Through the looking glass: looking back, looking forward: learning, teaching and research in adult education past, present and future

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Personal reflection
This paper seeks to follow the implicit directions within the conference title. It reflects on SCUTREA conference papers presented by the author since 1998 and includes insights obtained ‘through the (authors) looking glass’. Whilst acknowledging Alice’s observation that ‘it’s no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then’, I have benefitted in going back and reviewing what at the time were familiar ideas and considering their relevance to a current project.

This reflection and the ‘production’ of a paper for this 40th SCUTREA anniversary provides the basis for discussion about learning, teaching and research with respect to the Higher Education Academy’s (HEA) Designing Inclusive Curriculum in Higher Education (DiCHE). This is a current project that is being undertaken by researchers in Lancaster University’s Departments of Applied Social Science and Educational Research. The paper also provides an opportunity to reflect on the relevance for the DiCHE project of two reoccurring themes within past papers: educational guidance, and inclusive curriculum development. Previously I have examined the two themes from the perspective of specific learner groups or stakeholders working inside or in partnership with university colleagues located in the Community Access Programme (CAP) or the Researching Equity, Access and Participation (REAP) group at Lancaster University. In looking back at past papers these themes are interrogated and reflected upon using the four lenses outlined by Brookfield 1995: research literature, learners, colleagues and my own reflection on national and institutional policy and the practice or adult educators, community tutors and university lecturers.

The paper begins with a brief overview of the present DiCHE project; it then refers to the cross cutting topics from past papers of the social model of disability and social exclusion. Next it considers the application of the three reoccurring themes for the DiCHE project and concludes by looking forward and speculating about their relevance for future research, teaching and learning in adult education.

Designing an Inclusive Curriculum in Higher Education (DiCHE)
DiCHE is an HEA funded project that aims to gather examples of inclusive curriculum design for the twenty-four subject centres. In the UK higher education sector the concept of inclusion is often associated with making ‘reasonable adjustments’ for disabled students when delivering the curriculum. The DiCHE project seeks to broaden this perception to that inclusion becomes a term associated
with including all learners. The impetus for DiCHE are the external drivers of equality legislation that pertain to age, disability, gender, race, religion and sexual orientation and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) targets for widening participation agenda that focus on students from socio-economic groups 4-7.

**Cross cutting topics**

**Social Exclusion**
This umbrella cross cutting issue was discussed with respect to different groups of learners in previous papers. It is one of a long line of descriptors that seek to explain reasons for differences in the material, educational, employment and life experiences of individuals. Challenging social exclusion through community based culturally relevant curriculum and inclusive educational guidance that was designed to extend the social capital of those excluded from HE remains a strategy for engaging with learners not currently involved in HE. In 2001, I reported with Sharples on an action research Families And Higher Education Decision-making (FAHED) project. The focus was on using feedback from families with little or no experience of HE to shape future interventions and review institutional processes. As I discuss elsewhere the process was dialogic and was based on the premise that since:

Higher education is heralded as the vehicle for travelling to new horizons that promise enhanced futures, and life opportunities, for people who are willing to continue the lifelong learning journey beyond the school gates. ... HE needs to make an ‘holistic commitment to understanding community and family cultures and exploring with them what value HE has for their lives, as well as exploring what the economic gains might be for society as a whole’ (Preece and Houghton 2000: 189).

Although DiCHE requires this holistic commitment, it is not a speedy, simple or straightforward process as the 2005 paper that examined institutional policies as part of the Disability Effective Inclusive Policies project revealed. Revisiting that paper reminded me of Bert Massie’s discussion of the Disability Discrimination Act in HE where he explained that:

Discrimination and disadvantage does not disappear overnight – it is deeply rooted – not just in attitudes and assumptions but within the built environment, organisations and systems, within tried and tested ways of doing things, within professional norms, within the way we learn and the way the world is presented to us. (2004, p2)

Moving towards an inclusive approach to curriculum design is also not something that will happen overnight and has to overcome many of the attitudinal shifts outlined by Massie. The challenge is further complicated by the potential tension that may arise between the rights, interests and experiences of different learners. Inclusive design will also need to be matched by effective inclusive delivery that enables all learners to acquire the more transferable, graduate qualities of openness, managing ambiguity, tolerance.
Social Model of Disability
Although the social model of disability focuses on one learner group it arguably addresses the concerns of other marginalised, disadvantaged, non-traditional, under-represented groups. This is because its' focus is on institutional change rather than problematising the individual or placing the responsibility on them to change, adapt or adjust so that they fit in with the teaching and learning opportunities provided. As noted in 1999:

as the dominant medical model is challenged and replaced by a social model of disability, the impact of environmental and attitudinal factors that can disable a person as much as their physical or sensory disability is recognised. 
... In contrast to the medical model, the social model accepts that (learning) provision can be made more accessible by existing inhabitants and previous travellrs committed to providing equality of opportunity to travellers in the future (Houghton, 1999).

