

OEPS briefing

Open Learning Champions

## About this briefing

These notes provide a short outline of the rationale for Open Learning Champions and links to useful resources and further reading. It is one of a series produced by the Opening Educational Practices in Scotland (OEPS) project. OEPS was a three-year cross-sector project to facilitate best practice in Scottish open education. The project had a specific focus on widening participation and social justice. This briefing and others in the series reflects the focus and objectives of the project. Find out more about OEPS at [www.oepscotland.org](http://www.oepscotland.org) and access reports, case studies and good practice guides from the [OEPS legacy collection](http://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/oeps).

## Why OpenLearning Champions?

The last few years have seen a huge increase in access to digital devices – laptops, tablets and smart phones. At the same time there has also been a rapid increase in the availability of free online courses that cover almost any topic you can think of. So far, these developments have tended to increase the choices open to those with experience of higher education but haven’t had a significant impact on those who need support most. But this new ‘digital divide’ isn’t inevitable.

A separate OEPS report in the OEPS legacy collection, ‘Breaking down barriers to widening participation’, looks in more depth at the factors that deter non-traditional learners from using free online courses.

Research by Fred Garnett (Smith and Cook, 2002) noted that

*‘… there is no digital content that, in itself, alleviates digital divides. Rather, a more complicated picture exists concerning content creation and the learning relationships that support such a process. The recommendation of the research was that content creation tools and new skills in the “trusted intermediaries’’ who support learning in digital contexts were needed, …’*

Adult learners who achieve qualifications often do so as the culmination of learning journeys that often start with short episodes of informal learning. These journeys are personal, unique to each individual but also dependent on support and encourage from “trusted intermediaries”, friends, family and colleagues. Trusted intermediaries can be found in a very wide range of roles in third sector organisations, trade unions and more informal community settings. Jonassen et al (2003: 71) note that

*‘… learning starts with individuals and communities. The desire to learn, a natural desire, is often constructed as informal learning and comes from individuals or groups with interests who may organise and access resources in pursuit of that interest: In the real world, when people need to learn something, they usually do not remove themselves from their normal situations and force themselves into sterile rooms to listen to lectures on formal principles about what they are doing. Rather, they tend to form work groups (practice communities), assign roles, teach and support each other, and develop identities that are defined by the roles they play in support of the group.’*

## What is an OpenLearning Champion?

The idea of an Open Learning Champion is simple. A ‘Champion’ is someone in a workplace or a community setting who is enthusiastic about opening up learning opportunities, whom their colleagues trust, and who can help them on the first steps of a learning journey. They are not a teacher, a tutor, a computer geek or an expert on any particular course. They act to facilitate, bring people together in learning groups, support and encourage.

## Examples of the Open Learning Champion Model

The Open University in Wales and the Open University in Scotland have both established variants of the Open Learning Champions model. More details of each scheme can be found at:

<http://www.open.ac.uk/wales/our-work/community/openlearn-champions>

and

<http://www.open.ac.uk/scotland/our-work/open-learning-champions>

The OEPS project worked with Scottish Union Learning to explore barriers to participation in online learning. The insights into good practice that resulted are collated in a short open course, [‘Supporting Collective Learning in Workplace and Community Settings’](http://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/curse/view.php?id=2692). For more details see Cannell and Macintyre (2016).

## Further Reading

Case study interview with Gill Ryan in OEPS impact case studies – part of the [OEPS legacy collection](http://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/oeps).

Cannell, P. and Macintyre, R. (2016)Free open online resources in workplace and community settings – a case study on overcoming barriers. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 19(1), pp111-122.

Jonassen, D., et al., (2003) *Learning to Solve Problems with Technology: A Constructivist Perspective*, Merrill, London.

Macintyre, R. (2015) OEPS working with Scottish Union Learning Education Champions, https://oepscotland.org/2015/10/22/oeps-working-with-scottish-union-learn-education-champions/

Ryan, G. (2017) Open Learning Champions – model for widening participation, <https://oepscotland.org/2017/04/03/open-learning-champions-a-model-for-widening-participation/>

Ryan, G. and Hewitt, L. (2015) [*Developing a flexible model of Open Learning Champions: report on findings from pilot sites in Shetland and Dumfries*](http://tinyurl.com/ycac35sp). Edinburgh: The Open University.

Smith, M. & Cook, J. (2002) Progress Report on Study of UK Online Centres. Submitted to British Educational and Communications Technology Association (Becta). Learning Technology Research Institute, University of North London, March 2002.

Pete Cannell

July 2017

## This briefing is part of a suite of OEPS briefing notes, reports and courses

## Produced under a Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 License