

CUV Annual Lecture 2002

What's the Point?

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Learning is seen as a crucial tool in developing and maintaining economic prosperity and in building an equal, inclusive and fair society.

Within this (inclusive) society, provision of education would be both excellent and fair, leading to national economic prosperity and social integration. ... Mass participation in such a system is seen by some as necessary to provide a fulfilled life for individuals, a successful and developing economy, and a genuinely participative democracy (NIACE 1994). This is because successful education transforms people's lives, enhances their confidence, and raises their ambitions (FEU 1993)...

Creating a Learning Society. Stephen Gorard and Gareth Rees. 2002.

If we accept the importance of learning then it follows that we believe that those who are excluded or have excluded themselves from learning are at a disadvantage. So, for society, for those involved in providing learning opportunities, and for governments the point of bringing those excluded from learning into new learning experiences is to bring them not just back into the classroom or workshop and gaining qualifications, but to enhance their position in, and contribution to, society more generally.

But the question this paper addresses is not what governments and colleges and tutors see as the point to learning. Rather it addresses a statement made by many young people, and echoed by their elders, that denotes the scepticism they have about learning and its relevance to them. My aim is to explore why they are so sceptical on the basis that a thorough understanding of this is essential if the real relevance of learning is to be developed. And be warned real relevance is about much more than raising awareness.

Much of this lecture is based on my research into the lives of 16-25 year olds in the South Wales Valleys. The research involved a total of 54 young people and mapped

their experiences of education, training and employment. Half of the sample were mapped over 3 years. Half were male, half were female. They were, in the main, young people who had left school with no, or minimal qualifications and who had gone into low level training, unskilled temporary work or withdrawn from the labour market altogether. 23 were already parents and had between them 40 children. Only 8 were living with their children's other parent. I have used some of their own words to illustrate the points I make.

I am also drawing on the experiences of a piece of action research work developed by the People and Work Unit called the Ladder project. This project, run in partnership with Ebbw Fach Development Trust, Bryncynon Community Revival Strategy and the Penywaun Enterprise Partnership, enabled us to learn more about the needs of young adults and ways of addressing them and to model an approach to creating new learners. The project is written up in the book 'D'you know what I mean?'.

It is important to recognise that I am not talking about 'young people' but rather a group of people who are young but have little in common with contemporaries at university or in apprenticeships or settled in work. Even within the group I researched there were real differences in attitude, motivation and experience between, say, the 17 young mothers and the young men. We have to be wary of generalisations but I have tried to draw out some common themes here.

School experiences

So, where does the scepticism about learning come from? After over 11 years of full-time education the young people in my research emerged believing that;-

Learning is for kids, something you grow out of, and it was a sign of immaturity to be still engaged in learning post-18 years.

*I want to train, do an apprenticeship, but my father says I'm too old now...
I'm 21 now. But I need to be working anyway.*

That they can't learn; they are non-learners and exposing themselves to a learning environment now would be opening the door to humiliation.

the teacher'd say you'm thick, and I think that's why I believed it and I thought, no I can't do it. ..She'd give us set work .. And I'd run up to her, and I'd be thinking, "God she's going to tell me "Well done!" And she'd say, "That's wrong, this is wrong. Go and do it again." All the time, like. And it affects me now, like, in a way, cos if somebody says something, even if it's a joke, to put me down, aw God, I'm devastated. She affected me in a big way.

All my life I'd been told I was thick and now I was putting myself up to prove it.' Young woman contemplating joining a course.

That qualifications were meaningless to them, they couldn't get them and even if they did they would make no difference. Families encouraged this belief condoning and sometimes forcing young people not to sit school exams.