The social model places a responsibility on attitudinal, environmental and operational change informed by a strategic commitment. For some institutions change may be motivated wholly by equality legislation, with the most recent Disability Equality Duty requiring an anticipatory response that moves beyond reasonable adjustment of earlier legislation. For others, providing a more inclusive learning environment and curriculum is driven by a commitment to the principles of social justice that emphasise entitlement for all. It is at the equity end of the continuum that the social model of disability contributes to the wider inclusive agenda, championing changes in the system that have the potential of responding to the needs of other learners who for different reasons experience a sense of exclusion from the curriculum and learning opportunities available. The importance of embedding institutional change and the need to respond to institutional mission, culture, and individual awareness, commitment and continuing professional development are noted by May and Bridger (2010) and will be revisited when looking forward through the looking glass.

Reoccurring Themes

Educational Guidance
Educational guidance includes the activities of informing, advising, counselling, advocating, assessing, enabling and feedback that are delivered along four continuum (Houghton, 2003) that many believe should be informed by the guidance principles of student centredness, confidentiality, impartiality, accessibility and equality of opportunity. Since the introduction of the National Student Survey and associated league tables the guidance activity of feedback from learners has gained increasing recognition. As noted in 1998:

Guidance, research, teaching and learning are activities all open to interpretation. Consequently, they are the subject of debate and discussion amongst educational observers, planners, providers and participants. For me, the inter-relationship between them is reminiscent of a kaleidoscope with their interaction ever changing and emerging into new possibilities and images. Houghton, 1998
The kaleidoscope has continued to turn with educational guidance and its connections with the curriculum now needing to respond to a more diverse student population and supposedly contradictory external agenda. So for instance, in thinking about curriculum design and how students might be supported in their learning there is often a difference between widening participation students (who are targeted in response to evolving criteria set by HEFCE and students recruited in response to the internationalisation agenda. For some the widening participation student population is associated with myths (UUK, 2003) of different entry qualifications and unfamiliarity with traditional study techniques, whereas overseas students gain entry to higher education (HE) with different entry qualifications or having alternative educational experiences. Although viewed differently some of the issues that may prevent recognition of their common needs are the administrative labels that categorise and differently position these two groups of students. And yet, despite their differences the focus on compensatory support strategies often emphasises these students’ deficit position. The solutions are often individualised and reactive at the point of curriculum delivery rather than inclusive and proactive at the point of curriculum design.

Another example that is closely connected to educational guidance with its current focus on information, advice and guidance (IAG) relates to the terminology used to describe and label qualifications. There is the risk of considerable confusion about the level, coherence and clarity of information provided to learners by those responsible for IAG and curriculum design. One reason for this confusion is because of recent changes in the name and curriculum requirement of UK post 16 qualifications. For example, the introduction of the diploma, which has the same name as an existing qualification within higher education and the introduction of a degree whose title includes the word foundation can lead to confusion because it is a phrase more usually associated with a lower level qualification. It is not surprising that many students will wish to echo the words of Eaglet, from ‘Alice through the looking glass’ who says: Speak English! I don't know the meaning of half those long words, and I don't believe you do either! As noted in 1999:

At the root of good guidance is communication. For communication to be effective it is necessary for it to become a dialogical process that is based on establishing common goals and shared meanings ... Houghton, 1999

The mechanisms for identifying and proactively anticipating what a more diverse student population need to access the curriculum and what they bring to enhance the curriculum depend on changes at the individual, institutional, discipline and sector level. In 1998 my concerns related to adult learners and those learning within a community context, I concluded then by stating that there was a:

complexity and fascinating relationship between guidance as research, teaching and learning. The images created in (the guidance) kaleidoscope are ever changing and I am conscious that there are myriad representations still to emerge as the individual activities are examined by others looking from a different perspective. One image of the kaleidoscope shows that guidance is about one to one, face to face sessions ... However, twist the kaleidoscope and alternative, perhaps for some even more appropriate, representations come into view. Houghton, 1998
From a DiCHE perspective educational guidance activities offer a way in which academics designing new modules or courses might consider the wider context of their programme. From a guidance perspective academics need to communicate clearly the alignment of the components of their module including aims, learning outcomes, teaching, learning and assessment so that students can make informed choices about selecting optional modules.

**Inclusive Curriculum Development**

The Houghton and Ali (2000) paper focused on the voices of adult learners studying culturally and socially relevant curriculum developed by the Community Access Programme. In that context we claimed that:

> designing a course is a complex process because it involves a number of voices ... each with their own criteria for what constitutes a successful course. 
> Houghton and Ali, 2000

There are some interesting parallels and important reminders for those committed to inclusive curriculum development.

voices may be diverse, yet often for ease and convenience, or sometimes simply ignorance, (learners) are presumed to have the same needs and be represented by one voice, ... So for instance, the ethnic minority community is seen, by many, as one homogenous group, similarly with the disability community (and in the case of DiCHE other groups including those entering as international, widening participation students). Although (learners) who ‘belong’ to these umbrella groups may share things in common, there are likely to be as many differences as there are similarities. ... Although such categorisation can be useful, it is also potentially divisive and restrictive (Houghton and Ali, 2000).

