Student Transitions: Example of transitions practice

Title:
Co-creating Reflection Open Educational Resources to support transitions

**Transition(s) the practice supports**:
Widening participation, supporting student transitions from informal or 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. We work with a range of learning partners, focusing on individuals who may not normally aspire to higher education and who can experience multiple challenges to widening access. Through these partnerships, we have co-created a series of reflection-focused Open Educational Resources, all with the capacity to be contextualised to specific learner experiences.

Description:

The Open University in Scotland (OUiS) is dedicated to widening access to higher education by working collaboratively across sectors to facilitate transitions from informal to formal learning, and by developing open educational practices to support the use of online Open Educational Resources (OERs). We work with a range of partners to focus particularly on individuals who may not normally aspire to higher education and who can experience multiple challenges regarding access. Through these partnerships, we have co-created a series of reflection-focused OERs, all with the capacity to be contextualised to specific learner experiences.These OERs have evolved from a generic self-reflection and planning tool (The Reflection Toolkit, 2012*)* to more targeted interventions aimed at supporting the transition into informal and then formal learning among new migrants and refugees (Reflecting on Transitions, 2013*)* and Carers (Caring Counts, 2014 and Caring Counts in the Workplace, 2015*).*
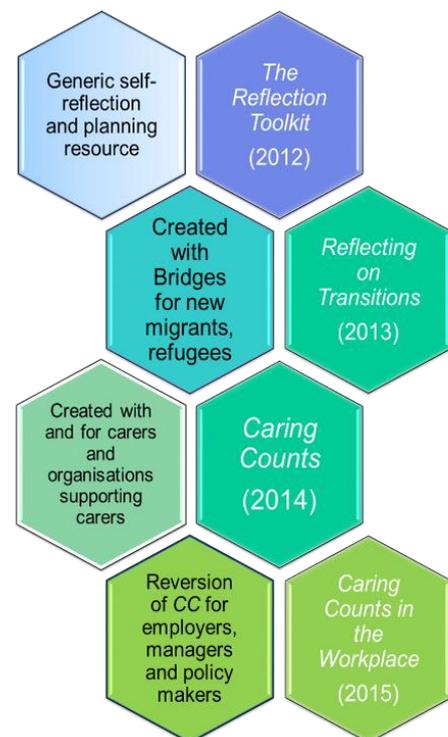
Why reflection?

Reflection is a way of focusing on the experiences and attributes of learners, with the aim of fostering confidence and a sense of purpose alongside the generation of new knowledge and understanding. Contextualised reflection can help learners identify the skills and qualities they have gained from their life and work experience, and aid them in developing ways of articulating these competencies and knowledge in a range of different contexts.

The original Reflection Toolkit was based on a case study approach, using a mixture of personal reflection, ideas about how we learn from reflection, and activities to support that learning. The toolkit comprised five short sessions and promoted the use of a Reflection Log to capture thoughts, ideas and evidence of learning generated through the process. The Reflection on Transitions, Caring Counts and Caring Counts in the Workplace courses were all developed from this starting point through collaborative work with third-sector partners. Each of these OERs is freely available through the OpenLearn Works platform and can be taken as a course or used by individuals or groups led by a facilitator. In what follows, we focus on the Caring Counts resource to outline the features and benefits of this approach to support transitions into informal and formal higher education, thereby widening participation, through the use of OERs.

Caring Counts: a self-reflection and planning course for carers

Carers engaging with Caring Counts gain a clearer understanding of themselves and their caring role through the process of contextualised reflection. Using a case study approach, based on the real experiences and caring roles of a diversity of carers, learners work towards recognising the range of skills and qualities they have developed from caring. Through their engagement with this OER, they also begin to look forward and plan their next steps into new learning, whether that is continuing their journey sideways into new areas within informal education for personal and work-related reasons, or into formal learning in higher education, or re-entering employment and developing skills while working. The role of the OER is to provide a gateway back into learning for carers, a foundation and springboard for learning, a mechanism for supporting transitions.

Case study

Lesley is a parent carer who gave up work to care. She participated in the creation of Caring Counts by working through the Reflection Toolkit and sharing her reflections with the team developing the OER.

> **"I think you definitely lose confidence if you have to give up a career, for whatever reason. You lose your sense of identity and worth. Being a carer can be isolating too. Not working has a huge impact financially. Reflection helps you realise your potential which can get lost in our caring role."**
>
> *Lesley*

On completing Caring Counts, Lesley undertook an OU Openings (Access) module. From there she decided to enrol part-time with the University of the West of Scotland on a business studies degree. In addition to continuing her studies, Lesley has recently been appointed non-executive director of NHS Dumfries and Galloway.

Caring Counts was developed with and for carers, in partnership with carers' centres in Dumfries, East Dunbartonshire and Renfrewshire and with the Scottish Young Carers Alliance. It is now being used by carers' centres and other third-sector organisations around Scotland to support carers, particularly those at a transition point in their caring role, such as young adult carers, parent carers considering returning to employment, and former carers.

Learners can work through the OER online, at their own pace, whenever they are able to make time for learning. The most successful approach, in terms of learner outcomes and completion rates, has been the Open Learning Champions model. This involves a trusted person, such as a carer support worker, facilitating the learner's or group of learners' engagement with the OER.

What we've learned

A blended approach of self-directed learning (on and offline) with regular group meetings is an effective way to deliver these kinds of reflection-orientated OERs. Peer support and facilitation increases motivation and completion rates. The flexibility of reflection OERs is an advantage for carers and other learners who may not consider themselves ready for formal study or be able to commit to fixed study times.

> *"Anything that encourages people and gives them opportunities and gives them an insight into what's out there I think is really important. We are limited in what we can do. Online courses like this I feel are a real benefit to carers and other people as well"*
>
> *(Open Learning Champion, Dumfries and Galloway)*

There is clear value in using OERs to support transitions into informal and formal higher education. As the Caring Counts example illustrates, these flexible, responsive and adaptable approaches to engaging hard to reach learners have the potential to play an important role in widening access and making the transition into higher education smoother and more supportive. Co-creating these OERs is important too because it allows HEIs to draw on the wealth of experience and knowledge held by practitioners and professionals in other sectors in developing more meaningful interventions to engage learners throughout society in higher education.

Links to Reflection OERs:

Caring Counts
Reflecting on Transitions
The Reflection Toolkit

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