

GROUNDING HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE COMMUNITY: THE CASE OF WATERFORD WOMEN'S CENTRE & WATERFORD INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

In 2004, a group of women engaged in a developmental educational programme in the Waterford Women's Centre (WWC) sought educational progression that would maintain a particular way of learning and teaching. WWC had been involved in the design of the Higher Certificate in Community Education and Development with the Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) in 1996, and requested permission to deliver the course in a new partnership arrangement. In this article **Eleanor D'alton, Mary Fenton, Helen Maher and Maeve O'Grady** chart the evolution of the learning partnership between WWC and WIT, evaluate this innovative partnership and summarise the key findings of research undertaken to evaluate the course from the perspective of the main stakeholders. These stakeholders included course participants, lecturers, the co-ordinator, WWC management and steering committee and WIT's academic staff.

The authors highlight good practice in this learning partnership whilst also taking cognisance of the key recommendations to enhance the delivery, operations and management of the Higher Certificate in Community Education and Development and to formalise the relationship between WIT and WWC. Moreover, the article identifies opportunities for the partnership to be extended internationally in tandem with Tanzanian Women's groups, partners of WWC. It informs both the community and higher education sectors of how effective and sustainable learning partnerships can be created, nurtured and sustained.

Introduction: From going round in circles to finding a way forward

This relationship between the Waterford Women's Centre and Waterford Institute of Technology began in 1995 with the question: how were community activists, engaged in personal and community development work in disadvantaged areas in the region, to gain a qualification that would reflect the work and values of the sector?

The question of access to qualifications had been identified in Mary B. Kelly's (1994) research that showed the problem for women of exclusion from higher education opportunities. The research showed that women engaged in voluntary community work could not afford or were not in a position to leave

their families and take up full-time places in higher education, yet these same women availed of community-based training because it was accessible although it offered no certification. This situation came to a head in the early 1990s as development funding for anti-poverty work became available to disadvantaged communities. The activists who organised groups and submitted funding applications were then rejected for the paid community work jobs that were created, because the jobs went to applicants with academically-recognised qualifications. To add insult to injury, these same voluntary workers were expected to train the newly employed graduates. The wider contemporary context to this marginalisation is considered in the next section.

The development of women's groups

The contemporary development of women's groups in the Republic of Ireland originates in the 1980s, a time of social upheaval where reactions to calls for greater independence and equality for women were met with a backlash of misogynistic referenda and legislation. Linda Connolly (2003) tells the story of the women's liberation movement in the Republic, and Tom Inglis (1994) considered the 'rupture' that motivated many women to form support groups and plan their development through a learning-approach. The motto 'no crèche, no class' began to be heard in the movement for adult daytime education.

By the 1990s, the Department of Social Welfare was providing small grants to locally-based women's groups, enabling them to identify their training needs and pay for programmes and childcare. Community education gradually became established as the accessible means for women's development work. 'Community', according to Powell and Geoghegan (2004), serves as a catch-all concept because it encompasses many different meanings. In addition, the connection with the Department's Scheme of Grants meant that women who could not afford course fees could join consciousness-raising groups. For the first time, access to feminist ideas became more democratic. Community development projects and programmes were created that addressed the needs of less-privileged women.

In 1995, there was a call for applications to the European Social Fund's New Opportunities for Women (NOW) programme. This programme specifically aimed to increase the numbers of women accessing training, education and employment opportunities. A network of women's groups in the south-east region of Ireland identified an area of common concern – the lack of

access to qualifications. They formed a partnership with the Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT), formerly known as Waterford Regional Technical College ('the College'), as the higher education provider to design and deliver a National Certificate in Community Education and Development for voluntary activists.

Formation stage: Genesis of a partnership

The network had researched all available qualifications in higher education in the Republic, and barriers of time, travel or methodology existed in all cases. The target group of women needed an opportunity to study on a part-time basis, and combine study with their community work and family life. The established practice at that time in the Republic required a student to be able to put the rest of their life aside and concentrate on academic study, while working-class women were not in a position to do that because the opportunity cost of pursuing higher education in this manner was far too high. A pathway to third-level qualifications had to be found that could reflect a working-class woman's life.