I don't intend to go into any great detail on why, for these young people, school has so clearly failed to instil a learning culture. Other researchers have looked into this in much more detail than me and my research echoes their findings. In summary what emerged was a complex mix including:

- **A failure of the education system to address the wider (non-curriculum based) development needs** of the individual. There were examples of young people with emotional needs that were never addressed and who failed to cope with the whole experience of the secondary school.
- **A lack of coherent support** when a pupil missed a period of schooling, as most of those in my research had. 16 of the sample had spent time in alternative educational provision; 13 had been excluded; 17 had missed between 3 months and a year through illness or accident. The out-of school educational and re-integration processes were inadequate or absent resulting in an existing disengagement becoming more pronounced. Systems put in place to sustain their involvement in education whilst out of school were patchy, sometimes non-existent and each time they returned to the classroom they were, as they saw it,

left to catch up as well as they could. This served to promote the view that even schools don't take education that seriously.

- **Teaching approaches that were exclusive and undermining.** The young people had experienced teachers who they perceived as rude, sarcastic, aggressive and scary. They had also experienced good teaching and they knew the difference.

He was always screaming and shouting at you. If you asked him for help he'd shout, "Oh hang on a minute, I'll be there now." And half the time you'd be too frightened to ask for help, so you'd end up getting your work wrong and get a row then for getting it wrong. And the reason you got it wrong was you were too frightened to ask for help.

The teachers'd be so hard on you, they wouldn't help you. They'd shout at whoever got something wrong. They won't sit down, talk you through it. So I used to mitch a lot, just to keep away from them.

- **Pupils own refusal to conform to the 'school community'**, frequently conforming instead to a 'peer community' that expected and rewarded anti-school behaviour. This sometimes led to aggressive and even violent behaviour towards teachers.

I lost it a bit there, like. I know I was uncontrollable.... it was towards the teachers like. I'd snap for nothing like. And I'd throw things at the teachers, and I wouldn't listen, like, if they said something to me. I'd walk out of the class and smash something up, or stuff like that. It's like I wanted the attention all the time, like. I used to like people laughing, like. I used to do mad things, just to get a bit of a buzz like.

But, to me, the most significant issue was that most of the young people in my research emerged from school convinced that learning was irrelevant to them **and**

their community. Nearly all the young people were absolutely sure that they would never move away from their neighbourhood and drew their learning references from what they saw around them. They were highly conformist within a tight community, and used phrases like ‘people like me don’t’ - in another age we would say that they ‘knew their place’. Many were quick to provide examples of people who had engaged in learning in and beyond school to no benefit, and sometimes to their real disadvantage, to illustrate the pointlessness of doing any more than the law demanded.

Jobs are hard to come by anyway it doesn't matter what qualifications you've got. My brother's an example - He's got twelve A levels and nine GCSE's and qualifications all around for office work and he's driving buses. He's overqualified for jobs around here.

These young people did what was expected of them, as their parents had done. In 1977 Paul Willis undertook a detailed study of a group of young men coming to the end of the schooling and entering the labour market. He described how their ideas, expectations and actions were defined by their gender and class (Willis, P. 1977). The picture that emerged to me in 2001 was no different (see Table 1 Ideas on Employment whilst at School). Indeed it could be argued that class and gender prescribed these young people’s ambitions and views of employment as much, if not more, than the features of local economic decline.

Which brings me on to the first key point I want to make. Motivation to learn is more than an individual issue, it is also one of context. Anyone living with a teenager will know how intensely conformist they can be and how vital it is to fit into a community of friends. Many in my research traced their disengagement with school to ‘getting in with the wrong crowd’ and others described friends and family as both the best and worst thing about living where they did because of the way they both supported and controlled what you did (drug taking communities emerged as particularly strong) . We have to find more effective ways of ‘selling’ lifelong learning to communities, to employers, to families as well as individuals.

Work

And the first issue to tackle here is aspirations for work. Three quarters of the young people I spoke to had had some idea of what work they wanted to do when they were at school but as Table 1 illustrates these ideas were drawn from a very limited vision and nearly always gender specific.

