

The Huskies are harnessed and ready to go, but who is shouting “Mush”?

A consideration of the challenges and opportunities inherent in meeting the needs of learners in Adult Community Learning

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Abstract

In the light of significant changes to the funding and delivery of adult community learning, the need to listen closely and respond to what learners require is essential but has become more difficult. This research project examined the value of collaborative approaches to community consultation, identified barriers to joint working and examined good practice in listening to learners and meeting their needs. Research was undertaken through surveys, interviews, community events, discussions with a group of learning providers and other stakeholders in a locality, and an extensive literature review and document search. Initial findings have led to a number of recommendations for the adult community learning sector in developing collaborative approaches that involve learners in planning, funding and delivery of local community learning.

Introduction

This research has been a journey of exploration. Through our roles as leaders in adult community and voluntary learning services, we are driven by a shared vision that learning can make a significant change to the lives of adults and the communities in which they live. It was clear that by working together we could offer more to learners - by avoiding duplication of effort and sharing resources. Our

working together coincided with the launch of the 'Big Society'. It was apparent that adult community learning had much to contribute to this concept.

The aim of Big Society is to create a climate that empowers local people and communities, building a big society that will *"take power away from politicians and give it to people"* (Cameron 2010). At present the power attached to community learning is held by the funding agencies and providers. For community learning to be truly responsive the power has to be given to learners and their communities, involving them at each stage of planning the learning offer, identifying funding sources and helping to prioritise existing funds as well as potentially delivering the learning offer through study circles or self directed groups.

The Husky Analogy

We found that using metaphors helped us to explore a complex issue.

"Metaphor can serve to make visible things that would otherwise be difficult to put into words, such as patterns of feelings, dynamics and perceptions and provide us with knobs and levers to let us go in the other direction and to intervene in these underlying patterns" (Martin 2004:66).

The use of metaphor helped us to explore the complexities and the multiple meanings of community and community learning, from a more neutral standpoint. Using the metaphor meant we could be more open and honest about the challenges and barriers because we did not have to make direct reference to our own learning provision, or that of others.

The dog sled represents adult community learning. It describes a vehicle that has to

be pulled by a team made up of individual dogs, representing the different partners, providers and interested parties in community learning. The dogs use their individual strengths but must go in the same direction at the same pace, over challenging and changing terrain. They will however only follow commands and require a lead to say 'mush'. There are many different voices shouting 'mush'. Our research indicates that it is the voice with the most power, influence or money that gets heard, and that whoever shouts the loudest gets to direct the sled. Our concern is that unless we genuinely listen to learners we could be going in the wrong direction or even across unsafe ground.

The term "mush" has numerous definitions. It is commonly thought to mean "go" but can also mean "speed up" and "to go fast". Just as the terms used in dog sledding are open to different interpretations, community learning is defined in many different ways and there may not be a shared understanding of its purpose amongst learners, communities and learning providers.

"Community is a problematic and polysemic term, meaning different things to different people with inherently political overtones." (Averweg & Leaning 2011)

Adult Community Learning

There is no single understanding of what is community learning. A narrow definition is the activities that are funded through the government's "Adult Safeguarded Learning" budget. This is the £210million that was ring-fenced and protected in the government's 2010 spending review. This public funding is distributed by the Skills Funding Agency to a variety of adult learning providers, mostly local authorities and some voluntary sector learning providers. In *New Challenges, New Chances* (Aug

2011) the term Informal Adult and Community Learning was used and the definition is much broader:

“The term Informal Adult and Community Learning (IACL) covers structured adult education classes taught by professionally qualified teachers, unstructured activity that leads to learning, informal courses delivered in the private sector, independent study online, and self-organised study groups. Some learning happens in very short episodes and some happens over a full year or even longer. This kind of learning can be delivered by public, private or voluntary sector providers or organised by people for themselves through face to face groups, online communities or personal projects.”

