Can you hear me through my photos? Engaging learners at-risk to understand their experience in college.

Dely L Elliot, The SCRE Centre, University of Glasgow
Anne Gillen, Adam Smith College
Nyree Rothwell, Adam Smith College


Abstract

This collaborative study seeks an in-depth understanding of at-risk learners’ perception of their college experiences using participatory action research. Their views were gathered through the combined use of documentary photography and reflective interviewing called Photovoice. In these research processes, participants were informed that they were the main players in ‘setting the agenda’, i.e. they have the liberty to take photographs of people and objects that matter to them and subsequently to use these photographs for directing the discussions. The findings suggest that there were four inter-related components influencing learners’ perception of their overall experiences in college: a) psychological barriers, b) physical barriers, c) social support, and d) support for learning. Each dimension requires serious attention, as they tend to inform learners’ decisions to engage in learning, pursue their studies or discontinue their learning. It is argued that addressing these four important areas for the sake of at-risk learners will, in fact, benefit every single learner in the college.

Introduction

This paper offers an outline of *My Photos, My Story: An Account of College Learners’ Voices*, a college-university collaborative research partnership that took place between August 2007 and July 2008. An influential review of Scotland’s Colleges ‘Developing Capability: How our Colleges can Respond to Future Challenges’ (Scottish Government, 2007) acted as a catalyst for this study, as one of the areas of emphasis was modernising learning and teaching. Colleges were advised that their provision should be tailored to meet the changing needs of future learners. Three Colleges – Adam Smith College, Cardonald College and Reid Kerr College in partnership with The SCRE Centre, University of Glasgow – responded to this call through self-funding an exploratory research study on students’ voices.

In Scotland, a large number of young people are not engaged in education, employment or training and there is some evidence that the figure is ‘high on an international comparison’ (Scottish Executive, 2006:4). Therefore, it was deemed crucial that the focus in this study should be on obtaining the views and experiences of at-risk college learners. At-risk learners in this study refers to
college students who are at a high risk of withdrawal and share the same characteristics with disengaged young people.

More specifically, this research study endeavours to obtain an in-depth understanding of how at-risk college learners perceive their learning attitudes and experiences. This includes initial impressions from when they first contemplated studying and their actual experiences with staff members and fellow learners at the college. This research also seeks to provide a basis for negotiation with the senior management team from the three colleges with a view to developing pertinent action plans.

The primary questions which this study sought to address were:
- What are learners’ views of their college learning experiences?
- How do the views of at-risk learners from the three colleges converge or differ?
- What do learners perceive to be the most significant factors that may impact on their college experience? Are these the same factors that decision-makers perceive to be important?

**Methodology**

**Research design**

In an exploratory study like this, which aims to understand the experiences of individuals or groups, a purely qualitative approach was considered suitable. In particular, participatory action research was executed as a means towards achieving a greater end, which is to empower the research participants and improve the current conditions. A creative technique called Photovoice was adopted for this study. This approach – developed by Wang and Burris (1997) – was employed because it provides a ‘lens’ through which impressions of college life and experiences can be viewed.

Photovoice is a form of participatory action research that utilizes documentary photography and storytelling. By entrusting cameras into the hands of oppressed individuals to act as recorders of their own community, Photovoice enables people to define for themselves and others, including policymakers, what is worth remembering and what needs to be changed.

(Graziano, 2007)

Empowering research participants was advocated by Strack et al (2004) and Kroeger (2003) who argued that the very process of making one’s voice heard can be very powerful and emancipating. Using participatory action research comes with a strong message, ie that the participants’ voices matter.

The study aims to convey important messages from at-risk learners to policymakers or to those who are capable of making changes in colleges’ policies and procedures. It is a way of creating a dialogue between the direct recipients of the college services and the decision-makers so that such services will be more aligned to the actual needs of the recipients.

---

1 They are often referred to as Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET) or the More Choices, More Chances (MCMC) group. Some of the participants, however, did not consider themselves ‘at-risk learners’.
The combined use of documentary photography and reflective interviewing are not only appropriate but also have a great deal of advantages for several reasons:

1) The approach strongly encourages vulnerable learners’ voices to be heard loud and clear.

2) The combined use of photographs\(^2\) and storytelling puts more weight on the message conveyed since the importance of the matters raised by the participants is reinforced by both photos and interviews.

3) It is regarded as an empowering research tool because research participants are given the liberty to capture scenes and subsequently discuss the issues that affect them most. In this study, participants see themselves as the main players in ‘setting the agenda’.

