards and digital recording in NVQ assessment, the article describes his findings working with these methods.

Literary Review

The second theme, 'Literary Review', contains two articles describing topical literature reviews, and two scholarly interrogations of particular books.

The first article in this section concerns the measurement of 'soft outcomes', (e.g. developing interpersonal skills and increasing self-confidence) which are difficult to measure but are valuable achievements in improving a person's life skills. The article, submitted for publication by Brian Butcher and Lee Marsden, is a literature review of the published research in this field.

The second article, prepared by myself and Brian Maples (a contract researcher), describes the findings of a literature review, 'Raising Aspirations in Learners', which compares student progression within Norfolk, with national and regional figures, and highlights the barrier issues to raising aspirations and enhancing learner progression, identified by the literature review.

The final two articles in this section are very different from those above, providing an in-depth look at particular pieces of literature. The first, by Hayley Ross, considers the statement:

"*The personal life is dead, history has destroyed it*" (Pasternak, Doctor Zhivago in Lowry 1999)

She explores the extent to which the authors of *'Disgrace'* and *'Oranges are not the only fruit'* believe this to be true, and looks at which strategies they use to demonstrate this.

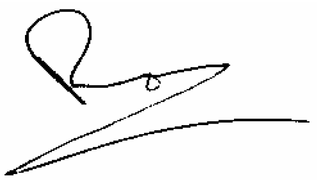
Last, but not least, is an article by Angela Marshall, which discusses the questions:

'Who is to blame? What is the truth of it?' and 'Could it be otherwise?', looking at how these questions have been answered in John Barton's '*Tantalus*'.

The Work in Progress section provides a brief description of research projects completed in their entirety since the last publication of the Research and Development Bulletin, and the research projects currently undertaken at The Research Centre, City College Norwich. The profile of research in City College has been raised significantly this academic year as a staff development activity and as a valuable method to inform practice and policy. If any individual, or other organisations would be interested in getting involved in research, or wish to participate collaboratively in multi-centre research with the research team at City College, please do not hesitate to contact me at The Research Centre for a chat on 01603 773478, or by e-mail at rmazey@ccn.ac.uk.

May I, once again, thank our readership and contributors for their continued interest and support.

Yours sincerely



Roz Mazey

Research and Development Co-ordinator

Towards a Shared Ethos: The next leg of the voyage

By Ruth Webb, APU MSc, City College Norwich

Introduction

This article is the sequel to 'Setting Out on a Voyage of Discovery' which appeared in the previous Research and Development Bulletin, in which the implementation of the first two stages of an action research project focussing on how a team of undergraduate degree lecturers can facilitate the development of independent learners were described. An outcome of these initial stages was a statement of our agreed values.

To facilitate independent learning, which we see as:

"Welcoming the opportunity to challenge the status quo (post-conventional thinking)"

"Enjoy risk-taking"

"Feel that they have the right to generate new theory"

"Learning is not compartmentalised (helicopter) detached and objective overview"

"Be aware that own perspective will change"

"Respectful of other group members"

"Making informed choices"

"Relishing cognitive dissonance"

"Being excited by learning"

"Initiating debate"

"Having an enquiring mind"

"Enthusiastic, interested and curious in the context of their individual learning styles"

Figure 1: Agreed Values

Preparation for the Next Leg of the Voyage

The initial study had incorporated the diagnosis of the issues, identification of agreed values and planning for the action to be taken. We had agreed to carry out peer observation, using direct observation with a written record and to use video recording, followed by a reflective discourse which would be tape recorded.

There were a crew of four, two teaching each of the year groups and all enthusiastic about carrying out the action research into our own practice.

A meeting was held, to finalize the details. We began to feel that we were in the 'swampy lowland' (Schon, 1983), we felt inexperienced and unsure of how to decide on the details; questions to do with the observations such as 'how long', 'when' and 'how?' preoccupied us. One person said they wished we had someone to tell us what to do; we ourselves were experiencing how hard it is to be independent. Eventually we decided that this was the first cycle and that we would do what we thought would be best and learn from it. The unease expressed by the team concerning making independent decisions may reflect how the students feel. The two strands intertwined here, illustrating the parallel between students' development and lecturers' development.

Casting Off

The observations were carried out over two weeks; however there were technical problems with one video. We agreed to continue using the reflective accounts and record of observation alone on which to base the individual's discussion with her critical friend.

The reflective discussions took place, but not as soon after the observations as would have been ideal. The team has a very busy schedule and time had to be found outside working hours to do this, this reflects the level of commitment of the team to the project, and highlights the issue of the significance of funding to the timely running of a project.

As we had agreed that the observee would keep the videotapes, the data available consisted of reflective accounts from each individual, observation notes, tape recordings of reflective conversations which were transcribed and minutes of a review meeting.

'Me yacking on won't do'

During the reflective conversations, a recurrent theme was that of talking too much. Surprise was expressed at this, with one individual comparing her reflective account to the video:

"I've actually written down here 'I said very little, wanting to get them on task as soon as possible and not wanting to give too much', but actually I said a lot - I went on and on."

It was apparent that there was a growing self-awareness in relation to talkativeness. This concern, which even led one participant to tell herself to 'shut up' whilst watching the video, was linked with giving too much information. There was clearly awareness that students need to find answers for themselves, and that giving them information 'won't do'. This was noticed by an observer who wrote that a participant:

"*Asks a question and then continues to give a great deal of information."*

And another who wrote:

"She was listening and asking questions, but gave rather too much information instead of eliciting responses."

These comments indicate an awareness of the need to move away from the traditional view of teaching as didactic, Jarvis describes didactic teaching as:

"The process of making a selection of knowledge, skills, etc. from the cultural milieu, those aspects which it is intended that pupils should learn, and transmitting it to them by the use of some skilled technique." (Jarvis, 1995, p107)

Through viewing the video, lecturers were becoming uncomfortably aware that they were not always putting their espoused theory into practice and that they were to some extent conforming to the concept of transmission.

There are two issues here; one is that expecting to be able to transmit information for the students to reproduce is consistent with lower order learning based on simple recall. It follows that it is unlikely to lead to developing the kind of values that we had espoused such as initiating debate, taking risks and challenging the status quo and developing post-conventional thinking.

The second issue relates to control of the knowledge delivered. Freire (1970) writes critically of the concept of the teacher as narrator and the students as patient, listening objects where the teacher's task is to fill the students with the contents of his narration. Thus in this concept of education the teacher becomes the depositor and the student the depositories, or as one participant said of the students:

"They see the class as them being blotting paper and me pouring ink over them; that they're being filled up with knowledge from me."

Freire calls this the banking concept of education, where:

"Knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable." (Freire, 1970, p46).

He argues that this concept has the capacity to imply that the teacher is knowledgeable, whilst the students are not and that this disempowers them and minimises their creative power. This was quite contrary to our espoused theories in that we had agreed that we value students having an enquiring mind, not behaving simply as receptacles for information, and feeling that they have a right to generate new theory rather than just accepting it from others.

It would seem that we should embrace more extensively Freire's view that the banking concept should be rejected in favour of:

"Liberating education (that) consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information." (Freire, 1970, p53)

He argues that those committed to liberation should replace 'deposit-making' with posing of the problems of human beings in their relations with the world, because:

"Banking education resists dialogue; problem-posing education regards dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition… banking education treats students as objects of assistance; problem-posing education makes them critical thinkers. Banking education inhibits creativity…Problem-posing education bases itself on true creativity and stimulates reflection." (Freire, 1970, p56)

These two conflicting concepts of education are reflected in the statement of one participant, when she said that she had learnt that:

"By me yacking on won't do, they've got to do it themselves."

'Compelled to Fill the Silences'

Concern was expressed that through talking too much the students' opportunities to respond were affected:

"*She saw that she tended to cut the quieter students off.*"

One participant said that:

"*I probably bombarded her."*

One participant was able to reflect that:

"I am also aware that I do not always give students sufficient time to explore widely whilst responding to questions."

One took a more positive approach; she noticed that by allowing more time for a plenary session, it went much better than she usually experienced. But the management of silence was challenging:

"I don't handle silence very well…you know, I feel compelled to fill the silences."

The value of periods of silence was emphasised, by an observer:

"There were lots of points when I did think you were encouraging them to explore, sometimes through not doing anything."

Schon (1983) describes listening in a special way in relation to psychotherapeutic practice, and although we, as educators, are not therapists, there are parallels between promoting reflective practice and the techniques of counselling.

This similarity becomes apparent when considering the work of Ghaye and Ghaye (1998) who write about facilitating reflective conversations in a way which seems to be reminiscent of a counselling situation:

"There can be occasions when in trying to facilitate a reflective conversation, we sense that there is, or might be, a hidden agenda which might take quite a bit of teasing out. Sometimes this reveals itself just at the end, or what you think is the end of the conversation perhaps… she says 'Oh yes, just one more thing'. We often have to be patient and allow time for the real agenda to be expressed." (Ghaye and Ghaye, 1998, p20)

Clearly we need to develop our abilities to allow quietness and time for students to reveal their thoughts and ideas thus allowing students to take the lead in a conversation, accepting the risk that teachers may lose control of the outcome.

This may be daunting for the lecturers; waiting for a silence to be filled could be seen as risky, maybe it is safer to keep talking in order to avoid being unprepared. There is a parallel here with our agreed values; we aimed for the students to enjoy risk-taking yet it could be argued that we find this challenging also. It seems that in order to take risks, individuals require the confidence to deal with the outcomes; a risk has the potential to be dangerous. Lecturers may experience this through the prospect of loss of control of the class, whilst for students it may lead to experiencing cognitive dissonance and for both it has the potential of exposing their own individually perceived inadequacies. Thus confidence is a key issue.

'It's Ok to Fly a Flag and be Shot Down'

Throughout the reflective conversations, reference was made to students' lack of confidence and its importance to learning, comments made included:

"It wouldn't take much to knock her off track."

"I think [student] needs to be very safe and I would say she's the least likely to undertake risk. She only feels safe to speak out when she really knows or feels she knows what she wants to say and has some knowledge of."

There was an implicit recognition that this lack of confidence would have a less than positive effect on learning, particularly in terms of participating in discussion to the extent of presenting a contrasting point of view, as shown in this extract of a reflective conversation:

"I think they're almost frightened of getting it 'wrong' even if I say there's no right or wrong here, they still won't have the courage of their convictions."

"She won't risk take, will she?"

"No, no and they won't see it as being OK to fly a flag and be shot down as it were, even though they know that I wouldn't academically attack them or anything, but no, it won't happen."

In addition, the new experience of returning to study, with its attendant possibility of failure has the potential to be emotionally destructive. Hanson (1996) considers that:

"Adults returning to learning are faced with many threats, both positive and negative to their identities." (Hanson, 1996, p106)

Furthermore, she argues that her research has demonstrated that adults returning to HE return to a role of accepting authority as children do, 'I found adults prepared to suspend their adulthood at the door of the institution and be only too willing to submit to its constraints' (Hanson, 1996, p103). Submissiveness is not conducive to developing confidence and self esteem, and Hanson (1996) asks the question:

"*At what stage then will they feel confident enough to re-evaluate their beliefs?*" (Hanson, 1996, p106)

This is a critical question; a traditional mode of education is likely to perpetuate a self-concept of a submissive person. Rogers (1983) draws the conclusion that where 'the teacher is seen as the possessor of knowledge, the student the expected recipient' the outcome is 'a great difference in the status level between the instructor and the student' (Rogers, 1983, p185). This culture in which students are treated as of lesser status would be unlikely to develop confidence. However, in the person-centred mode of education the 'student is in the process of gaining control over the course of her own learning, and her own life' (Rogers, 1983, p189), and this is much more likely to build a self-directive approach and burgeoning self-confidence.

Rogers holds that there is one precondition to implementing the philosophy of person-centred education, which he describes as a ‘growth-promoting climate’, that:

“A leader or a person who is perceived as an authority figure in the situation is sufficiently secure within herself and her relationships to others that she experiences an essential trust in the capacity of others to think for themselves, to learn for themselves.” (Rogers, 1983, p188)

The key here is the lecturer’s confidence and security within herself and it is significant that the lecturer’s own lack of confidence was an undercurrent through the data, again paralleling the students’ experience.

Lack of confidence was expressed as perceived dissatisfaction with their teaching and some also doubted their own level of knowledge, or felt anxious about being seen not to know. One participant felt the need to say ‘I would say that I had a stronger knowledge than her on that’ and about the same student ‘on occasions it feels like she is trying to trip me up’.

There seems to be a pitfall here, if one sets oneself up as an ‘infallible expert’ (Elliott, 1996, p19), then failing to fulfil this role is almost inevitable and students may see this and have less respect. However, if one takes a facilitative approach, where one is seen as promoting learning within the students, the lecturer’s expertise is seen as the ability to help the students to learn rather than as an all knowing being, an impossible image to maintain.

Schon and his students formulated an ‘incompleteness theorem’, which could provide very pertinent guidelines for teachers as well as counsellors, it included the following:

“Do not try to be complete or perfect.”

“Do not be afraid to be corrective on-line, correcting what you have to say after you have thought about it.”

“Advocate your position as clearly as you can and combine it with an invitation for challenge and correction.” (Schon 1987, p272)

This last point has significance in relation to the outcomes in our study, in that some lecturers were concerned that they were presenting their position with evangelical zeal. They all showed commitment and enthusiasm for their subjects; in the reflective conversations each one spoke at considerable length about the importance of concepts and issues arising from their specialism, however, concerns were voiced about not combining it with an invitation for challenge:

“I was a bit worried that towards the end I pushed them into acknowledging how important …was; that I got them to say what I wanted them to say.”

So it would seem that lecturers need to have the confidence to admit to not knowing everything, this in itself may help the students’ confidence to find out for themselves, but also to engender an ethos of being learners together. If we want the students to become independent, lifelong learners who continue to be curious, reflective and aware that their own perspective will change, it is valuable if they see us in this light also. We have to be prepared to be fallible and to see this in a positive light, demonstrating that knowledge is not static and that we are lifelong learners.

The lecturers also recognise the need to relinquish control, for example, one asked:

“Do you ever worry if you leave things very open for the students to develop, wanting to develop their ideas, their thinking, that they might not get what you want them to?”

This is indicative of a paternalistic attitude; the lecturer seems to have a very clear plan of what should be learnt and appears almost afraid that if students are allowed to develop their own ideas the outcome may be different. This could be interpreted as an attempt at the control of knowledge, not recognising the individual needs, motivations and previous experiences of the learners and prescribing the learning.

Freire (1970) argues that it is fear of freedom, which leads to oppression, and that:

“One of the basic elements of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed is prescription. Every prescription represents the imposition of one man’s choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the man prescribed to into one that conforms to the prescriber’s consciousness.” (Freire, 1970, p27)

Whilst it could be argued that the lecturer has to conform to a curriculum prescribed by external bodies, it is the awareness of the potential for oppression that is essential if any change is to occur. In Freire’s words:

“To no longer be prey to its force, one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.” (Freire 1970, pp27-28)

Here then is justification for action research; reflection and action are, according to Freire, the means to achieve freedom.

Anchored

Reflections on the Voyage

A review meeting provided an opportunity for sharing our learning from the research as well as a forum for developing new ideas and building on existing understandings.

We undertook a re-examination of our agreed values; these had been agreed as an outcome of the initial study, but we saw the need for modifications as a result of our learning.

We felt that we had begun by being too idealistic, that our expectations had been too high. For example, where we had agreed that we saw independent learning as 'welcoming the opportunity to challenge the status quo (post-conventional thinking)', it was felt that there should be a change of emphasis to 'embracing the opportunity to challenge the status quo'. It was felt that in the light of the students' identified modest confidence, to expect them to welcome the opportunity to be challenging was too great, however to embrace the opportunity seemed to imply that they would take the opportunity even if at this stage they did not go so far as to welcome it.

This moderation of our values reflects a more realistic understanding of the students as a group and as individuals. Hanson (1996) in her critique of Knowles' (1978) theory of andragogy describes how:

"One of my earliest learning experiences of my research with adult learners was the realization that mature students were not a homogeneous group and that there are dangers in treating them as such." (Hanson, 1996, p103)

It seems to me that it was our increased understanding of the individuals and the groups that had been generated through the research that resulted in a change of emphasis within our values. She argues that:

"Within any group of adult learners … there are significant differences regarding biographies, experiences, perceptions and, as a result, different expectations and approaches to learning." (Hanson, 1996, p104)

Thus, in attending to the students' identities, we have perceived the need to moderate our values. Hanson (1996, p100), is an advocate of this approach. She states that viewing adult learners as a homogeneous group leads to the exposition of 'a normative educational utopia' which includes how we would like to see adults behave 'as autonomous, self-directed learners', and that 'these expectations may be at odds with actual experience'. Perhaps we were being 'utopian' in our initial values, another example being 'enjoy risk-taking', where we felt this was a high expectation requiring a level of confidence, which many students did not yet have. This was moderated to 'being prepared to take risks.'

We initially agreed that we would use these stated values as explicit guidelines to be published for students in course handbooks and to be discussed during the initial stages of the course. However, what was so interesting was the subtle change in emphasis indicated by a change in pronoun, instead of 'they', 'we' was used. Thus, 'feel that they have the right to generate new theory' became 'feeling that we each have the right to generate own theory.' And 'learning is not compartmentalized' became 'making links and connections within our own learning.'

