

Community learning, networks and change

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Introduction and background to the Research

This report is based on a study being undertaken as part of a wider project investigating and evaluating the model of off-site learning provision delivered and supported by the University of Teesside. The aim of this study was to investigate and then report the views and experiences of staff from community learning venues in Middlesbrough that have some degree of involvement – be it formally or less formally – with the University. In particular, the study sought to identify key issues for staff in relation to the delivery of learning opportunities, partnership working and inter-organisational relationships. This paper presents an outline of the findings to date.

The basis of the current widening access agenda has been in the context of a number of far-reaching and influential policy documents, more recently including the Government's White Paper 'Learning to Succeed: a new framework for post-16 learning' (DfEE 1999) and the joint Higher Education Funding Council (England) & Learning and Skills Council proposals (2002) under Partnerships for Progression. Recent legislation has led to the formation of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP) and Lifelong Learning Partnerships (LLP) to work with local communities in line with the Government's national strategy for neighbourhood renewal.

The University of Teesside - 'The Opportunity University'

The University of Teesside is a compact, one-site campus located in Middlesbrough in the North-East of England. It is in the heart of the Tees Valley, where levels of educational attainment and progression to Higher Education (HE) are significantly below the national average. The University is one of the largest employers in the region and is firmly committed to contributing to the local community. For many years it has expressed a strong commitment to widening access to cater for all those who may benefit from HE.

Since 1993 the University has had formal links with a number of local and regional colleges, collectively referred to as the University of Teesside Partnership. Some HE level courses are offered in whole or in part in these institutions. The University has recently built upon this regional partnership by incorporating the six sixth-form colleges and by extending its association with local schools, thereby further facilitating progression from school and Further Education (FE) into HE. The University has been recognised in recent Funding Council Performance Indicators as one of the top two universities in England for attracting young students from neighbourhoods where traditionally people have not entered HE. There are currently around 16,500 students studying at the University on a full or part-time basis.

Teaching and research activities are organised into six Academic Schools and a number of central units. Some have responsibility for developing widening participation activities, notably the Centre for Lifelong Learning, which coordinates a wide range of projects and initiatives that are integral to the University of Teesside's mission and accord with the Government's widening access and lifelong learning agendas. Activities include the provision of information and

guidance, Access Programmes, the Associate Student and Negotiated Learning Scheme, and a Summer College / University.

The University's off-site provision

In addition to its school and college-based initiatives, one significant development in the past few years has been the expansion of community provision to enable the delivery of off-site HE-level modules (particularly in Information Technology) to reflect community needs. The University has a Community Learning Strategy that has been developed in response to the University's Mission and governmental agendas.

Community Learning Venues

A significant number of organisations in Middlesbrough provide opportunities for adult learners to engage in either accredited or non-accredited learning at a range of levels. These include venues supported by Middlesbrough Council and voluntary sector centres with charitable status, all of which are constantly seeking external sources of funding to maintain their survival.

Research Methodology

The research was undertaken using qualitative methods that focused on the perceptions and experiences of the participants (Locke et al., 1993). The study proceeded on the basis that key themes of the research and their possible relationship with organisational models would be formulated after initial data had been generated. This flexible approach was seen as a strength of this study (Burgess, 1984).

Data collection

Thirteen staff from eight Middlesbrough venues were interviewed in the course of this study. Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary research tool, with some follow-up interviews undertaken to clarify points or to elicit further data. As a tool for research, interviews are 'virtually infinitely flexible' and can be used alongside other methods (Breakwell et al., 1995). They allow researchers to develop some rapport with respondents, offering 'the undisputed advantage [of] the richness and spontaneity of information' (Oppenheim, 1976, p. 32) and allowing respondents to give their perceptions and experiences in line with the study's objectives. The interviews were either tape-recorded and transcribed, or comprehensive notes were taken. In addition, on-going methodological notes were made throughout the study (Burgess, 1984).

A focus group was also held to discuss findings and to examine the issues involved in greater depth. This gave further validity to the data previously gathered by allowing the respondents to discuss key issues that had been identified from the interviews. It also gave the advantage of gathering a large amount of data over a short time-period whilst allowing the researchers to observe the interaction between the respondents.

Ethical considerations underpinned the entire approach to this study. The respondents were made clear about the purposes of the research and the use to which the findings would be put. The reporting of the findings also had regard to these issues. In order to respect confidentiality, individuals and venues are not identified and a summary of the findings is presented in an issue-specific manner.

