Personal development in credit-bearing adult learning: The experience of arts and humanities students

Denise McHugh, University of Leicester, UK

The project

This research project arises from a training day held by the University of Leicester’s Institute of Lifelong Learning (LILL) for tutors in the department. In a discussion about the personal development of our students it became apparent that there was a wide diversity of views of students' needs and the lifelong learning tutor's role in this area. Some tutors articulated clear definitions of personal development in students and confidence in their own ability to facilitate this process, while others were doubtful as to what constituted personal development and dubious about the desirability of any attempt to 'mould' or 'form' students' selves. This diverse outlook produced an important question; if tutors differed about personal development what were our students' perceptions?

The project ‘Personal Development in Credit-Bearing Adult Learning: An Examination of Current Student Understanding and Expectations’ was designed to assess the current situation with regard to the ‘personal development’ of LILL students; how is personal development understood and measured? What are the existing student understandings of learning outcomes and personal development and how do these relate to their expectations and experiences on different programmes? The research is funded jointly by the University of Leicester College of Social Science and the Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults (SCUTREA). Both quantitative and qualitative methods are employed to analyse the learning outcomes and assessment methods of four programmes offered by the Institute of Lifelong Learning at the University of Leicester (the Certificate in Management Studies, Certificate in Modern British History, Foundation Degree in Managing Voluntary and Community Organisations and the BA (Honours) in Humanities and Arts). The programme modules have been analysed with regard to the extent to which they acknowledge a personal development element in addition to subject knowledge and skills acquisition. This
analysis has been compared with the results of a student survey focusing on the student understanding and experience of learning outcomes and personal development. In addition, students from each programme will be interviewed in a semi-structured way to establish their experiences of credit-bearing study and its impact upon them.

This paper is an early working paper and is concerned with the personal development of students studying humanities and arts subjects; it explores the alignments and differences between the intended learning outcomes of the programmes and student understanding and experience of these.

**Intended learning outcomes (ILOs)**

In the UK, credit-bearing higher education modules use intended learning outcomes (ILOs) as part of both their programme specifications and student guidance. ILOs communicate programme and learning aims both to students and within the institution, these form part of the quality control programme of higher education and also act as the basis for student assessment. Intended learning outcomes are not unproblematic; they have been described as part of an 'authoritarian' approach to learning (Brown, 2001); 'insensitive to the requirements of different disciplines' and even 'parasitic upon the very knowledge and understanding that they are supposed to be explicating' (Hussey and Smith 2002). At their best, however, the stated aims in intended learning outcomes embody our hopes and ambitions for our students and their learning progress in our subjects. In short, intended learning outcomes are at the heart of our teaching and learning activities; if personal development is an integral part of learning then what is its relationship to these stated aims? This project involves a detailed study of stated ILOs across modules in different disciplines to determine the role of personal development in teaching and assessment.

**Personal development in higher education**
Over the last two decades there has been a growing interest in the role of higher education (HE) in the personal development of students, particularly undergraduates. Despite a wealth of discussion and publications however the concept of 'personal development' remains somewhat vague. The concept includes such factors as a student's ability to identify strengths and talents, an ability to set and achieve goals and aspirations, improve self knowledge and social function and develop identity and autonomy. Personal development in the higher education context may also be defined as that which is developed above and beyond the subject-specific curriculum. Here factors can range from the spiritual to the prosaic, frequently with an emphasis on improving employability. The 1997 Dearing Report focused on the key skills which were to be developed by higher education and these have subsequently been defined by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) as generic skills to be developed in HE. These are; communication, information technology, application of numbers, working with others, improving own learning and performance and problem solving. These may seem predominantly functionalist and employment-orientated but require students to develop confidence, self-knowledge and empathy alongside practical and transferable skills. Working from the current QAA standards, personal development might be defined as learning which is not necessarily subject-specific (but does not exclude such) and which contributes to the student’s well being and long-term resilience. It might truly be termed 'learning for life'.

The lifelong learning sector is different to other schools, departments or institutes within higher education as it is the only one is defined by the characteristics of the learners rather than the subject. Much of the literature and research around lifelong learning is concerned with explaining or even reinforcing this difference. Lifelong learning students are considered 'mature', 'autonomous', labelled as a 'different' type of HE student and are sometimes invisible within HE policy (Callender, Jamieson Birkbeck and Mason, 2010). This is the case with the personal development agenda; much of the discussion concerned with personal development in HE implicitly assumes the youth of students and their relatively 'unformed' nature especially with regard to issues of identity and experience.

