

Learning Co-operatively: Networking Engagement and Experience

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Introduction

In the UK context, one of the consequences of the new settlements for further and higher education is that post-16 education is becoming ever more limited and limiting. Specifically, older candidates potentially engaging with continued or advanced learning for the first time (or those re-entering education following redundancy, forced career change or educational and career interruption) are increasingly excluded or dissuaded from opportunities.

Addressing needs in the area of flexible adult learning will require a close partnership between multiple agencies currently affecting educational engagement or delivering qualifications, bringing together a gamut of expertise and assets (Dearing, 1997). It will demand a fresh assessment of the role of culture led learning (Cultural Learning Consortium, 2008), enterprise learning and citizen inspired knowledge exchange in a relationship with professional educators in both the public and private sectors. A concept of co-operative learning networks is currently under investigation via a broad and inclusive collaborative partnership. It aims to provide an overarching framework for 'rhizomatic' education (Cromier, 2008) and open shell curriculum management, and aims for a comprehensive learning progression framework that can be effectively directed by the participant.

A careful design perspective and sensitively structured online environment incorporating tools for the personalisation and presentation of learning can cut across different types of provision or endeavour and support the notion of learning through a co-operative network. There is then the problem of designing learning recognition so that it may be accumulated and transferred reliably between differing contexts. The major consideration in all of this is one of ownership and how the individual might capitalise on their learning assets and start to take control of their own representation, future development and investment choices. We need a common and open

platform, supporting flexible and active life-wide learning through collaborative endeavour and participation.

Context

Following the implementation of widespread austerity measures subsequent to the UK parliamentary elections of 2010, the Vice-Chancellor at the University of Salford set out an aspirational challenge for academics in the university. The aim was to work with local authority partners and community influencers to transform educational opportunity and ensure fair access. What may have started as a reasonably straightforward mission framed by the language and the political tenets of widening participation and advancing social mobility has become increasingly vexed by the more essential goals of equanimity and wider democratic rights of access affecting civil and civic participation. As an increasing constituency joined debates around the nature, structure and value of affordable and accessible education its focus moved to an open, shared and mutually enacted learning area, one that could address issues of ownership, recognise the assets of individual learners, respond positively to experience and wisdom, evolve through the active engagement of peer learners, and shift the emphasis of control and governance to the learning community, a situated learning approach recognised by Lave and Wenger (1991). We initially sought inclusive educational access to and value in post compulsory education for adults and young people within the City of Salford's metropolitan area; we are now at a point where linked conversations stretching across disparate regions of the country and disparate organisational forms have started to interact with international communities and activist voices.

Within the higher education environment the reification of systems of public funding into a regime of marketable debt and transferrable liabilities has been protracted. When, in 2010, notice was given that the full burden of debt responsibility was eventually to be transferred to the student (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), 2011) the impact on the professional community of teachers and lecturers was acutely felt. The danger of cuts in higher education is not simply the risk of diminishing the form, quality and availability of traditional disciplines in academia, it is more the impoverishment of the humanities in general as an essential lifeblood to a civilised, inclusive and healthy society. For a relatively long time, the evidence from political moves affecting education's funding and quality assurance frameworks has suggested a concerted and co-ordinated attempt to undermine the paradigm of student centred and creative learning in order to prepare the ground for a more regulated, accountable and cheaper instructor led training for an employability environment. However, the larger impact is that which redefines the quality and reliability of

systems of access to meaningful learning and educational outcomes. This impact affects students and non-students: those actively seeking standard qualifications and, perhaps most significantly, those who are contributing to collective knowledge and experience through their civic role and activism (as non-students); as Hung (2002) emphasises, being social is important to learning. Public spending cuts have impoverished community living because they have affected all parts of our collective experience. It might be expected that the political class would choose to energise competition and widen economic distinction within society, even inadvertently, as dynamic inequality affects short-term economic growth. It is a short-sighted strategy but it does deliver discernible change. What might be seen as more troubling and critical is a wider general reluctance to adapt to fairer and more equally balanced social ecosystems; this trend, if it is real, represents long-term risk to our common sense of communal purpose and ethics, and to the health and wellbeing of individuals as well as their wider networks (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014).

