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Connecting Adults with Learning

The Julie Hamill Memorial Lecture

Julie Hamill *(1971-2000) was appointed in 1999 as a member of EGSA's team of Guidance and Network Area Advisers, to deliver guidance , promote adult learning and lay the foundations for collaborative working in the north east of Northern Ireland. She was based in Causeway Insitute, Ballymoney Campus. Tragically her life was cut short in February 2000. Julie Hamill was passionate about her work and made a huge contribution to developing the work of EGSA. She was a valued member of our staff.*

EGSA has established this annual lecture on themes related to adult learning or to guidance as a memorial to Julie Hamill.

Guidance for Access, Learning and Life:

Challenges for the Next Decade

presented by PROFESSOR JONATHAN BROWN

THURSDAY 14TH NOVEMBER 2002

in MALONE HOUSE

    BARNETT DEMESNE

    BELFAST

Professor Jonathan Brown *was a Senior Counsellor with the Open University in the North based at Newcastle upon Tyne until his retirement in 1999. In the OU he held a personal Chair in Educational Guidance. He was founder chair of NAEGA (1982-86). He was President of the National Association for Educational Guidance for Adults (NAEGA) until Sept 2000 and is Acting Editor of NAEGA News and Views.*

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Introduction

When Eileen Kelly wrote to invite me to speak here this evening, she gave me quite precise terms of reference:

> *The preferred topic would be around the role of guidance in Widening Access and because of our role in Basic Skills… (the strategic title here in NI is* Essential Skills*) we would be keen to flag this area of work.*

It was easy both to agree to come and to evolve in one short telephone call later a grand title for this evening: *Guidance for Access, Learning and Life: challenges for the next decade.* More difficult, as ever, is the task of actually working out what to say and this I suspect is not helped because all the words that we use mean different things to different people. In the arena of guidance most of the words we use have both common and specific connotative meanings. For example, try looking at all the key words in my title:

- Guidance

- Access

- Learning

Each of these can be a source of some confusion: *'the meaning has to be inferred from the context in which it is being used'*. (Bond, 2000)

Here in Belfast I am particularly conscious of the need to be careful with words and I will tell you why. Many years ago on my first visit to Belfast, I came to make a short address on the occasion of the award of an honorary degree of the Open University to the first director of EGSA. Dorothy Eagleson had almost single-handedly invented in the UK the concept and practice of *educational guidance for adults.* A term that underpins the very title of EGSA (Educational Guidance Service for Adults). I still believe that the concept and the practice of *educational guidance for adults* is important in

- distinguishing our practice from work with young people and

- asserting that our (or our clients) aspirations are not confined to the world of work.

So our work is not a mere adjunct at the periphery of statutory provision for the- yet-to-leave full-time education and training, it encompasses work with all adults of whatever

- age

- economic status

- aspiration

and involves the clarification of options at all educational levels and modes of study. Dorothy, in using this terminology, helped us to understand this and to develop services for adults.

However, I confess to increasingly using in my writing and speaking not *educational guidance for adults* but *adult guidance*. For many years on each such use I received, actually or virtually, a rebuke from Dorothy about such careless usage… and in writing and saying this I can still hear the correction! I will later in the talk attempt an explanation for my deliberate change of terminology. But here the point being made is that words matter and that this is particularly so in Belfast as a guest of EGSA and with Dorothy Eagleson in the audience!

What I wish to attempt in the time available is to

- say something about the nature of guidance

- look at the issues surrounding access (and Access)

- attempt to say something about the scale of learning available to adults

- ask what is the connection between guidance and access to learning?

- identify some of the challenges for adult guidance over the next 10 years

The nature of guidance

Let me start with defining **adult guidance**. Here I will draw both on the UDACE definition in the 1980s and more recent revision by the now defunct Scottish Guidance Group.

