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Authors	Healy, Brenda;Walsh, Jennifer;O'Neill, Sinead
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Promoting healthier communities through adult education: Learning Connections in Action

Brenda Healy & Jennifer Walsh
Centre for Adult and Continuing Education
University College Cork

Sinead O'Neill,
Access Service
Cork Institute of Technology

Introduction

This presentation will highlight an Adult Education initiative delivered in Cork City through collaboration between members of the Cork Learning Neighbourhoods Project. It will outline the outreach provision of the Certificate in the Mental Health in the Community and how this is delivered in non-traditional settings to achieve successful collaboration, support accessible participation in lifelong learning and build capacity in communities.

The process of creating a learning space to achieve transformative learning will be outlined as well as how this programme serves to enable students to address mental health issues on a personal level, community level and beyond.

Background

In September 2015, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning presented Cork with a Learning City Award at the 2nd International Conference on Learning Cities in Mexico City.

The Bejing Declaration on Building Learning Cities (2013) makes a commitment to social inclusion and expanding access to participation in lifelong learning opportunities. However, the Cork City Profile outlines that there was still a spatial component to educational disadvantage. The concept of Learning Neighbourhoods was presented in Cork by Peter Kearns (former Director of PASCAL Observatory Learning City Network) at a UNESCO seminar and then adopted by the Growing Lifelong Learning Committee in Cork. It was decided that it would be piloted in two Neighbourhoods in 2015 – 2016. This was supported by the Centre for Adult and Continuing Education (ACE) UCC, Cork Education and Training Board, Cork Institute of Technology and Cork City Council. Learning Neighbourhoods brings the Learning City concept to a local level and works with education and community organisations and residents to promote and develop active local lifelong learning. From the initial pilot project, it has now expanded to six Neighbourhoods throughout Cork City, Knocknaheeny, Ballyphehane, Mayfield, Togher, The Glen and South Parish.

This presentation will highlight deliveries in two of the Learning Neighbourhoods namely Knocknaheeny and The Glen (Cork Prison). All Learning Neighbourhoods have a Steering Committees comprising of a range of local stakeholders. In partnership with the Steering Committee these two communities sought to support existing community education initiatives in their area in 2018/19. Through local feedback, discussions began

around exploring the option of delivering the ACE Certificate in Mental Health in the Community on an outreach basis.

In its delivery of adult education ACE aims to 'deliver top quality university education in a responsive and flexible way to meet need' and offers a 'learner centred approach underpinned by principles of social justice, participation, social inclusion and active citizenship'. ACE provides programmes that are… 'for the community, by the community and in the community'. These values and approach to delivery very much responded to the need in these communities around community education at that particular time.

There was significant interest amongst local stakeholders at the prospect of providing this programme within the respective communities. Numerous meetings took place between community partners and representatives from ACE and the Learning Neighbourhood Steering Committee to discuss the feasibility of delivery of the programme and the needs of these particular cohorts of outreach students. The ethos of adult education adopts a collaborative approach to providing flexible and accessible learning opportunities to adult learners which was a key feature of this process. Once a needs assessment was undertaken, a careful planning process was undertaken for programme delivery.

The Certificate in Mental Health in the Community is a Programme designed for the community participant, to enhance the participant's knowledge, skills and values in respect of mental wellbeing and recovery. It explores concepts of mental health and considers community based educational and support options for mental health recovery.

The curriculum for the Certificate in Mental Health in the Community was designed in 2013 following a partnership agreement between Mental Health Ireland and Adult Continuing Education. Informed by Mezirow's theory of adult education, the curriculum transports the student through a personal and a social process with the ultimate goal of social action. Enhancing community capacity through education lies in its ability to "empower community members as citizens to self-manage their lives and environment through acquisition of leadership skills and engagement in the building and enactment of a shared community vision. It supports the belief that when empowered to do so, all people possess valuable skills, strengths, assets, and knowledge that can contribute towards mobilising community vision into action." (Mc Evoy, et al 2019: 229)

Findings

The deliveries in both Knocknaheeney and Cork Prison began with a delivery of the Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) workshop. Through the WRAP workshop participants are taken on a journey of self-awareness. Experiential processes encourage participants to draw on their own strengths through reflecting on and valuing their lived experiences. "The promotion of personalised learning and flexibility within the learning group encourages the development of critical self-reflection and fosters the capacity for transformative learning" (Healy & Houlihan, 2017) Students are asked to explore the concept of 'community' from a diversity of perspectives. Learning outcomes are strategically developed to achieve this through an adult education approach. Assessments bring students out of the classroom environment and into the community through collaborative project work and site visits. Project based learning allows learners to gain a deeper understanding on classroom topics, working together to examine real life issues that affect them in their own communities. The

programme culminates with a skills demonstration. Students design a mental health presentation for an identified target group of their choice, demonstrating their connection between theory and practice.

> *"The course was the best thing I have ever done in my life as an uneducated person I believe now that education is the key, I met lifelong friends in it and enjoyed every tutor and what I learned from each will carry with me through life. I am now on the working and steering group of the Recovery College in DCU and could have never done this without the knowledge and confidence I got from course".* Dublin graduate.

This initiative **supports accessible participation in lifelong learning** by acknowledging and placing value on prior life experience and the contribution that learners bring to the learning process. This along with the programme content allows students to explore beyond the set curriculum and enhances learning, knowledge-sharing, participation, confidence, satisfaction and development. Delivering this programme on an outreach basis in these communities enabled the utilization of local supports and resources, while also facilitating a process of inclusion within the UCC student community e.g. where appropriate students were brought into UCC in a supported way through visits/classes to/in UCC. In line with ACE's commitment to grassroots and community delivery, the programme, delivered on an outreach basis, connects with a diverse range of adult learners and brings the University to the community.

By providing an accessible opportunity for learning and undertaking local needs assessments, the needs of the students are prioritised. This allows students to learn and develop in a safe environment where full participation is facilitated, and learning is scaffolded. The experience that the students bring to the learning environment is key to the process. The adult learners are engaged in transformative and active learning processes through collaborative project work and site visits. Project based learning allows learners to gain a deeper understanding on classroom topics, working together to examine real life issues that affect them in their own communities. Students are involved in the development of a mental health promotion action plan for a chosen population group or for a particular setting, culminating in a presentation of their findings in an academic poster format. Reflective journaling throughout this process is critical to encourage transformative learning.

This initiative has served to **build capacity in communities by** developing active engaged citizens through learner centred education. By facilitating a process of conscientization among the student group they can become aware of their needs and subsequently develop the capacity to work as a group, in responding to these needs and ultimately the needs of their community. They are therefore supported to assess their position in society and critically analyse their situation through dialogue (Freire, 1972).

Collaboration is a strong feature of the success of the programme to date. This accredited programme was developed in partnership with Mental Health Ireland. The recent delivery of the programme at Cork Prison and Knocknaheeny is as a result of the collaborative efforts of a range of stakeholders including Cork Learning Neighbourhoods project, Cork Education Unit (ETB), the Irish Prison Service and Cork City Partnership..

Conclusions:

With the on-going deliveries in both Learning Neighbourhoods of Knocknaheeny and the Glen, there has already been huge learning to date. This presentation will share some specific examples of such learning and

will examine how this has facilitated a process of reflection on the value of and challenges facing the programme. The Programme is also delivered annually in UCC and on an outreach basis in various locations across the country.

The Learning Neighbourhoods initiative is engaging in research projects to establish the current outcomes and measure impact but also to inform best practice in future development. It is anticipated that it will be run in two new Neighbourhoods in 2020.

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