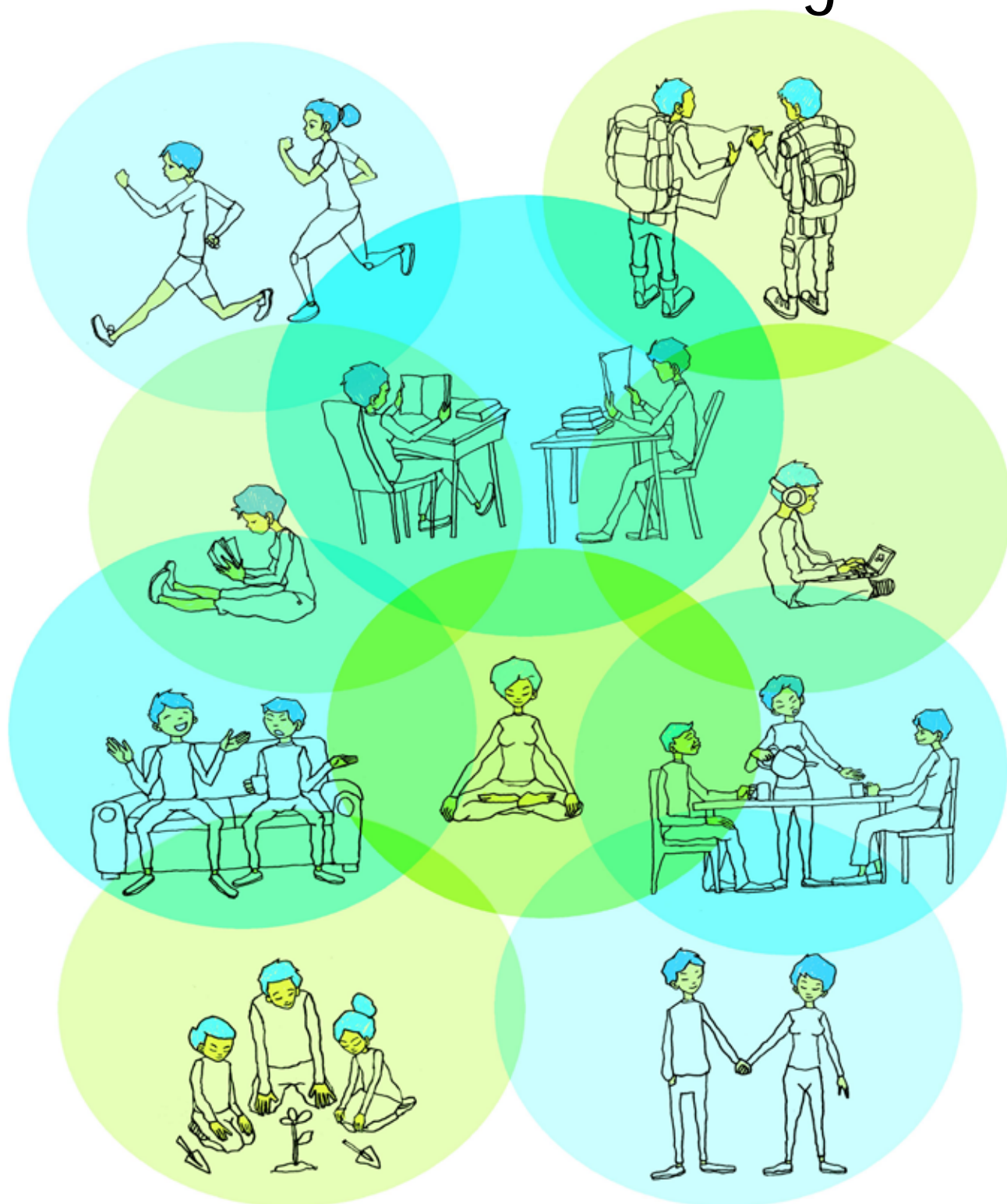


Lifewide Learning & Education in Universities and Colleges



Edited by
Norman Jackson & Jenny Willis
<http://www.learninglives.co.uk/>

CHAPTER B8

Make Your Experience Count

Neil Murray

SUMMARY

This chapter contains a description of the Open University (OU) module *Make your experience count* (MYEC) as an example of a vehicle for allowing lifewide learning to be recognised and valued within a higher education context. MYEC enables students to use their past learning experiences as a basis for acquiring higher education credit, as well as equipping them with a range of academic, transferable and developmental skills. MYEC has no prerequisites: it is open to anyone, irrespective of their educational background or aspirations, and students can bring any type of 'learning experience' - formal or informal - into the module. This provides an important educational opportunity for recognising lifewide learning and personal development.

BIOGRAPHY



Neil Murray is a Lecturer in Work-based Learning at The Open University, a post he has held since 2004. Prior to joining the Open University, Neil was employed in a variety of academic and educational management roles focused on the development and delivery of distance learning courses, materials and delivery systems. His active research interests include investigating the relationship between educational technology and work-based learning and exploring the cognitive, conative and affective aspects of reflective practice. He is the principal author of the Open University modules *Make your experience count* and *Career development and employability*, and joint author of the module *Change, strategy and projects at work* and the accompanying book of the same name. He has also developed a trans-disciplinary *Foundation degree in Combined Professional Studies*. Neil is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the aims, content, structure, pedagogical approach and study mode of the *Make your experience count* (MYEC) module, along with its intended learning outcomes and assessment strategy. The chapter also reflects on the contribution that MYEC makes to students' lifewide and lifelong learning, and explores tutors' experience of teaching on the module.



Aims

MYEC enables students to identify, describe, analyse, reflect on and present learning acquired through lifewide experience. Students who pass the module are awarded 30 higher education credits at OU level 1. The module is also designed to support students in developing some of the higher-level cognitive skills and practical study skills commonly associated with higher education study, and to equip them with vital Personal Development Planning (PDP) and transferable skills.