Guidance is a process by which individuals are helped to clarify options about their futures in terms of training, education and work. Through this helping process people learn to be autonomous, taking control of their own decisions… Guidance covers a range of interventions which are best described by the seven activities of guidance…

INFORMING	providing unbiased information
ADVISING	**helping clients to interpret information and choose the most appropriate action**
COUNSELLING SKILLS	**helping clients to discover, clarify, assess and understand their needs and the various opportunities and ways of meeting them**
ASSESSING	**helping clients to make realistic judgements about the appropriateness of certain opportunities** (NB this does not entail the use of formal assessment tools though these may play a part. All guidance workers are involved in informal assessment which is an essential part of their work with clients at very different stages of development and needs).
ENABLING	**supporting the client in dealing with educational or training establishments and employers** (NB writing at much the same time as the UDACE publication Diane Bailey called this activity **Coaching** – Bailey, 1987)
ADVOCATING	**negotiating with an organisation on behalf of a client**
FEEDING BACK	**gathering and collating information on unmet needs and encouraging providers and employers to respond to these**. (See SGG, 2000; see also UDACE, 1986).

Let me underline some key features of this definition

It is a **helping process** assisting adults to:

- *Evaluate* their own personal, educational, and vocational development…

- *Identify* their learning needs and the most appropriate ways of meeting them…

- *Pursue and complete* a programme of learning…

- *Review and assess* the learning achieved and identify future goals (UDACE, 1986, p. 22)

Guidance is an umbrella term covering a mixture of all seven activities

Counselling skills in this version has replaced the term counselling originally used by UDACE. In doing so there is an acknowledgement of the contribution counselling practices can make to guidance without transforming the guidance worker into a counsellor. But the guidance worker requires defined capability in the areas of:

- attending

- responding

- understanding

So, it is the use of counselling skills not counselling that is the guidance activity.

Autonomy for the user or client is the aim (see McNair, 1996)

All activities are in the dynamic "-ing" format. This is particularly important in the case of *information* which I think is a product or commodity with which we are awash. You can have information at the touch of a button and still not be informed. Informing is an activity or process of engaging with information and it does not necessarily take place at the start of the Guidance process as it underpins the other six activities. [This is particularly important in England where Government seems addicted to what is now called *Information, Advice and Guidance*. (IAG) But this formulation of IAG does not describe what is involved. Information is a mere commodity and is, by itself, static and I am not clear what guidance is when separated from the seven activities]. (See discussion of this in Brown, 1999b)

Adult guidance is then a

- Dynamic

- Helping

- Empowering

process of choice.

Guidance is **NOT**

- Telling people what direction to take (*The Traffic Cop Model*) or

- Succour for the weak (*The St. Bernard Model*) or

- An emergency rescue service (*The AA Model*) or

- Getting an expert to solve your problems (*The Accountant Model*) or

- Tea and sympathy (*The Agony Aunt Model*) [Adapted from Bailey, 1987]

[I suppose I should now apologise to all the policemen, dogs, AA roadmen, accountants, agony aunts and indeed St Bernard dogs that I have offended!]

(Adapted from Bailey, 1987)

Issues surrounding access (and Access)

Again we return to the meaning of words. Access to learning has been a central issue for adult guidance workers for a very long time (I almost said from the start of time!). However, from the 1980s onwards, with the development of courses aimed specifically at increasing access of adult students to HE the **Access Course** was developed (in effect creating distinctive programmes of study quite separate from the school – leaving-at-18-certificate of the A Level or IB type). Because of this connotative use of *Access* with a capital A, there has been a problem (since the 1980s) with the concept of access and so other terms for the process such as widening participation have been introduced. However, I quite like the simplicity of access being applied to entry to all levels of learning and training. Where the client is identifying (in whatever words) difficulties with basic skills, the concept of *Access* as only being about HE entry is singularly unhelpful: access must be about overcoming barriers to learning at all levels.

In looking at access I have found it helpful to identify the barriers to participation in learning as a way of comprehending the complexity of issues involved. In this regard I have found the approach taken in her recent book by Liz Thomas (2001) [albeit Thomas is talking about widening participation in HE!] to be quite helpful. Thomas views the barriers to participation as being in four categories:

- **the impact of the education system**
- **the impact of the labour market**
- **social and cultural norms**
- **individual issues.**

Let me take each of these clusters of barriers in turn.

