

**Opportunities for All:  
Widening Participation  
through the Adult and  
Community Learning  
Fund in Hull**

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# Foreword

This report is the first from the Learners' Forum. The aim of the Forum is to gather views about learning from the population of Hull. This includes information about why people do or don't go on courses; what encourages them to do learning; what discourages them; and how it could be made easier for them to engage in learning. The people who are speaking to The Learners' Forum are representative of the population as a whole - employed and unemployed people, men and women, young and old, from all walks of life.

Part of the remit of the Forum was to look at innovative funding streams, and see how they have worked from the learners' perspective. This report looks at the Adult

and Community Fund, through a project run by Hull Council for Voluntary Service. In this report, as well as feedback from over 70 learners, there are the views of tutors and course organisers, to gain their perspective on the project.

This report stands on its own as an appraisal of one funding stream. However, the information from the learners will also feed into the wider work of The Learners' Forum.

This research was carried out by a team at volcom comprising Mary Irish, Kerry Robinson, Iain Springate and Isabelle Tracy.



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# Introduction

The Adult and Community Learning Fund (ACLF) was launched by the Government in July 1998. The Fund was part of the Government's strategy to widen participation in lifelong learning. The aims of the fund included:

To engage new learners into a range of new learning opportunities;

To improve basic skills;

To develop capacity in community based organisations to deliver learning opportunities and;

To build partnerships involving local people, community organisations, and voluntary agencies with education providers.

The Fund was allocated £20 millions to be spent through a programme of small and major grants between 1998 and 2002. The Fund was devolved to two intermediary bodies; the Basic Skills Agency and NIACE, both working in partnership with the DfEE (Field et al, 2001).

Hull Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) bid for a major grant of £36,491 from the Fund, through NIACE. CVS's Lifetime Learning section has a track record of organising courses in the community in Hull, covering a wide range of topics and groups. The issues in Hull surrounding learning have been well documented; there is low educational achievement and high numbers of adults with low levels of numeracy and literacy (Citylearning, 2001). Coupled with this has been the decline of traditional industries, meaning fewer jobs in the city and consequent high levels of unemployment (Cityvision, 1998). Overall, Hull is recognized as one of the most deprived districts in the country (DETR, 2000).

The CVS bid aimed to engage new learners and facilitate their progression to further learning. Specifically this meant attracting non-traditional learners into learning through 'first rung' provision. This was to be done by offering small pieces of learning, only a few hours long, around issues that the learners had identified they wanted to learn about. The learning was tailored to the needs of those in the group. The idea was then to encourage progression on to further appropriate learning, providing stepping-stones into more formal accredited provision. This was to be done by supporting access to information, advice and guidance. Alongside this, the project aimed to develop systems for

measuring and recording 'soft outcomes' from the course, and the 'distance travelled' by individuals in terms of their learning. The aim was to use these methods to measure what people have learnt, but also to use them as a means of building confidence and identifying further needs.

This report looks at the project run by CVS as a whole, drawing out those things that worked and those that didn't in order to identify the key lessons learnt from the project. The report focuses on the setting up of the courses; the learning itself; progression of individuals and groups from courses; and the measures for soft outcomes developed during the project.

Data for the report has come from several sources. Firstly, the data has come from the courses themselves through the sheets that the learners and tutors used to evaluate the courses themselves. This source provided data for fourteen of the courses, encompassing data from 72 learners, which is not the total number of learners that were on those courses. Alongside this there is other supporting data, for example a video and letters about courses. This data has been augmented by in depth interviews with 13 learners from 4 of the courses, 3 tutors or course organisers, and from the project manager for CVS.

This data has been used to give an overview of the project, what worked about it, what was difficult, and how far it has achieved its stated aims. From this, some good practice points, and recommendations for future activity have been drawn out. So this report aims to look at the specific project carried out by Hull CVS, and draw out points of relevance for similar projects further afield.

## Overview of project

The project aimed to engage with 32 community groups and 192 new learners. The project runs until the end of March 2002, and at the time of writing, (February 2002), the project is well on target to achieve this. Twenty-two groups have already run courses, and of these, eighteen groups have gone on to do further learning. So far between them, these groups have completed 52 courses, which is 250 sessions equating to 3, 477 training hours. There are also three groups which have yet to run their first course. By the end of March it is estimated that 63 courses will have run. A further 10 groups were engaged into the project, but in the end their courses folded at some stage in the process. So, 35 groups in all have had significant work done with them.

At this point there have been 461 registrations on the project, however, this figure will be more than the actual number of individual learners because some people will have done more than one course and therefore will have been counted more than once. At this point the final statistics for the project are not available, and so it is impossible to say how many learners there were exactly. However, there were 173 new learners through the first courses run by each group, and there are still 3 groups yet to run their first course. It is safe to say that the project will have put more than 192 learners through courses by the end of the project.

The project has worked with a wide variety of groups with different learning needs. Groups that have been involved included women's and men's groups, mental health support groups, local community groups and groups that counsel and support others. The learning carried out has ranged from numeracy and literacy, to topics like money management, assertiveness, and video skills; and more specialised courses like behaviour management.