Our project is focused on non-traditional learners and those who find educational provision hard to reach due to their context or circumstances, whether they are in employment or are workless. The aim is to recognise informal and flexible learning, an approach described by Boud et al. (2001), where they recognised that learners undergo transformation through experiential and real work activities and their flexibility in assessment and accreditation, providing a progression pathway that is transparent. We seek to encourage accrued and enhanced educational experience that may then be subject to consistent validation processes, endorsements and a confirmation of standards of achievement leading to learning recognition and the prospect of formal accreditation. The outcome might advance educational aspirations, or may develop an individual's employability and performance, or satisfy and enrich an individual's life-course. Aspin and Chapman (2000) state that lifelong learning should aim for economic progress, personal development, social inclusiveness, justice and equality.

We started in Salford and the north-west conurbation of Greater Manchester simply because of our awareness and experience of people who feel isolated from institutional systems, many of whom appreciably suffer consequent to relative poverty and multiple deprivation. We are gradually encountering examples of practice from the large number of connected and similar initiatives that are fighting to sustain themselves as independent innovations throughout the country. Powell (2013) outlines the development of regional collaborative partnerships post Aimhigher and Lifelong Learning Networks in Yorkshire to replicate some of their successful work. These partnerships have

enabled the sharing of ideas and opportunities, and the transfer of knowledge between partnerships. Jones et al. (2011) present a case study on the University of the Heads of the Valley strategic partnership to enable social inclusion through education for non-traditional learners in an area of high social deprivation.

Practical Framework

An acute experience of many former industrial cities and regions is a structural shift towards the knowledge economy, which itself is a truly global phenomenon. The key question is how to ensure that the knowledge economy is a fair economy. During economically prosperous times in the UK, until the recession in 2008, many neighbourhoods remained almost untouched by the wider success and opportunities created in our city-region. The onset of recession made employment prospects for young people, as a specific subset, much bleaker with a double disadvantage for those from low-income neighbourhoods. In Salford 23.6 per cent of young people aged 16-18 years old are in receipt of Job Seekers Allowance (Office for National Statistics, 2014) and, in addition, 8.1 per cent are not in employment, education or training (Department for Education, 2014). Of course, young people eventually become older and possibly more remote. They join an adult population whose elective choices are increasingly constrained by the personal circumstances and poor opportunities for funding support. Within this context, and specifically related to a realignment with a prioritised knowledge economy, there are a number of factors that provide a rationale for the university's desire to work closely and co-operatively with the public sector of the city and proximal region, and, most importantly, with social and interest communities operating in the third sector.

Many local universities are, by default, a permeable organism (composed of and reacting to independent and free thinkers) that feeds from knowledge exchange and creativity emerging from associated external communities and individuals. In constructing this interpretation there is an acknowledgement that the dynamic relationships referenced have an ecology running counter to the traditional expectations of a higher education institution: that of a hierarchical and homeostatic foundation of knowledge capital. Linking this potential to comparable behaviours active within social and geographic communities is a key challenge for those institutions seeking relevance and impact within the host urban districts.

Within Salford, as with other urban conurbations, the harsh realities associated with post-industrialisation invite direct action as a means of combating disadvantage and sourcing alternative strategies leading to change. Documented evidence supports a link between educational access and

attainment and improved career opportunities, earning potential and life choices, and effective citizenship (Department for Education and Skills, 2006; Leitch, 2006). The purpose of inclusion and participation in education is thus to enable communities in all sectors to share experience and knowledge and thereby impact positively on public health, wellbeing and economic contribution. Yet gains in widening participation have not been comprehensive. Whilst the university has striven to form positive and compassionate relations with its near neighbours, many communities are taking the lead, reacting to drivers for change by forming their own working partnerships and acting co-operatively to develop their own capacity and enlarge the pool of future activists and social entrepreneurs. Kimble and Hildreth (2008) convey that adult learners discover, shape and make explicit their own knowledge through situated learning within a community of practice. One question that institutions, and specifically higher education institutions, might need to consider for the future is how they can respond positively to this form of 'radical democracy'; this is especially important when they have the potential to catalyse, enhance and even initiate activism. The university has a relationship with, and inspires, life-wide learning initiatives, but how do we capitalise and grow our presence and effectiveness in this area?

It is possible to contrast formal educational engagement – shown across the top axis of Figure 1 – with more entrepreneurial (i.e. radical or disruptive) opportunities for life-course learning/experience shown down the left hand axis.