Mapping Research Table 1: Ideas on employment whilst at school

Work	Male	Female	All
Join the army	4	2	6
Fire service	1	1	2
Hairdressing	0	5	5
Nurse	0	3	3
Work with children	0	7	7
Work with elderly	0	2	2
Factory work	0	2	2
Office work – administrator	0	2	2
Fashion designer	0	1	1
Dentist	0	1	1
Teacher	0	1	1
Marine biologist	0	1	1
Air hostess	0	1	1
Jet pilot	0	1	1
Construction trade	5	0	5
Join family business	2	0	2
Chef/cook	2	0	2
Electrician	2	0	2
Taxi-driver	1	0	1
Mechanic	1	0	1
Professional footballer	2	0	2
Veterinarian	1	0	1
Musician	1	0	1
Don't know – no expectations	10	3	13

NB: some young people identified more than one interest

These young people's ideas on employment were shaped by what they saw around them and what they saw was factory work and some skilled trades. It was not true that these young people were 'third generation unemployed' who expected unemployment.

My mother and father always worked and it's like, my little boy says to me, "Can I have this, can I have that?" And I say, "No, I haven't got any money today." He'll say, "Oh, you can go up to the post office." And it makes me cringe. "Aw God!" I tell him, "You don't just take a book to the post office." "Well, you do, Mam." I'm waiting to go up the DSS, hand my book in at the door, and say I don't want it no more, I can go out and I can earn my own money. The first time I'll have a wage, then, I think I'll be having a party. Oh, yea!

Parental unemployment was undoubtedly known and experienced but was not the core predictor we sometimes assume it to be. The research gathered information on 46 of the 54 young peoples' families (Table 2). Only 8 of these 46 families had had no adult working while the young person was growing up and these 8 were more likely to have experienced long-term sickness or disability than dole queues. Far more powerful was the class based limit they put on their options from a very young age. Only one male, for example, had ever even considered a professional career and he had never told anyone for fear of derision.

Mapping Research Table 2. Parental employment history.

Employment status	Mother	Father
Factory work	18	5
Skilled trade	2	9
Unskilled	5	2
Professional/managerial	1	5
Own business	0	3
Working but job not specified	1	5
Total parents in work	27	29
Unemployed	2	3
Long-term sickness	6	9
Total parents not in work	8	12
Parent left/not involved	1	6
Parent died when young	1	1
No information provided	17	4

Significantly, there was no evidence that any aspect of this limited world vision was shaped, challenged or extended through compulsory education. Work experience was always done locally and mirrored the type of work locally available – so there were young people who did work experience with parents on unskilled jobs in factories; who worked where they already had a Saturday job; or who worked in jobs that they knew were completely unsuitable.

It is not that there is no structure available to help develop a young person's vision. Nearly all the young people had had some experience of careers guidance – indeed this was one of the single most common experiences. But for this group of people (perhaps by definition?) the sessions were perceived as irrelevant and sometimes demotivating and it is hard to see, within the limited time that was made available, how they could have been different. None described having the opportunity to expand their thinking or ideas as a result of a guidance session.

It would just be, "Oh you can't do this, you can't do that. You'll have to find out off your teacher, you'll have to find out when you go to college. Don't really know." And they just like seemed to shove it all to the side. It was as if they were interested, but they weren't. You barely had half an hour and they were sitting there looking at their watches. And there's so many hundred kids in this room all talking about careers and, you know, you've got to be quick so it was all over and done with quickly like. ..It just wasn't enough. I think if I hadn't got pregnant in school and left school I'd have probably enrolled myself on an NNEB course. But that's what everyone was doing when they were leaving school, everyone was just piling into it. ...I didn't really want to follow everybody else. I wanted to do something that I wanted to do, but I just didn't know what was available for me.

Which brings me to my second key point. If we are to challenge the 'world vision' of a community, to raise aspirations, we are going to have to invest more in guidance that not only provides information but which is inspirational and integral to the education system. That means starting earlier – by year 11 it is too late to start talking about what is needed to become a brain surgeon, that discussion needs to start in the infants school. As it is, far from challenging their world view there was some evidence of guidance further narrowed it. Under the imperative of 'being realistic' young people told of being encouraged to dismiss anything that might challenge them, to focus on the training the most local college offered, or that of the nearest training provider. I recognise the frustration of encouraging young people to take up opportunities which they then find too hard and drop out of but isn't there a danger that by being realistic, we just ensure that young people stay in 'their place'?

