

**DR TESS MAGINESS AND CATHAL MCMANUS,
OPEN LEARNING PROGRAMME, SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**

1. CONTEXT FOR THE APPLICATION (300 words maximum)

Please provide a context for your application. This should consist of an introductory statement about your contribution to learning and teaching/learning support to date. Examples of the information you might include are; the subject you teach or the area of learning support you work in, the type of learning and teaching/learning support activities you are involved in, how many learners are involved, your particular learning and teaching/learning support interests and an outline of your overall teaching/learning support philosophy?

The Open Learning Team is a small unit within the School of Education with one Senior Teaching Fellow and one Teaching Fellow. In the past five years we have countered the UK trend towards the collapse of continuing education. Some 6000 students participate in Open Learning each year.

Our learning/teaching philosophy is grounded in:

- A student-centered approach valorising the learner's expertise, emphasising participative, co-negotiated learning
- A developmental, creative approach focused on delivering the University's Widening Participation agenda.
- Learning partnerships with a wide range of organisations.
- An autocritical learning culture among tutors.
- Professional development contextualising our practice within educational theory.
- Close team work with learning support staff.

Here, we will focus only on two Widening Participation initiatives:

Social inclusion learning projects

We were shortlisted for the THE Contribution to the Community Award (2008). Current learning projects include:

Mentalenty- promoting positive mental health among rural men in South Ulster. (funded by *Investing for Health*).

Fathers and sons – linking with Australian partners, focusing on father-son relationships. (funded by HEA).

Intercomm peacebuilding- leadership and Peacebuilding courses delivered in interface areas with participants including ex-prisoners, the Police Service, statutory and voluntary groups. (Peace 11 and 111)

Old Warren/Lisburn prisoner Support Project – history and politics courses, with ex-prisoners

Orange Order leadership course - in planning for over 90 students.

History detectives – local history course to enskill disadvantaged men in Rathcoole/Newtownabbey

Cairde social enterprise learning project- based in Armagh with local community group.

Special initiatives.

The Blackbird Bookclub and Contemporary Arts in Northern Ireland - artists and writers engaging directly with our learners. Funded by the Arts Council, the partnership also involves the Crescent Arts Centre, Culture Northern Ireland, Studio On, the Bookshop at Queen's and Belfast Exposed.

Outreach history courses- through a partnership with Down County Museum (Peace 111), and the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum.

2. DISCUSSION

You should illustrate your discussion throughout with reference to specific learning and teaching/learning support activities. You should also provide examples of the influence of learner feedback on your learning and teaching/learning support practice.

(a) Promoting and enhancing the learners' experience (1000 words maximum)

Centering the student

A student-centered, 'constructivist' active learning approach where the teacher is a co-learner and facilitator has been advocated for over 30 years (P Jarvis, 1983; S Kemmis, 1985; S Adams, 1989; J Preece 1998; J Clarke, 1998; E F Provenzo, 2006). But our experience is that many non-traditional learners, with very negative experiences of learning, take considerable convincing. (Golding, 2008) Much of our developmental work is about persuading these hard-to-reach learners that education can offer them respect, trust, value. We do this by internalising the literature on education, social inclusion and a range of other fields including biographical approaches, and by being accessible fellow learners.

Geographical and social accessibility

While the Open Learning Programme has always operated beyond Belfast, our current initiatives actively generate learning partnerships with groups generally deemed to be 'Beyond the Pale' and with other groups in remote areas in Northern Ireland. The 'decentering of the classroom' is thus not just about the paradigm shift where the traditional teacher becomes a facilitator, but about physically 'coming in to' learners who are marginalised socially and geographically.

Relevant learning

Just as crucially, we work in partnership with communities to develop learning projects which have real meaning for them and which tackle their disempowerment and alienation. Thus we deploy an action research model enabling communities to empower themselves, in which the role of education is to better communities. (Counts, G, 1934; M Oliver, 1997; S Kemmis and R MacTaggart, 2000; J Tew, 2003; K McCrea, 2006; R Perkins and L Sayce, 2006).

Our projects develop learning partnerships with 'hard-to reach learners and focus on 'difficult', contested, issues, including mental health/illness, sectarianism and identity conflict and peacebuilding. Such projects challenge learners, but also engage learners because they are ambitious and do not patronise learners. And because the subjects are relevant to the learners, they are much more motivated to engage.

Development work as foundation

Most of our learning projects happen because as, Teaching Fellows, we invest a lot of time working closely with the groups to develop the project with them. This developmental work can sometimes take months or longer, but does result in a genuine sense of ownership among the learners.

Flexible and supportive modes of learning

Over the years, we have developed very flexible modes of learning, meeting the realities of the learners' lives. For example, timetables are constructed to suit the learners – including weekends and nights. In addition, learning sessions are scheduled to suit the organic form of a particular project. Thus, for example, with the first Mentalentity project, which involved the making of a film there were a small number of intensive Saturday sessions, followed by a series of workshops spread over a few months to allow both for weather conditions and also the availability of the men themselves.

Learners are supported in other practical ways. Through our long-term partnership with the Out and About Disability Group, we have evolved a comprehensive learner support model which begins with facilitating groups to write funding applications which ensure that that learners experiencing disadvantage can actually access the projects by offering the learning free of charge. We work with groups also to ringfence resources for accessible transport, respite, note-taking and other practical learner support mechanisms. Again, this holistic approach creates real access for learners.

Student-centered Assessment

We co-negotiate the forms of assessment with the learners which have most meaning for them and which are most likely to create a practical legacy of learning. Flexibility also applies to modes of assessment; for example, a learner who does not have well-developed literacy skills, could be offered the chance to present assignments through a video diary, a sound recorded piece or using a visual mode such as photography or storyboarding.

