

'Informal Learning Works'



An innovative study
of adult learning
in Torbay

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Introduction

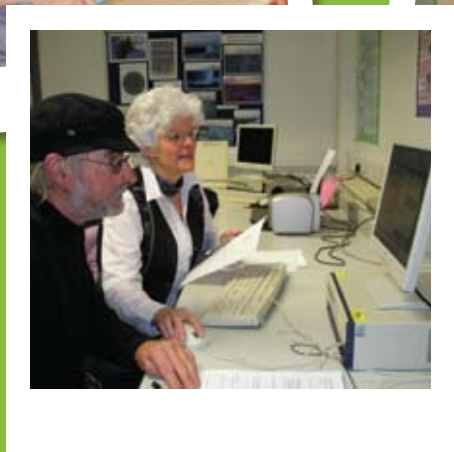
'Informal Learning Works'

That is the message from this innovative study of adult learning in Torbay, commissioned from South Devon College [SDC] by The Devon Community Learning Partnership [DCLP] in 2008.

We wanted to know whether the idea that traditional adult education provides 'hobbies for the leisured classes' is in fact correct.

Or do people join for more varied reasons and use the skills they learn in ways that are important for society?

Are there things we should be providing but aren't, or are we wasting public money by providing too much?



How we conducted the study

The report does not assess how adult education is managed, learner retention, achievement or progression and neither does it report on tutor skills through observation but is purely the opinions and suggestions of the learners themselves.

Learner interviews have been carried out over a period of three months. The project was evaluated in two ways. Classes were visited and a group survey carried out either at the start, during a break or at the end of a session, to obtain a general overview. Learners were then asked to volunteer for the individual survey, either face to face or over the telephone.

Who we spoke to

South Devon College [SDC] manages Adult & Community Learning [ACL] for the Unitary Authority of Torbay. It runs classes at its main centre at Vantage Point and through its three Adult & Community Learning centres in Brixham, Paignton and Torquay.

A range of classes from each centre took part, some of which were outreach classes provided at community venues away from the main ACL building, with a mixture of beginner and improver classes, although some classes were mixed ability. Apart from a single Modern Foreign Languages group, two classes were included from each of the other main curriculum areas:

- Art and Design x 2
- Sport, Fitness, Health x 2
- IT inc Photo editing x 2
- Modern Foreign Languages x 1
- Skills for Life x 2
- General Interest x 2

Information such as age, gender etc was collected from enrolment data.

Findings

People came for their own personal development and interest – all of those attending for the group survey (90) said this.

For a small number, there were other reasons. In the individual surveys five surveyed, for example, said they had joined the class to improve work prospects, gain a qualification or as a precursor to gaining one, with another learner 'sent by the job centre' and one whose doctor had advised her to join in order to improve her health.

It's good to learn in a group:

On the benefits of learning within a group setting, many learners appreciated the friendship and camaraderie and said that coming to the sessions gave them something to look forward to, a sense of belonging, motivation and support. They also hold tutors in high esteem, valuing their input, support and encouragement and find the tutor's knowledge and experience invaluable. Overwhelmingly, learners are pleased with their course.

Informal learning improves people's ability to be healthy and contribute to society. Whether learners are new to adult learning or have been attending for many years, a significant number report that coming to classes has given them more confidence generally. With other benefits such as overcoming or helping to deal with general health or mental health issues as well as companionship, along with a sense of community, learners see adult classes as being very important to society and more than half of those interviewed either already take part in other community based activities or have started doing so since taking part in ACL classes.

Nearly all say that family and friends value their learning, indicating good role models and positive examples to future generations supporting the culture of lifelong learning; this is particularly prevalent amongst the parents and grandparents who share the results of their own learning with younger members of the family.

Many older learners also feel that it is extremely important to have interests in later life, with one lady (in her 80s) saying that she believed it was helping to keep her out of residential care!

In the case of exercise classes both older and younger students feel that it's very important to maintain a level of activity throughout life for overall well being. In the other subject areas the view is the same, but with the emphasis on the mental stimulation gained from keeping active, mixing with others and learning.

Individual Comments & Quotes

As an example of how informal adult learning has benefited individuals, the following comments precede case studies from two learners who volunteered further information during interviewing, without prompting:

What are the benefits of learning in a group?

- it helps in every day life – I don't feel stupid
- adults only – I felt intimidated by youngsters in (another) class
- discipline, support and structure
- bounce ideas; keeps brain stimulated
- good to see others' artwork; different ways of doing things
- more open to other peoples' attitudes
- good to know that others struggle too!
- essential for dialogue; able to hear others' and check our own pronunciation, (conversational modern foreign language course)
- brings laughter to the learning process

A large number of people attending sessions (with the majority being women) comment that attending has helped to improve confidence and health, and in particular their mental health

Has your learning affected your life in any other way?