So, not only did we moderate some of the stated values, we began to include ourselves in them. The implication of this is that we are all learners together, and this is a major shift in approach from that which some of the lecturers saw themselves carrying out in the videos; that of the infallible, all-knowing expert who transmits information. There had been a conceptual shift within the ethos of the participant group towards 'being aware that our own perspective will change' and 'having an enquiring mind.' So the introductory sentence of the statement was changed to relate to both teachers and learners, and the final comment of the meeting, was 'it is important for us as teachers to be able to follow and participate in the points raised in the statement of values.'

Our statement of values became our shared ethos, or 'statement of shared ethos'.

This statement of values will provide a landmark of our progress thus far as a team and will act as a slipway to launch our boat for further travel on our voyage making.

We have explored how to help students become increasingly independent in their learning, and we have also developed our own approach to professional learning. We have been successful in developing a shared ethos; we have an explicit statement which will be included in student and staff handbooks to work from and to share with the students, and change has already taken place.

Through the teaching and learning process we share an ethos of:

“Embracing the opportunity to challenge the status quo”

“Being prepared to take risks”

“Feeling that we each have the right to generate new theory”

“Making links and connections within our own learning”

“Being aware that our own perspective will change”

“Respecting other group members”

“Making informed choices about our own learning”

“Relishing cognitive dissonance”

“Being excited by learning”

“Initiating and engaging in discussion and debate”

“Having an enquiring mind”

Key words being; enthusiastic, interested and curious

Figure 2: Statement of shared ethos

The Next Leg

And so our boat temporarily sits at anchor, the crew are changed, more knowledgeable, although not all-knowing, and more reflective. The boat may need to be re-equipped to take us further and we are all aware that there is still farther to travel across unpredictable waters with more crew members, but the enthusiasm, interest and curiosity is there to sustain us on the next leg of the voyage.

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Interviewing as a Research Method

By John Cockburn, City College Norwich

Introduction

As qualitative approaches to educational research have gained in popularity and academic respectability over the past two decades, the techniques used in that perspective are explored and used by many research students. Perhaps the one most featured is the 'ethnographic interview' as this combines flexibility and efficiency, with a fidelity to the phenomenological perspective. In research which celebrates the value of meanings, values, perceptions and other subjectivities, the interview holds high rank in the methodological repertoire of the educational researcher. It behoves us then to reflect on the process of interview, to be aware of what is psychologically involved when the exchange occurs, and to be clear about the epistemological status we accord its products.

I was fortunate to be given the opportunity to study the interview as a research method some years ago and toured the USA interviewing a range of well known social researchers about interviewing. I also located their perceptions within the phenomenological frameworks of Shutz, and the Chicago School symbolic interactionists. In the paper that follows the usefulness of interviewing is examined by presenting extracts of the conversations and exploration of the nature of interviewing at a psychological level by connecting it to the phenomenological perspective. The logic of research interviewing in the most general sense is to:

- Obtain as data the participants' definition of the situation
- To open up for analysis their private worlds
- To understand how they structure and organise their experience.

It is of obvious centrality to a research paradigm which takes as axiomatic the importance of subjective

Interviewing as an optimum research method

In this section the views are presented of some social researchers who were asked to consider when they thought the interview was the optimum method of research. They do not address the issue of the type of psychological data interviewing obtains, but rather the types of social context in which it might be most appropriately used. We arrive at four types of context which for various reasons best lend themselves to study by interview.

William Foot Whyte notes the **historical** context:

"I think when you're trying to trace the development of an organisation or community over a period of time, interviewing is indispensable because if you were to simply observe, you would obviously just be observing what's going on at the time. Whereas interviewing gives you a chance to go back twenty or thirty years with obvious pitfalls and bias and lack of recall and so on but still it's…" (Cockburn, 1984, p79)

Whyte makes the point here that interviewing transcends time and space without the loss of psychological data that may occur if documentary sources are all that are available. He also notes that although reconstruction and selection are important distorting factors, reasonable accuracy can be secured by cross checking and comparing accounts. Respondents in this sense are surrogate observers or witnesses.

Harold Wolcott, a keen proponent of observation specified the conditions under which he would find interviewing acceptable. His context might be termed **experiential**:

"... if you're working and doing a study of prostitutes, or people in some big law breaking business, if you're trying to learn about prisoners, if you're learning about dying cancer patients, there are a lot of things we don't want to participate in and those are really splendid times to use interviews. Also that lets you make a gender jump or an age group jump — I can't be a child again so if I want to learn about children I can watch them and I can talk to them and better I should do both ... But I would be uncomfortable with a study based only on interviewing. But if I were doing say a prison population and you can interview the prisoners then I guess you can talk to a lot of people until you have a sense that you are beginning to fill in the parts of the picture. But I'd rather spend the day in prison or the week or the month or the year to get the full sense of it. You'd never quite understand I think the terrors, concerns and pay off systems and all that." (Cockburn, 1984, p80)

Wolcott outlines a number of experiential contexts in which interviewing is crucial, because membership of the social group is restricted by circumstance. It is simply not possible to change gender or age and unethical to engage in crime. Ethnographies have been carried out in prisons and other total institutions but are particularly demanding in terms of resource consumption.

George Homans discussed a situation where due to the fragmentation of economic structure participant observation gave way to interviews. His context might be termed **distributed**:

"I was assigned to interview unemployed steel workers in this Pennsylvanian steel town in which a new method of rolling steel had eliminated the old plants. They were obsolete, and greatly increased technological unemployment. And my job was very simple. It was to go out and go see what was happening to these unemployed steel workers. And in this case I wasn't doing any particular participant observation 'cause the mills were all shut down. But I was going around Newcastle with the help of the steelworkers union who provided me with names, and then as soon as I got going the people I interviewed supplied me with more names, and I simply used, I was trained in what we call the non directive type of interview…" (Cockburn, 1984, p81)

The type of situation described here by Homans is an unbounded social context containing discrete respondents. Because of the collapse of their functional interrelatedness there is no well defined internally coherent unit to study.

The final context is discussed by Peter Conrad who carried out a sociological study of epilepsy. Here the community under study is firstly extremely difficult to identify and win the cooperation of, and secondly the units of the study (epileptic fits) are temporally and unpredictably distributed. Participant observation is not ruled on grounds of principle but on resource consumption. His context might be termed **sporadic**:

"…how can you study epilepsy as a fieldworker as a participant observer? My feeling is that it's almost impossible. …if you have a great deal of money like the way this New York research firm has and they take three anthropologists for eight months, six months and follow people around in their daily rounds a week at a time you can do it you can do fieldwork, you can do participant observation. Whether you get more than we get in our two hour interview I don't know, the answer's probably 'yes'. The question is, what are my resources? My resources are this, plus what am I interested in, I'm interested in people who have experienced epilepsy. Part of being interested in experience means I'm interested in what they can tell me about it. Now I would also because of my bias have liked to do some fieldwork, but really beyond going to self-help groups, there hasn't been a lot of settings in which I can do that…" (Cockburn, 1984, p82)

Thus the fieldwork problem for Conrad is that the specific events he is interested in are unpredictably spread in terms of time and space. The interview method telescopes these events and saves vastly on research time.

The Root Nature of Interview Material

While few empirical researches are likely to render interview data problematic enough to go to the phenomenology of experience, it is appropriate that a methodological work should push such an analysis towards its logical conclusion. Thus in this section we consider the phenomenological process of constructing intelligible experience, and attempt to identify the type of status it should be accorded as data.

The problem of reconstruction

By addressing directly how meaningful lived experience is possible, Schutz develops a theoretical system relevant to the analysis of interview material. Drawing in the early stages of his work on Bergson, Schutz echoes his distinction between the duree, the undifferentiated and unconsidered flow of experience, and conscious experience which resides in homogenous time, and which has, due to reflection become spatialised, quantified and discontinuous. The duree is the flow of inner duration:

"What we in fact experience in duration is not a being that is discrete and well-defined but a constant transition from a now thus to a new now thus. The stream of consciousness by its very nature has not yet been caught up in the net of reflection. Reflection, being a function of the intellect belongs essentially to the spacio-temporal world or everyday life. The structure of our experience will vary according to whether we surrender ourselves to the flow of duration or stop to reflect upon it trying to classify it into spacio-temporal concepts." (Schutz, 1976, p45)

Critical to his theoretical position is the notion that the act of experience is quite distinct from the act of recollecting and organising that experience. The implication for the interview, is that the act of response forces a different structure on experience in retrospect, compared to that which it possessed in non-self conscious spontaneity. The interview prevents the interviewee from surrendering to the inner flow of duration and encourages him or her to confront experience with the glare of reflection. Whilst in the duree of the everyday world the participant is:

"…unaware either of his own growing older or of any difference between past and present. The very awareness of the stream presupposes a turning back against the stream a special kind of attitude

towards the stream of reflection ... The awareness of the experience in the pure stream of duration is changed at every moment into remembered having just-been-thus; it is the remembering which lifts the experience out of the irreversible stream of duration and thus modifies the awareness making it a remembrance." (Schutz, 1976, p47)

Whilst in the stream of experience the "now point" continuously flows. But the interview situation asks the respondent to 'halt' the now point for a short while, and to cast back and make objects of those phases of experience which have transpired. It is by casting back over the undifferentiated stream with the spotlight of reflection that enables the interviewee to make intelligible, past experience.

Again Schutz writes:

"We must therefore distinguish between the pre empirical being of lived experiences, their being prior to the reflective glance of attention directed towards them and their being as phenomena. Through the attending directed glance of attention and comprehension the lived experience acquires a new mode of being. It comes to be differentiated, thrown into relief and this act of differentiation is nothing other than being comprehended being the object, of the directed glance of attention..." (Schutz, 1976, p50)

While Schutz's analysis is intensely theoretical it does have application in research contexts which rely on interview material. His analysis demonstrates the critical distinction that accounts of behaviour are not merely inferior, or surrogate versions of observation, but possess their own epistemological integrity. Thus there are at least two data forms at stake: data which may be objectively recorded (video) and interpretive accounts of that behaviour by participants. To demonstrate application of this in an empirical context an extract of an interview with Dave Moore is presented here.

"I find the connection between people's description of events and the events themselves to be so variable that I can't take it as a serious connection. I can't assume that there's any necessary connection. It's an empirical question about the degree of connection, between what people say and what they do. The philosopher himself,... thinking about that it's Abraham Katlin, in 'The Conduct of Enquiry', where he talks about the difference between logic and use and reconstructive logic in scientific enquiry. He's talking about how natural scientists go about doing their experiments and how when you write a paper as a natural scientist you say that we did X, Y and Z, so we started out with a hypothesis, actually did 1, 2 and 3 methods and techniques and checked it out and the hypothesis was not falsified.

That's a reasonable statement but its reconstructive logic because that is not what was going on in their heads or in their interaction while they were doing it, that's not an accurate representation of the scientific method." (Cockburn, 1984, p85)

The idealisation of behaviour

Explanations for the idealisation of behaviour can be identified at different levels. At one level we know that behaviour is idealised to enhance self concept or reduce ego threat. That people distort behaviour in the direction of social approval is clear. In this case the interviewee is basically aware of his idealisation.

Secondly psychodynamics teaches us individuals prefer to conceive of themselves as rational integrated human beings. However the model of the rational integrated human being does not always square with behaviours that were in reality, random arbitrary and lacking cohesion. Meaning is bestowed upon the behaviour to bring it into line with the model of self which is rational, integrated and coherent.

It might be useful at this point to turn back to the empirical and note some applications of the theory. Here Becker and Geer refer to the issue in a generalised form. They relate it specifically to change and process:

"Difficulties of analysing change and process on the basis of interview material are particularly important because it's precisely in discussing changes in themselves and their surroundings that interviewees are least likely to be able to give an accurate account of events. Changes in the social environment and in the self inevitably produce transformations of perspective and it is characteristic of such transformations that the person finds it difficult or impossible to remember his former actions, outlooks and feelings. Reinterpreting things from his new perspective, he cannot give an accurate account of the past for the concepts in which he thinks about it have changed and with them his perception and memories. Similarly a person in the midst of change may find it difficult to describe what is happening for he has not developed a perspective or concepts which would allow him to think and talk about these things coherently." (Becker & Geer, 1957, p31)

In Schutz' terms, Becker and Geer indicate the condition when the objects of the transpired phases are brought forward 'in addition to' but have not yet come to rest assimilated in a more stable structure. The example serves to illustrate how later experience furnishes the mind with a different set of interpretations and modes of thought.

In the following section the responses are given of some social researchers who were asked to give some consideration to this issue in interview. Those included are related to educational settings.

Wolcott gave an example which parallels the school to some extent:

"Well I maybe will only expand on the problem, but it's provided a most fascinating problem in ethnographic work. The ethnographer arrives on the scene and we'll make this now one of those mythical villages that's an easier way to look at it, so that he is engaged in participant observation learning the everyday, but he also wants to talk to people and one of the accessible groups of people will be the old people. And he wants to find out about the old days. So he goes and they tell him and they are glad to tell him, you know, 'finally somebody's asked me about the old days' Well the old days were really beautiful. In the old days the kids didn't do this, they didn't do that, there was plenty to eat and we didn't worry, and there wasn't all this bitterness that you see nowadays, you know they were really happy times. And the ethnographer writes all this down, not realising that he too is in a time machine. That he's got somebody telling him about the past, because he is on hand getting this information he's not realising that there is a different time frame. So he himself starts comparing the old days and the new. Now he wasn't a participant observer in the old days. He wasn't there. He's taken that second hand from people who were concerned by what they see as today's problems. And so he buys it, hook line and sinker not realising that they've slipped the time dimension on him. But he's calling it participant observation, contemporary study, writing in the ethnographic present. It's an intriguing problem." (Cockburn, 1984, p90)

Interestingly the notion of the village can be quite analogous to that of the school. Both are held together by collective mythologies and folk cultures; both have eccentrics and entrepreneurs; both have juniors and elders and in both cases the elders are the more accessible. In villages because they've 'retired'; in schools because if they are successful in traditional career terms they have the lightest teaching load and more flexible time.

Value analysis of rhetoric

It is a feature of many formal organisations that role responsibilities of certain staff include both shielding the organisation from penetrative investigation, and managing the impression of the organisation in terms of public opinion. These are of course the bureaucrats and administrators and the skills they possess include protecting the organisation with a wall of rhetoric and selectively escorting visitors to ensure they see the organisation in favourable light. Their style of presentation is skilful and their rhetoric internally coherent.

Colleges and college systems also possess staff whose functions are largely concerned with corporate impression management. One crucial role figure is obviously the principal whose job it is to maintain efficient organisation within the college and to demonstrate this efficiency to the community it serves. Principals speak moreover regularly to parents, stakeholders, local people, and professional groups thus refining and developing their presentation. They have good opportunities to organise their discussions of the college and its philosophy and become articulate in showing how it is put into effect.

How might the rhetoric of the college be analysed? Murray Wax pointed to the value and limitations of rhetoric:

"In interviewing in the kind of situation that you are talking about, if you're interviewing let's say administrators, these people have learned rhetorics and at least in the U.S. they are instructed in these rhetorics and part of the problem while you're interviewing is they feel they have to discharge those rhetorics at you. Therefore for me the interesting thing is to get past the rhetoric to concrete cases and to try and get them to be as specific and concrete and graphic as possible. So that I am no longer at the kind of abstract level one is going to encounter in these defences; rhetorics are often defensive and holding one at bay. Whether one can get past them or not is an open question because really, I think very able administrators part of their skill is in controlling conversation, and keeping conversation from getting on topics they don't want to get on. They are often very verbal, very facile, and very fluent and they regard this as a fine challenge to deflect the question and respond with appropriate rhetoric. And I think if you then try to analyse what they say you may have great difficulty getting past that." (Cockburn, 1984, p96)

Wax is alluding here to the professional bureaucrat skilled and trained in the art of rhetoric. Insofar as they do feel the need to 'discharge the rhetorics' this could be conceived as the operationalisation of a professional skill which has been internalised and become a card of identity for them. To successfully penetrate the rhetoric signals and the extent of their professional skill is ego threatening. Professionals do not like being deskilled. In this regard Barry MacDonald has stated his conviction that behind many bureaucrats 'there is no longer a self, identity or person - the role has taken over in total.'

If the problem of rhetoric is one of external validity, then we have to look at its internal logical construction to identify its value as data. It is the logical construction and not the tenuous link with reality which displays value content. Wax puts this well:

"But it doesn't tell you what's going on in the school. It tells you who he thinks you are and what message he thinks he has to convey to you and it may even reflect the last college course that he took. One administrator on campus here, somebody spoke of him as having this wonderful trap; that if you weren't careful you might come in with a problem and you'd never get to surface it carefully because the administrator had this line of conversation and interrogation. If he didn't want to get off on that topic you would never get there…" (Cockburn, 1984, p97)

It follows that the penetration of rhetoric to obtain accurate and valid information is a different matter altogether. In this case the relationship between the talk and the external world is at stake. Links have to be demonstrated by the interviewee. As observed above, Wax pursues the specific concrete and graphic, an advice also given by Becker. This strategy reduces glossing and generalization. Becker who is extensively experienced in investigating American institutions has developed a particular technique for dealing with rhetoric:

"On the other hand if you want more factual information, to get through the rhetoric he has another story to tell. You want to say to him, 'Listen, superintendent so and so, let's cut the bullshit. I know about this business, what's really going on here, how come you can't get those bond issues past. Tell me about it and cut the balloney, I've heard it all before'. And he'll say to you 'oh well alright', and he's got another story to tell you." (Cockburn, 1984, p98)

Whether or not the researcher can adopt the approach Becker recommends obviously depends on the personality structure of the researcher and also his relationship with the organisation under study. Academic research in colleges would not be well placed to take that line, as the relationship between colleges and research rests on co-operation which even in the best of times is stretched. However it could well be that a more forthright approach would be productive in some cases.