The Research Findings

Analysis of the data gathered from the interviews and the focus group produced four major themes / categories relating to the experiences of staff from community learning venues:

- Working in Partnership
- Managing Resources
- Working with Uncertainty
- Increasing Participation

Strong underlying themes permeated all categories, most notably issues of fear, security, funding and power imbalances.

Working in Partnership

The notion of partnership working is central to a plethora of Government policy initiatives, with an ever-increasing emphasis on multi-agency working. The study found considerable tensions within organisations in trying to work with others. It also found that different organisations had widely varying perceptions as to what partnership involved. One respondent felt this was a 'buzzword' and another stated people were unsure how all these partnerships fit in with each other.

Nearly all respondents expressed the tensions organisations felt. The smaller organisations were afraid of 'stepping on each others' toes' and of 'respecting loyalties'. They did not want to get into a competitive situation, and 'people are wary of safeguarding their own patch'.

Formal and informal partnerships

Most organisations perceived they had some form of formal partnerships, but few had Service Level Agreements or similar formal contractual arrangements. If organisations did work with each other, this was usually just for specific projects. The study found that partnership arrangements varied enormously between venues and that collaborative working developed on a makeshift basis. As one respondent stated,

R7 If we could crack this notion of *really* working in partnership then I think we could have done a lot more.

Despite the potential threats that could result from partnership working, all respondents did, however, feel that there were benefits to their organisations - and particularly for learners - of establishing closer working relationships between themselves and with other providers.

Power imbalances

Whilst wishing to build closer working arrangements with others, be they more formal contractual arrangements or informal networks, nearly all respondents expressed concerns about perceived power imbalances when working with large organisations such as local FE Colleges or the University. Respondents certainly felt disempowered when dealing with the Learning & Skills Council or the Middlesbrough Council, feeling that these bodies, not staff or local people decided the future 'direction' of the venue.

Communication

Respondents expressed strong views that they were largely unclear about communication structures at several levels:

- Those within the Borough relating to the numerous interrelationships between various initiatives (such as Connexions, SureStart)
- Those relating to the interrelationship between numerous funding bodies
- The relationship between – and roles & responsibilities of – University Schools and Central Departments

Community learning venues were largely unaware of the activities and learning opportunities offered in other venues, especially those outside of their neighbouring Ward areas.

Central coordination

There was strong consensus for the University to have a central point of contact for off-site organisations. All respondents stated that in the past few years their organisations had had contact with several people from various University departments. This often led to confusion; respondents were not easily able to identify the various responsibilities of, or the relationship between, University departments:

R2 I could reel you off a list of names of people I've spoken to

Most respondents expressed the view that having a Community Learning Manager / clearly identified Community Learning Team was helpful – it was preferable to have personal contact with people one knows and trusts:

R2 At least you've continued dialogue, even if you can't help.

R5 It's been enough working with and you. It's better to have a central point of contact.

Lack of expertise

The experience of most venues was that there was a small core of residents who had active involvement with the venue, but Management Committees lacked expertise and were not fully representative of the local community:

R3 We have a good board of directors, all of who are residents. Every good intention is there but they do not have the experience.

R9 Our committee is made up of pensioners. We don't get the balance.

There was a desire to involve more local people, but venues were finding this difficult to achieve.

Being listened to

Respondents expressed strong dissatisfaction with existing strategic structures within the Borough, feeling that

R2 (Committees are) ... very strict in following the agendas. It's very difficult to talk and make a point.

R3 Sometimes it's getting a bit political.

It was felt that representation on Middlesbrough committees such as the LSP and LLP was far-removed from giving a voice to their own organisations. Funding bodies and strategic committees were generally inaccessible and, even if they could be accessed, they lacked understanding and were unable to provide the required support.

A minority of respondents shared similar criticisms about working with other educational providers:

R8 The University should listen more to what you want and not what they want.

R10 You've got to fit in with what communities want.

Managing Resources

The issue of managing with limited financial, physical and human resources was a key consideration for all organisations. Respondents expressed concerns about how fairly resources were allocated and of the competitive nature of funding applications. All felt that funding restrictions were a barrier to facilitating learning opportunities. Funding for courses, tutors and crèche facilities was of key importance to all organisations.

Knowing where to look.

One respondent enquired if Middlesbrough had a committee to centrally control resources, and another asked how resources were shared. These questions highlighted the poor communication respondents felt existed within Middlesbrough between managers at a strategic level and providers at a local level.

Working with Uncertainty

The issue of fear and uncertainty has permeated all the identified themes – such as uncertainty about future funding and sufficient resources, the ability to engage with a sufficient number of new learners, anxieties of working in partnership.

