

Final

Community University of the Valleys(CUV)
Partnership Research Project
Voluntary Organisations as Training Providers

A Small-scale research project carried out between December 2001 and September 2002 with financial support from the CUV research and evaluation group

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Executive Summary

The CUV research and development group commissioned the project. Its remit was to carry out small-scale research into the role and function of voluntary groups as training providers. The project surveyed voluntary groups, learners and tutors by means of interviews, questionnaires and observation of teaching practice. The research took place in several areas of south Wales. It found that there is a need for education and training on the part of voluntary groups that is only partly being met. While the majority of learners were satisfied with the quality of learning they received there is a growing demand for learning in fields related to both personal development and capacity building. Responses indicated a strong bias in favour of group centred, experiential approaches. There was great emphasis placed on the need for both non-accredited and accredited learning, with the former seen as a means of widening access.

1. Introduction

1.1 The research project originated as a bid to the Community University of the Valleys (CUV) research and development sub-group. The intention of the research was essentially to carry out a small-scale piece of research into the role of voluntary organizations in the South Wales area as training providers. Several recent works have pointed to the expanding role of these groups in this field (Clarke et al 2001) and this has attracted

increasing attention at a number of levels in recent years
(McGivney 1999)

1.2 It was realized at the outset that it would be possible to do no more in a project of this size than provide a 'snapshot' of activity in a fixed period. Nor was it the intention to complete yet another mapping exercise. It is argued that this is more properly the work of local authorities or training agencies themselves.

1.3 The research focused on specific types of learning which occur in voluntary organizations. McGivney (1999) has outlined the characteristics of such learning:

- It is collective rather than individual
- It very frequently leads to continued learning (though this may not have been planned at the outset)
- The siting of learning in a familiar local environment is a major factor in widening participation
- Relevance to local interests and concerns is a major factor in widening participation. (*Informal Learning in the Community: A trigger for Change and Development* NIACE Leicester 1999 pp12-24).

1.4 The above were used as hypotheses that could be tested. A broader consideration of how types and methodologies of informal learning would be interesting, but it was decided that these fell outside the remit of the present project

2. Rationale and Methodology

2.1 The scope and scale of the project was dictated by the length of time available to complete it. There were subsequent limits placed on the scale of the research. More work on community classes would be valuable.

2.2 It was decided to test the hypotheses outlined by McGivney by means of conducting primary research via a variety of methods with learners, tutors and voluntary sector managers and volunteers. This would allow the project team to collect information unavailable via secondary sources such as annual reports. These give the bare bones of numbers of volunteers and numbers of people trained per annum. However, they cannot give any insight into qualitative issues connected with teaching and learning.

2.3 The qualitative research took place via face to face interviews and focus groups. For the telephone interviews a separate schedule was devised based usually on prior contact with the respondent to arrange mutually productive times. In practice the majority of interviews took place in this way.

2.4 Questionnaires (appendix 1) were devised by Adrian Sparkes of the University of Glamorgan's School of Business. They attempted to elicit information on the learning experience from both tutors and learners and the centre managers in voluntary organizations. Their objective was to gain data on the quality of the learning experience and to attempt to gain some understanding of the extent to which

voluntary groups' marketing strategy had an influence on student participation. This means that the majority of information gained from learners was via questionnaire. An ethnographic approach would possibly be of benefit here, given the nature of the field and the highly personal nature of the responses. The aim was to involve one community group from the various areas covered by CUV. In practice, the groups contacted depended to a great extent on availability and ease of access. The groups contacted are listed at appendix 2.

2.5 Some groups were contacted via Roger Hopkins' work in the field of training for community development in areas as diverse as Blaengarw, Newport, and Merthyr Tydfil. These groups were engaged in a range of training in community development, some of it delivered privately at the express wish of the voluntary groups themselves. Others were delivered through the University of Glamorgan's community regeneration programme and accredited as a part of the former Diploma in Community Development. It should be noted with regard to these groups that they are, technically at least, part of an accredited course programme. This has implications for their responses on informal learning. It is also relevant to note that not all students so enrolled had done so with the expressed intention of going on to complete the diploma. In fact, a majority of them have not done so at the time of writing.

