

Learning *from* Experience Trust

ACTION LEARNING IN THE COMMUNITY: Widening Participation through experiential learning

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INTRODUCTION

In the information age, it has been argued, 'learning is being positioned both as a strategy for individual economic survival and career progression - we need to be adaptable to survive in the twenty-first century workplace - and as a means of personal, even spiritual, fulfilment and social inclusion' (Paechter et al, 2001. 1). Lifelong learning has been identified as being 'as much a response to demands for continuous adjustment to skills and attitudes in a rapidly changing society as to the democratic requirement for social cohesion' (Commission of the European Communities, 1993: 20).

Similarly, in Britain, since 1997, the New Labour government's commitment to Widening Participation in post compulsory education and training has represented a key element in strategies to strengthen the nation's competitiveness in the global economy. Lifelong learning has, in addition, been advocated within the context of strategies to promote active citizenship and social inclusion. Continuing education has been valued for its potential contribution to democratic renewal as well as to enhancing the employability of the unemployed and the under- employed, those around the margins of the new flexible labour force. .

This was the policy context within which Action Learning in the Community (ALIC) was set up, in 1999, to explore innovative ways of facilitating Widening Participation, focusing upon reaching socially excluded adults. Through action-research, ALIC aimed to test new ways to identify and to overcome both the individual and the institutional barriers involved. More specifically, the project's approach was based upon initiatives to promote experiential learning, including experiential learning from active citizenship in the community, with a particular focus upon working with long-term unemployed adults to improve their employability.

Experiential learning has gained prominence internationally, over the past decade or so, described as being in the 'vanguard of educational development' (Boud, 1989. xii). As 'an educational philosophy, a range of methodologies, and a framework for being, seeing, thinking and acting, on individual and collective levels' this has been seen as enabling us 'to engage with the interrelatedness of self and the social context, inner experience and outer experience, content and process, and different ways of knowing' (McGill and Warner Weil, 1989.245-6). Unsurprisingly perhaps, given this range, experiential learning is a term with a 'spectrum of meanings', however, depending on the varying perspectives of its users and the differing contexts within which it is applied (Warner Weil and McGill, 1989). Both aspects, the contested meanings as well as the shifting policy context, need to be explored before evaluating the potential implications of projects such as ALIC.

CONTESTED MEANINGS AND VARYING APPROACHES

As Brah and Hoy have argued, 'questions of student experience have always been central to adult education' but 'the concept of "experience is an ideological construct" needs deconstructing' (Brah and Hoy, 1989.71). Experience has been seen as the foundation of and the stimulus for learning but learning is socially and culturally constructed and learners actively construct their experience (Boud, Cohen and Walker, 1993). Individuals may interpret their experiences in very different ways, then, the meaning depending on this interpretive process (Usher, 1993) experience being capable of being invested varying meanings, some of them conflicting and contradictory (Johnston and Usher, 1997).

On the basis of participatory research with adults Johnston and Usher concluded that 'the "text" of experience is always open to re-interpretation and reassessment.' (Johnston and Usher, 1997. 141). Whether with adult literacy work in England or establishing a black workers' school in apartheid South Africa, 'it has become obvious that we have constructed different ways of understanding, theorising and representing our experience at different times, for different audiences and according to our changing implication within different contexts, narratives and discourses'. (Johnston and Usher, 1997. 141). Experience, they concluded, is always 'in process', inherently capable of many significations because it can be represented in many ways, although some representations are more dominant (powerful) than others. (Johnston and Usher, 1997. 141).

Some reflections on experiences are clearly perceived to be more acceptable than others, then, depending upon the relative power of those concerned and 'confession' may be riskier by far, for the less powerful. As it will also be suggested subsequently, encouraging students 'to share their insights and experiences with each other' may actually be experienced as disempowering, if the right emotional tone of authentic discourse has not yet been established in the group (Brookfield, 2001. 73). Students may understandably suspect that the group leader 'has some kind of hidden agenda that will be revealed at a later point, by which time we will have spoken things that, in terms of this agenda, make us look stupid' (Brookfield, 2001. 73).

As Brew has argued, learning, knowledge and experience are not all cumulative, either. 'The process of transformation is a continual one' (Brew, 1993. 96-7). Some past experiences need to be unpacked so that they can be unlearned. Unlike 'forgetting' which 'is like dropping a few stitches', she explained, 'unlearning is like unravelling the whole and knitting it up again' (Brew, 1993.88), a process which was also relevant to ALIC participants.

Experiential learning has been explored from two contrasting theoretical approaches, it has been suggested, one in terms of challenging the traditional structures of education, the other in terms of fitting experiential learning into 'a very rigid structure, in which the traditionalists decide which bits of learning are valid' (Warner Weil and McGill, 1989. 1). In similar vein, Brah and Hoy distinguished between 'experiential learning, rooted in individualistic approaches to student-centred learning, on the one hand, and learning from experience rooted in Freirian approaches to the development of learners' critical understanding of social processes and an awareness of their capacity to change society', (Brah and Hoy, 1989), on the other.

