Adult education as a resource for resistance and transformation: Voices, learning experiences, identities of student and adult educators

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ADULT EDUCATION AS A RESOURCE FOR RESISTANCE AND TRANSFORMATION: VOICES, LEARNING EXPERIENCES, IDENTITIES OF STUDENT AND ADULT EDUCATORS

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Publishers
FPCEUC - Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, University of Coimbra, Portugal
CEAD - Centre for the Research on Adult Education and Community Intervention (CEAD), University of Algarve, Portugal
ESREA - European Society for Research on the Education of Adults

Cover Design Illustration
Tiles (20th Century) of the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, University of Coimbra, Portugal

Cover and Design
Diogo Amaral, Portugal

Typesetting
Isa Rodrigues, Portugal

ISBN 978-86-80712-40-6 (Print)

Coimbra, 2020

DISCLAIMER

The invitation for preparing the texts for this book was made to the presenters of the *ESREA Access, Learning Careers and Identities Network Conference*, that took place at FPCE, University of Coimbra, 7th-9th, November, 2019. The authors who participate in this book are responsible for the content of the chapters. Their perspectives and opinions may not necessarily represent the official positions of the scientific entities that support the publication, the publishers or the perspectives of the editors.

Acknowledgements: The organisers of the book would like to thank the Portuguese Public Institute for Employment and Professional Training, IEFP, IP, for the support of ESREA Access, Learning Careers and Identities Network Conference. The preparation of this book also received the support of the *Master's Degree in Adult Education and Training and Community Intervention*, of FPCE, University of Coimbra, Portugal.

The book's editors and authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to Barbara Merrill for her hard and extensive work in reviewing the English writing of the chapters, as most of the authors are not native English speakers.

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Wright, R. R. & Sandlin, J. A. (2009) Cult TV, hip hop, shape-shifters, and vampire slayers: A review of the literature at the intersection of adult education and popular culture. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 59 (2), pp. 118-141.

Section 2. Higher Education and Adult Students' Experiences

What Eliza and Jake did next: Learning beyond access to HE art and design?

Samantha Broadhead

Introduction

This chapter considers the wider social impact an Access to Higher Education Diploma (AHED) has beyond those educational benefits gained by individual students. This is an example of an Access course, which are designed in the United Kingdom to give those older students without qualifications a means of going to university. It is argued that the altruistic motives of some of the students extend the sphere of influence of their education beyond themselves and their immediate families to other communities. In relation to the 'possibility of hope' within adult education as advocated by Raymond Williams (1989) it can be seen that the students aimed to share their skills and knowledge gleaned from their learning experiences that included their AHED course. It also appeared that they chose to undertake this activity on the margins of mainstream education.

Previous research utilised narrative inquiry to investigate post-Access students' experiences in art and design undergraduate education (Broadhead, 2018; Broadhead & Gregson, 2018). Narrative inquiry is a means of appreciating the connections between significant incidents in students' stories about learning and any longer-term impacts beyond formal education (Andrews, 2014; Butler-Kisber, 2010; Clandinin & Connelly, 2004).

In this small study, two examples were considered through narrative inquiry where Eliza and Jake (who were previously Access students) had undertaken projects that developed from their learning experiences. These projects were positioned outside the university in particular communities; however, tenuous links were maintained with the 'official' sites of learning. It can be argued that Eliza and Jake initiated learning groups that were closely aligned to Freedman's (2015) model of Visual Culture Learning Communities (VCLCs). VCLCs are communities of practitioners who share skills in creative practices and at the same time providing critical feedback and support for members. The groups tend to be informal and cover creative subjects that are not covered in formal education. Freedman (2015) associated VCLCs with young people; however, mature, emerging creatives also seem to create their own learning communities.

Eliza successfully completed her undergraduate education and then progressed to postgraduate study where she was able to take part in an international residency. This led her, as part of an Erasmus + project with a social design collective (Brave New Alps, 2019), to travel to Rovereto, a city and commune in Trentino in northern Italy, to work with refugees/migrants.

Jake founded 'Art School' in order to provide art education for those who could not access it in formally. He is working with a wide range of traditional and 'non-traditional' learners. Jake has given opportunities to many diverse creative practitioners sharing skills and knowledge.

