

I want more: Learning at L.A.S.T.
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Introduction:

Lothian Apprenticeship Scheme Trust (L.A.S.T.) was established nearly thirty years ago at the Moray House Institute of Education (now part of the University of Edinburgh), with the first participants beginning their degrees in 1995. An innovative project for its time, it aimed to enable community activists lacking formal educational qualifications, and from predominantly working-class, disabled and minority ethnic communities, to gain a professional qualification in Community Education. Because all participants were simultaneously working, and in order to reinforce the link with employment, they were referred to as apprentices, studying part-time on a 40-week-a-year basis rather than the usual 30. In effect, they were undertaking an accelerated degree whilst at the same time working in their own communities. Nearly three decades later, we set out to explore the long-term impact of this unique programme on a small group of former apprentices.

The initial impetus for these interviews came from contact with Lauren (the daughter of one of the original apprentices who had recently died) as she reflected on the enduring impact of study on her late mother, and subsequently on her own work in widening participation at another 'elite' university. This aroused our curiosity about how other L.A.S.T. apprentices might, with hindsight, evaluate their own experience of the programme. In the end, we managed to interview four former students and Lauren. The questions we put to them are below. This article is developed from their reflections.

What do you think were the benefits and disadvantages for your professional prospects, your personal life and your local community of being part of such a distinct group?
Did the course change your thinking in any way, and how is that reflected in your current life/work?
What was the single most valuable thing you gained from the course?

The historical context of L.A.S.T.

The L.A.S.T. project was funded through the Urban Programme, a specific policy initiative aimed at 'disadvantaged' communities. Participants were offered designated tutorial support as well as funding for travel, books, dependants' care, and disability support. It was hoped that, through this holistic approach, they might become role models who would encourage people from their own communities to consider tertiary education for themselves. In essence, the programme sought to address significant structural barriers to higher education by not requiring traditional entry qualifications, ensuring that the timetable was flexible, and providing extensive financial, learning and personal support.

Research carried out by John Bamber and colleagues (Bamber et al, 1997; Bamber & Tett, 1999; 2000) with the apprentices during their degree identified three broad motives that had attracted them to the course: *intrinsic* (internal goals set by individuals based on personal values and aspirations), *extrinsic* (the material rewards that might follow successful completion of the course), and *political* (the wider significance of their collective situation). For some, *intrinsic* aspirations were focused on making a better, more fulfilling life for themselves and their families: *My life has changed from being a*

lone parent on benefits with pretty low self-esteem ... and the kids can see that it's their mum's education that's achieving this (Bamber & Tett, 2000: 66). An ambition for many was to raise the educational aspirations of their children, though it may come at a personal cost. As one apprentice put it: *If you want people to succeed you have to make sure the structures are in place for them ... it's not equal for people that come with responsibilities for families and children* (Bamber & Tett, 2000: 66) and another: *it's a constant struggle between looking after the kids, work and study* (Bamber & Tett, 1999: 469). In some cases, initial ambitions might have unanticipated consequences that could mean *changing your life...It might mean that you lose friends, family and partners because it can be difficult for them to understand* (Bamber & Tett, 1999: 470).

For others, *extrinsic* material change was their prime motivation, and their focus was on gaining the professional qualification so that they could achieve a better standard of living. It was hoped that, in providing financial and other forms of support, L.A.S.T. might level the professional playing field, at least to some extent. As one said: *instead of looking at community workers and saying I could do that but knowing I can't because ...I couldn't access the qualifications... I now know I can do the job* (op. cit. 70). The intensity of the degree programme could, however, create additional pressures that made it difficult to sustain, from *having no time to potter about in the library and go down different avenues ... [so] you have to focus on the work rather than being able to look at wider issues* (Bamber et al. 1997: 20), to more significant family demands: *it's had a big impact on my family commitments. I can't always be there for them* (Bamber & Tett, 2000: 65).

Despite the many and varied pressures, and because their studies were largely grounded in their working experience, the apprentices gradually became more confident about their abilities: *Before [L.A.S.T.] I knew I had the skills...but now I know that I can achieve things and can compete with the rest of the professionals* (op. cit. 72). One formulated for himself a useful way of rethinking his role: *for me being a professional community education worker is about understanding wider issues and being aware of boundaries as well.* (op. cit. 71). An important aspect of this involved *being able to think through thoroughly why I'm doing a piece of work [so] I can put a proposal in at work and argue my case* (op. cit.).

The wider *political* significance of their collective success was also a strong motivator: *I wasn't going to allow myself to fail ... it really mattered in terms of what L.A.S.T. set out to achieve and I had part responsibility for achieving it as well* (Bamber & Tett, 2000: 67). Ultimately, their own achievements would be assessed in relation to positive outcomes for their communities and their wider social class: *our success should open the gates for people instead of slamming them shut. It proves it can be done* (op. cit. 68); *I bring my experience of being working class and knowing that I have something to offer ... Being working class isn't just about being "deprived"* (Bamber et al. 1997: 24). Many were also conscious of how they might be perceived as role models because, as one put it, *people from my area don't go to university; we're breaking the mould and still being accepted because we're streetwise to what's going on in the area* (Bamber & Tett, 1999: 470). In other words, their activism was validated in a range of productive ways.

