

POINT OF VIEW

OPENING DOORS: a role for open learning in developing valued social roles

Introduction

Social integration and the development of valued social roles for people with learning difficulties have for long been seen as desirable (Wolfensberger, 1983; O'Brien and Lyle, 1987). The means by which to promote them have been varied, but one consistent strand has been the development of educational opportunities, such as College courses in preference to Day Centres (Sutcliffe, 1990), social skills and independent living training (Corbett, 1989, Hutchinson and Tennyson, 1987) and involvement in mainstream adult education classes (Sutcliffe, 1990). The increasing use of the term 'learning difficulties' as a preferred label in Britain reflects an increasing emphasis on education as a means to overcome the social disadvantage experienced by many people with intellectual disabilities.

The origins of the idea

It was in this context that a team of people at the Open University began work in 1987 on the production of a distance learning package for people with learning difficulties. Before describing the project in detail it may be helpful for readers to know that the Open University was founded in 1971 as the university which would extend the opportunity for higher education to all, regardless of previous educational experience and qualifications. In a sense it was fit and proper that it

was the Open University which was the first UK university to begin to consider provision for people with learning difficulties. It is important to mention that the University produces many courses which do not constitute part of the Degree Programme. The distance learning packages described here are part of the University's Continuing Education programme which offers short courses to practitioners, such as nurses, social workers and managers, as well as to 'the Community' at large.

The idea for a distance learning package for people with learning difficulties came from two sources. The first was an existing course, 'Mental Handicap: Patterns for Living', designed for 'anyone involved in the lives of people with mental handicap' (course publicity leaflet 1986). In principle the target audience included people with learning difficulties: in practice the heavy emphasis on the written word in the course material effectively deterred any but the most determined students and staff from realising that ambition (Peberdy, 1988). There were instances, however, of people with learning difficulties successfully joining in with group discussions arising from the course, and feedback from the groups where this happened was most encouraging. People had contributed a great deal, including in one instance acting as guide on induction visits for new staff to visit a long stay hospital which had been 'home' to many clients in the local area.

The second impetus was an intellectual and moral commitment to putting the principle of normalisation into practice. It seemed to the course team which produced 'Mental Handicap: Patterns for Living' morally right to open the ideas in the course to the people about whose lives the course had been written. If staff and parents were being informed through the medium of the course about recent developments in the mental handicap field, then these should also be accessible to people with learning difficulties. Consumer pressure played its part. Many course students voiced unease at the exclusion of people with learning difficulties from the course process.

People with learning difficulties are not a priority group for Universities. Whilst 'access' has been a watchword in many British institutions of Higher Education in the 1980s and 1990s (Fulton, 1981; Ball, 1990), people with learning difficulties are not yet on the equal opportunities agenda (Walmsley, 1991). Universities and mental handicap do not, at present, seem compatible. Fund raising to produce an open learning package for this new audience was essential. The institution's commitment to access was not sufficiently great to warrant university monies being diverted, however worthy the cause. After some considerable effort funds were raised from a number of charitable sources, and work began on the new course: "Patterns for Living: Working Together".

The educational technology selected for producing a course accessible to people whose literacy skills are minimal or non-existent was audio tape. The original course, "Mental Handicap: Patterns for Living" was based on case studies, human dramas. It was a relatively straightforward task to script the case

studies and have them recorded by actors on tape. The product resembles in some ways a series of radio soap dramas, but with the crucial difference that they are designed as teaching materials. Eight half-hour audio 'stories' were produced, each designed to bring out some of the course themes: normalisation, independent living, advocacy and self-advocacy, life transitions, relationships, institutionalisation. At different points in the taped stories the narrator asks the students to pause to consider the issues they have been hearing about, and 'thinking points' invite the students to relate those issues to their own lives - to think about 'being angry', 'leaving home', 'being a teenager', for example. Thus the tapes offer students the opportunity to hear about someone else's life, and to use that to stimulate reflection on their own situation, and to encourage discussion with peers, staff and relatives. The tapes are supported by an illustrated student workbook which acts both as an aide-memoire and as a stimulus to further learning.