## The establishment of courses

**This first section of the report covers the establishment of the courses, focusing on how groups found out about and engaged with the project; how the ACLF project was able to help them; how the courses were set up; and finally, the barriers that prevented some groups from taking up courses.**

There were two main ways that groups found out about the ACLF project. The first was through colleagues and other agencies; what might be termed the voluntary and community sector 'grapevine'. The second way was through being contacted by the project manager directly and being told what the project could offer them.

The voluntary and community sectors are well known for passing information informally through networks (Skelcher et al, 1996) and so it comes as no surprise that most of those who heard about the project from someone other than the worker did so through another agency or colleague. There was no mention from any of the groups that they had found out through printed publicity. Whilst some of them may have found out in this way, the fact that it was not mentioned highlights the importance of informal networks in passing on information. The project worker helped this process by passing on information about the project to those agencies (voluntary, community and statutory) that could effectively pass on the word. As one group commented, **" ... SEARCH pointed us in the direction, that direction, had heard about the funding that [CVS] had got to be able to help community groups and so we were basically put in touch ... "**

The other way that groups found out about and were engaged into the project was through intensive outreach. This was carried out in two ways; firstly through partnership with other agencies and then through contacting groups direct. Partnership working involved going to meetings in the community run by other agencies, and talking to groups and individuals there about the project. This was a successful way of reaching people. As the project manager concluded, these meetings, **" ... have also proven effective in recruiting more groups. Working in partnership with other people ... has been successful."**

The other way that groups were recruited was through direct contact. The project manager explained that,

"I've literally gone through the directory and contacted people, a letter followed up by a phone call, and then taken it on from there. That's been pretty successful."

He went on to explain that this was a time-intensive process, often involving several phone calls and follow up

letters. Although it was a successful way of doing it, some groups still did not get back to him, and a lot of time was invested in this type of work.

It is not possible from the data to state clearly whether different types of groups found out about the project in different ways. Certainly all the groups that found out about the project informally were relatively well-funded organisations, well connected within the networks in the city. It is possible that the smaller groups tended to find out through direct approaches to them. This would be worthy of further investigation to ensure that information reaches all those who need it, and to discover whether some groups regularly miss out on opportunities, given that workers don't generally have the time to carry out this kind of intensive outreach work (e.g. see Skelcher et al, 1996).

In terms of how the project was able to help groups there were several key issues, but the first was funding. As the worker noted, " ... I think the big issue's funding ... " Some groups had not looked into training, due to the cost, but once they found out there was money to do it, were very keen. Others had previously had difficulty obtaining funding. For example, one group had seen the training they were doing recognised as valuable, but still had not been able to access funds to run it until they were able to do so with the ACLF. Another group had scraped together the money to run sessions with a tutor only occasionally, and the funding from ACLF enabled the tutor to come in and facilitate courses weekly. So, funding is the big issue, but as the worker then commented,

**" ... I think the money is the first thing that attracts groups, but then they find out what we're about and how flexible we are, I think that's what keeps them hooked in."**

Flexibility and the ability to have a course tailored to their needs was a big bonus for all the groups. One tutor running an assertiveness course commented that one of the key outcomes for the students was it being "their course", being able to direct the learning in a way that was relevant to their needs, and this meant they got a lot more out of it than if the course content had been more restricted. A learner on a 'Dealing with Difficult Situations' course commented that she'd come because she knew the course was flexible enough to be tailored directly to the group she was working with. As the project worker commented, this needs-led approach meant the learning was directly relevant to the group, and,

**" ... people actually are going and learning what they want to learn. They're not there thinking, oh I don't really want to listen to this ... "**

It may be the case that, as learners progress in learning, they will have to engage with elements that they don't like, or find uninteresting, in order to achieve their intended outcome. However, at this early stage, in 'first-rung' learning, it is important that the learning is very tailored to the needs of the group so that they have a good experience and 'catch the learning bug'.

A third thing that groups appreciated was the organisational aspect of the project, with the project manager finding tutors and organising the course. One course organiser, a volunteer manager, only works part time and so just having the course organised by someone else was a great help, and speeded up the process. She was looking for a very specialised training course and appreciated that the project manager had the contacts to find an appropriate trainer. She commented that without him to do that,

**" ... I wouldn't have had a clue where to start, you know I'd just ask around, and so that [the project manager finding out] is much better."**

So the main issues were the funding, flexibility of the learning, and all the organisation support that the project manager offered. Some groups also appreciated having someone 'chase them up', and others were just thankful for the help. As one group on a peripheral estate fed back,

"Thankyou so much for your help - it does make all the difference to small groups like us stuck in the outbacks ... "

The courses were set up in different ways. In some cases the courses were set up or initiated by workers for clients, and in other cases the learning was set up by a group of people for themselves, working with the tutor. The common theme throughout was that the learners had involvement in the course content and structure, both before and often during the course. Learners, both on courses initiated by themselves, and on courses initiated by others, commented that they'd had a continuing input into the learning throughout the course.

This flexibility in the content, which allowed learners to play a role in shaping the content to suit their needs, was a key success factor in the courses. As will be seen later, when the course content is not negotiated beforehand or during the course so that it meets the needs of learners, this can lead to problems.

