

## Connexions - Mind the Gap!

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We can worry too much about what the Government is trying to do through Connexions. Thinking about what we can achieve through it is more promising.

Connexions links a range of human resources to the needs of learners: team members include social-, welfare-, youth- and voluntary-workers together with teachers. Furthermore, Connexions uses terms which allow us to face up to the impact of upbringing, early learning, neighbourhood conditions and cultural values. These strategic frameworks for help and diagnosis are new to policy and are promising.

But, in all the reams of DfES material, there are big and significant gaps. For example, there is little of any use on:

- knowing how to work with learners' cultures - their beliefs, values and allegiances;
- responding to the ways in which different learners have, not just different levels, but different kinds of needs;
- linking different needs to the most important feature of Connexions - the variety of its learning resources;
- shaping these resources into a workable programme;
- working out how programme planning must be different in each different neighbourhood;
- seeing how learning from Connexions can be used to help all 14-19 year-olds (and for that matter all 5-105 year-olds);
- appreciating how we may just 'fit' people into what is happening, or how we could enable them to forge their own responses;
- finding the right people for appropriately managing such programmes at neighbourhood level.

I like the gaps. Politicos and their officials should stay away from this sort of stuff. How would they know what to say? But we know. The gaps are our way in; they are where our thinking will make the critical difference.

And there is a lot of new thinking to do.

A driver in recent policy for careers work has been the pre-emption of 'producer capture'. George Bernard Shaw jolted the fear with his jibe - 'all professions are a conspiracy against the laity'. In contemporary talk professions are 'producers', the laity 'users'. Politicos seek to use the expanding apparatus of accountability to protect users from exploitative providers. Educators, social-workers, medicos and IAG (information, advice and guidance) people are among the usual suspects (though, so far, not lawyers or estate agents).

In Connexions, the policy requires that providers attend to what young users say they want. And, more impressively, its APIR framework (Assessment, Planning, Implementation and Review) uses the concept of need as a basis for organising the work.

On the provider side, some of what has been happening can only be characterised as scrambling for resources. We may defend this as protecting user interests; but we can deceive ourselves about that. Unsupportable claims of 'we know best' come into the issue.

Such claims crop up particularly among people who try to help: social-workers are commonly challenged by those who are sure they know better; and, although 'parents-not-admitted' signs have gone, some manifestations of teacher-parent competition persist. Helpers are understandably sensitive about the perceived value of their help. At times this borders on fear. And where the defence is a claim to exclusively superior knowledge (say, about career development), it is a lunge in the direction of producer capture.

We should at least consider the possibility that we - in careers work - are as capable of attempted producer capture as doctors and social workers are.

### Suspicion and consequences

Some social workers and youth workers have their suspicions. Such evidence is patchy and anecdotal; but there are claims of not being understood or valued by IAG people. There are social workers who have said that they find it difficult to gain access to careers-work thought and practice. And some claim that, when they do, much of what they find is old-fashioned and inappropriate.

If such attitudes are at all prevalent, the consequences will be serious. Most seriously, mutual suspicion hampers team building which relies on the ability to explore who is in a position to do what. This ability is essential to any effective local programme.

## POINTS OF DEPARTURE

Current policy displays little understanding of this fact. On the contrary, a drive for a targeted yet universal service strips out ideas of helping specialism. Personal advisers with careers-work experience are being prevented from announcing their specialism. It is easy-enough to argue that 'universal' can mean that any helper must be ready to help any learner; but it is harder to see how 'targeted' can mean that people with a special kind of need will get a special kind of help. That would require a referral service at the universal point of entry, signposting a differentiated map of specialised resources for targeted help.

In extreme form, current policy uses the 'undifferentiated mass' theory of Connexions. It is a black hole where team-building should be. It strips off specialisation.

### Worries about words

Words are important. The terms 'career', 'guidance' and 'Connexions' merit attention.

The word 'Connexions' lacks any well-defined focus for action. It vaguely connotes 'links'. The links refer to connections between what is going on in a person's life on the one hand and his or her life chances on the other. It implies that connections must also be made between the various sources of help that are needed, when what is going on is going badly.

But that is just about all we can get from the term in its present usage. There is little about how these ideas can be made to work. The guidance accompanying APiR is patchy and superficial. It offers few useable ideas about how a diverse range of resources can be linked to a diverse range of needs. Least of all is said about what mainstream schools and colleges can do. There is a lot more to say about what Connexions can really mean - more than the producers of DfES material seem yet to understand.

Worries about the words 'career' and 'guidance' are sharper. Is there policy hostility to the phrase 'careers guidance'? (A Government minister is said to have claimed that 'because my children are intelligent, they do not need careers guidance'!) Most likely, the rejection of 'careers guidance' is part of the drive to reduce complexity in provision - consistent with the undifferentiated-mass theory. It pre-empted producer specialism.

