

References

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Managing Transitions

If your job involves supporting learners during transition, or managing programmes for transition, this article will remind you of the range of transitions that learners make in the course of their lives and help focus on practical steps to ease movement between different types of institution.



There are two main senses in which transition will be used in this article. First, it refers to the range of transitions that learners make in the course of their lives. Secondly it focuses on one particular sense in which transition is used, namely movement between types of institution.

The field of education has been informed by a number of models of human development. A number of writers argue that life is a series of age-related stages, each with a series of developmental tasks (Eastmond 1991). These tasks may simply be related to physical maturation, but they are also responses to external societal forces to comply to certain norms and to personal ambitions. According to writers such as Havighurst (1972) developmental tasks must be achieved at or about a certain phase in life if a person is to be judged, or to judge himself, as a competent person. In turn these stages are said to consist of alternating periods of stability and transition. In periods of stability, individuals seek to solidify their life structure, whilst in periods of transition they reflect upon and adapt to new circumstances. These transitions might relate to changes that relate to living arrangements (e.g. moving away from home), personal relationships (starting or ending partnerships), work (starting a new job, being promoted or becoming unemployed) and so on. They might be even more fundamental and refer to biological transitions.

Many such models have been criticised on the basis of being linear and simplistic, and based upon outdated notions of the way in which modern lives are shaped. The notion that life proceeds along a line from school to college to one job for life to retirement, or from dependence within a family to independence to marriage to decrement and new dependence in old age, is clearly not the shape of many of our personal experiences. Furthermore many theories do not take into account the different experiences of men and women or minority ethnic groups in a multi-cultural society. A linear career pattern embedded within a well-defined hierarchical structure and conventional reward systems is perhaps the preserve of relatively few. Rather we may have multiple careers and a number of complex parallel personal and professional roles within which many more transitions are made.

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How does transition relate to education and training?

For many educators, transitions in life are important in explaining why individuals participate in learning. Some researchers see change in life circumstances (e.g. in occupation, family life, leisure style in life, etc) as *the* prime motivator for participation in education and training.



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In terms of education and training, developmental tasks have two fundamental functions, an *instrumental* function where a person uses education to accomplish an external goal (e.g. preparing for an occupation) and an *expressive* function where a goal lies within the act of learning (e.g. becoming a member of a group).

Some theorists speak of *perspective transformation*. It is at times of life crises that individuals gain new insights when they become aware of the contradiction between a current perspective upon life and a reflection upon actual experience. According to the theorist, Jack Mezirow, it is at such times that individuals may explore options for new ways of acting, build confidence in new ways of behaving, plan courses of actions and acquire knowledge in order to implement plans.

Tips for Teaching

Whilst there are many reasons why adults participate in education and training, many do so as a result of being at a point of transition, and many of these transitions are highly traumatic. Whilst it may not be important to know the details of your learners' life experiences, an understanding that these may shape their motivation to learn may allow you to design learning tasks that can capitalise on the positive aspects of transition.

Some adults in transition will often have very particular goals, and learning is often a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Adults therefore may come to institutions already with a substantial degree of self-direction and the role of the educator is one of facilitation, literally pointing individuals in the right direction and providing them with the right resources.

Other adults will find themselves in disorientating positions subsequent to a traumatic transition and whilst education and training provides a potential direction, it also plays an important role in re-establishing confidence and providing support. An educator will need to recognise such situations and recognise that such students may be vulnerable, anxious and lack self-esteem. Whilst teaching approaches should be challenging, they should never be threatening and should be designed to reduce the fears of returning learners and to build their confidence. Equally tutors should maintain a distinction between their intrinsic pastoral and advisory role and the specialist role of a counsellor for which they may not be trained. It is important to recognise the time to pass matters onto a specialist.

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Institutional Transition

The Scottish Executive has put great emphasis in recent years on the building up of credit within and across sectors with the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework acting as the backbone for transfer and accumulation of that credit. Thereby it is hoped that a ladder of learning can be built up between and across different institutions. However we know that many problems can occur when learners make transitions between institutions and between sectors because of lack of management of progression. Problems faced by learners include the following:

- curricular differences across sectors, particularly in relation to structure and content of provision
- the differences in the culture and ethos of types of institutions
- the preparedness of students in particular study skills
- differences in methods of assessment
- the lack of clear progression routes from one sector to another.

Much of the research that has been carried out in this area relates to the transition between Further Education colleges and Higher Education institutions (see Gallacher 2002), but will be found in other sectoral transitions. A number of strategies can be put into place to manage transition and some suggestions follow.

Tips for structuring transition

- at the outset, make learners aware of the opportunities that exist for transfer to other institutions and suggest that they actively investigate the different requirements of the institution that may wish to access
- create bridging courses
- provide integrated cross-institutional support for learners before, during and beyond transfer
- develop collaborative cross-institutional teaching programmes that gradually introduce learners to the new institutions methods and procedures
- explicitly teach for transfer, introducing new forms of delivery and of assessment that will be experience subsequent to transfer
- develop self-sufficiency in learners by giving them the tools to self-diagnose their learning needs, and the ability to learn in different contexts
- appoint staff with responsibility for managing transition