

Women's Access Course into the Teaching of Craft, Design & Technology

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Recent improvement in the recruitment of students onto Initial Teacher Training courses for Craft, Design and Technology may cause us to forget just how difficult it was three or four years ago to fill our courses with good calibre students. Most courses now have more than their 'token woman', but three years ago the position was rather different.

In July 1985 The Manpower Services Commission asked most CDT Training Establishments if they had any proposals for increasing the supply of teachers. As I remember it we had until 8th August to submit ideas. We had three and perhaps the most important one was for an 'Access Course for Women'. We needed to secure a better balance of the sexes on our courses and it was quite clear that there was effectively only a minute supply of suitable and qualified women available.

The Polytechnic was quite clear that as this was to be a Further Education Course it would most appropriately be run by a local college of FE. Dudley College of Technology is situated about half a mile from the Faculty of Education and because of its expertise in running general access courses for HE it appeared to be an ideal venue. Initial difficulties were fairly quickly overcome but clearly adapting a good room and taking the risk of appointing staff when MSC support was only available for one year were factors which the College and the LEA had to carefully consider.

The MSC responded with great enthusiasm and much of the early part of 1986 was absorbed with the task of appointing staff and preparing a suitable base for the course. We made a number of very firm decisions. It was to be a course for Women only. The Polytechnic and the College would both be involved in the selection of students. All accepted students would be guaranteed a place on the Four Year (hons) B.Ed provided they passed the Access Course. All students, unless they had 'A' Levels, would have to be at least 24 (at this time the DES did not recognise Access Courses as of 'A' Level equivalence).

The most crucial decision was concerned with who was to run the course. We felt it should, if possible, be a woman but it needed to be a woman with experience of running CDT in a school. The person appointed would

also need special skill in supporting and giving confidence to the students. Eventually we appointed Sue Denson. Sue had a background in Art teaching but had gradually become more and more involved in the teaching of CDT. In 1985 she was seconded by her LEA (Wolverhampton) to the Polytechnic to formalise her re-training as a teacher of Craft, Design and Technology. Unfortunately for them they never got her back. An extended interview (about 7 months) for the new job convinced us that we were unlikely to ever find a more appropriate and sympathetic person to run the Access Course.

Despite her still being on the Re-training Course at the Polytechnic Sue began the task of recruiting students, designing the proposals for the operation of the course and fighting the battles for space and essential equipment. The MSC was willing to fund the purchase of some of the equipment but much of it had to be drawn from other parts of the college or was lent by the Polytechnic. Fairly traditional departments within the college found it quite difficult to understand why the access students would perhaps be 'put off' by having to go into Engineering if they wanted to turn a piece of metal. To them there seemed little sense in putting a small lathe into the new CDT room.

Recruitment also proved quite difficult. Brochures were printed and circulated and various articles were written for newspapers and magazines. We had expected droves of women to jump at the opportunity of making a fresh start. Those whom we did interview at this stage impressed us as bright, energetic and ambitious people who almost invariably had seen little point in working hard whilst at school and who now bitterly regretted their failure to study. We had expected the Ethnic minority groups to seize the opportunity but despite targeting the advertising very directly there was little or no response. The 'breakthrough' in recruitment occurred when a man applied for the course and was rejected because he was a man! He made a great fuss and involved his local Councillor who, in turn, made sure that the matter was well ventilated in the local papers. This did the trick and the course rapidly filled for a September start.

Meanwhile a basement room, with the major distinction of being very close to the lavatories and having but little daylight or ventilation, had been grudgingly vacated by one of the departments. This room although not really big enough was now re-wired and decorated and gradually equipped as a multi-purpose studio/workshop.

Some mistakes were made — never buy a combined planer and circular saw — but on the whole most things were ready for the first intake of students.

The course was designed around a series of projects which offered increasing challenges. The initial projects were of short duration but right from the beginning the students were offered a balance of creative opportunity and skills-acquisition.

The most pressing difficulty for most of the students was the shortage of cash. The majority had no grants and because the course was full-time they were unable to claim benefit. One or two single parents were able to cope financially and some course members were supported by their families. Sadly, some students were forced to withdraw. Quite a few of the students travelled a long way from their homes and some of these were assisted by their LEAs with travel costs.

By Christmas the course had settled down with a core of about 10 students who were a joy to visit. Their initial fears about CDT were being overcome and you could sense a real feeling of triumph as they learned to manipulate materials and use machinery which such a short time before they had not even known the name of. Also there was the little matter of Mathematics and English. Some of the students had an 'O' level pass in these subjects; some had one of the subjects but the majority needed both. The decision had been made that in order to proceed all students would need to have these 'O' levels. The level of tuition within the college is excellent and these were a highly motivated group.

Another unexpected aspect of the course membership were the graduates. We did not anticipate that we would attract degree holders onto the course but we had about three with good degrees in academic disciplines who

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