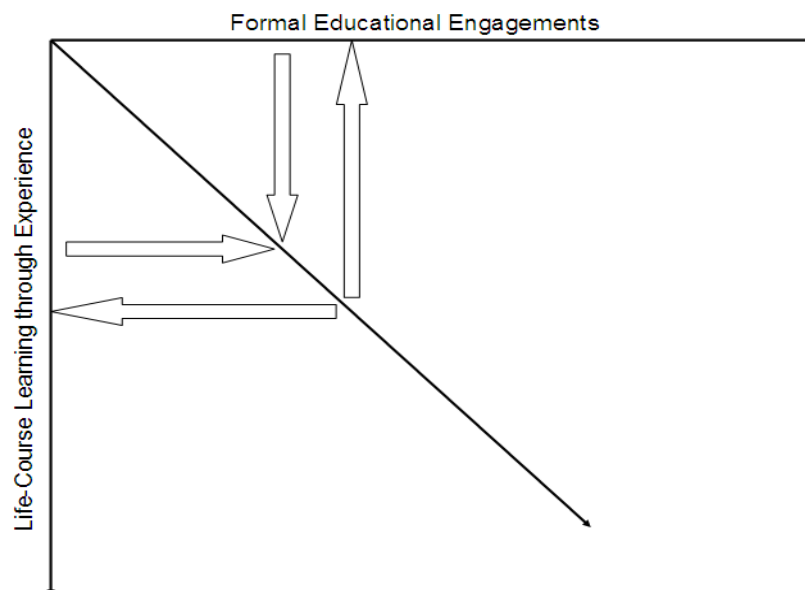


Figure 1. Learning to Learn Opportunities

Each axis represents a progression pathway from pre to post advanced learning or learning equivalence. The two axes can be experienced in isolation but are more likely to impact jointly on an individual's life choices in differing amounts. Within this dynamic relationship the two developmental pathways conspire at their intersection to add value and promote sustainable change in the way that the learner behaves and starts to influence others. Active engagement will provide the student with a more personalised, collaborative, socially active and work-focused learning habit/environment.