Although MYEC aims to help students derive learning from experience it is problematic to view MYEC as a form of APEL/APL/RPL¹ because higher education credit is awarded for the description and analysis of, reflection upon, and presentation of, the *processes* and *outcomes* of past learning experiences rather than for the particular skills, knowledge and understanding derived from the experience. To give a concrete example: students who bring in to MYEC the experience of 'learning to drive' would be assessed on the skill with which they are able to describe, analyse, reflect upon and present the process and outcomes of the experience; they would not be expected to provide evidence of competence as a driver. In fact they may have failed their driving test spectacularly, but still be able to derive useful learning from the experience that could be presented for assessment in the module. MYEC encourages students to learn through reflection on 'failures' as well as 'successes', in order to improve future performance.

So, MYEC is designed to get students to understand that learning is lifewide and lifelong, occurs in informal as well as formal settings and that reflecting on and acquiring knowledge about *how* they learn and the *impact* of what they learn is just as valuable for their future development as the specific, subject-related skills, knowledge and understanding derived from a particular learning episode. By the end of the module students should be able to present examples of prior learning from experience by describing the processes, evaluating the outcomes and assessing the impact of each learning episode. They will also have acquired valuable metacognitive skills and knowledge, including knowledge about their preferred learning style, and be able to plan for their future lifewide and lifelong learning and development.

MYEC is suitable for students in paid or voluntary work, as well as those planning a career change or wishing to enter or re-enter the labour market. It is also appropriate for students who wish to undertake some personal or academic development without a definite career goal in mind. Students who have engaged in non-accredited study of any type and level can also use this module as an opportunity to earn higher education credit based on such learning.

Mode of study

MYEC is studied through the OU's method of distance learning called 'supported open learning' (Open University, 2014a). MYEC is an online module with a dedicated module website containing specially authored study materials and links to other study resources that, along with a personal tutor, provide the structure and support that help students to succeed in their studies.



