Accreditation within Adult Education: Reflections and views of local tutors

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Introduction

The perspectives in this piece reflect the current experiences and thoughts from Dun Laoghaire VEC's Adult Education Service's literacy, second chance and community education provision as we move towards more accreditation of programmes. This move has been prompted by a number of significant changes and interventions within adult education over the last number of years, particularly the National Qualifications Act and Framework, the introduction of the Back to Education Initiative, Workplace Literacy initiatives such as Return to Learning, the setting up of the Adult Education Guidance Service and the appointment of Community Education Facilitators. In this context it was considered that how the service moves forward had to involve conscious reflection, evaluation and planning, not just with programme planners and administrators but also equally with tutors and learners.

At the outset of the BTEI in 2001, a process of informal consultation and reflection with tutors took place in relation to moving our adult learners towards certification. This was part of a wider process within the organisation to address the professional development needs of our tutors in a number of key areas. A series of focus group sessions were held with key programme staff and tutors on the issues of accreditation specifically. The views expressed in this process have informed many of the perspectives in this piece.

Why a Process of Reflection?

It is so infrequent in adult education that we take the time to gain the views and reflections of our tutors; they are the lost species of adult education yet so central to the teaching and learning process. Many tutors within adult education

see themselves at the fringes of organisations and outside of the establishment of 'teaching' (Collins, 1991). When tutors' views and experiences are considered there is so much to gain in terms of improving the quality of delivery and gaining insights into particular issues within the wider sphere of adult education. In his analysis of effective adult education institutions, one of the main criteria identified by Kidd as central to the quality of delivery is that of a democratic decision making process involving both tutors and learners (Kidd, 1973). Not involving tutors to the extent to which we should is perhaps symptomatic of a more fundamental issue within adult education, primarily the lack of attention that has traditionally been paid to issues of curriculum, methodology and process. In reviewing philosophies of adult education, Elias and Merriam make reference to how little information we actually have about the quality of the teaching process that is needed within adult education practice while at the same time no one disputes the need for very skilled teachers to effectively meet many of its objectives (Elias & Merriam, 1980).

Over the past number of years, enormous efforts have gone into programme development and putting the necessary systems in place to ensure delivery at a variety of levels and with various target groups; but to what extent has there been a focus on what is actually happening in the teaching/ learning situation?

For many in adult education we are often left with a feeling that issues of quantity surpass issues of quality in terms of evaluating what is important. Lindeman, one of the greatest pioneers of adult education, believed of education that by merely giving 'the same dose to more individuals', its true meaning and spirit would be lost. He believed firmly in an adult education that experimented with the qualitative sides of education, exploring new methods and new concepts (Lindeman, 1926, p.7).

Ohliger speaks about standard brand adult education institutions offering 'the same to more'. He believes that within these institutions we need to develop the commitment of a reasonable number of adult educators that can discover ways and means of creating more liberating and relevant learning situations and environments. This can only be done by engaging adult educators within institutions in dialogue about the goals and values of their work. Tutors can make significant contributions to the dialogue on adult education particularly when change of any sort needs to be facilitated (Ohliger, 1974).

Accreditation does create fears, many misguided, in relation to issues of quality versus quantity, subject versus student centred and the outcomes versus process dimensions of adult education. Leirman describes adult education over the last number of decades as swinging like a pendulum between differing schools of thought on these issues, but within these swings a competency based model has emerged, not just in response to the increased need for accountability, but equally in response to the increasing individualisation of society and by implication education (Leirman 1981). He makes the important point that:

> "even if adult education were to be de-institutionalised and de-professionalized, one may wonder whether the central goal of adult education – to enable adults to get a better insight into their personal and societal situation and to provide them with skills to act upon their situation, would in the long run be better realised" (ibid. p.11).

The only way to appreciate and understand this, he believes, is for practitioners to be given the opportunity to reach in-depth insights through critical analysis and reflection. It is important therefore to engage tutors in discussion, debate and evaluation and really promote the concept of reflective practitioners within our services.

Finally, accreditation is firmly set within the wider national and European adult education policy context. The White Paper on Adult Education, *Learning for Life*, recommends that an integrated approach to the development of an accreditation strategy be developed. It makes reference to the Green Paper's recommendation on flexible approaches in line with learner needs. It is important therefore that we consider and implement the most effective strategy for doing so *(Learning for Life, 2000)*. The enactment of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, led to the establishment of the National Qualifications Authority in 2001, its principle objectives being to establish a framework of qualifications and the facilitation of access, transfer and progression at all stages within the lifelong learning process (Towards a National Framework of Qualifications, 2002). One of the central values and principles, which underpin the framework, is that of quality, not just in relation to the setting of overall standards but as an overarching element in its implementation.