2.6 This diploma has since been redesigned with additions into the new foundation degree in community regeneration. It is difficult to assess at this moment in time the extent to which the students will transfer to the new programme or the numbers of them who intend to complete the whole programme, as opposed to taking discrete modules that arouse their interest. It would be of benefit to track

these learners to assess the extent to which community activists enroll purely in order to develop their skills as community workers and the extent to which they wish to gain formal qualifications in community development.

3. Areas and Centres Researched and methods Used

3.1

Area	Centre	Questionnaire	Interview	Focus group
Blaengarw	Blaengarw C.C	X	X	X
Porth	TABS	X	X	
Merthyr	VAMT	X	X	X
Hirwaun	YMCA	X	X	
Newport	Ringland C.C	X	X	X
Cardiff	Permanent waves	X		

3.2 Learners, tutors and managers from a range of organizations (see above table) were contacted using a variety of methods. Of twenty questionnaires circulated to tutors there was a response rate of 10, that is 50%. Of a total of 250 questionnaires circulated to learners there were 155 responses, that is 62%. In most cases the forms were circulated by tutors, who also collected them as part of the course evaluation. This would account for the high response rate.

3.3 The majority of learners were from community development classes. However, the responses from TABS were trainees. These were a mix of New Deal and basic skills trainees. It should be noted that the motivation of these responses may well differ from those volunteer community activists in Merthyr, Blaengarw and Newport (Ringland). Here with three exceptions all were volunteer community workers. A full list of groups is reproduced as appendix

4. Conduct of the Research

4.1 The bulk of the research took place over a period of seven months from February to August 2002. Some groups were initially reluctant to take part because of lack of time.

Training provision in voluntary groups is very student centred both in terms of methods and times of delivery

4.2 It was not always convenient for groups to make themselves available to project workers and vice versa. One tutor refused to take part who felt the research was ‘inappropriate’:

“ My main objection to this research is that it indicates a centrist drive- indeed an almost Stalinist need- to get all tutors and all centers to sing off the same song sheet: and hence compromise the potential learning experience for my students. And also gather data on potential future students for your university!” (anon)

4.3 While it was difficult to ascertain the precise reasons for this, it was felt by one research worker that they were connected with a perception that the research was connected with attempts by Higher Education institutions to boost their enrolments. Strenuous attempts to convince them that this was not the case failed. It is worth noting in this regard that there is still a profound lack of communication between some voluntary groups and institutions of Higher and Further education in the area.

4.4 It must be emphasized that this was very much a minority response. Some groups, notable the YMCA, expressed not only a strong wish to cooperate but also a strong desire to collaborate on a closer basis with the CUV in particular, but also Higher and further education in general. Existing CUV partners were generally helpful, though there were some difficulties in finding practicable arrangements in collecting data from some centers as a result of mutually inconvenient times. There was a realisation that the results would be skewed as a result of over-reliance on learners that were already incorporated in the University of Glamorgan's community education programme, either as accredited students or as part of the non-accredited widening access programme.

4.5 Some difficulties in the conduct of the research were caused by staff turnover, particularly the 'loss' of one member of staff. Inevitably, some loss of continuity resulted, and it was necessary to spend some time in ensuring that the focus of the project did not shift from the original intentions.

5. Findings

5.1 Both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed, the intention being to use a mix of the two to provide a fuller and more balanced impression. The findings will be presented under two headings; the first being concerned with the more qualitative responses of groups,

learners and tutors and the second with the quantitative responses to questionnaires circulated.

5.2 **Learners**

The three groups of learners initially identified in Blaengarw, Merthyr and Newport were attending a series of community development courses offered through the Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of Glamorgan in the above areas. Most of the courses were recruited through umbrella groups representing voluntary organisations in the areas (respectively Bridgend Association of Voluntary Organisations [BAVO], Voluntary Action Merthyr Tydfil [VAMT] and Gwent Association of Voluntary Organisations [GAVO]).