The personal tutor supports students through the module by giving them personalised feedback on assignments as well as study advice and guidance in asynchronous online discussion forums, during synchronous online tutorials and also via email or telephone. Learning at a distance can be a lonely experience, so students have the opportunity to support each other in their online tutor group forums and tutorials, and also via OU-hosted or moderated social networking sites (Open University, 2014b).

The study materials and activities that students engage with during the module are also designed to help them develop their skills as learners in higher education. The module employs an active learning approach, based on constructivist pedagogical principles, and uses frequent formative activities to facilitate students' engagement with the learning and assessment on the module.

Learning outcomes

All OU modules have intended learning outcomes that set out what students can expect to learn from their studies and what they will need to achieve to succeed in the module assessment. The learning outcomes for MYEC are detailed below. Each unit of study on the module has been developed around learning outcomes selected from this list.

After studying MYEC students should be able to demonstrate achievement of the following learning outcomes:

Knowledge and Understanding

- Understand how reflecting on experience can lead to the recognition of past learning
- Understand how reflecting on experience can provide evidence of past learning
- Understand how and why learning outcomes are associated with learning experiences in higher education

Cognitive Skills

- Describe and begin to discuss the outcomes of some of your prior learning experiences
- Select relevant examples of learning from a range of learning experiences
- Draw together a set of evidence detailing your personal learning
- Analyse, compare and reflect upon a range of learning experiences

Key Skills

- Work independently and with others in drawing together a range of evidence related to prior learning
- Collect, organise and present evidence of personal learning
- Develop skills in finding, selecting and using information related to career planning
- Develop skills in using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools and resources
- Develop plans for future personal and career goals

Practical and Professional Skills

- Demonstrate how you have engaged with a range of learning opportunities
- Demonstrate your personal and/or professional development as a result of analysing learning experiences



Structure and content

MYEC consists of a Module Guide, which provides an overview of the module and study advice and guidance, and seven study units. Students are advised to read through the Module Guide at the start of the module before embarking on the substantive units of study. The assessment strategy for MYEC requires students to submit four pieces of work: three tutor-marked assignments (TMAs) and one end of module assessment (EMA). A summary of the content of the study units and assessments is given below.

Study units: summary contents

Unit 1: Looking at experience

This unit looks at what is meant by 'experience' and asks students to think about the way they present learning experiences to various audiences for different purposes, for example, compiling a CV for employment purposes or presenting an account for academic credit. The metaphor of a 'learning journey' is introduced and the concept of reflective learning is explored. Students are also encouraged to start keeping a learning journal to help them reflect on their studies and prepare for forthcoming assessments.

Unit 2: The experience of learning

The focus of this unit is on lifewide and lifelong learning. Students are introduced to the idea that learning is an activity we all engage in throughout our lives and that it is not just confined to schools, colleges and universities. Common examples of informal learning experiences are cited to reinforce this point, and activities are included to help students identify and recognise their own informal learning experiences.

The concept of 'experiential learning' or 'learning by doing' is introduced and explored through an examination of the model developed by Kolb and Fry (1975); their learning cycle is also used to introduce students to the concept of different 'learning styles'.

Finally, students are encouraged to explore some of their own past learning experiences by identifying the processes involved and the outcomes achieved. Relevant examples are provided to help students with this activity.

Unit 3: Capturing the learning process

Building on the theoretical work undertaken in Unit 2, in this unit students are introduced to the experiential learning model developed by Race (2005) so that they have something to compare and contrast with the Kolb-Fry model. This serves both to broaden students' theoretical understanding of experiential learning and to develop essential academic skills.

Students move on to examine how theory relates to the practice of capturing and understanding their own past learning experiences. The Learning Experience Form (LEF), which is the main vehicle used for capturing and analysing learning experiences on the module, is introduced at this stage (a blank LEF is provided at Appendix 1). The LEF is split into two main sections: one dealing with the processes involved in the learning experience; the other with the outcomes. Students focus on the learning process section of the form in this unit. A fictional case study is used to scaffold students' learning and to provide an



example of a completed 'learning process' section that they are tasked to complete for an episode of past learning from their personal experience.

