

Mixed Gender Take Part Learning Programme

Context

Community leadership and active citizenship development work started in Wolverhampton in 1998 through a women's community development and health project, when the focus moved from running workshops on 'dealing with the menopause' and 'how to be a mother and stay sane' to working out how women can influence the decisions that affect their lives. It evolved from a series of workshops around women and leadership which, by 1998 had expanded to include a programme of training, practical support and mentoring. The first accredited 'course' of this type began in January 2000 and it focused on women's own experiences and opinions whilst setting out to explore local, national and European decision making structures.

The success of the pilot courses led to further developments around the main topics - citizenship, democracy, leadership and participation - and then to an invitation by the Home Office Active Learning for Active Citizenship (ALAC) programmes to showcase the IMPACT! approach as a creative learning initiative (2004-06). This then contributed to the development of the national Take Part learning framework.

The Black Country Take Part Pathfinder ran a women only learning programme in early 2009 and trialled a mixed gender learning programme starting later in 2009.

Approaches and methods

The Learning Programmes are delivered in 12 sessions over a period of 6-9 months and include a weekend residential. There are 3-4 weeks between sessions to enable learners to reflect and explore ideas, and also over the period of the programme to potentially become involved or more involved in public life.

The Four Essential Ingredients in the Take Part Learning Framework underpin the learning programme. They suggest specific content and processes, which combine to create the conditions for people to be confident and active in the public domain.

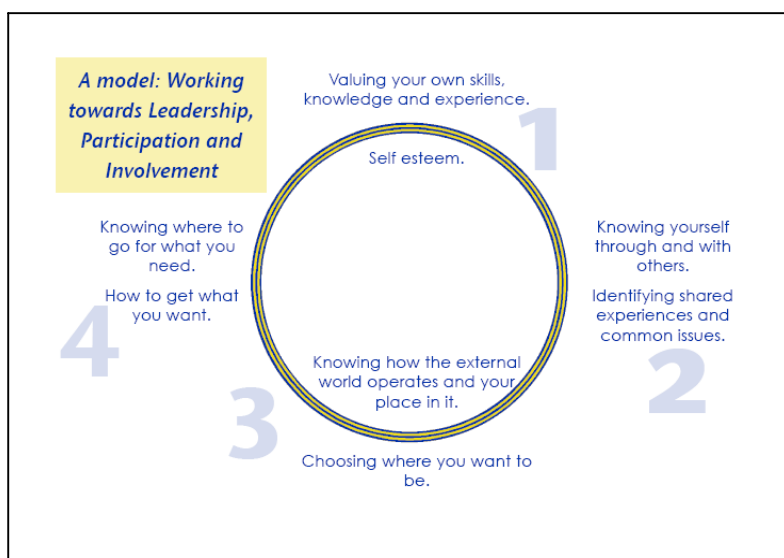


Figure 1: Four Essential Ingredients

Outcomes: The following is written by Nicki, a participant in the mixed gender Take Part Learning Programme run in 2009-10.

One of the essential ingredients in the course is about valuing your own skills, from the course I would hope that my own all round skills have been enhanced. I have been consciously aware of incorporating my learning to my personal and work life. In particular the assertiveness skills I have been taught and from reading "A Woman in your own right" from the course reading list that I found particularly beneficial. What has surprised me is the positive response to my requests made in an assertive way and how this has impacted on my self esteem.

The second essential ingredient is knowing yourself through and with others. The very essence of the course was raising awareness of ourselves through participatory working with others who have very different life experiences from ourselves. I found the lengthy discussions particularly where the older people contributed with historical information of real interest it brought to life information that I had only previously read. This gave me an excellent opportunity to challenge beliefs I hold. Although I have done extensive self development in the past it is amazing to still have enlightening moments. I realised how much of a task/ process person I am, although I have good communication skills and an ability to observe dynamics and respond to people in an empathic way, I still naturally veer towards the task elements of my work.

Essential element three - knowing how the external world operates and your place in it - was the most fascinating element, I quickly became inspired by the political landscape at national, regional and local level I have begun to read more political articles watch more politically related TV and became almost transfixed by the recent campaigning and subsequent coalition government. Friends have begun texting and emailing things that they think I will be interested in also. Two years ago I was lucky enough to visit the UN in New York, this feeling left me feeling patriotic and very proud of the influence the UK has in global decision making. The initial euphoria diminished quite quickly however impending visits to Parliament and Brussels have brought these feelings back into my awareness.

The fourth essential ingredient is knowing where to go to get what you want. The information provided on the learning programme was very helpful and has given me some useful ideas for the future. As a result of the programme I have secured a new job working for a network organisation supporting networks in building their capacity and skills to influence decision making in the Dudley Borough. The experience of the learning programme has helped me enormously in my work.

Outcomes for learning programme facilitators

Facilitators found it difficult at times to work with the power dynamics that existed between male and female members of the group. They constantly reflected on whether the learning programme they had developed with women was working as well for a mixed group. They concluded near the end of the course in 2010 that the programme works better with a women only group, and that there should be potential for a men only course if male facilitators could be trained.