

People and Work Unit

Discussion Paper

Adult Learning: Agency, Risk and Preventive Factors (or the problem with barriers)

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Uned **Pobl a Gwaith**

1. Introduction

1.1. Lifelong Learning is seen as the answer to many of society's ills. It is promoted as a means to enhance economic growth and social cohesion, and reduce economic and health inequalities (Deacon, 2002; NAW, 2002; Roberts, 1995). Within Wales, the National Assembly has outlined a vision of Wales as the 'Learning Country', committing itself to the aim of widening participation in education and training (NAW, 2001). Since then, progress has been made, with an increase in overall adult participation in learning from 39% in 2002 to 42% in 2003. However, progress has been uneven. For example between 2002 and 2003:

- there was a much smaller increase in participation from the lowest socio-economic classes DE (up from 26% to 28%) compared to the middling socio-economic classes C2 (up from 33% to 40%); and
- There was a much smaller increase in participation from learners aged 65 or over (up from 14% to 16%) compared to learners aged 45-64 (up from 32% to 40%) (Aldridge & Horrocks, 2003).

1.2. Overall, people in Wales who are older, and/or economically inactive and/or from lower socio-economic classes, remain significantly less likely to be learners, than their younger, economically active and middle and upper class compatriots (*ibid.*). Other groups with lower than average rates of participation in learning, include those with poor prior educational attainment, poor basic skills, ethnic minority groups, single parents, those with caring responsibilities, the elderly, ex-offenders, the disabled, people with learning difficulties, people in isolated areas, the homeless, asylum seekers and immigrants (McGivney, 2001)

1.3. In understanding why some groups of people in society are less likely to participate in learning than others, a large body of literature has developed examining the barriers to learning that these groups might face. The typology of situational, institutional, informational and dispositional barriers developed by K.P. Cross (1982), and adapted by Veronica McGivney (1990) is a commonly used example of this. These barriers help explain patterns of participation because they

make it more difficult, or in some cases impossible, for some people to access adult learning, and they are therefore a useful starting point, particularly for learning providers wishing help adult learners.

Barriers to Learning

- **Situational Barriers** are linked to the current life circumstances of the person (e.g. caring responsibilities, shift work and a lack of money to pay for courses or transport)
- **Institutional Barriers** are created by learning providers (e.g. restrictive entry, regulations and the requirement to have a contractor as part of a MA) or other institutions (e.g. the way the benefit's system can make participation in learning more or less attractive)
- **Informational Barriers** are created by a lack of information so that potential learners' don't know enough about learning opportunities (e.g. they may not know that courses are free or which course are available);
- **Dispositional Barriers** are negative attitudes, beliefs or assumptions about learning (e.g. disliking revision or test and exams).

1.4. There are limits to an analysis based solely upon barriers though. In particular, although some cases of non-participation can be explained solely by reference to magnitude of individual barriers and/or multiplicity of barriers, this does not apply to all groups of non-learners. Moreover, it does not readily explain why some groups of learners are able to overcome even significant multiple barriers that *prima facie*, would be expected to hold them back.

1.5. Research undertaken by the People and Work Unit for the Community University of the Valleys Partnership, suggests that learners' motivation to overcome barriers and participate in learning is a key explanatory factor (CUVP, 2005); albeit one missing from traditional analyses based solely upon barriers. These naturally focus upon the factors that constrain participation (barriers) and how providers can help dismantle or minimise them. Therefore, while for example, there is discussion of how to 'engage' or 'hook' learners, this tends to be premised upon a lack of interest as a (dispositional) barrier in its own right that is holding non-learners back

(see e.g. McGivney, 2001). What is missing is broader analysis of motivation and the impact it has upon the way potential learners respond to the barriers they face.