It is proposed that the Access learning experience and values remain with some students and encourage them to open up learning spaces for others. It seems that the sphere of influence and impact of the AHED course does not just stop at the individual student. Some of the Access values proposed by Broadhead, Davies and Hudson (2019) around social justice, democratic education, student-centeredness and community engagement appear to be modelled and developed by the

students. This challenges some of the neoliberal discourses about the individualistic motives of mature students that link Access education to increased economic rewards (Burke, 2002). The chapter also evaluates the ways in which narrative inquiry can connect significant moments within a person's learning career to achievements outside formal education.

Context

There are at least two types of Access course operating within the United Kingdom. Firstly, there is the AHED that is delivered mostly within further education, but regulated by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). It is a level three course that is usually studied over a year and enables students without the conventional 'A' Levels to apply to higher education through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). AHEDs can be aligned to many subject areas including art and design, law, medical sciences, social sciences and education. They are nationally recognised and the modules are graded.

There are also Access programmes delivered in higher education institutions (HEIs). These programmes share a number of common characteristics. Firstly, they tend to facilitate progression of students within the institution in which they are taught. Secondly, the programmes are more likely to provide educational opportunities in the humanities and social sciences rather than sciences and engineering degrees. Thirdly, the programmes draw upon the life experience of students while teaching study skills and preparation for study alongside the teaching of subject knowledge (Hudson in Broadhead, Davies & Hudson, 2019). The participants discussed in this chapter have previously studied an AHED course.

The people who study on AHED or on Access courses in general are sometimes described as 'second chance' students (Parry, 1996). This is because they may not have achieved the necessary qualifications for entry onto a degree programme when at school. There are many social, cultural, economic, demographic, political, and/or health factors that mean some students do not get a fair opportunity to achieve when they are at school. For example, they may have been looked-after children; they may have needed to care for ailing parents/guardians; they may have suffered a long-term childhood illness or they may have had incarcerated parents/guardians, all of which could disrupt a child's education. There is also the possibility that the quality of schooling that they received as a child was not very good (Broadhead, Davies and Hudson, 2019). Therefore, Access courses serve as a 'repair system' that enables people, usually mature students, who have not the 'traditional' or expected qualifications conventionally gained in compulsory schooling, to go to university (Broadhead & Gregson, 2018).

Access to HE values

In the 1960s and 1970s an Access pedagogy developed from a radical adult education tradition and at the same time a particular set of 'Access' values was established (Williams, 1997). These values were that Access education was student-centred, flexible and responsive, collaborative and practitioner-led (Burke, 2002; Parry, 1996; Williams, 1997). Many, if not all, types of Access programme were designed to serve the needs, and mitigate against the constraints, of local communities.

Altruism and community learning

Reay et al. (2003) have suggested that non-traditional students undertaking an Access course placed value on community and cooperation rather than on more individualistic approaches to decision-making. Reay et al. (2003) also conceded that it is difficult to disentangle the students' attitudes towards community and cooperation from the collaborative practices that are a result of Access tutors' commitment to the traditional values of adult education. In their research findings, altruistic motivations for learning seem to have been ascribed to female mature students in particular. For example, Skeggs (1997) has identified a 'respectable' working-class femininity, associated with strong morality including codes of (hetero) sexuality, domesticity and motherhood: often based on a high regard for the family and the local community. Other working-class femininities may include the 'community stalwart', the woman wishing 'to give something back', a motivation that goes beyond that of the individual or family (Maguire, 2001).

O'Shea and Stone (2012) have argued that learning on enabling courses can lead to "more active citizenship" (McGivney, 1999, p. vi). This is where students become more interested and involved in community, social and political interests and activities, as well as an increase in "intellectual interests, social liberalism, altruism, feminism and life satisfaction" (West, et al., 1986, p. 64). Broad or general education, similar to that delivered on Access courses can give people the skills to organise activities for themselves and others. Participation is central to a socialist and democratic society (Williams, 1989).

Within the context of learning and the creative arts, it can be seen that there is scope for adult students to give something back by using their skills and learning in their communities. Freedman (2015) has stated that Visual Culture Learning Communities (VCLCs) are becoming an important form of pedagogy that lies outside the art academies. She argues that the visual arts should not be perceived as a personal path to enlightenment but as part of a dedicated communal practice. Many people learn about art outside schools, in museums, community centres or outside institutions all together. 'Non-traditional' students may enter higher education because they have previously participated in a VCLC. They may continue to be part of such a community after they have left formal education or be instrumental in setting up a new VCLC. VCLCs provide a community of like-minded people, mediating against a lack of opportunities in formal education. They create a safe space for diverse practitioners to develop their identities as artists. Diverse practices that are sometimes absent in official sites of learning may be recognised as legitimate creative activity. People who participate in VCLCs share resources and skills. The informal structures of VCLCs can facilitate much-needed openings for dissemination, exhibition and critical review.