There were several problems that arose during the setting up process, which made the process more difficult, and with some groups meant that they never took up the course. One problem was time. One course organiser appreciated that the project manager kept calling her and chasing her to set things up, because if he had not done this then the course may not have got off the ground as she works part-time and

is very busy. Time was also a factor that impacted upon learners once a course was set up. Several courses that had been set up did not happen as the group that were due to do the training found they were too busy in the day-to-day running of their own groups, and did not have time to do the training.

Another issue is the way that groups work. The project manager explained that,

**“A lot of the groups, I find, function around one key individual and if they’ve got any issues themselves, if they’re ill or if a member of their family is ill or something like that then it appears to me that the whole group ceases to function effectively, or as effectively as it could do.”**

This issue of a key person encountering some problem was the reason for a lot of the groups coming to a halt with their learning. One example of this occurred when the daughter of a key group member was admitted to hospital, and the whole process of setting up a course ground to a halt. This raises issues of support for groups, and more broadly, the issue of raising capacity amongst all members of a group so they are not totally dependent on one individual.

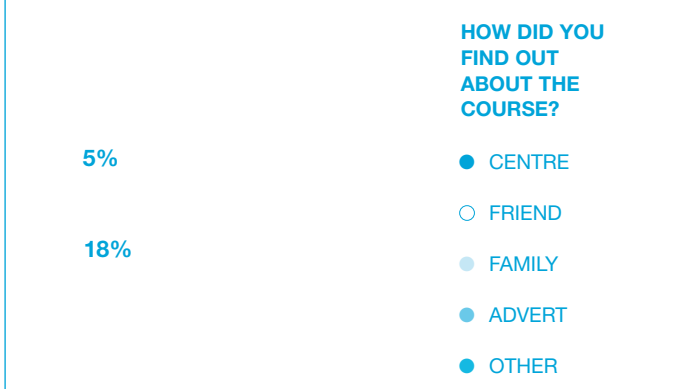
As another example shows, sometimes events occur which can shift the attention of a group, and cause them to stop focusing on the learning. For example one group suffered a violent incident at its meeting place, with the result that people stayed away for a couple of weeks; in that time the momentum that the course had gained as it was being set up was lost. Another group decided not to go ahead with training, as a significant number of the potential learners suffered poor mental health and were not able to go on the course.

It is perfectly understandable that events such as these disrupt or even stop courses from happening, and the lesson to be learnt is that the process of running courses is not a simple one; a great deal of time has to be invested in work with non-traditional learners, and this investment will not always produce immediate, measurable outcomes due to issues like those above. It may give the group the capacity and incentive to engage in learning in the future, where before, perhaps, they wouldn’t, but the impact of this development and the long-term outcomes arising from it are effectively lost in terms of a short-term funded project like the ACLF project.

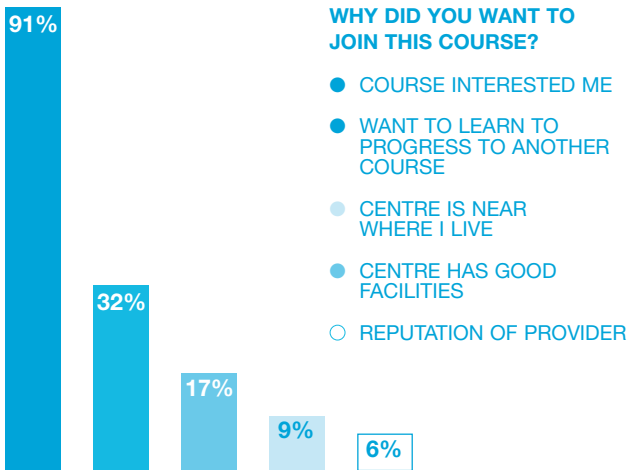
## The learning

**This section is about the courses, and the learning itself. It focuses on why and how individuals got engaged with the learning, the good and bad things about the courses, what they got out of going on the courses, and barriers to learning that were identified through the process. This section has been written from the evaluation sheets that students have done in the courses, as well as from interviews with tutors/organisers and learners.**

### STARTING OUT ON THE COURSES



The table above shows that most of the learners found out about the actual courses through the centre where the course was run. This ranged from being told by someone in the centre, or seeing a notice about it there, to being part of a group in a centre that was running a course. There is no clarity about how they found out exactly, but the issue to note is the link to a local centre of some form, be it a community centre or care centre. Almost a quarter found out through friends and family, showing the strength of informal networks in passing on information to individual learners. This is also shown in the evaluation of the ACLF as a whole (Field et al, 2001). Only 5% said they found out directly through an advert. Other sources were specific agencies, or individuals saying that they had asked for the courses to be set up. Again, the importance of local centres and informal networks to finding out information about learning should be noted.



Source: Evaluation sheets from 72 Learners- multiple responses

Most of the learners joined the course because it interested them. However some wanted to use the course in order to progress to another. The locality of the course location was also an important factor for some. However, in the interviews the learners, unconstrained by a small range of answers to choose from, gave many different answers.