More specifically, Warner Weil and McGill went on to identify four 'villages', or clusters of aims and concerns. These may be summarised as follows:

- Village One: concerned with accrediting learning from experience as the basis for opening up

access to higher education, training and employment opportunities

- Village Two: focused on experiential learning as the basis for promoting change in post-school education (making it more relevant)
- Village Three: emphasising learning from experience as the basis for consciousness raising, community action and social change and
- Village Four: concerned with personal growth and development.

In practice, of course, particular programmes and projects can - and often do - cross these boundaries. Nor do these 'villages' necessarily correspond at all neatly with either underlying theoretical perspective. As Edwards has pointed out, 'modernisers' and 'progressives' may both support projects to open up access to higher education and training, and both may support initiatives to promote change in post-school education although they may do so for varying reasons, in the pursuit of widely differing social goals and priorities (Edwards, 1997).

ALIC's promoters developed the project on the basis of varying combinations of these aims and concerns. There were, in addition, differences of emphasis, over time, as stakeholders learnt from their experiences of project implementation in practice, in a shifting policy context.

THE SHIFTING POLICY CONTEXT

In recent years there have been relevant policy developments and shifts within these, both internationally, within the European Union, and within Britain. In summary, learning has been valued for its potential contribution to securing our economic future' as the then Secretary of State for Education and Employment reflected in his introduction to the Green Paper 'The Learning Age' (DfEE, 1998.7). There has been considerable emphasis upon improving the knowledge and skills and hence the employability of individuals, whether these are young people or mature adults.

There has, in addition, been some focus upon education for citizenship, however, education to enable people 'to play a full part in their community' (DfEE, 1998.7) as well as promoting social inclusion via enabling people to improve their employment prospects. The most recent European proposals for developing a strategy for Lifelong Learning clearly include both sets of objectives, promoting personal fulfilment and active citizenship together with enhancing their employment prospects. These themes emerged from extensive consultations on the European Commission's 'Memorandum on Lifelong Learning' in 2001 (Waddington, 2002) leading to proposals for coherent, comprehensive strategies which:

- Are appropriately resourced
- Are based upon partnerships between government departments, education and training providers, employers, voluntary bodies and social partners
- Are rooted in the needs and interests of learners and potential learners
- Have developed ways of facilitating access / removing barriers
- Create a learning culture and
- Strive for excellence

In England and Wales, more specifically, increasing and widening participation in higher education has been described as being 'at the heart of New Labour's higher education initiatives' (Callender, 2002.83). Higher education, it was argued by the then Secretary of State, has a particular contribution to make in a knowledge-economy, acting as an instrument of social justice, opening up life chances and thereby combating social exclusion (Callender, 2002). ALIC was developed in 1999, two years into the 'New Labour' government, to explore ways of overcoming barriers to achieving these objectives, with a particular emphasis on the potential contribution of experiential learning, including experiential learning in the community.

There was already considerable evidence to document the existence of a series of barriers, both situational and motivational. Structural and educational obstacles included patchy provision, difficulties of geographical access, lack of information, guidance and support in the community as well as in colleges, inflexible pre-educational requirements and colleges which were insufficiently open, welcoming and user friendly (McGivney, 1991; 1997). The overall learning context had been identified as a key factor, since non-traditional students could easily be deterred by inflexible and unwelcoming learning environments, particularly if their earlier educational experiences had been problematic. Women were particularly disadvantaged, in addition, if they needed affordable childcare, because the lack of sufficient affordable provision was identified as a major issue.

Adults also faced material barriers such as lack of money, which was identified as the most important barrier for younger adults (Sargant et al 1997). Social class, it had emerged, was the key determinant, however, in understanding participation in learning (Sargant, 2000) with the lowest participation among unskilled working class people on limited incomes particularly those not in paid

employment. This was, of course, the group most specifically targeted by ALIC.

Similarly, the motivational barriers, the lack of self-confidence and low expectations of the possible benefits of education were unevenly distributed. Those with the poorest previous educational experiences were the most likely to undervalue the potential benefits of learning. Lack of self-confidence made students particularly vulnerable, too, if the institution was less than welcoming, because these were the potential students who were least likely to be able to cope with inflexible bureaucratic requirements. And those surrounded by the least favourable employment prospects (in disadvantaged areas) tended to be least optimistic about the potential for improving their employability via engaging in learning (Sargant et al, 1997). Once again, these were issues which ALIC was to address.

Since then, the situation for disadvantaged adults has become even more challenging in some ways, despite government targets for Widening Participation, overall. More recent evidence comes from a study of mature students' decision making which was published in January 2002. This started from the then Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals' concern that there had been a 12% decrease in mature students' applications for full-time courses between 1997/8 and 1998/9 (although the pattern differed for part-time applications). The study explored the motivations both of those who did enter higher education and those who did not (but were potentially qualified eg via an access programme). Its report identified four types of factor which inhibited Widening Participation:

- Financial and educational policy (including fees and student support)
- Economic and labour market factors
- The policies and practices of higher education institutions (including the availability or non availability of part-time provision)
- Individual background, aspirations and choices

There were parallels here with the findings of previous studies. In addition, since 1997, there had been policy changes in relation to student funding. As a result, it was suggested, financial barriers were seen to be even greater. Problems with the welfare benefits system also emerged as a significant constraint, inhibiting people from engaging in learning programmes.