Considerations for Tutors

The starting point for tutors is to acknowledge some of the inherent tensions that exist within the concept of accreditation. During our own reflections, one of our tutors very aptly stated:

> *'Yes, it was good to state why not accreditation? Now I feel better about discussing and opening up to the question of why accreditation?'*

The primary tension that existed for our tutors was that of a perceived conflict between a student/learner led curriculum and a subject led one; they perceived accreditation as taking the major focus away from the student to the subject, something which they saw as in direct conflict with their ideological position on adult education. Whereas they would have worked from a 'curriculum' previously, it was one that was negotiable and very much driven by the learner's needs. In talking about the dominant ideological emphases of different groups of teachers located within the hierarchical structure of the education system, Keddie believes the view held by adult educators comes from the principle of voluntary attendance by most adult learners and by implication the importance of responding to the demands of adults as they come to class, not beforehand – our reflections would certainly concur with this (Keddie, 1980).

Much of the resistance and fear had a lot to do with the tutors' perception of themselves as not being subject specialised. Their professional frame of reference was that of their commitment to responding to the students' needs. Comments such as, *'Let the learners tell us what they want, they will direct what happens and we will respond to that'* came up time and time again as we analysed how programmes were running.

Most of our tutors accepted the point that it is perhaps a luxury to consider an education experience that does not involve some element of certification, structure and sequential learning. Despite acknowledging this, they also had some learner related concerns which have been expressed within a number of other critiques of accreditation within adult education. These were mainly in relation to learner autonomy; feelings of them having less say in the direction, content and timing of their learning and becoming more like passive consumers as opposed to active participants (Clark, 1981, Hall, 1975, Heaney, 2000, Mayo and Thompson, 1991, Pennington, 1981). This tension between the passivity and autonomy of the learner is fundamental to the Freirean view

of the teacher as someone in an equal relationship with the learner, engaging in a process of dialogue and problem posing as opposed to what he saw as the impositional nature of more traditional forms of education (Freire, 1971).

Our tutors, although maybe not aware of the theoretical foundations of self-directed learning, had a very strong commitment to the andragogical process as espoused by Knowles, with self-directedness as its core (Knowles, 1989). It may well be observed, however, that there is an over dependency on this process and perhaps an over simplistic view of it that does not take into account some of the complexities involved in adults being truly self-directed in any given learning situation (Jarvis, 1987).

Considerations for Learners

There were also more specific concerns raised in terms of the type of learner that enters our service at this level, often referred to as 'non traditional' adult learners, most of whom have had little or no formal education experience and for those that have had this experience, it has often been very negative.

The central question for our tutors was 'What type of learner does this system suit'? It has been suggested that centralised systems of accreditation standards and curricula may act as barriers to working class participation in education programmes (Grayson, 1995; Mayo and Thompson, 1995; Thompson, 1980). At the same time, other research has reported that adults in basic education programmes perform better when they have a clear idea of what is expected of them than they do if the desired outcome is unclear (Mezirow et al, 1975).

Will all adult education be delivered within an accreditation framework in the future? Our tutors wanted reassurance that there would still be room within our service for a plurality of approaches to deal with and respond to the diversity and plurality of learners. Some of the tutors raised the issue of the 'unquantifiable learning' that can take place, of progression that can neither be defined nor captured, voicing the concern that, *'In the end of the day many of our learners just want to learn how to express themselves and they really do not care about a certificate'*. The critical challenge for the local adult education service will be to make provision flexible and supportive enough to facilitate all learners, particularly those who wish to enter the first level of accreditation.

Implementation Issues

In many cases it was not the concept of accreditation that was at issue for the tutors but the actual certification process and the framework within which it takes place and is delivered. National standards of performance have been established and must be met; without enriching the teaching process we could be in danger of excessive narrowing of focus. Some of the key questions which have arisen in this context have been: Are we assuming that most areas in adult education can be accredited? Are we actually deepening the context of students' learning? Will adult students be given the time to work through the profundity of issues to make connections and understand issues in a meaningful way? (Grayson, 1995). If local adult education services are to continue to deliver good adult education these must be considered. Standardised curricula and outcomes are likely to reinforce traditional teacher, student roles and encourage standardised approaches.