We must defend complexity; our understanding and use of complexity is our hope of effectiveness. The very idea of 'connections' is an acknowledgement of the need. We will, of course, defend our own position; but, our defence will have greater credibility when it is conducted on behalf of all kinds of specialism in the team.

All of that said, we may be compounding our own problems. We have allowed the term 'career' to become associated with decisions made by free-standing, self-aware and appropriately-informed individuals, prepared to anticipate

and deal with the consequences of their decisions. This is the DOTS analysis - associated with our own well-defined repertoire of provision. We need also to understand how social and youth workers will extend this analysis, and its range of help.

Producer authority is best manifested in a willingness to learn when new learning is required. Not, now, to move our thinking on would be a futile attempt at producer capture.

### New ideas

And there is some moving on to do. The understanding of career has in recent decades grown deeper, wider and more dynamic. There are more ways of understanding socially and personally constructed meaning and purpose. The way in which deeply-laid feelings are interwoven into the process are more fully appreciated. There is a growing awareness of the impact of significant others, and of the importance to career of internalised culture. We are in a better position to appreciate the importance of learning progression, and of the way that can be distorted by early learning. We more clearly see how people's responses to working roles are linked to what they do about roles as consumer, partner, investor, friend, and citizen. And we better understand how crime may feature in some attempts to achieve a sustainable way of living.

Some of the breadth and depth of such understanding is represented in the best of guidance work. But the way in which its dynamics can bring about change is less well represented. And possibilities for enabling change are critical to Connexions.

As to social workers and youth workers, we may safely assume that knowing how to work with meaning, feelings relationships, culture and distorted learning will feature in their repertoires. I wonder if they find some of our well-structured, firmly-categorised, key-boarded and paper-and-pencil-bound methods, a bit limiting. Can they really believe that we 'know better'? Should we let them?

### Managing centrally and locally

One of the biggest gaps in policy concerns local management. There is no need to argue for another layer of management. More bureaucracy would be suspect from everyone's point-of-view.

But 'local or central?' has been a recurring issue in careers work. Some IAG leaders welcomed moves to make careers services a child of central government. It had, for a time, the effect of getting careers services out of the scramble for limited, local-authority-controlled, resources.

Nonetheless, there are pros-and-cons: an important advantage of a neighbourhood framework for negotiations is that people arrive at priorities on the basis of visible conditions, that everybody must recognise. Effective local

negotiation is, in this respect, particularly critical to Connexions. If it really is to involve a network of resources, engaging a range of linked learning needs, that network must come from and respond to local conditions. The implications for locally managing provision are massive.

In modern usage 'managing' means everything from wheeling-and-dealing for resources, to enabling a processes of change. But 'big wheels' and 'local facilitators' are not at all the same thing. We are going to need a distinction between institution management at one end of a spectrum and network management at the other.

A feature of this need is that Connexions connects a community of help - a network. It does so both within and beyond institutional boundaries. Furthermore, much of the help that it calls upon is, in one sense or another, volunteered. Managing 'helping people' calls, in any event, upon a special kind of managing skill; but managing 'helping networks' calls for a very special kind. It is a quite exceptional challenge - probably beyond the reach of most wheelers-and-dealers.

Let there be no more than is necessary of centralising institutional bureaucracy. But we need a great deal more of neighbourhood networking management.

Connexions papers are silent on the matter.

### Learning needs

Connexions seeks a significant shift of concern in careers work. This is away from occasional choices and towards continuing needs. It therefore needs explanations of why and how things go badly. The APIR is at its most impressive for the breadth with which it trawls for that understanding.

It is least impressive for the way in which it arbitrarily compacts evidence into a one-dimension diagnosis. The diagnosis is at three levels; they are roughly characterised as the need for 'a lot', 'some' and 'a bit' of help. After a fashion, it is a model for linking need to provision.

But it is unsustainable: a one-dimension diagnosis of need cannot engage a multi-dimension framework for help. It is, at the same time, expanding the diversity of resources and collapsing the basis for harnessing them.

Connexions needs the three levels of delivery in order to hold onto the claim to universality - there is something for everybody. But it is much the same stuff for everybody: the 'undifferentiated-mass' theory suggests a 'conveyor-belt' model for delivery. According to the number of factors diagnosed, APIR suggests (with slight variations) 'basic help', 'a bit more help', and - at best - 'more of the same'. It misses the opportunity to articulate what social workers, teachers, guidance people, volunteers and others can do to respond in different ways to different needs.

Learning needs must be diagnosed not only by level but also by form. Different people (in different cultures) learn and mis-learn in different ways. We badly need to know how to organise different sorts of help for different forms of need.