When I was at school I used to see the careers officer cos, like, they used to come to the school then. And you'd have your interview, and I was, like, hairdressing then, and beauty therapy. But she put me off about the beauty therapy course, cos she used to go, "But it's in Newport, and the thing is you might..." And this and that, and that put me off then.

None of those who had a dream job had explored that dream with a guidance officer or teacher, partly for fear of being told to be realistic. Which meant that they had no knowledge of the steps needed to achieve that dream, either now or later in life. Those that had already decided what they wanted to do (primarily those planning to go into the army or to join a family business) dismissed the guidance session as irrelevant with the result that when their plans fell through, which they all did, they had no idea of other options. **Which means, none came away with any idea of the role that learning might play in helping them achieve their ambition.**

Guidance work with these young people is hard. As a group, it is almost impossible since the need to conform will over-ride any other interest. Even individually it requires a patient and highly skilled communicator with enough time to spend just to break down the barriers, before any meaningful discussion takes place. By why wait until those barriers have been built before talking about aims, ambitions, opportunities and lifelong learning? If, for example, we were able right from the infant's school to be constantly relating learning to life outcomes (not just qualifications) we would start a whole process of re-defining what learning is for.

Before I leave this theme of setting the foundations for lifelong learning I want to make a particular case for young mothers. 6 of the young women I interviewed had become pregnant while still at school. None had received any guidance or information on their options at all, and they understood both their school and careers officers to have dismissed them as outside the labour market before they'd even joined it. Again, it appears that the 'system' colludes with their received vision that having a baby is an end, a full stop and this has serious implications for them, their children and the wider community.

I got 5 As, 3 Bs and a D two months after having my baby, but I didn't see a careers teacher or anything.

There was this sort of fear of what would happen if I did go on to university, I mean what would happen in that time, in 2 years time. Am I going to be going away for 3 years? Getting pregnant sort of stopped that problem then. The problem didn't exist anymore.

Leaving school

And so each year a group of young people are released (as they see it) from school with no expectation of learning; no habit of seeking advice and guidance and a knowledge of the labour market limited by what they can see around them, and they don't travel much. How many of them there are is hard to be sure about. For the purposes of this lecture I did a quick calculation based on school leavers leaving with no or poor qualifications in 2000/2001, multiplied by 9 years being the number of years between 16-25 and came to 80,772 in Wales. This figure is undoubtedly flawed, but likely to be an under-estimation since the numbers have gone down each year.¹ Of course, many of these will have made a successful transition into the labour market and gained/improved on their qualifications since leaving school. But an inclusive society must look at what has happened to those who haven't.

Even with those who got least out of school, learning often has a second chance. Government policies oblige most 16-17 year olds to be involved in learning even if they have left school. Only 10 of the young people I spoke to had not been involved in any post-school learning. 23 had been on youth training, often on 3 or more different courses; 20 had done some form of further education, either college based or through a community venue; 8 had been on New Deal. Most had high expectations when they started a learning programme, hopeful that they would gain a qualification and be able to progress to better employment. But the fact is they achieved very little from these learning opportunities. Only 4 of the 23 who had been on Youth Training programmes gained an NVQ level 1, none gained a higher qualification. 7 of the 20 who had done some form of further education course had gained some form of certification, from a First Aid certificate to RSA and CLAIT qualifications. Another 5 thought they had