Some, especially the elderly, emphasised that the learning was something to do to get them out of the house, mixing with other people and to keep them active. As one elderly learner on a creative writing course said,

“It’s been a godsend to me. I mean usually I come here, have a cup of tea, have a natter, not using my brain. I’ve been using my brain now for 10 months. It’s made a difference in my life ... I had a new lease of life when this was brought in.”

This emphasises the general health benefits that learners have got out of the courses, especially, but not exclusively, for those who are elderly. This, again mirrors the findings of other research (James, 2001).

Others emphasised the fun they get out of learning as the reason why they do it. One young man on a men’s care project commented simply “I just love it.”

Other groups and individuals emphasised the outcomes to which they would put the training, for themselves individually or for their group, and this was their motivation. For example, on a ‘Dealing with Difficult Situations’ course run for the volunteer team of a youth project, one of the learners who is employed working with people with drugs and alcohol problems said that,

“I actually thought it would be useful for me for my work with [youth project] because we’re constantly in a situation where we need to know how to deal with difficult situations, there’s lots of potentially tense situations, difficult behaviour

that we have to deal with so to get some kind of round that will be really useful, but also, in a personal sense for me in my work, my employment work, that’s equally as important, if not more important. So I was quite keen to do it because I thought it would be quite useful in both arenas.”

Another learner linked her motivation to the effect her learning would have on others. She said she was motivated to learn because she wanted to improve herself and to keep up to date, but also because,

**“ ... it’s to help the kids as well. Because if you’re doing it there’s kids can see you doing it, and they wanna do it.”**

### WHAT LEARNERS SAID WAS GOOD ABOUT THE COURSES

Learners had much to say about what was good about the courses that they went on, and several main topics became clear through the data. The first issue relates to the learning itself. Learners appreciated the flexibility of the learning available to them, that they could be involved in deciding what to learn and how to learn it. One learner commented that “..they always asked us is there something else you want to tackle, and there was always the option of an extra week if need be ... “ Tutors also commented on the importance of giving the learners some say in the course material, and the confidence that they gained through the process. One learner summed up the issue when she said, **“ ... you can often go on courses and choose parts of them, and think yeah, well that’s applicable, but in fact [for the ACLF course] they asked us what we wanted and they tried to bring some of that into the course.”**

Learners also appreciated the absence of the pressure that they associate with accredited courses. They mentioned that they could come and go as they pleased, and it didn’t matter if they had to miss a session. One learner on an arts and crafts course commented that, “There’s no pressure here, it’s 100% creative. I like that. Other courses you get qualified, but so what?”

Some groups and individuals did go for accreditation on their courses, but for many the impression was that if a course had been accredited it would have been a barrier to them starting it.

Learners also liked the nature of the courses; that they weren’t in a lecture format with a teacher just talking at them, but that there was a dialogue, a chance for the learners to have an input. Some learners emphasised the practical nature of their learning, that they were able to make things. Others appreciated the chance to have a say as part of the learning process. One learner said,

**“I liked that way we did thinky bits ourselves and then [the tutor] interjected with ... not factual information ... she said this is important to think about ... “**

This method of teaching and learning, borrowing from Freireian pedagogy (Freire, 1986) also had benefits for the tutors. Some mentioned that they had changed teaching methods following discussion with the learners, and one commented about a particular course he'd tutored, “I learnt a lot about myself ... things I didn't know.”

Another factor which made the courses good was the tutor, with both learners and course organisers making positive comments about the tutors. Learners said that getting on with the tutor was something that made the course enjoyable, and that the learning was enhanced by the tutor being knowledgeable, and presenting the information in a clear way. Course organisers also recognised the part that tutors played in making the courses a success. One in particular, at a daycare centre, was impressed as the tutors were willing to share their skills with the centre staff, gradually upskilling them to continue the course after the funded course finished.

Another factor that learners thought important about the courses, and which made them good, were the other people involved in the learning. Firstly, for some learners, the size of the groups made a big difference. One of the advantages about the ACLF which will be discussed later is that it is able to support small numbers of learners, and this is not possible under other funding regimes. One learner has epilepsy triggered by stress, and has struggled in larger groups. He commented that,

**“The ... class, due to the small number of students, has helped me to improve my English. I am able to have one to one tuition, which is what I need ... I do find the small friendly ... class is perfect for my needs.”**

Another factor was the friendly nature of the groups that gave learners a supportive environment within which they could open up and learn effectively. In fact many of the learners wanted the courses to continue after they had

finished because of the support and the encouragement to learn that they got they got through them. This feeling was increased when the group had a common experience or background, through similar individual experiences or through common involvement in a group. One tutor commented about a group with a common experience of marginalisation,

“The fact that it was a group with a common experience was really important ... It produced quite a bond that enabled them to work together at a level that would have taken longer to forge [without the bond].”

There were also practical factors that made the courses good for learners. Firstly, the fact that courses were free for the learner was important, as many were not employed and wouldn't have been able to afford any fees. One of the tutors commented,

**“Even at a college with a fee waiver you pay ... 15 to 20 quid, they'd have had to pay and that's a lot of money to them. So having it completely free - I think they were a bit bewildered at first, why is someone giving us something free?”**

The project manager noted that these are not the only financial barriers to people going on the courses, and that the project has paid for childcare and transport costs for courses. It may be that these issues were not raised more often by learners because these barriers had been addressed by the funding.