In response, mature people were becoming more strategic in planning whether and what to study, it seemed, weighing up the disadvantages of acquiring a debt of £12-15,000 as against the possible benefits in terms of improved employment prospects. As one very lively, bright, black single parent in her mid thirties commented, having successfully completed an access course 'so, in three years I'll be £12-15000 in debt and I'll have a degree in English' (Davies et al, 2000.17). Would this enable her to improve her economic situation? The tutor who reported this conversation concluded that 'She won't be coming to study', concluding that this was a very depressing state of affairs (Davies et al, 2000. 17).

In general, mature students were getting younger (ie more were under thirty apparently), with increasing interest in directly vocational courses. 54% cited improving their employment prospects as their key motivation, but this was also seen as a gamble. Sadly, this was a risk that older people, those with dependants and those with least resources in the first place seemed to be the least prepared to take.

For those who did take the plunge, there were encouraging comments about the positive benefits and the sheer enjoyment of learning. Unsurprisingly, however, this enjoyment was lessened for those

who had most difficulties with time, whether because of domestic responsibilities and childcare (cited by 57% and 23% of women respectively, compared with 51% and 3% of men, respectively) and/or because of the need to undertake paid employment. Despite a series of policy initiatives to promote Widening Participation, accompanied by a range of initiatives within higher education institutions, the difficulties for those with the least resources to take up Widening Participation opportunities had actually been seen to be increasing rather than decreasing. Meanwhile special measures to meet their needs, such as additional resources for student support and for childcare were seen as being too complex, and insufficiently user friendly - a conclusion that the government itself has come to recognise. As the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, himself reflected in his speech to the Labour party conference in October 2001 'We have to find a better way to combine state funding and student contributions' (quoted in Callender, 2002. 83).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, as it will be suggested in more detail subsequently, ALIC confirmed the relevance of all these studies, including the relevance of those which included evidence of the impact of policy changes since 1997. The originality of ALIC's contribution may be more to do with the project's approach to finding ways of overcoming some, at least, of these barriers, including potential implications for the role of experiential learning.

ACTION LEARNING IN THE COMMUNITY: THE ALIC PROJECT

In 1999 the (then) Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) (subsequently reorganised into the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) funded the Learning from Experience Trust for a three year period to recruit and work with a total of forty five people (fifteen per year) to enable them to access higher education, as a means of opening up more fulfilling and better-rewarded career opportunities. This would be achieved through a learning programme (tailored for each participant's needs), through voluntary activity in the community (via fieldwork placements), through individual and group support and through personal guidance, with a particular focus upon the facilitation of learning from experience. This experiential learning would draw upon participants' previous life experiences and their more recent experiences as active citizens, in their fieldwork placements.

Action Learning in the Community (ALIC) was delivered through a partnership between Goldsmiths College, University of London, Lewisham College and the Community Education Department of Lewisham Borough Council. These partner organisations, together with DfEE/ DFES guided ALIC through the project's Steering Committee (which also drew upon expertise from external specialists). The more immediate aspects of management were guided by a sub group of the Steering Committee, the Project Management Group. ALIC recruited a project worker who was supervised via the Learning from Experience Trust and supported by their administrator. Monitoring and evaluation was undertaken via the Centre for Urban and Community Research at Goldsmiths (The author was the principal evaluator)

From the outset, there were differences of perspective on ALIC's overall aims, although stakeholders had varying views about the extent of these differences. One view was that there was (and always had been) a single shared **aim**, but that there were differences about the most effective ways of achieving this aim ('there may be more than one route to climb the mountain' as one stakeholder commented, but it was the same mountain to be climbed). Other stakeholders raised questions as to how far there actually had been such underlying agreement about overall aims, in the first place.

The fact that there were varying perspectives on ALIC's **objectives** was clearer, right from the start. One approach tended to emphasise ALIC's role as an experiment to test the relevance of facilitating experiential learning, including the promotion of experiential learning through active citizenship. ALIC would recruit and retain non-traditional adult students who would successfully complete their Higher Education courses AND would then go on to apply their learning as creative problem solvers and/ or reflective practitioners in the 'real world'. ALIC could increase understanding of the processes through which some individuals were able to learn from experiences of tackling and overcoming problems in their lives, and learning from experiences as active citizens. Through drawing upon these learning experiences, positively, they would be strengthened to complete higher education courses - and then to succeed in their subsequent professional careers. These creative problem solvers could, it was suggested by one external specialist 'bring uniquely valuable qualities to the world of work'.

Whilst the facilitation of experiential learning had been a shared objective in general, others gave greater emphasis to ALIC's role in promoting widening participation for adults from non-traditional backgrounds, more generally. From this perspective, ALIC should focus on identifying and addressing institutional blocks and structural barriers. Strategies to tackle these blocks and barriers would include, for example, facilitating effective partnership-working between the different

educational providers in the area (a key theme in more recent policy developments). Supporting institutions in building effective strategies for widening access would also include initiatives such as facilitating progression routes, promoting student mentoring schemes and providing 'taster' opportunities for potential students to sit in on lectures in the local colleges and universities. From this perspective, experiential learning was less central to the project, although it had its place, particularly through the experience of active citizenship via fieldwork placement.

