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The Open University Community Education contribution
to working with groups, developing materials and using the media
Lorna Bailey

The Open University of Great Britain received its Charter in July 1969 and is now in its
seventeenth teaching
year. Its main aim was to enable adults to study at home, in their spare time, using mult
i-media distance
learning materials. At the start it concentrated on producing undergraduate courses so tha
t people could
obtain degrees. However it's founding Charter had also committed it to developing Communi
ty Education
materials:

"The objects of the University shall be to provide education of University and profession
al
standards for its students. and to promote the educational well-being of the community ge
nerally."

(Open Universiy Charter. 1969)

The aim of community Education was seen to be that of helping ordinary people with the co
ncerns and

problems of everyday lite. The emphasis was to be on 'learners' and 'learning materials' r
ather than 'students'

and 'teaching': supporting people in their seli-paced open learning. The materials were t
o be developed and

disseminated in collaboration with existing community networks. (Table 1 spells out in mo
re detail the

present aims of the OU Community Education programme . All Tables are at the end of this
paper).

The then Vice Chancellor (Sir Walter Perry -.later Lord Perry) launched Community Educati
on by chairing the

team which produced. ior1977, the course 'The Flrst Years of Lite'. (My first task at th
e OU was to wont on

developing the materials for this course.)

Ten years later there have been over half a million users of Community Education material
s (see Table 2 for

details). More like one million users it you count those whose partners and friends have
shown them the

materials. or who only watched the TV programmes or worked with adapted extracts in newsp
apers and
magazines.

Today, our programme oi learning materials covers Family, Health, Employment. Consumer an
d Community

roles education. Our '86-'87 catalogue otters 16 study packs for use by individuals study
ing on their own or

in groups. Almost all these study packs have optional computer-marked assessment, and man
y of them

have audio and videotapes as part of the learning materials. In addition we offer nine dis
cussion packs, of

specially chosen topics with group-leaders notes, for use with groups.

The essence of the approach of our Community Education learning materials is that they re
late relevant

theory to the immediate needs of the learners and build on the learnersexisting knowledge.

They show that

we value the experience and existing skills of the learner. We hope that when using our m
aterials people

will feel that we understand their circumstances and that they perceive the authors as wa
rm, accepting

people. These are difficult objectives for distance learning materials but we do have anec
dotal and

evaluative evidence that we do , in part. achieve them. We are particular pleased that th
ose educationally or

socially disadvantaged students who receive sponsored places report a similar involvement
and enjoyment

of our courses as do our tee-paying students (see Table3).

Although the materials can be used by individuals studying completely on their own they h
ave also proved

to be very effective when used in groups. Such groups have been seli-led or perhaps with
a group leader or

facilitator. The groups do not need a tutor with an expert knowledge of the subject area. Since the materials provide the educational stmcture they can greatly enhance the groupwork ot a community or adult education worker who is freed from 'teaching' to concentrate on facilitating the smooth r unning of thegroup.

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Collaboration and dissemination Community Education at the OU has benefited greatly by the enthusiastic response of adult educators and other intermediaries - often health workers - who saw our materials as directly relevant to their clients or as resource materials for their own face-to-face work. Through their demands we were able to obtain sponsored places mainly from the Health Education Council and the Scottish Health Education Group for socially and educationally disadvantaged students. One of our first (1981) collaborative dissemination projects, with Cambridgeshire LEA (Community Education department) explored the use of our materials in informal settings. This 'Peterborough Project' was carried out by Marilyn Runnacles and her report, together with those from collaborative projects in Buckinghamshire, Sussex and Strathclyde provided the Open University with valuable guidelines on how to support such ventures. The reports also reflected the enthusiastic response of the actual students and this convinced all parties that the difficulties of such collaborations were well worth overcoming! One of these collaborative projects some became relatively independent and now as the Strathclyde Open Learning Experiment (S.O.L.E.) has widespread recognition, and EEC as well as other funding, for its massive community education programme in which, in 1986, over two and a half thousand students in informal group settings followed our courses. The SOLE started with three places for socially and educationally disadvantaged students. These students, who have mostly left school with few or no formal educational qualifications - and indeed had seldom enjoyed their earlier experiences of education - soon gave us increasingly detailed and constructive feedback about our courses. We then invited them to become developmental testers of our draft materials and they now actually develop for us our group notes. Some of these original 'disadvantaged' students are now group leaders themselves. And many more of them became active in their own communities in a variety of ways. We see the SOLE project as providing ample evidence of both the individual and community empowerment that we hope to encourage with our materials.

