

Strand 4: Networked Learning in Community Development

Paper 10:

Adult Learners and New Technology: Study Skills and Personal Development Through Multi-Media Mode.

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- This paper describes and critically evaluates the development and delivery of modules written for use through CDROM with the additional use of video material. The modules are in Study Skills and Personal Development, and are designed for adult learners. The modules were originally offered as a taught course and it is the transposing of these into an alternative mode of delivery which is the focus of the paper. The way in which this potentially widens participation and encourages inclusive learning is explored; as well as the problems of achieving the learning objectives of the modules through computer based learning. A supportive infrastructure is essential if independent learning is

to be achieved and the framework for this is described. The problems confronting marginalised learners are recognised and addressed and broader institutional issues raised. The rapid technological changes which have occurred since the inception of the project are also recognised, and as a result of this current developments are described which will further enhance the learners' experience. Finally, the extension of the project into a European dimension is briefly described.

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The Background

- Adult learners returning to education are often enthusiastic, committed to, and academically suitable for a course in higher education. They bring with them a range of learning and educational experience but what they most often lack are the basic academic support skills which are generically termed 'Study Skills'. Through the acquisition of these skills they gain the experience to become confident, autonomous, and independent learners able to progress successfully to the next stage of study. Traditionally these skills, usually delivered alongside a Personal Development module, have become an essential part of Access courses for adults re-entering education. At the University of Derby, where such a course is offered, the modules are Open College Network credit-based; delivered as taught modules and assessed through other academic subjects which are part of the learning programme. Experience indicated that these modules provided a sound preparation for the identified cohort of students. At the same time it was recognised that other learners could also benefit from such provision, but would be unable to access a traditionally taught course. These people were recognised as:
 - Learners, unable to attend a full-time access course, who would welcome the opportunity to complete the Study Skills module through home study. This group of people includes those with caring commitments which inhibit full-time attendance; those who are disabled and those living in isolated rural areas.
 - Those intending to pursue a part-time degree pathway and needing a preparatory course which can be easily accessed prior to starting the degree.
 - Adult learners who enter directly on to a degree programme without coming through the traditional preparatory routes and after a period of time away from academic study.
 - Learners engaged in work-based learning.

- Learners within ethnic communities who are taking initial steps into education but need to do so within the boundaries of their personal experience; the starting point of which is often small locally based community groups or their home. The opportunity for progression within an accredited and unitised curriculum, where learners can take small steps at their own pace towards a full Higher Education award, is particularly valuable for this group of learners.

For these reasons it was decided to transpose the Study Skills and Personal Development module on to CDROM. At the same time it was agreed that the material should also be available as a paper-based pack so as to offer provision as extensively as possible. Furthermore it was decided to include 'study tasters' in two of the most popular subjects; Sociology and European Studies. The project was funded through the University academic development fund and it was therefore not necessary to pass on any costs to the group of learners involved in the pilot

The Pilot

- The development process started in November 1996 and the pilot took place from July 1997. This involved a group of ten learners; four of whom were completing the Access course on a part-time basis, four studying through contact with community venues, and two returning to study prior to starting their degree in September 1997. There were eight females and two males; all were White European, two were employed outside the home and one was disabled. At the time of writing, the two returning to study have completed and the others are halfway through the course. Learners were identified through Access tutors and Adult Guidance workers. An interim evaluation of the project indicated the following: all students at some time found it difficult to motivate themselves to study, however this was greater for those who did not have an identified progression route; all found most of the material easy to access, informative and useful, the section on research was thought to be daunting in comparison with other sections; contact with tutors was valued but no one made

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attempts to contact other students taking the module; all valued the flexibility which the mode of learning offered; eight students thought that it was a more attractive option than paper based distance learning material. The evaluation was made through individual interviews either by phone or on a face-to-face basis. A final evaluation will be made when all students have completed the modules. It is at this point that substantial amendments will be made.

The Modules

- The design of the modules was based on a wealth of knowledge acquired by practitioners who had delivered them and who were also very familiar with the specific needs of adult learners. A summary of content is:
 - **Personal Development** - Time management, self assessment, action planning, understanding group dynamics, learning styles, preparation for interviews, stress management, identification of career paths, issues of equal opportunities, presentation skills.
 - **Study Skills** - Note taking and reading strategies, essay writing, bibliographies and referencing, research skills, report writing, and handling methods of assessment.

Self assessment tasks were included, but there was also the opportunity for students to obtain credit if they chose to submit work to their tutor. This of course depended on the goal of the individual's study and anticipated progression route.

The aims of these modules are to:

- introduce learners to a range of study skills appropriate to their development as independent learners
- to help learners identify, locate and handle a wide range of relevant information and to relate this to specific learning tasks

- prepare learners for successful study in Higher Education through the development of reflective, analytical and evaluative skills
- to enhance the personal development, effectiveness and confidence of participants by drawing on and extending their own strengths and skills
- to develop awareness, sensitivity and tolerance in respect of all issues relating to equal opportunities.

In many respects, although these areas are crucial to the learner if he/she is to make the transition to independent learning, they are the most difficult to transpose to CDROM. This is because the work has traditionally relied on group interaction within a taught situation. This problem was partially addressed through the production of a video which was part of the study pack. Through this it became possible to observe and analyse group and individual situations so enhancing the learner's experience. This contributed to the learning cycle, traditionally perceived as being one of initial stimulus, followed by reflection, reinforced by discussion and then application. The inclusion of video material was an attempt to replicate the discursive elements of the learning process. Retrospectively, if the Internet had been initially selected as a way of offering the material it would have increased interaction and learners could have communicated more readily through a bulletin board, homepage and Internet relay chat. As it is, this has become the focus of current developments.

