In 1993 the Department of Adult and Continuing Education (D.A.C.E.) in the University of Glasgow established a new community-based ‘collaborative’ adult education project that became known as Pre-Access. It was designed originally as a ‘first-step’ route that helped students in making the often frightening move from ‘informal’ community-based learning to more challenging ‘formal’ provision in one of the city’s Further Education colleges or universities. But just as importantly, it was also organized as a stimulating and intellectually challenging programme of classes that had value in itself, enriching local civic and neighbourhood life. Meeting these aims meant that the Pre-Access had to be organized around a number of features that included:

First, the basic arrangements had to be such that they targeted the barriers that enforced non-participation in adult education and not individuals as disadvantaged ‘poor’ people who happened to be living in certain areas.

Second, the curriculum had to be broad, covering a spread of classes moving across the arts, social sciences and environmental sciences, because this followed the long existing generalist tradition of Scotland, and the Scottish notion of the democratic intellect.

Third, following the findings of Gadamer (Cleary & Hogan, 2001; Gadamer, 2001; 1975), the project had to pursue a dialogic approach to teaching and learning that was conversational and not adversarial.

Finally, following Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, (2002 trans. Rowe & Broadie) the Pre-Access had to make issues of friendship and community well-being connect and be central to the academic work.

In outlining the way that these considerations shaped the Pre-Access in more detail, we first place the project within the general context of what Charles Taylor has termed the malaises of modernity and the more specific context of what various commentators have termed areas of social exclusion (Taylor, 1991).

The Malaise of Modernity

In shaping the Pre-Access project it was noted that social exclusion takes root in the conditions of modernity that often go unnoticed in the subjective experiences of contemporary human life. Taking the real individual and communal features of modern life on board, the project had to be formed around the aim of improving both individual and community well-being. This meant looking at some aspects of modern culture and society contributing to the experience of loss or decline even as civil society ‘develops’ or makes ‘progress’. There are a number of ‘development’ agencies pursuing progressive aims in the urban environment at any one time, however this sense of loss still prevails. Charles Taylor says that ‘sometimes people feel that some important decline has occurred during the last years or decades - since the Second World War, or the 1950’s, for instance. And sometimes the loss is felt over a much longer historical period: the whole modern era from the seventeenth century is frequently seen as the frame of the decline’ (Taylor, 1991, p. 1). Feelings of loss or decline are described in different terms by different thinkers. However, Taylor claims there are three common themes to all accounts. The first, he says concerns individualism. He says ‘we live in a world where people have a right to choose for themselves their own pattern of life’ (p. 2). This right is usually defended in the legal system. He states that in spite of the obvious improvements inherent in modern progress ‘many think it is still incomplete, that economic arrangements, or patterns of family life, or traditional notions of hierarchy still restrict too much of our freedom to be ourselves’ (ibid.).

‘Modern freedom was won,’ according to Taylor, ‘by our breaking loose from older moral horizons. People used to see themselves as part of a large order ... [human] hierarchical order in the universe was
reflected in the hierarchies of human society ... but modern freedom came about through the discrediting of such orders (ibid.). The discrediting of these orders has been theorised endlessly under the rubric of disenchantment with the world. Summarizing this trend, Taylor says 'people no longer have a sense of a higher purpose ... Alexis de Tocqueville sometimes talked like this in the 19th century, referring to the ‘petits et vulgaires plaisirs’ that people tend to seek in the democratic age. In another articulation, we suffer from a lack of passion. Kierkegaard saw ‘the present age’ in these terms. And Nietzsche’s ‘last men’ are at the final nadir of this decline; they have no aspiration left in life but to a ‘piteable comfort’ ... (p. 4). The loss of purpose that is at issue, Taylor links to a narrowing of human life where people lose broader vision because they focus on their individual lives. Democratic equality, says Tocqueville, draws the individual towards himself, ‘et menace de le renfermer enfin tout entier dans la solitude de son propre coeur’ (De Tocqueville, 1981, p. 127). According to Taylor this amounts to ‘the dark side of individualism' as something 'centering on the self, which both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others and society' (p. 4).

The second theme that contributes to the malaise of modernity Taylor cites as the primacy of instrumental reason. We might describe this as 'the kind of rationality we draw on when we calculate the most economical application of means to a given end' (p. 5). This involves maximizing efficiency, or 'finding the best cost output ratio' as a measure of success (ibid.). 'Once society no longer has a sacred structure, once social arrangements and modes of action are no longer grounded in the order of things,' explains Taylor, 'they can be redesigned with their consequences for happiness and well-being of individuals as our goal' and 'the yardstick that henceforth applies is that of instrumental reason' (p. 5). Similarly, once the creatures that surround us lose the significance that accrued to their place in the chain of being, they are open to being treated as raw materials or instruments for our projects,' says Taylor (ibid.). In some sense all this has not been entirely negative: it has to a certain extent been liberating. Taylor however warns that with this 'there is widespread unease that instrumental reason not only has enlarged its scope but also threatened to take over our lives' (ibid.). Taylor might be describing anxieties in the modern university when

1 ‘... threatens in the end, to contain him entirely within the solitude of his own heart’

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refers. Weber spoke of them in the language of the 'iron cage', a language alluding to some sort of helplessness in humans that inhibits them more and more as they try to negate the influence of the cage.