By their second year, nearly all the apprentices noted their changing attitudes to knowledge: *now I understand the structures, and I understand why people are in the*

situations that they're in; it's given me a holistic approach to the way I work, and I think that's powerful. (Bamber & Tett, 2000: 70). One apprentice provided particular insight into what this meant for his own practice: *It's about the way that you use theory. Before, I was doing the practice, but I didn't have the theory behind it. It has helped me to plan courses better, to have more structure to them ... I see myself as more of an educator now* (op. cit. 69). These changes, in turn, led to a strong commitment to learning: *No matter how much support you get, financially or whatever, it's not going to enable you to get a degree if you've not got something inside you wanting to do it, wanting to learn and being able to* (op. cit. 27). A growing commitment to the quest for 'really useful knowledge' to enable people to think critically and creatively about themselves and the world around them was summed up by one apprentice: *I enjoy the learning, the reading, and the lectures, the becoming critical about things* (Bamber & Tett, 1999: 473).

Looking back on learning

When the original research was conducted in 1996-7, what wouldn't perhaps have been anticipated was the enduring effect of access to those foundational theoretical frameworks which contextualised and helped to analyse their own experience and the world around them, and informed their practice. In this section, we review the current reflections of our five interviewees on the lasting impact of L.A.S.T.

Establishing reciprocal educational relationships

In retrospect, our interviewees were all positive about the value of the experience that they had brought to the programme and the recognition that this experience was respected by their communities. Joanne stressed the importance of being able to *connect with local people* because she shared the same circumstances, and Sas said *the community was proud of my participation in L.A.S.T. It was considered an acknowledgement of the local community as much as of me*. However, some felt their participation was, initially at least, less valued by the University: *It was talked about as the Schemes degree and we felt that we were classed as underdogs Over time, I think attitudes changed on all sides* (Allan). Jan felt that, *because it was so new and different ... people were just being wary*. In any case, it soon became clear that the apprentices *were capable of holding their own in discussion, challenging, making connections, arguing back. This was also stimulating for the teaching staff and positively affected the educational relationship and dynamic* (Allan).

Reflecting collectively on personal experience

Joanne spoke about how her experience of L.A.S.T. had influenced her children. *It enhanced my experience and confidence and when they saw me doing something, being resilient and strong, it broadened their own horizons*. Sas, who grew up where he worked, saw himself as *a bridge between the kids, the school, their families and communities that linked to the social and political institutions and the wider world*. Others reflected on how their previous attitudes to higher education, which had prevented their participation, had been challenged. *The culture of the time tended to shun folk regarded as academic ... a kind of inverted snobbery: 'Who do you think you are?' My friendship group were all like that* (Allan). Lauren commented that her mum *had imposter syndrome, not having had great experiences at school. She'd never thought about university as an option until the L.A.S.T. programme*. Although they offered different perspectives, they all valued the way L.A.S.T. had enabled them to reflect on their own experience: an asset to their learning, their communities, and the curriculum.

The collective atmosphere of the group gave people the confidence to take risks: *I felt protected because having the same purpose gave us solidarity in working for everybody's success together. It felt like being part of something special* (Joanne). Jan highlighted the confidence the apprentices gained from *having similar backgrounds with masses of practical face-to-face experience... of dealing with real life situations*. This meant that *having both community backing and extra support from lecturers made getting the degree a possibility*. As a result, *L.A.S.T. changed perceptions of higher education for working-class communities: it may be for them after all* (Allan).

Extending knowledge and confidence

The interviewees emphasised the impact of the programme on their wider understanding of the world around them. For example, Joanne said *the course changed everything for me. It made me listen to people's ideas and come up with different ways of doing things*. She found, however, that *this was sometimes an uncomfortable transition from getting on with it to thinking first*. Sas was also initially sceptical: *I couldn't understand a lot of the terminology - didn't see the value of it. I thought "I'm never going to use this". But I realised that during the course I had become more critical. This put my work into a wider context. I was beginning to question and challenge*. Jan also highlighted the value of analytical frameworks: *when we started looking at the theory, it was making sense because what the theorists were saying gave a better understanding of the ways we were working and why we were working that way. I think it also broadened my thinking*. Allan gave an example of how the programme helped him practically: *Sociology was an important discipline for arming community activists with facts and figures (especially through learning how to use the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation for community profiling), confidence in research skills, building arguments and navigating power relationships*.

Developing these unfamiliar forms of knowledge gradually enabled people to question more critically and creatively. For Joanne, discussion of *the idea and reality of community as not always positive ... in its assumptions about belonging, helped to validate my experience of not fitting in and the recognition that as many people may want out of community as want in*. Others found it helped them to work in more confident and authoritative ways. *You know that you're not just saying "this is what should happen", but you're saying, "this is the reason why this should or should not be done". It's having the knowledge to back up what you're saying* (Jan).

