



Student Transitions: Example of transitions practice

Title:

A 'Champion' model for widening access and supporting transitions into informal and formal learning

Transition(s) the practice supports:

Widening participation, supporting student transitions from informal to formal learning, working with third sector partners to engage with potential learners.

Abstract:

The Open University in Scotland works in partnership with a range of organisations that share its commitment to increase learning opportunities for all and to widen access to higher education. The Open Learning Champions model takes the approach of building on an existing relationship, such as between a carer and their support worker, to enable 'new learning in familiar spaces' for people who may not otherwise consider learning opportunities. Open Learning Champions make flexible use of the Open University's free, open educational resources (OERs) to meet the needs of learners in diverse settings. Their role will vary according to the Open Learning Champion's work context and their relationship with potential learners.

Description:

The Open Learning Champion (OLC) model is based on the premise that existing relationships can in a positive way to facilitate engagement with OERs. The model builds on previous OUIS widening access initiatives, and was initially developed by OU Wales in 2012. In Scotland, the model was been piloted with carers' organisations during April to October 2015 and is now being rolled out to other partners, including other third sector and community learning organisations, libraries, trade unions and colleges.

OLCs introduce learners to OERs and support them to navigate pathways through a range of informal and formal study options. Essential to the model is an OLC workshop facilitated by Open University in Scotland staff, where OLCs are introduced to OERs available from the Open University via its public OpenLearn platform. The workshop supports OLCs in developing their skills at navigating OpenLearn and facilitating learners in familiar environments.

The OLC model has been demonstrated to improve learner motivation, resilience and completion rates. In a recent pilot, OLCs facilitated groups of learners to work through reflection-based OERs, using a blended approach of group sessions and self-directed online learning.

Contextualised reflection OERs can be a gentle entry point into new learning, for example, using the Caring Counts in the Workplace OER for carers, or the Reflecting on Transitions OER with new migrants and refugees. Reflection can help learners identify skills and qualities gained from experience, articulate the value of these experiences in different contexts, and use the knowledge gained from the process to explore what they may want to do next. All of the learners who participated in the pilot evaluation reported positive outcomes, and intended to continue their learning journeys.

OLCs make use of the Open Pathways to Higher Education resource which is designed to help OLCs and learners navigate the OERs available on OpenLearn and plan transitions from informal into formal learning. The resource pack includes three subject pathways, a learner guide and a learning log. It can also include an accompanying Guide for OLCs. Therefore the pack can be used by learners, with support from their OLC, to explore the OERs available, to delve deeper into the subjects that interest them, progress to longer badged courses and reflection courses, and look ahead to formal learning opportunities.

With the assistance of the OLC, Open Pathways to Higher Education can be a gentle and engaging introduction to learning for people who have been out of education for some time, or who may not consider themselves 'learners'. The work of the OLC, then, is to facilitate at a local, face-to-face level, a range of widening access activities designed to boost confidence and upskill learners who are not ready for formal study or are unsure of the pathway they would like to take through HE, as well as working with enrolled learners to develop their study skills. In the pilot evaluation OLCs are already reporting a discernible 'ripple effect' emerging from these activities, influencing colleagues and other practitioners in their area of work, reaching well beyond the limits of the initial cohorts of OLCs and learners.

The OLC Model in practice

The OLC model and resources have been used in different ways in different contexts. Two examples are outlined below.

1. Glasgow Association for Mental Health (GAMH)

A number of GAMH staff have participated in OLC workshops and as OLCs are now engaging a range of learners with OERs, including volunteers, carers and people with mental health issues. Volunteers have been introduced to OERs so they can use them with the people they mentor. As a result of OLC activity, a number of GAMH carers and staff participated in a massive online open course (MOOC) on FutureLearn related to caring for people with mental health issues.

"I supervise volunteers so open learning presents a positive opportunity for learning and development. The volunteers support carers on a 1-1 basis with a

focus on wellbeing. In this way volunteers can pass information about adult learning on to the people they are mentoring”

(*OLC, Glasgow*)

2. *South Lanarkshire College*

Teaching staff from the Faculty of Care became the first college-based open learning champions, having participated in a tailored workshop. The college runs an eight week ‘Gateway to Social Care’ course for adult returners who have been out of the workforce, and education, for some time. The OLCs saw the value of contextualised reflection for these students, some of whom had caring roles. They also explored badged open courses such as Succeed with Learning and Succeed in the Workplace; resources relevant to the social care curriculum, such as dementia; and core skills, such as communication. They have since introduced their students to OpenLearn.

OLCs are proving to be a valuable mechanism for bringing possible pathways into higher education into sight for a range of difficult to reach learners and for easing the transition into study for these learners by providing crucial support and guidance in spaces familiar to the learner. This model of champions working with learners in familiar settings, supported through OUIS workshops and materials, places a strong emphasis on partnership and facilitates more tailored pathways into informal and formal learning opportunities for people hitherto disengaged from formal learning and HE study.

Useful Resources and links:

[Open Pathways to Higher Education](#)
[Guide for Open Learning Champions](#)
[OpenLearn Guide \(course\)](#)
[Badged Open Courses](#)

Contact details:

Gill Ryan (Learning Partnerships Officer, Learning Development Team, Open University in Scotland)
gill.ryan@open.ac.uk