- huge help with depression; helping to overcome long-term depression; I'm a carer – it helps with my mental health issues; it's helping me through personal grief
- therapeutic
- something to look forward to
- 'my' time each week
- I thought I wasn't any good
- less stressful dealing with personal finances
- socially confident
- it's important to keep active
- improved mobility
- I feel more agile – it makes me do other things

'Alma' attends a Drawing and Painting course:

“ I have more confidence in myself and in my artistic abilities. I suffer with bi-polar (manic depression) – in coming to this group I feel more sane! It has given me discipline, support and structure and enabled me to manage my condition. ”

'Susie' attends a Creative Writing course:

“ I have ME and my doctor suggested attending this course to help me to focus and to improve my concentration. I would love to take part in other activities but can't because of my illness. I find it very difficult to attend the sessions but it helps me so much that I really try to make as many as I'm able to. The camaraderie and support from both the other students and the tutor are what keeps me coming... ”

Learners are not that well off:

Those with lower or fixed incomes say that they would have to seriously consider whether they could continue or that they would have to cut back on other things in order to attend, whilst those who see themselves as being in a secure financial position would seriously have to consider whether they could justify the expenditure of joining a class on themselves but suggest that even though they might be able to afford to attend, others may not be so fortunate and feel that provision must be grant-aided by government to help those who may not be able to afford this valuable resource.

Asked if course fees were much higher to reflect full cost not underpinned by the Learning and Skills Council [LSC] grant – fee assumption rate is currently at 47.5% of full cost, would they still attend, just under half (48%) said that they would like to find a way &/or cut back elsewhere in order to attend, with just over a quarter (27%) saying that they couldn't afford to come, and a further quarter (25%) saying that they would seriously doubt whether they would be able to continue.

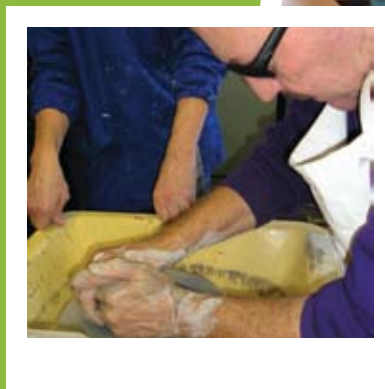
[This was excluding the two Skills for Life courses, which are delivered at no cost to learners, although seven of the nine commented that they wouldn't have attended if they'd had to pay for the course.]

Analysis of Learners Interviewed

In brief, of the 121 learners on register, 90 took part in the snapshot group surveys (75%) and of those attending, 61 people answered the individual surveys, roughly 51% of total enrolled learners (or 69% of those attending on that day).

More than three quarters of enrolments were female (77%), with just under a quarter being male (23%). The learners actually surveyed fall into a wide age range, with just a handful being in their 20s, and the oldest lady interviewed being 88 - the majority fall into the 50-70 age bracket (83% enrolled, 76% in attendance).

The most striking results are that 100% of individuals surveyed said that they were there for their own personal development and 100% would be enrolling on a further course, with 15 learners (17%) planning to undertake a qualification course in the future.



Conclusion

'Informal Learning Works'

The benefits of informal and non-accredited learning within the community are many and varied. Progression into work or further training for work can be a positive outcome for informal learning, but there are many other benefits too. Our society values people with the confidence and 'soft' skills to improve and develop their local communities and to support vulnerable and less confident learners. It needs adults healthy in body and mind especially at a time when so many pressures are generating stressful and destabilising influences. Vast sums of public money are spent on dealing with long term conditions, mental ill health and the effects of social exclusion, long term unemployment and community breakdown.

It is undeniable that vocational, employer demand-led funding is essential in order to support our drive towards a better trained workforce and in order to improve our economic competitiveness. But what this short survey also suggests is that adult informal, non-qualification bearing provision is of fundamental importance. Far from being a past time for the well-healed, easily sustained without government grant for a privileged few, this small survey suggests the exact opposite to be the truth. It is learning which is often the starting point of a learning journey; it is supportive of the vulnerable, first rung learner; it enables individuals to make an impact on their families'

appreciation of learning and to make a contribution to their wider community; it stimulates interest in further study and activities; it encourages social interaction and conversation; it supports those experiencing mental ill health and depression; it fulfils a social and health related role for the older learner; it offers a second chance to those who have lacked pleasure, motivation or a real sense of purpose from their previous learning experience; it enables in a friendly and welcoming way people to gain knowledge and to learn new skills; and it adds significantly to the other types of local learning on offer.

Yes, we need vocational and employer-led training, but not on its own. We need also a range of options to support, motivate and engage new learners. That's what informal learning, based around a local Adult & Community Learning service, can, and does, do.

let's have more of it!

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