In some ways lifelong learning students are different to their full-time counterparts on campus. It is unlikely that higher education will be the current defining or primary life activity for these students; even during their most intensive periods of study, learning
may be subject to and defined by work and family commitments. They are often available for limited amounts of time and have a different pattern of contact with the institution. In terms of personal development however, studies in the last two decades have show that adult learners both expect and experience significant gains in personal development from higher education (Bourner et al, 1991; Graham and Donaldson, 1999). An emphasis on personal development can be seen to be in sympathy with the 'old' utilitarian tradition of adult education (social purpose, social progress and public good) (Lawson, 1998), liberal philosophies of individualism in learning and functionalist policy approaches to higher education. How might personal development be articulated in learning outcomes for adult students?

The QAA categorises ILOs into four broad areas: Knowledge and understanding (this area is subject specific); intellectual skills (these are frequently subject specific or, at least, subject dependent); practical skills (these may be subject specific; for example, laboratory skills) and key transferable skills (QAA, 2006). None of these categories are exclusive but there is an expectation that personal development is embedded in the 'transferable skills' outcomes which '...are readily transferable to employment and other contexts such as communication, teamwork etc...' (QAA, 2006).

Learning outcomes for arts and humanities programmes

Learning outcomes for LILL's two humanities and arts programmes; the Certificate in Modern British History (HE level one) and the BA (Honours) in Humanities and Arts (HE levels two and three) were analysed against the QAA categories to ascertain their learning aims. The two programmes have been designed to produce a coherent experience of part-time university education with students choosing optional modules at levels two and three. Students on the certificate progress frequently onto the BA and are actively encouraged to do so. These two programmes listed a total of 118 ILOs (students will not experience all of these due to optional modules). Modules vary in value between ten and twenty credits. The composition of the ILOs can be classified in the following manner:

- 73 (62%) 'knowledge and understanding'
This produced an average of 4.72 ILOs per module which does not seem onerous in terms of teaching, learning or assessment although ILOs varied between three and seven per module. There was no obvious relationship between the credit value of the module and the number of ILOs. ILOs were generally written in clear and transparent prose avoiding subject-specific language. There were no specific references to personal development in the ILOs although there was a good deal of emphasis on relevant skills such as written and oral communication skills and the use of online and digital resources.

As ILOs form part of the Institute's communication with students and are reproduced in student handbooks and module information, it is important to establish student understanding of these. This was also an opportunity to research student perceptions of personal development and the types of learning they experience and value. Students on these programmes were asked to complete a tick box questionnaire on a voluntary and anonymous basis. The questionnaire asked students about their understanding of intended learning outcomes, their view of learning in their subject area, their understanding and evaluation of personal development and their own experience of personal development. Thirty four completed student questionnaires were received with a total of 578 responses to questions.

The student response

Most students (80%) said they understood what intended learning outcomes were and 68% of students said that they understood the ILOs for the module they were studying currently. The students in the final year of their studies produced a 100% response on these matters suggesting that they had learned how the system worked! Final year students also produced a 100% agreement to the statement: ‘I understand that my learning is assessed against ILOs’ against an overall response
of 85%. Students’ own use of ILOs was less clear cut, with 23% of students ‘neither agreeing nor disagreeing’ that they referred back to the ILOs for their course and a significant 11% said they did not. Students were also less confident in evaluating their subject learning; in response to the statement: ‘I can evaluate my learning in my subject’ 9% ‘disagreed’ or ‘disagreed strongly’, 26% ‘neither agreed or disagreed’, 26% ‘agreed’ with the statement and 9% ‘agreed strongly’. Overall, 37% of students felt they could evaluate their own subject learning. Final year students were much more confident with two thirds agreeing that they could evaluate their own learning.

Moving onto subject-specific feedback it may be no surprise that 100% of the adult learners ‘agreed’ or ‘agreed strongly’ that: ‘learning about my chosen subject is valuable’. However, it may be more surprising to find that 70% of students ‘agreed’ or ‘agreed strongly’ that learning in their chosen subject had changed them. This suggests that personal development is not confined to those activities which might be described as ‘practical’ or ‘transferable’ skills by the QAA but is also embedded in the acquisition of ‘subject knowledge and understanding’ and ‘intellectual skills’ and, moreover, that students are quick to recognise this.

Personal development was considered important by the arts and humanities students with 91% agreeing or agreeing strongly that ‘personal development is an important part of university study’. When asked about their own experience; 44% ‘agreed strongly’ with the statement that ‘personal development is an important part of my university experience’ and 25% ‘agreed’, the remainder ‘neither agreed or disagreed’. The diverse elements of personal development were reflected in the questionnaire and students were asked to consider if they had learned: ‘…things which are not subject related’ as a result of their course? 76% of students either ‘agreed’ or ‘agreed strongly’ that they had done so, and 67% felt that these things were valuable. This is an area which will be followed up in the qualitative research when students are interviewed and will be asked to describe what constituted this learning and its impact upon them.