The impact of the education system includes factors such as:

- gaining of qualifications from compulsory schooling
- 'good' qualifications being a 'passport' to further study (the concept here is of qualifications being a sort of 'ladder' or high jump competition where you go on till you knock off the bar! *To continue the sporting analogy, it would be much better if we moved to the concept of the marathon where every participant is desrving of applause).*
- disposition towards learning – *'negative attitudes are difficult to challenge and reverse'* (Thomas p. 82).
- reinforcement of social and economic advantage/disadvantage at school
- costs in FE and HE often borne by student and/or family
- competition for places in HE (with the wondrous exception of the OU)
- inappropriate support services for adult returners
- distance
- inflexibility in delivery
- the culture of institutions (some insititutions are just *not* adult environments).

The impact of the labour market includes factors such as:

- the view taken of advantage of study in terms of future employment and wages (NB In the coming months there will wide-ranging political assertions about the benefits of a university education in terms of an increment to lifetime earnings and discussion of a figure of £400,000 for the average graduate!)

- the attitude of employers to further education and training

- differential expenditure on work-based training by employment status

Social and cultural norms factors:

- view that learning is not for 'people like me'

- view that learning has little or no value to me

- an assumption of automatic progression to HE

Individual issues

- low aspirations or awareness

- complexities of life and existing responsibilities

- you have to change to meet the norms/rules of the institution

- I am the problem

- how to meet my special needs

- age (*'I'm too old to learn'*)

I hope that we are all now seeing access as ways of entry to learning programmes, formal and informal, which counter all such barriers, treating learners as equal irrespective of background in terms of age, financial or benefit position, nationality, religion, politics, gender and special needs. A big agenda.

The scale of learning available to adults

In a sense this issue leads on directly from consideration of access. In trying to map the availability of learning available to adults there has always been a problem of scale. Moreover, if, as it should be, the informal is included there is also a challenge about how to log and list all the possibilities. From

- formal to informal

- face to face to distance learning

- traditional support to electronic support

- from credit bearing (leading to qualification) to just-for-the-fun-of-learning

Neither information or imagination will cover all the possibilities. Back in 1986 when we drafted *The Challenge of Change* we said

> *'The system, in total, should provide a comprehensive range of information on the broadest possible range of education and training opportunities, including formal and informal, full and part time, public, voluntary and private'.* (UDACE, p. 81)

But can any system, no matter how sophisticated and linked, provide this? Usher and Edwards have argued that an all-inclusive set of information, full and perfect, is an impossible goal: *'People can never have complete information about all conditions and possibililties of existence'.* (1998, p. 218).

I have argued before that the issue of information is a tricky one because,

> *'time and information are an unstable combination. Whether the base is paper or electronic some of the information will be out of date at the point of publication. In terms of educational information it will be out of date because:*
>
> - *there has been a change of funding*
>
> - *the provision has been reviewed*
>
> - *the institution has been restructured*
>
> - *recruitment did not allow the course to run*
>
> - *there have been staff changes (retirement, sickness, secondment…)*
>
> - *validation/accreditation was not successful*
>
> - *the creche has closed*
>
> - *all training of this kind is now work-based*
>
> *The list could go on')* (Brown, 1999).

So on the learning available side I conclude that the range is both vast and impossible to map accurately. So that those involved in the collection, collation and retrieval of data are always producing a less than ideal system. In turn the adult guidance practitioner (and through the practitioner his/her clients) are always dealing with an imperfect range of information and options.

What is the connection between guidance and access to learning?

So having looked all too briefly at guidance processes, access to learning and the scale of learning opportunities, how do you make the link between access to those opportunities? Well my answer is straightforward: to ensure that adults understand the options available to them there has to be a central position for adult guidance. A central position not only

- when contemplating entry to learning (**pre-entry**)

but also

- when joining a learning or training programme (**at entry**)

- during the learning experience (**on programme**)

- when completing a particular course or module (and because of other responsibilities this should include the pre-mature exit) (**at exit**)

The central position is asserted because all too often guidance has developed or been consigned to a periphery in the organisation or within the institution or the curriculum. I think we need to assert centrality for adult guidance whether pre-entry, at entry, on programme or at an exit point. Centrality not in terms of telling people what to do but in supporting their right to make informed decisions at an appropriate time.

