The RETRO Project

In this era of lifelong learning, there is great scope for learners to realise their academic potential in educational environments geared to supporting them. It is important, however, to acknowledge that there are significant challenges posed by mainstreaming diversity in the classroom. The pedagogical challenges are universally acknowledged, but there are also personal challenges involved in managing the complicated interpersonal relationships that now exist in the average classroom full of adult learners. The traditional 'classroom' has evolved to include learners who differ in terms of social classes, ethnicity, nationality, age, gender and ability. Little regard has been given to the personal challenge of managing the relationships between the educator and the learners, and between the learners themselves.

In 2009, a group of educators from five different European countries (Ireland, Finland, Greece, Lithuania and Poland) came together to consider the challenges involved in managing relationships in teaching situations which are characterised by diversity.

The partners of the project were:

1. Limerick Institute of Technology – a third level higher education college in Ireland (www.lit.ie).

2. Adult Education Centre of South Karelia - a non formal liberal adult education institution in Finland (www.ekko.fi).

3. Hellenic Adult Education Association - an scientific non-profit association in Greece (www.adulteduc.gr).

4. Siauliai State College – a third level higher education college in Lithuania (www.svako.lt).

5. The Fullness-of-Life Academy Association - a non formal adult education institution in Poland (www.apz.org.pl).

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Aims of the project

The main aim of the RETRO (Relational Elements of the Teaching Role) project is to support the development of reflective practice in adult education. Having acknowledged the personal challenges educators experience when trying to manage the relational elements involved in teaching groups comprising older people, disadvantaged people, migrants, people with disabilities, people with different levels of academic ability, as well as mainstream learners, the project aimed to assist educators in identifying the supports – personal, interpersonal and organisational – which could be mobilised to help the educator to be more confident and at ease in this complex environment. We wished to identify actual, practical strategies which educators could use to help them in managing the relational elements of the teaching role.

Development of the Strategies

The process was a developmental and consultative one. We wished to garner the opinions of both educators and learners engaged in adult education, and to devise meaningful, practical strategies which could help them address the challenges they encountered. The same procedure was followed in each of the partner institutions.

1. Focus groups of educators and adult learners were convened in each institution. The aim of the focus groups was to discover the experiences and needs of the participants with regard to managing the relationships involved in teaching and learning. Thematic analysis of the focus group results identified key issues in the management of this relational element of the educational experience.

2. Using case studies reflective of typical situations identified by educators and learners, potential strategies for best practice were developed. A compendium of innovative approaches to managing relationships in adult education was created.

3. The proposed strategies were implemented by educators in each of the partner institutions. The educators maintained a record of their experience in implementing their chosen strategy. Suggestions for improvement were incorporated into the development of the final set of strategies.

4. The electronic manual, detailing innovative strategies for managing relationships in adult education settings, was compiled and disseminated among the adult teachers by means of an electronic link on the website of each of the partner institutions.

Key Issues

Regardless of experience, all educators were concerned with:

1. The quality of the learner's classroom experience.

2. Their relationship with the learners.

3. Their ability to maintain authority while facilitating deep learning.

Educators seized the opportunity to share their experiences and, often for the first time, to articulate their concerns, which included:

▪ Establishing a professional identity with learners, and having one's knowledge and experience respected. This was a particular concern of younger educators when dealing with older learners, particularly if they were coming in from industry.

▪ Lack of confidence in dealing with certain students or groups of students, particularly those perceived as uncooperative or highly critical. Educators mentioned feeling embarrassed and even afraid of certain students who could be sarcastic or dismissive of their opinions in front of the rest of the class.

▪ Lack of confidence in dealing with students from unfamiliar backgrounds. Not everyone has experience of meeting, professionally or otherwise, people from other nationalities, or people with disabilities. Participants spoke about being uncertain how to communicate with certain groups. They were also anxious about offending people through lack of knowledge about cultural norms, or lack of information about the learning support needs of certain students. The phrase 'thrown in at the deep end' was used to describe their experiences.