¹ In 2001 the statistics show 1566 young people left school with no qualification at all, 3% of the school leaving cohort (*Statistical Directorate, National Assembly for Wales. December 2001*). In my sample, 21 of the 54 young people did not even sit a school leaving exam. If the school leavers figure is the full picture and is multiplied over 9 years it would suggest that my research included over 5% of all the unqualified 16-25 year olds in one county area. Even allowing for higher figures of unqualified leavers in earlier years, I am surprised that I could have reached such a high proportion of the unqualified. Nevertheless, on these figures we can estimate a minimum of 15,000 16-25 year olds who left school with no qualifications in Wales. Add to this figure the 7308 who got some form of qualification but less than 5 GCSEs at A-G grades in 2000 (*Schools Data 2000*), multiplied by 9 years so equalling 65,772 and you get 80,772 16-25 year old who left school with no or poor qualifications.

completed and passed a course had never actually received their certificate and were unclear what exactly they had achieved.

I'd done so many months of this and so months of that, and it is a shame really cos I haven't got nothing to show for it. . . I've been coming yer since my middle son was a fortnight old. He's 5, so for 5 years

Interior design. I completed that. I was supposed to get a certificate but they didn't give them out to anybody so....basically I thought that was a waste of time then 'cos I didn't get anything to show for it.

Their failure to achieve, as with school, was complex and involved a mix of lifestyle demands that made it hard to prioritise learning; crises of confidence and commitment that enabled small problems to become serious barriers and economic imperatives that meant a short-term job had to take precedence over the long term gain a qualification might (but is not guaranteed to) offer. However, of far more importance to this audience has to be the fact that the most common cause of their failure to achieve was that the learning provision was not good enough. Those providing the learning opportunities, whether training providers, colleges, community education or youth programmes recruited them and then lost them **and there was very little evidence of them ever trying to find out why.**

They kept telling me I'm not going to pass. It just got to me. I grabbed my bag and I'm off, like. One tutor said I wasn't going to pass cos I'd been really ill for about 3 weeks. I went back in and he checked my work and couldn't believe it cos I was still in front of most of the boys and I started after. It had been going really well down there. But I picked my bag up and I just walked out.

It's not what I want, but I think the dole will send me to training. I've got to go and see the New Deal woman next week. So I think their intention is to pack me off there and give me an extra £10 a fortnight. It's no good for me

cos it's basically messing around over there. I've been there before and it's rubbish. I used to know a lot of people who used to go to there but none of them do go no more, they all jacked it in. None of them got a qualification out of it.

Those who did achieve an outcome from their learning frequently wanted to progress. They gradually developed a vision of where their learning could take them. But again I want to focus on the issue of guidance and the quality of provision available to these young people. This is best illustrated by the young mothers I spoke to. They were not typical in that the majority were accessed through their involvement in community based initiatives that had set out to involve them in education. However, their experiences were very illustrative. Some had developed the idea that their learning was going to be productive, that it would improve their chances of finding employment when their children were in school, and so were prepared to invest these years of labour market inactivity and childcare in improving their chances. The problem was that although they may have had years of involvement with learning provision, often with excellent support services, their approach to learning was unguided and unlikely to lead to them achieving their aim. Two young women illustrate this very clearly:-

Mother with 2 school-age children who wants to be a social worker - I'm thinking that all the jobs that I need to go for need qualifications, so I've looked up all the courses that are going on, and they last about 10 weeks, so once I finish one, I'll take another, and then keep doing that until I'm satisfied that I've got what I need..... I've worked it out for myself. And I've heard about it - A. here told me about the youth induction course but the english literature, I found out that it was going on off my daughter's school.

Mother with 1 school age child, pregnant again at the last interview - I've got my RSA one and two. IBT three has just come out. I've got four lots of text processing which means I can do memos and letters the proper way. I can do all that and I love typing and filing. I can use a photocopier. I can do spreadsheets and database.

A year later, last interview..

..all I've got is computer qualifications. Every time I go for a job they look and say, "That's all she's got."I do volunteering work up here, I don't get paid for being up here, and they reckoned that didn't count.I don't want to be on Income Support for the rest of my life.

