In the same breath: learning, adults with an intellectual disability and the partner assisted learning system

Judy Buckingham
Doctoral candidate
Deakin University

Since adults with an intellectual disability are accessing not only adult education but the workforce and recreation centres as part of government policies towards greater inclusion, it should be in the interest of educators and workplace trainers to understand more about this particular impairment and its impact on learning. This article considers both intellectual disability, and learning and then describes how these concepts were used to develop the Partner Assisted Learning System – this being the end product of a three year research and development project instigated by Deakin University and Gawith Villa Inc to look for ways to incorporate participatory learning into the everyday experiences of people with an intellectual disability in adult education, recreation and the workplace.

On the ground, in the hundreds of community education centres and TAFE colleges around Australia, adults with an intellectual disability attend classes, and their learning is of great importance and discussed at length. Yet within much of academia, it sometimes seems that "learning" and "adults with an intellectual disability" are not phrases used in the same breath. It has been claimed, in fact, that that adult education has yet to develop theoretical frameworks around adults with an intellectual disability (Riddell, Baron, & Wilson, 1999). Yet people with an intellectual disability do learn. Because theirs is a learning impairment this learning may be slow, and it may be very slow. It may take place in very, very small increments, but there is evidence that the "vast majority of students with an intellectual disability" (Van Kraayenoord, Elkins, Palmer, & Rickards, 2001:450) can and do learn even such an abstract skill as literacy, given the right teaching and learning conditions and the motivation (Bach, 1990; Bochner, Outhred, & Pieterse, 2001; Moni & Jobling, 2000; Van Kraayenoord *et al.*, 2001; Young, Moni, Jobling, & Van Kraayenoord, 2004; Ziebarth & Van Kraayenoord, 2000).

Since adults with an intellectual disability are accessing not only adult education but the workforce and recreation centres as part of government policies towards greater inclusion (Department of Human Services, 2002), it should be in the interest of educators and workplace trainers to understand more about this particular impairment and its impact on learning. I want to consider in this article both intellectual disability, and learning and then to describe how these concepts were used to develop the Partner Assisted Learning System – this being the end product of a three year research and development project instigated by Deakin University and Gawith Villa to look for ways to incorporate participatory learning into the everyday experiences of people with an intellectual disability in adult education, recreation and the workplace.

Intellectual Disability

I intend to start with a discussion of what we mean by intellectual disability since this is not as straightforward as it might seem. The World Health Organisation definition states that it is:

> ...a condition of arrested or incomplete development of the mind, which is especially characterised by impairment of skills manifested during the developmental period, skills which contribute to the overall level of intelligence, i.e. cognitive, language, motor, and social abilities. Retardation can occur with or without other mental or physical condition (World Health Organisation, 1992, cited in Wen,1997:9).

The Victorian Department of Human Services definition which determines whether or not a person has an intellectual disability for the purposes of receiving services under the Intellectually Disabled Persons' Service Act 1986 states that a person with an intellectual disability has significantly below average intelligence (an Intelligence Quota (IQ) of about 70 or less) plus shortcomings in everyday life skills: such as self care and communication, which are inadequate compared with other people of the same age and culture (Department of Human Services, 1999). Such a reductionist definition might be considered questionable. Bogdan and Taylor suggest, for instance, that intellectual disability is a social construct (Bogdan, 1995; Bogdan & Taylor, 1976; Taylor, 1995; Taylor & Bogdan, 1989). While this is valuable, since it positions people with a disability politically, economically and socially within mainstream society, and places the responsibility for their being marginalised with the community, it may also sideline the very real impact the impairment can have on the day to day lives on people with an intellectual disability, whatever their environment.

IQ tests purportedly measure intelligence. Even though there seems to be some doubt as what exactly this intelligence is that is being measured (Brody, 2000; Sternberg, 2000), as Brody points out it has

been shown to be a prediction of performance in academic settings. Therefore IQ is a measure of potential learning ability and those with a low IQ can be said to have a "learning" disability. This distinction, I think, is important when considering adult education and disability because since the impairment is so directly connected with learning, it cannot in, learning contexts, always be subsumed with disability in general. This conflicts with the social model of disability which prefers not to divide the group in terms of medical conditions, functional limitation, or severity of impairment (Oliver, 1999). Nevertheless as Baron *et al.* state (citing Christie (1922)) the reality of cognitive impairment needs to be accepted (Baron, Riddell, & Wilkinson, 1998). In learning contexts this reality means that a person with an intellectual impairment is likely to pick up information more slowly; there is sometimes a reduced memory capacity and a short term memory span; and conceptualisation may be difficult (Jenkinson, 1984).