4) Lastly, because participants, through their cameras, are given the means to identify areas that they see as significant and/or affect them, this also promotes and develops both their critical and reflective thinking abilities.

It is also worth mentioning that the research process also caters for the needs of all the participants, including those who lack the writing and linguistic skills required in other forms of research data gathering (e.g. questionnaire surveys).

**Study participants**

The research study involved three Scottish Colleges from the west and east of Scotland that are all serving the local and often deprived community around them. A range of learners from Adam Smith College in Fife, Cardonald College in Glasgow and Reid Kerr College in Paisley took part in this research.

Groups and research participants were purposively selected by using the definition of at-risk learners as the main criterion\(^3\). They included the following groups of learners:

1) learners with additional learning or physical needs,
2) immigrant learners/learners for whom English is not their first language,
3) adult returners,
4) learners from groups historically at high risk of drop-out/low achievement,
5) part-time learners,
6) learners in outreach centres,
7) ‘silent’, ‘invisible’ learners.

In the selection, representation of the main socio-demographic variables (eg gender, age, mode of study) was also taken into account.

**Stages and procedures**

There is a series of interlinked stages involved in the Photovoice approach, which the researchers endeavoured to adhere to.

---

\(^2\) Photographs alone do convey messages in a powerful way as they can reveal a lot more information than written text, feelings and emotions included.

\(^3\) Some of the participants, however, did not consider themselves ‘at-risk learners’.
Preparatory stage
- Reviewing the literature and related policy documents
- Defining goals and objectives
- Making the policy/decision-makers aware of the study’s aims and objectives and discussing initial negotiations with them on how to respond to the study findings
- Training other staff members who would be involved in the data collection
- Preparing project leaflets to raise awareness of the study

Data gathering stage – use of photographs
- Contacting college learners and asking for their permission to take part.
- Briefing the participants regarding the research process, the significant role of the expressing their voices through their photographs, and the ethical procedures involved⁴.
- Giving each learner a disposable camera⁵ and a timescale once consent was granted⁶.
- Selecting meaningful photographs. These sets of photos were then used as stimuli for the next stage of data collection, ie reflective group interviewing.

Data gathering stage – use of interviews
- Interviews were unstructured, informal and reflective, sharing some of the qualities of ethnographic interviews (Cohen et al., 2001).
- The discussion was guided and led not by the researcher’s questions but through the photographic voices of the participants.
- These interviews with learners, which took between 25 and 40 minutes, were audio-recorded for full transcription.

Data analysis stage
- The interview data were transcribed fully.
- NVivo was employed in organising or coding the data, discovering emergent concepts and themes, and in finding relationships amongst concepts
- Basic content analysis was also utilised to quantify and weigh the value of the issues raised.
- Attention was also given specifically to the narratives as they often communicated both literal and psychological interpretations of the findings.

Ethical considerations
The research team ensured that all the college practitioners involved abided by a common protocol for using the Photovoice approach. Consent and voluntary participation is a requirement and was carefully followed from the outset

---

⁴ This included gaining consent from other people before taking their photograph. The discussion also entailed explaining the philosophy behind participatory action research and how participants’ voices could be used powerfully to inform the needed changes.
⁵ Some learners preferred to use their own digital cameras.
⁶ Each participant signed a consent form if they were willing to take part in the research. On some occasions, some elementary training in how to take photos was also provided.
through to the dissemination of findings. It was also highlighted to all that their participation was strictly voluntary.

Throughout the research process, information of a personal and confidential nature was strictly safeguarded especially during the analyses and reporting of data by describing learners rather than giving personal information.

Learners were informed that the photos remain at all times their property and will not be used for any purpose without their permission.

**Research Findings**

When these photographs were analysed with the learners’ stories and narratives, four emergent themes became visible. Based on this study, the things that really matter to learners are divided into four areas namely:

1. **Psychological barriers** – Through numerous photographs of buildings, doors, gates and entrances as well as a blank page, college learners expressed their trepidation of what college life would be like. For many of these learners, the experience can indeed be very frightening as ‘going through the doors made [them] feel nervous’. The door appeared mysterious as they wondered what awaited on the other side.

According to College B learners, the college’s façade appeared to be ‘formidable’, ‘dark’, ‘imposing’, ‘exciting’ and ‘scary’. A learner who took a photograph of the building said:

> Mine is more about before coming to college … I live just across the road. So I passed the college every day on my way to work [but] I felt it wasn’t open to me.

