

LEARNER INVOLVEMENT AND THE DISAFFECTED LEARNER: A CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH

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July 8th 2016

Motivation for the study

- The knowledge and experience that many early school leavers are capable of more cognitive challenge than currently offered in vocational training programmes
- Many early school leavers have 'gaps' in literacy skills which hold them back from making progress. These could be addressed
- Many early school leavers have negative school experience and are not involved in their learning
- Long-term, what, if any, aspirations are these young people offered within the education system?

Key Factors affecting this group of young people

- Multiple and complex disadvantages present in family background
- Many presenting with 'gaps 'in literacy skills which affect overall performance in training and education
- These 'gaps'in skills also affect confidence:aggressive behaviours and emotions often compensate for this lack of skill
- Limited expectations of the young people from schools, systems, educators

The learners in the study

- The ESLs attending the centre and the literacy project range in age and background and normally commence training at sixteen years. Most live in housing estates in the local town, which has a population of approximately 25,000 people. Many of the ESLs come from disadvantaged and problematic backgrounds and this tends to affect their general attendance and overall performance. The perception of these YP in the wider community is generally that of 'a crowd of wasters' or 'troublemakers' who are regarded as badly behaved, who cause trouble on the streets and are not generally fit for school or exams. Schools in the community tend to see the centre as a last port of call for YP with whom they cannot deal and many referrals come from them when other avenues have been exhausted and when they are about to exclude the learner.
- The eight YP who started out in the study had all left formal schooling in the previous three years without completing upper secondary examinations. Their average age was 17.5 years and they included six Irish nationals, two being members of the Travelling Community and two English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) learners from the Czech Republic; two females and six males. While reasons for leaving school varied, the majority of them reported a dislike of school and problems with teachers. All had successfully completed Level 3 (basic level) Communications on the Irish qualifications framework.

What concerned me? the learning experience, the lack of literacy skill and what might motivate the young people to aspire to a higher level certificate:

The first object of any act of learning, over and beyond the pleasure it may give us, is that it should serve us in the future. Learning should not only take us somewhere, it should allow us later to go further more easily (Bruner, 1960, p.17).

‘literacy development is a conscious act of will’ and ‘each literacy act requires the motivation to act, the motivation to persist in activity, and the motivation to engage in cognitive and affective practices that will result in comprehension’ (Davey,2006).

Intrinsic motivation ‘is catalysed (rather than caused) when individuals are in conditions that conduce towards its expression’ (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

What is literacy in this setting? What were the young people going to experience?

I was influenced by the following:

The National Literacy Strategy (Ireland) defines literacy as inclusive of the capacity :

‘to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication, including spoken language, written text, broadcast media and digital media ‘(DES, 2011, p.7).

And the enriching definition by Hurry which goes beyond the core skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening which states:

‘By substance we mean what you get out of being literate: reading a novel, a play, a poem which moves you; reading about travel in China or who said what about weapons of mass destruction or how to change a tyre. It enables us to communicate ideas, instructions, anger, despair, joy. These are the powerful reasons why being literate is so enriching. ‘(Hurry et al., 2010, p.16).

What did I do?

- I approached eight early school leavers to see if they would like to participate in Fetac Level 4 Communications (Level 3 is the usual starting point for ESLs). Taught the Communications module over an eight month period, using the methods below. Two staff were involved.
- I created opportunities for learner involvement such as deciding break times, what type of pen and paper, how corrections were to be approached, how the units of the curriculum were to be taught, how many drafts of an exercise we would do..
- I introduced constructivist teaching strategies of teacher as coach (Simons 2000), self-directed learning (Giesen, 2008) and generative learning (Wittrock, 1990)

What the young people wanted....

- 'better English', (John), 'more English' (Brian), 'better English, to pass it' (Michael), 'proper English skills' (Trudy) and 'the right English to get my dream job' (Clara). ' 'My reading and writing -- ok, but need to improve my communications'(Brian).
- They saw the course as 'a better chance of getting a job, education. It's something better to put on my C.V.', 'get a good education', produce 'a better piece of work for my c.v.' (John), 'get another qualification' and 'get good communication skills and help find a job' (Clara) and 'move on to LCA next year' (Brian).

What happened?

- The young people responded in a variety of ways: scared, tentative, responded to challenge, were determined to complete.
- Their emotional responses to the literacy demands of the programme were very significant: aggressive, nervous, blaming, personal, physical
and yet:
- Five of the eight completed the course and the young people's portfolios were singled out by the external examiner as 'being of a particularly high standard'

Constructivist strategies / methods used in the study

□ *Teacher as coach*

The role of teacher as coach in constructivist theory requires a particular approach to teaching and a shared collaborative view of learning. The work of the teacher as coach is to adapt the curriculum to address the learners' suppositions, help negotiate goals and objectives, pose problems of emerging relevance, seek and value the learners point of view and provide multiple modes of representations or perspectives on content (Bruner, 1960; Christie, 2005; Giesen, 2008; Honebein, 1996).