Wolcott also had something to say regarding administrators, rhetoric and its penetration:

"And yet sometimes I almost have a bias or a prejudice against using interview. I don't like to interview people when I'm almost sure what they're going to tell me. I don't like to interview people I consider to be liars and sometimes they can be very highly placed people who you simply know how they have to respond and that there's no reason for them to respond to you in an honest across the board way. So I can think of all kinds of reasons where you'd want to use other methods if you could. But, if you're working in education where you're working with highly literate, busy, committed people who would like to help you but who really don't have a lot of time then certainly an interview is better than nothing. And if you can convince the person that you were there - for example it's very useful for me to have been a teacher. I figure my teacher interviews are generally rather effective: in an hour's time I can often learn an awful lot about a teacher, this is assuming it's a focused interview, that we have some external thing that is being considered." (Cockburn, 1984, p99)

The relevance and appropriateness of these comments from Wax, Becker and Wolcott to British educational research is not direct and some important issues are involved.

The administrators of British schools and colleges are not the professionally trained rhetoricians of the American kind and the relationship of research to practice in British education aspires to be supportive and to facilitate understanding of educational action. Therefore although there are times and situations where rhetoric is employed by educators in defensive ways, and times when educators might need to be pushed by researchers, a conflict orientation should not be built into the naturalistic tradition as convention; this would merely serve to restrict access, increase cynicism by practitioners regarding the value and utility of research, and generally estrange the two.

Summary

This paper began by examining the conditions under which interviewing is an especially good method through the perceptions of a number of researchers, and identified the historical, experiential, distributed and sporadic contexts. We then reviewed some phenomenological literature and attempted to set it within an empirical context to develop some understanding of the idealisation of behaviour and the reconstruction of experience. Finally we reviewed the nature of rhetoric, the style of administrators and some techniques of how to penetrate it if required.

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Retention and achievement: Making a difference for NVQ`s

By Karen Castle, City College Norwich

Introduction

The numbers of students enrolling on to NVQ Care courses are growing. This is due, in the main, to the Care Standards Act legislation (2002). The Act stipulates that by 2005, 50% of people working as health care assistants will be qualified to a minimum of NVQ level 2. Government targets indicate a need for, and an increase in, a qualified workforce. The DfES (2002) has indicated the Government's position with regard to adults obtaining qualification, in aiming to reduce by at least 40%, the number of adults in the workforce who lack NVQ 2 or equivalent by 2010.

As programme manager, I was acutely aware that retention and achievement figures on this NVQ programme were poor and this should be investigated to identify how these figures could be improved. The achievement rate for 2000/2001 was 42% which for a large further education college is poor.

The conclusion of a small scale pilot study into reasons for students failing to complete, or withdrawing from the NVQ care programme were as follows:

- Personal, family and financial problems
- Lack of employer support
- Difficulty in understanding the awarding body criteria
- Difficulty in understanding the concept of portfolio.

The theme for the main study was to discover if student retention and achievement could be improved by the introduction of two new processes. A new design of portfolio was developed with the objective of being easier to use and promote cross referencing. Secondly, a workbook was designed which offered the student different scenarios within the workplace from which to obtain evidence. The introduction of the workbook replaced the necessity for the awarding body standards.

Assessment by portfolio

Most of the students investigated within this study are practical 'hands-on' practitioners who prefer to demonstrate their competence in a practical manner, finding difficulty in understanding the concept of the portfolio. Clarke (1997) has indicated that practical people do not find portfolio building an easy option since this kind of learner may not be able to produce material of an academic nature. Beaumont (1995) recommended that the way in which the standards are written be changed, as currently they are open to misunderstanding as a result of being too complex and containing a high percentage of jargon terminology.

On investigating an alternative portfolio design, the aim was to produce a system whereby the student could see exactly what they have achieved and how their knowledge had increased, with a greater deal of ease than was previously the case.

Retention and achievement

According to the FEFCE inspectors handbook January (1999), the NVQ retention and achievement rates in Further Education in England in 1995/1996 and 1996/1997 in health and social care are as follows:

	Retention rate	Achievement rate
1995-1996	76%	52%
1996-1997	75%	53%

Smith and Spurling (1999) argued that employers need education providers to enable students to obtain the necessary skills needed in order that they have the opportunity to become capable and skilled employees, who are able to carry responsibility in the workplace. If we are to address the issues of students withdrawing from vocational courses, we need to work with employers to ensure that students have maximum workplace support. Greater interaction and involvement with employers could increase their awareness of the students` needs, equally, informing students of industry and employment issues could enable them to understand some of the limitations experienced by employers.

Research methodology

This research was intended to inform the management of student retention and achievement, the model, 'fit the change to the individual as opposed to fitting the individual to the change,' was developed for the introduction of change.

Stern (1980) has suggested that qualitative methods be used to investigate the areas about which little is currently known, or about which sufficient is known but there is a necessity to gain a better understanding.

As a qualitative method of data gathering, Bowling (1997) claimed that the advantage of interviews is that the interviewer can probe fully for responses and clarify any possible ambiguities. She further suggests that more complicated and detailed questions can be asked, leading to a greater depth of information being obtained. Face to face interviews were conducted with students (withdrawn and current), assessors and employers. All were visibly uncomfortable and suspicious of the interview being tape recorded. Despite reassuring the interviewees that the interviews were being taped for ease of data collection, and confidentiality was assured, the responses were poor and lacked detail. Once the tape recorder was abandoned in favour of taking notes, thorough answers that contained more detailed information were obtained.

In addition to individual face to face interviews, workplace observations and focus groups were held. Focus groups form a more inclusive approach that collects data through a particular group interacting and debating a topic that has been determined by the researcher. Morgan (1996, p98) offers support for focus groups by suggesting that 'the main advantage of focus groups in comparison to participant observation is the opportunity to observe a large amount of interaction on a topic in a limited period of time.'

This study investigated what impact the introduction of new systems had on student retention and achievement. Firstly the introduction of an alternative design of portfolio, and secondly, the introduction of a workbook that took the place of the awarding body standards.

The principles of action research were used to inform the ongoing research by the continuing reflection and interpretation of the data. Whilst analysing the data, various issues were identified. For example, following a focus group, the students commented that they felt that using the new workbook may be problematic where they have an assessor who is still training, and therefore unfamiliar with the new process. This led to the implementation of assessor familiarisation workshops. Workshops were made available for assessors who were coming to the end of their training to inform them of the new systems of working and offer support until they were familiar with the different aspects of portfolio design and criteria interpretation.

The following table indicates the student cohorts that were studied.

Cohort start dates	Status of study group	Methods	Others involved	Level
April 2002	New portfolio design, original method of collecting evidence.	Interviews Focus groups Observations	Assessors Employers	NVQ 2 and 3
Sept: 2002	As above	Interviews Focus groups Observations	Assessors	NVQ 2 and 3
Jan: 2003	As above	Interviews Focus groups Observations	Assessors	NVQ 2 and 3
April 2003	New portfolio design, new method of collecting evidence	Interviews Focus groups Observations	Assessors Employers	NVQ 2 and 3
Sept: 2003	As above	Interviews Focus groups Observations	Assessors	NVQ 2 and 3
Jan: 2004	As above	Interviews Focus groups	Assessors	NVQ 2 and 3

Results

The following tables show the figures for student achievement taken from the cohorts studied.

These results indicate a considerable rise in the achievement rates, and this coincides with the introduction of the two new methods, however, there are other issues to take into consideration when addressing the results. Different members of staff are involved with the programme delivery, assessment and internal and external verification.

April 2002 cohort

	Level 2	Level 3	Total
Total numbers enrolled	57	30	87
Numbers withdrawn	21	3	24
Percentage withdrawn	36.8%	10%	27.5%
Numbers achieved	36	27	63
Percentage achieved	**63.15%**	**90%**	**72.4%**

September 2002 cohort

	Level 2	Level 3	Total
Total numbers enrolled	48	28	76
Numbers withdrawn	4	3	7
Percentage withdrawn	8.3%	10.7%	9.2%
Numbers achieved	44	25	69
Percentage achieved	**91.6%**	**89.2%**	**90.7%**

January 2003 cohort

	Level 2	Level 3	Total
Total numbers enrolled	33	26	59
Numbers withdrawn	4	12	16
Percentage withdrawn	12%	46%	27%
Numbers achieved (about to complete)	29	14	43
Percentage achieved	**87%**	**53%**	**72.8%**

Discussion of qualitative data

The first group to be investigated were students who began the programme prior to 2002, and therefore who carried out the original method of portfolio and evidence collection. They were given the awarding body standards when they enrolled and worked through the award a unit at a time.

Some of the students that were interviewed had withdrawn from the course. The following are statements from these students:

"I thought the portfolio was difficult to get my head round, I have never done anything like that before. The staff were good and spent time with me, but in the end, I found it very difficult to understand".

"I know it was a long time since I was at school, but I had never come across anything like portfolios, it took me until about half way through the course to really understand, the tutor and assessors could not have been more helpful, I just found it difficult".

The students, on the whole, preferred the idea of portfolio assessment when comparing this method of assessment to taking examinations or producing assignments, however, it would seem that the manner in which the portfolio is introduced to students is of paramount importance.

The comments below are quotes taken from interviews with the same cohort of students but the theme for these interviews was regarding the awarding body standards:

"I could not understand what was needed from the paper work we were given, whoever had written the criteria like that could not have been writing for people like me".

"I was told that the course was for practical types of people, those who are good at caring and the practical things rather than reading and writing. I can read and write but on the first day when we opened the packs I did not know what on earth anything meant, the tutor explained that we should not worry, that our assessors would go through them with us, but when I got them home and started to look through the book, it frightened me, even my husband couldn't understand any of it. I stopped going to college for a while, I was going to give it up, but my boss told me I had to see it through, it caused me a lot of stress."

Notes taken from the interviews with these students indicated that there were two main areas for concern; the students view of how the awarding body standards are introduced to them during induction and the content of the standards.

The research has found that the students regard themselves as practical people, not preferring academic methods of study. Given this one would expect then, that these people would relish the opportunity to use their workplace as the primary arena for obtaining evidence. The students were asked for their comments regarding any negative issues. Some of their quotes are recorded below.

"I found it really difficult to find the time to do the paperwork at home. I was not allowed to do any of my NVQ paperwork whilst I was at work, so I had to do it at home. I feel like the kids have not had a mother for 14 months."

"The questions must have been written by somebody that just does not understand us. We are not academic people, if we were, we would have done our nurse training. These just made me feel stupid and I know this applies for most of us in this room today."

Problems identified with the old method of portfolio were:

- Difficulty in cross referencing
- Repeating work for the purpose of obtaining evidence
- Too heavy, making it difficult to transport to college and work
- Not really knowing what they had as evidence within their portfolio.
- The second group of students studied and produced an alternative portfolio design.

The second group were given an alternative method of presenting evidence within a portfolio:

On obtaining a lever arch file, the student divides the file into two sections, by inserting a piece of card or similar. The back section is taken up by the awarding body standards, so for the students participating in level two, there are nine units for those doing level three, twelve units. The front section contains all the evidence. The students are advised to obtain as much evidence as possible by direct observation and witness testimony, and on receiving the written evidence, they page number as appropriate and place in the front of their portfolio. For example, page one, two and three might be a direct observation report, pages four, and five might be a witness testimony, page six might be a reflective account, page seven, another direct observation, and so on.

On obtaining the evidence, they then 'marry' this to as many of the unit criteria across all the units that are appropriate. The students record the page number on which the evidence can be found, alongside the appropriate criteria, and they record the criteria reference on the page of evidence. This resulted in less repetition and the students reported less ambiguity from cross referencing. Students following this design seem to experience less confusion and appear happier with the concept of portfolio:

"I did my level two with [another training provider] and the portfolio was completely different. I had three portfolios for my level two, I can't believe that I only have one for my level three. The portfolio here is much more easy to understand, it makes cross referring easier too."

"I haven't had many problems with the portfolio, my assessor is training at the moment and they teach them in their training another portfolio method. When my assessor saw how we did our portfolios she is going to suggest that they are all trained to do them this way, as she says it is much easier to understand and find your way about."

"I am really proud of my portfolio, it took me a while to get going, but now I'm just getting evidence whenever I can and I can see the evidence section growing each time I put a piece of evidence in."

"The biggest problem for me was that my manager is a qualified assessor and although she is not my assessor for this course, she told me that I was doing my portfolio the wrong way. She removed all my evidence and put it in with the units. That really confused me. You were showing us one way and she was showing me another."

The third group of students carried out the new portfolio design, and also had a workbook instead of the awarding body standards. The workbook was given to them during their induction to the programme on their first day in college. The workbook was quite prescriptive in that it asked the students to obtain evidence by direct observation and witness testimony only. Containing many of the situations that they would experience during their working day, it was felt to be a more holistic method of evidence collection. Students were advised to carry out as many of the tasks recorded within the book that they could. On obtaining the direct observation reports or witness testimonies, they would page number them and place them into the front of their portfolio. Once they had a sufficient amount of evidence about twenty to thirty pages, they were then issued with the awarding body standards; typically after ten to twelve weeks. The students would then to go through the standards with their assessor to assist with selection of units. Several criteria would now have been covered by the direct observations and witness testimony evidence leaving some criteria uncovered; the assessor could then advise preferred methods of gathering the final collection of evidence. It resulted in most criteria being covered by observing the students in practical work tasks. Comments from students participating in this method include:

"By not giving me the standards on the first day, I wondered how I would know what to do. I did my

level 2 here and I was given my pack on the first day. The pack confused me a lot, but at least I had something to work to. When you told us we were not having the packs but gave us that workbook instead, a lot of us who had got our level 2 were confused. When you went through it [the workbook] and once we realised that we were to get evidence just from the things we do at work and not to worry about the units, it was really great. I have got more evidence just from working than I did at level two and I have managed to nearly finish my level three in six months. I now wish I had done my level two this way."

"I didn`t have any problems with the workbook. My assessor helped me to think of things I do at work that can be assessed and when I read through the workbook they were written in there. All I did was work through the list of things that I had to be watched doing. I got the matron to watch me do some things as well. I found collecting my evidence easy. I looked at it as if it was a big scrap book of all the things I did. The good thing for me was that I could look back at some of the things and appreciate just what I could do. When I realised that most of what I did at work was all that was needed I started to really enjoy getting the evidence. I will definitely do my level three."

A further method used to obtain data, was workplace observations. The following observation was of a discussion held in the workplace, between an assessor and a student in group 3. The student completed NVQ level two at this college using the old methods.

The assessor asked the student what she had completed since the last visit. The student had carried out six witness testimonies and three direct observation assessments. The assessor examined the evidence and confirmed that it was appropriate. The student had nineteen pages of evidence consisting of direct observations and witness testimonies. The assessor introduced the awarding body standards to the student. Together they selected the optional units. The documentation for each was placed at the back of the evidence pages, in the second section of the portfolio. The assessor informed the student that the workbook was no longer needed. Together they matched the evidence that was in the portfolio to three of the optional units. The criteria that was not covered was discussed and an action plan made to determine what the student would do in order to cover the remaining criteria. The student informed me that she found this method much easier than that used for level two. She went on to suggest that, in using this method, the students could bring to the college sessions all their work in order that it is internally verified. The assessor commented that the students in general, seemed to develop an understanding of what was required of them much earlier in the course. The assessor further added that the students were more confident with their portfolio and that had impacted on how they approached gathering their evidence. The assessor offered only one negative affect of the new methods, that they had not been introduced earlier. They felt that many students had withdrawn due to the ambiguous nature of the performance criteria and the assimilation of evidence within portfolio.

On observing this scenario, both the assessor and student were confident with the methods being used. The student had 'ownership' of the portfolio, in terms of being able to locate evidence and being generally aware of the contents.

In a further workplace, the manager of a unit for people with learning difficulties was interviewed. The manager had five employees currently registered on the NVQ programme. He felt that the new portfolio had a positive motivating impact on the students in this environment. He suggested that the style of portfolio should have been brought into practice earlier. It was made clear that the manager feels the NVQ is a worthwhile experience for his employees. He further suggested that assessors undergoing training are trained to use this style of portfolio design.

Conclusion

This study has identified that the manner in which the awarding body standards for the NVQ Care are written are confusing, ambiguous and cause students, assessors and managers a great deal of frustration. Many students withdrew from the course due to becoming anxious and de-motivated as a result of the way in which the standards are written. By not giving the students the standards at the start of their course and guiding their focus on to their work practice, it would appear that we can increase achievement and lower the rate at which students withdraw.

Altering the structure in which the students and assessors compile the evidence, appears to improve student motivation and confidence. The new portfolio design has had a positive impact on the students' learning and achievement.

From the point of view of managing the quality assurance of the programme, this investigation has resulted in a change to the way in which the NVQ is delivered, in terms of the introduction of portfolio building workshops and portfolio support. Reviewing student's progress is more focussed. Students and assessors are encouraged to evaluate their progress. It seems that in removing the need for assessors to interpret the criteria so early on in the programme, the assessors can offer more time to evaluating evidence.

Assessor standardisation events are more focussed and take into consideration the needs of trainee assessors. The new portfolio design has enabled the internal verification process to be more focussed and succinct.

Employers, managers and other staff in the workplace are offered more support. This is an area that will require further research in identifying more favourable methods in which to provide the support that is needed by the students.

The study had identified issues that were not considered at the onset, for example, assessors who are undergoing training were following the old method of evidence collection and portfolio design. This was addressed by having access to the assessors when they commenced training and immediately they completed their course. Secondly, Students who completed their level 2 following the original methods were initially confused by the new methods introduced for their level 3 programme. These students were offered extra support early on in their studies, which had a positive effect.