(College B, young female learner)

> This is a picture of the door to my Maths classroom. When you first come here, your instincts are, ‘Oh gosh I can’t do this’. You see all the advertisements in the paper – ‘Come and learn’ – and you are like: ‘No – shriek!’ This door made me frightened….

(College A, adult female returner)

Learners’ perception of barriers raises three significant points. Firstly, the realisation of college learning meant that, for some, it was a step forward because learners successfully manage to cross their psychological barrier(s). Secondly, these initial feelings prior to learning at colleges often had an impact on their attitudes towards their college experiences. Thirdly, depending on their actual experience in college, these perceived psychological barriers may be removed or strengthened.

2. **Physical barriers** – Similarly, inadequate or unsatisfactory facilities that cause sufficient inconvenience to learners were also perceived to be barriers, especially by learners who have physical disabilities. Classroom and toilet doors were cited as examples.

> I had my power chair last year and I couldn’t get in … the chair was too big for the door. So, I couldn’t get in. That’s why I’m in this chair now. … It wouldn’t just be the toilet door, it would be the classroom doors too.

(College A, disabled male learner)
In addition, a minor issue like noise emanating from the building work was something considered to be ‘off putting’ as they could not hear the tutor.

…it wasn’t until we got in and sat and I listened in classes and my train of thought was just away just because of the noise.

(College B, adult male learner)

Even the lack of good vending machines was also pointed out to be a cause of inconvenience or some minor irritation for some learners.

No, there’s not [a vending machine in this building] … I don’t eat [in the college]. … Sometimes, I’m hungry but sometimes, I have something to eat before I come here.

(College A, disabled male learner)

…when you put the money in, it doesn’t give you what you wanted. It takes the money but it doesn’t give you want you want and it’s a pain in the butt. It really is … especially when you’re dying with thirst … It’s not good at all.

(College C, young female learner)

Physical barriers were often sources of frustration for college learners. Nevertheless, it is also evident that learners\(^\text{7}\) learned how to cope with these physical barriers.

3. Social support – Learners stress the significance of friendship as a source of encouragement, social support, and a sense of belongingness. Having friends gives them a reason to keep on persevering with their learning. Lack of friends, however, increases their sense of fear and is likely to lead to withdrawal.

…my friends…are really nice people who have helped me come into college life and feel comfortable. I was nervous but from now on, I’ll keep contact with them.

(College A, disabled male learner)

…I found it quite relaxing actually because we got on with everyone straight away, it was unbelievable … it was amazing.

(College C, young female learner)

Similarly, the support given by college staff was also highlighted.

…the two ladies who work in the office … are brilliant. They make you feel really comfortable and help you in all ways they can. If you phone in, they deliver the message and they’ll call for you if you are needed. When you see a friendly smile like that in the morning, it makes it worthwhile.

(College A, adult female learner)

…when I was getting my bursary, the staff were really helpful because I really didn’t have a clue. …when I went in, the woman … gave me a form for my tax statement and everything….

(College B, young female learner)

It is evident in this study how the social dimension of support from both fellow learners and college staff (both teaching and non-teaching) was crucial to how learners perceive their experiences, which subsequently informs their decision to continue or give up learning.

\(^7\) especially disabled learners
4. Support for learning – Learners also emphasised the support provided by the college and the college staff. This included appropriate teaching style, learning areas and libraries.

"I took a picture of my History [folder and book] because from the minute I started, I enjoyed History. I think it’s maybe got something to do with the lecturer because he’s so passionate about it when he’s teaching… you can’t help but smile… because… he’s so upbeat about the whole subject."

(College B, young female learner)

"Library. It impressed me because it’s a very useful part of the college. You’ve got the different areas [where] you can sit and study, but there are also group areas….."

(College B, young female learner)

Learners were very positive about such learning areas as libraries. It is interesting to point out that for learners, these areas served two purposes: to assist them in their learning as well as to provide areas for social interaction with their fellow learners. This suggests that support for learning can also be seen as an instrument for acquiring some social support.

A slightly different but nevertheless important point raised by two young female learners concerned their determination to succeed with their learning.

"[This] is a picture of my philosophy books and folder because … from the first week at college, it’s been the … hardest to understand. At the start, I found it a wee bit confusing … but the more I’m doing it, [the more] I’m … starting to get my head around it."

"…I attended all [lessons] so I just made sure that I was at every class…. [The lecturer] was going over it and the more practice I was doing, the more it started to sink in."