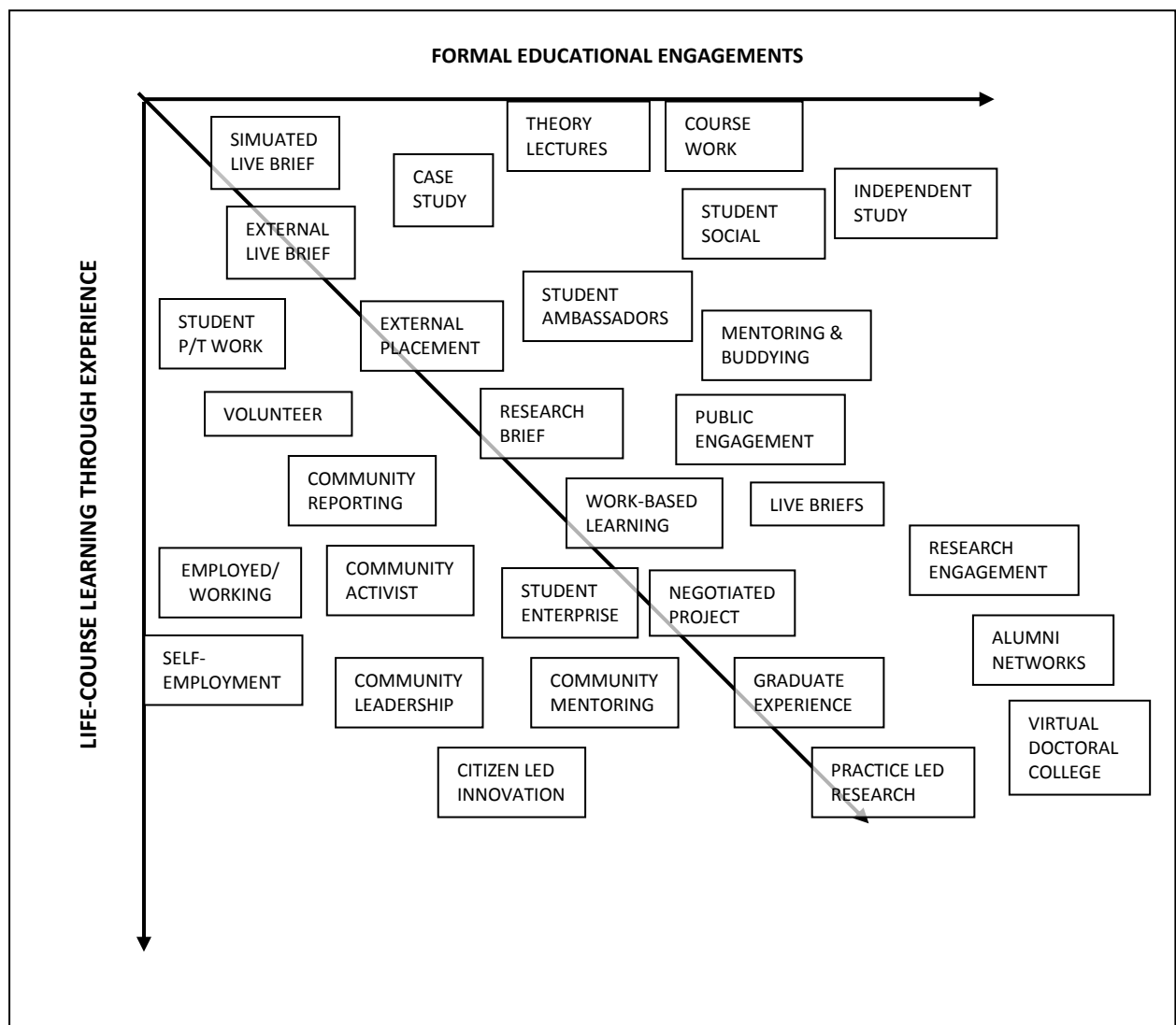


Figure 2. Positioning Learning Environments

Considering the experiences of university students, by populating the spaces for learning with indicative activities (Figure 2), it is possible to start to map the complexity of learning experience and

the benefit received from increasing engagement. Sources of experience linked to 'study' and formal learning environments promote an improving awareness of both learning gain and relevance.

Engagement and externality impacting on the university learner in the early stages of their development provides a key benefit in that it supplements their learning gain and promotes relevance. To maintain that relevance throughout an educational cycle will eventually reform the learner's experience and transform them into an engaged stakeholder capable of motivating or inspiring others. The question is, how does the supported and enrolled learner work and collaborate with wider learning networks and experience environments to ensure mutual potential, in order to access wisdom and to inform the aspiration of peers in the external community?

Bill Smid, one of Salford's recognised social activists, has explained his concept of 'Total Engagement' (Figure 4) as a principle foundation for combining resources and sharing potency. The notion of 'Total Engagement' confers equal respect and legitimacy in the balance of knowledge and experience exchange, positioning the academic community and the experience community as partners in the same equation. It further suggests room for co-creation in the curriculum and therefore co-production in the research arena. The ideal is an area for engagement and learning where mutual value is balanced and produces a trajectory of development that is reforming for both the student and the educators.

In consideration of the myriad learning opportunities covered by such relationships, it is possible to represent the student learning experience as a series of layers or concentric rings (Figure 3) centred on the learning core and growing into the personal and social spaces that the individual brings with them or acquires (via radical sources) on their journey. The delivery of teaching, the curriculum, is posted at the centre of this learning engagement map and included in this zone are activities that are led by the professional educator and sponsored by the institution. Moving out towards the edges of the map the learner becomes increasingly independent and adopts responsibility for their learning, knowledge exchange and accrued experience. The institution becomes less of an agent (or agency) and, therefore, less likely to appreciate or engage with the knowledge and experience that the student is encountering. It helps the university if the learner, or the agents that provide the context for their advancing experiences, volunteers to declare and associate their activities with their educational process and journey. It is, therefore, necessary to provide a means of reporting, valuing and evaluating externality and engagement from the learner's perspective; the university is

developing means by which this might be achieved and managed through, such as the Salford Advantage programme and student volunteering. Such processes are common across universities.