1.6. Motivation is not simply a function of interest, what might be thought of as the expected benefits, but also of the expected costs of participation in learning. A potential learner's assessment of cost and benefit will include consideration of the:

- Effort required to produce a given outcome – people will tend to be more motivated when a small amount of effort produces a significant positive outcome;
- The perceived reward for that outcome (e.g. in terms of enjoyment to satisfaction) - the greater the reward, the greater the motivation; and
- The perceived need for that outcome (e.g. in terms of the ability to perform their job) - the greater the need, the greater the motivation. (Crowder & Pupynin, 1995)

1.7. The People and Work Unit's action research projects, *The Ladder*, *Build It* and *Life Support*, suggest that whilst this model of motivation is valid in principle, in practice, calculations of costs and benefit are complicated by potential learners' lack of knowledge. In particular learners may have a very strong level of motivation and be absolutely determined to become a plumber, nurse et al, but may have little or no understanding of what it would require from them in terms of work, effort or changes in their lifestyle. Therefore, whilst they may have, what might be thought of as 'theoretical motivation', in practice their lack of understanding of what it would take, means that they don't act effectively in pursuit of their goals, and they lack what might be thought of as 'applied motivation' (Lloyd-Jones, Pers. Comm.).

1.8. Theoretical motivation alone can be very destructive, because without an understanding of what it takes to achieve goals, people can be doomed to failure, to think that they're 'thick'. In practice it is not a lack of innate ability or intelligence that causes them to fail, but their lack of the skills and knowledge necessary to understand what it would take to succeed, and action consequent upon this. For

example, some learners' do not understand or appreciate the importance of revision in evenings and at weekends, or of moderating or changing their lifestyle during the week (e.g. reducing drinking) so that they are fit and able to attend college every day.

1.9. Sarah Lloyd-Jones (2005) has found that many non-traditional learners in the South Wales Valleys have a "conditional commitment" to learning. That is to say, that they believe that learning is a good thing, but that it must fit into their existing lifestyles and not cause excessive stress: participation in learning is fine provided that it does not impinge on family, community and social life. Therefore, for example, spending time with your children, 'going out with the boys', children's birthdays, Christmas shopping and funerals of community members all come before study. These may be reinforced by community norms, that, for example, put pressure on parents not be a 'bad mother' by 'neglecting' their children and studying outside school hours.

1.10. There is evidence from Lloyd-Jones (2005) research, that non-traditional learners often adopt a coping strategy of passivity and avoiding decision-making, as way of minimising stress. This means when faced with adversity, they often give up and walk away. They are not therefore consciously prioritising family, community or their social life above study. Nevertheless, breaking the habit requires an understanding and recognition of the way their choices impact upon their study and a conscious decision to prioritise study and therefore change their lifestyle.

1.11. Robert Cornwall's (1999) research suggests that dispositional barriers can have a very serious impact on motivation, even if people understand what they would need to do. In the first instance, they can reduce potential learners' motivation to overcome barriers that could hold them back. For example, if people doubt their ability to learn, they will expect the level of effort required to be high, and their prospects for achieving the desired outcome low. They may feel that participation in learning is risky, not only because they may fail to achieve the desired outcome, but because it may also threaten them with exposure as a failure in front of their peers, and to themselves, threatening their self-confidence and self-

image. These risks alter potential learners' calculations of cost and benefit, reducing their motivation to overcome barriers that could hold them back. Indeed, they may actually find the barriers useful, as they provide an 'excuse' not to put themselves in what they fear will be a vulnerable position. So for example, the 'children not liking childcare' is a culturally acceptable reason for dropping out of learning and means that learners need not take responsibility for their decision to drop out.

1.12. Research also suggests that even if someone with little self-confidence in their ability to learn musters the motivation and manages to overcome the barriers that could hold them back, their fragile confidence will tend to reduce their motivation and therefore also effort, making them less likely to succeed. They are also more vulnerable, as they are more likely to give up if they face problems along the way. Those who don't fully understand what it will take to succeed may be particularly vulnerable, as they will be unprepared for the problems they encounter. In contrast, those who see a real value in learning, who know what it will take and who believe they can succeed, are more likely to put greater effort into overcoming barriers such as family and work commitments that would otherwise hold them back, and are likely to be more motivated, and to have greater resilience (CUVP, 2005; Cornwall, 1999).