Within the context of the DiCHE project the issues of inclusion also need to be applied to the academic disciplines linked to the twenty-four HEA subject centres. The HEA project embedding inclusion from an institutional perspective (May and Bridger, 2010) included several institutional projects relating to an inclusive curriculum; predominantly they focused on disability related issues and emphasised strategies to encourage inclusive delivery. Within the DiCHE project the division between inclusive design and inclusive delivery is emerging as blurred and in some respects artificial, there are nevertheless some important distinctions. For instance, inclusive delivery often prioritises an individual response to enable an individual to play on an existing playing field. Over time these responses may become less novel and even get encompassed within student support practices or systems, nevertheless they focus on more reactive adaptations. In contrast, DiCHE aims to avoid or reduce the need for individual change. The focus is to explore at the design stage ways in which the curriculum including its content, teaching and learning activities and assessment strategies can enable all students to access the curriculum.

Institutional change and development of policy and procedure may be a response to external drivers and legislation. Implementation and commitment to inclusive design
is however realised by individuals. Continuing professional development (cpd) was a key factor in bringing about change (May and Bridger, 2010) this was something I also noted in my paper with Pam Coare (2008) where we found that:

Even where new lecturers are keen to adapt their practice they often report feeling overwhelmed by the potential enormity of the task of trying to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. One lecturer noted at the end of a cpd session, 'I didn’t realise there was so much information available to help you, I know it’s exciting but I don’t know where to begin and where I will find the time'. Coare and Houghton, 2008

Finding somewhere to begin, making incremental changes that are manageable that colleagues believe are possible, practical and purposeful is vital, otherwise we are in danger of joining Alice with her exclamation that ‘There’s no use trying, (since) one can’t believe impossible things’.

In moving towards action based on a commitment underpinned by awareness of the benefits to their learners and themselves academics are likely to engage in what Tough describes as a learning project. The concept of a learning project was adopted as the basis of research into the decision making process of PhD students, and used as an explanatory framework.

According to Tough, a learning project is a sustained and highly deliberate effort to learn. It includes an initial stimulus and identification of an action goal, a minimum amount of time allocated to the project, a (primary or secondary) planner, ... to shape the learning episodes that are undertaken to achieve the action goal of the learning project (Houghton, 2003).

Designing an inclusive curriculum for a single module might easily be regarded as a learning project. In my 2003 paper I discussed how my research had generated further insights into the notion of a learning project, which I concluded consisted of three components – a barrier – an activity – a solution (Houghton, 2003).

In thinking about the design of an inclusive curriculum in HE the barriers are features of the content, its teaching and learning activities, assessment that restrict the access of some students or fail to offer them with an opportunity to discuss issues or consider the application of concepts to contexts that may be relevant to them. This may be by failing to include opportunities for them to connect with the content, for instance an absence of different perspectives in a bibliography. At its simplest level the absence of a particular genders voice or the over-reliance on western perspectives may limit the relevance of the curriculum for some students.

The activity of the DiCHE learning project might involve: a review of research on teaching and learning strategies that are more inclusive; dialogue within a discipline to connect with researchers investigating issues from a different perspective to our own; feedback from existing students on how they believe the curriculum could be more inclusive, discussion with departmental colleagues about how our module connects with an overall programme or institutional colleagues about quality enhancement processes that might support the development of inclusive provision.
Looking forward ‘through the looking glass’

External policy drivers play a key role in helping to bring about change in the attitudes of and commitment to disability amongst institutional policy makers and practitioners, so that there is a critical mass who are in a position to provide the impetus and momentum for wider change. Coare and Houghton, 2008

A range of external drivers exist to facilitate a shift towards inclusive curriculum design, these include legislation as well as projects such as the embedding inclusion (May and Bridger, 2010) and the current DiCHE project. The reoccurring concerns relating to educational guidance and inclusive curriculum development suggest that there is no simple solution to the challenges facing those involved in research, teaching and learning. Linking research with teaching and learning remains valuable because it supports an ongoing exploration that confirms the complexity of any educational change. Designing an inclusive curriculum within HE requires more than legislation based on models like the social model of disability that advocate attitudinal, environmental and systemic change to tackle the social exclusion experienced by groups of learners. It also requires feedback from an increasingly diverse student population, who like the academics they encounter are seeking to successfully complete their learning project. Changes in response to the reflective activities engaged in during a learning project focused on DiCHE constitute the current solution of that learning project, however, in the case of designing an inclusive curriculum it is likely that as one learning project ends another will begin. The individual learning projects may vary but in the words of TS Elliot rather than Alice:

We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time. (T.S. Elliot in Little Giddings)

Postscript

In gazing through the looking glass I have also remembered the many research participants and colleagues who have aided my process of reflection both at the time of writing and presenting ideas at SCUTREA conferences, this seems a fitting time to give a public thank you.

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