□ *Generative learning*

Generative learning has been described as the process in which links between old and new knowledge are constructed and personal understanding is developed. Generative learning takes place when links are created between the contents of short-term memory and our knowledge base (Wittrock, 1990)

□ *Self -directed learning*

In constructivist pedagogy, the skills of self-directed learning facilitate greater learner involvement in what is learned and in how things are learned. Self-directed learning is conceived as an active constructive form of learning in which learners are becoming better and better at designing their own learning environments (Simons, 2000, p.3). According to Revans, while learning is central to the process, the learners themselves determine the goals of learning according to needs arising from their actions, in VET, at work, or elsewhere (Revans, 1982).

Young people's initial responses to learner involvement and literacy challenges...

- 'I hate listening to myself. I hate me voice, big traveller voice'(Trudy, classroom setting).
- 'why don't ye just get on with it and let us start some real work. Let us get something done. All this talking is nothing. It's not work' (John, classroom setting).
- Brian said 'I hate writing stories. Do less of them', while John declared that he was not learning enough and was finding things difficult 'No, there could be more learning for me. There could be easier ways of learning for me' and Clara stated that 'I need to fidget when working. I don't like doing the work in silence'.

More emotional responses to literacy issues

‘I know you f****g mean me when you say that. When you say’ there are some spellings we are all getting wrong, you f****g mean me. Why cant you just say it straight out. F**k this. There must be an easier way to learn’(John,1-1 interview).

‘I’ve got to get out. I can’t breathe here’,(Trudy, group setting).

‘I’m not going up to that f****g class. I’m not in the mood, I’m not going up’,(Brian, workshop setting).

What happened as the course progressed?

- As the course progressed, the young people responded positively to becoming involved in their learning and in making decisions about what happens to them
- Teachers found that there were heavy demands on them in using this approach, but it can be done
- The young people were motivated by teacher support and belief in them, by a cognitive challenge and by teachers guiding them rather than directing all the teaching
- The programme settled into an easier flow, with young people taking responsibility for their work.

What the young people thought about involvement in their learning...

- 'It was good, cos we, the group, got to decide the order of the units-what's first, what's last. That's right, we did. We got to decide what way we learned instead of you just pushing the stuff on us. I got on better, like, with having to decide what to do, when, what day. With Communications, it was kind of up to yourself. Ye gave me my own chance, like. If you want it, you'll do it. But I did want it, so I'd get in the mood, snap out of the mood five minutes later and then crack on again' (Brian, 1-1 interview)
- 'I dunno. There was more, I dunno. It just made us come in more, we knew what we were doing so we had our own choice about what we wanted to do so we just got on with it. Got it over and done with' (John, 1-1 interview).

What they thought about having some control over their learning...

'If I didn't push myself, I felt I was letting somebody down. I can't say to Matthew 'go in there and do my learning for me' (Clara, interim review discussion).

'It's a good way to do it. It's up to yourself to do it. It's a better way of doing it, to let people know that they have to do it themselves. You have to put your head down to do the work like. If you're petted too much, you get jaw locked. You sit there and do nothing. Let them [teachers] do it' (Trudy, 1-1 interview).

Matthew expresses his experience of being involved with having a voice in how he learned:

'like everyone had the right to say how you learn. That way of learning, I liked it. We were making the rules how we wanted to learn. Yes, talking about some things for a while and then you said 'now, go and do it' 'The Communications course I found sometimes boring but I know it's good for me. But I'm not sure if it will be useful for my life or for my job.' (Matthew, 1-1 interview).

'It makes you feel like an adult. It makes you feel we know how to do it. She thinks we know how to do it, but we don't, but we just do it anyway'(Mark,1-1 interview).

Perceptions of progress in literacy...

- Spelling. New words that I learned that I didn't know how to spell 'til I got used to them for the first time, like. I'm better in writing, talking and reading (John, 1-1 interview).
- My vocabulary has developed a lot. I know how to spell better. Just talking to someone, words would be popping into your head and I might use them depending on who the person would be (Brian, 1-1 interview).
- I found it very good and helpful. I improved in my reading, my speech, writing letters. Yeah, like speaking in front of people, reading aloud in front of a group. Before I'd just read to myself. It helps me outside now. Cos if I meet somebody who says a big word, I can understand it more, I'm not looking at them'.(Clara,1-1 interview).