Finally, Taylor talks of the political consequences of individualism and instrumental reason where 'the institutions and structures of industrial-technological society severely restrict our choices' (p. 8). He says that 'they force societies as well as individuals to give a weight to instrumental reason that in serious moral deliberation we would never do, and which may even be highly destructive' (ibid.). Individual lifestyles are difficult to sustain when they go against the collective grain of instrumental reason. Yet societies 'structured around instrumental reason can be seen as imposing a great loss of freedom' (p. 9). Taylor draws upon the terms of Alexis de Tocqueville to substantiate his point saying 'a society in which people end up as the kind of individuals who are 'enclosed in their own hearts' is one where few will want to participate actively in self-government'. These people 'will prefer to stay at home and enjoy the satisfactions of private life, as long as the government of the day produces the means to these satisfactions and distributes them widely' (ibid.).

Social exclusion defined

Taylor defines the time and cultural climate in which the Pre-Access takes form. That time and climate are not abstract issues. Together with other factors they make up much of what amounts to the concrete conditions of socially excluded areas around Glasgow. These conditions dominate the geographical areas recognized as areas of social exclusion that are superficially characterized by high unemployment, poor housing and poor health. But what is a more devastating feature of these areas is that people live with little meaning or hope. Silver (1994, p. 542) has linked this feeling of hopelessness to the broader problems coming out of the cultural conditions of modern specialization where poverty and exclusion regularly work together to assert personal apathy. Silver had written that:

'In Anglo-American liberalism, exclusion is considered a consequence of specialization: of social differentiation, the economic division of labour and the separation of spheres. It assumes that individuals differ, giving rise to specialization in the market and in social groups. It is thus individualist in method, although causation is situated not simply in individual preferences but also in the structures created by co-operating and competing individuals - markets, association and the like. Liberalism, thus conceives of the social order, like the economy and politics, as networks of voluntary exchanges between autonomous individuals with their own interests and situations'.

So Silver implicates far more than individual inadequacies in the problem. Howarth and Kenway (1988, p. 80) give an even more comprehensive explanation saying that 'exclusion' in social exclusion means 'exclusion from systems which facilitate social integration'. Social exclusion then can mean exclusion from the legal system, from the labour market, the welfare system, educational opportunities and general community. The Pre-Access classes are actually based in excluded areas because it is in these areas that the barriers holding people back from educational opportunities operate most effectively, enforcing social injustice in just the spheres that Howarth and Kenway site. Following Cross (1981) these barriers can be summarized as: situational barriers which involve the relatively high costs of education for those living in these areas, the lack of creche support; institutional barriers involving the location of colleges well outside of these marginal areas and concentrated in city centres where the timing of classes are usually incompatible with local domestic responsibilities; and finally attitudinal barriers that relate to the residents of these areas own self-perception and self-evaluation.

It is because of the specific points made by various commentators on social exclusion and the general points made by Charles Taylor on modern malaise, that Pre-Access openly embraces the broad generalist tradition of Scotland’s educational traditions. It is also because these traditions have nurtured so many civic aspirations, associated with the Scottish democratic intellect. And it for these reasons that Gadamer’s conversational approach to learning and teaching is endorsed on the project - as it leans so heavily on notions of friendship as the basic bond of good civic and community life.

The Programme

The Pre-Access Programme, first introduced in 1993, is a community-based initiative set up by the University of Glasgow’s Department of Adult and Continuing Education in collaboration with local authority Community Education Services. During the past ten years the University has also worked with other local agencies in course delivery. The thinking behind Pre-Access was to try to maximise the respective strengths and traditions of both the University and key partners, with the objective of providing high quality learning
opportunities for those living in areas with little or no tradition of participation in higher education. Drawing therefore on their strategically significant location in local communities, Community Education Services and their equivalents have identified the students who participate on the programme. Most of these students had been involved in locally based leisure classes prior to Pre-Access but had less experience of academic study. The academic input on Pre-Access is provided by the University, which continues a centuries-old tradition of taking learning opportunities to those beyond its walls. Since 1993 the Pre-Access has demonstrated that residents in less affluent areas do wish access to intellectually challenging and critical curricula. University teaching staff have been determined not to sell students short by offering a diluted curriculum based on the mistaken belief that students are not capable of coping with subjects such as philosophy. This is evidenced by the fact that since 1993 hundreds of students have benefited from the programme. Some have gone on to complete a degree, some have become more engaged with local community life, almost all have grown in confidence. Central to this success has been the idea of teaching and learning through conversation.