5.3 Almost all learners were volunteers with various community organizations in the areas concerned. The Blaengarw group included representatives from the Porthcawl Regeneration Partnership and the Ogwr Railway Society. There was also a representative of the local church. The Merthyr group consisted of volunteers and workers for local regeneration partnerships, while the Gwent group consisted of volunteers from the Ringland area of Newport and regeneration partnerships in Northern Gwent. Information on learner views was acquired via:-

- Interviews with individual students

- Interviews with groups of students

- Observation of student learning and reflection techniques used in group environments
- Circulation and completion of questionnaires

5.4 Initial findings included a strong instrumental bias on the part of learners towards practical skills and knowledge that could be utilized for the benefit of their community organizations. This seemed to supplement, rather than preclude, an inclination towards the development of their own personal and intellectual development:

“I’m here for what I can put back into my community work...I’ve tried various other ways to make a living and find this kind of work the most rewarding.” (Mike 42)

“I initially got involved in unpaid community work as I was bored stiff on the dole and I felt I could be doing so much more with my life. I’m still a volunteer but am gaining very useful experience and knowledge that is useful to my community and will also help me get paid work-hopefully soon-doing this sort of thing” Dai 27

5.5 Second, the research revealed that learners saw a direct correlation between the positive impact of group learning and their acquisition of new skills, knowledge and in some cases new personal world views. This learning process seems to be intimately bound up with group leadership, group maintenance and group activity. The group was particularly valued in terms

of its collective support mechanism. This was felt to be particularly relevant to education for voluntary activity in the community, where such skills were highly valued practical assets:

“I get a real buzz out of these sessions. On my estate there isn’t much to keep my mind active and working in groups here opens me to such a lot of new experiences” (Gill 23)

*“ I was against coming to these sessions as my time at these sessions was ****, really pointless. But here-alongside people with similar backgrounds and like concerns...is really great (Mostyn 22).*

“ Most of what I learn on these kinds of courses just reinforces my previous experience. It often seems just common sense...like ‘why hadn’t I seen that before’ when it’s explained to you. I then take it back to my ‘people’ and pass it off as my thinking.” (Mair 33)

6. Tutors’ Comments

6.1 It was felt by tutors that there were lessons to be learned in terms of curriculum development and design. It was felt that new and innovative approaches, and particularly flexible methods of course design and assessment were needed for community work. This was the case especially in relation to assessment, when dealing with non-traditional learners common in such community based classes. Neither learners not tutors were enamoured of traditional assessment methods. The implications for those institutions with fixed quality

systems aiming at consistency and the maintenance of academic standards are clear, but outside the scope of this brief report. This should inform future work by Higher Education with its community partners.

7. Centre Managers' Comments

7.1 Centre managers were contacted and interviewed, either face-to-face or via telephone interviews. They were asked a range of questions relating to the importance of a number of variables to training in voluntary organizations. These ranged from the importance of funding bodies to the organizations training activities, to the influence of volunteer management boards and the 'typical' learner. Attitudes towards informal community based learning as opposed to formally accredited courses were probed.

7.2 Perhaps unsurprisingly, the availability of funding ranked highest as an influence on organizations training activities. Centre managers pointed to a clear correlation between funding streams and courses offered. This may seem an obvious observation but may have an impact on the sources and type of provision that groups receive. There was a notable demand for non-accredited provision. In the case of the organizations interviewed, access was easiest to those funded by University of Glamorgan, who scored correspondingly well as a major influence. This finding clearly needs to be treated with a certain

amount of caution, since it could merely reflect the views of groups that researchers were able to contact: “ *whilst there are lots of things I’d like to do unless there is funding for them they’re just dreams...of course it’s funding driven, when the funding changes or stops, so do the courses.*” (anon centre manager)

7.2 Managers felt that learner background was of central importance to the type of training provided. There was a strong sense that training was demand led rather than needs based, and there seems to be little formal needs assessment in the groups interviewed. Interestingly, there seems to be less demand in the centers outside Merthyr, Newport and Blaengarw for training in community development, though there was a strong demand for this in some CUV partners:

“We’d like to get more involved in community development. My background is in training and I suppose that’s what we’ll always be involved in to an extent. But I’d like to diversify more –everyone’s trying it now.” (anon centre manager)

This may simply reflect the groups interviewed, or may indicate designer bias.