For this research we chose to use the definition contained in the “New Challenges, New Chances” report in December 2011 which used the term Community Learning:

“IACL provides opportunities for people to develop new interests, improve their confidence and wellbeing, support their children’s learning and interact positively with people from disparate backgrounds. Informal learning makes society a happier and healthier place, and this country a better one to live in. IACL offers personal choice, personal responsibility and personal empowerment. It takes place in accessible community venues and takes account of individual needs and learning styles. It engages people through their interests in relaxed and welcoming classes that contribute to community wellbeing and social inclusion. Without this kind of learning, many people would never get started in learning or realise their full potential.”

The Local Context

This research is conducted in an industrial city in the East Midlands. It is a city with a history and tradition of engineering and manufacturing. Of the seventeen wards in the city, seven are classed as areas of socio-economic deprivation. It is a city of contrasts with 26% of the workforce qualified to graduate level or higher but with 19% of the working age population with no formal qualifications. The Centre for Cities 2012 report ranked it as the city with the highest number of the working age population without any formal qualifications. Strategic partnership working is strong in the city and the city's strategic plan for 2011-2026 has clearly defined aims and objectives that are shared across public, private and voluntary sector organisations. The plan was informed by a Three Wishes public consultation campaign asking people who live and work in the city what they would wish for their city to be like in 15 years' time to help decision makers see what issues people feel are important. Learning scored highly in the wish list and is clearly identified in the strategic plan. There is an overarching aim that "all people will enjoy achieving their learning potential" with specific objectives of "more adults learning" and "better qualifications among adults". The responsibility for achieving these objectives is distributed among several boards and subgroups representing organisations from across the city. The responsibility for community learning rests with the Children, Families and Learners' Board which has a "Learning for Living" sub-group. We are members of this group as representatives of the two organisations that receive Adult Safeguarded Funding from the Skills Funding Agency together with other publicly funded providers, local authority departments, voluntary sector groups and other interested groups.

This group has already gained a shared identity with its own logo and an information

booklet detailing all of the member organisations. In 2011, the group opened a “learning shop” for a fortnight using an empty shop unit in the city centre to provide and promote learning activities. This event provides a good example of partnership work as the venture was too large for any one member organisation to have attempted alone. Working in partnership we were able to offer a wide range of activities that attracted over 500 people. The success of this event prompted us to think about further collaboration.

The National Context

Providers of informal, or non-formal community-based learning are facing a period of significant change that is both a threat in terms of reduced funding but also an opportunity in terms of the government’s focus on Localism with recognition of the importance of local communities and response to local priorities. Local communities, learners and prospective learners are keen to ensure that decisions about learning benefit local communities, as NIACE discovered in their citizens survey into informal adult and community learning;

“The predominant view is that decisions should be made locally by the people who are directly affected: learning providers, learners, local people and local government.” (NIACE 2012)

The changes affecting learning provision are significant and wide-reaching, but also full of tensions and contradictions. The Localism Bill highlights the importance of identifying local priorities and meeting local needs whilst the Skills Funding Agency’s introduction of minimum contract values has reduced the number of smaller, community based organisations directly funded to deliver learning.

“While it is envisaged that voluntary organisations will continue to be eligible to receive public funding directly and indirectly through sub-contracting and consortia arrangements, the process and legal costs of making the arrangements have already excluded some smaller learning providers, and limited the time available for other partnership building activities.”

(Quantrill 2012)

The Conservative ‘Big Society’ ideal has emphasised the importance of volunteering and empowering communities to make their own decisions in order to make a difference, but at the same time funding for community learning initiatives around citizenship, community development has been reduced and charities are seeing a significant reduction in donations.

Community and voluntary based organisations are recognised as having a significant role to play in supporting the hardest to reach into learning and employment. John Hayes, Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning emphasised the important role of the Third Sector in providing learning opportunities and contributing to the “*rainbow of provision*” (June 2011) and it is recognised that Third Sector learning providers are more successful in reaching the most disadvantaged (IFF 2009). The recent move to outcome-based funding, alongside prime contractor models and contract values above £500,000 has, however, limited the opportunity for small local authority and local voluntary and community sector providers to get involved.