Teaching and Learning through conversation

In their ordinary environment, students do not embrace academic methodologies or specialised languages to communicate with each other about the ordinary, but none the less important issues of life. Following from this, conversational rather than adversarial procedures characterise the tutoring approach on the Pre-Access project. This in no way means that the tutor works without focus or direction in leading each class. However, conversational procedures allow features of ‘recognition’ to emerge naturally (Gadamer 2001), encouraging the different participants to openly develop their own interpretive skills. The interpretive process involved does not work towards ‘correct’ readings of class material. Rather, difference is always acknowledged as valuable. Students are encouraged to approach any reading as a critical exercise and to form their own critiques. When done in a conversational context, the ‘authentic’ voice seems to come out with ease. Reading critically thus endorses a collective involvement centred around different perspectives. This means that there is no focus upon certainty. There is, however, a communal struggle to settle into the language as different positions are woven together. This is rarely other than inspiring for everyone involved. The more that the students settle into the conversational approach to learning and teaching, the more that ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ ideas about different opinions seem to disappear in class discussions. The ontological grounds of truth rarely emerge in this way, as the more natural way of conversing always encourages an approach that is neither completely objective nor subjective.

On the Pre-Access project the emphasis is always on getting students to think about issues for themselves and converse about them in their own way. When it comes to discussion on eudaimonia there is often hostility expressed about the contemporary conditions that do not embrace the centrality of the notion in ordinary life. Similarly there is hostility expressed in relation to the idea that eudaimonia is now irrelevant. None of this means that a person’s existing beliefs about a good life are to be abandoned completely when it comes to reading Aristotle. But there are certain ideas that seem to endure - as in the case of the structure of aims that appear to be unavoidable. Ideas about structures may not be specifically expressed but they come in acknowledging the daily demands of traditions and day-to-day culture. Gadamer argues that tradition - in the case of the Pre-Access this is the Scottish democratic tradition - is not dead or oppressive. Tradition is rather like an active presence that shapes the context of different understandings, beliefs and commitments that make self-understanding more real. The significance of tradition then emerges not in acts of acquiescence but in acts of questioning where the influence of tradition is never accepted unconditionally. This gives a deeper understanding of tradition that does not silence inquiry. Tradition can serve to stimulate or energise people and make them more aware of themselves and the ground on which they think and act. Here the insecurity of questioning works to inspire agency - the very thing that modernity does not encourage in the lives of many people. In this conversational approach then, people learn to think for themselves. This is quickly realised to be the inescapable condition of humans in living truly human lives. Alas, frustratingly this means that total self-clarity is always just beyond attainability - or the next class and this goes on across the entire spread of subjects.

Gadamer (2001) is adamant that education takes place primarily through conversation and the experience of the Pre-Access project seems to support the conviction. Gadamer argues (Dostal, 2002) that on the one hand this gives a key role to others in the learning process, and on the other it places responsibility on the individual to learn for themselves through the exercise
of certain (totally human) capacities. Yet the two emphases are not contradictory and exercising the latter involves a responsibility that inevitably involves a relationship with others. He cites voluntary study groups or learning circles ‘where one’s own sense of being-in-the-world comes to fullness as a being-with-others in purposeful relationships of learning’ (Cleary and Hogan, 2001, p. 521). Learning here is burdened with issues of identity and self-understanding that are sorted out, as best they can be, in communication. Learning to speak ‘makes possible: naming, ascribing significance, being recognised, gaining acceptance and so on’ (ibid. p. 522). Gadamer draws upon the Hegelian term einhausen (in-dwelling) in highlighting the importance of making oneself at home in this learning process. But this 'making oneself at home is not any form of domesticity' but is rather a ‘recurring interplay, or a challenging tension, between at-homeness and not-at-homeness’ that is always at play in conversation (ibid.).

**Friendship and Community**

Whilst modernity tends to separate people into living atomised lives - as Tocqueville clearly pointed out - and social exclusion marginalizes people from the mainstream normalising activities of society, friendship and community work in an entirely different way. Friendship is spoken about, written about and read about with a special focus on the Pre-Access. It comes up in Aristotle as one of the necessary conditions of human flourishing. Where people are being whatever it is that humans are, and they are being that well, they are reasoning about their lives, discussing different activities and evaluating different choices. They are functioning well and getting on with life, and according to Aristotle, when people function well they live eudaimonic lives. Aristotle thinks it is uncontroversial to say that eudaimonia is the highest good, or ultimate end of human action (NE, 1095a). He thinks that all humans desire eudaimonia for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else, and that happens to be the case because of the structure of eudaimonia. This is difficult for ‘moderns’ to grasp now but it makes sense to those on the Pre-Access. Less difficult to grasp is that having friends and being a friend to others is central to the whole notion of living a good life. Being a friend contributes to a person’s well-being - a concept again that works on a number of different levels, all of which emerge in the dialogues of the Pre-Access classes.