1.13. Negative attitudes toward learning that undermine people's motivation to overcome other types of barrier, have traditionally been lumped together as types of 'dispositional barriers'. Research and analysis undertaken by the People and Work Unit suggests that this is not a very satisfactory description. Firstly, the language – 'dispositional' – can imply that all is needed is a change of attitude. Strictly speaking this is correct, but it can serve to obscure how embedded some negative attitudes and beliefs about learning can be, because a 'disposition' implies an "inclination or tendency" (OED) that might be expected to be easily discarded or changed. Secondly, it is required to describe a number of different types of distinct attitudes and beliefs ranging from a dislike of hard work, through a lack of self-belief in ones' ability to learn, to cultural norms about who is and isn't a 'learner'. It may therefore be useful to separate out efficacy and cultural barriers from dispositional barriers (Lloyd-Jones, Pers. Comm.).

1.14. As discussed, dispositional, cultural and efficacy barriers may compound other barriers, by reducing people's motivation to participate in learning and attempt to overcome them. However, they are not the only factors that can reduce motivation. Equally there are also factors in people's life that can help diminish other barriers and increase people's motivation to overcome them. Crucially, the absence of barriers does not, of itself, imply the presence of supportive factors and the language of 'barriers' does not easily capture or describe these types of supportive factors.

1.15. Rather than only thinking in terms of barriers, it may therefore, as table 1 below illustrates, be more helpful to also think in terms of:

- **Risk factors** that make participation and continuation in learning more challenging or more complex and that tend to reduce motivation; and
- **Protective factors** that make participation and continuation in learning less demanding and more straightforward.

1.16. The language (and concept) of 'risk' and 'protective' factors was developed as a way of helping to understand offending by young people (Farrington, 2000). However, it is increasingly been applied beyond young offenders, to explore why some young people achieve worse life outcomes than others in a range of domains (e.g. health, education, housing and employment) (SEU, 2005; Haines, et al, 2004).

1.17. As the table shows, risk and protective factors are paired, because they tend to relate to the same factor, such as the family, but describe how it can either help or hinder a learner. For example, supportive attitudes and behaviour of family members can help learners overcome barriers to learning such as caring responsibilities and increase their motivation. In contrast hostile and obstructive behaviour from family members can make it harder to overcome barriers, may even erect new ones, by for example restricting learners' access to private transport and can reduce learner's motivation.

Table 1. Risk and Protective Factors

Risk factors	Protective Factors	Alternative descriptions of risk factors
Financial problems e.g. Inability or unwillingness to live on a low income and/or debt and/or inability to effectively manage money	High income, absence of debt or manageable debt, willingness to forgo income and expenditure now in return for a longer term gain.	Situational Barriers/soft skills?
Ill health (caused by unhealthy lifestyle, poverty, accidents)	Good health, healthy lifestyle, capacity to manage ill health (e.g. do you get a ‘cold’ or the ‘flu’, does this force you to suspend study?)	Situational barrier
Poor housing (e.g. insecure/unstable, sharing or overcrowded, cold, lack of study space)	High quality housing (e.g. warm, private study spaces)	
Pre-school age children, caring responsibilities, not feeling that you have a role in your children’s education	Interest in children’s education, desire to help them with homework	
Hostile and/or uninterested parents, partners and peers	Supportive and interested parents, partners and peers who understand and value learning (e.g. supportive loving parents who don’t understand and value learning may attempt to shield their children from stress, and support them if they choose not to take exams); strong support networks	Cultural Barriers
Having no books in the house, parents who don’t read	Books in the house, parents who read to you	
Social circle characterised by excessive drug and/or alcohol use	Social circle characterised by a willingness and expectation to moderate drug and/or alcohol intake (e.g. not on weekdays)	
Growing up in a family and community where few people study and/or have highly skilled employment	Growing up in a family and community where learning and highly skilled employment is the norm.	Cultural/information al barrier?
No or limited contact with support services, or contact only as a ‘client’; No or limited contact with positive role models	Contact with a or a ‘trusted adult’/’lead professional’ able to make referrals to other agencies and advocate on their behalf, provide information, advice, guidance, support and encouragement, and where appropriate challenge	Institutional Barriers
Undiagnosed learning difficulties (e.g. dyslexic, ADD)	Assessment of learning needs and appropriate support	
Poor quality learning opportunities	Effective and accessible learning opportunities	
Negative school experiences	Positive school experiences	Efficacy barriers
Sheltered life, limited life experiences, risk adverse	Responds positively to challenges, experience of successfully responding to challenging situations, increasing confidence, strengthening coping skills and resilience.	
Lows levels of self-efficacy (e.g. shy away from challenges, weak resilience, focus on personal weaknesses, vulnerable to stress and hopelessness)	High levels of self-efficacy, self-belief	Soft skills

