

'WHAT ARE THE TRUE COSTS OF COMMUNITY LEARNING?'

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Introduction

In 2004, the Community University of the Valleys Partnership (CUVP) commissioned the People and Work Unit to assess the 'true costs of community learning'. A thorough review of the literature revealed that although institutions like ELWA had commissioned studies examining the costs of delivering learning, very little of this had been published. This assessment of the 'True Costs of Community Learning' is therefore primarily based upon interviews conducted with fourteen CUVP partners and fifty-seven of their learners between November 2004 and March 2005.

The approach taken by the People and Work Unit was to document the type of barriers that learners faced, in order to use this as a basis for exploring the cost for (a) learners and (b) providers, of overcoming these barriers.

The first section of this paper discusses the barriers to learning identified by both learners and providers. The second and third sections discuss the costs learners and providers identified in overcoming these barriers. Thus for example, if the barrier was a caring responsibility such as having children, the research team documented and assessed the (emotional) cost for a learner of leaving their children in a crèche and the (financial) cost for a provider of providing childcare. The fourth section outlines the importance of community based learning in enabling learners to overcome these barriers, but also highlights the importance of ensuring that community based learning is a genuine stepping stone for those who want to progress to, for example, college and university. The fifth section briefly outlines some of the limitations of an analysis of learner choices based solely around barriers. In particular, it highlights the role of expectations of both the costs and value of participating in learning. The final section outlines the conclusions from the study.

Barriers to Learning

The study classified the barriers identified by learners and providers in line with the four-fold categorisation developed by the National Literacy Agency (1981) from the work of K.P. Cross (1988) and Veronica McGivney (1990). Examples of the types of barriers identified are outlined in the table below:

Barrier	Examples given
Situational barriers are linked to the current life circumstances of potential learners.	<p><i>"I did a one year hairdressing [course] then got pregnant".</i></p> <p><i>"I trust the family {to look after my children}, but not the creche".</i></p> <p><i>"If you're working, [it's] much harder"</i></p> <p><i>"Timing of courses is an issue for people who work"</i></p>
Institutional barriers are the characteristics of the institutions that alienate or exclude certain people.	<p><i>"..I suspect ...[we are] seen as very much as a white middle class university"</i></p> <p><i>"reception was quite helpful, but college, to me, they don't give you enough information, [they] give you sheets, ask you to sort it out, 'go back, [you] need this', 'this', 'this'...very frustrating! I hate forms."</i></p> <p><i>"they [tutors at the local college] just don't seem to get on with people...no respect."</i></p>
Dispositional barriers are negative attitudes, beliefs or assumptions about learning	<p><i>"Children could suffer if you go to uni"</i></p> <p><i>"Memories of school were horrendous, therefore [it was a] big step"</i></p> <p><i>"low self-esteem" stops me.</i></p> <p><i>"I haven't got the confidence or ability to do the course"</i></p>
Informational barriers are a lack of appropriate information	<p><i>I "just didn't know what I wanted to do".</i></p>

The research concluded that learners face a range of barriers, and different groups of learners often face different barriers. For example, caring responsibilities are often more of a barrier for women than men. This is well documented in the wider literature (see e.g. Crookes, 2001). Nevertheless, the research conducted for this study and that undertaken for other studies (Aldridge & Horrocks, 2003; Gorard & Rees, 2002) suggest that overall situational and dispositional barriers are the most significant barriers for learners.

Costs of Overcoming Barriers for Learners

The learners we interviewed identified the cost to them of overcoming situational barriers as relatively small, because many of the courses they attended were either free or subsidised, delivered locally in their own communities and offered free childcare. However, the research indicated that for many learners the emotional costs of learning were significant. For example, many of the female learners we interviewed identified the serious negative impact that their participation in learning had upon their relationships and friendships. One learner commented on the tensions that her participation in learning had created:

"I have changed, I still love him [husband] don't know if he still loves me. I'm not going to stop [though] that's for sure."

"I've just drifted away, made new friends, I find them [old friends] boring."

Another learner's comment indicate that choices were being made that put relationships at risk:

"If I knew I could get a better job, I wouldn't give a damn about my partner."

These tensions were attributed primarily to "jealousy" (partners *"think you're having affairs"*); changing interests; and sexism (*"A woman's place is in the home"* mentality).

Interviews with female learners also indicated that the potentially negative impact of participation in learning upon their children was a major concern.

The anxiety associated with learning that many learners described, indicates there are also significant emotional costs in terms of having to put yourself in what you fear will be an extremely uncomfortable situation. One learner described her fear of the exposure that trying learning again would subject her to:

"[I] used to hide from education....don't draw attention to yourself, hide: [be] 'the quiet one'

There is some recognition of these emotional 'costs' in the literature (see e.g. Dowswell, et al, 1999), although it is rarely couched in terms of 'cost' and is usually discussed in the context of barriers to learning (see e.g. McGivney, 2001).

The Cost for Providers of Overcoming Barriers to Learning

Many of the costs of providing community based learning are linked to measures designed to enable learners to help overcome situational barriers to learning. For example:

- running courses in the community;
- using warm and well equipped venues;
- forgoing potential income by providing courses on free or subsidised basis; and
- providing free or subsidised childcare.