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‘Do you want to learn, or shall I just push you through?’ Vocational assessment at the crossroads

By Chris Devereux, consultant to City College Norwich

Introduction

The question this paper poses is a provocative one. It begins by recording the poor state of vocational education in Britain and the implication in the title is that things cannot continue as they are. The review of vocational qualifications by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and the demand for a system that employers and employees understand, will only work if the end user, namely the employee or the candidate for the award (‘learner’), actually wants it. Pushing people through to meet financial or other targets is highly unlikely to motivate them. Learning might.

However, learning cannot be ‘delivered’. It has to be undertaken by the individual in conjunction with others. My definition of learning is one that is centred on learners themselves, who draw meaning and knowledge from increasing co-participation in their own community of practice. Such learning is social and situated, that is, social interactions provide the situation for learning to take place, more than cognitive processes or conceptual structures. Lave and Wenger (1991) and Dann, (2002) expand this view, with Dann explaining how self-assessment is integrated into teaching and learning.

As the National Vocational Qualification system continues to decay and the retention and achievement of learners on vocational courses is close to a national scandal, it seems the right time to examine the role of assessment and verification in terms of what needs to be done now to demonstrate that all is not lost rather than wait for the next punitive policy change to arrive and then try to comply.

There are three aspects this paper wants to address in order to distinguish between, and make judgements about, enabling learning as opposed to ‘pushing through:

- The use of streamlined standards and the notion of validity
- The use of the professional discussion in vocational assessment
- Using digital audio as a superior verification instrument.

Vocational assessment at the crossroads

There is a dichotomy in the assessment of vocational education. On the one hand we have overspecified national standards with regulations and bureaucracy that focus on paper driven models and targets. On the other we have QCA demanding more streamlined standards understandable to learners and supervisors and a website fostering assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning. This is supported by the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) who are focussing on the effect of teaching and learning, the disposition of the learner and their understanding and articulation of their own progression.

This streamlined methodology usually has money attached to it and there is a natural willingness to stick to what we know. Initial enthusiasm about any new ways of reducing bureaucracy and enabling candidates to take control over their own assessment is often replaced by chastened reassessment brought on by disapproving Internal (IV) and External Verifiers (EV) who, ultimately, believe the process is summative.

The traditional method of over-specifying standards coupled with the bureaucracy of portfolios is used only for accountability purposes and not for any sort of reflective learning on the part of candidates. Cohorts of assessors and verifiers intent on pursuing an administrative system rather than an educational one, serves only to prolong the sickness of the vocational education system.

Let us look at the facts and opinions that come from the 2002-2003 Annual Report of the Chief Inspector for the Adult Learning Inspectorate.

In 2002-2003, the median success rate for Advanced Modern Apprenticeship programmes was around 37%, for NVQs it hovered around 40% and for Foundation Modern Apprenticeship programmes it did not reach 30%.

‘All these rates are too low. The foundation modern apprenticeship is particularly poor, with three-quarters of providers offering learners no better than an even chance of achievement.’

‘A culture once rooted in short-term contracts, payment by result, low staff pay, inadequate investment in staff development and over-complex learning programmes, has taken its toll.’

'Ideas of 'inclusive learning' are more mature in further education colleges than elsewhere in the Sector, and there is a need to develop the concept more widely'

'There is virtue in simplicity. Provision that is easy for learners to navigate their way through to the highest levels…still eludes us, particularly in vocational work'

'The achievement rate for key skills was poor in most areas of learning.' (Sherlock, 2003)

By no stretch of the imagination can we remain complacent about a system that, at its best, can only manage a 40% success rate.

With the QCA review of vocational qualifications and the call by them and the Sector Skills

Development Agency for more streamlined standards understood by all, coupled with the focus on assessment for learning, it seems that the route at the crossroads is more towards learning rather than more of the same. What this means in practice forms the main content of this paper.

The misunderstanding of validity

I have already defended the need for a formative rather than summative approach to vocational assessment on the grounds that summative assessment only looks back and contributes little to the learning process (Devereux 2002). Yet in spite of firm evidence to show that formative assessment in the statutory sector yields the results the ALI Chief Inspector is looking for in the adult learning sector (Black and Wiliam, 2003, pp623-637), many practitioners on the ground are still loathe to examine the wider context of assessment as learning. As a result 60% of people seeking vocational awards do not succeed.

Prescription and compliance

The principles of formative assessment provide the learner or candidate with goals and assessment criteria that they understand, and equip them with the reflective skills to master and assess their own work through discussion with their assessor. In spite of six years of continuous support of this methodology by a number of awarding bodies and several hundred awards, many individuals are suspicious of an approach that follows all the very best in educational research and practice. This 'very best' takes the context of the learner and their learning as the central core of activity rather than the model of over-specified standards and the paperwork associated with them. But it is this latter model of administrative prescription and compliance that holds sway. It is characterised by a neat, reliable system with all the requisite forms completed, (often repetitively), all capable of being cross-referenced, and into which the candidate has been squeezed, unit by atomised unit. It is seen as 'rigorous' and 'right'. So why, with such a quality system in place, is retention and achievement so bad?

Streamlined Standards and Validity

The example of Unit C2 from Retail Level 2 offered in Figure 1 is a streamlined version of the original occupational standards. Figure 2 shows the first assessment from a candidate just starting Retail level 2.

Unit C2. Display stock to promote sales to customers	Done?	What is still missing?	Which examples?
C2.1 Prepare the display area and materials by: a. Check the stock, space, display position and size, materials and equipment you need, and duties of the display, making sure access is not blocked, and asking for help if anything is not clear or there are problems. b. Preparing the display area and the stock so they are clean and safe and that everything you need is in working order.			
C2.2 Set up and take down the display by: a. Using examples of displaying new stock and increasing the sales of existing stock, set up and take down the display according to the organisation standards of display, and their safety, security, space and time requirements. b. Checking that the display is tidy and safe when it is up and has the right levels of stock and that when taken down you have returned everything to its right place and have got rid of the waste safely.			
C2.3 Label displays of stock by: a. Putting the labelling about products and the organisation on both the products and the display so that everything is in its right place, is fastened securely, can be seen clearly, and is done on time.			
Candidates signature & date: Assessor signature & date: IV signature & date:			

Figure 1: a streamlined version of the original occupational standards

Learning Story Record Name: Learning Story No.:	Which criteria are being claimed?	Where can confirmation be found?
**Had to come to work to be in charge of a floor move (was ill)* **Condense sale to a smaller wall bay box overstock* *Re-merchandise back wall, cord/day* **Re-merchandise club wall and move pods* **Stand at front of store to check store layout*	*E6.1-a* *E6.1-b* *E6.1-c* *C2.1-a* *C2.1-b* *C2.2-a* *C2.2-b* *C2.3-a*	*E-mail from HO on bill, deputy, staff look, shop floor, star on my locker*
Candidate signature & date: Assessor signature & date:	*A. Smith, 21.11.03* *C.Devereux, 21.11.03*	

Figure 2: First assessment from a candidate just starting Retail level 2

The ALI grades for retail, together with customer service and transportation, fell this year from an already low base (Sherlock, 2003).

The streamlined approach does four things. It:

- Compresses the original standards into criteria most people can understand in the context of their own work, without losing the meaning of the full national occupational standards
- Enables rich learning stories chosen by the employee to be quickly matched across units and elements
- Takes assessors away from atomised assessment towards more holistic judgements
- Enables learners to self-assess.

By using the streamlined standards and coupling them with an assessment for learning conversation (i.e. recorded by digital audio) the whole focus is now on the candidate's agenda rather than on the regulatory one. Assessment unit by unit for a uniform, focussed response is impossible, because the candidate is no longer attempting to provide a solution for the performance criteria and range in Unit XYZ. They are using their own experience, drawn from participation in their own community of practice to demonstrate mastery across awards. Atomised assessment is easy to do but does nothing for learning. The approach outlined above forms the starting point for formative assessment. And it is validity rather than reliability that must be the focus.

Justifying judgements is what validity is about and making judgements is not a quantifiable concept. Black, (1998) one of the leading world authorities on assessment suggests that 'validity, in relation to effective models of learning must be the overriding priority for formative assessment'. Validity, in the context of holistic assessment criteria, is an integrative, evaluative judgement on the degree to which the candidate's evidence meets the totality of the assessment statements across the award.

This means assessment cannot be atomised. It involves judgements about learning, thinking and achievement all rolled into one and takes assessment to a higher plane. Validity is about expert judgements, by assessors who can then justify those judgements. We also adopt the view of Martin Cross (1997) that:

"*in assessment the greater the validity the greater the reliability. But the reverse is not true: increasing reliability does not lead to greater validity, but may actually prevent it. Reliability is the couch potato of the assessment world."* (Cross, 1997, p6).

Much current poor practice in assessment in the vocational arena comes from an inability or unwillingness to make expert judgements about performance across a wide range of issues based on a context the candidate understands. Instead, paperwork, atomised unrelated competences and a summative assessor-led approach dominate. This latter approach is often wholly inappropriate for the vocational area in which situations differ from place to place and the 'one size fits all' approach does not work.

If the intention is to help learners to learn and, moreover, enable them to assess their own learning, through rich experiential pictures, and then to assess this largely through the spoken word, a number of perceived problems arise from those assessors/verifiers who:

- Want to remain in total control of the assessment process
- Always do what they are told
- Do not understand the difference between assessment for learning and assessment of learning.

There are still some who feel streamlined standards and audio conversations opens up the system to abuse and a lowering of standards. This seems strange as the 'assessment for learning' approach is featured prominently on the QCA webpage (QCA, 2003) and is based on years of research on how to raise standards.

The professional discussion: Is it or isn't it?

The wide differences encountered in work-based education are not really suitable for written portfolios as the assessment medium. Firstly, writing does not capture the complexity of everyday experiences and action. When Elliot Eisner, an expert on evaluation and assessment of visual arts, argued that:

"*oral communication has a flexibility that a written form does not, and for some situations that flexibility is more important than the virtues of a written statement*." (Eisner, 1996)

Many everyday actions are too complex to describe easily in writing. e.g. Try writing down the procedure for making 5 cups of tea and one coffee, no sugar, but two teas with sugar. Learners can often express things better in the spoken word and find the writing down of 'personal statements' demotivating. The idea of a 'professional discussion' arose in 1996 for the NVQ in Customer Service standards at Level 3.

A professional discussion between assessor and candidate implies a recognition of the different skills, experience and understanding of customer service that each bring to the conversation. (Devereux, 1997).

Several standards setting bodies have adopted the professional discussion as a valid form of assessment, but to date no one seems to have specified more fully what it actually is. As formative assessment requires discussion to take place it seems appropriate here to give examples of what constitutes a professional discussion. In my experience, the discussion between assessor and candidate tend not to be ‘professional’ but rather a quick way of galloping through the performance criteria, range etc, by asking closed questions or even supplying ‘answers’ to candidates in order to tick the right box.

A non-professional discussion is one where assessors identify standards and go through them all, using questions like:

What could be unsafe about your computer?

What would you do if you met a distressed customer?

And did you put the carton away in the right place?

Other examples where any form of discussion is stifled, where the assessor asserts their authority with the excessive use of phrases like:

I want…

You must…

Sign here...

If you don’t…

I think you ought…

Don’t…

Messages that indicate the assessor always controls the agenda may give rise to compliance on the part of the candidate that does indeed enable them to be pushed through. But what was their part in the NVQ? What were they taught? What did they learn? How was their confidence raised? Did the candidate get the NVQ or did the assessor do most of the work for them?

The professional discussion that promotes learning takes a different stance. It begins from the standpoint that the candidate ‘can do’ rather than ‘can’t do’. Although the ‘can’t do’ may appear later, it is not assumed at the outset. Good professional discussions have as their basis a learning story, with five or six written bullet points which have been prepared in advance and form the basis of the joint assessment agenda. Although some of the above questions could well appear, the process is one of discussion and conversation around what a candidate wants to talk about and relating this across their award. Silences are often important parts of the process, as they allow candidates to think about what they want to say. Streamlined standards assist the candidate in understanding what is required of them. In addition, they assist in enabling self assessment and the confidence that goes with it. Wording used in the professional discussion helps this by adopting a tone that is more collaborative than the one-way assessor-led approach.

Common phrases are on the part of the assessor are:

Go ahead and tell me about your story.

I wonder if I could have done that as well as you did.

It would be nice to know a bit more about that.

I agree.

What do you think we should do now?

What you seem to be saying is…

How interesting!

You must have been pleased/worried by…

Although the tone of the phrases and questions are much softer than the earlier examples, they nearly always get a candidate to think and open up richer examples. Offerings on the part of the candidate on the other hand are far more positive, characterised by such phrases as:

I’ve got B.1c except for the packing bit

I’ll get Carl to give me more time on the forklift

I’ll have two more examples for next time

What you’re asking me to do is a bit scary, but I’ll have a go.

Crucial to the professional discussion is the conclusion and action from the conversation. In

The example shown in figure 3 we can see from the candidate’s ‘What I need to do next’ form that:

- It is all in the candidate’s own writing
- It is going to go towards something in Unit E13
- This is the first assessment meeting and the candidate found useful the idea of discussion rather than writing
- The candidate knows she needs to get better at handling staff, but has not said who is going to help her.

What I need to do next Name: *A.Smith* Learning Story No.:*1*	Extra comments and suggestions from my assessor that I have found useful
These are the things I need to do for next time as a result of discussing my learning story with my assessor: 1. *Do another learning story* 2. *Go for something in E13*	*Whole thing is useful like telling a story instead of writing it takes less of my time* What specifically do I need to learn now to get better at achieving my Modern Apprenticeship? Who's going to help me? *Handling staff*
Date & time I wrote these notes: *21.11.03, 10.30 am*	Date & time of my next assessment meeting: *8.12.03*
Candidate signature & date: Assessor signature & date:	*A. Smith, 21.11.03* *C. Devereux, 21.11.03*

Figure 3: The candidate's 'What I need to do next' form

All this was achieved by focussing on what the candidates wants to learn rather than pushing them through, and all in just over half an hour in the very first assessment meeting.

The culture of disbelief

Whilst learning may be taking place during the professional discussion, there is always the worry by some that it is too pink and fluffy to be 'rigorous' enough for assessment and verification purposes, and direct answers to direct questions, suitably recorded in a bulky written portfolio is the only safe way to do it. This, in spite of government advice and 25 years of evidence from practical research to the contrary.

Paper portfolios are generally used for accountability purposes even though all those supervisor signatures are no guarantee as to what really happened. Yet they still hold some kind of magical authority as do all forms of the written word. This is due to the fact that the culture of regulatory organisations is one of 'Role', a hierarchical culture where power is exercised by rules, systems and written procedures. In the vocational world other cultures exist, cultures of 'Power, Achievement and Support' (Harrison, 1987):

- ROLE, The dominant culture in the Western World. A hierarchical culture where power is exercised through rules, systems and procedures
- POWER, characterised by authoritarian leadership and a compliant workforce
- ACHIEVEMENT, typified by an orientation towards 'making a difference'
- SUPPORT which motivates and bonds people through close relationships.

These cultures, especially those of 'Achievement' and 'Support' do not hold the same view of the importance of the written word, as does the 'Role' culture.

If assessment using the spoken word is to satisfy those whose natural inclination is to use the written word, it may be that new technology has an answer. In the last section we look at the benefits of digital audio in capturing and verifying the nature of formative assessment.

Digital audio

Streamlined standards and a formative assessment approach to enable the learning that is so much sought after by the ALI, does not sit easily with a bureaucratic culture. There has always been an unspoken unease by quality people that audio is somehow cheating and is tedious to assess. In the past, tapes have been used but, understandably, verifiers have never been very willing to listen to tapes. It takes too long to find the right bit.

However, new products on the market enable the tracking of competence in a manner that certainly enables a 'safe' certificate to be awarded and enables verification to be neither costly nor difficult to do. It does however require those who verify the process to understand the following:

- Streamlined standards do not replace national occupational ones. They just make sense of them and remove repetitions and subsume lower level activities into higher ones. Using streamlined standards focuses on the much higher-level task of making valid judgements rather than ticking off each pc
- It is infinitely more difficult to cheat with the authenticity of an audio file than it is with a portfolio
- Digital audio is both economic in terms of time and is not difficult to verify as long as the verifier understands assessment as a learning exercise.

So what is digital audio? In brief it is tape recording without tape. A small recorder offers 5 hours of recording and comes with the software to transfer audio files onto a computer. Once this is done it forms a data record just like any other computer file.

Experience in using this methodology suggests the following:

- Try to make assessment recordings no more than 20 minutes
- Record the learning story and then those parts of the discussion where the candidate is claiming across the award from their learning story
- Use a homemade tracking sheet to jot down timings (the recorder gives you minutes and seconds as it is recording) and what the candidate was saying at those timings (e.g. loading lorries, using the till). This is invaluable for assessors and verifiers later
- Get verifiers to come and watch you and your candidate talking together. It is always positive.

Tracking sheets have been a breakthrough as they offer pinpointed moments of the candidate's learning story and there is nothing better than an external verifier hearing the candidate claiming competence with the agreement of an assessor. These critical incidents can be captured in seconds with the software using simple tracking sheets to indicate where to go for what.

The use of audio is transparent. If the candidate and assessor are good it shines through. If not, poor practice is immediately, and starkly, obvious.

Reflection

For far too long the system of vocational education has been creaking. The current national review of vocational qualifications seems likely to take up the views of the Chief Inspector of the ALI as well as beginning a root and branch job on the way standards are written and assessed.