Method

Previous research employed narrative inquiry in order to investigate the learning experiences of post-Access students in art and design undergraduate study (Broadhead, 2018; Broadhead & Gregson, 2018). Narrative inquiry, a form of qualitative research, is an established method within educational research that draws upon field texts, such as stories, conversations, interviews, and life experiences, so researchers can understand the ways students create meaning in their lives. In a sense, stories never end so participants from the earlier project were asked if they would be

prepared to continue to share their stories about their experiences that occurred after they had left formal education.

Narrative inquiry was chosen because it is a means of seeing the connections between significant incidents in students' learning careers or learning journeys and any longer-term impact that lies beyond formal education (Andrews, 2014; Butler-Kisber, 2010; Clandinin & Connelly, 2004).

The use of narrative inquiry means that an analysis of experiences of individual subjects is undertaken. Therefore, generalisations cannot easily be made and applied to other, different contexts. However, human stories can have a powerful impact and provide models for possible action by other practitioners and students (Nussbaum, 1990; Skilleås, 2006).

In the field notes and research texts, the participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities. The projects were anonymised so that individuals could not be identified.

The two examples considered, through narrative inquiry, are the experiences of Jake and Eliza. They had originally studies on an AHEAD course in further education and subsequently progressed to higher education. Both had successfully achieved an undergraduate and postgraduate degree in a creative subject. After leaving formal education, Jake and Eliza had established projects or learning communities that seemed to have been informed by their previous learning careers. These learning communities were positioned outside the university, situated in particular communities; however, tenuous links were maintained with their 'official' sites of learning.

Case studies

There are examples of mature students leading collectives, exhibiting groups, providing services for local communities. Two case studies are discussed in this chapter, which asks what did Jake and Eliza do next?

Jake was a participant who had studied on a part-time AHED course in art and design and then because of his previous experiential learning was able to undertake postgraduate study, achieving his Masters in 2016. He then, with his partner set up 'Art School'. 'Art School' held regular art workshops for young people after school and evening adult creative courses. In addition, there were regular weekend day courses that explored drawing through stitch, printmaking and life drawing. Jake (2018) claimed, 'My sense is that the arts in schools is at an all-time low but there is a seed change. Access and undergraduate study need to be defended...the only available route for many at the moment.' He continued:

> I have worked on two collaborative projects, which involved residency, response and exhibitions. I am also project managing a new studio and exhibition space as part of the new project. This space will also house Art School, of which I am joint founder, which runs workshops and classes for the community, working with 11-18 year olds after school, and adult classes in the evening. This month, under the Art School banner we have facilitated a Bradford School Trust to celebrate creativity in education. This involves nine schools coming together for a single day of celebration, music, visual arts, performance and dance. (Jake, 2018)

Jake went on to talk about how some of the students had used the sessions to prepare a portfolio so they could attend an AHED course interview as part of the application process. Thus, a new progression route had been made into formal education for those who needed it.

Eliza, another person who had previously studied on an AHED course completed her undergraduate education and then went on to postgraduate study where she was able to take part in an international residency. This turned out to be a critical incident in Eliza's story leading her to make the courageous decision to take time off from her paid work to develop her own creative practice outside the United Kingdom.

As part of an Erasmus+ project with a social design collective (Brave New Alps, 2019) Eliza travelled to Rovereto, a city and commune in Trentino in northern Italy. Once she had established herself there, she set up sewing workshops for female refugees and migrants. Using her textile skills Eliza (2019) aimed to, 'find out what their future is e.g., stay in country or return, if possible, what they want their future to be and how they can make this happen?'

She aimed to, 'capture these questions/thoughts through visual means – by writing, mark making or drawing on fabric. This would then be embroidered and eventually 'gifted' back to the women.'

Her philosophy was that by taking part in her sewing group, the people she worked with would gain many other skills. She argued that, '[They] become better problem solvers going forward. Sewing is just another way!' (Eliza, 2019).

Eliza worked on her project for three months, which has motivated her to develop more projects that utilise sewing as a means of instigating social change.

Discussion

When reflecting on the stories shared by Jake and Eliza it can be seen that there are many common values and functions shared by Access educators and those starting VCLCs.

Early Access courses were situated within local environments (in community centres, youth clubs, women's groups, further education colleges and prison education departments) (Broadhead, Davies & Hudson, 2019). They were created to meet learning needs of individuals who could not easily access other forms of education and their development was 'bottom up' rather than 'top down'.

