



participation in learning projects and programmes

Why do people engage in learning projects? What are the barriers to participation? How are we to theorize participation?

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In northern countries discussions of participation in adult and continuing education are far more likely to be found in the literature than, say, explorations of involvement in primary and secondary schooling. In many southern countries - where, through various economic and political reasons, schooling is not available to all and there are various barriers to participation - this tends to be far less true. The main reason for the northern attention to adult participation is not difficult to see. Where attendance at school is compulsory - and there is a high take-up of places - why people participate may be seen as of 'academic' interest only. In those situations where participation in educational activities is voluntary the picture changes. Programme providers need to have an appreciation of what their target groups want from education, their motivation for engaging in learning, the barriers to participation, and the preferred forms if they are to both be effective and survive.

Defining adult education

Here we explore people's participation in what might be described as 'adult and continuing education'. In doing this we have to pick our way through a terminological minefield. As Courtney (1989: 15) says, adult education, continuing education, lifelong learning, independent learning projects, community education, community development, adult learning, andragogy, adult basic education, animation, facilitation,

conscientization have all been used at one time or another to mean more or less the same thing. Here I want going to short circuit these considerations and focus on learning projects and learning programmes.

The shape of participation

Over the last few years there has been a significant amount of research exploring the participation of adults in learning. Here Naomi Sargent has been a significant figure and I want to look at the results of her work *The Learning Divide* (1997)

Participation in adult learning - some key findings

The Learning Divide reports on a survey funded by the Department for Education and Employment, and carried out for NIACE, the national organisation for adult learning, by the Gallup Organisation. Between 24 January and 6 February 1996 4,673 adults aged 17 and over across the UK nations were interviewed.

In Northern Ireland a booster sample of 528 adults was interviewed to enable separate results to be analysed for the first such survey in the province.

Participation in learning

Nearly one-quarter (23%) of all adults say they are currently learning. A further 17% have been learning in the last three years. Three in five of all adults have not participated in the last 3 years.

More men (25 %) than women (21 %) are currently learning. Men also outnumber women when current and recent learners are taken together (43% against 38%).

Significantly more women (41 %) than men (31 %) report undertaking no learning since leaving full-time education. This is partially but not entirely accounted for by the higher proportion of older women in the population, and the lower levels of older people's

participation.

Social class continues to be the key discriminator in understanding participation in learning. Over half of all upper and middle-class (A-B) respondents are current or recent learners, compared with one-third of the skilled working class (C2) and one quarter of unskilled working class people and people on limited incomes (DE).

Almost twice as many white-collar workers, C1s, (32%) as C2s (17%) currently participate. A comparable NIACE survey in 1990 showed 31% of C1s currently studying and/or learning informally, and 21% among C2s. 42% of C2s and 53% of DEs have done no learning since completing full-time education.

Employment status affects people's opportunities for learning at work, provides resources to take up learning opportunities and, for many, the motivation to learn. Effectively half (49%) of full-time workers are current/recent learners, compared with 42% of part-time workers and 40% of unemployed people.

Those who are not working (23%) and retired people (20%) have almost half the levels of participation of people in work or seeking work.

The length of initial education continues to be the best single predictor of participation in adult learning. The more initial education and training people receive, the greater the likelihood of their learning later on. Only 20% of people leaving full-time education below the age of 16 are current/recent learners. 39% of people leaving at 16 or 17, and 59% of those leaving at 18 or later are current/recent learners.

Current and recent participation in learning is greatest among young people, and decreases with each successive age cohort - with 86% of 17-19 year olds; 43% of 35-44 year olds, 19% of 65-74 year olds, and 15% of the 75-plus

population reporting current or recent participation.

Where people live has a major impact on whether they are likely to participate.

There are marked national differences in levels of participation. Overall 40% of the UK population are current/recent learners. The national totals are England 42%; Scotland 38%; Wales 37% and Northern Ireland 28%.

