



# THE WORK AND AMBITIONS OF THE WIDENING PARTICIPATION RESEARCH AND MENTORING GROUP (WARM)

Penny Llewellyn and Rhianne Morgan

# WHAT IS WARM?

The Widening Access Research and Mentoring Group (WARM) practises:-

- A peer/partnership learning and engagement model with people who are marginalised and stigmatised by mental health issues.
- Many participants have 'missed out' on conventional education, often due to issues with their mental health.
- Guided by the capabilities approach with aims of 'freedom, human flourishing and dignity' (Walker, 2006.139).
- Students are not necessarily expected to rely on existing services or to use previously established methods

*Ref: Walker, M. (2006) Higher Education Pedagogies: A Capabilities Approach. Philadelphia Open University Press*

# Perception of mental illness

A reduction of capability and choice – a lack of opportunity to convert resources.

Individuals may experience any or all of these:-

- Stigma, labelling – reduces confidence to engage
- Illness, change in status – may encourage adaptive preference e.g. 'It's my lot in life'
- Economic hardship

# What innovation is offered by the WARM Capabilities Approach to HE?

The WARM approach recognizes the opportunity to increase social justice through higher education. It:

- Enables students to work on projects with status and thus to become students/researchers rather than 'service users'
- Raises capability/agency to challenge social structures
- Increases engagement in democratic life
- Offers critical, flexible pedagogic practice to meet these requirements

# An example: The Pen y Fal records project

WARM students were invited to conduct research on the historic records of the now defunct Pen y Fal Lunatic Asylum.

- None had experience of archival research.
- A capabilities approach was used
- After the initial introduction, the project was led by the students, supported but not controlled by a tutor and a member of the archive staff

# Focusing on the ability to turn resources into functions, the students were:

- Shown around the archive
- Encouraged to explore the asylum records
- Supported in informal discussions

Each student chose their own area of interest and decided how they would study it.

Access to all the records was available at every meeting and a designated 'education officer' was always available to answer questions and give advice when asked.

# Results of the project

- Several detailed case studies
- Analysis of pharmaceutical treatment of 'patients' in the asylum
- Glossary of medical terms used in the records
- Attempts to find a 'typical' asylum patient
- Analysis of daily employment and entertainment of asylum patients and comparison with more modern practices

# Impact: The culmination of the project



On completion of the project, engaging in co-production the students designed, organized and delivered a highly successful presentation of their work to academics, former staff of the asylum and other interested parties.



# Contribution to successful Widening Participation

Enabling students to 'do' and to 'become':

- The students 'did' independent research.
- They 'became' researchers and presenters. Their sense of personal identity changed as they took charge of their work and of themselves

Raising capability to challenge social structures

- The students challenged the perceptions of others by presenting and explaining facts to academics and former staff of the asylum in a reversal of their normal roles

# Contribution to successful Widening Participation (2)

## Engaging in democratic life

The students engaged in democratic life by organising discussing and deciding on the format of the presentation and who should be invited

## Employing critical pedagogic practice

Students employed the practice of self-organised learning, working with critical and flexible pedagogy, they developed aspirations to continue research and to engage in Higher Education.

# Evaluation and sustainability

The project impacted on social justice and on education

- Co-producing, presenting and publishing work and talking about it widely, challenged people's perceptions of people with mental illness and the students perceptions of themselves.
- The perceptions of the audience regarding the students/participants shifted away from 'service user/patient' to a much more positive frame

# Evaluation by the students

A focus group was held towards the end of the project, the results were written up by the students, resulting in presentations at conferences and articles being published in peer reviewed journals

This success and the success of the open day and public presentation of their work encouraged the students to adopt a 'can do' attitude. They are rapidly becoming confident ambitious researchers.

# What came next?

## The Sewing Machine Project



# The Sewing Machine Project

Following the success of the archive project a small group of WARM members using a mental health 'drop in' centre, looked for a research project.

- Interest aroused by a plaque on a sewing machine belonging to one of the group
- A member of the archive group, with no prior experience as a group leader, offered to take the role of organiser of the project.

# The sewing machine.



- Owned by a WARM member
- Bought from a second-hand shop in the 1970s
- Engraved plaque aroused interest in its ownership.

# Plaque on the sewing machine

## The plaque on the sewing machine



## What did the group want to know?

- Who was Miss Gertrude Walters?
- What was Heathfield House School?
- Does the school still exist?
- What happened to Miss Walters?



**Many places and people were sought out and assisted with the research but it was organised and conducted entirely by the WARM members who used and consulted:**

- Online websites: 'FindMyPast' Ancestry.com, RootsChat.
- Glamorgan Archives
- Cardiff Library
- Incumbent of St Peter's Roman Catholic Church, Cardiff
- Staff at Thornhill Cemetery
- Staff at Government Records Office
- Staff at St Fagan's Museum

# Results of the Research

- Fascinating life history of Gertrude Walters (later Donovan).
- Insight into education at a High School for Girls in pre-war and second world war Cardiff.
- History of Singer Sewing Machine Company from 1851-1958
- Gravestone of Mrs Donovan unearthed

# A practical outcome

- The gravestone was difficult to find
- With help from cemetery ground staff the stone was uncovered
- Group members cleaned the stone and ‘framed’ it so that other visitors to the cemetery can see it.

# Gertrude Donovan's gravestone



# Academic outcomes

- Illustrated booklet produced, detailing the research and its results.
- Students discussed their work with 2 university lecturers for a retrospective assessment
- Lecturers agreed that the work was of university entry level standard.

# Outcomes for students

A focus group held with the students found that they had:

- Psychological satisfaction, students expressed surprise that, working together, they had discovered so much.
- Students moved from having no aspirations for the future to having ambitions to continue with research and possibly moving into a future involving academic study.

# What the students thought

- I didn't realise what impact [doing the research] would have on my life. I have enjoyed every minute of the research project.... And surprised myself with what we could actually achieve.
- I was surprised at how engrossed I became. It was something I found very interesting and want to carry on with.
- Working within the group environment has shown me what it means to be part of something, These past months have been a huge benefit in dealing with my mental health issues.
- It's remarkable what we have achieved as a group. We have noticeably gained in confidence and pushed back the boundaries of [what we can achieve through] research. I think we can all be proud of this project

# The Future

- Further projects planned by WARM groups.
- Local Archive encourages access to historic records and offers assistance with research.
- WARM approach to research translatable to other groups where members have been disadvantaged by lack of conventional education.

