

## **Bonding for lifelong learning: former students' perceptions of the impact of their university education on their subsequent learning**

Learning, as students, how to reversion formal learning for the informal sector and how to continue to acquire skills and knowledge and to engage in self-directed, often socially-mediated, learning, is important because many graduates will need to reskill or change careers. Listening to members of three creative, collaborative learning communities which arose as a direct result of the common university educational experiences of the members, illuminates how a university can support the acquisition of such skills. The narratives of members of groups founded in the '80s, the '90s and this century indicate how their imaginations were sparked and their confidence bolstered by learning, within a formal, university, setting, about how to socially construct learning through conversations and interactions around problems. Their university experiences enabled them to structure and control their own subsequent learning, to teach and learn with one another and to recruit new members to sustain their vibrant communities.

Informal learning, once marginalised as 'the tradition of "autodidacts" and hobbyists outside work' is now more likely to be seen as, 'where most of the significant learnings that apply to our everyday lives are learned'.<sup>1</sup> It is of significance to graduates as they are likely to need to update their skills so as to ensure their continued employment. While there are formal, assessed, vocational opportunities, an understanding of how to learn with other adults in informal settings is likely to be of value. The recorded narratives of alumni who formed three different communities of learners related to specific university modules indicate that they were able to create these spaces for further learning because they gained confidence, through the university's pedagogy, and an understanding of structures, through their university experiences.<sup>2</sup> The importance for learning of peer support and also of self-confidence and trust have long been recognised.<sup>3</sup> Their accounts indicate the impact of the pedagogy, developed since the 1960s and adapted for online communities, which encourages reciprocity and mutual respect of the life experiences of other adults, the development of student-directed learning groups and recognition that learning occurs when people are part of shared cultural systems and engaged in collective social action.<sup>4</sup> The application of these concepts in modules has enabled the subsequent informal communities of learners to be formed and to act as catalysts for further learning and cognitive change.

The groups being assessed all derive from modules presented by The Open University (OU). Opened to students in 1971, from the beginning the OU connected to informal learning. In part this was because its teaching materials were produced in co-operation with non-academic BBC staff, many familiar with non-assessed educational material and in addition many teaching staff had strong roots in adult education. The OU produced materials centrally which were taught face-to-face by locally-based part-time staff. OU material aimed at these part-time tutors encouraged them not to see

students as deficit in terms of understanding the canon of accepted knowledge while students were encouraged to question the assumption that there is an accepted body of theoretical knowledge about which they needed to learn. Rather dialogue and collaboration were presented as aids to intellectual development and learning. In 1973 support for the formation of self-help groups was offered and by 1974 there were over 1,000 self-help study groups.<sup>5</sup> For one, by no means unusual, module, S232, *Ecology*, first presented in 1974, students selected a project from a wide choice of topics, sent a plan to the tutor who commented upon it and following negotiation, the student then carried out the practical work and collated the data. In addition, students carried out group projects.<sup>6</sup> In 1975 John Ferguson, the OU's Dean of Arts, contrasted the OU with other universities where:

many students would pass through their whole student career without any effective personal confrontation with individual members of staff. In Buber's language there was no I-Thou encounter.<sup>7</sup>

It was from within this milieu that, in 1976 a module, TAD292 *Art and environment*, was produced in the OU's headquarters.<sup>8</sup> It was taught (as many OU modules were) through broadcasting, correspondence, part-time tutors and a week-long residential school and presented every year until 1985. Like many OU modules it crossed disciplinary boundaries and echoed developments elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> TAD292 invited students to develop 'strategies for creative work'. It dealt with

the processes and attitudes of art not so much as these were evidenced in products of art but as they underlie the very act of doing art. This can be seen already from the titles which were given to some of the units in the course[module]: 'Boundary Shifting', 'Imagery and Visual Thinking', 'Having Ideas by Handling Materials'.<sup>10</sup>

Some of those who studied TAD292 formed a society, Tadpoles, to 'share skills, experiences, ideas and knowledge of creativity and personal growth'.<sup>11</sup> Their retrospective reflections present their activities as running their own summer schools and other events for over 30 years, as adaptations of the structures and pedagogic methods of the module.

The OU module DA301, *Family and Community History* ran 1994 — 2001. Students undertook local history research and compared their data with those of the previous cohorts of students whose work they could access via CDs. There were other collaborative elements to the module. Encouraged by academic staff, former students formed the Family & Community Historical Research Society which adapted OU structures and established its own connected history projects and publications, encouraged links between institutionally based and independent researchers and offered its own Continued Learning courses.