As understanding of these possibilities grows (and it will) there will be medium- and long-term consequences. In the medium-term, programmes will be developed to support different helpers in the provision of different sorts of help. We will learn to map a network of help so that routes to different kinds of help are clearly signposted.

Systems of links, referrals and cooperation will be established. In some localities it is already happening. But it can only happen at neighbourhood level. It is what programme management is for.

In the longer-term, overlapping matrices of needs and provision will bring about the realisation that most people experience some kind of learning need, calling for an appropriate kind of help. That will put us on route for a service which assigns resources to finely-identified needs, rather than to crudely-identified populations. The phrase 'to each according to his need' calls from afar. It speaks of a service equitably responsive to the needs of the many and the few.

### Policies and programmes

Government needs an arena in which it can show how it can improve things. Loss of control on economic levers causes politics to turn elsewhere. Education was an inevitable target.

While governments cannot design educational programmes, they can provide frameworks for programme development. Connexions broadly indicates a direction for development. But that direction can be pursued by many different programmes. And should be.

A programme can be usefully understood as input, process and outcome. Policy provides some of the ideas and all of the funding for the input. It also provides some of the outcome measurements. But, at programme level, central policy cannot take account of local needs and inputs. And there are more outcomes from Connexions than policy can anticipate. Some may not be measurable in policy terms; and some will prove more significant than policy envisages.

But the central feature of programme design is arriving at a process for transposing inputs into outcomes. Process is best expressed in verbs: it is real people doing local things. Policy cannot specify much of this. This is the main reason why there is never an exact correspondence between what policy seeks and what practice delivers. From the local point of view, this is often a good thing.

## POINTS OF DEPARTURE

Programme is, then, a gap much of which policy should leave empty. Programme development is our job - based on a defensible professionalism and an understanding of local learning needs.

### Needs, equality and universality

The notion of 'needs' can be troublesome. It implies a deficit, putting the user at a disadvantage: people are thought of as in difficulty because of some lack. At best they become objects of pity - which is a form of condescension. We might then try to help them to fit into what is currently available. That would be a form of producer capture - they act, on our terms.

These issues must not be evaded. Where people are in difficulties because the social, economic and education system has failed, it is not they who need to adjust, it may well be policy, professional and employment-and-training providers who need to change.

There has been, in guidance, a discourse about this. It is about how helpers may - when they are most trying to offer help - collude with a damaging system. More than any other programme, Connexions needs this discourse to be restarted. It is genuinely philosophical and usefully subversive. We should not expect politicians to do it for us.

But, before we climb back onto the barricades, we should remember that careers work got started on the basis of providing for people thought to be in need. Work experience, Progress Files and active learning each got their start this way. So did careers guidance. Connexions is not the first in careers work to begin by concentrating resources on the needy.

The strategy has this strength: Connexions is the only careers-work policy in a generation to be explicitly linked to equal opportunity - our primary policy concern. While 'competitiveness', 'economic benefits' and 'raised standards' were, at best, tangential to our purposes, concerns for how people gain access to life chances are central.

The charge of condescension may be more damaging where Connexions is conceived as a service for a troubled and troublesome minority. But this is no more than a starting point. The history of our work is a history of realising that the learning needs of the most obviously needy give us the clue to the needs of the rest. All helping professions advance in this way.

At closer quarters we can do this: working out in inner city or leafy suburb who needs what kind of help. With or without policy mandate, we could do it now for all 14-19 year-olds.

With serious investment, it could be done life-long. NICEC Fellow David Andrews remarks that Connexions would have taken on a different shape if it had been first directed

at adults. He is right: the greater depth, breadth and momentum of adult learning would have been impossible to ignore. Connexions will eventually catch up with David's thought.

Actually it is no more patronising to suggest that all people need to learn than it is to suggest that hungry people need to eat. But what they then do with their new energy is another matter. That is the philosophical question and another gap.

### Any hope for Connexions?

I have not yet met a person managing a local Connexions programme who does not agree that the programme must achieve more than policy requires. And all agree that, when you know that the targets can be met, then the most creative and most relevant work can be developed. That's what happened with TVEI, the year-9-10 Initiative and the National Curriculum. All outflanked and transformed what policy first proposed.

And worry about universality is not going to help. We never really had it: too many people, in one or way or another, slipped through our hands. Despite the inevitable protests, it is a moot point whether universality is what is now needed. Better to think of the problem in terms of responses to need; and better still to think of it in terms of a repertoire of responses to a variety of needs. In such a discussion, universality will become a redundant concept.

Policy habitually leaves gaps. We will put our mind to them. That is how the most interesting ideas emerge after the launch event. Sometimes long after.

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**On issues for Connexions.** *Young Learners at Risk: The Career-learning Café - The Magazine - Making It Work.*

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**On complexity of career.** *How Do Careers Really Work: The Career-learning Café - The Memory.*

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