There are striking differences, too, in the English regions with Yorkshire and Humberside (52%) topping the list; and the East Midlands (50%), the North (45%), London (44%) and East Anglia enjoying the higher-than-average proportions of current/recent learners, and West Midlands (35 %), and the North West (35 %) having the lowest proportion.

Note: The question used to determine these results was as follows:

This card describes the sorts of learning that people might do. Could you read the card please while I go through it with you. As the card says, learning can mean practising, studying or reading about something. It can also mean being taught, instructed or coached. This is so you can develop skills, knowledge, abilities or understanding of something. Learning can also be called education or training. You can do it regularly (each day or each month) or you can do it for a short period of time. It can be full- or part-time, done at home, at work, or in some place like a college. Learning does not have to lead to a qualification. We are interested in any learning you have done whether or not it is continuous. Have you done any kind of learning activity in the last three years?

Sargant, N. et al (1997) *The Learning Divide. A study of participation in adult learning in the United Kingdom*, Leicester: NIACE.

Learning for a Purpose

Sargant (1993), in an earlier study, examined the participation of adults from various different ethnic groups. Averaged across different Black and Asian groups, the figures show that around one in three people (32 per cent) participate in adult learning activities - more than that of the Great Britain population as a whole (29 per cent in the 1991 study). On the one hand, those describing themselves as of African origin reported 60 per cent studying recently or currently; on the other, those describing themselves as having a Pakistani background had a participation rate of just 20 per cent.. People of colour also devoted more time to their studies - around 15 hours per week, compared with nine hours for the population as a whole. However, a significantly smaller proportion (8 per cent as against 15 per cent) have recently studied at work. This discrepancy may, in part, be due to the fact that unemployment and part-time working particularly impacts upon people of colour. In general a higher proportion of women study than men (the reverse of the whole population average) - although slightly more men from the Caribbean and Indian sub-continent were currently studying than women.

Sargant, N. (1991) *Learning and Leisure*. Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.

Sargant, N. (1993) *Learning for a Purpose. Participation in education and training by adults from ethnic minorities*, Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.

In this summary we can see some important dimensions. Not unexpectedly participation in adult and continuing education is patterned according to key social dimensions. We can see the division in

subject interests, for example, between men and women; the differential rates of participation between different ethnic groups (with an overall participation rate affected by higher unemployment and racism in the labour market); and, most significantly of all, the striking difference along class and age lines - particularly in relation to organized education provision.

In the case of the former, much of the research conducted in North America points to a strong correlation between relative success in schooling, further, and higher education and a readiness to engage with organized education provision in later life. As Cross (1981: 54) put it 'young people who advance furthest in the formal education system are the most active learners as adults'. There is also some indication that this acts independently of socio-economic status and income (Darkenwald and Merriam 1982: 121). In other words, it is not so much the particular occupation that a person is in, as their experience of education that is significant. As there is a significant correlation between class and initial educational success then this is carried through into adult life.

As Sargant (1991) reports, there is strong skewing of educational participation to certain age ranges. The majority of students on qualifying courses, not surprisingly, are at the younger end of the age range (ibid: 42). There is a significant tailing-off at age 45 years and above. In part this may be explained by people feeling that there is less need for them to study for employment. A further factor is that the relative length and depth of older people in formal education provision in their youth is substantially less than that which pertains today. There are, however, also significant barriers to participation as we will see.