Flexibility of OU Community Education materials The flexibility and self-empowering approach of our materials has been recognised by many adult and community educators:

'The easy accessibility of the style readily provoked a desire for involvement, even encouraging those who had difficulty in reading, and the attention paid in the text to the personal needs of the learner implied a respect which was new to many and to which they responded with interest. The single discouragement, initially, came from the words 'The Open University' on the front cover: this caused alarm in the APTs (Areas of Priority Treatment - selected as in need of intensive community and educational intervention - in Glasgow, Scotland) until curiosity conquered tears, and today the local term 'open uni' is bandied about with familiarity and affection in these areas, where it has achieved some recognition as part of their way of life."

(Marion Jack 'Open Learning in Strathclyde: meeting the needs of the community', 1986.1)

Marion Jack argues that if this 'experiment' can succeed in Strathclyde then it should and could be repeated elsewhere:

"More than 30,000 young adults from the poorest areas have over the last ten years or so enjoyed a learning experience which has left them greedy for more: the demand for further learning among this group currently exceeds all possibility of satisfying it despite very considerable effort. One might

suspect that the nature of the personal and environmental backgrounds prevalent in these areas would be the least propitious imaginable for awakening a genuine interest in self-development through adult teaming; but the ways in which this has come about suggest that the approach might be transferable to any social or educational context where the objective - simply that of providing an effective education - is similar."

The workshop themes

I should like, now, to address the three themes which will run through the workshops of this seminar and

offer the workshops some challenges with examples from OU Community Education materials, which may

stimulate your discussions. I am taking a personal viewpoint and the idea is to fuel debate rather than offer

prescriptive opinions.

Working with a group

The challenge:

Understanding and facilitating the group process is more important than expert knowledge at the subject being studied.

Group members are expected to take responsibility for their own learning. In an open learning group they should be able to negotiate the curriculum, be aware of the group process and monitor the groups' progress.

It is possible to train people with relatively poor educational backgrounds to lead groups which are to work with structured learning materials. Where these people work in their own communities this greatly strengthens community commitment to the projects.

Community Education at the OU has produced a pack 'Leading a group' which provides instructions for training people to lead a group and also notes directly for group leaders on how to work in groups. Since the pack was developed for people who wished to run groups using Open University Community Education

materials the examples used are from OU packs and courses. However 90% of the training pack is relevant

for any open learning group leaders' training.

This pack will be available for you to examine during this workshop in Crete. Of additional interest may be that

it is designed for training 'grass-roots' leaders. The materials were developed in collaboration with a variety of adult education institutions including the Scottish Adult Basic Education Unit. This pack was developed and

tested with some of our original students who wished to go on to learn how to run groups.

Many of these

group leaders in Scotland started off as members of the groups for disadvantaged learners which are part of

the Strathclyde Open Learning Experiment.

The workshop, which in its full length requires 3 days, has topics covering:

- 1 Breaking the ice
- 2 Needs and expectations
- 3 Getting a group together
- 4 Learning in groups
- 5 Using written materials
- 6 Practice session
- 7 The group leader
- 8 The leader and the group
- 9 Using other resources
- 10 Evaluation

Table 4 provides some details of these topics

A group Activity To give you a taste of the materials and also to model the need to 'start where the learner is

at' perhaps you might like to join in one of the suggested group activities. We, at this seminar, are

experienced in working with groups but for most of us the seminar offers new challenges.

Many of us have

travelled long distances - so perhaps don't really feel 'at home' yet. Though I am sure that by the end of the

day the famous warmth of hospitality of our hosts will have made us feel at ease and amongst friends. But the

prospect of working in groups at a European seminar will probably have made many of us at least a little

anxious and so it may be that at the start of this seminar we do feel somewhat like 'beginners'. And like many

'beginners' we may be paying more attention to what we want to say or may be expected to do and so be in

danger of losing contact with what we feel about participating in groups.

This Activity provides a list of statements that describe how people may feel about joining a group and you

are asked to tick those statements which apply to you at this point in the Seminar. As part of the handouts for

this lecture you will have copies of this questionnaire in English (pink), French (blue) and Greek (green).