In the last five years there has been a move towards more holistic assessment and clarity of purpose. We need to move away from a summative assessor led approach towards a more collaborative, candidate-led approach. If not, then vocational education will continue to pay little attention to learning.

The change that we all need to consider is to move from what Schön (1983) called technical rationality, which is an instrumental approach to the practice of assessment, to one that is much more to do with reflection-in-action, an ability to raise the thinking, acting and reflective abilities of candidates so they can take charge of their own learning and its assessment.

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Measuring Soft Outcomes: A Review of the Literature

By Brian Butcher and Lee Marsden, The Research Centre, City College Norwich

Introduction

In order to meet ever-stricter criteria community and voluntary organisations are increasingly required to evidence their achievements to funding bodies. For many organisations this is easier said than done. Traditional quantitative evidence is simple enough to provide demonstrating the numbers of service users, the numbers who successfully complete accredited courses, or those who go on to jobs or further courses. What is more problematic is evidencing the real achievements the sector makes in equipping people to cope with life, in developing interpersonal skills and in increasing self-confidence. These intangible outcomes have been notoriously difficult to measure but over the past few years considerable attention has been given to the issue and a comprehensive literature on measuring soft outcomes and distance travelled is beginning to be compiled. This article reviews the most significant publications addressing the issue as a resource guide for the community and voluntary sector and other researchers working in this field.

Background

Funders have traditionally been more comfortable with providing resources for accredited rather than non-accredited learning. The use of easily interpreted quantitative evidence enables funders to justify their distribution of resources. This funding bias does, however, create difficulties for community and voluntary organisations working with people who are neither willing nor often able to undertake accredited learning. In December 2003 the Learning Skills Council (LSC) published a consultation paper, '*Measuring Success in the Learning and Skills Sector'* (LSC, 2003), which recognised the contribution of non-accredited learning. '*Success for All'* stated that there was a need to 'define targets and performance measures in a way that recognises learning which does not lead to an accredited qualification, yet demonstrates learners' achievements' (LSC, 2003, p20). The paper seeks to encourage the introduction of a method of recognising these achievements without deterring people from accessing these learning programmes. The paper recognises that any method must not be burdensome to implement but it should enable learners to clarify their learning goals, have feedback on their progress and how they can improve that performance, and enable them to receive recognition for their learning.

The LSC intend to introduce a five-staged process linked to the *Common Inspection Framework*, these are currently being trialled around the country in the 'Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement in Non-Accredited Learning (RARPA)' process. The five elements of the process are:

- Clearly stated learning aims for all programmes
- Initial assessment to establish learners' starting points
- Identification of appropriately challenging learning objectives
- Recording of learners' progress and achievements during the programme
- End-of-programme assessment and review of the learner's overall progress and achievement (LSC, 2003, p21).

The LSC's new found commitment to recognising soft outcomes is mirrored by an increasing number of funders who are insisting that organisations provide clear evidence of the outcomes of their projects. Fortunately there is an ever-increasing literature available to help organisations devise ways of measuring their soft outcomes.

Soft Indicators: Demonstrating Progress and Recognising Achievement

The measurement of soft outcomes has primarily been concerned with encouraging and developing soft skills as part of government-inspired initiatives to increase employability. One of the early reports to concentrate on the importance of soft outcomes was produced by ECOTEC in 1998. *Soft Indicators: Demonstrating Progress and Recognising Achievement* explored current practice and issues around qualitative outcomes achieved on innovative training and employment projects. Over two hundred EMPLOYMENT projects were examined during 1995-97 under several schemes and the report details the evidence of soft outcomes that each of the projects sought to obtain. The recording of such information was intended to demonstrate to employers, and the individual, evidence of transferable skills and abilities. Once this information was evidenced this would enable staff to be more effective in progressing beneficiaries on to higher levels of training. The information would prove valuable to funding bodies because it would demonstrate the value of interventions and the progress made by the project. Recording soft indicators and developing soft skills was considered necessary to meet the needs of employers who were more concerned about skill development to create effective employees rather than individuals being trained to pass interviews. It was argued that employers were concerned with levels of motivation, flexibility, reliability, and reassurance of a stable background, measuring soft outcomes would provide them with reassurance that they were employing the right people.

The report groups soft outcomes under three headings:

- Attitudinal skills - Attitudinal skills includes self-esteem, positive regard for others, taking responsibility for own lives, confidence, motivation, attitude, self-awareness, reduced depression/anxiety, and aspirations
- Life skills - Life skills outcomes comprise social skills, attendance, time-keeping, personal presentation, personal hygiene, and relevant conversation
- Transferable skills - Transferable skills include such factors as working in groups/teams, problem-solving, questioning, evaluating, initiative, language skills, and communication.

The report provides six case studies from a variety of 'into-work' initiatives which essentially provides a thumb nail sketch of those analytical tools deployed by the various projects. A variety of measures for tracking soft outcomes are cited including action planning, regular beneficiary assessments or reviews, psychological testing, identification and recording of key skills, feedback from agencies and individuals, discussions, and questionnaires. In developing soft indicators the projects emphasised the importance of relating outcomes to key and transferable skills. Such indicators should be diagnostic and transferable amongst all relevant agencies. These projects should also consider incorporating these indicators within accredited training-education-employment courses. The report mentions the dangers of over-emphasising accreditation to the detriment of core objectives, the overall sense, however, is to encourage service providers to steer towards accreditation.

The EMPLOYMENT initiative was funded by European Social Fund and set the standard for successive analysis about the measurement of soft outcomes and distance travelled. The report emphasises the need for individualised measurement and an effective evaluation of distance travelled, starting from a baseline. There needs to be flexibility to accommodate the various agencies involved with individuals over time, and training for assessors, including sensitivity when dealing with issues of personal hygiene and appearance. Beneficiaries should be involved in developing indicators, which should be relevant to the aims and objectives of the activities. Once developed the measurement systems should be incorporated within activities and monitoring at all stages and an account taken of individuals leaving and rejoining training. In considering measurement systems special attention should be paid to the requirements of employers (ECOTEC, 1998).

Measuring Soft Outcomes and Distance Travelled

Two years after the publication of the ECOTEC study a two-part seminal report was produced by Dewson *et. al* for the DfEE and the Institute for Employment Studies. *Measuring Soft Outcomes and Distance Travelled: A Review of Current Practice* surveyed 300 ESF projects to establish what was happening on the ground and to develop a generic model for measuring increases in employability or 'distance travelled' for ESF Objective 3 projects. The report identifies weaknesses in existing practice of monitoring soft outcomes. The researchers discovered that there was poor integration with other sources of information, there were related problems with the attribution of information, subjectivity, language, and the use of different baselines to record progress (Dewson *et. al.*, 2000a). The three categories of soft outcome outlined by the ECOTEC report are expanded and redefined to include key work skills, attitudinal skills, personal and practical skills, each offering a number of indicator examples (Dewson *et. al.,* 2000a).

The researchers' analysis suggests that any generic model for soft outcomes is not achievable:

"I*t would seem that there are too many different client groups to devise one particular soft indicator or model to fit all projects…Just as it is impossible to develop one model to measure soft outcomes, so too is the development of national indicators unattainable."* (Dewson *et. al*, 2000, p5)

There are methods of collecting, measuring and recording soft outcomes, however, that can be applied to individual projects. The report lists various collection methods including the use of self-completion questionnaires, tests, portfolios, reviews and recorded observations. Soft outcomes could be measured by scales of feeling or agreement with statements (scale between agree strongly – disagree strongly), comparisons with previous benchmark data, reports or questionnaires, qualifications attained, and assessor's views (Dewson *et. al*., 2000a). In the rush to record and monitor outcomes the researchers advise caution noting that:

"The nature of the help they receive is usually holistic, integrated and geared to the individual needs of clients. A 'one-model-fits-all' system to measure soft outcomes and distance travelled runs counter to this type of intervention." (Dewson *et. al.*, 2000a, p24).

The second part of the Dewson *et al.* report, *Guide to Measuring Soft Outcomes and Distance Travelled*, produced for the Institute for Employment Studies, emphasises the necessity for monitoring soft outcomes and distance travelled for all project evaluations. Rather than offering a generic model the authors offer general guidelines on the measurement and presentation of soft outcomes. The authors' emphasis concentrates on the development and recognition of soft skills as part of the beneficiaries' long term integration into the labour market (Dewson *et. al.*, 2000b, p4). The starting point of any measurement of soft outcomes is to establish a baseline from which individual progress can be measured. A variety of methods of collecting and recording information are suggested including individual action planning and goal setting, trainer/client reviews, personal journals, reflection, questionnaires, recorded observations, portfolio evidence and testing (Dewson *et. al.,* 2000b, p8-9). The assessment process should serve the interests of the client and be geared towards their level of ability and comprehension. Whatever assessment method is devised the measurement should be systematic and numerical through scoring systems and scales. Within this system inferences may be drawn in order to better understand the client's external situation to determine which factors/changes are attributable to the project and which are not (Dewson *et. al*., 2000b, p10).

All projects should be measured at least at the beginning and end of the project, but regular intervals throughout the project would be best practice. The assessments can be undertaken by the client, employer, project staff, or by peer assessment and used to present evidence that aims and objectives of projects are being achieved. The information should be able to influence future project evaluation and dissemination strategies, and provide useful feedback to clients and project workers (Dewson *et al.*, 2000b, p12-13). The report goes on to provide useful guidelines in developing tools such as questionnaires and in particular advice on the sort of tests that they need to meet to be effective. Both reports provide an ideal starting point for any serious consideration of soft outcomes as stepping stones leading to employment.

Richard Lloyd and Fionn OSullivan, in preparing *Measuring Soft Outcomes and Distance Travelled: a Methodology for Developing a Guidance Document* for the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), build upon this foundation laid by Dewson *et. al.*. In preparing a guidance document for ESF projects the authors conducted a large postal survey of existing ESF supported projects receiving almost 600 responses and undertook case study visits and interviews with ten further projects. The aim was to examine current practice, three years after Dewson's reports, and devise a generic model that might be appropriate for all ESF supported projects. The survey and observations revealed common elements in measuring soft outcomes and distance travelled including target indicators, scoring systems, baseline and subsequent interviews, a system for reporting results, and staff training to use the system. The different approaches to monitoring emphasised its value as an 'initial diagnostic tool and on-going motivational support' (Lloyd and O'Sullivan, 2003, p19). Such systems evolved over time and were subject to constant refinement. Where soft outcomes were not being measured the authors found a great deal of interest in doing so by projects provided a suitable approach was available. The report is particularly valuable in producing a list of exemplar indicators of soft outcomes demonstrating reliability, motivation/attitude, communication, presentation, work, and achievements. They also tackle issues surrounding the operational context of any system of measurement, the value of judgemental and evidence based approaches, and staff resources to run a successful monitoring system.

Lloyd and O'Sullivan's work resulted in the publication of the definitive *A Practical Guide to Measuring Soft Outcomes and Distance Travelled*, published by the DWP, ESF and the Welsh Assembly Office in June 2003. The guide was written specifically for ESF projects on employability but is applicable to a wider audience. Soft outcomes are defined as 'those outcomes that represent intermediary stages on the way to achieving a hard outcome' (Welsh Funding Office, 2003, p5). Such a definition is at once prescriptive and pejorative interpreting soft outcomes as simply stepping stones to achieving a hard outcome. Many service users in the community and voluntary sector will not go on to achieve easily quantifiable hard outcomes and yet in achieving soft outcomes there is a social benefit to society as they are able to lead more fulfilling lives. What would become of the 90 year widower who gained the confidence to learn computing skills to write his autobiography for his family, that the researchers recently encountered. He will neither be getting a job nor going on to accredited courses and yet the soft outcomes achieved keep him active and involved rather than confined to a retirement home.

The guide develops the themes raised by the earlier report and makes some important provisos. The tools are to be viewed as an accompaniment, rather than a replacement for, the project worker's professional judgement. Measuring soft outcomes is not an exact science and any scoring system can only reflect indications of movement towards achieving soft outcomes rather than producing an exact measurement. The authors concede that there may be times when it is not appropriate to measure soft outcomes, although it appears increasingly unlikely that funders will adopt a similar stance. The guide identifies five stages in developing monitoring systems:

- Understanding what the process of developing a soft outcomes monitoring system consists of, how much effort it will require and planning accordingly
- Deciding what to monitor and which indicators to use
- Deciding how to measure
- Establishing baselines
- Reviewing progress to assess distance travelled.

The guide continues to demonstrate in general terms how soft outcomes should be reported to funders. Perhaps the most useful contribution to knowledge about measuring soft outcomes is included in a fifty page section on existing projects with many helpful examples of existing practice. All the projects are devoted to issues of employability, which raises the question as to whether such indicators are transferable to learning situations where the outcome is related to educational achievement and progression, or learning situations that result neither in progression to accredited courses or an employment outcome.

Recognising and recording progress and achievement in non-accredited learning

The impetus for measuring soft outcomes in non-accredited learning has come from the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) and the Learning Skills Development Agency (LSDA), in cooperation with the LSC. The LSC position paper on *Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement in Non-Accredited Learning* was produced in 2002 and draws on Greenwood's *et al*. seminal text, *Recognising and Validating Outcomes of Non-Accredited Learning* (2001). The position paper sets out to develop a national approach to recognising achievement in non-accredited learning. The staged process envisaged has been described at the beginning of this article. The LSC's stated intentions are to drive up standards to improve the learning experience and outcomes, to make any national system of recording outcomes sufficiently flexible to have relevance to informal learning undertaken in a community based or voluntary activity. In addition the LSC state that they wish to 'ensure that formula funding does not distort the relationship between learners' needs and the learning programmes they access and that the transition to formula funding does not destabilise institutions' (LSC, 2002, p10).

The position paper has become the basis of the RARPA Project trialled around the country which is due to report at the end of July 2004 with a period of consultation with the sector lasting until October 2004, followed by publication of that consultation in mid November (LSC, 2004). At present there is little information available on individual projects being trialled but the evidence used in determining measurements includes: The records of learner self-, group- and peer-assessment; tutor records of assessment activities and individual/group progress and achievement. Learners' files, journals, diaries, portfolios, artwork; videos, audiotapes, performances, exhibitions and displays; individual or group learner testimonies; artefacts, photographs and other forms of evidence are also acceptable (LSDA/NIACE, 2003). It is envisaged that there will be a national roll out of the new approach in 2005/06, and we can expect a plethora of information detailing how to evidence soft outcomes at that stage.

Community Development

An approach which seeks to utilise soft outcome indicators for both employability and educational development has been produced by the Community Development Foundation. Richard Steer and Jayne Humm produced a report detailing the findings of a workshop to investigate measuring soft outcomes and distance travelled over Neighbourhood Support Fund (NSF) projects, a community based initiative for 13 -19 year olds who are out of work or education, or at risk of dropping out. *Developing "Soft" Outcome Indicators and Measures of 'Distance Travelled'* –

Issues from the Evaluation of the Neighbourhood Support Fund (2001), details experimental and on-going research into measuring outcomes. The authors expand the narrower definition of soft outcomes to include prerequisites to success in education, training or employment, and to maintaining positive social relationships. The report divides soft outcomes into four subsections including: key work skills, attitudinal skills, personal skills, and practical skills. The outcomes measured will vary depending on the individual client but measurements include the use of baseline and subsequent questionnaires with young people on the projects. The questionnaires are designed to cover soft outcomes such as core skills, self-esteem, aspirations and community involvement. The report is particularly useful in honestly tackling practical difficulties of establishing such measurement systems. The problems of recording information from young people with learning difficulties, intrusiveness into clients' personal lives, whether the outcomes achieved are directly attributable to the project, how comprehensive a picture is provided of the young person, and how to overcome the bias of subjectivity.

Steer and Humm's report was followed by a further report from a qualitative research project conducted by Maire Gaffney based on almost 2,000 structured interviews with young people on NSF projects. *Perceptions of Success* (2002) provides a detailed appraisal of the way projects seek to develop soft skills among their client group. Although this is interesting in its own right the benefit to community and voluntary organisations comes in the section on measuring soft skills. The sort of difficulties experienced by some projects with insufficient time and resources to develop adequate measurement systems and the problems of establishing baselines will resonate with other projects embarking on measuring their own soft outcomes. Project workers expressed concern that reduced flexibility and 'professionalisation' of the projects may alienate their client group and turn community based people and volunteers into 'professionals' (Gaffney and Humm, 2002, pp29-30). The report strikes a very different tone from those produced from governmental departments and probably has greater applicability to those organisations, in the community and voluntary sector, which are increasingly forced down accredited routes to secure funding and yet know the value of the non-accredited courses and services they provide for their client group.

Final Thoughts

The need to measure soft outcomes and the distance travelled by service beneficiaries will not go away and service providers in the voluntary and community sector will increasingly be required to provide evidence of these outcomes to satisfy funders. The literature to date has emphasised the need to measure soft outcomes as evidence of a stepping stone linking non-accredited/soft learning with progression to a hard outcome, such as a job or taking an accredited educational course. Such an approach narrows the interpretation of social inclusion to employability and educational achievement and ignores vast swathes of the community and voluntary sector working with clients who may never access jobs or educational qualifications. There is a value to society when informal learning leads to increased motivation and feelings of responsibility, confidence and self-esteem, inter-personal skills, improved individual appearance, time management and teamwork for the individual. What price do funding bodies and society in general, put on the value of a mother with postnatal depression achieving those soft outcomes that enable her to relate to her child and feel good about herself? She might not go out to work for a few years, or take an accredited course, but society as a whole will benefit now and in the future from the improved mother/child relationship. There is an intrinsic value in achieving soft outcomes for their own sake and the literature needs to be expanded to take this into account.