Another practical issue was time, as for some learners there were only certain times when they could attend the courses. The ability to be able to run courses when it was convenient for the learner was important, and enabled more people to participate. One learner expressed this by saying that the course was “ ... at a time to fit in with my life.”

Location was another practical factor, and the project manager tried to set up the courses in the neighbourhoods of the group where possible. This cut down transport costs for the project, and travelling time for the learners. Again one of the learners commented that “ ... being in the neighbourhood it was easy to get to ... “ Again the familiarity with location and the lack of a long journey may have encouraged people to be involved, and made it easier for them.

## WHAT LEARNERS SAID WAS BAD ABOUT THE COURSES

There were far fewer criticisms of the courses than positive comments, and many of the participants were entirely satisfied with their courses. However some common themes emerged from the feedback. The first theme related to time. Learners often complained that there hadn't been enough time to go into topics in depth, and they would have liked more time to discuss and explore topics. However, it must be noted that the context of the comments made clear that they enjoyed and got a lot out of the learning, and that was the reason why they wanted more time to discuss and explore issues further.

Another common theme was that the course was not so good if attendance was not stable. One tutor contrasted two courses, one with a stable group of people, and the same course run again with a different group who were not so regular in their attendance. The tutor commented that,

“... the effect on the group was we weren't as cohesive, the dynamics seemed to change as there wasn't a stable core membership, whereas the first group had 3 or 4 people and they stayed for 10 weeks.”

This has an effect on the learning that goes on in the group; it is less effective than with a consistent and therefore strongly bonded group.

Another problem was when the learning wasn't pitched at the right level for the learners, or some of the learners in a group. One particular course had some negative feedback as some participants felt they already knew all that was covered in the course. As the project manager explained, “... **Maybe it was pitched at the wrong level, there was too big a range of needs and understanding of what it [the course] entailed across the group, so that's the reason why [there was some negative feedback].**”

In this case the group had not met with the tutor before the course started to work out exactly what would be covered, a process which could have resolved the issue before the course started. This emphasises the importance of the tutor discussing the learning with the group prior to the course starting.

## WHAT LEARNERS GOT OUT OF THE COURSES

Learners had many different things to say about what they got out of the courses. However most of them can be seen as relating to skills they gained: their confidence levels; what they learnt about learning; and what they gained as a group.

There were two aspects to the comments on skills. The first related to the topic of the course. With such a wide range of courses, from assertiveness to basic skills to creative writing, there were many different skills that learners said they'd picked up through their courses. For example,

**“..I have mastered the internet and written a story, which is something I have not done before.”** (Basic Skills Course)

“... it gives me more of an understanding about myself and life.” (Gender Agenda Course)

“Well obviously the drawing - to do it properly ... “ (Arts & Crafts Course)

A lot of the learners appreciated being able to learn without the pressure of accreditation, although some learners have asked for their course to be accredited, and this has been possible. As the project manager commented,

“... people in some cases are getting qualifications that they've never had or they've not had for twenty years ... “

Learners were keen to talk about the skills they'd learnt that were relevant to the course material, and were often keen to show interviewers examples of their work and how far they'd progressed through the learning. However, they were equally as keen, if not more so, to highlight other skills and personal development that had occurred through the courses.

There were many diverse examples of these skills. One learner who has taken responsibility for running the course (by finding a venue and looking after the opening up, closing and administration of the venue) said,

**“Certainly my organizational abilities have been improved beyond recognition from what they were originally. Also it has increased my level of responsibility, knowing there's other people depending on me to open the place ... “**

Another older learner spoke of how he'd learnt to use a computer through his creative writing class, and then had bought one for home so that he could use it there.

In addition to these highly individual responses, there were a number of common themes which emerged. One common theme was of becoming more comfortable with other people; more able to interact with people, and work with them in a group setting. One specific example related by a tutor was of a group of young people who, throughout the length of the course, grew much more able to tolerate and accommodate differences of opinion within the group; where before there may have been confrontation there was now much more acceptance. Other individuals noted that they felt much more comfortable around others, and that they felt far more able to talk with them, both inside and outside their groups.

However, the most common issue that learners and the course organisers/tutors mentioned was confidence. Learners said how much they had grown in confidence, for example,

**“The group has been a big confidence builder ... “  
“It has given me great confidence in myself and in what I do.”**

**“ ... It's been good for me because it's made me realize what I really can still do.”**

Some learners said that self-confidence was the most important thing that they'd gained from their course. Tutors, in evaluations and interview, also recognized that groups had grown in confidence and stated that they could see change both individually and corporately as a result of this increase in confidence.

This increase in confidence then had an impact upon individual's lives outside of the course. For example, parents on a childcare course related how they were more confident to make changes in the routines of their children and families where necessary, where before they would have left it. Others talked about being less quiet with other people and engaging more. Some have used this confidence to move on to new things, for example, volunteering opportunities and further learning. The confidence, as lots of

the learners said, re-motivated them and made them want to go out and do something.