A further area of difference emerged in Year One, as to whether ALIC should become a direct provider of educational programmes. One view was that ALIC should be working with the partner providers to open up access and progression opportunities for ALIC students. ALIC itself would be facilitating students' experiential learning and providing them with counselling and support services. Through these processes ALIC would be identifying and addressing structural and policy related blocks and barriers. In practice, however, partly in response to requests from participants themselves, (some of whom were more interested in gaining certification than they were in experiential learning per se), ALIC did become a direct provider of learning programmes, offering two modules which were accredited at pre-access level.

During its three year life, to a greater or less extent, ALIC addressed each of these varying objectives. For some stakeholders this was fine, since these objectives were complementary, rather than being in competition with each other. Whilst recognising that the different elements of ALIC might be complementary, however, other stakeholders expressed the view that one - or other - of these objectives had been given too much – or too little - emphasis in practice, at particular periods. By implication, the balance ought to shift in one or other direction, in the future. And shift it did, as the monitoring and evaluation process documented.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

As the Strategy for Monitoring and Evaluation explained, ALIC set out to ‘develop systematic ways of learning the lessons of this innovative project. Has the project succeeded in finding new ways of widening participation and facilitating progression, and if so by what processes? What then are the lessons of ALIC which could be replicated more widely?’ (Strategy for Monitoring and Evaluation, 1999).

More specifically, the monitoring and evaluation strategy set out to answer two questions:

- 1 How to measure the impact of ALIC, in terms of academic attainment in Higher Education, and how to measure the impact of ALIC in terms of enabling individual participants to meet their own long-term goals (eg improved employability, improved participation in children’s education, social inclusion, increased involvement as active citizens, taking responsibility for their own learning) and
- 2 How to measure the impact upon increasing the effectiveness of partners’ collaboration to improve access and progression

This was to be achieved by:

- developing systems for collecting baseline data for monitoring and evaluating the impact of ALIC on individual participants
- implementing these tracking systems for the first and subsequent intakes of participants, both as individuals and as members of their groups
- monitoring and evaluating the costs and benefits for placement agencies in the community
- monitoring and evaluating the impact upon partners working together in partnership

Triangulation was to be obtained by including qualitative as well as quantitative data drawn from the different stakeholders. This was planned as a ‘360 degree’ evaluation, including data from the students themselves, reflecting upon their learning, and from the tutors, the colleges, the fieldwork placement agencies and - as far as possible employers/potential employers. The evaluator attended Steering Committee meetings and provided feedback on a continuing basis throughout the three years, including feedback on the workings of the partnership itself, the processes as well as the project outcomes.

Baseline data on the participants was obtained from the initial interview (following referral). This was followed up via recordings of regular progress meetings between the participant and the project worker and the participant’s own portfolio (which was to include records of progress on college courses and, for the first years, on fieldwork placements in the community) In addition, the evaluator met with participants, for both individual and small group discussions, in each year.

In total there were seven agencies directly involved as providers of fieldwork placements in the first year. These seven agencies were also interviewed and similar interviews were carried out in the second year. This was not applicable in the third year, however (for reasons which will be explained subsequently).

The perspectives of employers were also intended to be included. By definition, given the unemployed status of ALIC participants, this proved problematic. In the event, employers’ views were taken into account less directly, via the valuable contributions of a particular member of the

Steering Committee with relevant management expertise. There remain questions to be answered for the longer term, then, about the extent to which ALIC contributes to improving participants' ultimate employability, recognising that enabling them to acquire particular qualifications may or may not improve their eventual job prospects, in practice.

The Strategy for Monitoring and Evaluation did not specifically include a commitment to taking account of the views of referral agencies (the statutory, voluntary and community sector agencies through whom the ALIC project worker made contact with potential participants). After discussion with the project worker, however, it became clear that the active co-operation of referral agencies had been a key factor in recruitment for the first year and was likely to continue to be a key factor in recruitment in subsequent years (as indeed it was). Referral agencies' perspectives were therefore included in Year Two and Year Three.

ALIC IN OPERATION

In Year One, the focus was upon setting the project up, building relationships with agencies in the community, establishing contacts and recruiting the first pilot cohort of participants to undertake the programme. The numbers were small, at this stage, although the project worker was also supporting a wider group of potential participants, encouraging them to come on the programme subsequently. In total the project worker supported twenty seven participants/ potential participants over this first year.

Overall, participants were very positive about their experiences, including their learning experiences on their fieldwork placements. As one participant commented ALIC 'made a fantastic difference' to her life. This was an encouraging start.

On the basis of feedback from the first participants, and from those working with them, some fine tuning was already taking place. In particular two tailor-made modules were provided, in addition to the community-based experiential learning - via the fieldwork placements - and the individual and group support and guidance. Participants expressed

their appreciation of the fact that these accreditation opportunities had been made available. Experiential learning was all very well, but as one participant commented 'it was important to me to have something to show for being with ALIC too', certificates with recognised value in relation to future progression and/ or employment opportunities.