The Waterford Institute of Technology was one of the first Irish third-level institutions to establish an academic Department of Adult and Continuing Education to cater to the needs of mature learners accessing third-level education. The Department interpreted the mandate of the College to meet the needs of employers by creating courses that qualified workers for new forms of employment. It provided adult learners with access to courses they needed to study: its Educational Development Centre, for example, pioneered a foundation course for adult learners, a training course for tutors of adults, and piloted the first Adult Educational Guidance Service in the Republic. The Department's work with adults resulted in its taking a leading role amongst the Colleges in developing mechanisms for the Recognition of Prior (and Experiential) Learning (APL). The Department's courses were designed in a modular framework, years ahead of the developments in the National Qualifications Framework. The Department had established a reputation for creating access routes for adults, which had the added benefit of being a local programme.

The theoretical framework for community education and development work characteristic of the members in the network is feminism and Freirean praxis, of the type described in Brid Connolly's (2008) *Adult Learning in Groups*. Personal and group development is facilitated through critical discussions, reflecting Freire's *conscientization* (1972). The personal and the

political are linked, and an analysis of power is central. There is a sceptical view of the state and its enterprises, with the 'who benefits' question being brought to any new experience. Relationships of trust are not assumed; they need to be created over time.

In 1995, the College was requested to consult with the community sector as an employer, and with the network as the key partner to design a National Certificate in Community Education and Development. The course was submitted to the National Council for Educational Awards and approved, along with a follow-on year for a National Diploma. These awards under the new National Qualifications Framework are now offered as a Higher Certificate and an Ordinary Degree, respectively. A follow-on Honours Degree was designed and delivered in recent years, as funds became available. The result of this partnership was the development of a suite of accredited courses in Community Education and Development which would enhance opportunities for community activists and volunteers, particularly women, accessing employment within their community.

The network of women's groups, currently known as the ACCESS 2000 NOW Project, targeted and supported voluntary women activists' applications for the course, and provided additional support for mentoring. The women who applied were confident community workers, but were not necessarily confident about their academic skills. The Department was willing to work with tutors recommended by the Project and support them in learning and implementing the assessment processes.

The first independent evaluation of the course (Blackmore & Heynen, 1998) described the learning that benefited three parties: the students, the Project, and the College. The learning garnered informally and non-formally was integrated within formal processes, through negotiation, compromise and agreement. By the time the first National Certificate in Community Education and Development course had been completed, all of the students had achieved paid employment which helped to build the reputation of the course.

The ACCESS 2000 NOW Project retained its relationship with WIT and the course, sometimes as a very active partner with Project workers as students on the follow-on stages of the course, and at other times simply inputting on changes or new directions for the course. Since the graduation of the first cohort, WIT has appointed a co-ordinator and lecturers to the course which enabled many community groups to avail of the course in their own

locality. Research carried out in 2003 established that 163 students had completed full courses, and an additional 53 had studied in modules from the courses in Waterford but mostly in outreach centres located in Wexford, Carlow, Kilkenny, Tipperary, Westmeath, Portlaoise, Newbridge and Nenagh. A total of nine locations were used in addition to the College campus, enabling people in Wexford, Westmeath, Roscommon, Laois/Offaly and Kildare to participate. These outreach centres were all areas without a third-level institution offering educational progression by ACCS (accumulation of credits and certification system) mode and follow-on certificates and diplomas (Deane, Lally & O'Grady, 2003).

Stabilising stage: After the pilot project

In 2000, the ACCESS 2000 Project came to the end of its NOW Project. From the ashes of this phase rose two separate organisations: ACCESS 2000 Wexford, and Waterford Women's Centre. Both focused on early engagement and personal and community development courses for women marginalised by a range of structural factors. As two of the few organisations able to offer childcare support, they have grown in order to meet the demand for supportive courses for women. These courses are funded by the Department of Social and Family Affairs and FÁS, the State training agency, and the course providers are core-funded by (the soon-to-be dismantled) Community Development Programme from the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.

