

Education Towards Employment for People with Learning Difficulties: A Transnational Approach

People with learning difficulties - in particular those with a moderate/severe disability - frequently fail to achieve acceptable levels of employability through a combination of inadequate or uncoordinated programme provision and poor expectation and promotion of adult status. A joint Dublin/Newcastle-upon-Tyne project addresses the challenge of employability in terms of personal self-esteem building, accessible learning approaches and channels of effective communication.

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INTRODUCTION

The English and Welsh education system recognises a particular group of learners as having 'severe learning difficulties'. Although there is no formal definition of this group, it comprises young people with a marked level of intellectual impairment who nonetheless have some communication and social skills and who may ultimately be capable of living independent or semi-independent lives. Typically such young people are educated in special schools, and may progress from the age of 16 onwards to specialist courses in Colleges of Further Education. Unfortunately as these young people reach adulthood, this co-ordinated provision gives way to a patchwork of day centres, sheltered workshops and care within the home, organised by a variety of agencies - or, indeed, by none. As a result, very few adults with severe learning difficulties progress into anything like full employment and some of them are effectively housebound.

addition, students have been offered a short college course in Food Hygiene if this is a requirement of their work placement.

IRISH-ENGLISH LINKS IN CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

In 1991, The Education Towards Employment Project received funding for curriculum development work related to the Employability Skills Course through the European Community Horizon Initiative. This Horizon Project work has been undertaken in partnership with a group of tutors from St. Michael's House in Dublin, who offer a work preparation course for school leavers with moderate learning difficulties and disabilities. The Dublin group piloted elements of the Employability Skills Course with their students and attended joint workshops with the staff of North Tyneside College to exchange ideas and discuss issues raised by the work.

One of the main factors underpinning the development of the Employability Skills Course has been the need to design a curriculum which is meaningful and accessible to people whose disability in the main prevents learning through the medium of literacy. Staff teaching the course have therefore been encouraged to experiment with a variety of techniques to facilitate learning through different media e.g. drama and role play, use of video and audio recording equipment, photography, visits and visiting speakers, group discussion, group projects and individual tutorials. There has also been an emphasis on developing pictorial and verbal recording systems which are meaningful to the students. Tutors in the Dublin group were able to try out some of these ideas developed in North Tyneside and feedback their findings at the workshops.

The joint team also discussed some of the underlying issues which they felt needed to be understood by anyone developing an employability skills training programme for people with learning difficulties and disabilities.

ISSUES: WHAT DO WE MEAN BY REAL WORK?

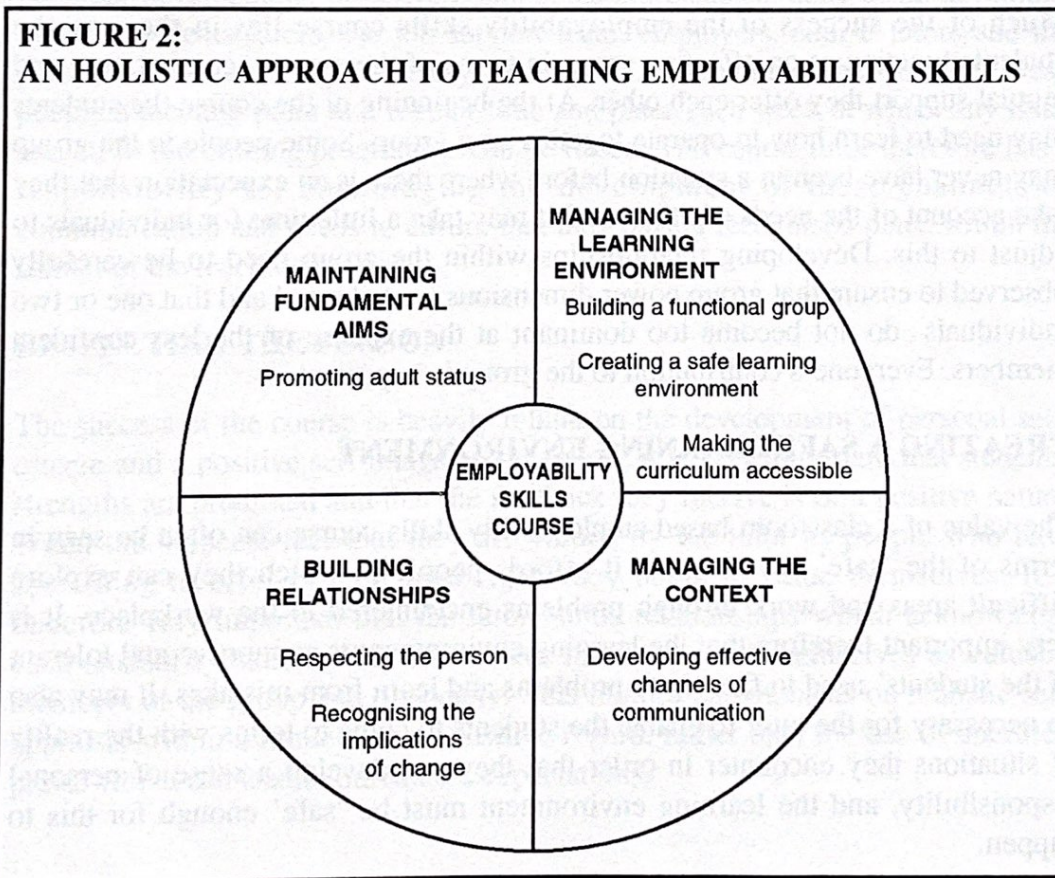
The team members identified the need to define clearly what we mean by 'real' work for this group of people. It was felt that whilst it is important that people receive monetary remuneration for their work when appropriate, the main benefits for a person with a learning difficulty in going to work are often measured in other terms. A realistic definition of 'valued' work needs to recognise that work can mean something of personal benefit, especially in terms of raised self-esteem. The tutors felt that the ultimate purpose of an employment

preparation programme should be to enable people with a learning difficulty to take control of their own lives.