Barriers to participation

Within the literature of adult education a good deal of attention has been given to 'non-participation'. Some of the reasons for this are pretty obvious as we have seen. The problem for researchers is that simply going up to people and asking them why they have not taken part in education projects and programmes does not necessarily tell us very much. For example, there is some evidence that people may be either embarrassed about their reasons e.g. around finance and literacy, or

lack a detailed analysis concerning the operation of the system. In her discussion of education in the 'developing world', Graham-Brown (1991: 50) lists a series of filters, both within the educational system itself, and in the wider economy and society, which tend to reproduce existing social hierarchies. As she comments, these filters are of different types and intensities depending on the goals and character of particular governments and societies

Education filters

Some forms of selection:

- those overtly defined by government policy: for example, exclusions based on race or language.
 - those created by gaps in the education system (especially in rural areas).
 - those caused by the inability of certain disadvantaged groups to enrol or to remain at school because of language, gender or the poverty or isolation of the community.
 - the way the formal education system selects through examinations - although it may be formally accessible to all, relatively few are expected to complete all its stages.
 - the chances of a child completing school depend on his or her socio-economic circumstances, including the economic situation of the family, the educational background of parents and the perceived relevance of education.
 - different types of education in a particular society are given differing social and economic values: for example, private/public, academic/vocational, formal/non-formal.
 - the value placed on different types of work and skills: for example, manual as opposed to white-collar work.
- (Graham-Brown 1991)

This listing has the virtue of drawing our attention to social and structural factors which may affect participation. Much of the (North American) literature of adult education rather tends to look to what is

going on for the individual when making choices. If, within a society, there are only limited forms of formal education provision - and it is oriented to particular ends, and directed towards certain sections of the population - it is hardly surprising that various social groups do not participate.

One way of looking at some of the barriers is to differentiate between situational, institutional and dispositional factors. These obviously overlap and interconnect. To these might be added simple lack of information. As McGivney (1993: 17) comments, a common finding in participation research is that non-participants have little or no knowledge of the educational opportunities available.

Perceived barriers to learning

Situational barriers: those arising from one's situation at a given time.

- lack of money - the cost of studying, the cost of child care and so on
- lack of time, for example, because of job and home responsibilities
- lack of transport to study venue

Institutional barriers: those practices and procedures that exclude or discourage adults from participating in activities.

- inconvenient schedules or locations for programmes
- lack of relevant or appropriate programmes
- the emphasis on full-time study in many institutions

Dispositional barriers: those related to attitudes and self-perceptions about oneself as a learner.

- feeling 'too old' to learn
- lack of confidence because of 'poor' previous educational achievements
- tired of school, tired of classrooms (Cross 1981: 99)

Research has found significant differences as to the strength of such

factors in different countries (see McGivney 1990). For example, while cost of programmes was seen to be a highly significant factor in British research, it was rated far less highly in the USA.

Theories of participation

As will now be apparent, the motives for engagement in learning projects are often mixed and can operate at a number of levels.

McGivney (1990) has provided a useful summary of some of the better known theories which she divides into single strand and composite (involve a number of strands). Later we will look at an influential 'composite' theory - that of Cross, for now we will look at McGivney's summary. (Cross 1981 also discusses most of these theories/models).

Needs hierarchy theory: The main line of argument here is that participation depends on the extent to which a person has been able to meet a range of primary and secondary needs (after Maslow 1954) and the influence of positive and negative forces (see, also, 'force-field analysis below'). For example, as basic primary needs are met (as one economic and social position 'improves'), higher needs are activated, and the balance between negative and positive forces shifts. As a result people are more prepared to take part in educational activities. (See Miller 1967).

Congruence model: In this model it is suggested that people are more likely to participate in educational activities where there is some congruence between their perception of themselves (their self concept) and the nature of the education programme/environment. One of the key findings in the North American literature which has driven this is the correlation between the number of years spent at school and college, and the likelihood of taking part in education programmes after that. (See Boshier 1973).

Force-field theory: This approach draws heavily on the work of Lewin (1947; 1952). Miller (1967), in particular, sought to draw together Maslow's and Lewin's theories to explain why socio-economic status (class) is linked to participation in adult education. He charts positive forces and negative forces and their relative strengths. This is then taken a step further by Rubenson (1977). He argues that education, like work, is an achievement-orientated activity, 'meaning that people who

want to get ahead will put effort into personal achievement' (Cross 1981: 166). Rubenson suggested that motivation emerges from the interaction of two factors: expectancy and valence. 'Expectancy' consists of two components: the expectation of personal success in the educational activity; and the expectation that being successful in the activity will have positive consequences (op cit). 'Valence' refers to the sum of positive or negative values that people assign to learning activities. For example, participation in education can lead to higher pay, but it can also mean seeing less of the family or spending less time in social activities (Cross 1981: 116).