The project manager recognized that skills such as these above, which can be classified as Key Skills, have been an important part of the learning across the whole project,

“ ... things like motivation, ability to work in groups, all sorts of stuff, timekeeping, use of computers, some groups are using computers that have never used them before. That kind of thing.”

He also commented that an important facet, as people have made positive comments about the learning, is what they have learnt about how learning can be,

“I think the realisation that learning doesn't have to be in a stuffy environment, 'cos I think a lot of people ... they've probably had really negative experiences of schools ... the school environment, it's very rigid, you're not allowed to think freely. I think that's the joy of a lot of it. People can express themselves, and don't feel they're under any pressure to produce x, y and z.”

Lastly, individual groups gained corporate benefit from the courses. There were broadly two types of learning that groups undertook for themselves, although the margin between the two was at times blurred. There was learning for enjoyment and interest, and then there was learning to help the group function more effectively. However, as the project manager commented, “ ... underpinning all that is the development of Key Skills.” For most of the groups, the corporate benefits were the same as the ones identified by individuals. But for those groups whose courses related directly to the running of the group, the learning helped their group work more effectively. The project manager expressed this by saying,

**“ ... you get groups that have just started and you can tell they're just zigzagging all over the place, not sure what direction to go in. Once they've accessed training you can see them pulling together and getting more focused on what they're doing.”**

## BARRIERS TO LEARNING

Various barriers to learning were also identified through the interviews. The first issue was that of familiarity. Some learners were not comfortable going to a course where they didn't know the other people or the place. One learner commented that " ... if I learn in a group of people I know, I find the learning much easier." This was an issue when learners decided whether to go on courses, but was also sometimes an issue in progression from the ACLF course to another. Some people were nervous about the prospect of stepping out of the environment of the group where they had got to know everybody, and wanted to continue learning in the same setting with the same people, rather than going elsewhere. Other learners were comfortable in the place where the learning was taking place and didn't want to go elsewhere to learn.

These issues are closely tied up with the confidence levels of individuals and groups, and the time needed for people to gain sufficient confidence to step out of familiar situations, go to new places and meet new people. The project manager emphasised that it takes a long time, and intensive work, to build up people's confidence so that they can move on. Even then, as a tutor commented, " ... there's so many influences on their lives outside the group, so many things happen ... " and these things also affect people's confidence and decisions about learning.

There were also practical barriers to learning identified. Both groups and individuals saw funding as a barrier. Some groups were unable to do certain courses because of the costs of the crafts and the materials. For example one group wanted to do sewing and needlecraft at their centre, but the cost of the sewing machines and other materials was prohibitive. Another group in a daycare centre said that their learning activities had been cut back as funding for the centre had diminished. But individuals also found finance a barrier. One person had even got part way through a counselling course, found he could not afford to continue, and then had to drop out.

Other barriers related to the family. One student had taken a break from learning due to an illness in the family. Others mentioned that having children made things more difficult. The free childcare available across the project was appreciated by parents, and parents with school-age children found it easier to attend if courses were held during the school day.

One of the aims of the project was to facilitate progression for individuals and groups to further learning. This has been successful. As discussed above, at the time of writing, 18 of the 22 groups who had done courses had gone on to do further courses. So in terms of groups progressing to further courses supported by the ACLF, there is clear evidence.

In terms of individuals within those groups there is also clear progression shown in the sample of results that are available at this stage. Courses that were established in a centre and were then continued due to demand tended to have very high rates of progression, over 90%, as effectively the course was a continuation. Groups that were doing learning to increase the effectiveness of their group also had high progression rates, with up to 75% of people continuing with the group onto further courses. One group that organised courses for local people on a range of topics showed a progression rate of 32% across their courses. So individuals were progressing onto further learning as the groups did, and also new people were being continuously added.

However, this can only show part of the picture because, as was noted above, there are many influences on people's lives that help determine their progression from a certain course onto something else. As one tutor commented about the difficult experiences that the learners he had been working with had to deal with:

**"Progression can be staying where you are when everything's knocking you back."**

It is important to be aware of the barriers discussed above, and other life circumstances that may delay or halt progression. This means that although some people may progress, this will not be recorded either because other factors delay the progression, or because the progression is not in a manner that is recordable. In this case then it is important to know whether people, regardless of other factors, wanted to progress further following the learning they did with the ACLF project.

When asked at the end of the courses whether they would like to go on to further learning, over half said yes, with more than half of those having a clear idea what they wanted to go on and do. Of the rest, only a very small number said they wouldn't like to do more learning, and the majority left the question on the evaluation sheet blank.

Underlying those statistics was a trend of several different answers. Some people wanted to continue with the same course and the same people, and were reluctant to consider any other approach to learning. Others wanted to do something, but weren't sure of what they wanted to do, or

what was available. Lastly, some had very clear ideas of their progression.