Unit 4: Outcomes and experience

In this unit the focus shifts to examine learning outcomes, i.e. what has been achieved as a result of the learning process. The concept of 'learning outcomes' is explored and the meaning of the term in different contexts - formal/informal, academic/vocational - is examined. The fictional case study is, once again, used to scaffold students' learning and to provide an example of a completed learning outcomes section. Students should then be in a position to complete the 'learning outcomes' section of the LEF that they started in the previous unit.

Units 5-7: Taking stock and moving forward

Having focused on experiential learning theory and their own past learning experiences in the first four units, students are encouraged to take stock and look forward in the final three units of the module. Bearing in mind what they have learned from their analysis of past learning, and its impact on their personal development, students are required to think about their prospects and to develop some goals and action plans related to future aspirations.

Unit 5: Personal and career development planning – your future

In this unit the shift to a future-oriented perspective begins with exploration of, and reflection on, broader life experiences along with personal values and beliefs. A key activity in this unit is a PDP 'health check', which helps students to identify factors that may be important to them when making choices about their PDP in the future.

Unit 6: Researching future opportunities – information and people

In this unit students begin to consider what the next steps might be in achieving their future career and/or personal goals. Furthermore, this unit examines the role of research in the planning process by asking students to explore the range of resources that are available to them, thereby, also acquiring essential academic and digital literacy skills.

Unit 7: Plans for the future

In this final unit, students build on the work of the previous two units by creating an action plan. This plan forms part of the work students need undertake in preparation for the end-of-module assessment (EMA).

Assessment

The assessment strategy for MYEC is designed to be developmental and progressive. Formative activities, including learning journal entries, forum contributions, worksheets, quizzes and self-assessment tasks all feed in to the summative assessments. The summative assessments become more challenging as the module progresses, and this is reflected in the weighting allocated to the TMAs. All assessments are submitted and returned electronically. Feedback/feed-forward on the TMAs is provided by the personal tutors with specific comments on the script itself and a more general summary on the assignment cover sheet. A selection of scripts from each personal tutor is monitored for



quality purposes by the Module Chair and by the tutor's line manager (Staff Tutor).

All assessments are marked out of 100. Table 1 shows the contribution each component makes to the overall grade. To be sure to pass the module students need to achieve a minimum score of 40% in both the continuous assessments (TMAs) and the examinable component (EMA).

Table 1 Module assessment weightings

Component	Score
TMA 01	20%
TMA 02	30%
TMA 03	50%
Total TMAs	100%
Breakdown of overall module score	
Contribution of TMAs to final result: 50%	50%
Contribution of EMA to final result: 50%	50%

TMA 01 (submitted after Unit 1)

Students are asked to submit an account of an experience from which they think they have learnt something valuable. They are asked to include the following:

- a succinct and coherent description of the experience
- a discussion of the skills, knowledge and understanding gained from the experience
- an analysis of how they learnt from the experience
- an evaluation of the impact of what they learnt on their personal/career development.

TMA 02 (submitted after Unit 3)

Firstly, students are asked to compare and contrast Kolb and Fry's theory of experiential learning with that put forward by Race. Secondly, students are asked to describe their learning style and to make suggestions for improving the effectiveness of their learning.

TMA 03 (submitted after Unit 4)

Students are asked to write a reflective account of the learning process and outcomes associated with the learning experience described in LEF 1.

EMA (submitted after Unit 7)

Firstly, students are asked to submit the LEFs for two learning experiences that they have selected to present in this EMA. Secondly, students are required to write a reflective, comparative analytical account based on both of the LEFs submitted.

Finally, students are expected to provide an action plan for a future goal as evidence that they have thought about how they can move closer towards achieving their personal and career development goals as a result of the work they have done on this module.