These costs, which are relatively easy to quantify, were used to calculate the cost of a 'Model Centre' (Table 1) which indicated that it costs around £300,000 a year to staff and run a base for community learning. In order to validate the costings, the fourteen CUVP organisations were invited to comment. To date, three organisations have responded. Two confirmed that they felt that the figures were about right for a centre of that size, although one indicated that most of the figures were a little high with the exception of the training budget, that was too low. Further comment is welcomed and should be sent

to the People and Work Unit <peoplework@btconnect.com>. Assuming that the approximate level of cost is correct, it is clear that funding individual courses alone cannot cover costs of this magnitude.

Table 1. The Model Centre, serving approximately 300 learners

Costs		Direct cost borne by provider		Indirect costs, typically borne by third party
		Annual Cost	One off capital cost	
Buildings - one off capital cost				£200,000
Overheads (excluding staff costs)		£25,000		
Café (excluding staff costs)			£50,000	
Crèche (excluding staff costs)			£20,000	
Equipment (including ICT suite) [¹]			£10,000	
Staff [²]	Coordinator	£33,000		
	Centre Manager	£27,500		
	Development officers x 2	£44,000		
	Administrative Officer	£20,000		
	Café Staff x 2	£29,000		
	Crèche staff x 4	£48,000		
	Caretaker/cleaner	£12,000		
Staff Training		£1,000		
Tutors [³]		£36,000		
Volunteers [⁴]				£3,095
Board of Directors [⁵]				£5,760
Recruitment and advertising [⁶]		£5,000		
Community activities budget		£5,000		
Evaluation		£6,000		
Annual Reports		£2,000		
Total		£293,500	£80,000	£208,855

In addition to these direct financial costs, a number of providers identified costs linked to helping potential learners overcome dispositional barriers. For example, providers stressed the importance of :

- the credibility and reputation of the organisation in the community; and
- the need for staff to have empathy with learners and to be credible in their eyes.

¹ Costed on basis of 10 x PCs and printers + furniture

² Including on-costs

³ Costed at £20/hour. Each course 30 weeks, 2 hours/week (60 hours/course). For 300 learners, 10 people per course (30 courses/year). Total of 1800/hours/year

⁴ Costed at 5 volunteers, doing an average of 1 hour every two weeks (total of 638 hours/week), paid £4.85/hour

⁵ Board of 8 people, meet for 2 hours, every month (total of 192/hours/yr). Charged at £30/hours

⁶ Costed on the basis of £3,000 for press advertising, £2,000 for in-house printing of leaflets and posters.

In effect, the community organisation as a whole, through its status and profile within the community acts a 'learning broker' that helps catalyse change in potential learners' lives (Cf. LSRC, 2004). However the financial costs associated with this, while potentially significant, are much harder to quantify. This model for widening participation in learning relies upon a long-term physical presence within the community and has significant cost implications compared to the alternatives (such as attracting more learners directly to existing educational institutions like colleges and universities). It also means a relatively high cost per student because each provider works with relatively small numbers of students. Nevertheless, the study suggests that community based learning can play an important role as a 'stepping stone' for those people who feel that going straight into further or higher education is too big a step.

Stepping From The Community To College And University

The importance of the type of 'first step' learning that community based providers can offer is commonly recognised. By implication though, it should be seen as a first step (Cf. McGivney, 2003). The argument for encouraging progression is partly economic. Precisely because, as this study has demonstrated, community based learning is more expensive to provide (on a per student basis), there is an economic case for enabling and supporting people to progress to 'mainstream' providers (that is, into campus based Further and Higher Education institutions). Such progression means that community based providers can target their resources upon recruiting and supporting new cohorts of learners.

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that enabling and supporting vertical progression is not simply about targeting scarce financial resources on those most in need. It is also about ensuring that learners achieve their full potential. Interviews suggested that some learners had overcome initial barriers to learning and reached a 'comfort zone' which led to the development of new barriers for progression. It may also be easier for providers to offer courses at lower levels and derive benefits from retaining existing learners rather than having to recruit new ones. Learners may have derived important benefits from this through feeling supported but it is important that providers are also willing to challenge learners who could achieve more.

The interviews suggested that vertical progression would not suit everyone. For example, many were quite content where they were and had little interest in higher level courses. However, where a learners' aim is to secure employment, enabling and supporting them to do a succession of low-level course may not be in their best interests and this employment aim may frequently be unexpressed. For example, we interviewed learners who had not discussed their future aims with anyone and were unsure about how to achieve their goals, beyond a vague notion that learning would help. In many cases, the choices of courses they had made in the past had not enabled them to achieve their goals and the frustration that followed from this risked alienating them from further learning. We also interviewed learners who felt they had gained both qualifications and confidence precisely because they had been encouraged and challenged to progress and were in some cases completing university degrees – something they would never have considered if asked at the start of their learning journeys. Equally, we also interviewed learners who identified the social interaction that their participation in learning enabled, as the main benefit. Given the costs of paying for a tutor, this may not necessarily be the best or most cost effective way of enabling this, and it may be more appropriate to support and facilitate more informal learning.