Learners' anxieties

It was unanimously felt that people's prior learning experiences, usually their school years, had an adverse effect on their future motivation and confidence for further learning. But as one respondent pointed out, 'bad educational experiences are not just confined to school'. Organisations needed to recognise that their own current provision could reinforce the poor educational experiences of learners. Helping learners to feel emotionally and educationally secure was of key concern to all respondents:

R1 It's about obvious security issues as well as that incorporating self-being and confidence.

R2 It looks scary to people who haven't done anything before.

Staff anxieties

Several respondents talked about the anxieties and training needs of tutors, as well as the difficulty in recruiting and retaining tutors. Working in the community required specialist skills and a high degree of confidence. Staff often felt insecure about their future employment and good volunteers were quickly lost as they moved into paid employment.

Security

Whilst the security of buildings was of ongoing concern, measures such as bars and shutters on windows and doors made many venues appear a less hospitable environment. As one respondent

stated, it was necessary to make security ‘as inconspicuous as possible’. The safety of staff and equipment was also identified as a key issue for most venues.

Increasing Participation

Some respondents felt that issues relating to partnership working and communication difficulties took the emphasis away from the real needs of learners and local residents. Two venues reported a high number of lone parents in the area, and three venues worked with a significant number of refugees and asylum seekers. Many respondents expressed the view that they were working with a transient population.

R7 The people who are using the place are not the people we originally targeted...

R12 All we’re concerned about are the residents feeling comfortable to come back to us, and this isn’t happening.

Stepping Stones

Learner confidence and poor previous educational experiences have already been identified as barriers to learning. The study found that the most pressing task was engaging with new learners in some kind of way. Offering incentives such as food and prizes was common practice.

R1 It’s about being an icebreaker – making the initial steps a lot easier and comfortable.

Taking the first steps does not necessarily mean that learners then engage in learning in a sustained or coherent way. Learners often step on and then off the stepping stones that meander around the learning environment – they do not form a single path progressing from A to B.

R9 People drop in and out, depending on their needs.

This made it particularly important for ‘bite size’ learning opportunities to be made available, to make new learning opportunities more manageable and achievable as well as allowing people to access learning as and when required.

Other key issues for people were the timing of events / courses, the provision of Crèche facilities, and assistance with travel to and from venues. Two venues provide a minibus service for learners and Middlesbrough also has a community minibus service that can be accessed by local people. Despite such resources, the study found that many learners are reluctant to attend venues outside of their immediate locality. Lack of confidence and low-esteem was identified as a significant barrier preventing people from travelling, even to a nearby venue, let alone to the local college or University:

R11 He can’t do this, can’t go to – it was enough for him to come here.

R10 People find the University daunting, scary, especially a lot of the older people.

Publicity & Raising Awareness

A variety of methods were used to promote the opportunities available at venues, notably distributing leaflets and posters in local shops, pubs and houses. Some venues produced a local

newsletter circulated to all houses in the area. However, nearly all respondents expressed the view that word of mouth was the most effective and popular form of attracting new learners:

- R2 It doesn't matter how many leaflets you put out, people don't read them.
- R9 We know I doesn't work through media-based publicity (such as newspapers) – we like the personal touch, knocking on doors.

The study highlighted the problem of lack of clarity in terms of roles and responsibilities for publicising University courses. This tended to be jointly managed in most venues, with a minority being unclear about who had ultimate responsibility for recruiting learners. Three respondents were strongly of the view that publicity showing University logos was not successful in engaging with new learners who often felt that such publicity was not for people such as themselves.

Conclusion

This paper provides a summary of the main findings emanating from the study. There has not been scope herein to make detailed comment on the findings nor to explore the relationship between the findings and published research / theoretical models.

The study revealed that resource allocation and engaging with new learners are significant issues of concern. In principle, community venues are committed to the idea of partnership working but in practice there are inherent tensions and considerable difficulties with making this happen. Further research is required into perceived power imbalances in terms of the size of an organisation and access to / expertise in gaining funding. However, staff working in smaller venues have excellent knowledge and expertise of their locality and of the people who live there / access their venues.

It is clear that strategies for community learning provision are still evolving and that recent policy developments have not led to significant changes in organisational practices. Policy-makers need to recognise the difference between organisational structures and local populations. Coordinated and workable structures are not in place to assist learning venues to work more cooperatively with each other and with other organisations. Any joint initiatives happen on an impromptu basis. There is considerable scope for promoting a more sustained and coherent approach to assisting collaborative working.

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