(English version given at Table 5.1 Choose the language version with which you feel most

comfortable and

tick as many of those statements as you wish When you have finished doing this, turn to your nearest

neighbour and spend five minutes discussing your answers. Don't worry if he or she doesn't speak your

language! You can look at which numbers you have ticked. You can always try non-verbal communication - after all it's often a better way to communicate feelings.

In the large group. let's see which questions you ticked and what light that throws on our hopes and possible tears about working together...

This is a rather tricky activity to carry out in a large group but I am sure you can all see how this might be used in the relatively small groups which most adult educators work.

Material development and design

The challenge:

To produce free-standing educationally structured materials which allow the group leader to concentrate on the group process

To produce materials which acknowledge and value the learners' existing knowledge, experience and value systems.

At this second point is not given attention the material may be discarded as irrelevant theory or as patronising to the learner. The aim should be to enhance the learners' sense of 'self-empowerment' - their ability to understand relevant issues, make informed decisions and to put their plans into action. This includes their power to be responsible for their learning; they are not being taught but rather supported in their learning.

The title 'material development and design' implies, for me, that the materials will have formative (developmental) testing and that the principles, in so far as they are known, of effective educational design will be used.

The OU Community Education materials are distance learning materials - designed, it needs to be, to achieve their purpose without additional support for the learner - and so must have particularly rigorous testing and design. However the adult education worker who uses well designed materials will be freed from the worry of using unstructured and untested material and be more effective as the facilitator of the groups' learning.

Knowing how to produce educationally well designed material will alert the educator to the need to monitor, evaluate and modify any material to meet the groups needs. For each component used it should be possible to identify what educational objective you hope to achieve by its use and why the medium you have chosen is the most appropriate for that objective.

The OU Community Education learning materials are interactive and learner-centred. With this jargon translated, this means that they use activities (usually quizzes, questionnaires, reviews, structured observation and case studies) which draw upon the learners' existing knowledge and experience. New theory is then related to the activity in such a way as to ensure that the theory is perceived as useful and relevant to the learner. We say that these materials convert theory into working knowledge - of use in everyday life.

Developing the materials

Our materials go through three drafts. First we ask subject area experts to tell us what they think our students need to know or be able to do. In general such 'experts' do not know how to produce interactive learning materials so our 'transformers' produce the second draft that now includes activities and feedback that aims to turn this theory into working knowledge. These second drafts are developmentally tested with the target audience. In the light of their comments - and using their examples, quotes and case studies - the materials are revised for a final time.

Although I have met many imaginative and intuitive adult educators - unaware perhaps of why they are successful - I would still urge you to use a systematic approach to developing materials.

That way. too, you
can learn from your successes as well as your failures since you will know exactly what y
ou are trying to
achieve. Of course. as face-to-face educators you have the advantage over us distance lea
rning educators
in that you can modify the use of the materials as you work with your group.

Designing structured teaming materials.

Let's have a look at the elements of structured learning materials. Table 6 identifies the elements of

Community Education topics. For this seminar I've chosen a particular topic that will hopefully be directly

relevant to each one of you - it's taken from our 'Look After Yourself health education discussion pack and

it's called 'You're more active than you think'. It's designed to help someone decide if they need to take more

exercise. I assume that whatever European country you come from your health educators are putting across

the message that most of us, certainly those of us not involved in hard manual labour, need to take more

exercise if we are to stay fit. You can keep this topic so that you can - at your leisure - work through it to come

to a personal decision. However at the moment I want to use it to demonstrate the educationally important

elements of the topic.

Let's look at the key elements in this 'You're more active than you think' topic - (examples from the topic are

shown in italics). Of course every topic may not have all these elements.

Short Introduction - which raises key questions and outlines the way the topic will look at the issues.

In this topic the introduction identifies that there is pressure from health educators to take exercise but

also that there may be exaggerated claims for its benefits.

Questionnaires - which help learners to explore their own feelings and ideas, and reveal the way they

normally approach the issue. '

Checking if daily work is done the active way ' - this just requires ticking the appropriate column.

Activities - which help learners review and analyse what they normally do. and consider different approaches.

There are three activities here - 'grading daily activities: 'keeping a diary' of grade D exercise, and monitoring the amount of standing done.

Examples - which show how other people have responded to the questionnaires and activities.