Jake and Eliza had also set up VCLCs in particular communities because the people they worked with could not access formal arts education. Their projects were practitioner-led because they were creative and teaching practitioners. As they were working in a context outside compulsory education, they were not subject to the monitoring and standardisation processes that Access education has recently had to adhere. However, both projects continued to have a connection to formal education. Jake talked about preparing some students to apply to study on an AHED art and design course in further education. Eliza undertook her project with the support of her University where she studied her postgraduate qualification.

The 'Art School' and sewing project enabled people to share their art and design skills, providing time, space and material resources. One aspect that was perhaps particular to the visual arts context is that the projects like other VCLCs allowed their members the opportunity to show their creative work to their peers for feedback. Exhibition and critical review are crucial to the visual arts learning process.

All forms of Access Education aims to be inclusive adopting student-centred pedagogies that often relate to people's previous life experiences (Broadhead et al., 2019). Freedman (2019) has argued that models of VCLCs were inclusive because they allowed different types of practitioners from diverse backgrounds to take part in arts activities from which they may normally be excluded. However, VCLCs, if closely aligned to a particular set of arts practices or a particular arts philosophy do have the potential to be exclusionary, depending on how open they are to newcomers and new ideas.

Jake and Eliza used their educational experience and the skills they had gained through many years of engagement with art and design learning. Access courses were part of that experience. However, it would be very challenging to disentangle any particular influence Access educators had on these individuals. Jake and Eliza may have started up their VCLCs, irrespective of their educational journeys, because of the values instilled in them by their families, communities, schooling, work and other forms of education. Jake and Eliza may have chosen to study an Access course because they recognised a common ethos about the importance of social learning that they could already identify with.

Attending an Access course was a significant and critical part of Jake and Eliza's stories. This experience gave them a confidence to recognise other people's learning needs and to take action in meeting those needs. This type of active participation is one important outcome of a democratic education and society (Bernstein, 2000; Williams, 1989).

Conclusion

The process of narrative inquiry was effective in identifying critical incidents in the past that appeared to have a connection with subsequent events. It must be remembered that stories are often partial and are always contingent on particular contexts that are constantly in flux. Narratives about transformation or cause and effect can be seductive because they give an appearance of narrative coherence or narrative smoothing (Spence, 1986; Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). It can be inferred that there are common values shared by some Access students and Access tutors and these inform the decisions taken by some to set up projects in their communities to share learning.

The stories from Jake and Eliza have been collected over 8 years. It is a testament to their own belief in the value of Access education that they generously continue to share their own stories. Being a part of the research around Access education calls for a certain amount of reflection and contemplation on a participant's own motivations, values and actions. Nevertheless, it is difficult to claim that people who study Access courses are likely to engage in altruistic practices to help others who have an educational need. It can be suggested that such students do have a potential to have a wider impact on their communities and the lives of others beyond their own selves and families.

Both projects continue to have a tenuous link with formal education. Some people still wished to engage in formal education because it legitimised their own creative practices. Accreditation publicly recognises a person's level of skills and knowledge within a certain subject area; for some leaners, this is very important. Jake and Eliza operated as 'ambassadors' for adult learning outside institutions, but at the same time had the potential to act as bridges between their VCLCs and formal education. Jake and Eliza gave their time and skills, not for financial gain, but because they felt it

was the right thing to do. They believed that creative education is important and people should have access to it.

The question is how Universities can recognise and support this kind of activity and at the same time benefit from it without destroying the flexibility and independence of VCLCs. A civic university is distinguished from an entrepreneurial one by its focus on wider social concerns rather than those purely related to commercialisation (Goddard et al., 2016). Therefore, the ways in which universities can help sustain VCLCs, without endangering the work they do through too much interference, should be considered. The success of VCLCs is that they are able to operate at the margins or outside educational institutions and this should be protected.

This chapter has drawn upon the experiences of mature students with an AHED background, that is, an Access course that was delivered in further education. It would be interesting to look at the experiences of those students who had studied on an Access course that was taught in a university.

Universities should also be open to the wide range of motivations that drive mature students back into education; they are not only concerned with gaining careers with high salaries. Some mature students do want to give skills and knowledge back to their local communities. Motivational drivers include a sense of responsibility for others as part of an active citizenship.

In spite of the diminishing participation of mature students in the arts and adult education within the United Kingdom, it can be seen that some people are still passionate about these aspects of our society and are actively fighting to maintain them.

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