The notions of well-being and friendship are grounded in the general ethos of Pre-Access. To what extent can Aristotle’s ideas be thought to shape that ethos? Aristotle says people address one another as ‘friends’ when they are about the same campaign or project and this makes friendship close to justice: ‘for in every kind of sharing community there seems to be a specific kind of justice, and friendship’ (1159b). On Pre-Access, the students share a learning experience and the nature of that sharing implies a certain sort of relationship that is one form of friendship (1159b). There is little competition. Aristotle writes of friendship in the Ethics as though it is a fundamental notion to the way he builds the idea of politics. Aristotle always has friendship based upon reciprocity. This might involve friendships of utility, friendships of pleasure or friendships of virtue - best thought of as friendships built around the mutual appreciation of both the friend’s personality or character. Friendships of utility and pleasure may help people in moving house or writing an essay. They may help in child minding but friendships of virtue are more ongoing. By virtue Aristotle means character traits or intellectual qualities that are deeper and might be thought of as at work in the kind of friendship that exists between soul mates or really good pals. Friendships of utility and pleasure arise almost accidentally but friendships of virtue do not. Aristotle’s view of this latter form of friendship is that it is absolutely necessary in really good lives and as such it is the kind that has to be thought about carefully and nurtured. It is too important to be left to chance. In relation to this best sort of friendship, friends wish the very best for one another (NE, 1156b). They lift one another, giving each other the confidence to try harder and be more ambitious in their activities. All this is spelled out in the reading of Aristotle and on a project like Pre-Access inspiring this kind of relationship amongst the students (who are mainly female) can be invaluable. They do not develop overnight of course but such relationships do develop on and continue after the project has finished as students go on to more challenging study. This is simply raised in class in the context of humans being the sort of communicative and social sorts of beings that they are and being it well. Aristotle quotes ‘someone’ saying ‘cut off the talk [about friendship], and many a time you cut off the friendship’ (NE, 1157b). There is almost endless conversation and talk about friendship on Pre-Access.

They say that a person should love most the one who is most a friend, and the one who is most a friend is the friend who wishes good things for the one for whom he wishes them, for that other’s sake, even if no one will know; and these features belong most to oneself in relation to oneself, as in fact do all the others by which a friend is defined’, states Aristotle (NE, 1168b). This is
read as something strange on Pre-Access. After all most of the students are mothers, many of them young single mothers who care for their children more than they care for themselves. For these young women care is regularly equated with making sacrifices. Other older women on the project may have spent most of their adult lives caring for others, like their working spouse, children and aged parents. They may then have difficulty in thinking of themselves as first caring for themselves as their own best friend. However this is encouraged on the project because 'all the features of friendship start with oneself and are then 'extended to others' (NE, 1168b). Amity as the basis of equality, starts with the self in relation to the self and takes the form of 'self-love'. This is not a selfish sort of love that makes care for others less important. It simply makes caring for oneself central to caring for others less important. It makes it inconceivable to ignore our own well-being whilst considering the well-being of others, and in no way makes concessions to some of the more pernicious aspects of modern individualism that are highlighted by Taylor. Individualism replaces self-love with personal desire satisfaction. This is not Aristotle's idea.

History in Scotland cannot avoid the legacy of the Scottish Enlightenment. For Hume and Smith (Hill & McCarthy in King and Devere, 2000, p. 33) the terms of friendship were clarified with contracts. There are no contracts on Pre-Access and yet there is the trust and respect between agents that Smith associates with the contract. With the exception of Ferguson (ibid.), sympathy plays a fundamental role in almost all Enlightenment theories of friendship. The idea of eudaimonia as something relating to the human’s nature just about disappears. It goes with the extended family. In feudal or pastoral orders extended families remain united for the purpose of common defence. Smith makes the point that biological affiliation is displaced by proximity, but this does not mean the end of communities (ibid.). Human learning builds upon social relations where meanings and morals inevitably move towards the collective, towards new and different ideas of community. New communities erode and build at the same time. They do not just go away. As King and Devere note, ‘Smith celebrated the breakdown of feudalism and the diffusion of freedom and individual power brought on by commercialism. He witnessed first hand the transition from social organisations based on mechanistic solidarity to those characterised by organic solidarity’. In Scotland ‘that transition saw the passing of clan and village life, the breakdown of extended families, the growth of cities, the increasing development of task specialisation and the extension of markets’ (ibid.) but Smith did not witness humans becoming something that they are not. This was left to the more pernicious forces of contemporary life that the Pre-Access project pushes against in every detail of its organisation.

References


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