For those working with local communities the challenge is to maximise the opportunities offered by initiatives such as National Citizens Service, Community

Organisers and Open Public Services. This will mean working in partnership with those organisations that hold the contracts in order to ensure they meet local needs. Working in partnership, however, should not be about the survival needs of learning providers but rather to ensure that the needs of local people are met,

“Decisions should be made for the benefit of everyone in the community, not the vested interests of individuals and providers” (NIACE 2012)

Both the Forward Communities and the NIACE reports agree that local community groups, front line workers in communities, faith leaders and mental and physical health providers should also be involved in decision making around the learning and skills offer. Partnership approaches should bring together local authorities, local people, groups and providers.

The final report of the independent commission on Colleges in their Communities investigated the role that further education colleges can and do play in their communities (Sharp 2011). However the report misses out on the recognition of other learning providers that also have a role to play within local communities, including local authorities, voluntary and community sector learning providers and work based learning providers. Those local authorities engaged in adult and community learning often hold a pivotal role in the way learning and skills provision is funded and co-ordinated in a locality (Quantrill 2012). The report found that many colleges were already *“embedded in their communities”* but that the FE college brand was weak. The report also emphasises the importance of involving the learner in the design of the curriculum in order to ensure success (Sharp 2011). The challenge for those learning providers not immediately recognised as a college, but

performing an equally important function for our communities is how to engage with the Colleges in the Community agenda in order to demonstrate just how effective they can be. If the key is the formation of partnerships (ibid:6), then community learning providers need to collaborate in order to reduce costs, support one another's provision, limit duplication and create streamlined progression opportunities. The challenge will come from ensuring that in all that work to develop partnerships the voice of the learner is not lost. Involving people in decision making through learner forums, open community meetings, local media, parish and district councils and health providers is crucial to ensuring that we focus on the provision of learning, not survival of learning providers. To misquote Antoine de Saint-Exupery; partnership working is not a focus on the relationship between the partners but creating a joint vision on a common goal. That joint vision should be on the learner and the learning needs of our local communities. The only way we can achieve that is if we listen, and listen together.

Collaboration

We started our research by considering how the public and voluntary sector providers could collaborate to meet the needs of adult learners. We have found through group discussions, surveys and interviews with group members that a willingness to collaborate in our city is strong. We also considered the relationship between partnership and collaboration and supported Watters' view:

“Collaborative activity and cooperation may take place through informal alliances and networks as well as through more formal partnerships.

Partnerships, on the other hand, cannot work effectively unless there is

collaboration and cooperation”.

We found that organisations are willing to collaborate when it will enable them to maximise their funding and income and when it will help them to achieve their objectives. We also found that it is also necessary to be aware of and challenge stereotype views of other partners. For example, voluntary sector organisations are frequently considered to be willing to work for no cost, low quality and employing unqualified staff. Public sector organisations are considered to be heavily bureaucratic and too large to be responsive to individuals and communities. Unless these stereotypes are recognised and challenged it is difficult to develop effective partnerships. We would recommend that in organisations that are working through the stage of forming partnerships that these views are discussed and challenged openly. There may also need to be recognition that there may be an element of truth behind them and that many try to do their best within the constraints of their working cultures and regulations.

The Methods

We initially aimed to explore the importance of collaborative working in giving learners a voice. In order to gather information from a range of organisations we used a range of research approaches, a questionnaire to 100 learning providers, five one to one telephone interviews, case studies of two examples of community consultation events, a mapping exercise of provision, learning trees to gather information from current learners and a city wide survey of households.

Response

The response rate to the questionnaires was 10% but some of these did offer insight

on the particular issues of more disadvantaged learners, particularly in the light of recent funding cuts. One response indicated “*we have insufficient resources to give the essential time to securing the socially excluded person’s engagement and to identify what learners want or need. Often, without support, time and resource, the learner cannot identify what they need or want as they have few expectations*”. The telephone interviews offered opportunities to interrogate the answers from the survey. These revealed that learning providers were already using a range of methods to find out what learners wanted to learn, but more effective methods were more costly in terms of time or resources. There were examples of innovative ways to link to communities including using a learning centre to host community meetings on key topics for that community. They gave the example of a public meeting regarding ‘forced marriage’ which they then used as an opportunity to find out about learning needs. The questionnaire and the interviews indicated that community based focus groups and taster sessions were regarded as the most effective methods of gathering data on learner needs and wants. Respondents indicated that questionnaires, panels of existing learners and comments slips in community learning venues were useful in finding out what worked but not as effective at reaching those that were not currently engaging with learning. A recurrent response was that engagement must be meaningful, and have the learner as the focus; “*We know we can’t meet targets without learners but it must be about them not us. It should result in ‘off-shoots’ of a contribution to the local community such as civic activities and local services for local people*”. In one instance a community tutor’s programme was being developed to train individuals to deliver informal learning activities in their own communities, and enabling them to pass on intelligence regarding learning needs to the provider. This resulted in higher attendance levels on