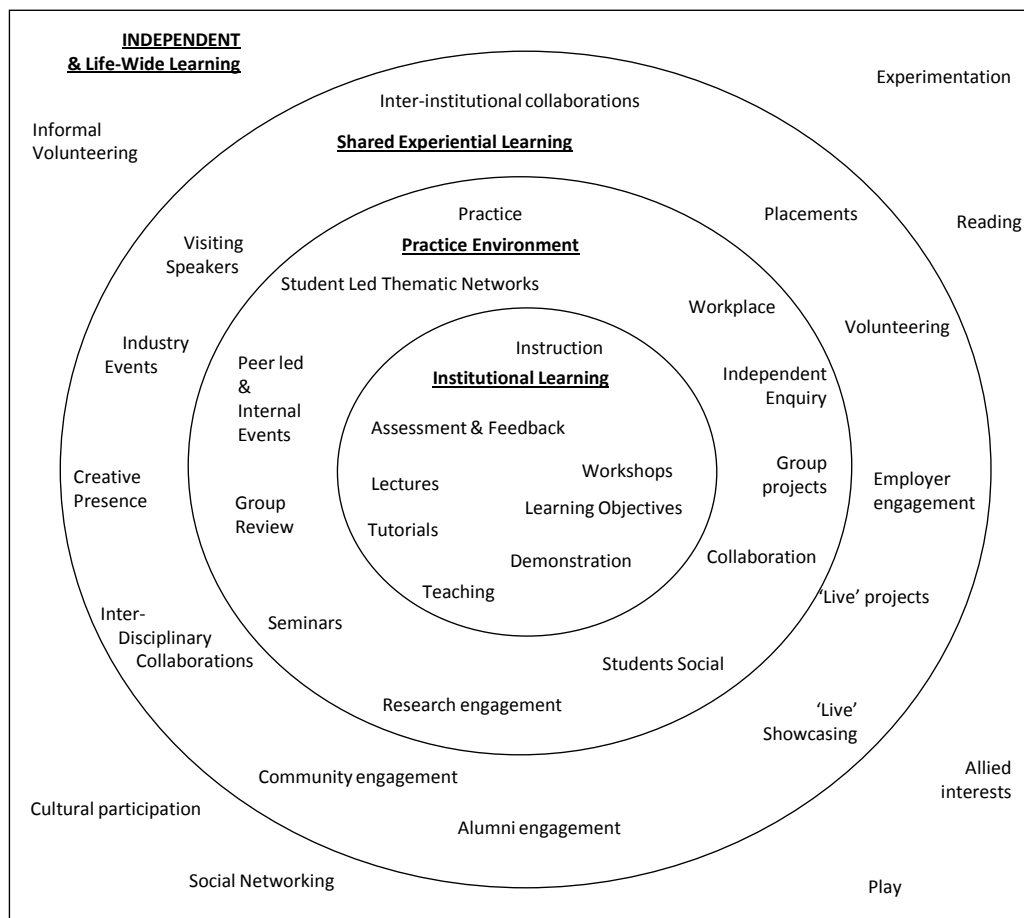


Fig 3. Student Learning Experiences

Ultimately, as suggested by the earlier figures, the reverse model also applies, where individuals encounter learning or pursue independent learning goals through their life-course endeavour and then seek to translate their gains into further structured learning. There are relatively few effective mechanisms for moving from life-course, experience based learning into formal qualifications and structured programmes of subject specialist study. There are, currently, limited options or routes to conversion other than Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) systems. APEL is an effective mechanism to capture this learning and to support mature and work based learners to enter higher education. The Institute of Work Based Learning at Middlesex University has developed a module to support learners in identifying learning from their own individual experiences. This creates much greater flexibility, allowing recognition of learning that has occurred outside of the university, and focuses on the individual's own personal experience (Garnett et al., 2009).

Typical of many universities with embedded roots in the industrial and social heritage of the local area, the University of Salford has a rich history as an institution of and for the city. Its contemporary positive reputation as a ‘friendly’ institution is largely based on a consensus view of a proactively engaging space for learning, knowledge exchange, enterprise and innovation. A similar characterisation applies to the population of the city and near region and extends back to Salford’s landmark history at the core of the industrial revolution. There is a perception of community fusion, a concept that mutual dependence has invigorated communities that have been affected by experiences of relative deprivation or poverty. Whether this is a viable interpretation of social history has little relevance as the narrative still gives a core purpose to collective action. Therefore, independent activism has an essential and material value to the local geography and all of its active socio-political agencies.