Life transitions theory: The notion of 'transition' has assumed a much larger role in thinking about the take-up of education. This has been reflected, for example, in shifts in UK research concerning young people's participation in further education (see, in particular, Banks et al 1992). In North America populist accounts of the impact of 'life-changes' (e.g. Sheehy 1976) have had a significant impact. The basic hypothesis involved is that participation in education projects is frequently linked to changes in life circumstances such as changes in job, the break-up of relationships, having children, bereavement and retirement.

Reference group theory: This theory is based around the assertion that people identify with the social and cultural group to which they belong - 'normative reference group (NRG) - or with another to which they aspire to belong - 'comparative' reference group (CRG) (McGivney 1993: 25). A number of studies point to the extent to which people's total environment and group membership creates an orientation to involvement in educational projects and programmes (Darkenwald and Merriam 1982: 142). In the case of CRG, people have some sense of 'missing out' or 'being deprived' and thus seek out opportunities to advance themselves. CRGs may be provided by the mass media, by colleagues and by relationships e.g. keeping pace with your partner (Gooderham 1987).

Social participation: This approach has now been developed at some length by Courtney (1991). He argues that significant learning often takes place in organizational settings (schools, community groups, work). Thus to seek motivation for learning, 'we might seek for those

factors which motivate people to join or be part of organizations or for reasons why organizations compel as well as encourage forms of voluntary participation' (ibid: 99). Second, if learning is a 'discretionary act' - a function of 'leisure' time - then we must look to the total distribution of life's activities over the day/week/year to understand why people participate or not. Last, he argues that we need to consider the idea that learning involves socialization or integration of the individual within the larger whole. Therefore, 'reasons for learning might be sought in the "function" played by education in giving or denying the individual access to social roles and rewards' (op cit).

Cross: the 'chain of response' model

Here I want to focus on one, highly influential, model - that of Cross (1981). She takes various elements from the theories just described and moulds them into a seven-stage process. It begins with the individual and ends with external factors. It is called the 'chain of response' model because each of the stages are seen as links in a chain! Each stage influences another. 'The more positive the learner's experience at each stage, the more likely he or she is to reach the last stage - the decision to participate (McGivney 1993: 27)

K. Patricia Cross: Chain of response model

Participation in a learning activity, whether in organized classes or self-directed, is not a single act but the result of a chain of responses, each based on an evaluation of the position of the individual in his or her environment (Cross 1981: 125). The main elements in the chain (above) are:

- A. Self-evaluation.
- B. Attitudes about education.
- C. The importance of goals and the expectations that these will be met.
- D. Life transitions.
- E. Opportunities and barriers.
- F. Information on educational opportunities.

G. The decision to participate.

Cross' model is an important contribution to the literature - it brings together a number of elements in a useful way. Crucially, it emphasizes the interaction between various elements and in so doing moves away from simplistic explanations. However, it does leave a number of questions.

First, although Cross (1981: 129) makes clear that she has over-emphasized the linearity of the model to illustrate the cumulative nature of the forces, there are problems about the systemic way in which she sets out the process. Theorizing about the process of reflection generally also falls into this trap. As Dewey (1933: 199-209) has argued things often happen all at once, elements are jumped, matters need not move in a 'logical' order. I suspect what we need is something much more fuzzy and less linear than this - a model which allows for zig-zagging movements, and for interaction and accumulation (see Smith 1994: ch. 7).

