

Widening Access and learner diversity in health and social care: Lessons from and for practice teaching

Janis Greig¹ and Rhona MacKenzie¹

Summary: The attempt to recruit non-traditional students to health and social work is not just to compensate for the decreased availability of traditional students but because it is socially just. The non-traditional student journey can be lengthy; starting with community-based Widening Access courses then typically on to Access courses in Further Education, before entering Higher Education. One such community based course is described here. Positive evaluation of the courses reflect their local nature, affordable child care and identifiable personal, family and community benefits. Lessons for practice teachers dealing with increased learner diversity are outlined.

Keywords: widening access; learner diversity; practice teaching

1. Lecturer/ Teaching Fellow, School of Health and Social Sciences, Napier University

Address for Correspondence: School of Health and Social Sciences, Napier University, 74 Canaan Lane, Edinburgh EH10 4TB. J.greig @napier.ac.uk. rh.mackenzie@napier.ac.uk

Introduction

There is widespread agreement about the current recruitment crisis being experienced by health and social care professions. McLenachan (2006) describes social work's 'demographic time-bomb' caused by the burgeoning number of baby boomers born post-war who entered the profession in the 1970s and are now due to retire. Major recruitment concerns have also been voiced by many disciplines including GPs (Cross, 2002) dentists (BDA, 2005), nurses (Wells & McElwee, 1998) as well as science teachers (Royal Society, 2003) and university staff (PRU, 2005)

Although higher education participation rates have risen significantly overall, there are huge disparities in social class access (Napier University, 2004) and the shrinking size of the pool of traditional students from whom health & social care recruits has intensified competition across the professions. This is happening globally, in the context of an expanding market and professional mobility in the European Union and beyond (PRU, 2005).

Widening Access and learner diversity

One key approach for improving recruitment to the professions is the Widening Access agenda which seeks to increase the enrolment of non-traditional students to higher education in general, and health & social work in particular. Warren (2002, p.86) describes non-traditional students as being 'far more mixed in terms of age and educational, class, cultural and linguistic background' and '... tend[ing] to include lower socio-economic groups, ethnic minorities, English as an additional language, mature and part-time students'.

The attempt to recruit such students to health and social work is not just to compensate for the decreased availability of traditional students but because it is socially just. Napier University's commitment to widening participation is grounded on partnership working with strong community links and partnerships with local voluntary organisations and other agencies to provide stepping-stones into further study for community learners (Napier University, 2004). The non-traditional student journey can be lengthy; starting from the community-based

Widening Access courses then typically on to access courses in further education, before entering higher education. One such community-based Widening Access scheme is described here and the need for practice teachers to consider increased learner diversity highlighted.

Experience at Greengables and lessons for practice teachers

Greengables Community Education Centre is situated in a deprived community on the outskirts of Edinburgh which in partnership with Napier University, delivers free, local, credit bearing short courses in health-related subjects. Crèche facilities are offered on a low cost basis and this has resulted in the recruitment of mature students; mainly young mothers whose children attend the adjacent nursery and who live in the locality of the centre.

Practice teaching for the short courses provided at Greengables centres on the philosophy of 'andragogy' or a learner- focused approach which acknowledges that non-traditional students need different considerations to promote student engagement and enhance retention. In catering for learner diversity, practice teachers were also strongly influenced by Crawford's (2005, p.8) idea of the asset-based approach to well-being for individuals and communities, the features of which include

valuing positive things in a community; envisioning a possible future; engaging in dialogue and creating the future through innovation and dialogue'.

In practical terms, Greengables practice teachers positively focus on student strengths and abilities, rather than operate on a deficit model, with a problem-solving approach. Being asset-based is a mind-set in which practice teachers emphasise 'what students can do, not what they can't'.

There has been a real attempt by practice teachers to encourage a 'learning community' by designing learning opportunities that value the students' existing personal experience and incorporate their ideas into the learning and assessment process. Reflection after a learning experience is strongly encouraged to identify new learning and the aim is to be empowering and provide a real opportunity to promote

partnership in learning.

The relevance of the curriculum and educational provision can be very different for non-traditional students (Yoshimoto et al, 2007) and practice teachers consider choice and empowerment as key to the andragogical approach. For example, at Greengables, students have to achieve stated module learning outcomes but practice teachers negotiate with individuals or facilitate group decisions about how these outcomes should be achieved.

Process assessment is used throughout the short courses to split up assessment tasks and avoid a 'big-bang' end of module assignment. Examples might be interpretation of the information on food labels or to design a health, balanced menu. This approach makes it less daunting for students than a large piece of coursework and allows practice teachers and peers to facilitate immediate feedback to students thereby encouraging confidence and skill development (Brockbank & McGill, 1998).

Practice teachers at Greengables emphasise the importance of transparency in the learning process. They consider that dialogue between teachers and students with openness, trust, respect and mutuality can change the dynamic of the learning experience from one of dependence to one superseded by collaboration (Brockbank & McGill, 1998). The aim is that learning is of a critical, transformatory kind that encourages the learner to become a critical thinker.

Progress so far

Community courses at Greengables have been a wholly positive experience for both students and staff. There is demonstrable knowledge and skills increase but, more than this, there is obvious human flourishing. This is evident in personal growth, development of students' self-esteem and confidence, not just about the course content, but cascading into the wider family and community. Several students have commented on the importance of offering a role model for their children and the value of education. On a practical level, community courses provide student with recent evidence of study, with credit-bearing qualifications for non-traditional students in long-term unemployment. This facilitates CV-building and gives opportunities in accessing a referee

when applying for employment or education. One noticeable benefit was the mutual support and encouragement engendered through group work and this continued outside the class situation as friendship and social support, encouraging participation in other community events and activities. Community staff reported an increase in self-perceived prestige through association with a higher education institution and access to their facilities, such as professional leaflet printing. A small but significant number of students have used these modules as a springboard to enter Further or Higher Education, with our first student due to graduate in 2009 from Napier University.

Conclusion

The non-traditional student journey to higher education, and ultimately to health and social work, can be lengthy and Widening Access is only of many possible strategies to tackle the professional recruitment crisis. A concern for social justice has also emphasised the need for increased participation by non-traditional students. One community-based educational partnership Greengables/Napier University was described and has had very positive evaluation by students and staff. The key points were the local nature, affordable child care and identifiable personal, family and community benefits. Practice teachers adopted an andragogical and asset-based approach to the student experience, acknowledging their existing knowledge and skills. Issues for the future centre on practice teachers maintaining good relationships and increasing student numbers at Greengables and the other community partners with Napier University. Work continues to develop increased articulation opportunities for community course students to progress to Further and Higher Education.

Lessons for practice teachers dealing with increased learner diversity

- Growth in non-traditional students needs practice teachers to acknowledge and value diversity.
- Appreciation of the student 'journey' - acknowledging how far

students have come, and how far they still have to go.

- Adopt an asset-based approach – focus on student strengths and ability, rather than operate on a deficit model.
- Collaborative working – involve the student in assessment and planning of learning experiences.
- Review assessment strategies – process as important as outcome .
- Immediacy of feedback builds confidence and rapport between practice educator and student.
- Use every opportunity to listen to the student ‘voice’ – to foster ownership and empowerment.
- Group processes with an emphasis on reflection should be encouraged in order to promote a ‘learning community’

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