Total Engagement

The process of intra-organisational networking, connecting and partnering with groups, enterprises and services active in social and neighbourhood communities (Figure 4), creates a rich and dynamic knowledge framework and a collective memory resource relevant to local conditions and sensitive to

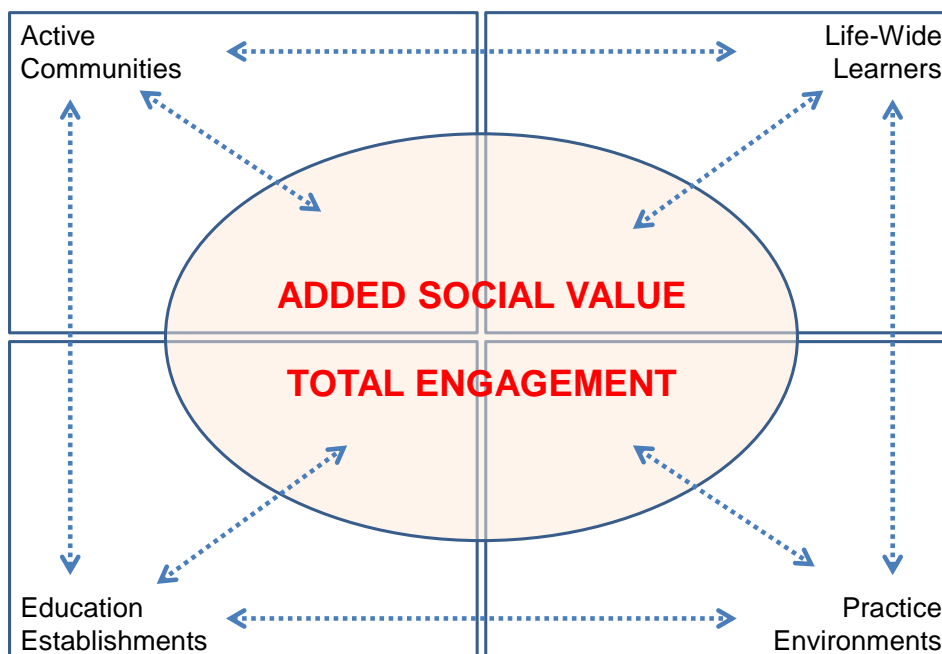


Fig 4. Smid’s model of Total Engagement

local change. Enlarging and invigorating existing collaborations, however loose, by establishing flexible learning partnerships will strengthen any potential for benefitting local capacity building, enacting representative democracy and devolving fair access to resources (intellectual, technological and structural). Universities have opportunities to capitalise on histories of co-operative behaviour and collaboration between social and enterprise communities and join learning hubs that can deliver added social value at the same time as advancing and transforming learner experiences and achievements. This is a perspective where the university joins in and participates with other organisations, agencies and employers, rather than the concept of systemised outreach where there is an assumption of distance between the institution and its external encounters.

It is not necessary to conceive of the educational institution as 'giving', but more as aligning and corresponding. In addition to maintaining near relations and communications with similar institutional stakeholders, the model places equal importance on the activist or practitioner in their role as representative of their own individual perspective and their independent role within communities and businesses. It suggests that informal and spontaneous relationships promote value and a recognisable space for knowledge sharing and mutual disclosure. It would be normal for educational establishments to form bonds with practice environments (employers) and with active communities such as special interest networks. The energising space for 'Total Engagement' is a 'give and get' exchange environment where equal investments of time and knowledge contribution are, at least, a conceptual possibility.

Co-operative Learning Action Networks

The process of development has, so far, involved multiple consultation events and exercises. As a consequence, a loose consortium has taken shape working towards a common framework that includes proper integration with informal learning, pathways to progression and an emphasis on personal portfolios. The collective aim is to support flexible and active life-wide learning with the possibility of mapping experience on to standard qualifications. Progression into formal education is not the end goal; rather, it is to encourage the student to better control their own rate of progression and take ownership of their options for the future.

The overall project demands the creation of a hyper-local environment to support open mutual learning. This will involve the design and maintenance of an interactive website capable of appealing to and reflecting the needs and character of the community of learners. Hence, there is a need to develop easy-to-use solutions that resemble the online practices of potential community users. It is

assumed that the target audience for the initiative is, for the most part, inexperienced learners or mature learners that have been out of education for a significant time. Further, it is assumed that digital resources may be difficult to access for many individuals; therefore, materials published in virtual environments need to be very transferrable across platforms and mobile devices.

