



An Excellence Gateway case study

Published: 30th July 2012

Unite the Union: Future Citizens Project

Contact person

Jeremy Townend – email: jeremy.townend@uniteunion.org

Outline the aim

This was a pilot project to test approaches to working with people who have been estranged from formal education for whatever reason. Our target groups included young people, the unemployed and homeless people.

The challenge

Engaging marginalised young people in educational activity, and more specifically encouraging those who have been alienated from formal education.

Partnership organisations

- ⤴ Unite the Union – oversight, management and support.
- ⤴ Policyworks – implementing the project and involvement with local groups.
- ⤴ Freire Institute – training methodology

The outputs

A mix of methods was used with some informal training sessions and discussion groups, as well as one-to-one discussions.

Over 40 individuals were involved in the process. There was positive response from those who participated. However, it was clear many among our sample were not ready or willing to participate in more structured learning.

There were a number of significant achievements:

- We helped create links between Unite and a number of community organisations in Leeds, including St George's Crypt, Create and St Anne's Community Services.

- We identified a range of 'key themes' from participants in each group to form the basis for the process – the raw material for learning. These will be used in a DVD training pack that is being created.
- We identified significant needs among the participants in terms of advice, support and learning. This is hugely positive as a large proportion are not yet ready for a formal learning environment, but have begun to articulate their needs
- We discussed the project widely with trade union representatives within and outside Unite with a view to developing their long-term commitment and involvement

We will provide links to the training materials, once completed, on our website (<http://www.unitetheunion.org>).

The impacts and outcomes

The project has been successful in significantly helping to change the focus of Unite's work towards more community-oriented educational work rather than being restricted to workplace issues. It has also opened up possibilities of partnership working with a number of community organisations.

In terms of the training approach, it has enabled staff to think of more imaginative ways to engage learners.

We believe it has helped a small number of individuals in terms of removing barriers to learning, although more input would be required to follow through on these.

The longer term impact we expect to see will be through the dissemination of training materials for community-oriented practitioners which will help their users/clients to access learning opportunities.

The project has already helped to determine the shape and scope of Unite's educational programme, with its new three-year programme that started in April 2012.

There will be a DVD training pack available from July 2012 (this is currently being worked on).

We engaged over 40 individuals in discussions and/or training. Our evaluation of the process tells us that most of them were a long way from being prepared (or able) to be engaged in more structured learning. We would need to have a longer and deeper involvement in order to bring a significant number to that stage.

All of those involved were from disadvantaged or marginalised groups, with participants drawn particularly from the unemployed and homeless. However, about a third was above our target age group. This was unavoidable as the environments in which we worked included broad age ranges and it was difficult to separate out into specific age groups.

Working relationship with LSIS

LSIS gave us some good advice at a key stage of the project. The willingness of LSIS to support a more experimental approach to informal learning, as opposed to structured and accredited learning, was vital in enabling the project to happen.

Good value for money

The project will prove to be good value for money in the longer term as its work is disseminated in the form of training materials. This will enable service professionals (community workers, youth workers, social workers, probation workers, tenant participation officers, homelessness workers) to access resources specifically for educational work with marginalised and disadvantaged groups. We believe this will have benefits in terms of broader community cohesion and the development of skills.

The project has also had a direct impact on how Unite conceives its educational work, with a much greater focus on the community beyond the workplace. Unite has a large educational programme and the benefits of this will become much more widely available.

Variety of public

Senior managers involvement

Senior officials at Unite have been fully briefed on the project at all stages and have been supportive of its aims. Unite is developing a community-oriented educational focus and this project has played a key part in shaping how this is to be done

Stakeholder involvement

St George's Crypt, a centre for homeless people, allowed us to use their dining area for meeting their users and provided facilities for training.

Castleford Community Learning Centre gave us the use of their facilities as a base from which to do outreach work in the local area, and also referred a number of individuals to us.

Create and St Anne's Community Services both gave us significant advice and offered to play a role in supporting / educating young people beyond the stage of our project

Learner involvement

The project involves all learners in the sense of bringing their own experience into the process but not in planning the project as such.

In terms of delivering the project, we had one volunteer who helped to teach others about the use of video.

Raising awareness

Awareness of the project has been raised within and outside Unite. Within Unite, we have briefed senior officials, including those responsible for education and community work. We have also visited three regions to talk about the work.

Outside Unite, we have held meetings with a variety of organisations including Create, St Anne's Community Services and Incredible Edible, all of whom have expressed interest in being involved in ongoing educational work.

Further dissemination of the project's results and an evaluation of the process will be provided through a video-based training package for practitioners.

We will also seek opportunities to present the findings at relevant forums such as professional conferences as well as opportunities for published work

Continuity of project, after LSIS funding

Although the pilot project has finished, we are aiming to continue the work in various forms across different regions of the UK. Policyworks has held discussions with Unite about implementing a national programme of engaging marginalised groups in Unite's work.

Some of the lessons of this work have been incorporated into Unite's three-year educational programme, financed via the Union Learning Fund.

The lessons from the project will also be incorporated into the work of the Freire Institute, based at the University of Central Lancashire.

Did you experience any difficulties in implementing the project and how did you overcome these?

A key problem was continuity among participants. The target groups we identified were those more itinerant and difficult to engage.

A secondary issue, in the case of one location was, there was no natural space within the building for people to congregate and thus feel encouraged to become involved.

While our programme content and methodology was successful in getting participants to talk about issues relevant to their lives, the lack of continuity among participants unavoidably weakened its overall coherence.

This is an issue that will be addressed in any future projects of this kind.

The lessons learned

We believe an informal learning approach can lay the foundations for young people to go on to participation more structured learning or eventually, work based programmes. This will require a sustained effort and funding of the kind that is beyond the limited duration of this project.

If we were to start the project knowing what we do now, there are a few things we would do differently:

- ⤴ We would drop the initial idea we had of splitting groups into age categories, as this proved unhelpful in the event.
- ⤴ We would focus on co-operation with key workers (e.g., youth workers) rather than organisations/ places.
- ⤴ We would not attempt (as we did at one location) to recruit individuals in the street as this is extremely time consuming and had limited effect.

Sustainability – lasting legacy

The project's legacy will be two-fold:

- ⤴ A change in how Unite plans and implements its educational work, with a much greater emphasis on community-oriented work and informal learning.
- ⤴ Training materials enabling practitioners to incorporate informal learning into their work, helping to remove barriers to learning among difficult to reach target groups.

Demonstrating impact – evidence of short and long term impact

In the short-term, the main impact has been in helping to change the way Unite conceives its educational role, giving it a much greater emphasis on community engagement. This can be seen in its new three-year programme for the Union Learning Fund.

In the longer term, we expect to see an impact from the work of practitioners using the training materials that are currently being developed.

Disclaimer

The Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) support the development of educational e-practice. We may refer to specific products, processes or services. Such references are examples and are not endorsements or recommendations and should not be used for product endorsement purposes.