Slowness in information processing, memory and attention spans may be addressed by strategies of timing, rehearsal and task analysis. But the difficulties with abstraction have more implications, I think, than simply needing to present material in a concrete and immediate fashion.

Firstly, learning is change (Barber & Goldbart, 1998; Falk, 1992; Sidorkin, 2002). Although a dislike of change is not peculiar to people with an intellectual disability, research undertaken in the development of the Partner Assisted Learning System showed that people with an intellectual disability often seem particularly resistant to change, and that this could be because change is itself an abstract concept. Therefore, people who have difficulty conceptualising the differences that change may bring are likely to mistrust it. Another aspect is that they may have had previous bad experiences of change. To learn therefore, it is necessary to create a climate in which change can be trusted.

Secondly, learning requires a self belief in ability to learn. Again, research in developing Partner Assisted Learning showed that some adults with an intellectual disability had been persuaded by family (and sometimes teachers) that they were not able to learn. They therefore conceived themselves as non learners. Jenkins (1996) posits self identity as being initially that which is reflected by others, but which is then changed through a process of reflexivity. Because of the nature of the impairment and the difficulties posed by the abstract nature of reflexivity for people with an intellectual disability, it would be reasonable to suppose that for people with this particular impairment, they would be more reliant on the reflection of others in establishing their concepts of self identity. Learning for people with an intellectual disability therefore requires that they are reassured of their ability to learn by someone they trust. To extend this further, learning requires a relationship.

Learning and relationships

The concept of relationships in learning is not new. Earlier educational theorists such as Piaget and Vygotsky posited that learning is socially based and therefore requires social interaction and this concept has remained as a core of socio-cognitive learning (D. W. Johnson & Johnson, 1975; McNally, 1973; Salmon, 1980; Sidorkin, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 2000). There has been substantial research undertaken within the framework set by Carl Rogers on the positive effect of relationship and feelings on student learning and behaviour (Neville, 2004). Similarly emancipatory education which relies on dialogue and reflection also depends on such interactions (Foley, 1996; Freire, 1972; Shor & Freire, 1987). In other words, there is considerable evidence to suggest that learning relies on a relationship between teacher and taught – even more so when the teaching/taught boundaries become indistinct.

Collaborative learning is not a new idea either. This is the broad term used to cover learning in which two or more learn together

within a structured curriculum. Emphasis is placed on social and goal interdependence (that is, participants have an interest in the social development and the achievement of the learning goal both by themselves as individuals but also for each of the other members of the team) and reciprocity between peers. It has been successfully used with groups and pairs of primary school aged children including those in which one member has an intellectual disability (D. W. Johnson & Johnson, 1975; R. T. Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Putnam, Rynders, Johnson, & Johnson, 1989; Sapon-Shevin, Ayres, & Duncan, 1994; Stainback & Stainback, 1994) and with adults (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999).

Collaborative learning is based on a combination of the cognitive development theories of Piaget and Vygotsky and behavioural learning theories (D. W. Johnson & Johnson, 1975). Vygotsky (1978), for instance, proposed that knowledge is social and that mental accomplishments originate in social relationships. His theory of the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD) asserted that when a learner collaborates with a more capable peer, his/her development is greater than that which he/she can achieve on their own. That is, a 3–5 year old may be able to do what a 5–7 year old can do if it is done collaboratively. Running alongside this, are those learning theories which espouse dialogue and reflection as the mainstay of cognitive learning (such as Brookfield & Preskill, 1999; Freire, 1974; Shor & Freire, 1987; Sidorkin, 2002; Wells, 2000). It was within these perceptions of the need for relationships in learning, especially where a learner had an intellectual disability; the ideas behind collaborative learning, and the efficacy of dialogue and reflection in learning that Partner-Assisted Learning was conceived.

Partner Assisted Learning

In 1996, the Open University in conjunction with Mencap and People First (London Borough) developed a learning package *Learning Disability: Working as Equal People* (usually referred to as *Equal*

People) which encouraged people with and without an intellectual disability to work and learn together (Fairchild & Walmsley, 1996). In the year 2001, a project managed by Gawith Villa Inc and Deakin University, in association with a number of community organisations, was funded by ANZ Trusts to develop a learning package based on *Equal People*. This would be appropriate for the Australian community and would retain the partnership component but would also be applicable for use within paid employment, recreational and educational contexts. The project's goal was to create a learning package for adult partners learning together when one partner may have an intellectual disability – the Partner Assisted Learning System. The package would aim for recognised learning for both partners, connections between partners, and both partners gaining skills, confidence and pathways to education or work. The essential components of the package were to be learning and relationships.