This type of feminist group work practice was recognised by the Department of Education and Science in its White Paper on Lifelong Learning (2000) for its specifically ideological nature and its ability to engage marginalised communities and adults who lack the confidence to participate in formal adult learning opportunities. The ability to participate in community-based courses builds confidence; however, confidence to engage in further and higher education requires an even bigger step in personal development.

WWC is located in close proximity to WIT's College Street campus. Some of its voluntary members and staff have either been lecturers in or graduates of (or both) the Department of Adult and Continuing Education in the Institute. Many participants in a pre-development course in the Women's Centre expressed a strong interest in undertaking further study. However, many participants did not feel ready to take the next step toward taking the modules of the course being offered in the Institute, although they were interested in

enrolling for the Higher Certificate in Community Education and Development in the Women's Centre.

The notion of being able to take more responsibility for the running of the course had to be seriously considered by WWC and the Centre decided to apply to the Department of Adult and Continuing Education for permission to manage, co-ordinate and deliver the course within WWC. The Centre had amassed a considerable amount of expertise in different areas: understanding the needs of women's groups, and understanding the rigours of academic coursework, assessment and co-ordination. They were able to put their expertise to the test in early 2004 when a group of women from WIT, who had already participated in a developmental educational programme delivered by WWC, began seeking an educational progression to higher education that would maintain this particular way of learning and teaching. WWC requested WIT to be given the autonomy to deliver the Higher Certificate in Community Education and Development course to women. In September 2004, WWC began the first WWC-based delivery of the Higher Certificate in Community Education and Development to a group of women who had experienced multiple barriers and obstacles to participation in education and training. Some 30 per cent of the course participants left full-time education after primary school (most of them aged over 40 years) and a further 55 per cent lacked upper second-level education. As a group, they were up until this point educationally disadvantaged.

Evaluation of partnership 2004-2007

The Higher Certificate in Community Education and Development was delivered by WWC from 2004 to 2007 inclusive with the first cohort of women graduating in October 2007. Anecdotally, the delivery of the course appeared to be successful; however, both WWC and WIT were anxious to conduct an independent evaluation of the course. In June 2008, an independent evaluator was appointed to evaluate the delivery of the course and to examine the following:

- The participants' overall learning experience;
- The flexibility and user-friendliness of the course approach and delivery;
- The modules and subject matter covered in terms of their relevance to participants' community work practice;
- The modes of assessment used;

- The lecturers' overall learning experience;
- The experiences of the course co-ordinator;
- Quality assurance issues;
- Outreach and pre-development requirements; and
- Feedback from the participants and course facilitators regarding the relationship between WWC and WIT; the level of service from WIT's School of Education and Professional Development and its Community Education Section; and access to WIT student services such as the library.

The evaluation highlighted good practice in the innovative, sensitive and women-friendly delivery of the course. Moreover, it identified how WWC had succeeded in providing a pathway to a third-level qualification for the women by:

- Adapting the delivery of the course to meet the needs of the women;
- Creating the space and a safe learning environment for women to engage with new knowledge;
- Acknowledging the lived experience of the women;
- Facilitating the women to find their voice and allow them to be heard;
- Adopting an integrated approach to the course delivery;
- Developing creative assessment strategies which are real to the women; and
- Integrating the learning into everyday community work of the women.

The evaluation concluded that WWC consistently demonstrated an openness to innovative approaches to course delivery and assessment methods. In addition, WWC placed a strong emphasis on the process of shared and collective learning as a key feature of the course facilitation. Consequently, participants felt that they had benefitted considerably from the group-based mutual learning and shared experiences. The delivery methods also created an environment in which there was a reduction in the distinctions between the 'teacher' and the 'taught'. Given the participatory nature of the learning, the emphasis was on drawing from participants' own knowledge and experience, which in turn had the effect of creating a shared learning space, considered a facilitated style of education rather than the traditional teacher/student relationship. The evaluator stressed the importance of engendering a supportive learning environment and culture which values collective and interdependent learning rather than independent and sometimes competitive learning.