Year Two began with a similar format. There were discontinuities, however, linked to staff changes (including the departure of the first project worker and the appointment of the second). Largely as a result of these discontinuities, the recruitment and retention of participants proved more problematic. In response, there was some re-thinking, at this stage, to address these problems and some additional features were planned - although these could not all be fully implemented until Year Three. These additional features included the provision of mentoring via the Goldsmiths students Union, with students trained to act as mentors. There were new opportunities for participants to sit in on lectures as 'taster' sessions, and in Year Three residential weekends were also added. These residential weekends were organised at Ruskin College, Oxford, a residential college specifically catering for second chance adults.

By Year Three there were also further modifications to the original project design. In particular, the fieldwork placements were dropped. This decision was taken reluctantly, the fieldwork placements having been key to the initial focus upon experiential learning in the community. But organising these placements had been extremely time consuming. It was particularly difficult to find fieldwork supervisors with sufficient time to supervise ALIC participants, and this was especially problematic in small, already over-stretched voluntary and community sector agencies. The benefits of the placements did not warrant the time spent, in the view of the fieldwork placement agencies, or indeed of ALIC by now. By this time, experiential learning was taking other forms, in any case, as will be explained more fully subsequently, taking account of the fact that for a number of participants, reflecting on past difficulties was also proving problematic.

Meanwhile ALIC had really taken off, in terms of participant numbers and in terms of its growing reputation for promoting Widening Participation within the colleges and statutory, voluntary and community sector agencies in the wider locality in South East London. Some thirty five participants were on the programme in Year Three, twenty seven of whom successfully completed it.

This burgeoning success was all the more creditable because ALIC was continuing to work with people who had been long-term unemployed, many of whom had experienced a series of difficulties in their lives. They included those who had experienced particularly stressful life events, making them vulnerable to depression, for example, and other forms of mental illness. These factors were all too often combined with the effects of domestic violence, drug abuse and crime. Seventeen of the twenty seven people involved with ALIC in the first year had experienced one or more of these problems.

In subsequent years, the project worker developed extremely effective collaboration with agencies working with those who had experience of brushes with the criminal justice system. This resulted in further successful referrals. ALIC was reaching - and retaining participants whose life experiences might have been expected to mean that they would be particularly hard to reach, in terms of Widening Participation, young men as well as women, single parents from white working class communities as well as from black and ethnic minority communities. Whilst this was a significant feature of ALIC's success, it did mean that some of the participants required relatively high levels of support, needing access to specialist advice about welfare benefits, for example, as well as access to counselling, and other support services. This was recognised, from Year One, together with the project worker's need for de-briefing and access to specialist support services (including social work and mental health services).

Overall, then, by Year Three ALIC was widely seen as having 'taken off' with a growing reputation amongst colleges, and amongst statutory, voluntary and community sector agencies, for its unique contribution to Widening Participation in South East London. The final evaluation report summarised the factors which were contributing to ALIC's success in overcoming motivational barriers to widening participation, together with its successes and its limitations in addressing the situational barriers, and some reflections on the potential contributions of varying approaches to experiential learning.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO ALIC'S ACHIEVEMENTS IN ADDRESSING MOTIVATIONAL BARRIERS

Participants in Year One particularly valued the project worker's support and the way in which she treated them with respect. This view was shared both by participants and by referral agencies and placement agencies. The qualities which were mentioned most often were her personal commitment to participants, her energy and enthusiasm, her general helpfulness and her approachability. 'I am 100% positive about ALIC and this is down to - (the project worker) ... She is really helpful, very supportive' were typical comments. It should also be noted that the project's administrator was also mentioned in this context, for her helpfulness and approachability. This was seen as very important too, because she represented the first contact with the project - the gatekeeper effectively.

Both project workers clearly had the commitment, energy, enthusiasm and personal qualities required to build confidence and trust. Both professionals and participants reflected upon the personal contribution of the project worker, in similar terms, in Year Three. Typical comments from students were as follows: 'Really supportive', 'gave me the encouragement', 'pretty much bent over backwards' (to provide support), 'the most powerful influence' on the student in question's decision 'to move forward'.

Comments from professionals included reflections on the creative balance which had been struck by the project worker. As one commented 'in some ways he held their hands closer' (than the interviewee would have done, recognising that at this stage 'it is no good expecting them to do things that they are not ready to do for themselves'). But he was right, this professional concluded, and 'he can also be tough with them - coaching them and getting them to take responsibility. He can say 'I did it and you can too and you have to take responsibility'.

More generally, it would seem that 'like recruits like', most effectively. The first project worker was a young woman, whilst the second was male. Recruitment in the latter stages reflected this, with increased take-up amongst young men. The project worker himself, when reflecting upon this, concluded that it was of benefit to students 'to work with someone that has common experiences they can relate to' although this did not mean that 'only people that have the experience of social exclusion are equipped to work with this group'. It did mean that empathy and personal insight were key, though, being comfortable with oneself, and not being 'condescending or patronising'. ALIC students did not want to feel 'that they were being seen as charity cases or worthy causes'.