In terms of specific transferable skills which may be said to constitute personal development, 88% of students agreed or agreed strongly with the statement: ‘I have gained new skills since starting my course’. These skills included communicating better (70%) and understanding others better (65%). In relation to personal identity, 68% of students either agreed or agreed strongly with the statement ‘Since I started
studying I think about myself differently' with 65% agreeing they could '...understand myself better as a result of studying'. This did not necessarily produce positive change in personal identity however, with only 47% agreeing or agreeing strongly with the statement 'I have a stronger personal identity since I started studying', 35% of students did not agree or disagree with this statement.

**Differences between intended learning outcomes and reported learning outcomes**

A case study of the ILOs and student responses on a single credit-bearing course shows the surprising gap between what we may say we do in teaching and learning and what students experience! The Certificate in Modern British History (MBH) is a part-time course; students attend one night a week for two academic years and study six modules. The course guides list twenty six ILOs and of these nineteen (73%) are concerned with 'knowledge and understanding', six with 'intellectual skills' (23%) and one with 'practical skills'. At first glance this may seem both obvious and understandable; students come to this course in order to 'learn about history', they are attracted to enrol primarily by the course subject and content. Some students do not join the programme with a long-term study plan in search of qualifications, but see it initially as an interesting and social leisure activity, although they may subsequently enrol for the BA (Hons) Humanities and Arts. Closer reading of the course guides beyond the ILOs suggest that there is a great deal of personal development taking place in these two years. For many students the MBH Certificate acts as an access course; some of the students have not had any experience of formal education for a long time or since leaving school and it is evident from the session plans that students are introduced to skills such as essay writing, analysing texts and interpreting statistics through consistent use of historical documents and data. There is also a module entitled 'History all around us' which trains students to: 'conduct and interpret oral history interviews within the framework of copyright law and the ethical guidelines of the Oral History Society'. This addresses and develops many of the components of personal development, including communication, working with others, developing empathy, information technology and problem solving. It is clear that there are, embedded within this course programme, a multitude of activities and opportunities for the personal development of students but
these are rarely articulated in the ILOs. The course handbook gives clear and practical guidance on developing specific skills including research, essay structuring and referencing.

At present this course has a small intake so the questionnaire produced only seven responses, students were either in their first or second year of study, all were studying at HE level one. Five out of seven students either 'agreed' or 'agreed strongly' that they knew what ILOs were and the same number agreed or agreed strongly with the statement 'I understand the ILOs for the module I am studying currently'. There was less clear understanding of the role of ILOs in assessment however, with four out of seven students agreeing that they understood their learning was assessed against the ILOs, two 'neither agreeing or disagreeing' with this proposition and one individual 'disagreeing'. Only two students agreed with the statement 'I refer back to the ILOs for my course'. Personal development was seen as an important part of both university study and 'my university experience' (6 out of seven). When asked about their learning, all students were in agreement that: 'learning about my chosen subject is valuable' and five out of seven said that this learning had changed them. Six out of seven of the students said they had: 'learned things which were not subject-related as a result of my course' and understood themselves and others better since starting studying.

Towards qualitative research...

While this single course case study is not statistically significant, it highlights something which will be familiar to all adult education tutors; the difference between our stated intentions of teaching and what students are learning. Students' learning is often richer and deeper than the subject learning that we hope for! In terms of research, this case points to the importance of understanding the learner's experience from their own perspective and account. The responses to the questionnaire give clear indications of how adult students value aspects of learning and their understanding of specific areas, but produce further questions; for example: 'What did you learn that was not related to your subject?' or, 'how has studying helped you to understand other people better?'. The 'Learning Lives'
approach of listening to students' experiences in their own words is vital and some of these techniques will be used in semi-structured recorded interviews to explore learning experiences further (Biesta et al, 2005).

It is too early to draw any conclusions from this research but it is possible to establish some facts about the understanding of learning outcomes and the experience of personal development among the arts and humanities students.

- Adult learners on LILL’s arts and humanities courses have a broad understanding of the nature and purposes of intended learning outcomes (ILOs) but do not always use these to assist, or evaluate, their own learning.
- Adult students develop their understanding of learning, course structures and assessment as they progress through their programmes. Student understanding of the link between ILOs and assessment could be stronger.
- Without exception the students surveyed believe their subject learning is valuable.
- Adult students say that subject-specific learning changes them.
- They recognise and value the learning that occurs which is not subject-related.
- Adult students value personal development and regard it as an important part of their university experience.
- Adult students tell us that studying has enabled them to gain new skills, communicate better and enhanced their understanding of themselves and others.

We know from the research so far that students report personal change and development resulting from subject-specific learning as well as from the 'other learning' that they experience. Students are more likely to value the learning in their chosen subject, however. This has implications for tutors framing learning outcomes and for assessment. The evidence shows that personal development occurs even when it is not articulated or defined in ILOs but when the teaching activities allow space for this. We might think of this as the built-in ‘freedom to learn’ described by Brown (2001). If we decide to articulate and desire ‘personal development’
outcomes beyond specific transferable skills, such as communication skills, in ILOs, then we must consider how we will recognise and assess these.

References