Evaluation and Research: Reflective Praxis

The learners are central to a process of continual review within the Best Practice 'cycle of educational action research'. (J McNiff and J Whitehead, 2006; D Schon, 1983). The mode is continually interrogative and this allows for flexibility and re-direction of learning if projects get stuck(P Clough, 1999; P Metcalf, 2002; S Avigitidou, 2007; T Cook, 2009; J Quicke, 2010). The result, in our experience, has been the building of much greater trust and improved learning outcomes. (T Maginess, 2010). Student comments reflect this. One commented on the solidarity the project built, 'working as part of a team' another said the project 'gave me a reason to get up in the morning', while another commented that he was able to 'participate at a level I felt comfortable with. Perhaps the most profound comment came from one man who said: it was like finding one rock and then others rolling down the hill until you suddenly found you had a rockery.'

The 'reflective', evidence-based' research we have produced derives directly from a co-negotiated approach to learning and provides fine-grained analyses of how to apply learner focused approaches in adult education, backed by educational literature. As such, we are offering models of practical use to other teachers. The learners are genuine participants in the research rather than 'subjects'.

Use of technology

Mainly as a result of our longstanding partnership with the Nerve Centre, we have been able to apply technology in innovative ways in our learning projects. Examples of this would include the building of skills in areas like filmmaking and interactive media, demonstrated by the Mentalentity project and the Fathers and Sons Project where filmmaking, the creation of a website and distance learning will be central. The use of multimedia also contributes to that goal of 'decentering the classroom' and fostering

active learning in a very direct way, since it is impossible to make a film with teacher sitting in front of a fixed class. (U Felix, 2005; D O'Mahony, nd).

Through the Nerve Centre the Blackbird Bookclub and the Contemporary Arts courses have been filmed, and through a partnership with Belfast Exposed, we have developed a Portraits of the Artists series, thus creating the foundation for another new project to develop e-learning resources.

(b) Supporting colleagues and influencing support for student and/or staff learning (350 words maximum)

Teaching colleagues have been involved with a number of our projects both as tutors and also as evaluators; for example two colleagues contributed to the evaluation of the Mentalentity project while another will be the evaluator on the Fathers and Sons project. A number of other colleagues participate in the teaching, for example on the Peacebuilding courses. This has enabled colleagues to enhance their own staff learning but has also brought great expertise to students and has thus been an important source of support for them.

The Open Learning programme directly contributes to the University's Widening participation agenda in all its work, but very specially through our Social Inclusion initiatives which have been commended by the Vice Chancellor, Professor Peter Gregson and by Pro-Vice Chancellor, Professor Tony Gallagher. We also contribute to the University's Collaborative provision Group and to the current Languages Strategy, overseen by Professor Shane O'Neill.

All our new tutors are offered an induction programme to enhance their understanding of the ethos of engaging with students, encouraging participation and co-negotiated, active learning. Tutors are also offered small group and one-to-one- training and support and regular feedback from moderation. Learning support staff are facilitated to participate in professional development.

One of the Open learning team is also a Disability Officer for the School and she has been able to advise colleagues in relation to quite specialist problems and also to promote student-centered, best practice solutions. She is also a 'one-stop-shop' for disabled students, facilitating the individual needs and aspirations of each student.

The Open Learning programme is hoping to contribute to internationalisation through our Australian linkage in the Fathers and Sons project and the development of e-learning resources with international potential. The programme also directly addresses a range of Assembly priorities including Targeting Social Need, Unlocking Creativity and the promotion of community based education on positive mental health and wellbeing as proposed in the *Bamford Report*. We will also be working with the Nerve Centre in Derry to develop special initiatives for the City of Culture programme. Our work with the museums and with the Arts Council is helping to deliver key aspects of their strategic priorities.

(c) Ongoing professional development (350 words maximum)

The two Teaching Fellows have participated in a number of conferences which have greatly enhanced their professional development through having access to leading edge theory and networking with academics from many different cultures in a spirit of mutual support.

Despite the pressure of teaching, development work and administration, they have also presented papers at international conferences and have published papers in peer-reviewed journals. The range has been

very wide – from conferences on mental health to conferences about creative learning approaches, to conferences about identity and culture, qualitative research, social inclusion, to conferences about the use of technology in education. This scholarship has been vital in enabling the Teaching Fellows to contextualise their practice within leading edge literature and to, contingently learn a great deal which they can apply in their own practice for the benefit of learners.

One of the Teaching Fellows has completed his PGCHET as part of his professional development, entitling him to membership of the Higher Education Academy, with which we are establishing links, having accessed funding and having had an article accepted for a book to be published by HEA on narratives of mental health in education. The other Teaching Fellow completed a Certificate in Multimedia Studies. Our own lifelong learning has been crucial in honing our teaching skills but also in keeping us in touch with the perspective of the student.

All of these professional development activities have enabled us to review and reflect upon our own practice and, through having more detailed and specialist knowledge, we have been able to offer learners a higher quality experience. Thus, for example, knowing that there is a whole corpus of literature endorsing the principles of participative, emancipatory research has given the work we do credibility and has encouraged our own learners to become participant researchers – two papers were given at international conferences jointly by a Teaching Fellow and a participant researcher student. They were both very well received and, equally, the direct testimony of the learner carried great conviction and credibility for those who attended. The Duchess of Abercorn singled out our paper as an especially exciting initiative in her concluding address to the IPDA conference in Dublin in 2008.

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