The course process

As an open learning package the course 'Patterns For Living: Working Together' becomes the property of its students. The University does not provide tuition. This enables costs to be low, an important consideration for people who are often living on low incomes. It is usually studied in groups, but can also be studied in partnerships between two people, or by a student working alone. The assumption in producing the package was that initially people with learning difficulties would study it with groups of their peers. Despite the temptation to promote integration by encouraging mixed groups of staff,

relatives and people with learning difficulties to join together to study it, it seemed necessary to give ownership of the course to the people for whom it was made - people with learning difficulties - and let them choose whether or not to share it with others. In the context of strategies for the emancipation of oppressed groups it seemed important to allow a period of separate development (Williams, 1989). The correctness of this decision was borne out when the course was piloted. In the only 'mixed group' the people with learning difficulties were silent, unpractised as they were to voicing opinions in front of staff and parents. Equally, staff and parents were unpractised at listening to people with learning difficulties.

There was also a commitment to encouraging people with learning difficulties to become group leaders, rather than rely on staff to run the study sessions. This commitment was not entirely fulfilled. The notes for group leaders are written in a way which is inaccessible educationally to people with learning difficulties. The team was unable to conceive a way to make these materials accessible. Nevertheless, people have taken on the group facilitator role. One way which has proved viable is for people to become apprentices, working with an experienced facilitator before leading their own group.

Accreditation

Initially the course was not accredited: students who studied it did not get formal recognition of their achievement. The University has no regular contact with the students. It provides no face to face teaching. The course runs in those settings which have bought it. However, consumer demand forced the

Course Team to tackle the issue of accreditation. Students on the original course, "Mental Handicap Patterns for Living", could do Computer Marked Assignments and receive a University Letter of Course Participation: why not students on this course? Optional computer marked assignments are now available to students of "Working Together". There is no pass or fail, though simple feedback is provided. It has proved to be a significant step. All over the UK groups of students have held carefully arranged public ceremonies where certificates have been presented. In pubs, town halls, colleges, Training Centres, Open University Regional Offices, actors, athletes, footballers, lord and lady mayoresses, politicians and other local notables have been presenting certificates to proud students. The local press has been busily employed with flash cameras and reporters notebooks. Students show these press photographs with great pride. Dog eared and faded they may often be, but they are a public recognition of an achievement which has more than local significance. The Open University is a national institution and "Working Together" students are a part of it. Participation in the course has given them a 'valued social role' and it has been thoroughly celebrated.

A Takeover

So far the story has been one of what "Working Together" has given to its students. It is a heartening story, but it is one way. The University, after much prodding and some reluctance, produced a package for people with learning difficulties and they have received it with enthusiasm. But it is only half the story. The other half is perhaps a more

complex story, of what its students have brought to "Working Together" and how they have moved beyond it.

New experts

The story began with the promotion of the course. In order to promote the course most effectively it seemed sensible to employ those people who had piloted it. They alone knew what it was like. Could they tell others about it? Looking back, the team's doubts about asking the pilot students to come and tell others about "Working Together" seem unfounded. One of the pilot students, Kevin, put on a blindfold and plugged his ears to demonstrate to himself and others how it might feel to be deaf blind like Melvyn, one of the case studies. Anthony sat in his wheel chair conducting a small group session which included the nurse who had led his "Working Together" group in a long stay hospital, a real role reversal. Valerie confounded all doubts about whether people with learning difficulties could learn from tapes by reciting every detail of the first taped Story which she had last heard three months earlier.

Involving people with learning difficulties as 'experts' in the course was a first step in transferring 'ownership' of the package to its students. Since then many students have 'graduated'. In doing so they have taught the Course Team and the staff, volunteers and relatives who have worked with them many lessons.

Who are the students?

There are estimated to have been about 5,000 users of Patterns for Living: Working Together, two and a half years after its

launch. Data on purchasers shows that the majority (47%) are Social Service Departments, followed by Health Authorities and Hospitals (12%), with other categories such as individuals, voluntary organisations, Further Education Colleges, private nursing homes and Housing Associations making up the rest.