A brief, reflective commentary on the action plan explaining why they chose that particular goal and how the learning experiences analysed earlier and the work they have done on the module have influenced their goal is also required.



MYEC – student and tutor perspectives

In this section the perspectives of both MYEC students and tutors are explored by analysing a small, but representative, selection of anonymised comments. Some key themes that emerge from this analysis are presented and discussed briefly.

Student perspectives

So, how do students react to MYEC? OU student satisfaction surveys regularly show 85-95% of learners enjoy their MYEC experience and many gain new and deeper insights about their own learning and development. A selection of students' comments below give a sense of why this might be.

Student A: I enjoyed the course very much, and it made me think about a lot of things especially for the voluntary work I do and how I can help other people. I feel this has helped me to gain a much better understanding of what reflective learning really is and I hope it will help me on my career path.

Student B: This was a great module to study. It really helped me to focus on past learning as a goal to improving my present career, helping me to understand the best methods for my future personal and career development. The module is a good way to get used to reflective learning and also provides lots of advice and links to help make the best use of your learning skills. I had a brilliant, supportive tutor and really enjoyed studying this module.

Student C: U122 is a very useful course. Very informative and easy to follow. A good course for those starting out with the OU. I would recommend the course to anyone wishing to start studying with the OU. It is also a good course for those returning to work/study and those looking for work and needing help in the reflective process. A first class course, one of my most useful Level 1 courses.

Student D: I have discovered in this unit that not all learning has to be career related and that the learning itself can be fun.

Student E: The module so far has changed my thinking quite a lot, in the way I learn things and the way I reflect on these experiences. I think now I have become less critical on what I do and more open to different perspectives on things, I think this has enabled me to become more open and better able to deal with future learning.

Student F: The module work has made me think about my work life in combination with my private life. It has helped me prioritise past events and hopefully will help me find a new path for the future.

Student G: Thinking about the experiences I have had has really made me think about what I want to do in the future. I have thought about experiences which I have really enjoyed and some which I didn't like and now have a clearer outlook on where I want to progress to career wise.

Student H: Since undertaking this module however I have been enlightened as to how I learn, the skills and knowledge that I have through my previous experiences and an



understanding that some of these are very transferable.

Student I: One of the things that has struck me the most about this module is it has highlighted my learning style which has opened my eyes to past situations which have gone well or not, as I can better understand now why they went well or not so well.

In order to present a balanced view, it is only fair to point out that not every student expresses unalloyed satisfaction with their entire MYEC experience and the comments below illustrate some common themes in the feedback from students who are dissatisfied with their experience to some extent.

Student J: I felt I did not take away much from this module. It is about reflection of course but I like to think forwards and solve problems so this course was not much use to myself which is not to say it would not be useful for another student. This module was part of the optional 30 credits to count towards a computing and IT degree. I thought I would do this instead of a mathematics module but in hindsight I would probably be better off sticking to science and logic based modules.

Student K: I found it quite difficult to pin down exactly what was required on this module. The marking and comments on assignments enabled me to see whether I had really understood what it was about. This wasn't the fault of the module materials or tutor themselves, more how I had envisaged how the module could pull my experiences together. For others considering the course I would stress that it is about learning methods not what you have learnt.

And a minority view, demonstrating that MYEC is certainly not for everyone!

Student L: I found this course to be woefully inadequate. Credit Transfer should have been granted for my extensive prior learning. A few personal one-to-one careers advice sessions might well have been more appropriate and better value.

I thought this module would be a great way to use previous experiences to use as credit for me degree. Past life experiences were pretty much redundant as marks were not awarded on this basis and the module was more literature based centred around 2 major learning styles/models.

The key comments noted above are representative of the feedback received from students and illustrative of key recurring themes about the pros and cons of studying MYEC.