The literature points the way to measuring soft outcomes to satisfy funders but can also be utilised to provide real benefits for the voluntary and community sectors to benefit clients and project workers. Measuring soft outcomes and distance travelled shows clients the progress they are making and have made. The evidence reveals to workers how the project is going and indicates directions for further developments. A system of measuring soft outcomes that is simple to use, easily understood and interpreted, and puts the client's needs at the centre of any measuring process is desirable regardless of any funding considerations. The literature provides guidance on preparing such a regime but provides no definitive answer or generic model. It is worth service providers investing time and energy in adapting some of the ideas and suggestions provided by the into-employment literature, to improve their service delivery with the added benefit that somewhere along the line a funder may decide that social inclusion consists of more than simply finding employment or gaining a qualification.

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Raising Aspirations to Learn: A Literature Review for the Norfolk Learning Partnership

By Roz Mazey and Brian Maples, Research Centre, City College Norwich

Introduction

The Research Centre at City College Norwich was commissioned by the Norfolk Learning Partnership (NLP) to undertake a literature review with the focus looking at the learning aspirations of people aged 14+ years of age, living in Norfolk.

This article aims to summarize the findings of the literature review, in particular, highlighting any identified barrier issues to raising aspirations in learners.

A previous literature review, (Desira, 2003) raised many issues that may potentially lower the aspirations of young learners in the Norfolk area. The current review reinforced the findings of the 2003 work, and also assessed the large pool of research work ongoing both locally and nationally with relevance to the subject of learner aspirations. Of particular interest was the identification of successful initiatives that have enhanced learner progression through increased learner uptake, an improved learning experience, progression through basic skills, further and higher education, development in the work place and in the community.

Objectives

The objectives of this article are:

- To attempt to address the research question: How do the aspirations of people in Norfolk compare to other areas of the country?
- To produce a summary and evaluation identified barrier issues to raising learner aspirations, highlighting any examples of good practice.

Review Limitations

The literature review focussed primarily, but not exclusively on research conducted in the last year (2003) and research currently underway.

Internet searching and reviews of data sources and reports as supplied by the sponsors were the main sources of information in the literature review.

It is not claimed that the review is fully comprehensive, or that all of the relevant material has been identified. There is a wide range of information available, and also a significant amount of ongoing research on the main and related topics. Consequently, to make best use of the limited time available, a relatively narrow perspective was taken. The emphasis was placed very much on 14+ learning issues within the education system, and progression into higher education and the workplace. The key messages drawn from the work reviewed have been selected for their relevance to the objectives indicated above, and are not claimed to be representative of the entirety of each specific piece of research.

Discussion of Findings

There is no evidence based on academic ability to suggest why aspirations may be lower in the Norfolk area. Statistics (Figure 1) show that up until Key Stage 3 in secondary school, performance of Norfolk students is in line with the national average. However through the remainder of secondary school it is significantly below the national average and towards the bottom end of the regional league table.

The 2003 literature review, LSC Norfolk Learner Feedback Research (Desira, 2003) raised many relevant issues that potentially lower the aspirations of young learners in the Norfolk area. It is recognised that amongst those in the community who are most unlikely to engage in learning, are young people from lower socio-economic and occupational status, and people who live in rural areas. The major influences on the aspirations of learners identified during this project are discussed below.

School performance

Statistics (DfES, 2003) show that up until Key Stage 3 in secondary school, performance of Norfolk students is in line with the national average. However through the remainder of secondary school the performance is below the national average and towards the bottom end of the regional league table. Following on from this, the percentage of the Norfolk population entering full time post-16 (Figure 2) and remaining at the age of 17 is below the national average and with one exception, the lowest in the region (National Statistics, 2003). This indicates that there is no evidence based on academic ability to account for why the aspirations learners of 14+ years of age should be lower in Norfolk, than anywhere else in the local region or the country as a whole.

LEA	Primary School (Key stage 2) *Average point score*	Secondary School (Key stage 3) *Average point score*	Secondary School (GCSE/GNVQ) *Average capped point score*	Post – 16 (GCE/VCE) *Average point score per student*
England Average	**27.4**	**34.3**	**34.8**	**258.6**
Norfolk	**27.3**	**34.5**	**34.0**	**236.5**
Bedfordshire	27.4	34.6	34.3	255.4
Cambridgeshire	28.0	35.3	35.9	281.4
Essex	27.6	34.5	35.4	257.9
Hertfordshire	28.1	35.6	36.9	247.3
Luton	26.7	32.0	30.8	213.9
City of Peterborough	27.4	33.8	32.4	224.6
Southend on Sea	27.4	35.8	36.1	257.3
Suffolk	27.2	34.8	36.3	244.7
Thurrock	26.4	32.4	32.8	199.1

Note: Post – 16 results for Luton and Thurrock are based on 3 and 2 schools respectively.

Figure 1: DfES School and College Performance Tables 2003: East of England Region

LEA	16 year olds		17 year olds	
	Full-time %	**Part-time (FE college) %**	**Full-time %**	**Part-time (FE college) %**
UK Average	**73**	**-**	**58**	**-**
Norfolk	**69**	**5**	**55**	**7**
Bedfordshire	77	7	64	9
Cambridgeshire	71	7	60	8
Essex	72	3	57	5
Hertfordshire	88	5	74	7
Luton	69	6	56	10
City of Peterborough	73	5	56	7
Southend on Sea	73	2	61	2
Suffolk	72	5	57	8
Thurrock	67	4	46	5

Note: Preliminary assessment of 2001 Census, published November 2003. National Statistics – Winter 2003.

Figure 2: 16 and 17 year olds in Post – 16 Education (percentage of post – 16 populatio

Learners opinion of self-worth

Many youngsters have limited vision (SHM, 2003; Breckenridge *et.al*., 2003) and may have already eliminated high level success from their range of possibilities. Dead end jobs may be more readily accepted *(*SHM, 2003*).* University can be perceived as an alien culture in which they will feel out of place (Payne, 2003).

Taylor (2003) highlights an example of good practice in Oldham where the Post-16 citizenship programme for young people involves colleges and other partners to empower young adults and nurture a critical understanding of rights and responsibilities, showing how working together can achieve change.

Life advantages and career fulfillment as a result of qualifications are understood by those youngsters not in formal learning (Labour Club, 2004; Frost, 2003; Knight and White, 2003) but are seen as being for others, who will then have advantages over them. Confidence or lack of it is a significant influence on learners well-being and involvement in the learning process (Norman and Hyland, 2002).

Being treated as an adult (Baker *et.al*., 2003) and being handed responsibility are motivational factors (Frost, 2003 and are likely to increase self-worth.

At 13/14 years of age, aspirations are seen to begin to decrease (Elliot *et.al.,* 2001). This is consistent with the circumstantial evidence discussed above in the school performance tables (DfES, 2003).

Disaffection with schooling was seen as a significant block to students' perceptions about their own self-worth (Elliot and Zamorski, 2002).

Attitudes relating to self-regard, confidence and work ethic all correlate with academic achievement (Williams *et.al*., 2003). Highly motivated young people are less likely to leave education (Knight and White, 2003).

Parents and family

Parental approval is a motivating factor for young people (Frost, 2003). Parents may have low aspirations themselves *(*SHM, 2003) and limited horizons for their children, and this is likely to rub off. The strength of family influence, particularly in rural areas has been reported (Beales and Sutherland, 2003). Aspirations are often compromised in favour of family and community (Elliot *et.al.*, 2001). There is a contradiction between parental ambition for their children and the desire for them to become wage earners (Elliot *et.al.,* 2001). Parents exert greater influence than professional advisors (McGrath and Millen, 2003) and are probably the single most important source of advice *(*Payne, 2003*;* Princes Trust, 2003). Payne (2003) suggests that the most positive encouragement to enter post-16 education and beyond comes from parents who have followed this route themselves.

The involvement of families by schools in the learning process has shown positive results. This is particularly apparent with the 'West Walton Experience' (West Walton Primary School, 2003), where families are encouraged to get involved with the school and learning, with some parents actually participating, alongside their children, in the learning process with the result that improvements in performance are clearly being seen. Active parental involvement throughout the career decision process is important (Elliot *et.al*., 2001).

Schools and colleges

Negative views of learning and a resulting lack of self confidence are often due to bad experiences at school (Brockenridge *et.al.*, 2003) and there is generally a negative view of schooling, tutors and education (Labour Club, 2004; Frost, 2003).

Disaffection in schools is a matter of increasing concern to teachers and is seen as a major impediment to students educational attainment (Elliot and Zamorski, 2002). The 'teacher effect' has a major influence on attitudes to learning, both positive and negative. Inability to explain things clearly is a major cause of student disengagement (Frost, 2003).

The importance of "*pastoral care*", and the building of self-esteem in 'weaker personalities' (Frost,2003; Elliot *et.al*., 2001) should not be overlooked.

Peer Pressure

Contact is lost between those who choose the learning/career path and their peers who go in alternative directions, making the progression route invisible to non-learners (SHM, 2003). Contemporary friends are regarded as being of greater influence than peers already in higher education (McGrath and Millen, 2003). Thus, peer groups can have both a negative (SHM, 2003) and positive effect (Elliot *et.al*., 2001) on aspirations.

Young people are more likely to stay in education after 16 if their schoolmates also stay on. Few choose a particular post-16 route merely because their friends have chosen it. However friends may help to form their general attitudes towards education, which in turn influence their choices (Payne, 2003).

Career Guidance - The Decision Making Process

Career advice during schooling is perceived to be additional rather than integral to the curriculum. Integration of personal guidance into the curriculum from 11/12 years of age onwards may encourage trust and prevent aspirations being compromised towards the end of secondary education (Elliot *et.al.*, 2001). The majority of disadvantaged youngsters view career support services as inadequate, leaving many confused as to where to turn for help (Princes Trust, 2003).

Students tend to begin serious investigation of careers late (McGrath and Millen, 2003), although many have ruled out certain options well before the age of 16 *(*Payne, 2003*).* Those who make the decision to leave before the age of 16 tend not to change their mind*.* Ideas about preferred work begin to take shape in early teens (Payne, 2003)*.* Indeed, personal tutors are regarded as more important than any other professional source of advice (McGrath and Millen, 2003).

The more accessible the source of influence to the young person, the greater is the perceived significance.

Role Models

SHM (2003) suggested that adult and peer role models are either generally absent, or present only at a low level. Elliot *et.al.* (2001) suggest that to increase their influence, positive role models need to be more visible within the community

Targeted endorsements by successful past students can be effective*.* Using past students' endorsements in a targeted way can be an effective influence. Outcomes such as good job/salary/better off than others should be stressed rather than the course itself (Frost, 2003). Adults and 'successful' young people from a range of roles should be invited to schools to talk about their jobs, job satisfaction and education requirements (Elliot *et.al.*, 2001).

Mentors

A pilot scheme in Islington (Taylor, 2003) provides support for young people when they begin new learning by the provision of a mentoring service under the title 'Handholders', a service for people who want someone to support them when they begin new learning, or progress to a new course. Mentors, who are themselves recent new adult learners, receive training for the work.

The National Ecumenical Agency has carried out pilot studies in East Anglia in conjunction with the national Learning Skills Council (LSC) to explore mentoring models within the local community (Beales and Sutherland).

Work experience

Employers were often more enthusiastic about work experience than students (Elliot *et.al*,, 2001).

A combination of college and work education in 14 – 16 year olds has proved successful (Baker *et.al*,, 2003). The college environment and the experience of actual working environments were preferred to traditional schooling by young people, and seen as being more relevant to their futures.

Finances

Many not in formal learning do not believe that funding is available to them. A comprehensive understanding of student finances and the availability of funding is not apparent (Frost, 2003; McGrath and Millen, 2003; Labour Club, 2004). Debt is seen as a significant barrier to progression into higher education (Elliot *et.al,,* 2001).

Financial support aimed at re-engaging disadvantaged young people may result in more staying on in post-16 learning (Denholm and Macleod, 2003).

In pilot studies, the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) scheme had a positive impact on potential early leavers remaining in education, and has also resulted in improved performance in terms of attendance, retention and levels of achievement. (Knight and White, 2003). National roll-out of the EMA is due to commence in September 2004. Work to date shows that the introduction of the EMA has helped more young people to benefit from post-16 education (Maguire, 2003).

In one study (Rowney, 2003) 85% of full time students at colleges, were doing at least 10 hours part time work per week. Potentially this can create conflict, and a polarization of staff and student views. The ability to earn is a key motivator when deciding on post-16 options (Frost, 2003).

Knight and White (2003) found that participation in the EMA scheme has made a positive financial impact on young people in terms of greater opportunities for personal expenditure, financial independence from parents, and reducing the need to work part-time. It also had a significant impact on the financial situation of some young people's families. Although the scheme was universally welcomed, there were, however, some concerns raised about whether it was encouraging young people to remain in education for the wrong reasons, whether it was preventing young people from considering alternatives to education, and whether it was encouraging students to remain in education at 16 only to find they could not afford to go on to higher education.

Rural environment

Norfolk is viewed by local youngsters as a slower world (SHM, 2003), and although they value their community, many do not believe they can succeed outside of their local environment.

Differences in staying on rates between and within regions have been observed, and involve both the local market, and cultural factors (Payne, 2003).

Transport

Problems with transport and the lack of an affordable public transport infrastructure are constant themes and are seen by youngsters as a major barrier to opportunities for both learning and more varied job prospects (Elliot *et.al*., 2001).

Local initiatives

There is clearly a great awareness of the issues at the local level within Norfolk. Numerous groups and agencies are involved in varied and extensive initiatives and ongoing programmes. There may be merit in ensuring that there is wider knowledge of these activities to ensure optimum access to them. A mapping exercise has been started by the Norfolk Learning Partnership. There may be scope for greater collaborative working between partners and merit in clarifying who is 'leading' on activities (i.e. based on client group and/or geography). Presumably one of the reasons for commissioning this specific project is to consider whether they need to be more effectively coordinated.

Work In Progress

There is much research work ongoing both locally and nationally with relevance to the subject of learner aspirations. The two local projects of particular note are the Market Segmentation project (Frost, 2003 - 2004), and the Pathfinder project looking at raising achievement in rural areas (Woods, 2003 - 2004).

Regional and National ongoing research work is extensive, all of which is worthy of follow-up. Particular projects with direct relevance include new technology methods of learning in rural environments (Traxler, 2003), localised geodemographic analysis of data (Farr, 2003; Russell, 2003), a Pathfinder project in rural Derbyshire (Sellers and Alford, 2003) looking at work related issues, and a quantitative study on the value of mentoring in vulnerable young people (Philip, 2003).

Conclusion

There appears to be very little specific evidence to indicate that aspirations of young people in Norfolk are significantly lower than anywhere else in the country, although there is plenty of circumstantial evidence based on related research topics to suggest that this may be the case. A lot of work has been carried out within Norfolk on the subject, but comparative quantitative data does not appear to be available.

This is a very complex and diverse issue. The perception of their self-worth and the aspirations of young people in Norfolk are influenced by many factors. Most of these are known, and well documented in the literature. This review has served to reinforce many of them.

Local initiatives and ongoing programmes are likely to improve the situation. However, there are opportunities for further specific studies to investigate the subject further.

Recommendations

A review of how the varied range of local activities are co-ordinated may improve effectiveness.

There is a significant amount of ongoing work described above. It is suggested that the output from current research projects is reviewed as and when available. Consideration may be given to repeating some studies of particular relevance in the local area. The output from ongoing regional and national LSDA projects is likely to provide new insights, with widening participation and enhancing learner progression being major themes of on-going action research projects. A further detailed review of these is likely to uncover data directly relevant to Norfolk and to stimulate ideas for further local research.

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"The personal life is dead, history has killed it" (Pasternak, Doctor Zhivago) To what extent do the authors of "Disgrace" and "Oranges are not the only fruit" believe this to be true, and which strategies do they use to demonstrate this?

By Hayley Ross, BA (Hons) English with Sociology, City College Norwich

Introduction

The above quotation was taken from a review of J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*, in which Elizabeth Lowry (1999) questioned the extent to which the novel render 'the claims of the individual as of secondary importance'.

This paper explores this idea further in relation to the problems of 'white-skin' in post colonial South Africa in *Disgrace* (Coetzee, 2000), and 'lesbianism' set amongst religious fundamentalists in *Oranges are not the only fruit* (Winterson, 2001). It draws on Foucault's theories of history in demonstrating the novelist's use of these two strong aspects as a challenge to the history in which they are contextualised. Through a metafictional 'self-consciousness' the novels can be seen to celebrate the personal life, and the ways in which the representation of power and sexuality can be seen to construct identities and relationships.

Michel Foucault's writings on history are centred on history's tendency to assume that events throughout time have:

"…moved in a linear development in which words have kept their meaning, still point in a single direction, and ideas retain their logic." (Foucault, 1984, p76)

For Foucault, historians can be seen to dismiss all previous interpretations by:

"…*composing the finally reduced diversity of time into a totality fully closed upon itself."* (Foucault, 1984, p81)

In other words, history claims to deliver the 'truth', to capture the exact essence and universal meaning of that truth and delivers it as a completed and authoritative picture. Foucault argues that the reality of history is a:

"…*tangled profusion of events in which the world of speech and desires have been subject to invasions, struggles, plundering, disguises and ploys."* (Foucault, 1984, p89)

Therefore, history can be seen as a construction, a fabrication of the 'facts', and one version of events, which is as valid as any other story. This can be viewed in Coetzee's attempt in *Disgrace* to find a way in which to tell the 'story' of South Africa, amongst the inadequacies of its violent and exploitative history. By writing within the conventions of a realist novel it would be impossible to draw attention to and criticize those elements of the history in which it is set.

