

Reinterpreting the LearnDirect Model to Achieve Successful Communities of Practice

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For many students, the specific requirements of their cultural background can serve as a barrier to realising their learning potential. In such cases, the distance to an educational establishment may be more a cultural than geographical mile. Technology may, for some, be the only way to travel this mile, and thus enable learning to take place where once it might have not.

This poster reports on the findings of an initial pilot study undertaken as part of a larger research project. It focuses on a group of Asian Muslim women in East Manchester studying online using learndirect materials in the Awaaz centre. The poster looks at how the learndirect model – which aims to widen participation through the use of information and communications technology, (ICT) (Blunkett, 2000, DfEE, 1998, FEFC, 1999, NILTA, 2001) has been reinterpreted here. The cultural voices of this particular community have been loud enough to engender a change from the centralised, prescriptive model for individualistic, independent learning proposed by the government. This change has been positive, and the increasing numbers attending the centre attest to this. The research conducted for this study is based on observation data collected over a period of weeks exploring the practicalities of how the students engage with e-learning.

The government has implemented a number of schemes to augment the use of ICT to widen participation, (Hramiak, A.J., 2001a). Current research findings suggest that the results of these strategies are not wholly positive, (Gorard and Selwyn, 1999) even though increasing amounts of money is being used (Morris, E., 2001). There is also evidence to that the problems faced by women in relation to access to ICT are different and cannot be overcome through ICT alone (PAT15, 1999, 2000). The research on which this poster is based specifically focuses on the experiences of Muslim women of Asian decent who are students at the centre, and builds on previous work done in this field (Hramiak, 2001b).

The Ufl model is one that flies in the face of all learning theories that argue for learning through and with others, and through the creation of communities of practice. (Garrison, 1997, Tiffin, 1995, Wilson, 2001). It is also a model that has to work alongside the need to meet regional and local requirements. The Awaaz centre is in itself a community of practice in which the learndirect model is being reinterpreted to meet local needs, as the observation data collected illustrates. The practicalities of e-learning as experienced by the learners in this study, reflect a need for collaborative, socially constructive, experiential learning, and not, as intended by learndirect, for individual, independent study. This poster will argue that this should be assisted, rather than hindered, with the drive for a central model.

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