The challenges for adult guidance over the next 10 years

I am not sure how good a forecaster I am. But I will try to suggest challenge in terms of the pre-dominant stakeholders each of whom tend to have a differing view of adult guidance and its processes. It is not only that the approaches to guidance are at variance, but the language used is dissimilar. (I am very grateful to Richard Edwards for developing an analysis of guidance through an examination of the discourse used. (see in particular Edwards, 1998). So I will look at challenges in relation to:

- clients

- practitioners

- managers

- policy-makers.

IN RELATION TO CLIENTS

The challenge here is to have a better explanation of what we are about. What is the problem? Well, research by the Guidance Council in England (Jackson & Wilson, 1998) and by Segal Quince Wicksteed for the Scottish Executive (SQW, 2001) has shown that the guidance terminology is widely misunderstood by clients and potential clients. I think the message is clear enough. The guidance terminology will let us understand as practitioners, managers and policy-makes what we are doing, will allow for codes of practice and for the setting of standards, but it is not clear enough to the public. This is not an unusual position to be in. Indeed, most professions and callings are widely misunderstood. But I believe that it is a clear challenge that we have to face in the next decade. We have to find an acceptable, clear way of explaining adult guidance. In contemporary management speak, we have to find a way of branding guidance. And I fear that most of our words are unsuitable for this purpose (Remember at the very start of this talk I said *all the words that we use mean different things to different people*.) I cannot see an easy way around this. Our clients and potential clients need a better explanation of what we do. We need a brand that is recognisable and will allow us to develop a more universal understanding of our purpose. One possibility in the absence of an agreed term is to go for a word apparently without meaning like **matrix** (to pick but one example out the air!). I am indebted to my good friend and ex-colleague Diane Bailey for putting the problem with such branding so succinctly: they *lack appeal because they are unusual, latinate, unmemorable and without clear associations or resonance – unlike, for example, 'the Open University'* (e-mail to author). Just so. The other is to use our existing titles and terms but to brand with an explanatory strapline. In a sense EGSA already does this with its strapline of **connecting adults to learning**. What is needed is to extend this throughout the UK with a slightly extended strapline so that the brand would be something like **Learning for life: linking people to training, education and work**. Agreement on something like this is the challenge here and I hope that action can be taken in well under the 10 years.

FOR PRACTITIONERS

Here what is needed is nothing less than a new definition of *practionership* for adult guidance. The challenge here is to facilitate the development of practice beyond the concern about initial training and recruitment. Such a definition would attempt to be open to all practitioners of adult guidance irrespective of their initial professional training or past experience. I can see three elements to such a definition. Practitioners would need to:

- **Undertake Continuing Professional Development (CPD).** CPD can take many forms from short seminars, conferences, visits to or shadowing in other guidance settings, through to longer courses of study which encourage reflection on practice and linkage of actual practice to theory. Such longer study will often be at postgraduate (Masters) level. In my recent experience the purpose here was caught exactly by John, an OU student who had recently completed our MA module (E839) *Guidance and Counselling in Learning*, who told me in a telephone interview that:

'I thoroughly enjoyed E839. It was so relevant. Able to earth my practice in the theory that was coming through the course'. (2001 Interview series. 'John' is of course a pseudonym but the comment is real)

- **Be under Supervision.** Within the decade I would hope that all adult guidance practitioners will have a supervisor. Here I am using the model of supervision in counselling. In explaining this I can do no better than to quote Sue Copeland:

'Outside [counselling]… a supervisor is someone who has hierarchial and managerial authority over others… Supervision in the context of counselling is very different: it is a collaborative process with very little power differential… [It is] a supportive learning environment where the counsellor reflects on their work and grows in ethical competence, confidence and creativity'. (1998, p. 387)

We need to plagiarise the counselling model to introduce the concept of legitimised and required supervision for the guidance practitioner. (See also Brown 2002, Jolley 2002, Trahar 2002, Edwards A, 2001)

- **Conduct Research.** Also included in the development of practitionership would be the introduction of the need periodically for the worker to be involved with research and /or evaluation. This links to developments in adjacent professions (teaching, social work and nursing) where there is much interest in practitioner research and on *evidence-based* (or *evidence-informed*) development of practice and policy.