The Group's support was also mentioned positively by the first cohort of participants. 'Group support is good' said one. 'The group is good for sharing problems and learning on placements' said another. In addition, as one commented, group discussion had enabled her to explore past experiences which had been difficult (in this case experiences of being bullied) draw positive lessons from these and then move on in terms of personal development. (Subsequent discussions of experiential learning raised questions about the potential value of other approaches, however, discussions which will be considered in more detail subsequently).

As another participant commented, ALIC had enabled her to 'regain confidence - re-establish my identity'. Being a member of the group felt good 'after being so isolated for so long as a single parent'. Another commented on how s/he had gained in self awareness - 'I've learned my weaknesses, the lazy side, the lack of confidence side' and this had facilitated the development of realistic approaches to study. 'It made me aware that I could be hard working and reliable'. This particular student had succeeded in staying with an access course at Goldsmiths, over the past year, and then moving on to a degree course.

In Year Two the small size of the participant group was actually perceived as a benefit by some (offering students the opportunity for so much personal tuition specifically geared to their learning needs). For others, including tutors, the small size of the group was more problematic however, leading to a loss of group identity and morale. The group was described as being 'too small- didn't really work that well in terms of group support'. As one student put this, she would have 'liked to have had more peers on the course'. Some of the early group discussions had been enjoyable but the group momentum, overall, had declined. As another student put this, the lack of a consistent core to the group had 'had a very negative effect on the group dynamic' and so on the student in question's own commitment to the course. A larger group, initially, would have meant that it would have been less noticeable if a few people had then dropped out.

The larger and more stable group in Year Three clearly contributed to ALIC's developing success. One factor here was the addition of the study weekends which were valued both in their own right and for the impact on developing positive group dynamics. The groups jelled more effectively as a result of these shared experiences away, in a different environment.

These study weekends were organised at Ruskin College, Oxford as part of Ruskin's programme of taster/ Residential Short Courses. The weekends were valued as learning experiences because the learning was pitched appropriately. Other features which were also described as being positive included 'the company, the group, the people' as well as the environment. Another student commented on the value of leaving London and 'experiencing something different'. The fact that Ruskin full-time students were also non-traditional mature students was seen as encouraging. These were people with similar backgrounds - if they could succeed in higher education, then clearly others could too.

The evaluation process identified significant benefits for participants in terms of their increased self-confidence, their expanded self-esteem and their heightened aspirations. People spoke of their 'dreams' of successfully completing university courses. As one participant commented, her main barrier, she felt, had been herself, her faith and trust in herself and her ability to do things. Although she had not succeeded in achieving all her objectives ALIC had given her 'the chance and the confidence to go back into an academic situation'.

This increased confidence spilled over, some commented, into benefits for their families and communities. For example one participant explained that she did her homework at a time when her children were around because this encouraged them to study too. Another commented on the impact on her friends and neighbours saying that 'you encourage others when you do well'. One participant dropped out of her course to stand for election as a local councillor - and was delighted to be duly elected. She was clear that she would never have had the confidence to do this, previously.

In addition, ALIC enabled a number of participants to make more informed choices about future career paths. Given the difficult life experiences of so many participants, it was not entirely surprising that a number expressed interests in careers in the helping professions, desiring to help others as they had themselves been healed. ALIC recognised the importance of checking these aspirations out against reality, providing briefing sessions about what social work, for example, actually entails. As one participant commented 'If it hadn't been for (this) I'd have been doing a social work course now and I would have dropped out because it wasn't what I really wanted to do'. Some students did indeed pursue courses leading to careers in the helping professions, including social work, counselling and youth and community work. Others changed their aspirations however,

as they had opportunities to explore other options.

In line with the findings of wider studies, ALIC participants seemed generally focused upon programmes of study which would be likely to have direct benefits in terms of improving their employability, including improving their skills in information technology. But for a number, ALIC represented the beginning of a voyage of discovery, without necessarily being clear about the likely outcomes in terms of specific jobs. Overall, in any case, it was far too early to evaluate ALIC's contribution to participants' eventual career paths.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO ALIC'S ACHIEVEMENTS IN ADDRESSING SITUATIONAL BARRIERS.

The Mentoring scheme was seen as crucial to ALIC's increasing success, not only in recruiting but in also in retaining participants. Through the drop in sessions that were organised for them in the Goldsmiths Students Union, ALIC participants gained practical support and advice. Here in the Students Union, their view of themselves shifted, as they came to see themselves as students too, a shift in self-perception which was strongly reinforced through their attendance at lectures, via 'taster sessions' and via attendance at summer school events. In the Students' Union ALIC participants/ students also gained confidence from finding that their problems were by no means unique. Even students from relatively more 'traditional' backgrounds (in terms of going to university) were experiencing anxiety and stress over writing their essays. These sessions enabled ALIC students to share experiences, rather than feeling marginalised, as 'cases for special treatment'.

