

Experiences of using the National Take Part Learning Framework in the Black Country

Lorna Prescott and Jill Bedford

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. Jill Bedford, a member of the Black Country Pathfinder Delivery Group was involved in the writing of the National Take Part Learning framework.

The IMPACT! and Take Part Pathfinder learning programmes are based on the content of the National Take Part Learning Programme. In 2009 participants from the courses were invited to be trained to facilitate Take Part learning activities. The facilitator training was based on the Four Essential Ingredients in the framework.

The Four Essential Ingredients in the Black Country Take Part Learning Programme

The Four Essential Ingredients weave through the 12 day Learning Programme. The following provides examples of learning programme sessions in which a given ingredient is a prominent component of the learning.

Essential Ingredient 1, value your own skills - threads through session on:

- Assertive communication
- Presentation skills
- Meetings - how to make sure they work for you/rules of engagement
- Working with others
- Leadership - skills & qualities

Essential Ingredient 2, know yourself through and with others arises in the sessions around:

- Human Rights - Power & powerlessness
- Diversity, equality, difference & citizenship
- Working with others
- Leadership - skills & qualities

Essential Ingredient 3, know how the external world operates and choosing where you want to be underpins sessions on:

- Why participate? - What does citizenship mean for us
- Democracy & decision making - How laws are made
- Systems and structures in Wolverhampton, regional structures, national structures
- Consultation tools & techniques
- Meetings - how to make sure they work for you/rules of engagement

Essential Ingredient 4: know where to go to get what you want is addressed through sessions on:

- How to influence decisions - lobbying and campaigning
- Assertive communication
- Presentation skills
- Meetings - how to make sure they work for you/rules of engagement
- Working with others
- Leadership - skills & qualities

Facilitator Training

The facilitator training consisted of 7 days 'core' facilitation skills training with 4 days learning programme facilitator training.

The aims of the facilitator training were:

- To equip participants with the knowledge, skills and expertise to enable them to plan, deliver and evaluate training courses and workshops
- To raise participants awareness of their own level of personal development
- To extend understanding of equal opportunities, equalities and diversity issues and how these impact on group work and course delivery
- Understand the relationship between learning process and learning outcomes and the role of the Take Part facilitator in making this happen

The core facilitator training covered:

Session 1: The Pathfinder Approach and starting the core programme

Session 2: Theories of learning

Session 3: Role and responsibilities of a facilitator

Session 4: Promoting equality and fairness

Session 5: Planning sessions and workshops

Session 6: Evaluation and assessment

Session 7: Support and development for self

Each day of the learning programme facilitator training focused on one of the Essential Ingredients.

In terms of learning methods the training was highly participative and rooted in trainees' own experiences. Participants were expected to contribute and deliver aspects of the programme in a spirit of shared learning. Trainers encouraged participants to reflect upon the course and their own learning throughout. Learning methods included workshops and group activities, delivery and reflective practice, observation and feedback, peer support and reflective diaries.

Reflections from the Facilitator Training in relation to the Four Essential Ingredients

Trainee facilitators felt that it's a bit like a jigsaw - we want to take the ingredients apart and put them back together again - it's about the whole being greater than the sum of the parts. However, the learning is not linear and different aspects occur and reoccur throughout the programme, both in terms of process and in terms of content

Trainee facilitators considered how learning programme participants come to value their own skills (Essential Ingredient 1) through the course. Key factors included:

- Willingness to engage
- Smile and welcome - have time for people
- Good balance of activities that link people together
- Offer individuals opportunities to participate
- Be real and authentic - if we expect people to offer something of themselves - we need to offer something of ourselves
- Attitude and understanding - awareness of a whole range of experiences
- The way you come across - the way you manage the group - expect facilitators to take some responsibility
- As facilitators we can model the way we want to be treated - value ourselves - set that up as a way of being - if people see us talking to others, smiling, caring, being focused, listening - hopefully they will also see that as a good way to be.
- Recognising hurdles to getting on to the course
- Recognising that sometimes people press your buttons

On a more practical note it was recognised that Essential Ingredient 1 is as much about the icebreakers, endings and introductory activities. They help people to start to develop connections when they recognise similarities - participants start with preconceived ideas and gradually mix with others.

In the second facilitator training session the group looked at Essential Ingredient 2, know yourself through and with others. The following was reflected:

- It's not about what we are but about 'who' we are and about how we behave.
- It's 'real' to make assumptions as long as we question them
- Remember: A belief is not a 'fact'
- Negotiated understandings of people and getting beyond stereotypes and judgments, whilst also acknowledging the differences as well as recognising similarities, those external appearances - class, gender, sexuality, race etc.....these are equality issues and as in the material world there are huge differences between people.
- A balance between acknowledging the 'facts' around equality whilst acknowledging the similarities.
- Recognising individual experiences vs structural inequalities - micro vs macro
- Knowing where you sit in the world and able to decide where you want to be, what you might need to overcome, not blame yourself or see yourself as inadequate for not 'making it' in whatever context
- Recognising all the structural issues that may 'disadvantage' you

Essential Ingredient 3 is knowing how the external world operates and choosing your place in it. This ingredient is explored through the following topics in the course: what do we mean by citizenship, local, national and European political landscape,

campaigning, lobbying and meetings. The idea is that once we are clear about the system and our place in it, we can have clearer ideas about how we can get involved. We could be a constituent, consumer, voter, citizen etc.

Trainee facilitators discussed the Parliamentary Outreach and how useful that session was for participants. There was some discussion around how the democratic systems that we work within is quite new and was originally set up for white middle class male structures. We can critique the structures and that if we don't fight to keep it, we could lose - and in some ways we are losing our rights.

We discussed how, as facilitators, can we raise awareness of power and how it operates and keep a level of optimism and agency?

- It's often about keeping a tension between raising awareness of power dynamics in structures, challenging them - and stopping feelings spiralling down into an abyss where there is no point in doing anything.
- We offer tools about how people can make a difference.
- We should be wary of overplaying how power can keep people in their place. This could stop people from moving forward.
- However if you are not aware about how power and politics can play out where you are trying to access, you can get your 'fingers burnt' and it can be very off putting and disempowering.

Ways that we can keep the balance include:

- The fact that the course is not modular - the four ingredients weave around each other, so building self-esteem goes in hand with understanding how the world works.
- Is it perhaps about getting involved on our own terms - influence what we want to, in the way we want to - and helping people to make these choices.
- The way we raise awareness is to ask questions. Useful probing questions.
- As facilitators, we might need to do things to keep us from sinking into the abyss!! Perhaps by researching where people, groups, communities have made changes in the world.
- Facilitators would like to re-frame the notion of power. Look at how we are powerful as individuals and together. Life experiences etc. experts by experience for example. It is easy to fall into seeing that power is over there, rather than here with me, with us.

Trainee facilitators discussed Essential Ingredient 4, know where to go to get what you want. There was discussion about whether it should be reframed as:

knowing where to go to get what you need...

*...in order to make the change you want or
...and make sure that you get what you want*

There was discussion about the difference between want and need and the danger of this ingredient appearing too individualistic and possibly selfish. The group concluded that it can't be taken in isolation - it is part of a whole, around the value of social justice.

Trainee facilitators felt that theories are really important - the course handouts made much more sense when revisited at a later stage.