Confidence also came from possessing the professional qualification: *it gave me the opportunity and the authority to work alongside, challenge and influence colleagues and practices* (Allan). The challenge of having their own experience contextualised also broadened people's perspectives: *without reference to the bigger picture, you can't turn the wheel of change. I see that professional expertise alongside local knowledge gives authority and legitimacy* (Sas). For Lauren, reflecting on her mother's experience enabled her to understand the importance of education: *Seeing my mum throw herself into her studies and how it changed her practice, how she became so reflective and deliberate, cemented in me the understanding that education is the vehicle for making change*.

Connecting theory and practice

Although gaining theoretical knowledge was of central importance, it also needed to result in action, or praxis; *to speak up and to place our experience in reaction to others. It prepared us for challenging authority* (Joanne). It also gave apprentices the confidence to analyse and challenge policy, which resulted in *a wider perception of the possibilities and problems for young people, and a more critical understanding of the purposes of youth work* (Sas). Jan's view was that *the course made [her] a better worker and gave [her] the confidence to be able to challenge the powers that be*. Allan's reflections perhaps offer a useful summary of the mutual benefits of L.A.S.T. for the participants, their communities, and the university: *I thought of L.A.S.T. as offering both a personal and a collective benefit: there were communal benefits for me and others in my community. The knowledge gained helped to improve the quality of campaigning, for example. I also thought the presence of working-class students' experience would positively influence university education and vice versa.* (Allan)

For Joanne, however, the intensity and stimulation of the degree also had its challenges: *I had a lot to contend with: a job, kids, house etc. that left me with very little time. Inevitably, perhaps, the end of the course left her, like others, with a huge sense of loss ...massive stimulation then nothing. The course bred solidarity and we all felt lost without it.* Lauren wondered whether the very intensity of L.A.S.T. resulted in *a very instrumental view of the benefits of university education. To my mum, university was primarily about passing assignments - not the social side - and she treated it as if it was a job. She couldn't understand why I would want to get involved in student life.* On the other hand, she acknowledged that her own LGBTQ activism was directly related to her mum's conviction *that community is the place in which you make change. In spite of all her own difficulties she always insisted on people having their own voice and that led to my own growth.*

Similarly, Allan found that *activism and education fed each other, keeping [him] animated, invested and interested*, while Sas said that he *took more risks in his work: I see myself as a bridge between the kids, the school, their families and communities ... [and] try to be more strategic in advocating for young people.* He also reflected that, while *the course encouraged you to get into your own mind, the challenge is how to stay in your own mind in an increasingly difficult financial context.* All the interviewees not only felt sustained by their own thirst for knowledge, they wanted to share it: *if you've got knowledge, share that with people so they can gain experience* (Jan). Allan echoed this sentiment, and spoke of *the joys and stimulation of learning new things: even though I'm retired from full-time work, I'm still learning and researching all the time and developing new and re-invigorating interests.*

Lasting learning

These retrospective insights from former students raise profound questions about the nature and purpose of higher education, particularly in professionally-accredited courses such as Community Education. This course has historically been characterised by the productive dynamic between professional and academic demands, frameworks and qualifications. In the case of L.A.S.T. this relationship was distinctively problematised, enriched and extended by the circumstances of these students. The curriculum was framed around what might be called the dialectics of community - the ways in which 'community' embodies tensions between the personal and political, individual and society, agency and structure - and how these inform the relationship

between theory and practice. We believe that the inevitable intensity of their engagement heightened these students' attentiveness in ways which proved to be both reflexive and reflective. Immersed in their communities as they were, the L.A.S.T. students were inevitably focused initially on their own experience and that of those around them, as suggested by their responses. Smail (1993) usefully argues that 'those factors which affect us most are often the most difficult to see in our own lives', encouraging what he calls the cultivation of 'outsight' as well as the more familiar concept of 'insight'. A reasonable expectation of higher education is that it will engage, challenge and extend the frames of reference students bring with them, stimulating and resourcing both outsight and insight. It is clear from these students' reflections 30 years on that such perspectives not only stimulated them during the course but that they have sustained and provoked them intellectually ever since. In an increasingly challenging policy context, such frameworks retain their critical significance.

Finally, as teachers on the L.A.S.T. programme, this venture has been a stimulating experience for us. It has reinforced our commitment to the necessary difficulty of higher education and its contribution to informing professional practice, but it has also reminded us of the necessity of engaging with professional practice in a critical and creative way. What stood out for us in the interviews, above all else perhaps, was that these students from non-traditional educational backgrounds (and underestimated intellectual ability!) actually relished the kind of theoretical understanding and insight that enabled them to locate and engage actively with their own and each others' experience, and the world at large. This broader understanding, in turn, informed their practice. With hindsight, we are reminded that this enthusiasm also informed our own practice as teachers, becoming a joint project of praxis: reflection and action in support of purposeful and progressive social change. In the words of one of the respondents: *I want more. Here, here!*

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