As well as a literature review, we (that is myself, as researcher; my co-researcher who had an intellectual disability; and a Reference Group, half of whom also had disabilities) conducted research in the field over three contexts where it was considered adults with an intellectual disability might be learning: adult community education, recreation and the workplace. Thirteen pairs of learning partners, one of whom had a disability were observed and interviewed. Another 25 people who had long term involvement in teaching and/or managing people with a disability in learning environments and 10 organisations in which learning was taking place were also involved in the investigation part of the research. This looked at good teaching and learning practices, what people wanted and needed to learn, how people formed relationships and what were the barriers to learning and relationships. From the data collected a prototype set of learning modules was developed. These were then action researched with four small focus groups of pairs of people with and without a disability and finally tested with five learning organisations, both generic and disability specific, across all three contexts. Toolkits to

support learning modules, once created, were also critically reviewed by a number of disability practitioners, academics and people with a disability.

Space does not allow for a full account of all research findings, but the following paragraphs give an outline of a few of the most important to the package. The research confirmed the place of relationships in learning. Lack of confidence in learning was cited as a major barrier to learning. Also confirmed was the need for on going dialogue, review and assisting in the process of reflection as a teaching strategy. There was a concern amongst most of those interviewed that learning partners, either as teacher/student or co-learners should understand what and how to learn, and that both should explore their own and each others' learning styles. There was almost universal support for curriculum which could encompass social skills, and not only for people with a disability. Many non disabled people have difficulties, it seems, in being able to facilitate social introductions, to help those they support to fit into the general culture of a community setting or to help them negotiate the support they might need in a generic setting. It was people's lack of access to such social skills which was identified across all three contexts as being one of the biggest barriers to inclusion.

The Partner Assisted Learning System is a set of learning modules and learning materials; it includes tool kits which are support materials for both management and co learners and which cover aspects of disability and support, plus basic teaching strategies and good practices; accreditation guidelines (since the competencies gained fit within GCEA General Curriculum Options); and further information on the literature and research processes. The modules cover those areas that research showed those with and without a disability felt it was important to learn:

- *Learning Together* is an introductory session for partners to get to know each other, their learning styles and about learning;

- *Making Friends* shows partners how to look at different kinds of friendship and suggests ways of introduction into social groups;
- *Being Safe* lets partners discuss what it means to be safe, safety issues pertinent to partners themselves and emergency procedures;
- *Fitting In* assists partners to look at ways of fitting into the cultures of workplaces, recreational and other community groups;
- *Looking Out for Each Other* gives partners some basic self advocacy and advocacy strategies and promotes discussion on rights and responsibilities;
- *Getting Out and Joining In* assists partners to work out ways to research, enrol and undertake a community activity at the same time as making sure they have the support they need;
- *Meeting Together* assists partners to support each other to attend and contribute to meetings.

Partners are expected to work cooperatively through the modules using a process which involves dialogue and reflection and which allocates each partner interdependent roles at a pace which suits both of them.

Not just learning materials

The important point about Partner Assisted Learning is that it is a process, not just a set of learning materials: it requires that a relationship be developed between the partners. However the nature of the partners can vary. They may be one non disabled person such as a friend, a co-worker, a volunteer, or support person working with a person with an intellectual or other disability; or they can be two people both of whom have a disability. There is a requirement, however, for one person to have basic literacy skills, even though wording and concepts have been kept as simple and easy to read as possible.

Some of the ways that this package can be used beyond conventional teaching structures include the induction of people or volunteers who have not before experienced working with people with a disability; induction of people with a disability into new environments such as the work place; the integration of people with a disability into non disability specific community activities; the involvement of people with a disability into planning and governance. One innovative use already implemented has been to assist small groups of people with a disability along with non disabled people to work together to produce an organisational Code of Practice using the *Looking Out for Each Other* module.

Further information

More information about Partner-Assisted Learning can be found on the website: www.pal.org.au; or by contacting Gawith Villa, PO Box 234, Armadale, 3143; or by ringing (03) 95094266.

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About the author

Judy Buckingham *has been the researcher and project officer for the Partner Assisted Learning System for the past three years. The processes involved in the development of the resulting learning package, which were undertaken collaboratively with people with an intellectual disability, formed the basis for her PhD thesis* Towards Inclusion *which is currently under examination.*

Contact details

Postal address: Gawith Villa Inc, PO Box 234, Armadale, Victoria, 3143
Telephone: (03) 9251 7390   Mobile: 0438 502220
Email: judy.buckingham@deakin.edu au