those programmes. Another respondent was developing a steering group of local residents to steer their learning provision and another focussed on programmes with a longer lifetime, building up the community's experience and gaining trust; "*you need to have relationships to create a sustainable way of working with learners, no picking them up then dropping them and saying 'thank you very much – bye'.*"

The two case studies involved observations of two events, specifically designed to explore what learners wanted. The focus group with young people was undertaken without an adult facilitator, just a 'listener'. The group, aged 14-19, were discussing the issues of employability and work experience; they had directed their own group, chosen the agenda, and invited 'experts' for additional information. The group identified learning needs, and raised concerns but, most importantly, began to identify solutions that they could act on for themselves. The second case study was an event in a Community Centre held specifically to find out what the local community wanted to see in a Learning Centre for their ward. Over 50 people attended the event but responses were limited to what they already knew happened or vague suggestions of "*something for young people*". This reiterated earlier findings about asking learners to say what they wanted to learn; current funding priorities may not cover their needs, and some might not know what they want to learn because they don't know what is possible. We found that our research was raising more questions about leadership, genuine community voice and power than it was answering.

The final two methods generated data from existing learners, but this indicated that they wanted more of what was already on offer, thus telling us little that we didn't already know. The survey to household was intended to ask three questions, but the

key question “why aren’t you engaging in adult learning?” was left out. So whilst we were able to gather significant data on what adults were learning, and how many were engaged, this didn’t help us identify what was stopping people from learning. We were witnessing another dimension of the power dynamics at work in listening to learners, this time bureaucratic. For this reason we began adjusting our focus to look at the power dynamics involved in collaborative working, and listening to learners.

Power

Power is significant and can be positive or negative. It can empower people, or exclude them from participation, or manipulate what information is gathered or shared. It is possible for participants and stakeholders in the community to be seen simply as sources of information for verifying the indicators in the narrative, rather than as actors embedded in social relations (Pinder 2007). Power relationships and inequality are deeply embedded in culture and society in social norms, values and perceptions (We Adapt 2011). In developing our interactions with the community we, as researchers, have power over what information gets reported, how it is shared and what action is taken as a result. Our research therefore aimed to view those that provided data as co-researchers, potential delivery partners and solution finders, rather than as static sources of data. Limited funding and the current funding priorities also present a power dilemma; even if we identify what individuals in communities would like to learn, we may not be able to fund it. In these circumstances it is tempting for those who manage public services to decide what the community needs but if this is not undertaken as a dialogue then we risk imposing the learning we wish to deliver, rather than providing what the community

wishes to learn. This in turn demonstrates that the power does not lie with the community, thus reinforcing the power structure. In the words of Freire,

“Leaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organise the people—they manipulate them.” (Freire 1987)

We propose that working collaboratively with those that represent the community, and involving a range of learning providers, would provide a mechanism to check against this ‘top down’ approach. The members of the partnership would remind and chastise us if we became too paternalistic. By involving community representatives we aim to reduce the power imbalance, and meet the real needs of communities.

“Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects that must be saved from a burning building.” (Freire 1985)

Community Learning Trust

In April 2012 the government launched the Community Learning Trust Pilots prospectus with the aim “*to give communities a real say over learning*”. The prospectus invites directly funded community learning providers to work collaboratively with other community partners to submit proposals to become part of the 2012/13 Community Learning Trust pilots. The formation of a Community Learning Trust became the logical next step for the Learning for Living group to build on its experience of collaboration. The challenge remained as to how we could ensure that communities did in fact have a real say.