Tutors and learners must be facilitated to regain the locus of control of the learning situation while at the same time working within a particular framework. Skills to deliver in this way may need to be developed and supported and cannot be taken for granted. Some limited research on this from the UK perspective showed that working creatively with accreditation, particularly at the pre-access level, was welcomed by learners. Although many of the programme objectives had very low and limited expectations of learners, by taking the time to develop the outcomes in a more meaningful way, some of the frustrations that both tutors and learners were feeling were smoothed away (Ross, 1995).

This places a lot of responsibility in terms of quality of delivery on the tutors. Fundamental to this will be their underlying attitude or orientation. In their interpretation of the tutor/ learner role they can create a dependency role or otherwise (Hadley, 1981). It may be easier to deliver within a dependency model and more efficient in terms of their time. Developmental work of this nature is not without practical implications.

This raises an interesting point in terms of how adult education tutors actually see their roles. Much adult education practice to date has taken place in the absence of a certification and accreditation framework. That is not to say that it has been without outcome, but it has been without clearly defined sets of criteria in relation to named competencies. Within a primarily meritocratic education system, it is inevitable that this type of adult education will have a low

priority (Keddie, 1980). This most likely is because of the minimal contribution it has made to conferring qualifications. Historically, this has contributed to adult education's low status and by implication has affected the professional identity of those delivering it. Within an accreditation system, tutors consider that more is expected of them and they want to deliver good quality teaching. We are moving our programmes from a more ad hoc type of provision to a more streamlined and formalised one. The key question is should we not also be taking this view of our tutors and considering a suitable model for their professional development that is equally resourced and planned for?

The final issue from the perspective of the learner which was raised was one which had a more practical application and wider implication for all service providers – do we actually have the necessary progression routes in place locally to enable learners to go forward? Within our own service mandate we can only take our learners so far; is there the full compliment of necessary provisions locally to make the aspiration of 'Access Transfer and Progression a reality for all?' (National Qualifications Authority, 2003). In presenting arguments against accreditation in the British context, Ross makes the point that we need to advocate for more coherence on the issue, both to address problems of continuity and purpose within programmes and following on from them. Teams of tutors need to work together as do service providers. He places responsibility for this within the adult education services themselves (ibid, 1981).

Moving Forward
Elias and Merriam have stated that 'radical thought is a good antidote to complacency', believing that critiquing their current practice can enable adult educators to question the basic thrust of their effort and this is ultimately good for the service (1980, p. 171). Our experiences would lead us to concur with this view. New ideas and innovations in education, in particular adult education, will flounder unless there is more conceptual clarity at all levels (Lawson, 1975). Conceptual clarity within adult education is a rather elusive phenomenon and confusions have led to many practical difficulties and deep divides, the danger is that we overlook these and continue to move forward. Accreditation is a contested area within adult education and we must acknowledge this.

The theory and practice of adult education has been shaped by something which has unevenly filtered down. As a result practitioners are struggling with

ethical, intellectual and practical questions to the extent that the real meaning of adult education has become blurred (Field, 1991). We, as providers, in partnership with our tutors, need to seize the moment and determine the quality of provision. Whatever the position we adopt on the issue of accreditation, it must be held critically and as a result of a process of examining and evaluating, perhaps rejecting or modifying what has been previously practised and understood. As Freire himself stated on the process of change within education:

> "The shock between yesterday which is losing relevance but still seeking to survive, and a tomorrow which is gaining substance, characterizes the phase of transition as a time of announcement and a time of decision. Only however, to the degree that the choices result from a critical perception of the contradiction are they real and capable of being transformed in action" (Freire, 1973, p. 7).

Throughout any process of change, our tutors can feel marginalised and threatened in terms of their particular professional identity and purpose. It may present the best of them with the impetus for leaving. The process of reflective practice opens up new possibilities for working within organisations, helping to develop both a sense of our limitations and our future potential. Within the adult education service we must try to enable our tutors to remain ideologically centred while at the same time respond in a professional way to new methodological and institutional demands.

Our process was informal and in many ways reactive; for it to be truly of value it needs to be supported by academic effort and documented research. We have not paid enough attention to this. How we capture these valuable insights in a more structured way and perhaps within a more formal research framework is our next big challenge.

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