The student volunteers also expressed their appreciation of the scheme. Volunteering was seen as a two-way process that was of benefit to the volunteers as well as the ALIC students. This reciprocity has been a key aspect of the scheme. The Students' Union reinforced this very positive view of ALIC as being beneficial to both parties. The Student Development Officer commented that the 'volunteers are very dedicated and there has never been an occasion when they have not turned up'. The volunteers had 'gained a lot from the experience'.

The mentoring scheme was one of several initiatives designed to promote bridge-building. As some of the first cohort had explained Goldsmiths, like any higher education institution, was seen by newcomers as 'a scary place'. By Year Three ALIC had clearly succeeded in tackling a number of institutional barriers within the higher education sector. Crossing the threshold had become far less scary. The taster sessions had been a key factor here, enabling ALIC students to test out the experience of being a student in a lecture - but safely, with fellow participants and the project worker sitting alongside them and discussing it all with them afterwards. The summer school experience was also very valuable. As one commented 'I went to the summer school and looked at the people that were doing it with me and I thought, look at these people, if they can do it I can'.

In addition to the taster sessions, a number of other relatively small practical issues were mentioned, including access to the library (a practical issue which took time to resolve each year, but which was very a significant benefit described by one as 'a godsend' when it was resolved). Tours of the building were organised and these were also valued (another simple way of making ALIC participants feel welcomed). The support of the porters was referred to, in this context, directing ALIC participants and helping them to find their way around. ALIC was located at the top of a building which was not very immediately accessible or easy to find, especially to those who were not used to the building. Having helpful, friendly directions was an important factor, enabling ALIC participants to feel welcomed.

Overall, ALIC strongly re-inforced the importance of addressing Widening Participation strategically and holistically. Students need to be supported on a continuing basis if they are to be retained once they have been recruited. It emerged that it was particularly important that ALIC students felt welcomed and supported as **students**, as part of the wider student body. Being a student, rather than a 'special category/ special needs/ cases for special treatment' was seen as key. It was in Year Three that ALIC participants became referred to as 'students' rather than 'participants', a change of nomenclature that was evidently seen as symbolic - and very welcome.

By Year Three, in any case, the colleges were already developing more holistic strategies for

Widening Participation, with increasing emphasis upon partnership working, to facilitate progression. Government policy was providing strong steers towards such partnership working, indicating that future funding for Widening Participation would be dependent upon evidence of such collaboration. As it has already been suggested, partnership working is also being emphasised at the European level. ALIC's experience demonstrated the importance of partnership working, not only between colleges but also with statutory, voluntary and community sector organisations and groups in the locality. Whilst ALIC did not set out to develop models for partnership working more generally, in the present policy context, with the current emphasis upon the development of partnerships, ALIC's experiences may have some relevance.

In summary, ALIC's management structures had to withstand precisely the types of pressures which may be anticipated in other partnership structures (Balloch and Taylor, 2001, Glendinning, Powell and Rummery, 2002). Although the partner agencies all started out from a common commitment, there were changes of personnel as well as changes of ALIC staff. Continuity was thus a problem. In addition, as ALIC developed over time, the interests of different partners, and individual members of the Steering Committee varied. Particular individuals demonstrated outstanding levels of commitment, providing positive support and encouragement throughout the project. This was not entirely the case, however.

Over time, the Management Group eventually ceased to meet regularly. This would not, of itself, necessarily have mattered (especially once ALIC was well established by Year Three). But this was compounded by other changes in staffing in line management as well as by changes in the staffing of ALIC itself. During the second year, when ALIC was finding it more difficult to develop its direction, this lack of continuity was experienced as particularly problematic. Unsurprisingly, the Steering Committee was therefore looked to for guidance in ways which were, perhaps, unrealistic (the Steering Committee being tasked with overall guidance rather than more direct, 'hands on' management). One view was that the Steering Committee 'was a place we reported to' rather than that it 'did a lot of steering' (which this particular informant had evidently found somewhat disappointing).

On the positive side, the project workers had considerable flexibility and space to follow new directions creatively. But more consistent support could have made their task somewhat less stressful. It was noticeable that the most dynamic periods, both at the beginning and towards the end in Year Three, coincided with the periods of relatively most consistent management support. Year Three was also the period of most developed institutional support (as ALIC began to become more mainstreamed within the host higher education institution).

One conclusion to be drawn from ALIC's experiences may be to emphasise the importance of clear support structures, including both managerial support and specialist support (and access/ referral systems to specialist services such as counselling and related health and social services support). More generally, there would seem to be implications too, for the development of partnerships. Personnel do change, and partnership structures need to cope with these changes effectively. Partnership working, it would seem, requires on-going support, so that collaborative structures can be renewed and re-inforced over time. Successful partnerships do not just 'happen' - they need to be worked at.

FACTORS LIMITING ALIC'S ACHIEVEMENTS IN ADDRESSING INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS.

Apart from any inherent tensions in partnership working and in managing institutional change more generally, the biggest single barriers for ALIC students were material ones. Realistically it became clear, very early on in the project's life, that there were not going to be any policy shifts in relation to student fees and maintenance grants, nor were there going to be any policy shifts in relation to welfare benefits. On the contrary, in fact, by Year Three policy seemed to be shifting in the opposite direction, with the potential introduction of additional 'top-up' fees for university students, in the foreseeable future.