Responding to Learners

We believe that collaboration is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for responsiveness but that recognition of the power base and an awareness of the constraints are also required. The government and its funding agencies have power over the community learning “sled” as they restrict and regulate the funding available and enforce restrictions on access through eligibility regulations. They have the power not only to shout “mush” but also to steer the direction that the huskies can follow. The providers as “huskies” also have power in determining if they will run together, where they will go and the type of learning they will load on to their sled. In an effective partnership they have to be facing in the same direction and pulling together. It is the providers who usually decide on the curriculum offer with the decisions influenced by funding, accommodation, expertise and interest. They also have power and influence over the recruitment on to courses according to their publicity materials, distribution and connections with local communities. However, if the government, its funding agencies and learning providers truly want communities to have say over their learning, the meaningful engagement of learners is essential. Fielding (2004) describes typologies of student engagement. The first describes students as passive data sources wherein students provide information to teachers through data on the work completed and the targets agreed. At the next level of involvement, students are active respondents giving feedback on their experiences. For students to be fully engaged they need to become co-researchers alongside professional staff or “students as researchers” when the voice of the student comes to the foreground. If adult learners are to truly become the voice that shouts ‘mush’ then they have to be given opportunities to be actively involved in researching and

determining the direction working alongside providers and funders of learning. Our intention is that this condition is created within a Community Learning Trust and that we use the information we have gathered and the connections we have made to make this happen in our locality.

Findings

Our local survey showed that 14% of adults in the city have taken part in learning in the previous twelve months. This is lower than the national picture showing 19% in the survey conducted around the same time by NIACE. The national survey also states that 36% have not participated in learning since leaving school although intentions to learn have increased by four percentage points. Learners and potential learners have a wide range of interests which they have shared with us through a variety of consultations, including a community day, written responses on learning “trees” that were set up in a variety of settings, and individual interviews. The majority enjoyed learning, knew what they wanted to do and were already engaged, though in most cases as passive sources of data, but we are challenged to make links with those who are not engaged. This will remain a challenge beyond the period of this research activity. We have found that involving community representatives and working collaboratively is not a guaranteed way to shift the power imbalance in favour of the learner, or potential learner. Our experience of recent partnership meetings indicates that those who are called to represent their community may actually represent their own interests, or the specific interest of a small group within that community.

We found that collaboration is not the only necessary condition for effectiveness.

“Whilst the significance of prior relationships does not suggest that establishing new partnerships is doomed to failure, it does indicate that it will not necessarily be successful simply because collaboration is seen as a good thing to do, and that such arrangements require considerable investment of time, resources and commitment.” (Fielding 2005:9)

Summary

Our research has shown that when working in collaboration or partnership there has to be shared understanding and a common goal. The different perspectives within the partnership and the constraints within which individual members have to work must be acknowledged.

Whilst we fully support John Hayes’ aim that communities should have a real say in community learning and welcome the introduction of Community Learning Trusts, our research has shown that there are many challenges to be faced if this is to be achieved. It is difficult for communities to have their say whilst the power and decision making lies within government policy, funding agency regulations and learning providers’ decisions. Learners are too frequently passive data sources providing information through surveys. Learners who are not eligible for publicly funded adult learning, who are unable to engage with traditional methods of collecting learners views do not have a say and are unlikely to be given a voice.

Recommendations

We consider the formation of Community Learning Trusts to be a way that has real potential to bring localism into community learning. We recommend those individuals and organisations who want learners to have their say in community

learning in their locality should:

- Seek ways of working collaboratively to benefit from the strengths of partnership working, acknowledging the barriers that exist and finding ways to overcome them.
- Embed learning into the life of the community, such as the example of the learning provider that hosted public meetings.
- Involve learners as co-researchers in planning and quality improvement such as the young people's 'Voices in Action' project, which was led by the learners.
- Consider the extent to which, under current funding regulations and restrictions, power can actually be given to learners, though creating communities of enquiry and developing community tutors.

Community involvement could mean taking risks by creating steering groups of local community members for learning institutions and spending time to develop the learners understanding of what could be possible. This may even mean involving them in writing funding bids, delivery of learning activities and developing their advocacy skills to speak up for local learning provision. We will have to make some investments of time and resources, if we genuinely want learners to decide where the community learning dog sled will go.

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