Young people's responses to the 'academic' challenge of the literacy module

'It was more of a challenge than the Junior Cert anyway, a lot more challenging. The reading and the writing was a lot harder. There was a lot more writing in Communications. The words were a lot bigger.'(Brian, 1-1 interview)

'It was a bit harder. Yeah made me work more, writing more, I didn't know I could do all that. It was a bit harder. There was more stuff -- more writing. The thinking was harder. You had to think more' (Trudy, 1-1 interview).

John liked the challenge of the materials and even experienced some enjoyment!

'I enjoyed writing out the report and getting it done, over and done with. I just said I might as well do it. I got help but I knew what to do towards the end. I knew I was learning how to write about something '(John, 1-1 interview).

Practicalities of the work:how did I deal with literacy issues?

- I explained a lot, any word that was unfamiliar or challenging was gone through and put in a sentence
- I made a list of the common words that they all misspelt and they noted them, for example, 'litracy' for 'literacy', 'intrest' for 'interest' and some pronunciation issues such as 'Vetac' for 'Fetac'
- I provided alternative words and phrases so that the young people had a range of options and felt they could make choices when writing responses.
- I spoke to the young people very clearly and often, that I believed they had a right to a good education
- I provided a range of choices and experiences-we met an author, read an interesting book, film script: they liked the challenge of all of this, and responded positively. The young people were particularly scathing about repetitive materials such as the learner journal, which required them to repeat what they learned, on a weekly basis.

Any changes in reading?

‘Improvement in reading accuracy was inconsistent. Two participants had marginal increases in accuracy, one remained unchanged and two decreased. Reading comprehension scores, however, improved for four of the five, indicating that they were reading and interpreting materials with more understanding and perhaps more critical thinking **skills**’. (Based on the original standardisation sample of 304 tertiary level education students attending FE/HE in south-east England, Adult Reading Test).

Key Findings

- Learner involvement can work for the disaffected learner, but it takes time, patience and commitment
- Literacy issues within this population influenced confidence, performance and, at times, prevented any progress
- The young people's personal lives and the circumstances they found themselves in affected participation and concentration right throughout the course: 'there isn't one moment of the day when I amn't thinking about my family'(Clara,1-1 interview)
- Staff of the project had to be very organised and very flexible in order to respond to and challenge behaviours and ensure the young people made progress: i.e finding the balance between managing the learner as a young adult and allowing them to manage their roles.

Key Challenges of the approach

- There is a high attrition rate in this type of education and structural inequalities/external circumstances affect YP's participation in a very significant way (Atkins,2001; Jones,2009)
- Young people live in very challenging situations and this must be acknowledged by tutors and education institutions.Those young people whose freedom is curtailed through prison sentences are particularly vulnerable
- Young people have interests and experiences which could meaningfully be brought into the curriculum but this is challenging for tutors working with formal curricula

More key Challenges

- Young people should be challenged more in their learning. It is simply wrong that they are perceived to be at the lower end of the scale in terms of ability and employment opportunities, because they left school early/are within the justice system
- This approach will not work for everyone but it can work for some young people and this is sometimes the biggest challenge: to commit resources, time and imagination to a small group of young people who are often not valued or taken seriously, despite the fact that they are cognitively well able to achieve and succeed
- This approach requires experienced and open-minded tutors
- BUT: using a framework of understanding motivation(Deci and Ryan,2005),constructivist methods (Simons,2003; Giesen,2005) and learner involvement(Larkin,2009,2014), young people can and do respond to having greater involvement in their learning.

Key Recommendations

- Encourage tutors to take risks when working with young people, even the most difficult. There is always fruit on the tree
- Ask young people what ways they would like to be involved in their learning and in how literacy work is corrected
- Create a group contract with young people so that they can take responsibility for their decisions.
- Young people respond to tutor support and belief: keep them involved and encouraged and communicate your expectations
- Use a variety of materials and encourage them to suggest interests; i.e. Rap music artists, social media issues etc

Would I do it again?

- Yes: the study indicated that the disaffected learner might benefit from increased learner involvement. This is critical when planning future work in this area at this and earlier ages
- The traditional role of the teacher could change: I would use the teacher as coach and self directed learning aspects of constructivism as these were not difficult to implement and are possibly used in many training centres and school settings already.
- I would very openly involve the learners in deciding their learning experience
- Despite the time required, I would involve other staff in the process: we were two teachers and this enhanced our style, our individual personalities complemented the approach and it was very useful to have another colleague to discuss and critique with.

The importance of culture for the learner in the vocational/justice/prison setting

According to Smyth and Hattam, the culture of a school has a powerful impact on YP and plays an important role in alienating or welcoming students:

‘In many respects, school culture is a crucial linkage between the aspirations and experiences of students and the decisions they make to leave school prematurely (Smyth and Hattam, 2002, p. 377)’.