The proposal is for a curriculum and assessment framework that will accommodate input from a range of providers and sources, and support inter-organisational learning recognition. There is also a need for a single source learning environment that can be appropriately shared and can link into the preferred virtual learning environment (VLE) in use by each educational partner. That said, essentially, the resource will have to make use of open source software; there is no operational budget and no dedicated revenue income other than what the social business might generate through its practices. At the same time, the initiative is difficult to own as the central objective of open mutual learning networks is one that wilfully seeks radical and dynamic interaction. Any sense of a core organising and authoritative function would be anathema to many who seek to invest their time and energy into this form of activism. What is essential in terms of a core offering is the transferrable resources, three complementary elements to the Co-operative Learning Action Networks vision that comprise its digital offering.

The initiative will require a digital resource supporting member networks, a platform from which member-led networks can co-produce/co-create their own educational pathway and structure their needs for accessing content, commissioning services and designing an evidence based portfolio. The portfolio structure and functionality is seemingly a key to individual uptake and clearly links to the assessment and award.

The project has so far assumed that flexible engagement and progression into learning will be best supported by the adoption of the Mozilla open badge system to provide new forms of assessment, endorsement and accreditation, adjusted for adoption appropriate to our needs. This feature will demand a dedicated facility within the learning environment and the badges will have to be repurposed to support andragogic processes of learning, open mutual peer exchange, and a 360 degree assessment regime that will better harness and attach value to experience and life-course competencies. The badging tool enables self-assessment, peer assessment and then a range of objective endorsements that visibly increase the robustness and credibility of the award.

The third element is an online one-stop learning exchange site, a single hub for information and access to educational resources, open source content, mentor guidance, welfare support, training offers and links to qualifications. One observation here is that the informal learning opportunities flagged on the tool will benefit from equal treatment alongside accredited learning and education from professional providers. Previous module catalogues have floundered due to their complexity, their poor responsiveness, their poor currency and their bias towards structured education based within institutions and protected by fees and threshold entry requirements.

The co-operative learning networks initiative has these three practical tools in mind as immediate tasks. Its wider goals are both ambitious and challenging, not only as a set of targets but also, perhaps more importantly, as a set of political gestures that potentially conflict with the growing concept and practice of an educational market place.

Future perspectives

Co-operative Learning Action Networks are envisaged as temporary, member-led communities that develop educational recognition from meaningful activity. They are a means by which the learning that takes place through employment, community enterprise, social activism and good citizenship can be recorded and valued. They should offer an adaptable structure for experience-led learning to suit the needs of diverse communities of interest. They will promote learning exchange through a single hub resource that signposts opportunity, relevant support and services. To be successful, the initiative will need to enjoy a broad subscription and approval. This has meant that the major part of development so far has been engagement through consultation. Regular early input from the University of Salford and, initially at least, Salford City Council was matched with time investment from one of the larger local authorities of the Greater Manchester area and one of the main facilities management groups working within the public services area. This base has intentionally broadened and the project has been able to rely on regular representative contributions from four other universities, a diverse and growing range of community driven initiatives, social enterprises working in the community development area, housing trusts based in the city region, tenants associations, local training providers, broadcast media organisations, and Trade Union interests concerned with union education and community learning.

As a group we have resolved to pursue some organisational goals through our joint association. There have been five common themes that have emerged from repeated workshops.

There has been a degree of mistrust, or at least the expression of doubt, in consultation workshops; mostly smaller, voluntary sector social enterprises are naturally cautious of professional institutions. There has been a clear suspicion of the motives of universities. The repeated suggestion is that those people likely to benefit most from co-operative learning networks will have vulnerabilities, economically, politically and in terms of their personal confidence and sense of esteem. Therefore, the behavioural standards expected of participating organisations and professional entities require expression. In the first instance, the groups consulted have fixed on the need for an agreed set of principles, a shared charter to guide practices. This is not withstanding any form of membership scheme that may be developed with particular relevance to a specific learning network. Those engaging with the project overview anticipate a long-term collaboration; there is, then, a requirement to establish a resilient basis for co-operation between active organisations of differing shapes, sizes and type, and therefore a set of common values. The spirit of the initiative suggests that co-operative principles are a reasonable starting point.