Frequently identified positive themes include:

- Students gain an understanding of reflective learning
- Learning skills are acquired
- Metacognitive knowledge, e.g. about learning styles, is acquired
- Transferable skills are developed
- MYEC helps with PDP, including career development.
- MYEC facilitates clarity of focus on future plans
- MYEC facilitates return to work and/or study



- MYEC helps students to explore their lifewide and lifelong learning and development
- MYEC encourages students to think that learning can be fun!

Some common themes drawn from student feedback expressing some degree of dissatisfaction with the MYEC study experience include:

- Reflection is about dwelling in the past, not planning for the future
- Reflection is not easy or enjoyable for some people to engage with
- The theoretical aspect of the module is challenging for some
- The fact that there are no clear 'right' and 'wrong' answers, just better or worse responses to assessment tasks is an issue for some

Tutor perspectives

Of course, the student perspective is only one half of the learning and teaching relationship, so in this section the focus shifts to the tutor experience of MYEC and draws out some key themes from tutors' comments.

Tutor A: It has been a real privilege especially where students have opened up to me. Students have spoken about very personal things such as domestic abuse, mental health issues, self-harm, bereavement, etc.

I have really been moved by some of the things that students have told me about. I think writing about these experiences has almost been like a therapy session for them.

Tutor B: Frustrating when students simply will not engage and when they submit TMAs with the same mistakes. Rewarding when they take on board my feedback and reveal an understanding of the learning process and their own learning journey. In a busy world, the slow pace needed for students to really engage with the tools in U122 can be a real challenge for them.

I have to say that, in my experience, men have much greater problems engaging in the kind of reflection required than women. This is especially true of the young men in my groups. On the other hand, I have one or two (only) shining examples of men using this module in a very constructive way to enhance their learning more widely. They were older men - the young ones are too busy getting on with other important stuff in their lives and would really like the module credits to be achievable without them having to stop and think about it.

Tutor C: It's fascinating for a tutor, to have the privilege to witness students' reflections; as the experiences they write about are incredibly varied.

Whilst each experience has unique personal significance, which can make the tutoring work very challenging at times, the pattern underlying all the experiences is that of being human and the very human endeavour to know better and do better.

Many students find it difficult to reflect - the precious time to stop and think has never before been theirs, and their focus has always been on those around them who require them to learn, or the goals they are working towards, so they have never stopped to consider themselves learning.

One of the best things about tutoring for U122 is when students have breakthroughs, realising why they have struggled to succeed in certain learning situations or recognising



what they have achieved.

One of the best results from U122, is when students finish the module saying that they feel more confident to work towards doing the things that they want to do - that they can see a way forward now and are clearer about what is important to them and how they will be able to do it.

These comments made by tutors illustrate some of the challenges, rewards and issues associated with tutoring a module that aims to encourage lifewide and lifelong learning, and represent some recurring themes that run through tutor feedback.

Inevitably there is a risk that students will bring in to the module 'challenging' learning experiences such as those alluded to by Tutor A. Although airing these experiences may be cathartic for some students that is not necessarily the case for all. Such disclosures require tutors to demonstrate great sensitivity and awareness of the limits of what they can deal with in the context of the module. It is vital that clear advice and guidance is given to both students and tutors about presenting and dealing with such difficult experiences.

Tutor C makes the related point that dealing with varied and meaningful experiences is a privilege as well as a challenge and alludes to the fact that striving to learn from experience is part of the human condition. Tutor C recognises that turning that experience into learning through reflection can be difficult for people who have not had the time or knowledge to stop and practise reflection. Tutor B also alludes to questions that are frequently raised about whether or not women are more amenable to reflection than men and whether reflective capacity increases with age.

The issue of engagement with the theories, models, tools, techniques and activities within the module, as highlighted by Tutor B, is also a consistent theme raised in tutor feedback. Related to this issue of engagement is student motivation; that is the extent to which extrinsic or intrinsic motivation is predominant, which leads to either deeper or more superficial engagement with the module.

Both Tutor A and B comment on the satisfaction they obtain from seeing students develop self-awareness and deeper understanding of themselves as learners, which enables them to plan for the future with greater confidence.