Inevitably, the course has been used most by people with mild or moderate learning difficulties. It has been taken up in a variety of settings. Most commonly it has been used in Adult Training Centres, as part of the regular programme of activities. It has also found a place in Special Needs Courses in Colleges of Further Education, often as a way of encouraging the development of skills such as listening, expressing ideas, discussion, and recognition of a variety of points of view. Long stay hospitals have found it of value as part of preparation for deinstitutionalisation. Arguably the course is most effective when students are given the opportunity to choose to do it, and in some places it has been offered as part of mainstream Adult Education, for example evening classes. This makes it special, a new venue and gives tutors, whose skills lie in teaching rather than strictly mental handicap services, added value. Some imaginative schemes have been devised to make it a tool for staff development: one College made being a Study Partner to someone with learning difficulties part of its In Service Certificate in Social Care Course, validated by the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work.

There is a commitment to its being accessible to anyone. This in practice has taken the form of people with particularly profound or severe learning difficulties being part of the group sessions within the main-

stream study programme. Regrettably, it has not been possible to systematically evaluate the impact the course has had on these students. Much of the evidence is anecdotal, and some of it has been cited here, but its value to people who are particularly severely disabled has yet to be substantiated. Access to people who are deaf is possible through making transcripts of the tapes available, but this is dependent on people having literacy skills, or a Study Partner who can use sign language.

Some people have become 'Group Coordinators', often on an apprenticeship system by working through the course as students before moving on to lead a second group. Others have volunteered to be Study Partners, working with friends or colleagues. In this way new and valuable skills are acquired: though it is as true of people with learning difficulties as of anyone that some are more gifted as facilitators than others. Some rather idiosyncratic styles have emerged, as well as some which demonstrate considerable sensitivity and competence.

Networking

After one year of the course life funding was obtained to run a series of 'Looking Back Looking Forward' Conferences for users of "Working Together". These were regional events, drawing participants from a radius of approximately 50 miles. Thanks to the grant travelling expenses were paid, and no fees were charged. A deliberate policy of engaging people with learning difficulties as presenters and workshop leaders was pursued. Careful attention was paid to ensuring that all conference proceedings were accessible to people with learning difficulties, for example illustrated programmes were designed, picture

signposts provided and workshop activities were tailored so that everyone could participate. People with learning difficulties were involved in planning the Conference programmes and designing the supporting information.

The conferences proved very popular. A clear message emerged from them, that people with learning difficulties are often denied the opportunity to get out and about to meet others, exchange ideas, make new contacts. Networking of this kind has begun to happen in other contexts, most notably People First Conferences nationally and internationally (Amans and Darbyshire, 1989; Whittaker, 1991). "Working Together" itself has contributed to widening peoples' networks. But the Conferences really opened up new possibilities. One group had pioneered the use of audio tapes to send messages to other groups. An outcome of this conference was a network linked by audio tape messages. Another group left the Conference determined to take the message about "Working Together" to service providers, such as training officers, so that it becomes accessible to more students. A third instance is the creation of a Speakers' Panel in Birmingham which had appeared prior to the Conference to lack any coordinated self advocacy movement. A group, based at a Day Centre, has produced its own story tapes and is making them available to others. Another has produced a video to promote the use of "Working Together", and held a conference to tell others about the course.

Messages from the Conferences consistently reiterated the point:
'develop a network so we don't feel so alone'
'thank you for an enjoyable day: more please'
'more conferences so we can hear from others'
'why not have a summer school on a

University campus next time?'
'please can I come again?'
'more conferences on "Working Together" '
'come and visit us at our Centre'

Self Advocacy

One of the aims of "Working Together" was to promote self advocacy, people speaking out and saying what they want. This article has already demonstrated that it has fulfilled that aim in a variety of ways.

People have demanded involvement in the course at every stage including production - 'get us involved in every thing you do about us. Co-working'.

A sense of achievement through undertaking and completing the course has given many students a taste for further learning, and the voice to suggest what topics should be covered. Suggestions include womens' issues, black peoples' experiences, having children, being gay, more about people who live independently, bereavement, epilepsy, reasons why people with learning difficulties are treated as they are by others: issues which were consciously avoided in the course as being too sensitive and, perhaps, beyond the comprehension of people with learning difficulties.