One of the points frequently made has been that the system must attract equal acceptance/respect from employers and educational tutors of both manual and academic learning. Of course, there is a question here as to how different delivery and responsible agents work out and agree on the value of different types of learning experience and achievement.

The second key priority of the group has been the creation of 'Learning to Learn' curriculum tools and a guide to life-wide active learning. One of the most consistent themes from workshops has been the need to empower the potential learner so that they can control and negotiate their own access to education with improved confidence, so that they can become effective in paying forward their learning and supporting their peers.

Quality assurance and the design/application of transferrable and generic systems of learning reward or credit is a priority for all in the consultation. The two main strands of relevant debate focus around systems for recognising experience and prior learning and the possible adoption of digital badges as a means of structuring evidence based portfolios. Essential here is that systems can be supported by qualified testimonials and recommendations coming from mentors, experience givers, educators and a combination of all three. In this regard, the digital rewards must clearly indicate relative credibility, and therefore demonstrate greater resilience where there is robust and rounded testimony.

A key concern of all of those who have dedicated time to the consultation has been that of fair access and clearly defined routes to community controlled learning commissions. One of the most pressing issues expressed by the majority of people attending workshops has been the identification of and institutional response to people who are seen to be at the margins of social inclusion. A consistent view was that the needs of a significant number and diversity of individuals, families or communities are often overlooked and therefore ignored by standard educational provision.

There is a crucial lesson to learn about accessible and common language, for example. University (academic) language and writing is reasonably distinctive and, at times, alien. Even the persistent use of anagrams can present a barrier to those who are not primarily adapted to the academic environment. Those who are not used to the vocabulary and structure of language used by education and teaching communities can be made to feel that they do not fit in and that they may not understand. This experience is frequently compounded by ongoing life experiences that conflict with the notion of study and studentship. Very many learners and potential learners, particularly adults, are time poor with complex and conflicting responsibilities; 'can I manage my time to learn, work, volunteer, be a mother and be an individual?'

The alternative curriculum needs a person centred, holistic approach, one that focuses on the learner as an individual. It is more normal for institutions to determine what subjects or specific specialist knowledge they can teach and for funders to determine the character and nature of current educational deficits; neither of these approaches builds on the learner as an asset within education as a process.

The final, though possibly most critical issue agreed from the consultation exercises has been the need to confront costs and share capacity across dedicated participants. Affordability is an obvious and highly important theme should learning networks come to fruition. One main focus of discussions so far has been the perception of cost and value, where the burden of responsibility should rest, and issues of exclusivity associated with any type of access dependent on economic transaction. Therefore, one of the most common observations was that cost control and resource efficiency would not only make provision more reachable but could also make the learning opportunities more relevant by design. Money is an easily recognisable barrier but the issue is often more complex than the initial anxiety over fee levels; the main anticipated beneficiaries will frequently face complexities through multiple deprivations and the capacity to pay for learning is, therefore, marginal. For increasing numbers within our communities, local organisational resources

are often limited; the opportunity to engage is restricted due to low levels of available support that in turn affect both financial and time barriers. There are often additional needs that relate to financial hardship and time constrained life circumstances, e.g. access to affordable transport, care of dependents, and wider community support commitments.

In many instances, peer pressure can form a significant barrier to educational engagement; a lack of understanding or appreciation from associates, family and friends places pressure on the individual not to disrupt mutual support networks. The Co-operative Learning Action Networks are intentionally directed towards this specific anxiety in that their structure and design must assist in developing an understanding of the learners' existing experiences and wisdom as viable assets that form and potentially reform their educational currency. If the networks can build recognition around the contribution of people surviving and providing within any social context they may eventually address some of the barriers that confine our claims for a fair democracy.

This is not simply an argument about economics. The recent drift towards a focus on education as a means of preparing people for work has produced sensitivities towards learning and education that are self-limiting. The idea of education for education's sake has been mostly subverted and, with it, a willingness to engage with education as a pursuit in its own right and as a means of developing one's personal interests, needs and wider cultural awareness. Funding drivers and policy makers (Department for Work and Pensions, BIS, DfE, etc.) are the main problem here producing a culture of payment by results, qualifications or measurable outcomes that do not accurately reflect real value, or real experience. The negative impacts are creating barriers to engagement and also increasing dropout and non-completion rates as learners are forced to experience education in a specific form that does not necessarily suit their requirements, preferred learning habits or essential life circumstances.

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