▪ Feeling anxious about having to teach large groups of learners. This was a particular concern for educators who were unaccustomed to teaching large groups and were more comfortable in small class situations. They reported feeling vulnerable, nervous, and

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afraid of being challenged and embarrassed in front of a large number of students. This discomfort did not stem from lack of confidence in their own command of their subject matter, but simply being overwhelmed at the task of engaging with so many learners at once. This often led to loss of confidence in their teaching style and ability.

▪ Feeling pressurised by learners forming 'cliques' in the classroom, and expressing reluctance to work with learners outside their own group. Educators spoke of wanting to facilitate learners' integration into the class, but experiencing resistance because of shyness or general unwillingness on the part of the learners. Managing this resistance, which could in some cases lead to outright conflict, was a real challenge for educators.

▪ Successfully managing the classroom situation is often challenging. Dealing with disruption of classes by late arrivals, noise from conversations in the classroom, people texting on mobile phones can pose a challenge which, if the educator is unsuccessful, can lead to reluctance to go into the class, or resentment against the perpetrators. Other such challenges include dealing with interruptions to the lesson – e.g. mature learners monopolising the educator's time by constantly asking questions or commenting from personal experience - and losing the attention of other learners in the process.

▪ Feeling worried about dealing with ideological conflicts in a group situation. Fear of offending learners because of cultural norms or religious beliefs can lead to uncertainty and insecurity, and avoidance of certain issues or people.

▪ Feeling a sense of loneliness and isolation because of the solitary nature of the role. Needing support from peers and management.

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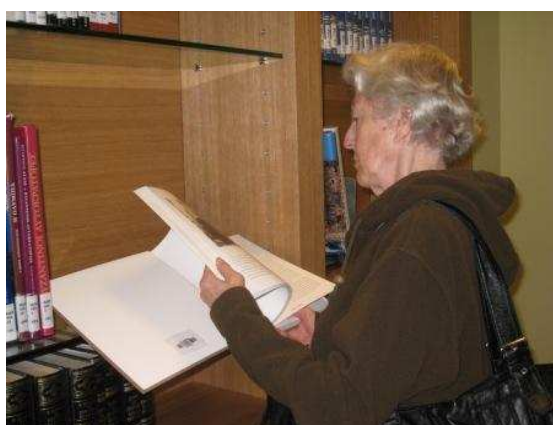
Educators expressed keen concern in relation to supporting the learners to have a good and meaningful experience of education. However, there are challenges to this endeavour, including:

- Enabling learners to share their knowledge and experience, worries, concerns and expectations both in private consultation and in the classroom situation, without fear of embarrassment or ridicule from other students. Enabling open and sincere communication between a teacher and a student on topics that are related to studies. This can involve keen awareness of the boundaries between the professional role of teacher and the personal relationship with the student.

- Increasing learner engagement and enjoyment and thereby increasing their motivation. Wanting learners to experience membership of an enjoyable and supportive peer group of learners. Educators felt responsible for bringing about a sense of group cohesion, but were often uncertain of whether their efforts were successful.

- Facilitating achievement of the main goal of the studies – the acquisition of theoretical and practical knowledge. Educators wanted to try to foster a sense of trust in the learner in their teacher's competence. However, dealing with the difference in learning styles between learners can be a personal challenge, particularly if their learning style differs from the educator's. Similarly, dealing with learners that are slow to engage in the learning process can be a source of frustration and even irritation.

- Dealing with learners' stereotypes and expectations regarding the teachers' role. Mature learners usually approach education informed by their previous experience of a didactic process. Engaging in discussion, self-directed learning, group work and peer-facilitated learning can be a culture shock and not every learner is willing to embrace new methodologies. This can lead to conflict between the learner and the educator.

- Establishing a functional contract with learners, so that acceptable norms of behaviour could be articulated, based on mutual respect and tolerance.

Strategies for managing relationships in adult education

The following strategies were identified as particularly helpful in addressing the above concerns. In particular, they seek to reduce ambivalence about the respective roles of the educator and learner, increase the confidence of the educator within the educational setting, foster an atmosphere of mutual respect and tolerance and facilitate the use of the reflective approach to the teaching and learning experience.