The course delivery was very learner-centred with a focus on building the capacity of participants to take ownership for their own learning. It was evident that the approach was both consultative and democratic from the learners' perspective. The modes of assessment were innovative and creative, and they helped to develop a broad range of skills. Reflecting on the overall course, a lecturer noted that:

“The participants got skills: new academic skills, powerful recognition and validation through the assessment process; submitting and getting a mark is a transformative experience for someone who doesn't have that confidence and they worked and earned those marks. They got a framework for their experiences and in terms of the most significant impact it was hearing what the quietest person had to say, when a person has not had that opportunity and then they get it, it is the one that has most impact on me when I see it”.

In general, the partnership between WIT and WWC was a partnership of equals which helped to support the innovative practices. This partnership was based on trust, mutual respect and shared experience of working together since 1996.

Performing stage: Formalising the relationship

Notwithstanding the many positive features of the WIT and WWC learning partnership, the evaluator strongly recommended that the relationship needed to be formalised. To this end, both WWC and WIT developed and signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in spring 2009, which outlines the main duties, responsibilities and expectations of both organisations with regard to the delivery and management of the Higher Certificate in Community Education and Development. The MOU states that WIT is responsible for the academic management of the course, in consultation with WWC, including: curriculum development; agreement of assessment criteria; the appointment of an external examiner; and the overall academic quality assurance of the Higher Certificate. WWC is responsible for the overall operations and day-to-day management of the course including: recruiting students; appointing and paying for a course co-ordinator to administer the course; appointing lecturers; and identifying the training needs of lecturers.

Both WIT and WWC meet once per semester as a part of a course board, which is comprised of WIT's Head of Department of Adult and

Continuing Education, the WWC steering group and facilitators of the Higher Certificate in Community Education and Development. A co-ordinator reports on students' progress and feedback from the lecturers and provides a written annual report highlighting the key issues of the course during the academic year which is forwarded to the Academic Council.

The MOU has succeeded in articulating the roles and responsibilities of both WWC and WIT and thus served to strengthen their ongoing relationship. A second cohort is currently pursuing the Higher Certificate in Community Education and Development in the Womens' Centre and this group is benefitting from the lessons learned from the first delivery of the course. In a recent programmatic review of the Department of Adult and Continuing Education (November 2009), WWC took a leading role in informing the redesign of syllabi and assessment for the course. This proves that WWC is playing a key role in informing course design and that there is a real dialogue and symbiosis between both WIT and WWC with both partners working together to enhance the course.

Conclusion

WWC's delivery of the Higher Certificate in Community Education and Development is based on a model of community education that is transformative in its approach. It is reflective of the characteristics of women's community education (Healy as cited by WERRC, 2001) with the following indicators:

- A woman-centred agenda;
- Community development principles and processes;
- Grounded in and attracting participation in community development;
- Identifying and exploring community needs;
- Promoting a sense of community identity;
- Providing opportunities for social inclusion;
- Contributing to building organisational capacity; and
- Strengthening solidarity networks.

With its sensitivity to the needs of the women and creativity in the course delivery, WWC has succeeded in providing a real pathway to higher education for women who traditionally did not engage with higher education.

The Higher Certificate in Community Education and Development has supported participants to become effective community development practitioners; this is reinforced by the fact that many of the participants are now working in the community and voluntary sector. It is also evident that the success of the course is based on the approach that was undertaken by the WWC and the fact that this approach was supported and facilitated by WIT's Department of Adult and Continuing Education.

Both WWC and WIT believe that such a partnership model is widely applicable, particularly in developing leadership in marginalised communities and challenging inequality in education and enhancing access to third-level. This model recognises the positive impact of locating the learning experience in a non-institutional environment and within a culture and ethos that critically reflects on the barriers to participation and works to remove these barriers. Through its links with a women's project, WWC is currently investigating the feasibility of delivering the course in Tanzania.

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