However, critics of Coetzee's post-modern attempt at this view his novels as 'little more than an artfully constructed void' (Head, 1997, p10).

I would argue that this is intentional, in his refusal to structure his novels as ones whose function is to represent history, and through open-endedness, he draws attention to the political issues of the time, without being a solely political writer. David Atwell views this turn away from history as a turn towards textuality:

"…situational metafiction: the only form available to prose narrative as it attempts to negotiate the determining and circumscribing forces of history." (Atwell, 1993, p10)

Through metafiction, Coetzee (2000) is able to tackle a complex situation, whilst not attempting to enforce one singular version of events as history has, and places history and the novel as competing discourses. An example of this can be seen in Coetzee's use of the focalised narrative of David Lurie, and the difficulty felt at times, by the reader, to see beyond what he sees. By drawing attention to Lurie's characteristics within the text, there is a clear intention to highlight this story as being one sided and told by someone whose temperament is functional, unemotional and fixed. Lurie is a communications lecturer who appears unable to communicate, a man who:

"…has to his mind, solved the problem of sex" of which is 'satisfactory', whose "mind has become a refuge for old thoughts, idle, indigent, with nowhere else to go" of which he does not care enough about to 'sweep' clean, and who holds

judgments of people as "a prejudice that has settled in his mind." (Coetzee, 2000, p72)

In this way Lurie may be seen as the personification of history itself, a history which is unrepresentable, unmoveable and superior, and which presents itself as the 'essential truth'. This is apparent when Lurie's daughter is raped by three black men. In a scene, which should be incredibly traumatic and violent, Lurie's response to it and the language he uses to describe this is restrained and controlled:

*"*He speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him in darkest Africa.*"* (Coetzee, 2000, p95)

Regardless of his bilingual vocabulary, he finds his only weapon of words are unable to stake a claim to his daughter's survival. This contemplation provides us with a glimpse of doubt as to his own superiority as a white, 'educated' male in South Africa. Coetzee appears to be drawing attention to the requirement for South Africa to revaluate what is required of it so as not to repeat the contours of its past.

The pessimism apparent in this novel as to the situation in South Africa can be seen when this doubt is immediately replaced with Lurie's characteristic self-assurance. His attempts to come to terms with what has happened to Lucy places her experience as:

"…*not human evil, just a vast circulatory system", "a debt to be paid" and a "crime of hate which stems from history."* (Coetzee, 2000, p98)

This not only removes all individual claim from Lucy as to her own experience, but also from all women who he describes alongside other objects of short supply and part of this 'system'. It would appear that Coetzee is looking at history's attempt to 'kill the personal life', by placing Lucy's personal experience as secondary to what has occurred before. Yet when Lucy requests that her father keeps to his "own story", and recalls his own version of events, we see an attempt to keep hold of the personal by not constructing another's story from his own perception. Rosemary Joley views Coetzee's depiction of 'de-sensationalised violence' as:

"…*rejecting the model in which a writer/narrator constitutes the authoritative witness and judge of his subject, who is regarded as having an ultimately representable history."* (Joley, 1996, p110)

In this sense Coetzee is suggesting as Foucault does, that we have no right to see, and history has no right to convey the complete picture, when what is offered is partial and belongs to the personal and emotional lives of individuals.

The character of Lucy continues in the novel as a celebration of the personal life, although what happens to her is degrading and demoralising, Coetzee seems to suggest that she embodies an aspect of humility and desire to move on which is needed as a white person in South Africa. It is because of a history of the domination of whites over blacks, and his own fixed nature, that Lurie cannot conceive of living in a situation, which suggests a reversal of these roles.

"Do you think what happened to you was an exam: if you come through, you get a diploma and safe conduct into the future, or a sign to paint on the door-lintel that you will make the plague pass you by?" (Coetzee, 2000, p112)

But for Lucy, what happens to her is a:

"…purely private matter. In another time another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this time, it is not." (Coetzee, 2000, p112)

In the same way Foucault sees how:

"…*rules are empty until somebody seizes them for their own, punishment has obtained different definitions throughout history of revenge, excluding an aggressor, compensating a victim, creating a fear, not just setting an example and so the domination of one person over another is no more a relationship, than the place where it occurs is a place."* (Foucault, 1984, p83)

Although the rape has as much to do with the domination of men over women as it does black over white, Lurie cannot see beyond his own cultural arrogance, even in his treatment of the black neighbour, Pettrus, who he still believes should 'report to Lucy' (Coetzee, 2000, p114). Prior to these events, Lurie has described himself in an almost parodic way as 'a servant of Eros' (Coetzee, 2000, p89), likens himself to Blake as: 'sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires' (Coetzee, 2000, p.69), and quotes Byron:

"And this same impulse would in tempting time, mislead his equally to crime." (Coetzee, 2000, p.33)

For him, what happened with his student Melanie was uncontrollable desire, and romanticised in his own self-delusion to appear something other than the power domination it is construed as. Although through Lurie's moments of self-reflection we see the reality of him acting out his desires as 'not quite rape, but undesired nevertheless' (Coetzee, 2000, p25), he shows no remorse in pleading guilty to his charge of 'sexual abuse', through refusing to admit he is wrong. There is a strong sense of the 'facts' by which Lurie lives in the same way as Foucault's history sees 'no past better than the present' in refusing to question itself. Through this, Lurie's narrative can be seen to determine the voicelessness of the other characters in his own construction of their identities and denial of their own stories. In his refusal to acknowledge her statement we never hear Melanie's story and her boyfriend is never heard to speak out against what Lurie has done. Soraya's story is his own illusion, which abruptly shatters when another reality replaces it, parts of Lucy's life are hinted at but never fully disclosed, and we are told that Lurie's own language of English is inadequate to relate Pettrus' story. Sue Kossew sees this characteristic in the author's work as:

"Coetzee's refusal to offer an easy vantage point from which one might gaze upon the historicized, fictional subject with flattery and self possession is because the narrating subject resides in its own history." (Kossew, 1998, p30)

These fragmented and untold stories can be viewed as Coetzee's attempt to maintain the stories of individuals within the private sphere. By the end of the novel, Lurie demonstrates a realisation of this through the symbolic sacrifice of his dog, it is not his sense of self that is being sacrificed but that part of him which has maintained superiority over women and his black neighbours, his nature which has determined his fixed 'facts' of life, and he is simply living, just as Lucy is, and as history should, in acceptance and harmony with other people and their stories. Coetzee appears to suggest that this is a small price to pay for the historical arrogance of the white situation in South Africa.

Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges are not the only fruit* is far more overtly a metafictional text. The broken flow of its narrative, the chapters that act as a commentary of history, and the fantastical and mythological preludes are, as Winterson states in her introduction, provided because:

"You can read in spirals. I really don't see the point of reading in straight lines. Our mental processes are closer to a maze than a motorway, every turning yields another turning, not symmetrical, not obvious." (Winterson, 2001, xiii)

As with *Disgrace*, the novel is written from one perspective, but in this case it is the first person narrative of Jeanette. Unlike Lurie, it is the narrator of the story who is surrounded by fragmented, broken and untold stories of her own life and of others, and it is her mother who appears as Lurie does in being the 'personification' of history and determining what Jeanette is allowed to know.

We are introduced to her mother picking and choosing her own stories: 'the story about a brave person' and 'the story of the converted sweep' (Winterson, 2001, p7), stories, which she has invented, ones she has denied or restricted, and romanticised: 'her own conversion story' (Winterson, 2001, p8), and broken stories: 'she'd start to tell me a story and then go on to something else in the middle, so I never found out what happened' (Winterson, 2001, p16)

The mother's control over her daughter's knowledge of the world is reinforced by her religion in which Jeanette is placed as a preacher and converter:

"…*seen to guide others and the readers along her own story."* (O'Rourke, 1991, p61)

However, she is relaying the 'wrong' knowledge as a lesbian, as opposed to the authoritative and unambiguous message of the church's written words. In the same way that Foucault suggested that the 'body maintains through its strength and weakness, the sanction of every truth and error as it sustains the origin of descent.' (Foucault, 1984, p82). She embodies an articulation of everything her mother and the church are opposed to in an alternative to their fixed truth. We see this also with Jeanette's friend Elsie who tells her that 'stories helped you to understand the world' (Winterson, 2001, p29), something which in the constraints of the 'real' world, where her mother burns her sexuality and desire along with her 'letters', is denied for her.

It is in the inclusion of the chapter *Deuteronomy* that Winterson explicitly points towards a celebration of the personal. Just as Foucault criticises the form of history which assumes a 'superhistorical' and totality of truth, for Winterson stories are likened to a:

"…string full. It's all there but hard to find the beginning and impossible to fathom the end. The best thing you can do is admire the cat's cradle, and maybe knot it up a bit more." (Winterson, 2001, p91)

Her idea of history is that it is 'just another story', which we like to view as being 'fact' and suggests that it is this tendency to support one view of events which prevents others from telling or having their own story:

"…*an all purpose rainy day pursuit, this reducing of stories called history."* (Winterson, 2001, p91)

Attention is drawn to this idea throughout the novel in emphasising the forbidden and the boundaries of knowledge and sexuality. Jeanette refers to 'words you can trust' (Winterson, 2001, p70) as the written word that cannot be altered and in which you can 'spot a lie' (Winterson, 2001, p70) and the fantasy, which runs alongside the main plot, may suggest 'an appeal to a higher kind of psychological truth' (Head, 2002, p100) or one which is just as realistic as the limited life with her mother. Even at the end of the novel when Jeanette comes back to her mother, it isn't at the cost of her own sexual identity; rather her mother appears through Jeanette's narrative, not to have accepted what Jeanette 'is', but as resigned to it. Her mother's religious fundamentalism is seen as less threatening and looked on with a familiar fondness of which Jeanette appears detached:

"…*families, real ones, are chairs and tables and the right number of cups, but I had no means of joining one, and no means of dismissing my own*." (Winterson, 2001, p171)

She is herself resigned to the life and story her mother maintains and realises that instead of living in conflict of it, she can exist with her own sexuality and story alongside it.

Andrzej Gasiorek highlights one of the characteristics of post-modern fiction as being an exploration of the 'end of history', not in the sense that it no longer exists, but in an increased questioning of its claims to 'knowing the past' (Gasiorek, 1995, p147).

The two novels discussed in this paper can be seen to do exactly this through the use of metafiction. There is no authoritative voice present within the narrative that does not lead us to question what has been denied or left unsaid. By drawing attention to the limitations and boundaries that individual stories can be told from, the novels offer a criticism of history's absolutism and its constraints on sexual and cultural identities. When seen in light of Foucault's theories of the relative nature of history, we see that regardless of the constraints and denial that the novelists demonstrate as being placed on personal experience, the personal life in '*Oranges are not the only fruit'* and '*Disgrace'* is still very much alive.

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Who is to blame? What is the truth of it? Could it be otherwise?

How are these questions answered in John Barton's 'Tantalus'?

By Angela Marshall, B.A (Hons) Combined Arts, City College Norwich

Background

John Barton's *'Tantalus'* is a ten-play cycle and was developed over 20 years. It was finally published in 2000 to coincide with the opening of Sir Peter Hall's stage adaptation. It is described as An Ancient Myth for a New Millennium and is a retelling of the Trojan War epic (Barton, 2000). At the centre of the work are three main questions: Who is to blame? What is the truth of it? Could it be otherwise? In seeking to address these questions, Barton self-consciously addresses a whole series of theoretical questions about text and textuality and in order to secure a fuller understanding of how the questions are answered it has been necessary to explore appropriate methodology. A primary concern of this paper is the relationship between Barton's central questions and current critical thinking. *'Tantalus'* embodies critical theories; they are enacted by the characters. Tantalus himself is written into the text by being literally 'woven' into the narrative:

Poet (as Zeus):

"You hope to become god-like

Without first understanding

What it is to be human.

That is dangerous, so I must bind you

Like Prometheus before you;

Like Prometheus before you;

I shall set a rock above you

Tied with ropes to the sky

And you will never know

The season, year or day

When I or some other

May unloose the bonds of heaven." (Barton 2000, pp81-82)

Introduction

In his retelling of the Trojan War, John Barton investigates the whole process of storytelling. The character of Tantalus appears only briefly at the end of Play 10 but the story of his over-reaching

and subsequent punishment at the hands of the gods underlies the story serving as a constant reminder of human mortality; the shadow of death being cast by the rock. Another version of the story has Tantalus condemned to sit in a pool of sweet water under a tree of luscious fruit, both of which move out of reach as he tries to satisfy his thirst and hunger and it is this version that has associated his name with the craving for nourishment and with eternal frustration. This simple variation on the story of Tantalus serves as an illustration of how fluid the pool of mythology is into which Barton and his predecessors dipped.

The most obvious approach to studying *'Tantalus'* is through genre and historical context. According to Barbara Mackay, Homer's book *'Iliad'*, the earliest written account of the Trojan War, and the *'Epic Cycle'*, Barton's main source, were written at a time when the Greeks were beginning to have a sense of national unity and wanted to capture and record their history in myth and legend. Although they liked to elaborate their stories the essential myths remained spare and clean and had strong structural patterns in the recurring revenge and ill-fated live motifs (Mackay, 2000). The *'Iliad'* and the 'Epic Cycle' can be seen as ways of fixing the story of the Trojan War in the interests of reinforcing Greek identity. Barton, on the other hand, is writing in an age where identities, personal and political, are increasingly unfixed. The decision to use the *'Iliad'*, which grew out of a poem called *'The Wrath of Achilles'* and focuses on the final year of the Trojan War, was determined by the fact that it is the first attempt to 'fix' the story in writing and because it was a well-known and accessible source. (Graves, 1996). Barton's main source, *'The Epic Cycle'*, covers the whole saga of Troy and the House of Agamemnon, but only survives as short summaries and is not readily available (Boedeker, 2000).

In his introduction to the *'Iliad'* Bernard Knox says:

"In any civilisation which makes a place in its thought for free will (and therefore individual

responsibility) and pattern (and therefore overall meaning), the two concepts – fixed and free – exist uneasily cheek by jowl. The only escape from this logical contradiction is the prison of rigid determinism, a pattern fixed from the beginning and not subject to change, or on the other hand, the complete freedom and meaningless anarchy of an unpredictable universe. And Greek thought, like ours…tries to embrace the logical contradiction of freedom and order combined." (Knox 1997, p40).

The question: 'Who is to blame?' can be explained by exploring the relationship of how successfully Barton reconciles the contradiction of freedom and order (fluid and fixed) through his use of character and plot, and its bearing on ideas of free-will and destiny. If characters have predestined roles and no free-will can they be held responsible for their actions? My approach was broadly based on the two ways of viewing characters in texts identified by Marvin Mudrick: a purist view, seeing characters in a semiotic way, as part of the action of the text, as patterns of recurrence and as motifs; and a realistic view, seeing characters as imitations of people and as acquiring an independence from the text (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983). The first view supports a structuralist theoretical approach to character, and the second legitimises the application of psychological theories.

To address Barton's second question, 'What is the truth of it?' My approach to this was one of deconstruction and reception theory. Deconstruction, as a form of textual analysis is most commonly associated with Jacques Derrida. He questions the concept of central, fixed points of reference in favour of a decentred universe where everything is relative to everything else, including meaning which consequently is always deferred (Barry, 1995), thus challenging the very existence of 'truth'. Reception theorists view the meaning of texts as changeable over time because the relationship between reader and text can change. Hans Robert Jauss rebuts the idea of a single point of reference in favour of:

"…*a succession of moments of reception, each one affected by the expectations, tastes and aims of the receivers.*" (Pope, 1998, p245).

Is there a single truth or is truth consistently represented as contingent as opposed to absolute, bearing in mind how nineteenth century hermeneutics influences our concept of truth?

Barton's use of various sources could have been problematic as Laurent Jenny warns:

"*The problem of intertextuality is to bind together several texts in one without their destroying each other and without the [text]…being torn apart as a structural whole.*" (Allen, 2000, p114).

Barton overcomes this problem by deliberately drawing attention to the intertextuality of his work. He has struggled against the idea of being described as the author of *'Tantalus'* as he sees his work more of an adaptation than an original text. According to Ley, Barton wanted to keep personal invention to a minimum using it only to bridge gaps (Ley, 2000). This concern touches on the extent to which any work can be considered original, an issue raised by Bakhtin's theory of re-accentuation. Bakhtin believes that a writer always takes another's words and re-accentuates them and furthermore that their very meaning changes with time. Bakhtin says:

"Classic works have intentional potential embedded in them and so have proved capable of uncovering in each era and against ever new dialogising backgrounds ever newer aspects of meaning." (Bakhtin, 1996, p421).

This questions the idea of there being a permanently correct interpretation and leads to the last of Barton's three questions, 'Could it be otherwise?'

The last question has been considered in relation to issues of rereading and rewriting texts. Barton, in rereading his sources, is inevitably rewriting them in terms of his own culture. As Simon Dentith points out historical distance is:

"…*only an extreme case of the distance that already divides reader from text, and this distance is the condition for meaningfulness."* (Dentith, 1995 p99).