There were young women who had spent years doing one foundation level course after another which took no account of their previous qualifications (one had 11 GCSEs at good grades) or of their ambitions. The young women enjoyed the courses and valued the gains in confidence, but crucially, **they also believed that all this work was going to lead to improved employment options.** The investment they were making in learning was crucial for them, and for their children and the ensuing disappointment when the learning was proved to have such a limited currency had a very damaging ripple effect. How does a mother who got no-where, in her terms, in 5 years worth of learning convince her child that learning pays? Please believe that I do not dismiss the importance of informal learning, rather the point I am trying to make is the importance of ensuring that the learner understands clearly what the agenda is and what will result from their investment.

There were examples of good practice that illustrated what could happen. Only 2 of the young people had made a sustainable transition into employment by the end of the research but for both of these learning provision had played a crucial role. They had progressed through involvement in short community based courses, through to part-time further education provision and then onto part-time higher education courses. In both cases their progression to further and higher education was linked to employment and in both cases they had employers and community based mentors who were actively involved in encouraging, supporting and pushing them. One of these young people had rarely attended school, sat no school leaving examinations and had gained no post-school qualifications up to the age of 22 years. He progressed over the next 5 years until he is now in the final stages of achieving a Diploma in Youth and Community Work at university.

However, these were 2 out of 54 and they were in the unusual circumstance, for this group of young people, of a job that required and paid for training. For the rest there was little that challenged their scepticism about the point of going into learning. From their perspective there was a lot to lose, in terms of self respect and peer regard, for an unguaranteed gain.

As I've already illustrated, this attitude to learning isn't just a received notion based on ignorance. It is the outcome of experience. What is remarkable is the constantly renewed optimism that I saw in some young people that learning opportunities, despite all the evidence, can help and their willingness to try yet another youth training scheme or New Deal programme.

Those involved in post-school learning may feel that what I have talked about so far is not really relevant to you. But I am not talking about schools and government training schemes purely as background, to illustrate how young people develop their low expectations of learning. I have seen definitions of lifelong learning as being about post-school learning but, to me, they entirely miss the point. Schools provide our best chance of changing a community perception of learning and instilling a lifelong hunger for learning in the individual. We have a structure that funds, plans and evaluates school and post-school learning differently but they are all part of the same life process. We still have a very long way to go in really bringing the worlds of learning together but it will have to happen. Otherwise, apart from anything else, we are all working in a structure that takes the view that, for most of us, learning is something we grow out of. We can, then, hardly be surprised if young people absorb that idea.

So what is the point?

The prime motivation for change for the young people in my research is economic. Linked to this was the respect of their children, where they had them. They saw, increasingly as they got older, that their lack of qualifications was condemning them to a life of unskilled precarious jobs or benefits dependency and they wanted to change. In general it was not until they were around 19-20 years old that they began to see this, long after the main thrust of government funded vocational training had passed them by.

I don't want to be stuck in a factory job for the rest of my life, but I think to get a good job that you're happy with you've got to get qualifications. Like, the things I'd like to do I think I'm not capable of. I like psychology and things like that. But I don't think I'm capable of that – I'm not brainy enough. But I'd do some training. The way I see it, I can either stay in the house and be like this for the rest of my life, or go 4 years and struggle and at least have something at the end of it.

However, for most there is no obvious link between the learning opportunities they see around them and improving their employment options. They already know, as I have said, that taking up a learning opportunity is not a risk free strategy either for personal esteem or for improving employment options. The investment of time and lack of earnings that arise are hard to justify without clear evidence of likely results. Being unemployed, with even the vague hope that tomorrow you could find work, can seem preferable and certainly more socially acceptable, than taking on a commitment which means you can't look for work. It is an irony that the more time you have, the less you feel you can justify 'wasting' it on uncertainties.

So my next core point is that we need to make learning more obviously productive, to focus better on results both in terms of learner outcomes and progression to work. I can imagine a number of you balking at any suggestion of the further linking of learning to employment outcomes but all I am saying is that learning that purports to be vocational needs to do it better for this group.

