

IATL Academic Fellowship Interim Report, 31st October 2015

Community Engagement: Theory into Practice

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Curriculum development

The module was formally approved by Academic Board after some small changes to the original MA1 proposal.

Discussions with convenors of other interdisciplinary modules suggested that the original plan of a guest speaker each week would be likely to cause a lack of continuity, and so the number of guest speakers has been reduced. Meetings with guest lecturers have helped align each of their proposed lecture content with the overall flow of the module, and the order of lectures has been revised accordingly.

An overall thread of development of reflective approaches to practice and to inter-disciplinarity has been developed, drawing on a range of community engagement practices; on CLL's Developing Community Leadership off-campus course; on a range of approaches for building reflection into HE pedagogy; and on models from other HE institutions with community-based pedagogical approaches, nationally and further afield.

Finding volunteer roles in community organisations

Individual contacts have been made with a wide range of individual voluntary organisations, as well as infrastructure organisations, in relation to hosting module students. Organisations interested to host volunteers who are students on this module, in this or future years, include;

- ACCOL, which works with African Caribbean communities across Coventry
- A community woodland in Leamington and a community allotment in Hillfields
- Arty-Folks, a mental health voluntary organisation which has worked effectively through visual arts practice with mental health service users for 20 years
- Brunswick Healthy Living Centre, a community health facility in South Leamington
- Coventry Law Centre
- Coventry Peace House, which works with migrants, refugees and asylum seekers; as well as campaigning for peace
- Coventry YMCA
- Grapevine – a local charity which originally helped people with learning difficulties, and now supports a broad range of people facing severe isolation, poverty, disadvantage and discrimination, including work with young undocumented migrants, 'Troubled Families', disabled people, vulnerable parents and local neighbourhoods.
- Hope in Unity, which works with Black and Asian elders

- Kairos Women Working Together, which aims to support, empower, and give a voice to women at risk of or subject to sexual exploitation, including those caught up in sex work, and those aspiring to leave it.
- The SYDNI Centre, a successful community centre on the Sydenham estate, Leamington
- WEETEC, a successful community centre in Willenhall

A number of students already have appointments to meet potential volunteering host organisations, others will do so shortly, and there are more than sufficient roles available to offer all the students a role reasonably close to where they are living this year.

Recruiting students

Fourteen students have signed up for the module, and were asked to fill in a supplementary questionnaire about previous volunteering experience, goals for their participation in the module, areas of interest as volunteers, any areas they were definitely not interested in, and any other factors that might affect their ability to complete the volunteering hours during Term 2.

After further correspondence in response to their answers to the questionnaires, two students decided to withdraw from the module given the workload they were already facing in Term 2 (I think this was a good call in both cases).

The twelve remaining students have a wide range of home disciplines: Philosophy, Sociology, English, History of Art, Politics, Economics, WBS (Management) and Modern Languages. Two are overseas students, and two others are mature students on the 2+2 in Social Studies.

Progress to date

The Fellowship has so far allowed me to develop a good first version of a model of community-based learning pedagogy as an interdisciplinary module. I had capped the module at 15 this first time round, in order to allow enough time to find suitable hosts for each student, and to stay closely in touch with each student's experience of the new module next term – so twelve students is a very satisfactory number.

There have been some difficulties in getting clear commitment from students to the module. One other mature student, for example, pulled out after I had worked to find her a quite particular kind of volunteering role – and although that role might suit another student another year, there will be some lessons to learn in terms of sign-up timing for any larger cohort that might take a similar module in future.

Some challenges remain in regards to finding suitable hosts for two or three students who have either communicated their interests very vaguely, or extremely narrowly – again, there may be lessons to learn about how to gather that information more effectively from future cohorts.

Overall, I am pleased with progress, and look forward to learning much more from running the module with the students next term.