So, if a writer always re-accentuates then the act of reading itself can be a form of rewriting, as any distance or gap gives the reader a creative opportunity. Barton fills the gaps in the source material for his Trojan War epic with his own ideas and it has been argued by reception theorists, such as Wolfgang Iser, that readers perform a similar function when they engage with a text, they fill in any gaps to make a coherent whole (Pope, 1998). This implies that the overall interpretation of a text is as much a creation of the reader as of the author. Roland Barthes suggests that the extent to which a reader can rewrite a text is dependent on the way the text is written. He makes a distinction between a 'readerly' text with a closed fictional world and a 'writerly' text which encourages the reader to participate in the construction of the fictional world (Macey, 2000). This idea is a particularly interesting one to pursue in regard to *'Tantalus'* because the characters within the text are invited by the narrator/poet to try to influence the outcome of the story (Barton, 2000). This clearly draws attention to ideas of destiny and free-will but it also has a bearing on the way stories are created. The narrator of the *'Iliad',* on the other hand, depends entirely on the Muses for his story:

"*Sing to me now, you Muses who hold the halls of Olympus! You are goddesses, you are everywhere, you know all things*." (Homer, 1997, p115).

This again has implications for the discussion of how far a text is fixed and to what extent we can rewrite texts and, consequently, whether it 'could be otherwise'.

Conclusion

Iphigenia

"*The words are worn and ancient*

But they are still fresh.

Nothing's new or changes

But each of us, like children,

Must learn it all anew." (Barton, 2000, p170)

John Barton has taken the ancient myth of the Trojan War and reworked it so that it has profound resonance for a twenty-first century audience. He has used materials from the oldest written sources and demonstrated how they can be made fresh and relevant for today. The three fundamental questions he asks turn out to be central issues in critical theory. He highlights problems with the concept of story-telling by his playful integration of this theory. An example of this is the Poet tantalisingly implying that the story can be 'otherwise', that it is 'writerly', by inviting the Chorus to change the story and save Troy (Barton 2000) but in the very next scene the Chorus ignore their knowledge that the Horse is a trick and are drawn irrevocably into the 'original' story, thus implying that the story is in fact 'readerly' and that it could not be otherwise. This has implications for the pull of traditional narrative and the extent to which any story can be changed.

The primary aim of this research dissertation was to find out how the three main questions posed in 'Tantalus', 'Who is to blame? What is the truth of it? Could it be otherwise?' are answered. My initial approach was to consider genre and historical context which was useful in identifying the way the questions are presented but not so useful in the search for answers to them. The three questions were therefore examined separately and in each case the methodologies which seemed most appropriate were used.

(Chorus) "*Who is to blame?*

Poet *All, but all are innocent.*

(Chorus) *Could it have been otherwise?*

- Is that how it truly happened?

- Why did it have to happen?

Poet *Because that is the story*." (Barton, 2000, p174).

For the first question, 'Who is to blame?' My approach looked at how character is used, whether it is simply a device used to move the plot along, or constructed on a more realistic basis, with a life that can be imagined beyond the confines of the narrative.

A structuralist approach made it easy to separate motivation, action and result, and in doing so showed blame moving from character to character and to be clearly associated with an uncompromising desire for honour. Blame in this sense can be seen to rest with a trait rather than with a person and the trait shared by more than one character.

This structuralist method of analysis, although not as useful for *'Tantalus'* as for *'Iliad'* demonstrates a tension between purist and realist, pre- and post-nineteenth century, ways of representing character. Barton incorporates realistic features into ancient Greek characters which mean they cannot easily be seen merely as types. It is perhaps in the character of Agamemnon, more than any other, that this is so apparent. Barton has taken a character whose name means very resolute and ironically presented him as a negotiating, philosophically-minded character who works against the narrative 'Troy must not fall', (Barton, 2000, p216) questions the truth of the prophets 'while I have life I mean to fight the lies of the prophets' strives for peaceful negotiation, 'I am meeting [Priam] tonight…and there we will make peace' (Barton, 2000, p181).

He also wants to break the cycle of repetitive violence: 'we must all learn to live in harmony together' (Barton, 2000, p123).

Agamemnon's stance on blame is a compromise between those of Hecuba and Odysseus:

"Blame is seldom single:

We must all share some blame

For the horror of these years." (Barton, 2000, p345).

Hecuba clearly wants blame to rest with someone, she wants closure, whereas Odysseus refuses to fix blame, showing it to be circumstantial and will not even accept responsibility for his own lies:

"*May I repeat the exact words*

I spoke to you when I swore them?" (Barton, 2000, p278)

The obvious post-modern response to the question, 'What is the truth of it?' is that there is no absolute truth because truth is relative. This question was explained through methods of deconstruction and reception theory. For deconstructionists, such as Derrida, there is no certainty about meaning other than it is constantly in motion. Thetis expresses these sentiments when she tells Agamemnon that 'the only thing that's certain is the shift and turn of the tides.'

The stability of words such as 'truth', 'justice' and 'God' is shown to be an illusion. Thetis says that true is a word invented to give a sense of meaning and Cassandra says that justice labels something that does not exist. For reception theorists there is meaning, but only at the moment of reception, and as circumstances change meaning is revised. Hecuba's initial reception of the Horse was meaningful at that time, and her truth, but after the fall of Troy the meaning of the Horse is revised. Truth, like blame, is shown to be something that cannot be fixed.

Barton manages to create a unified illusion of wholeness despite self-consciously drawing attention to the different versions of the stories he draws together in *'Tantalus'*. So one might expect the answer to the final question, 'Could it be otherwise?' to be, 'Yes'. However, by thinking of the text in terms of Barthes' readerly and writerly definitions, Barton seems to question the whole idea of a totally fluid text. The women of the Chorus enter the story with the intention of making it their own and changing it, but they ultimately fail and appear to be compelled to follow the traditional story instead. Agamemnon is seen to fight against the plot but he, too, is unable to change it. There is 'no triumph of reason over blind tradition (Boedeker, 2000). In some respect the character of Agamemnon can be seen to represent the tension between postmodern concepts of the self and essentialism:

Agamemnon *"It's as if you tell me something*

I already heard inside me." (Barton, 2000 p358)

'Tantalus' is written in a postmodern age and Barton embraces multiple versions and perspectives of myths. Although leading to playful polysemic richness this also undercuts the idea of authority, finality or truth, in the stories dramatised here. (Boedeker, 2000) Blame cannot be fixed if character is fluid:

"Leave your masks; they may be needed

In some other play." (Boedeker, 2000, p503).

However, underlying the apparent fluidity of this text is the theme 'nothing changes, nothing' (Barton, 2000, p37).

'Tantalus' ultimately shows human nature to be unchanging and unchangeable, and human beings to be fixed in a never-ending cycle of revengeful violence and blame is finally directed at the character accused of beginning the cycle, Tantalus:

Chorus *"You made the whole world suffer:*

-You, you are to blame." (Barton, 2000, p494)

Barton tantalises us with the freedom of relativism but ultimately shows us its limitations; the outcome of the story remains the same: 'because that is the story' (Barton, 2000, p174). In contrast to this, the *'Iliad'*. a seemingly fixed text with an authoritative narrator, ends on an optimistic note; a change in Achilles' nature. But what both Barton and Homer seem to attempt to do in their very different works, is to address the ultimate paradox of text, that it contains freedom and order combined.

It is poignant to note that at the time of writing this dissertation President George Bush of the United States of America was preparing for war with Iraq, just as his own father did twelve years ago. The media are filled with discussions about the justness of such a war.

Who is to blame? What is the truth of it? Could it be otherwise? These are the very questions being asked on a daily basis.

Cassandra *"Until the great rock falls*

What has happened already

Will happen again:

That is god-law, Agamemnon,

As it's man-law on earth." (Barton, 2000, p362)

In this view, history is *not* a story of development, but a circle inscribed by unchanging human nature. (Boedeker, 2000) In his retelling of the Trojan War epic Barton is addressing questions that are all too clearly relevant today. Like the Chorus we are tantalised by the idea of finding certainty and meaning through truth, and into believing we can change the outcome of the story, but the title serves as a warning – the name *'Tantalus'* means most wretched.

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THE RESEARCH CENTRE CITY COLLEGE NORWICH

By Roz Mazey, Research Centre, City College Norwich

Work in progress

The following projects have either been completed at the Research Centre since the last bulletin, or are now ongoing.

SOUL

The Soft Outcomes & Universal Learning (SOUL) project, funded by The Community Fund, is now well underway and is already having positive outcomes, with the research team of two, working closely with 6 voluntary organisations in Norfolk to develop a system for measuring and evaluating progress through the recording soft outcomes in learners. Voluntary Sector Organisations find it difficult in obtaining funding/grants as they are unable to 'prove' the value of their work and the beneficiary's learning outcomes, and often feel pushed down the accreditation route even when inappropriate for their learners.

The Research Centre is undertaking this two and a half year research project on behalf of a consortium including: The Voluntary Sector Strategy Group including Norwich and Norfolk Voluntary Services, Norwich Community Workshop, Break, The Benjamin Foundation, Creative Arts East, together with City College Norwich, to create a 'model' to help organisations understand how their work nurtures clients' progression, to measure this effectively and enable them to access and justify funding. Look out for the initial dissemination events of the pilot model on 21st September 2004, in Norwich, and 30th September 2004, in Kings Lynn.

Lead Research Fellow:

Brian Butcher (bbutcher@ccn.ac.uk)

Research Fellow:

Lee Marsden (l2marsden@ccn.ac.uk)

M Learning Project

The LSDA have formed an m-learning consortium to explore how mobile learning equipment, systems and learning materials can be used to help young people develop and achieve life long learning objectives including improving their literacy and numeracy skills. City College Norwich is one of the learning providers that has recently completed researching the use of new hard and software for this project. The research has produced a great deal of useful feedback which the LSDA will now assess along with data produced by a wide variety of other organisations conducting similar research for this project.

Lecturer:

Sandra Thurston (sthurston@ccn.ac.uk)

LSDA Action Research Projects x 4

In October 2003 four new action research projects received funding from the Learning and Skills Development Agency. Staff have been seconded to work on these for periods up to eighteen months.

Working with Fourteen Year Olds

This project, aiming to support staff that are dealing with 14 year old learners in a FE context for the first time, is mid-way through and already producing noticeable results in the classroom, as reflected by practitioner participants of this action research project, investigating classroom practice amongst a number of volunteer staff. Staff have been encouraged via a project co-ordinator/researcher to gather data on their teaching techniques, reflect on this data, and change their practice as a result of this reflection. This process is being encouraged by a series of focus groups where interventions, such as extra training to inform practice, are identified, tried and then reflected upon by the practitioners in the following focus group, facilitated and organised by the researcher, a lecturer seconded from Childcare Studies, where staff experiences a can be shared and outcomes monitored. The outcome of this project will inform policy making and changes to the teaching of students training in this field.

Senior Lecturer:

Ruth Webb (rwebb@ccn.ac.uk)

Widening Participation in the Voluntary Sector

This research aims to investigate and implement support mechanisms for students undertaking the Level 2 ASDAN Certificate in Community Volunteering. The project is using action research to identify students and volunteer 'employers' needs on a one to one basis and to offer support and guidance on good practice to volunteer 'employers' in areas such as volunteer agreements and policy documents. This project is being undertaken by a lecturer seconded from Voluntary Sector Studies.

Lecturer:

Kate Paine (kpaine@ccn.ac.uk)

Staff development

The research aims to use action research to investigate current lecturer skills demands and produce bespoke staff development opportunities and strategies based on identified areas of need. Invoking an action research cycle, staff will monitor their practice and use workshops to share their perceptions of areas of strength and weakness in relation to their ability to fulfil the varying demands of their changing role. The data is being collected by the researcher; a lecturer seconded from the Hotel School, and be used to develop bespoke solutions to expressed development need.

Lecturer:

Vicky Hingley (vhingley@ccn.ac.uk)

Level 3 Information, Advice and Guidance Relating to Progression

Recently concluded research in the college has suggested that information flow, attitude and perception hamper progression in some areas. This action research project will draw on this data and investigate how these barriers to in-house level 3 to HE progression opportunities might be addressed and successfully overcome. Invoking an action research cycle, the researcher, a senior lecturer seconded from CIS, is exploring the ways in which staff promote progression with level 3 students, share experiences and offer alternative approaches. A range of interventions have been identified, through a focus group and by face-to-face interviews, which are aimed at improving progression and it will be interesting to see the reflection upon the outcomes of these interventions at the start of the next academic year, by participating volunteer staff.

Senior Lecturer:

Anne Aves (aaves@ccn.ac.uk)

Leonardo Project

City College is in receipt of Leonardo funds to investigate methods of careers guidance in the UK for inclusion in a pan-European project. A researcher has been employed from the academic staff, on a part-time basis, for the next 15 months to conduct research, supporting the Project Leader, Mark Bayley, from Services to Business.

The provision of career guidance within the UK is being researched and compared, through collaboration with pan-European research partners, with provision throughout Europe to investigate best practice and relevance of system transference from one country to another. The project will also look at typical or innovative methods of testing and profiling young people. This research will culminate in a series of recommendations for delivering careers guidance within the UK and possibly pan-European.

Head of Services to Business:

Mark Bayley (mbayley@ccn.ac.uk)

Lecturer/Researcher:

Paula Henderson-Gray (phenderson-gray@ccn.ac.uk)

BSR Questionnaire Survey

The work of the Board for Social Responsibility (BSR) is rooted in ‘God’s command to love our neighbour as ourselves and, therefore, to care for the socially wounded, seeking to transform unjust structures of society and to safeguard the integrity of creation and life on earth’. There are 640 parishes within the Diocese with about 200 benefices covering these parishes. A need was highlighted to investigate these issues and raise awareness, identifying areas of need within the Diocese.

With these issues in mind the BSR approached City College Norwich to conduct work in partnership with the BSR, for an evaluation of the current situation within the Diocese, with the aim of contributing to community cohesion through this research.

Contract researcher:

Sarah Edwards

Raising Aspirations in Learners project

The Research Centre at City College Norwich was approached in January 2004 by the Norfolk Learning Partnership (NLP) to undertake a literature review with the focus: “Raising Aspirations to learn”, looking at the learning aspirations of people living in Norfolk. This now completed review evaluated research conducted in the last year and described the nature of research currently underway concerning the aspirations of learners aged 14+ years of age. The primary aims and objectives of the literature review were to attempt to produce a summary and evaluation of recently undertaken and currently being conducted research in relation to learner aspirations, barriers to learning and to address the following research question: How do the aspirations of people in Norfolk compare to other areas of the country?

Contract researcher:

Brian Maples

What's it Worth?

The Norfolk Voluntary Services network currently plays a vital role in the skill development of organisations and their paid and unpaid staff. It is envisaged that the proposed project will provide voluntary organisations with a tool to undertake their own 'mapping' of skills, experience and qualifications. This will in turn facilitate the voluntary sector's overall understanding of what training is available and how it might best meet their needs, facilitate the sector's understanding of the potential range of pathways available, will support the development of new skills and assist in identifying current skill gaps, and enable the voluntary sector to make more effective use of the training opportunities available within Norfolk. A three-part project has been undertaken within the voluntary sector by a City College Norwich staff member.

Researcher:

Kate Paine (kpaine@ccn.ac.uk)

Business Innovation and Support Feasibility Study (BIAS)

Business Innovation and Support (BIAS) is support for company innovation and development, primarily intended to improve a company's products and performance. It typically involves consideration of a technical problem by means of applied research and development, which may draw on knowledge and expertise from a range of sources. In many cases it may be concerned with the application of existing knowledge, which is new to the organisation concerned, rather than with leading edge technology or practice. BIAS may be of benefit to both public and private sector organisations.

The purpose of this 6 month research project, funded by the LSDA, is to establish the current extent of BIAS-type activity in City College Norwich, and to access the potential for this to develop by the development of a proposed 3 year corporate plan and risk assessment. The findings of the research conducted at City college Norwich will add to findings from over 20 other colleges throughout the UK, which the LSDA will use to inform government policy strategy.

Researcher:

Helen Durrant (h2durrant@ccn.ac.uk)

Student Shadowing and Mentoring Project

The Research Centre, City College Norwich has received funding from Aimhigher, Partnerships For Progressions (P4P) to recruit and train 30 higher education students as mentors within City College, to mentor Level 2 and 3 FE students. The object of the exercise is to raise aspirations and motivation amongst FE groups regarding their HE progression, and to develop understandings of barriers to progression with the aim of developing examples of good practice which can be shared across the region. Each mentor will be allocated a potential case-load of mentees and provided with support and project co-ordination from an appropriately experienced member of staff. This scheme will collaborate with a similar project based at the University of East Anglia.

Project co-ordinator:

TBA

Post 16 Transport Related Barriers Project

A 20 month research project started in April and funded by Essex County Council to provide valid and reliable data on the extent to which, and how, travel and transport issues affect young people's choices and decisions about participation in post 16 education. The research findings will form the basis of developing effective action to address any barriers presented. The report based on the research will inform the Essex Post 16 Transport Partnership so they can improve provision. This will be a longitudinal study of the preferences and choices of a sample of pupils in Essex 11-16 schools through years 10 and 11 as they determine their post 16 destinations (e.g. further education/training/employment). It will follow them from the stage of initial preferences, initial choices and final destinations to establish the factors that influence them and the role played by travel and transport issues in those decisions. These issues will be investigated by a researcher appointed by the Research Centre, City College Norwich, by way of questionnaire surveys and interviews with year 10 students, then the same students in year 11, in schools throughout Essex.

Researcher:

TBA

THE RESEARCH CENTRE
Research Seminars & Bulletin

Do you ……

- … have an interest in research?

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In the NEW YEAR, THE RESEARCH CENTRE will be running a new series of Research Seminars which are open to all but may be of particular interest to staff undertaking research degrees, other programmes involving research, or for those just wishing to find out more about research activities within City College Norwich. The Research Seminars & Bulletin aim, in time, to reflect the wide diversity of research activity that is undertaken across City College Norwich. Research Seminars will be held approximately twice a term, with one Research Bulletin published at the end of each semester.

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