Jane's completed Diary

Feedback sections - which relate what learners have worked out in the activity to any new theory and

enables them to make an informed decision about any action they wish to take.

The feedback for each of the activities tends to lead into the next activity. This topic suggests

that 'now that you know what types of Grade D exercise you do WM

and that this is the only type vigorous enough to keep you fit (new mega) how about

checking out if you do enough of it by keeping an exercise diary (another activity) ? '

Case studies and quotes - which show what decisions other people reached and how they put their plans

into action.

Jane's review of her diary and comments on the decisions she reached.

Information boxes - which summarise useful information and offer 'handy tips'.

Not present in this topic.

'What next?' boxes - which suggest follow-up action and how to take learning further.

Not labelled as such but final section suggests follow-up action.

Using the media
I wonder if we may be using this term in different ways? Many people today use the 'media'
to mean the
visual media - television and perhaps videotapes. When we say that the OU produces multi-
media courses
and packs we are referring to a mixture of print, diagrams and pictures in the print, aud-
iotape or radio
programmes, videotapes or TV programmes. and in a few of our courses slide-tape presenta-
tions and
computer software programmes each of which provide a medium for communication.
The challenge:
The use of TV and videotapes can be very seductive and can make for sloppy educational ob-
jectives. There
seems to be a pervasive idea that TV or video is better than any other medium.
Adult educators should aim to use a variety of media to their best educational effect.
The visual media can be great for raising awareness - often by using affective anecdotes
which may be in
danger of sensationalising the issues. Television can campaign for the need for both indi-
vidual and
community or national change. If short enough not to numb the brain it can make excellent
discussion
'triggers'. However television is often poor at conveying information that can be remem-
bered and. I would
argue, ineffective for enabling individual decision making and personal planning. It can
identify and model
skills but it can't usually enable viewers to practice skills. it can show complex proces-
ses or distant or difficult
places but it seldom gives viewers the time to reflect or relate what they see to their o-
wn circumstances.
Both the BBC and Channel 4 have shown that transmitted television programmes are only sub-
stantially and
long-term educationally effective if backed up by print materials and, if at all possible,
by local support
groups.
Choosing the appropriate medium for the educational objective is where the skill comes in
. I hope this will be
the focus of your workshop.
I thought I would end with an example of choosing the appropriate medium from one of our re-
cent projects.
Naturally we have many requests to print our materials in ethnic minority languages. But
of course many at
these people are not literate in their mother tongue. They understand verbal better than
printed
presentations. Sometimes the group leaders will be fluent in both languages and so can tr-
anslate as they go
along. However the leader can concentrate on the group process more easily if translated
material can be
used. So, in conjunction with a local Milton Keynes health education project, we are tran-
slating some of our
topics and recording them on audiotapes. (Incidentally making audiotapes is often far ea-
sier and cheaper
than getting materials designed and printed.) Sometimes these audiotapes will be used wit-
h our existing
pictures and charts but the main information and instructions will be carried on the tape
with any case studies
adapted for the new target audience.
Where people have difficulty with reading they are often better helped by hearing the mat-
erial rather than by
reading it so this approach can also be used to adapt the materials for use with students
on basic literacy
courses.
One of our earliest Community Education workshops was for Basic Literacy Tutors in Dorset
who had already
begun to experiment with our materials for those students who had just completed their ba-
sic literacy
courses. To start with these tutors needed 'permission' from us that it was OK to cut up
existing materials and
to discard the pieces they couldn't use and to adapt others for use with their students.
But soon after this
workshop we received reports from some groups of students in which mm were doing
just this. The groups had become responsible for their own learning in a particularly emp

owering way: they
were writing to us to tell us how to make better materials and we were delighted with thi
s feedback. in
Strathclyde, too, the wheel is now coming full circle and some of the groups are developi
ng new learning
materials they hope to publish themselves for other groups to use. The ultimate challenge
to many of us as
professional educators is surely 'to give away the tools of education ' and not seek to h
old on to them as a
professional 'secret'.

Table 1 Overall aim of the Open University's Community Education programme
1 To meet the learning needs of individuals at various stages in their lives:
in their roles as -

- parents
- consumers
- employees
- . citizens

in the context of their -

0 family

- workplace

o community.

2 To reach as wide a range of learners as possible regardless of prior educational achievements,

through appropriate learning materials and to support their learning.