Support Issues

- The issue of support through peer groups and tutorial support is crucial if learners are to meet their full potential. It is particularly crucial for adult learners returning to education. As Jill Mannion Brunt argues:

"Traditional ways of working with adults have involved extensive periods of support, both on a personal level and an intellectual one." (1997)

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She quite rightly recognises that there is a need for continued support despite the medium in which teaching and learning occurs. This was precisely the problem which confronted us. How could we ensure that learners were adequately supported so as to encourage a strong sense of personal worth? It is unrealistic to expect learners to initially take control of their own learning when they are often from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and have little social capital from which to develop confidence and academic self-assurance.

A Supportive Infrastructure

- On this basis it became apparent that an infrastructure designed to support the learner through the experience was essential if it was to be successful. It also needs to be recognised that for some people computer-based learning was not a good starting point and that they would be embarking on yet another pathway of failure. Learner autonomy is not necessarily achieved through autonomous learning,

“Different kinds of teaching and learning process can encourage or discourage it, but it does not depend on freedom from physical constraint, since it is an internal quality - a matter of how one feels about one's situation. Nor is autonomy directly linked to isolation, an autonomous individual knows how to work with others and chooses when to be independent”

*(Department for Education and
Employment 1996)*

An essential part of the infrastructure was the provision of initial guidance, the purpose of which was to: introduce the learner to people within the University; assist the learner in deciding whether the mode of study was appropriate for his/her individual needs; and to identify suitable progression routes on completion of the module. This was established as part of the package and provided by Adult Guidance workers within the Centre for

Access and Lifelong Learning (CALL) within the University. Where appropriate, this guidance was offered on an outreach basis.

If learners decided to take the module by using the CDROM then they were allocated a personal tutor whose responsibility was to support the individuals and monitor progress. This support was provided in a number of ways; for example through regular meetings, phone calls and e-mail if there was access to the technology. The possibility for group meetings was also recognised, but in reality this did not occur. I suspect that people perceived little value in group interaction having not experienced the positive elements of it within an academic environment. The co-ordination of this project was through CALL which meant that there was access to a broad range of provision specifically designed to support adult learners returning to education.

Accessibility

- One of the purposes of this project was to widen participation to include those traditionally excluded from Higher Education. Access to appropriate hardware was therefore essential but in reality problematic. The University has a new well equipped Learning Centre which meets the needs of its learners. However, within communities and the homes of individuals comparable technology is unlikely to exist. A survey commissioned by Technology Foresight (1995) showed that only 10 per cent of semi-skilled and unskilled workers claimed to have heard of the Internet, compared with 52% of professional and managerial workers. Although the percentages in 1998 will be much greater the discrepancy will still exist. Access to technology through personal ownership is class-based and dependent on the socio-economic situation of individuals. Furthermore studies have indicated that the majority of home computers are used for games. (Silverstone 1991, Schank 1994). In relation to age, new technologies appeal more to young people than older ones. (Field 1997). Against this background the associated problems of accessibility, in its very broad sense, can be envisaged. However adult learners, within a supportive environment do gain confidence quickly. Evidence from the North East Midlands Access Partnership (NEMAP) suggests that even those learners who

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are initially extremely reticent about using technology when starting courses gain confidence quickly and are able to use computers effectively (1997 Annual Course Reports). However this does not address the socio-economic situation which many adult learners experience as part of their everyday lives. As John Field (1997) says,

“We will have to take account of the real social, cultural and economic contexts in which adults will be learning to use the new technologies to acquire new skills and knowledge.”

Within the computer laden environment of universities it is easy to imagine that access to technology is the same in the wider community. There is substantial evidence that this is not the case and great care must be taken not to create even more social divisions for those already marginalised. Within the project a way of addressing this problem was to identify community venues where access to computers with CDROMs were available. So, for example, a cyber cafe was identified within a rural area, and two community venues in urban areas were set up. Unless this provision is made on a broader scale people will be unable to use the technology which could genuinely address issues of disadvantage.

Finally the cost of learners using computer based learning needs to be addressed. Within this project the cost was not passed on to learners. However it is unlikely that this will be the case in the future. Ways of supporting economically disadvantaged learners must be identified so that equity exists and inclusive learning is a reality.

Problematic Areas

- Through the development of this project several problematic areas were identified. Initially the time needed to develop modules was underestimated. The opportunity for prolonged discussions, to draft and re-write material, to disseminate information to local communities was considerably more than anticipated. Secondly the development team and project leader had other substantial responsibilities.

In retrospect the project needed a designated person whose responsibility was solely the development of the modules. The University, as a large organisation, needed to share more effectively information about ongoing developments. It seemed that substantial time was wasted by not having knowledge of ongoing or previous developments. Mistakes were repeated across the University which were needless. As the project progressed the availability of technological support became problematic and this slowed down the development process.

These problems are typical of institutions developing new initiatives. However within the fast moving world of new technologies a sharing of knowledge is essential if we are to avoid fossilisation.

Current Developments

- The development of the modules has facilitated a rapid movement up a steep learning curve for those involved, as up until this point experience of computer based delivery was extremely limited. However during the project development period significant changes have taken place in respect to the availability and uses of new technologies. It became clear that accessibility would be broadened if the modules were available through the Internet. This will widen participation as well as increasing individual interaction and group communication - a point previously made within this paper.

A further development is through the European Union Socrates Programme which specifically targets adult learners. The University is working with partners in Greece, Spain, France and Germany in developing a Study Skills module which will be delivered through CDROM and the Internet, and will also be available as a paper-based resource. Social, cultural and educational norms as well as progression routes are the main issues of current consideration. It is hoped that in time communication between learners, across the countries will take place.

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