Second, the theories that Cross draws on are culturally-bound. We need to look, in particular, at the notion of the 'self' involved - and ask to what extent does it reflect dominant western views of the individual. The way we understand ourselves is bound up with the culture of which we are a part. The ideas around the self that many Western educators hold as 'obvious' are rather peculiar in the context of the world's cultures (Geertz 1983: 59).

To members of sociocentric organic cultures the concept of the autonomous individual, free to choose and mind his own business, must feel alien, a bizarre idea cutting the self off from the interdependent whole, dooming it to a life of isolation and loneliness. Linked to each other in an interdependent system, members of organic cultures take an active interest in one another's affairs, and feel at ease regulating and being regulated. Indeed, others are the means to one's functioning and vice versa. (Schweder and Bourne 1984: 194)

Other assumptions too need testing for their cultural specificity - after

all just about all the writers Cross draws upon are writing within, and using data from, the North American context.

There are other questions - how does this model work in relation to self-directed learning projects, for example? How it might apply to education around literacies?

Further reading

Here I have tried to include texts that take forward the theorizing around decisions to 'participate' in adult education and learning and some of the more recent UK surveys.

Courtney, S. (1992) *Why Adults Learn*, London: Routledge. Reviews the North American literature on adult participation in education in order to build a theory of participation. Operates from a sociological rather than psychological basis - which is welcome in the context of the literature.

Cross, K. P. (1981) *Adults as Learners. Increasing participation and facilitating learning* (1992 edn.), San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Become established as a modern 'classic'. Has chapters on the growth of the learning society; issues in recruiting adult learners; who participates in adult learning; why adults participate (and why not); towards a model of adult motivation for learning; implications for increasing participation; patterns of adult learning and development; how adults learn and want to learn; facilitating learning.

McGivney, V. (1993) *Women, Education and Training. Barriers to access, informal starting points and progression routes*, Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education. 113 + xii pages. What are women's education and training needs, and what are the factors that impede access, participation and progression? Focus on the characteristics of successful threshold provision.

McGivney, V. (1998) *Excluded Men*, Leicester: NIACE. 80 pages. Examines barriers to participation and implications for targeting and curriculum approaches. Provides examples of practice.

Preece, J. (ed.) with Weatherall, C. and Woodrow, M. (1998) *Beyond the Boundaries: exploring the potential of widening provision in higher education*, Leicester: NIACE. 128 pages. Number of case studies

examining attempts to develop responses to 'the learning society'.

Sargant, N. (1991) *Learning and 'Leisure'. A study of adult participation in learning and its policy implications*, Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education. 132 pages. A major study which provides useful data on participation in both informal and formal education.

Sargant, N. (1993) *Learning for a Purpose. Participation in education and training by adults from ethnic minorities*, Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education. 117 + viii pages. Follow-up study to Sargant (1991) that highlights significant differences in participation and the role of educational aspirations, cultural backgrounds, and occupation environments in decisions to participate in, and access to, adult education.

Sargant, N. with Field, J., Francis, H., Schuller, T. and Tuckett, A. (1997) *The Learning Divide. A study of participation in adult learning in the United Kingdom*, Leicester: National Institute of Continuing Adult Education. 127 pages. Report of a study undertaken in early 1996 and thus providing a much needed picture of adult education participation following changes in funding and the move towards vocationalism and accreditation. It is difficult to compare these findings with earlier surveys as there have been changes in the questions used (which was especially important in the area of informal learning). The survey confirms the continuing impact of social class; age; gender; location and previous educational experience. The survey also deals with issues around advice, travel, finance, personal circumstances, use of leisure time, and participation in arts and crafts.

West, L. (1996) *Beyond Fragments: Adults, motivation and higher education. A biographical analysis*, London: Taylor and Francis. Exploration of the relationship between motives, educational participation, biographies and present situations based on work with a number of adult students in access and foundation programmes. The approach is 'a kind of cultural psychology'. Also draws on the psychoanalytical tradition in some interesting ways.

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