- If we are offering accreditation, make sure it is accreditation that employers understand and accept, or warn the learner about its limitations. An NVQ level 3 or equivalent has to be the target.
- If we are developing trade skills, make sure the learning goes to a level that can be usefully applied in work – this means advising a young person who has already done an NVQ level 1 in one skill on progression, instead of recruiting him to do an NVQ level 1 in a second skill.
- If we are offering I.T. courses, be clear about their purpose and likely impact. I was recently at a meeting where an employer and training provider clashed

because the employer said what was needed was soft skill development and the training provider said what was needed was I.T. skills. What evidence base does that training provider have that he is preparing people for employment?

- If we are offering certification, make sure certificates are sent out.

In other words, don't offer what won't be delivered. The responsibility of the learning provider does not stop with the delivery of the course. I accept that it can be hard to resist the agenda of funders but ultimately that agenda can be challenged if learning providers and learners think outside their immediate brief and offer evidence of need.

Secondly, we need to develop effective role models. Learners need to see that young people like them have taken the risk of engaging in learning and gained rewards. The strong belief that 'people like me' don't do courses, don't get engaged in learning, don't get qualifications has to be challenged and this can only be done by illustrating successes amongst 'people like me'. The Ladder project, run by the People and Work Unit aimed to do just that by recruiting unqualified young people who worked in their own community whilst also pursuing their own education. The impact on other young people in the locality was interesting. They saw that the involvement in learning was hard work, that it required dedication and sacrifices, but they also saw the rewards.

Thirdly, as stated above for this group making a long-term commitment to learning is hard (with the exception of some young mothers). So, learning programmes need to be short and productive, engaging from day one and cumulative. The Ladder showed that having someone you respect who believes in you can compensate for a lack of self-belief in the beginning, and as learning successes accumulate gradually the commitment can lengthen and become self motivated.

Fourthly, although what may be needed in the beginning is a confidence raising process this needs to be a part of something more obviously vocational, especially if young men are to be attracted. Developing confidence and communication skills has to be a core feature of all learning but is more an issue of methods of delivery than curriculum. A colleague who writes training programmes for some of the major agencies in Australia recently listed the core features of any learning programme as needing to include –

- listening skills
- ‘Socratic dialogue’ - exercises to teach the basic skill of clarity in language and experience of expressing and negotiating meaning with others
- non-verbal communication awareness and understanding our impact on other people
- negotiating skills
- handling criticism – fair and unfair, implied and explicit
- understanding barriers to communication and recognising unconscious and conscious hurdles.

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These should be embedded, as learning techniques, in everything from brick-laying to sugar-craft courses; from learning to run a disco to sitting a degree. And, in fact, this brings us back to the point of learning for society and the economy. Lifelong learning will not lead to a more equal, inclusive and democratic society unless it is able to both meet and extend the learner’s vision of his or her place in society. Being involved in learning can add to every aspect of life, but only when it is done well. In the same article written for the People and Work Unit Margaret Purdey wrote that

Learners who are uneasy with the tools of effective learning – debating needs, negotiating processes and changes and talking about problems – are effectively denied full participation. Articulate, expressive and engaged learners are rarely victims of poor education or training experiences and people who can express their needs with precision, debate relationships and interactions, express values and negotiate change, become more effective learners and both get and contribute more value in other personal and social life experiences.

All of the young people in this research hope that their lives will improve in the future and most expect it to, but few had any idea about how to go about influencing that

improvement. They know, in theory, that they have to learn new skills, but have no faith that they can – no faith in their own capacity or, crucially, that of the learning providers they have come in contact with. We may describe them as disaffected or disengaged but in fact they are making reasonable decisions based on experience. The only way to counter that experience is to provide the highest quality learning opportunities that will give them:

- support to build confidence in their ability to learn
- good guidance, advice and encouragement, which is free and accessible
- opportunities for progression
- financial arrangements which recognise that they are adults with commitments and responsibilities
- childcare support
- ongoing, consistent personal support which encourages, cajoles and helps to problem solve.

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