7.3 There was a tendency for groups involved in training, such as TABS and YMCA to value the non accredited training particularly highly. This seems to correspond with those groups who deal with

volunteers of trainees from non academic backgrounds. There is insufficient information in this regard to make any reliable assertions. More research would be of benefit in this area to assess the need and demand for accredited versus non-accredited provision, or whether a mix of the two would be of more perceived benefit:

“Many of my students feel badly let down by their experiences of school. Telling them that their going to be examined is a good way of emptying the course. It’ll end before it begins!” (Anon centre head)

8. Quantitative Analysis

8.1 The other findings of the project revolve around the largely quantitative research carried out via the questionnaires. The raw data is reproduced as appendix 3 . The vast majority of learners found out about the courses through their voluntary organization or through a CUV partner. The most common other means of learning about training opportunities was via word of mouth, generally from former learners. It was generally agreed that course publicity was good, but care must be exercised here since there is a risk of an attribution effect by students who had already been recruited.

8.2 A generally high level of satisfaction was expressed with both venues and tutors, with an overwhelming response in favour when asked if they would recommend the course to others. Nevertheless, there was no complacency involved,

with a high proportion of learners commenting that the courses could be improved.

8.3 Interviews with voluntary groups active in Valley communities, such as Hirwuan YMCA, highlighted the importance of family and intergenerational learning. This was felt to be of particular importance in the context of widening access and generating a learning culture. This seems to bear out recent research in the field (Selwyn and Gorard 2002)

8.4 Interest was expressed in further courses. Favourites were ICT in general, web page design, Community funding and there was also demand for the Further Education Teachers Certificate. More research on this particular area would be welcome, since the responses here were generic and probably not exhaustive. The data is reproduced in tabular form at appendix 4 .

9. Conclusions And Areas For Future Research

9.1 The research was successful, after initial access problems, in covering a wide geographical spread and gaining access to a number of different types of voluntary organizations. The response rate was pleasing. It needs to be emphasized that small- scale research surveys of this kind can never meet stringent academic criteria of

representativeness, and more research would be needed before reproducible generalizations could be made. The diverse nature of the field precludes such generalizations, and the needs of learners in one environment will differ in significant respects to those in another.

9.2 Nevertheless, some tentative conclusions can be drawn:

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- There is a strong, and growing demand for education and training on the part of voluntary organization in the South Wales area. This is expressed in a number of ways, via demand for courses in ICT, community development and further skills training.
- There is a direct correlation between funding streams and the kind of training offered.
- There is clear scope for an expansion of this kind of work by HE institutions.
- Voluntary groups value both accredited and non-accredited provision.
- Accredited provision is seen as an important means of improving qualifications and employment prospects.

- Non-accredited provision is highly valued, both instrumentally as a progression route to accredited courses, and as a form of widening access.

- Learners show a strong preference for experiential, group focused learning. The importance of family learning was highlighted.

- Learners make no distinction between learning for personal development and learning for community capacity building; the two are seen as inextricably linked.

- There is general satisfaction with the quality of learning received in the community.

- From a methodological viewpoint the learner responses were somewhat limited as questionnaires cannot supply the depth of qualitative response needed in this kind of social research.

Further research would be of benefit into qualitative issues revolving around the impact of course provision and into the specific types of learning most valued by groups. Research, possibly ethnographic, into tracking students through the 'system' would be of great benefit to institutions and voluntary groups alike. There is likewise scope for an examination of the

role of formal versus informal learning and its relation to policy and funding issues.

Appendices

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Appendix One

Questionnaires

- (a) Learner Questionnaire
- (b) Tutor Questionnaire
- (c) Management questionnaire

Appendix Two

List of centres contacted in the course of the project

Blaengarw Community Centre

Porthcawl Regeneration partnership

Ogwr Rrailway Revival Trust

Bridgend Association of Voluntary Organisations

Gwent Association of Voluntary Organisations

Voluntary Action Merthyr Tydfil

Interlink

Hirwaun YMCA

Pontypridd YMCA

Ringland Regeneration Partnership

Dowlais Regeneration Partnership

Telecentre and Business School, Porth (TABS)

Permanent Waves

Appendix Three
Project data

Appendix Four

Courses wanted