Some individuals have progressed from the ACLF Project courses onto other activities. Some have accessed further courses and have started volunteering at centres they've learnt at with a view to moving into employment further down the line. Others have gone onto courses at larger institutions like Adult Education centres, colleges and universities. However, as one tutor noted, "... the difficulty is staying on the course." One factor that was an issue was that the support available at the larger institutions is different from and less intense than that with the smaller courses that people have come from, and this can make things difficult. For example the tutor mentioned one individual who'd gone onto an access course and now a degree course, and uses the ACLF group where he started out as a means of support for his degree course.

Learners were at different levels and so progression for some was much less spectacular than for others. For some, progression has meant a next step of putting the skills learnt into practice in the home, or moving onto further learning within their group. As the project worker commented, for some individuals and groups it takes a long time for them to get from where they are to a point where the moving on in their lives is recognized as progression, for example, by moving on to further learning. However, this does not devalue the progression in their own lives which is unrecorded. As one tutor commented,

**"Some of the people in the group expressed learning outcomes of being able to be more honest in relationships with people outside the group. That's a progression in terms of relationships with others, but you don't get O-Levels in relationships!"**

Overall, groups have progressed as well as individuals, being able to work better either due to the specific learning they have done, or just through working together as a group on a course. As the project worker summed it up,

"I think ... you've got groups that can function more effectively as a result of the training that they've undertaken, and I think groups, when individuals feel empowered through training, or their confidence is built, [are] more knowledgeable, I think that can help move them forward."

## Measurement of the Learning

**One of the aims of the project has been to look at what works in terms of measuring soft outcomes and distance travelled. This is an area where organizations are still working out how best to do it, and there is no standard 'best practice' approach as yet (Greenwood et al, 2001). However, as the project manager commented, in order to measure what people have got out of learning, you do need the views of both the tutor and the learners.**

Most of the tutors on the project mainly used observation to look at and determine what the progress of students was. But as one tutor mentioned, this is difficult to do when you don't know the learners, and especially when the courses are short. However, the majority managed to make an assessment of student progress based on this kind of method. The issue for the project, however, has been getting these observations down on paper from busy tutors after the course has finished. This is a problem for many institutions offering similar courses (ibid). Whilst the project manager praised the tutors on the project for the work they'd done with learners, the lack of completed forms has been a problem, even when tutors have been offered to be paid to do it. His solution to this in the future is to write the completion of the forms into the contract so that they are obliged to do it.

This is one practical problem that has arisen during the project. Another is that learners don't tend to like filling in evaluation forms at the end of courses. This again is mirrored in the wider literature (e.g. Watters et al, 2001). The experience of the tutors and organisers was that generally learners didn't understand why the forms were useful, and couldn't see any benefit to themselves through them.

Therefore they were reluctant to fill them in. The project worker also noted that when forms came back they were often half filled in, or done very quickly with little detail. This means that the evaluation sheets, even those that are fully filled in, often only give a flavour of what the learner thinks, rather than any detailed information. One of the tutors summed the attitude as,

**"It's a necessity that needs to be done, but in terms of the meaning of their experience, it doesn't really touch it, it's just a formality to be done ... "**

What has worked throughout the project has been embedding the evaluation of the learning within the course. Learners have been consistently keen to talk about what they've got out of the course within the group and as part of the course. One tutor, in the courses he ran, held a session in which learners devised the evaluation questions, then worked through them in a group. This worked very well and the learners were able to reflect on what they'd learnt, and on the course as a whole in a meaningful way. Another tutor held a discussion about what people had learnt, what had been good and bad about the course, and videoed it. This again proved to be an effective way of evaluating the learning as again the learners were able to reflect on their experiences and pull out issues pertinent to the learning for themselves. As the project worker suggested:

“ ... people seem to like talking about their learning, maybe it depends on how they are able to communicate it.”

The indication then, is that what has worked are evaluation sessions that have been embedded in the course, and where learners can see the meaning in what they're doing. The 'tick-box' exercises at the end of courses are not so popular because the learner cannot see their relevance. As one learner said about them “ ... sometimes the questions they ask are not always the ones you'd like to be asked..” Also the fact that they are often to be done after the learning has finished put some people off, as did the paper based nature of the method.

There were some paper based tools that were developed to measure the progress of learners across the course, but these were not used with all the learners, and therefore it is difficult to come to any conclusions about them. One method worth a mention, however, is the Personal Growth Barometer, which was used only once but was liked by both learners and tutors.

Personal Growth Barometer was developed through a project called 'Barrier Busters', part of the London Borough of Croydon. It is a method where the tutor and/or learners

come up with polarised statements related to the learning objectives, for example 'I have learnt to read' and 'I can't read'. A list of these are drawn up at the start of the course, and printed on a form with a scale of 1 to 5 between them. The learners mark where they are on the continuum at the start of the course and then again at the end of the course. The results can then be depicted graphically, giving a visual image of progression.

The tutors liked this as it could be adapted to a specific course and gave a visual image. The learners who used it also liked the visual image, as the tutor explained,

“It's quantifiable, measurable, they're really into that. It's really good to come back to the group with the charts, and each had their own to take away ... They took them home, it was really important for them, so that was good. Evaluation for them was really positive, it worked.”

