

***ESB Endorsement – it can be a “wobbly” experience***

**Geoff Wykurz**

I led the MA in Community Development (MACD) from 1996 until Claudette took it over and I became Head of Department in 2004. I left the University last year and now work in a freelance capacity, but securing ESB endorsement was one of my most satisfying achievements during my time at Westminster. **[title slide]**

I'm going to give you some background to the ESB's endorsement of the MA in Community Development, after which Claudette will bring the story of the MACD up to date.

At the time of the ESB endorsement the MACD was struggling with its status. I felt uncomfortable with a course that had 'academic' credentials, as it did not feel to me sufficiently grounded and linked into the wider field of community work practice.

I've often reflected on the comment from a colleague when I first took on the job of course leader. When I told him that I'd just taken on the role to lead the 'MA in Community Development' – he remarked: *'That's a contradiction in terms isn't it?'*

From that I guess he implied that creating a higher academic qualification for community work risked making it an elitist 'profession' – making it 'exclusive' rather than 'inclusive' – denying access rather than opening it up – debates with which I am sure you are all very familiar.

My priority as a course leader of a postgraduate community work course was to facilitate access for people engaged in community work to provide an opportunity to engage with others who wanted to explore theory and reflect upon and debate issues relevant to community work practice.

The course had consistently attracted community workers who wanted to study part-time. They were already engaged in community development work in a variety of settings, so by joining the course they had the opportunity to meet with others who shared a common desire to take time out from their work to reflect on their practice.

To access the MACD people did not have to have a prior qualification, but they had to demonstrate significant experience of community work practice and provide evidence that they could work at a postgraduate level.

This was positive, but it meant that they may not have a wide range of community work experience and some had been working in the same job or with the same groups for several years. I wanted to re-create in some way the learning opportunities I had enjoyed through a variety of placements on my own community work course.

How could this be developed on a part-time postgraduate course?

### **Learning through experience [slide 2]**

The challenge was to re-configure the course in tune with the principles of '**experiential learning**' and '**reflective practice**' – indicative of a **transformative approach** – it's about effecting change and breaking people out of their comfort zones to prompt new learning.

Placing learning in an '**international context**' was also important – encouraging local and global connections

I believe that these are crucial components of community development practice and learning.

### **The Reflective Cycle [slide 3]**

I guess you can sum up the underlying principles and design of the course in this one diagram:

**Community workers are 'do-ers'** we get 'stuck in' and work with people to effect change:  
The focus is on 'action' – we move from action to action with no time to think.

The MACD tries to break that pattern and offers a new mode of working and learning - enhancing learning to inform action.

### ***Moving through the cycle***

Consequently, instead of moving from action to action, the linear direction is broken to encourage a reflective cycle, beginning with 'observation' of past practice , followed by 'analysis' of the context drawing upon appropriate tools that may include concepts, models, theory and the experience of others. These steps may prompt the collection of new information from literature or conversation with people who are seen as sources that would assist in reviewing past action and preparing for the next stage of 'planning' the next steps before re-engaging in 'action'.

The whole course and its individual components, the modules, were designed to reflect this model and create a series of iterative cycles.

To offer new experiential learning within the course, to complement the students work experience, and prompt reflection on practice three new modules were introduced - each with an experiential, practical component to challenge assumptions and stimulate new learning:

### **Learning through experience [slide 4]**

- **Community Work Principles & Practice**
  - exploring identity, difference and anti-oppressive practice
- **Power & Empowerment**
  - interviewing people
- **International Perspectives on Practice**
  - comparing practice with a 'counterpart' in another country

The MACD had been reshaped to support community work practice more effectively.

By definition it had academic status, but it lacked formal recognition from the field of community work.

Having worked with Rooney Martin in the early days of the 'London Community Work Training Group' when the Federation was but a twinkle in her eye, I was eager to seek endorsement from the England Standard Board.

Believe it or not academics are busy people, just like community workers on the ground, buzzing around like blue-tail flies – so despite intentions, it took a while to initiate the process. To get some momentum going I invited a formal visit even before we had submitted our application for endorsement.

### **ESB Endorsement [slide 5]**

**2002 – The Visit** – the Reporter met students and colleagues and her report indicated that she liked what she heard **[slides 6 and 7]**

“The level of reflection was sophisticated, and encouragement to develop this skill was one of the aspects of the course that students seemed to particularly appreciate. For example, when asked how relevant the course was to their work, one student replied “It’s relevant to my life!”.

This student went on to describe how use of a learning journal had made her feel “wobbly” at work because she had started to question all her interactions with users and workers, particularly in terms of power and how she used her own power. It had been like starting afresh and had profoundly affected her practice.”

But it wasn't until 2004 that we made time to prepare our submission – by this time Claudette had been appointed following my promotion to Head of Department. We worked together to craft the documents required.

After due consideration we received initial endorsement, but only for one year.

But there was a condition.

## **ESB Condition [slide 8]**

‘The quality of participants’ Community Development Work practice prior to entry and during the programme should be assessed using the National Occupational Standards as a basis.’

It was suggested that, ‘this could be undertaken by participants and/or with others involved with the programme or their community development work’.

*Quotations from ESB letter August 2004*

Despite what you might think, although we were a University course we weren’t keen to ‘assess’ applicants and students.

## **Response to ESB [slide 9]**

We wanted to meet the condition by enhancing student’s ownership of their own learning, so we came up with some ideas that we felt would meet the ESB’s concerns, which would also be consistent with both community development principles and adult learning.

We suggested a framework and a process that would encourage applicants and students to give considered reflection on what they wanted to get out of the course and reflect on how they could use the opportunity to develop knowledge, understanding and skills to enhance their practice as a community development worker.

There were three components:

- **Pre-course reflective questionnaire**

We created a form for applicants to complete based on the six key roles of the National Occupational Standards

- **Learning Agreement**

Once accepted onto the course, students had to draft a ‘learning agreement’ spelling out what competencies they wished to develop and how they planned to achieve them through specific modules and the integration of their experience in their work

- **Portfolio with guidelines**

During the course they would be expected to keep a portfolio of 'evidence' that would include their course assignments, complemented by other material from their community work practice.

It would be the completion of the portfolio that would demonstrate that they met the competencies they had focussed on.

I am pleased to say that the ESB liked what we proposed.

### **ESB Endorsement [slide 10]**

They were 'really impressed'

We secured five year endorsement.

Since then the course has continued to grow from strength to strength under the able leadership of Claudette Carr to whom I now handover to tell you about current developments on the MACD.

*Thank you*