(College B, young female learners)

This implies that learners’ perseverance in understanding the subject complemented by regular attendance and additional support from the lecturers, also illustrates how support can start with the learners themselves.

**Discussion**

It is evident from the research findings that a large number of at-risk college learners start their learning journey with a profound sense of trepidation. Although, exploring the cause of their fears was beyond the scope of this study, it can be assumed that a wide range of factors played a part in the development of this fear. This may include some unpleasant experiences related to learning in the past or a dearth of academic and emotional preparedness that might help learners cope with the demands of the course. Some of the narratives also pointed to how potential learners feared that their current condition (e.g., financial, family/work responsibilities) could obstruct their desire to engage or re-engage in learning. A number of these potential learners were also initially concerned that they might find themselves alone in a new and strange environment, that they may not be accepted as part of the new group.

Learners’ fears manifest themselves in the way they perceive such inanimate objects as buildings, doors, gates, entrances and corridors. These physical objects appear to be ‘symbolic representations of their inner thoughts and trepidation’, which create an imagined psychological barrier to learning.
Although, this barrier may only exist in the learners’ minds, it is considered seriously as a real barrier that is likely to influence their decision to engage in learning, pursue their studies or discontinue their learning.

Secondly, many from this cohort of learners also highlighted specific physical barriers to learning (eg dirty facilities, disruptions and noise caused by building work, lack of certain facilities in the college). Although, their significance may appear subsidiary, the impact of the presence or lack of these barriers can make a tremendous difference to the quality of their college experience. Based on the accounts presented by the participants, these physical barriers tend to affect physically disabled learners most.

Thirdly, the evidence from this study shows that the social support received from both the teaching and non-teaching staff is extremely important. As a member of the college teaching staff reflected ‘it was how [learners] were made to feel about themselves at the start of their college experience that directly affected what happened next’. Social support is a tangible expression that other people are concerned about them, respect them and genuinely wish them to improve themselves as a result of their college education.

The three main sources of social support for college learners are:

a) fellow learners
b) lecturers/tutors
c) other non-teaching college staff members.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study, colleges can certainly play a significant role in helping learners who are at high risk of withdrawal. The critical time to act or provide an intervention is at an early stage – just after this cohort of learners starts learning at college. It is critical because their initial experiences influence their decisions as to whether they will pursue or withdraw from learning.

The four key areas in which at-risk learners need to be supported mean that if these areas are adequately addressed, the benefits will not be restricted to the at-risk learner cohort. Instead, they will be extended to and have an impact on the experience of the overall college population.

Recommendations

Close examination of the evidence collected during the study suggests that the following recommendations are worthy of further discussion.

• It will be to the benefit not only of the learners but also of the college if the subsidiary issues (eg cleanliness of the toilets, disruption caused by building work, lack of drinking facilities in the building, and inconvenience caused by smokers) raised by the learners are carefully addressed.

• Activities that will promote good relationships amongst learners should always be promoted at all times as this will encourage learners to have a deep and lasting psychological bond with fellow learners.

• College receptionists’ roles are extremely important in making people feel welcome as they are the potential learners’ first point of contact. It is
essential, then, that the people in these posts have excellent interpersonal and social skills.

- Tutors, advisers and support workers need to tailor their learning approaches combined with sensitivity in dealing with vulnerable learners (Elliot, 2008). Tutors should also be prepared to act as guidance counsellors to this cohort.

- Colleges may endeavour to create/maintain a college ethos where everyone is friendly to each other – something that can be seen and felt especially by newcomers. This sense of belongingness is extremely important to encourage learners – vulnerable or otherwise – to keep on coming until a closer relationship with their fellow learners or other staff members has been established. Friends are a very good form of support mechanism in difficult situations.

- Since the evidence points to at-risk learners tending to be more vulnerable than other college students, more tailored support in various areas (eg more organised timetables, additional wheelchair-user friendly facilities) would be highly beneficial.

- It is acknowledged that this cohort of learners faces a wide range of issues even before they start life at college. Through a smile, a kind word and willingness to help, college staff may implicitly impress certain values that will help these learners overcome these barriers, both real and imagined.

**Contact details:**
Anne Gillen       annegillen@adamsmith.ac.uk       Project Manager
Dely Elliot       d.elliot@educ.gla.ac.uk            Project Team Member
Nyree Rothwell    nyreerothwell@adamsmith.ac.uk       Project Team Member
References


This document was added to the Education-line database on 11 February 2009