The conferences, in particular, have given people the opportunity to have a voice publicly and to develop self advocacy skills. This has been most clearly demonstrated by workshop activities. At each of the three conferences there was one workshop on self advocacy and assertiveness run by people with learning difficulties. Two women ran 'Talking to Top People'. This is an exercise based on Gestalt techniques, adapted for use by people with learning difficulties. Participants were invited to talk to an empty chair,

and to imagine a 'top person' in that chair. They were then given permission by the group to say what they would like to say to that person. The choice of people varied enormously, from a flat mate to Mrs. Thatcher who was harangued for introducing the unpopular 'poll tax'. A second example, 'Talking to people', involved the demonstration of aggression, passivity and assertiveness in turn in a jewellers' shop. Volunteers then tried it for themselves. There has also been considerable emphasis on life histories. "Working Together" is based on peoples' stories. But everyone has a story. Drawing life maps, discussing best and worst memories, and reenacting past events through drama have been various ways by which people have been encouraged to discover, and value, their own histories. A vivid illustration comes from Ellen who was acting out a scene from her past to illustrate 'shame'. Ellen had stolen some money from her brother to buy liquorice allsorts for her friends. She had been found out, and had had to go back to the shop to ask for her money back, then return it to her brother. It was clear Ellen had mixed feelings when she said, unscripted, to her brother - 'You've got a lot more money than me anyway so what's the fuss about?'

In simple ways people owned their likes and dislikes: in ice breaking exercises to say what was their favourite food; in being asked to say what they disliked about the course; in being offered a free choice of workshop. Self Advocacy is as much about these small choices as it is about making speeches.

Conclusions

The experience of "Working Together" students offers us some clues about promotion of integration and valued social roles for

people with learning difficulties. What is particularly significant about "Working Together" is:

* it is a national resource and offers people with learning difficulties something positive they have in common, something they can easily talk about to others in other settings and in other parts of the country.

* it is a public activity, with public recognition. The spontaneous proliferation of certificate giving 'graduating' ceremonies illustrates that the significance of the achievement of completing an Open University course is widely recognised.

* barriers to participation are amenable to change. Just as people in wheel chairs can gain access through provision of ramps, wide doorways and appropriate toilet facilities, and deaf people through hearing loops and mini coms, so people with learning difficulties can have access through audio tapes and drawings to quite complex ideas and activities. In a very real sense their social disadvantage stems from being illiterate in a literate world.

* the flexibility of Open Learning has given rise to a whole host of ideas, techniques and strategies from people with learning difficulties and their supporters. It has enabled people to tap a vein of creativity and to give it a public platform.

* networking is of vital importance. Through the conferences ideas were disseminated to a wider audience than the immediate group with whom people normally come in contact. Positive role models were available not only to people with learning difficulties but to staff, relatives and academics and have promoted a shift in attitude from doing things for people to doing things with them, co-working as one delegate phrased it.

* "Working Together" has given its

students the chance to demonstrate that they can contribute important ideas and that they too can be teachers and educators, not necessarily remain the eternal student.

In a very real sense one Open Learning Course has revealed a range of possibilities for people with learning difficulties to take their place alongside staff, relatives and friends and to begin a two way process of teaching and learning - 'opening doors'.

Summary

This article is an account of the development of the first university course designed for people with mental handicap (learning difficulties). The account argues that open learning can play a valuable role in promoting opportunities for integration and valued social roles, such as that of being an Open University student. However, the University course in question has done more than that. It has given people a public platform on which to demonstrate their creative potential - as public speakers, as actors and as group facilitators. Although this potential clearly existed prior to people's study of the course, it is through the course and its follow up conferences that it has been given public recognition. The author concludes that people with learning difficulties are disadvantaged as much by the written word as they are by cognitive impairment. The challenge is to find ways of enabling people to gain access to valued social roles through educational technologies which do not rely heavily on literacy skills.

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Course Information

Further information about P555M 'Patterns for Living: Working Together' can be obtained from The Information Officer, Department of Health and Social Welfare, The Open University, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, UK.

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