At the OU the view that the reinforcement of feelings of confidence and self-esteem often aided learning continued to be proposed.<sup>12</sup> T189 *Digital Photography: creating and sharing better images*, first presented in 2007, aimed to ‘teach you how to critically evaluate your own and others’ work in the spirit of continuous technical and artistic improvement’.<sup>13</sup> Students uploaded non-assessed photographs to a shared online site and were encouraged to assess one another’s pictures. The Module Guide claimed ‘this is the very first online digital photography module provided by a university anywhere in the world that is structured around online collaborative photo sharing’.<sup>14</sup> Although guidance was offered it was explained that ‘You will also find lots of help and support from your fellow students’.<sup>15</sup> Subsequently former students have established their own online groups, via a commercial site and maintained contact with one another.

When recorded, many members of these groups stressed both the role of the OU in fostering their collective construction of knowledge and their independence from it. Their perceptions of the culture of their communities indicate that they felt that the OU helped them to build confidence and to gain an understanding of how knowledge construction is an active, personal endeavour which can be socially mediated through a supportive network. By foregrounding the relationship between learning and social connections and by offering realistic objectives and opportunities to share ideas and learn skills, the OU encouraged the collaboration which enabled them to learn and achieve together that which they could not have done separately.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Gorard, Ralph Fevre and Gareth Rees, ‘The apparent decline of informal learning’, *Oxford Review of Education* 25, 4, 1999, pp. 437-454 (p. 451); Daniel Schugurensky, ‘The forms of informal learning: towards a conceptualization of the field’, *WALL Working Paper, No. 19*, 2000, OISEUT, Toronto, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> These recordings were made with the support of a grant from the Society for Research into Higher Education.

<sup>3</sup> N. McKenzie, M. Eraut and H. C. Jones, *Teaching and Learning: New Methods and Resources in Higher Education*, Unesco/International Association of Universities, Paris, 1970; J. Roby Kidd, ‘How adults learn – what’s new’, *Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education*, 4, 1, Summer 1977, pp. 27-30 (p.27).

<sup>4</sup> E. Wenger, *Communities of Practice: learning, meaning, and identity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 166. See also E. Wenger, N. White, N. and J. D. Smith, *Digital Habitats: stewarding technology for communities*, CPsquare, Portland, Oregon, 2009, p. 14 and Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: legitimate peripheral participation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 1991. On the earlier literature see Frankie Todd and Roy Todd, ‘Talking

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and learning: towards an effective structuring of student-directed groups in Higher Education', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 3, 2, Summer 1979 pp. 52-66.

<sup>5</sup> David Sewart, 'Some observations on the formation of study group' *Teaching at a distance*, 2, February 1975, pp. 2-6.

<sup>6</sup> Margaret E. Varley, 'Ecology projects: an innovation' *Teaching at a distance*, 2, February 1975, pp. 27-30.

<sup>7</sup> John Ferguson, *The Open University from within*, University of London Press, London, 1975, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> The letters and numbers combination indicates the position of the course. In this case TAD refers to its combining elements from Technology (T) Art (A) and Social Sciences (D) while the first digit refers to the level at which it is pitched (ie second level).

<sup>9</sup> There was considerable interest in the integration of design and art during this period, for example an undergraduate university degree in Engineering Design and Appropriate Technology was offered at the University of Warwick from 1980. See also Peter Green, *Design Education: problem solving and visual experience*, Batsford, London 1984. See also The Design Council Reports: 'Design Education at Secondary level', 1980 and 'Design and Primary Education', 1987 and K. Baynes, 'Defining a Design Dimension of the Curriculum', *Journal of Art & Design Education*, 4, 3, 1985, pp. 237-243.

<sup>10</sup> TAD292 students were offered a range of projects. These included the suggestion that the student stop activity and engage in listening. Another was to compose a score for sounds made from differently textured papers and a third was to enumerate the household's activities and categorise these in terms of role and sex stereotyping. Assessment involved a student not only submitting the product, such as a self-portrait photograph, but also notes describing the process and rationale. The criteria were not specific but involved formulations including enthusiasm, imagination and authenticity. See Philippe C. Duchastel, 'TAD292 – and its challenge to Educational Technology', *Programmed Learning & Educational Technology*, 13, 4, October 1976, pp. 61-66 (pp. 62-63).

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.open.ac.uk/ousa/societies.php> accessed 8 March 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Alan Tait, 'Planning Student support for open and distance learning', *Open Learning*, 15, 3, 2000, pp. 287 – 299.

<sup>13</sup> See <http://www3.open.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/course/t189.htm> accessed 2 February 2012.

The final presentation of the module is expected to be in 2013.

<sup>14</sup> <http://learn2.open.ac.uk/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=56319> accessed 1 May 2012.

<sup>15</sup> <http://learn.open.ac.uk/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=576650&section=3> accessed 21 March 2012.