

PARTNERSHIP IN PRACTICE

Wendy Teall

discusses a partnership between education and healthcare, which led to the setting up of a successful college access course for students with mental health needs

I am a visual artist and educator, who is employed by Manchester Mental Health Partnership to work at START Studios, an arts centre for people recovering from a period of mental ill health. My colleagues and I form a team whose aim is to help students build sufficient skills, knowledge and confidence to return to work or to formal education. We design and run training and education programmes in the visual arts.



There are many motivated, talented and intelligent students on the training programmes at START. They have achieved great things - securing exhibitions at major galleries in Manchester, selling artwork, gaining commissions - and their work is of a high standard. Yet when these students were encouraged to move on into formal art education, many of them failed. This was a puzzle to me, as I knew from experience that colleges cater successfully for many forms of learning difficulty. However, when I came to undertake research on this subject, through interviews with our students, and with staff at local education centres, I realised that college staff showed patchy awareness of mental health issues and a lack of coherence in responding to student need in this area. My research showed that our students were struggling due to lack of study support, unsuitable recruitment practices, inappropriate delivery styles in the classroom, and tutor-failure to recognise their particular learning needs. Obviously change was needed, but we, as a Mental Health Service, could not achieve this alone. We needed a partner.

Beginning the partnership

Working with my manager, I made contact with Manchester Adult Education Services (MAES), who were keen to listen to the problems our students outlined, and willing to discuss solutions. The first step our new partnership took, after discussion, was to implement a training programme for staff in Manchester Adult Education Services, regarding the needs of students with mental illness. This was well-attended, and was useful because it highlighted the anxieties most tutors felt around mental health issues. Importantly, it showed that tutors need support just as much as their students.

Secondly, we decided that we would design and pilot our own course, which we hoped

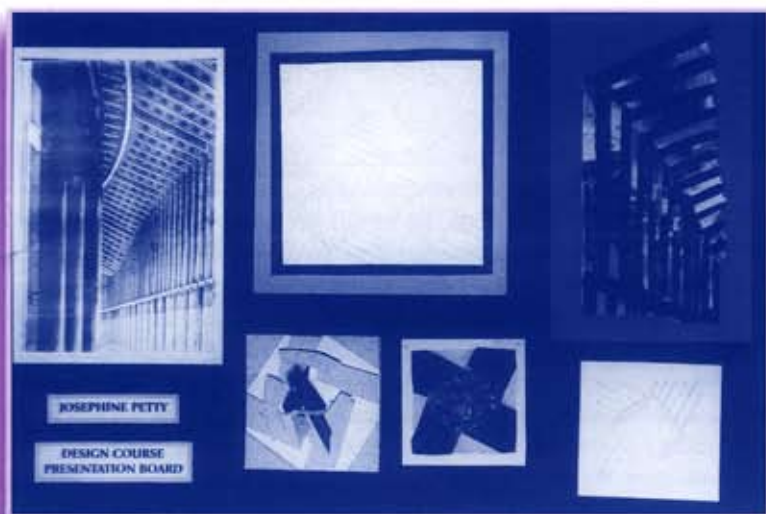
would act as an access course into formal education for our students at START. This course would be tailored to meet the specific needs of our student group in content, pace, delivery style and learning materials. Most importantly, the course would be delivered on a college site, and would be co-taught by an Adult Education tutor and a tutor from START Studios. This would provide plenty of support for students both inside and outside the classroom, as they could access their START tutor between their college lessons. The tutors would also provide support for each other, helping to monitor the course and respond to students' needs as they arose.

Deciding what to teach

The subject we chose for the course was an Introduction to Design. Students at START study a wide variety of art skills. In START's studio sessions they are able to become technically competent and knowledgeable, but the ability-mix in the groups and the busy schedule in the studios do not allow tutors to teach much in the way of design skills. My research showed that this was a significant handicap to students when they entered formal art education, as their lack of design know-how prevented them from being as self-reliant as other students who had progressed through 'normal' educational channels (A levels, etc.). A course in design would not only begin to address this problem, but would also be generic enough to suit all START students.

Setting the goals

When we established the design course, Carol and I discussed our criteria for success. We were ambitious. We aimed at a retention of two thirds of our students. We wanted to provide a positive experience of college learning, and to enable students to obtain an objective measure of their skills as compared to other students, by gaining a nationally recognised accreditation. We hoped to effect observable changes to our students' confidence and knowledge, and help them prove to themselves that college could be a viable choice for their future. Most of all, we wanted to change our students' attitudes and perceptions - to themselves, to their work, and to the work of



others.