CONCLUSION

MYEC was designed to meet a perceived need for a module that transcended disciplinary silos and offered students an opportunity to recognise, value and receive academic credit for past learning of all types and at all levels. In part the module was developed in response to government agendas on widening participation, PDP and employability that were salient in mid-2000s (JISC, 2009).

However, at least as important in the thinking behind the module's development was the notion of empowering and giving confidence to students with little or no experience of formal learning at tertiary level as well as to those returning to formal education after a long period away. What MYEC strives to achieve is to demystify learning by getting students to



recognise the value of their own prior lifewide and lifelong learning experiences; and by equipping them with the skills, knowledge and understanding to reflect upon and to analyse how they learnt, what they learnt and the impact of that learning on their lives.

Armed with the confidence that they have learnt things throughout their lives, and with the theoretical and practical tools and techniques to evaluate and improve their learning, MYEC enables students to take stock of their current position, think about their future aspirations and make concrete plans to achieve them. MYEC prepares students to become both lifewide and lifelong learners by showing them how to derive learning from any experience through analysis and reflection.

REFERENCES

- JISC (2009) *e-Portfolios: Policy Context* [Online]. Available at <http://www.JISC.ac.uk/~link.aspx?id=E8B376F0AFED43D3960BA42E4EFC4FA4&z=z> (Accessed 10 January 2014).
- Kolb, D. A. and Fry, R. (1975) 'Toward an applied theory of experiential learning' in Cooper, C. L. (ed.) *Theories of Group Processes*, John Wiley, pp. 33-57.
- Open University (2014a) *Distance learning explained* [Online]. Available at <http://www3.open.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/distance-learning/index.htm> (Accessed 10 January 2014).
- Open University (2014b) *Open University communities around the web* [Online]. Available at <http://www.open.ac.uk/community/main/> (Accessed 10 January 2014).
- Race, P. (2005) *Making Learning Happen*, London, Sage Publications.

END NOTES

1 APEL/APL/RPL

Accreditation of prior experiential learning/ Accreditation of prior learning/Recognition of prior learning. All of these terms are commonly understood to involve the mapping the content and outcomes of prior learning against the specific content and outcomes of a module/qualification in order to fast track a learner to accreditation. Usually, such claims for credit demand verifiable evidence of achievement and relevance and set criteria for the currency of the prior learning claimed. MYEC does none of these things.



APPENDIX 1: LEARNING EXPERIENCE FORM

Learning Experience Form

Name:

Learning Experience Title:

Part 1: Learning process

1. Give a brief description of the experience:

2. What did you learn, i.e. know, do or understand as a result of the learning experience?

3. How did you accomplish this learning?

a. *What training, practical experience or hands-on opportunities did you have?*

b. *What support or advice did you receive from colleagues, family, friends?*

c. *What information sources, if any, did you consult? For example: books, media, internet searches, specialist databases, conversations with others.*

4. What challenges did you encounter during this learning experience?

5. How did you respond to the challenges you encountered?

6. In what ways did you receive feedback on your learning?

Examples of feedback include: other people's reactions, confirmation, praise, compliments and simply seeing the results. Remember to include the source of the feedback and how you responded to that feedback.

7. How did you incorporate the feedback you received into your learning experience? (What did you do after reflecting on the feedback you received?)



Part 2: Learning outcomes

8. What specialist concepts or language did you become familiar with during the course of this learning experience?

You should provide explanations of these concepts or terms.

9. What specialist processes or actions did you become familiar with during the course of this learning experience?

10. How did this experience lead you to develop your communication skills?

11. How did this experience lead you to develop your skills in terms of handling information or data?

12. How did this experience lead you to develop your ICT skills?

13. How did this experience lead you to develop your numerical skills?

14. Are there any other skills, not covered above, that you felt you drew on or developed during this experience?

15. What was the impact of the learning experience in relation to your career and/or personal development?