Both ALIC students and other agencies reflected upon the importance of these issues, which presented continuing problems and disincentives. It was argued that for mature people who were unemployed (and living on welfare benefits) there was very little prospect of embarking upon full-time study. This would involve the risk of coming off welfare benefits - because as full-time students they would no longer be available for paid work. If they did embark on a course of study and then dropped out they would be even worse off, because they would have the debt from their student loan to repay - and it might take some time to have their welfare benefits restored by a welfare system which was widely perceived as bureaucratic and insufficiently flexible.

'Student debt is a mill stone especially for middle aged and older students' said one 'and the benefits system is a huge trap'. Studying part-time was an option, but this posed its own challenges, because the time-lag between enrolling on an access course and completing a degree might be six or seven years or more. This continues to represent a major disincentive. ALIC did succeed in recruiting and retaining students **despite** this, but financial anxieties were a constant source of problems.

As it has already been pointed out, these barriers have particular importance for mature students, especially those with family responsibilities. Given that women are disproportionately likely to be represented in the latter group, this makes it a vital issue in terms of Equal Opportunities that government policy does not focus upon the younger age group to the detriment of those over thirty years old. In addition, the costs of childcare posed a further barrier for those with childcare responsibilities. Whilst there were changes in the support system for students with children, during the life of the project, these were not generally perceived as being in any way sufficient, as the prime minister himself has already been quoted as recognising. Realistically, then, ALIC's experiences reinforced the view that if the government is seriously committed to Widening Participation, then these material barriers must be alleviated rather than exacerbated.

THE REVISED APPROACH TO LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

As it has already been suggested, the first cohort of ALIC students did value their opportunities for experiential learning through their fieldwork placements. It was not only the logistics of arranging these placements with hard -pressed agencies that was problematic about experiential learning, however. Experiential learning through reflecting upon past life experiences had its problems too. Whilst this type of experiential learning did work well for some, for others it less positive.

For those with particularly difficult life experiences, reflecting on these was even more problematic than experiential learning in the relatively safe spaces of the fieldwork placements, throwing up painful episodes which project workers were not necessarily equipped to work with. As Brookfield has argued (Brookfield, 2001) encouraging people to reflect on their learning from very difficult life experiences can be very challenging – ‘a minefield’ (as one commentator expressed this). The project worker had needed additional support to work with some of the more challenging issues that had emerged as a result. Working with people who had been long term unemployed, this was not exactly surprising, in view of the associated life pressures. As Brew has pointed out more generally (Brew, 1993) for some participants, it was ‘unlearning’ that was required, to unravel the past, and then to move on from these negative experiences.

Alternatively, in Year Three, partly as a result of other time pressures (and partly as a result of conscious choices) the emphasis shifted - to focus upon learning from experience through reflecting on positive experiences in the here and now. These were experiences such as going to a lecture, as a taster, and finding that the content was both comprehensible and stimulating. This was a very different approach to Learning from Experience, but it seemed to work for ALIC students.

These shifts in approaches to experiential learning did have their costs however, particularly the loss of the fieldwork placements, along with the related opportunities to test out possible future career options. More generally, the possible benefits of facilitating access to higher education via learning in and from active citizenship in the voluntary and community sectors were not fully explored. Given the potential significance of the learning - and the raised aspirations - which may be taking place through initiatives to promote community participation, capacity-building and active citizenship, both in Britain and more generally, it would seem relevant to explore these possibilities more fully via future projects.

Given the range of ALIC’s original aims and objectives, it was not necessarily surprising that there were such gaps, just as it should not have been surprising that there were shifts of emphasis and focus, over time. These were, after all, positive responses to feedback from the monitoring process, learning from ALIC’s own experiences, in practice. When ALIC’s priorities were being re-considered, in Year Two, concerns about its diversity were expressed (concerns which were shared by the evaluator, at this stage). By trying to combine such varying objectives, was ALIC in danger of losing focus?

In practice, as Year Three demonstrated, however, Widening Participation agendas do require holistic approaches, combining policy changes **and** institutional changes, together with the support systems needed to recruit and retain students successfully. Experiential learning had a constructive contribution to make, here, but so did experiential ‘unlearning’. ALIC shifted its approach in response to this finding. Public policy on addressing the material barriers, especially the barriers caused by student fees and the lack of provision for student maintenance, was apparently shifting in a less constructive direction, however.

More generally, ALIC also demonstrated the relevance of each of the four 'villages' of learning from experience. Initially the focus was upon two of Warner Weil and McGill's 'villages'. Village One, concerned with accrediting experiential learning to open up access to higher education, training and employment opportunities and Village Three, emphasising the role of experiential learning in the community for promoting active citizenship. Although the second was less fully explored, both had potential relevance. Holistic approaches to Widening Participation would also seem to imply the potential relevance of the second and the fourth 'villages', drawing upon the lessons of experiential learning initiatives to promote change in post-school education, to make it more relevant, and drawing upon the lessons for promoting personal growth and development.

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