- Establish the rules of engagement from the outset. This involves setting out expectations for respectful engagement between all the people in the class. These expectations should refer to norms of behaviour, not just in the classroom setting, but applicable to any and all encounters between the educator and the learner, and between learners, whether individually or in groups. At the outset, in consultation with the learners, the educator should take time to make clear what s/he expects in terms of behaviour in the class. Items covered should include punctuality, respectful questioning of opinions, cooperation with the teaching and learning strategy and general respectful interaction. Learners should also be encouraged to articulate their expectations of the educator. These 'rules' should then be agreed between the educator and the learners and referred to throughout the academic year if an issue arises. Rules may be reviewed in terms of their relevance if necessary.

- Become a more reflective practitioner. Identify your values and stereotypes and if necessary take steps to alter your perceptions of yourself and of your learners (Link to Kolb).

- Explain your teaching philosophy and methodology and be ready to change and adapt the methods and tools used. This essentially involves creating a supportive learning environment, where learners are expected to propose alternatives instead of just offering negative criticism.

- Get to know your students – be aware of their needs, possibilities and limitations. Try to get information in advance about the class composition, the age profile, etc. If possible, take the time to ask students in class about their expectations. If it isn't possible to allow everyone to speak about this, ask them to write down briefly what their expectations and concerns are. This can give you insight into how you need to proceed .

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- Establish open channels of communication, where learners are encouraged to express problems openly in the group. Acknowledge that you do not have all the solutions to issues that arise, and seek the opinions and suggestions of the learners.

- Try to implement innovative teaching techniques. At the very least, introduce some innovative approaches. Examine your own teaching and ask yourself whether you always do things the same way. Take risks and try something new. Practical, experiential learning situations - such as field trips, role plays, debates – can fruitfully supplement lecture-based teaching and appeal to a greater variety of learning styles.

- Distribute responsibility for the success of the classroom experience among all the people in the room. Expect learners to take an active part in their own learning. Encourage them to research possible solutions to problems, present their ideas to one another for comment and support each other in projects. In this way, the educator is less likely to feel totally responsible for the success of each class, or to worry about 'performance anxiety'.

- Initiate frequent, focussed in-class discussion. Expect students to question, debate and consider alternative interpretations and responses to problems. Stress that there are alternative solutions that they need to uncover for themselves, rather than expecting you to have all the answers.

- Try humour to diffuse tension. The ability to laugh at oneself, and to identify a humorous element in a situation, can help to place an issue in perspective and facilitate a more open-minded approach to addressing an issue.

- Use the group dynamics as a catalyst for better communication and cooperation within the group. Move people around. Change the membership for small group work from week to week. This enables learners to get to know a wider range of colleagues in the class, encourages the development of collaborative teamwork skills and reduces the risk of certain well-established sub-groups dominating the interaction in the class. This is likely to result in the educator feeling more confident as an authoritative facilitator of learning.

- Speak to individuals about issues arising in class. If individuals consistently express impatience with the learning experience, if they are reluctant to cooperate with your approach and if the group based strategies you employ fail to have an impact, take the

time to have a face-to-face contact with the individual. People often need a simple acknowledgement of their individuality in order to change a resistant attitude.

▪ Acknowledge differences between participants. Acknowledging differences in age, gender, and experience can often prevent such differences becoming an issue. Make an effort to include as many different perspectives as possible in discussions. Acknowledge differences between yourself and your learners.

▪ Seek the support of colleagues in situations where you feel unsure of yourself. This will also involve being frank about difficulties you are experiencing. Often, educators are reluctant to express uncertainty. However, most educators experience threats to their self-confidence and can often offer advice and propose strategies to other colleagues.

▪ Find out the limits of your authority within your organisation. There are times when it is necessary to be very firm about your expectations of learners, and to insist that appropriate norms of behaviour are respected. In these instances, you can increase your confidence if you are very clear about your role and your boundaries.