To accompany these goals, MAES and START workers had identified some further points to do with the establishment of successful partnership working practices. We wanted to see the opening of a dialogue between our two organisations, a cross-fertilisation of ideas, an understanding of opportunities and constraints within each partner organisation which would lead to improved working practices on both sides.

Planning and running the course

The planning for the design course was thorough. Carol Mowl, the MAES tutor, and I produced a detailed scheme of work with aims and objectives. We wrote all the course materials, producing worksheets and samples for each section of the course. We designed tools to monitor and evaluate the course and measure student progress. We also arranged to accredit the course through the Greater Manchester Open College Network.

The course ran over a period of 14 weeks, and began with an introduction to the building blocks of design - colour, line, shape, composition, texture, pattern and tone. Following this, students pursued a personal design project. This challenged them to apply the foundation skills they had covered earlier, and also to learn further skills such as selectivity, simplification and abstraction. Finally, the students were shown how to present their work, which they exhibited in the end-of-year City and Guilds art shows

at the Adult Education Centre.

Regarding delivery of the course, Carol and I decided to introduce students to new teaching methods gradually. As a familiar face, I led the first part of the course, with Carol in a supporting role. As the course progressed, and students became comfortable in their new setting, Carol took over the lead, and I became the support. This worked successfully, and students adjusted well to the change.

The big gamble

The design course had a challenging curriculum. It set high standards from the outset, and it was a gamble to aim, as we did, for its content and pace to match the students' level of potential rather than their level of known ability. We could only attempt this because of the support structures which we built into the course. As START's Manager, Morag Musk explains: 'By setting our standards high we took a calculated risk. If you raise the expectations you hold for people, they will aspire to meet them, and this is what happened to START's students on the design course. The key was to set up the right context of support along the way, so that we could challenge our students to move beyond the shelter of START without removing their safety net.'

And how the gamble paid off! Students on the design course made great leaps forward in their skills and knowledge, particularly in their ability to understand, integrate and apply design

theories to their studio practices. They began to use art language more freely, both within the course and in the studio, and became more articulate about describing their working practices during group critiques. Their work became increasingly unified and confident, their thinking more independent. By the end of the course, students had grown familiar with the difficult conceptual task of extracting and developing original ideas from source material, a vital skill for the designer-maker if s/he is to be a self-reliant worker.

Attitudes shifted along with abilities. Students' self-perceptions began to change. They increasingly saw and referred to themselves as students, and became relaxed around the college venue. They noted their enjoyment - unexpected for many - of being part of a conventional class, all moving forward at the same pace; they mentioned the companionship they derived from this situation. Another surprising success was the homework - students found themselves commenting on their enjoyment of working at home, liking the way that the homework assignments caused their artwork to become more integrated into their everyday lives.

Other perceptions shifted too. Many students were amazed at how much they began to enjoy the challenge of the course's abstract design projects, and discovered that new doors were opening for them regarding their understanding and enjoyment of abstract works by other artists as well. Most said they viewed the visual world differently since doing the course, seeing potential in situations where before they had seen none. Some students began to use a sketchbook and camera when out and about, for the first time, and gained confidence to use these original sketches in their studio sessions.

In the end, eight out of our nine students graduated from the design course with a Greater Manchester Open College Network accreditation. They have now gone on to further studies, taking the City and Guilds Core Module 'Preparing Working Designs', with which they find they are coping with little additional support.

For us, the tutors, the design course felt like a great success. It wasn't plain sailing: difficulties

arose due to students struggling to adapt to change, and time constraints were a constant problem. However, the experience of co-teaching was a tremendous source of support, and enabled Carol and I to deliver the course to a high standard. This in turn allowed the students to achieve their potential as learners.

The different teaching skills we brought to the partnership - my experience in a mental health setting, Carol's expertise in the delivery of design skills - proved to be complementary, and this skill-mix formed the cornerstone of the course.

Managers from both partnership organisations were, and continue to be, delighted with the experience of working together. Both sides are keen to progress the links, both are convinced of the benefits of skills-sharing, both see the need to support and train their staff in order to widen student participation in these supported programmes of learning. Glenda Cox, MAES Curriculum Manager for Arts and Health comments: 'The overall standards achieved by this partnership are very high - you simply do not come across this quality of work very often. We are keen to develop the links further and hope to do a lot more with START in the future.'

The shape of things to come

This course lies at the end of a lengthy period of research and planning. It also lies at the beginning of a new partnership between MAES and START. At its heart is the mutual belief that partnership working is the best way to make real and lasting changes to institutional practices which have excluded people with mental health needs from pursuing educational opportunities. The experience of working together has given both organisations insight into the stumbling blocks that have prevented the development of appropriate provision in the past. Now we have the chance to make changes. The formula piloted in the design course partnership is full of potential. We aim to make it the shape of things to come.

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