3 To collaborate with national and 109211 organisations in:

- defining needs
- developing learning materials

0 sharing resources i

o publicising and promoting learning opportunities

- organising support for learners

- evaluating the provision.

4 To finance this work, within the rules laid down by the University, from student fees, external

grants and other sources of income. (This self-fmancing rule is at last (19871 being revi
ewed

with the prospect of some baseline funding being available for this socially and educatio
nally

desirable programme.)

Table 2 Community Education learning materials users. 1977-86

Course registrations . 83.000

Discussion packs distributed 37,000

Course book sales 135,000

Table 3 Sponsored place students' responses

Survey (1981) compared sponsored place and fee-paying students on 'The Five Years of Life' and 'The Preschool Child'.

Questionnaire was completed by 491 sponsored place students and 463 fee-paying students. (Fee-paying students' responses are given in brackets where these differ substantially)

90% worked through the whole course

60% submitted the optional Assignments

80%4- passed

95% found the material not very/not at all difficult

84% found the 'Activities' very/fairly helpful

45% completed 50% or more / all the 'Activities' .

(fee-paying students 38%)

II

61% valued the 'Letter of Course Completion' t

(fee-paying students 46%)

'1 Not all of the 'Activities' could have been completed during the 8 weeks study period

" Value was considered to be related to enhanced self-worth/ self-esteem.

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Table 4 Leading a group

A workshop for group leaders using Community Education packs

This pack suggests timetables for three different length workshops. The full-length 3-day workshop covers:

9

e

1 Breaking the ice People find it difficult to co-operate on a task before they have made contact with each other.

Ice-Breaker activities:

- enable group members to introduce themselves.
- ensure that people pay attention to each other.
- create a friendly, informal atmosphere.
- ensure that everyone gets involved from the beginning.
- focus the anxiety that always exists at the beginning of a group and discharge it.
- introduce an initial awareness of listening and 'contacting' skills.

2 Needs and expectations The training programme needs to be adapted to meet the learning needs of the group and of

the individuals in the group. These exercises carried out at the beginning of the programme will give you a chance to:

- gauge the level of experience, motivation and anxiety in the group.
- ensure that you get the pitch and pace of learning right
- make any necessary additions or changes to the programme or if necessary plan follow-up meetings.
- emphasise the importance of involving group members in taking responsibility for their own learning.

3 Getting a group together Practical tasks may include:

- publicising the group and bringing people together.
- finding a suitable place to meet.
- arranging creche facilities.
- deciding on times of meetings.
- making sure everyone knows the arrangements.
- taking responsibility for the room, setting out the furniture and clearing up.

4 Learning in groups Work-shop members need to be helped to reflect on their experience as group members and to

focus on the difference between individual and group learning.

5 Using written materials This session explores the use of topic leaflets as resources in learning groups. through:

- sharing ideas about how leaflets have been used so far in different groups.
- focussing on the purpose of discussion and the advantages of using materials.
- preparing to lead a session.

6 Practice session Confidence and skill in leading groups are only gained through experience. This practice session

provides a safe environment in which participants can risk 'taking the hot seat' and learn from their experience through reflection and feedback.

7 The group leader The activities in this session aim to:

- make group members conscious of what they have learned, from this workshop, about leadership.
- reach some consensus about the qualities and attitudes which make for effective leadership.
- concentrate people's attention on their own strengths and limitations as a potential group leader thus raising self-awareness and identifying individual learning needs.

8 The leader and the group This session gives workshop members an opportunity to:

- reflect on their own experience of groups and of the sessions in which they have taken part.
- review the training, discuss perceptions and come to conclusions about the leader's responsibilities and skills.
- raise any anxieties they have about leading a group.

9 Using other resources For most groups the main method of achieving their goals will be reading and discussion.

This session aims to explore other possibilities of achieving group goals.

10 Evaluation This final session:

- gives course members a chance to evaluate and comment on their workshop experience.
- gives workshop leaders a chance to identify limitations in the training and future training needs.
- introduces the importance of evaluation in learning groups.

How do you feel about joining a discussion group? Nervous? Cheerful? Confident? Unsure? If you belong to lots of groups you probably don't have many worries about this one. If the last group you were in was a class at school, you may be a bit more nervous. Even people who are used to groups can have mixed feelings about them. Try the following quiz.

first group meeting. It will help you to get to know each other and feel more relaxed.
IO