These strategies were implemented by educators in RETRO partners' organisations. Feedback from the implementation was universally positive. It is very important to remember that these strategies are not necessarily new or revolutionary. They are simple steps that can be taken to increase a person's confidence in managing tensions in the classroom that can stem from diverse experiences and expectations of how learning should take place and teaching should be accomplished. Very often, faced with situations that induce feelings of anxiety, irritation, anger and even fear, we forget that we have options open to us.

Educators' views on the strategy implementation

Here is a selection of responses received from educators after they had implemented strategies of their choice.

Educators were enthusiastic about the outcomes

"I would definitely use this strategy again at the beginning and middle of the academic year, perhaps a brief discussion at the beginning of each academic term, to remind ourselves of what had been agreed."

"This strategy is very useful; it is important for the instructor never to pretend that they are somebody they aren't, and they must always be ready to admit that there is something they don't know. At the same time, the teacher must be a professional in everything they do and they must always seek answers to questions posed by their learners."

"By using this strategy I hope to achieve better relations between me (lecturer) and the students. I don't hope for better grades from the subject, I just want that students would feel correctly assessed".

The effect on learners

Adult students were reported as generally enthusiastic, confident, engaged and cooperative with the strategies employed. . Learners had responded positively to clear boundaries in the classroom situation.

"The students respond to boundaries, especially when they are neither a challenge to me in setting them or to them in complying with them."

A big difference in the social environment (the 'atmosphere') in the classroom was reported.

Learners are*…"Much more open to the process of learning and group participation than simply concentrating on the end result."*

"The Students' reactions to the employment of the technique were very positive. Not only were they glad that the topics they were discussing fit their interests, the materials fit their needs, and the pace of the classes was in line with their needs, but they also felt they had had a part in structuring the course. They felt I had taken them seriously […]"

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Educators' self-perception

Educators reported feeling more confident and happier in their teaching role, as well as being clearer about what it is they are trying to achieve.

"It is easier in some ways to ignore the fact that a minority of the learners are not participating and just carry on. This strategy encourages me to address this issue and acknowledge aspects of the learning relationship that I may otherwise not examine".

Educators also reported having more insight into their own needs and space to decide on a respectful response to challenges. They became more aware of their role.

"Reflecting on the situation has given me more insight into my own needs and space to decide on a respectful response to the situation, where I retain my sense of dignity and the student is confident that the classroom situation is a safe place to express opinions."

"It is very positive in a training process to have space for free expression and an open and tolerant environment for all the trainees. The challenge for the educators is to work with himself, to fight his internal conflicts and to keep on questioning but at the same time accepting his particularities and difficulties"

What is very apparent from the feedback is a shift in educators' attitudes away from feeling frustrated and powerless in some situations, to feeling that they were engaging with students in a respectful and collegiate manner. The collaborative approach has given educators courage to take risks with their teaching style and classroom management. The strategies helped in dealing with personal insecurities and the need to manage the classroom situation. Educators found the strategies easy to understand and apply and became more inventive and innovative as time went on.

"I feel that this is a very effective approach to beginning the "learning journey" together."

As a result of the implementation, educators suggested the following **adaptations**:

1. Believe that you have nothing to lose if you consult with students.

2. Start empathising with 'different' learners from the start – imagine what it must feel like face the challenges they encounter.

3. Foster enthusiasm for your subject and for your role as educator.

4. Give yourself more lead-in time to design/plan appropriately.

5. Get the student/class profile much earlier – to help adjust your program to the needs and goals of your students.

6. Begin the strategy at the start of the year and review periodically.

7. Cooperate with students in teaching process and adopt a helpful attitude to supporting learners.

8. Make time to meet more often with small groups and to engage with individuals.

9. Look for regular feedback from the learners.

10. Cooperate with colleagues.

11. Look for support from your organisation.

In conclusion …

The RETRO partnership wishes to acknowledge the efforts of staff and learners in their institutions to support this process. We acknowledge the complexity of the issues facing educators as you try to teach and to relate meaningfully to your learners. The emotional component of the teaching role needs to be acknowledged as one of its most challenging aspects. We hope that the simple strategies we propose will support your continuous development as an effective and fulfilled educator.