Unreflective, inability to understand why things have happened	Reflective learning skills: able to learn from mistakes and celebrate success; recognise what was within their control and what was not	Cultural/personal Barrier? Soft skills?
Poor communication skills	Strong communication skills	
Spiky, aggressive, unfriendly, arrogant	Warm, amiable, approachable, charming	
Short term outlook, associated with coping and survival, 'living in the now'	Long term strategic outlook, ambition, willingness to defer gratification	
Passivity, non-decision making, weak locus of control	Pro-active, strong locus of control	
Low level of intelligence	High level of intelligence	
Lows levels of motivation	High levels of motivation	
Lack of drive and ambition	Broad horizons, clear vision	

- 1.18. As the third column of the table shows, many of the risk factors could be classified as a type of barrier, or absence of a 'soft skill' needed to succeed as a learner. Others though are harder to classify within traditional typologies (indicated by the question marks after the descriptions), providing another reason for using the language of 'risk' and 'protective' factors in preference to simply barriers.
- 1.19. It is important to note that many risk and protective factors are not static; they will often change as a people's lives change and that while some are beyond people's control, others are within their control; some people can change their behaviour, thinking and lifestyles, and reduce risk factors and strengthen protective factors. Indeed, in order to succeed as learners they will often need to do so. However, in order to do this, people need to understand what they need to do, and not everyone will. They also need to value and believe in their ability to achieve the goal to accept the sacrifices (costs) required.

2. Summary & Conclusions:

- 2.1. It is important to not only consider barriers in isolation, because barriers can interact and compound one-another.
- 2.2. Some barriers represent an absolute bar on participation; many though, are in principle, surmountable.
- 2.3. If some barriers act not as absolute bars on participation, but instead obstacles that make participation in learning more difficult or perhaps 'costly' in financial and emotional terms, we must pay greater attention to the reasons why people would try to overcome them – their motivation.
- 2.4. Analyses of motivation based upon rational choice theory assume access to perfect information about costs and benefits. However, there is evidence that many potential learners do not understand the depth and extent of the changes in lifestyle required and consequent costs of this. Therefore they only have what we have described as 'theoretical motivation'.

2.5. An understanding of what is required from study is only the first step. People need to act upon it and prioritise learning – what we have described as ‘applied motivation’.

2.6. The concept of ‘dispositional barriers’ is one way of thinking about the factors that can reduce or undermine people’s motivation. However, the language is potentially misleading and the term is required to describe a number of distinct concepts. We suggest separating out and distinguishing dispositional, cultural and efficacy barriers from one another.

2.7. The concept of barriers is useful, but it is too limited. In particular, it only casts light upon the factors that constrain people; it does not illuminate the factors that enable and support people. It may therefore be worth thinking, not only in terms of barriers, but also in terms of ‘risk’ and ‘protective’ factors that can aid or hinder participation and increase or diminish motivation.

2.8. Thinking about risk and protective factors helps imbues learners and non-learners with a degree of agency; they are no longer simply passively constrained by barriers (or structures), waiting for providers to dismantle them (and release them). Nevertheless, the approach recognises that learners’ (and non-learners’) agency is both enabled and constrained by the risk and protective factors they face. There is no question that for some people, participation in learning will be very difficult and in order to succeed they will need to change their lives.

3. Bibliography

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