So, this method worked well with the group. However, the group that used it were a group that were given incentives in terms of lunch money and travel to be there for the evaluation, and that added to their enthusiasm for the evaluation generally. This was, the tutor explained, because a value was being put on their thoughts, and therefore they were motivated to do it. The only concern about the tool is the paper based nature of it, and the long number of statements to fill in. This may have put less motivated groups off. However, if this can be overcome, it seemed that the visual image of progress worked well with these learners. So this approach is worth looking into with other types of learner and groups in the future.

Overall, then, the main lesson that can be taken from this is that learners are happier to be involved in evaluation, and put more in, when it is an integral part of the course and of their learning, rather than being an addition tacked on at the end of the course. When learners put more into the evaluation, they get more out of it, and so do the tutors.

## Benefits of the ACLF Model

**Having seen what the learners have valued about the courses they have been involved in, it is now clear that some of the key things they mentioned would not have been possible without the ACLF funding structure. These things relate to the size of the groups and the nature of the learning.**

The project worker said that,

“ ... we've run courses with just three people on them, but it's been really intensive, one to one work, which has been some significant progress with those individuals. From that point of view it's been brilliant..”

Some individual learners have needed small groups, and the pressure has been taken off groups to find a large number of people to make a course viable. Another tutor also mentioned that sometimes numbers fluctuated with the non-traditional learners, and so would sometimes be very low. At a bigger institution this may have caused the course to be stopped, but with the ACLF Project this was not the case, and so people were able to come when they could make it without the course being stopped as a consequence. This was especially important when working with vulnerable groups of learners.

The other factor related to the flexibility of the learning and the content. Learners greatly appreciated being able to have the courses tailored to their needs, and to be able to have some input into the course content as the course went along. This was a key factor in their experience, and for some, their learning needs were so specific, they needed this flexibility in order to get something from the learning. However, outside of the ACLF project, there is rarely the opportunity to have this flexibility to the same extent, as one tutor said,

**“Education is more and more focused on outcome and retention and achievement, having the right figures, and you can spend weeks doing it. We rarely get the opportunity to move beyond the parameters of an accredited syllabus ... I wouldn't have been able to run that course at [a] college, no way, where the syllabus almost changed from week to week ... “**

So there were key freedoms in the ACLF model that have facilitated the organisers and tutors to be able to make the learning work better for learners.

## Lessons that can be learnt from the project

**There are some key lessons that can be taken from this project that will be relevant for those working with non-traditional learners in Hull as well as further afield. They relate to the learning itself, progression of individuals, the measurement of outcomes and time.**

### THE LEARNING

Informal networks through individuals and grass-roots organisations are vital to getting information out to non-traditional learners. Advertising that may bring in other groups may not work as well with this group of people.

There needs to be continuous support and capacity building whilst working with groups of learners to organise and take up some learning, otherwise other events may cause them not to take up what is offered. This is especially the case where a group relies on one key individual.

There are several factors that these learners said were good about the learning, and therefore any future learning for them should take account of these:

#### Flexibility

**At this level, learners wanted to know that what they are learning is directly relevant to them, and appreciated the flexibility to adjust the course material as they went along in response to what they were learning and interested in.**

#### Tutor

**The fact that learners got on with a tutor well, and found the way they worked helpful, encouraged them to keep learning and added to the enjoyment.**

#### Other learners

**Where a group had a common experience or background, and where they 'bonded', the tutors felt the learning was more effective, and the learners were more encouraged to keep coming.**

#### Practical factors

**The fact that the course was free, and childcare and transport were covered, enabled more people to take part.**

#### Locality

**People are more willing to go somewhere close to their home, or to a place that is familiar.**

## MEASUREMENT OF OUTCOMES

Learners are much more likely to engage with evaluation about their learning where it is embedded in the course and they can see the relevance of it to their learning. They put less into it, and everyone gets less out of it if the feedback or evaluation is an add-on at the end of a course.

Measurement also needs to take account both of the expected outcomes of learning specifically related to the course and of softer outcomes that are less easily quantified, as for the learner, these are equally important.

## PROGRESSION OF INDIVIDUALS

All sorts of influences impact upon the lives of learners, and the fact that they have learnt much on a course and want to progress does not necessarily mean they will be able to immediately, as other factors are prevalent. For some there will be a time-lag before they progress, and for others, their progression will not be in terms of courses and qualifications, and so it will not be recognised. These issues must be acknowledged when looking at the outputs of short-term funded projects.

## TIME

**“I think time is a big thing, I mean I think that’s the problem with a lot of the funders, they don’t realize the time that it takes, I mean I’ve been doing this for 15 months and some of the groups are just getting started - it does take a long time, that’s why we need more long-term funding.”**

**(Project Manager)**

Much of the project manager’s time has been spent in intensive development work getting groups to the point where they can identify learning needs and take them up. With groups and individuals at this end of the learning scale, it takes time to engage them and to move them forward. This highlights the need for long-term development funding to work with these groups and individuals in this way. Once people are past the initial stages and into the accredited learning, then they progress much faster. As the project manager explained,

**“ ... when you get to the accredited stuff you can just plough on through it, the courses are all there and you can get on with them - It’s getting from point A and moving forward that takes all the time.”**

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