FOR MANAGERS

Here the challenge for the next ten years is to develop management styles, cultures and procedures that are sympathetic to both clients and practitioners, rather than antipathetic. Much management development in the service sector (whether public, voluntary or private) has aped commercial and business sector approaches which are not appropriate to the tasks involved. And of course stable structures and funding would assist in meeting this challenge. A central issue is how to recognise professional practice and to manage its development.

FOR POLICY MAKERS

The challenge here is much easier to outline. For adult guidance in three of the four parts of the UK the last twenty-five years, there has been a policy vacuum [NB I exclude Northern Ireland from the policy vacuum]. A vacuum that has been partially filled by a series of partial initiatives and a multiplicity of short term projects. This has left adult services meeting a whole series of structural and funding transitions supported by fragile and ever-changing cocktails of funding. So what is required from the policy-makers is simple:

- Clear policy on adult guidance

- Stable delivery mechanisms within this policy

- Secure funding of mainstream services as defined by the policy

- Avoidance of projectitis

- Better feedback and understanding of the views of clients, practitioners and their managers

- Help to build-in service quality rather than impose it externally.

That's the challenge and I suspect (know) that it is an impossible one to meet! But we must attempt to educate our masters!

… AND FINALLY

Having discussed

- the nature of guidance

- issues surrounding access (and Access)

- the scale of learning available to adults

- the challenges for adult guidance over the next 10 years

It is now the time to come to the… and **finally**. In this case my …*and finally* relates back to my introduction. You will remember at the start of this talk, I said that I had to be careful with the words used especially in Belfast. And I illustrated this in relation to my use of *adult guidance* instead of *educational guidance for adults*. I said then that I would later in the talk attempt an explanation for my deliberate change of terminology from one (*educational guidance for adults*) to the other (*adult guidance*) which you have heard me use throughout this talk.

So, why use 'adult guidance' rather than 'educational guidance for adults'?

There are three overlapping reasons for this change of use on my part:

1. I believe that in a fractured field of practice there is a need to be inclusive. Careers, work, employment and training are important factors in guiding adults and it is often difficult to distinguish between education and learning on the one hand and work and training on the other. So in worrying about the barriers and mind-sets imposed by the *careers* banner and by public policies for lifelong learning that seem to be restricted to those who are 'economically active', there is also a concern about being in a ghetto where all that matters is *education* and *the educational*. But in an inclusive approach to adult learning I do not wish to erect new barriers. So the sectoral descriptor whether

   - careers,
   - vocational,
   - education,
   - educational,
   - learning or
   - training

   has to go. What is needed is an inclusive terminology that will include work done by free-standing adult guidance services, voluntary organizations, institutions of further/ higher/community education and work-based guidance as well as careers and vocational guidance services.

2. The realisation that the practice and processes of work with adults is not a mere extension of work with the young. We are not talking about a generic trade which will be solved by the mere addition of an **all-age** banner, as I fear may be happening in Scotland and in Wales. We are talking about a discrete and specialised practice that is defined by the complexities of the lives and needs of our burgeoning client group.

3. The realisation that in talking exclusively (and this links directly to point 1) about *educational guidance* was in danger of cutting off our vital work from dialogue (and more importantly) and funding by agencies of Government and the EU on whom the many adult guidance workers and services depend.

I believe that *adult guidance* is a more flexible and comprehensible term that will not exclude areas of practice and yet will assert the vital needs of our clients. Clients who also need a separate and better explanation (as already discussed in the ten year challenge) of what we are about.

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