Work and employment should be seen as aspects of quality of life and in designing a training programme we should be thinking in terms of a continuum of aims rather than a single end-point of paid employment.

HOLISTIC APPROACH TO TEACHING EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

The team also looked at course organisation and delivery and emphasised the importance of developing an holistic approach to teaching the employability skills course. Whereas many vocational courses focus on narrow, job-specific skills the team felt that 'employability' is much more related to the development of the whole person and should not therefore be limited to particular skill competencies. The holistic model suggested by the transnational team is illustrated in Figure 2 and incorporates the following elements which have implications for course delivery:



PROMOTING ADULT STATUS

In suggesting that people with learning difficulties and disabilities can achieve acceptable levels of employability we are aiming to promote adult status for a group of people who may have been regarded as being childlike for most of their lives. It is therefore very important that this is reflected in the overall delivery of the course. This can be achieved through making the classroom environment as much like that of any other adult learner as possible, using teaching materials which illustrate an adult perspective and displaying students' work in an adult manner using appropriate materials. Where possible, central student facilities and resources should be fully used e.g. library, refectory, common rooms, information technology and communication skills workshops, student union etc. Promoting adult status gives people with a learning difficulty credibility and helps create adult expectations.

BUILDING A FUNCTIONAL GROUP

Much of the success of the employability skills course lies in the way the students function as an effective group in terms of the respect, co-operation and mutual support they offer each other. At the beginning of the course the students may need to learn how to operate together as a group. Some people in the group may never have been in a situation before where there is an expectation that they take account of the needs of others and it may take a little time for individuals to adjust to this. Developing relationships within the group need to be carefully observed to ensure that group power dimensions are balanced and that one or two individuals do not become too dominant at the expense of the less confident members. Everyone's contribution to the group is important.

CREATING A SAFE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The value of a classroom based employability skills course can often be seen in terms of the 'safe' environment it affords people in which they can explore difficult areas and work through problems encountered in the workplace. It is very important therefore that the learning environment is supportive and tolerant of the students' need to face up to problems and learn from mistakes. It may also be necessary for the tutor to enable the students to come to terms with the reality of situations they encounter in order that they can develop a sense of personal responsibility, and the learning environment must be 'safe' enough for this to happen.

MAKING THE CURRICULUM ACCESSIBLE

In designing a course for people with a learning difficulty the conceptual problems inherent in the disability must be taken into consideration. This means accommodating to the fact that the students will experience difficulties in accessing a curriculum through channels of learning which rely heavily on the use of literacy skills. It will therefore be necessary to develop alternative methods of course delivery which are meaningful to people who, in the main, cannot make sense of the written word. This requires a very creative approach to teaching, using a variety of visual, auditory and participatory resources which offer the students stimulating, meaningful learning experiences.

DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION

If the employability skills course is to be successful in offering a forum for the exploration of issues pertinent to an individual's employment training and personal development, effective communication channels need to be developed between parents/carers, the job support team, employers, course tutors and the person with a learning difficulty themselves. The course can offer all these people a meeting point at a regular time and place each week at which any issue related to the training programme can be raised. The course tutor therefore has a responsibility for encouraging the development of these channels of communication and needs to ensure that they have a recognised place within the format of the teaching session.

RESPECTING THE PERSON

The success of the course is heavily reliant on the development of personal self-esteem and a positive self-image and therefore it is very important that students' strengths are promoted and that the feedback they receive is of a positive nature. When the students feel that they are valued by the tutor as people who have something to offer in their own right, they begin to value themselves. It is therefore very important that the tutor builds relationships which acknowledge each student's individuality and makes them aware of themselves as valuable members of the group and of society. This implies an emphasis on realistic self-appraisal within a framework of positive regard, rather than the use of uncritical praise which can lead to unrealistic expectations.

RECOGNISING THE IMPLICATIONS OF CHANGE

The employability skills course is essentially a personal development programme relating to the world of work. As such its broader aim is to help people move from dependency towards independence. In offering this opportunity for change there is a responsibility on the part of everyone involved to be aware of the effects that the programme will have on the person themselves and the people with whom they live. It may be necessary for the wider implications of change to become the focus of college sessions and for the tutor to become instrumental in helping families and carers understand the realities of a situation where their dependent young adult is no longer so dependent. The tutor may need to develop relationships with parents and carers which imply an understanding of their feelings whilst continuing to support the student in his/her striving towards independence.

The joint work undertaken by North Tyneside College and St. Michael's House has resulted in the production of a resource pack on employability skills training for use by people who work with people who have learning difficulties and disabilities. The pack outlines the work of the Education Towards Employment Project in developing the Employability Skills Course, identifies the common issues raised by the transnational team of tutors, gives a detailed description of course content with suggestions for effective curriculum delivery and illustrates the work with several case studies.

This article is based on work by the same authors published in *Educare* 49, July 1994. *Educare* is the journal of Skill: National Bureau for Students With Disabilities, 336 Brixton Rd., London SW9 7AA.