Those learners we interviewed who had progressed vertically, often highlighted the importance of the advice, encouragements and support that had made this possible. These support needs were recognised by the CUVP organisations we spoke to and the research indicated that the CUVP as a whole has helped forge links needed to enable learners to progress from the community to university. Nevertheless, even when providers have strong links to other institutions there was evidence of assumptions being made about *which* learners would progress, based on the courses they were taking. There was also evidence from some of the learners we spoke to that their attitudes and interest in learning had grown and was now different to when they had chosen their course. Moreover, in some cases, a course that might not appear at first sight to encourage vertical progression, for example where a hairdressing course, had, with support and encouragement, fostered a strong desire to take a nursing degree at university.

Research suggests that Individuals' "learning journeys" are often messy, and that while linear progression is often the expectation it cannot be the rule, particularly for adult learners (McGivney, 2003). People need to be supported to find a learning pathway that meets their needs. This may mean support to enable vertical progression to a higher-level course or to further and higher education institutions. It might mean horizontal progression, as learners develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence they need to widen their interests but want to study at the same level. It may also mean supporting and enabling people to organise their own 'classes', be they sugar craft, creative writing or quilt making. Whatever the route, it was clear from the research that progression is often challenging for learners and it is therefore important that learners are supported through appropriate advice, guidance and encouragement, and that the partnerships between providers that enable this, like those facilitated by the CUVF, are in place.

Beyond Barriers: Understanding Learners' Choices

The analytical framework used by this study for assessing the cost of learning (to identify barriers to learning and the cost implications of overcoming them for both learners and providers) proved to be an effective framework for assessing costs. Nevertheless, a focus upon barriers inevitably means the focus is upon the negative: upon constraints to learning. The underlying proposition is that by removing barriers to learning (for example by providing free courses and childcare), participation (and by extension, continuation and progression) in learning should increase. However, this proposition rests upon an important assumption: namely that people want to learn and want to learn in the environments offered to them. An analysis of barriers does not necessarily cast light on the reasons why people want to learn.

The interviews conducted with learners suggests that interest in learning is primarily influenced by peoples' expectations

- of what the **learning episode** would be like (e.g. would the course be hard? Would they feel embarrassed? Would they be like the people on the course?); and
- of what the **value of learning** would be (e.g. would it help them get a job? Would it help them to help their children?).

Crucially, our research also indicates that there are often significant differences between peoples' *expectations* and their *actual experience* of learning and its value. For example, current learners often report that they didn't expect the learning experience to be so much fun. This disjuncture between learners' expectations and actual experiences of learning reflects the informational barriers they face, which means their choices about participation, continuation and progression are based upon imperfect information. The research indicates that these informational barriers are higher in disadvantaged communities where few people are participating in learning, because what people 'know' about learning is shaped by:

- **personal experiences** of learning and its value (e.g. what was school like?); and
- the **beliefs and attitudes of the community** (e.g. do parents or partners value learning? Had it helped them find work?)

Therefore in disadvantaged communities where few people are involved in learning programmes, there are few positive stories about learning and people are more reliant upon their own experiences, primarily of school, which for many of the learners we spoke to, was not a happy experience. This problem is compounded by the lack of evidence that learning 'works' in many disadvantaged communities that are characterised by low skilled and low waged employment. In this context, learning often has little expected value (Lloyd-Jones, 2005).

Of course, although an interest and a belief in the value of learning may be a necessary condition, it is not sufficient to ensure participation in learning. For example, people may still face situational barriers that prevent them from learning. The research indicated that what people expected learning to be like and the situational barriers they face often changed as their lives changed. For example, young children could initially be a situational barrier that forced some people to suspend or stop learning. Yet

later in life, as children grew up and began asking for help with homework, they could act as a catalyst for re-engagement in learning for parents who wanted to be able to help their children. By investing learning in value, their children had tipped the balance of costs and benefits back in favour of learning. For example as one learner we interviewed put it:

“...it was children that catalysed it: they were passing you, the girls doing GCSES – I couldn’t help no more... You’ll do anything for your kids, no matter how humiliating”.

Conclusions

The research concluded, as might be expected, that community based learning is relatively expensive. Nevertheless, it was also clear that community based learning can offer a vital stepping stone for those for whom the step straight up to college or university would be too large. Partnerships like the CUVP provide one model of how pathways between providers can be established to make community based learning a genuine stepping-stone. However, for this vision to be realised, providers need to offer the advice, support and encouragement to challenge those learners who will not achieve their full potential without progressing.

The research also illustrated that a focus upon the barriers to learning serves to highlight the factors that constrain participation, continuation and progression. Although the research demonstrated that overcoming these barriers may be a necessary condition for attempts to expand participation (and by extension continuation and progression) in learning, it is not a sufficient condition: learners also need to value learning. Providers, particularly those working in disadvantaged communities, cannot take it for granted that they do.

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