

Women 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 is running 4 learning programmes. Two started in 2009, one programme for women and one mixed group. In 2010 both programmes are for women.

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.

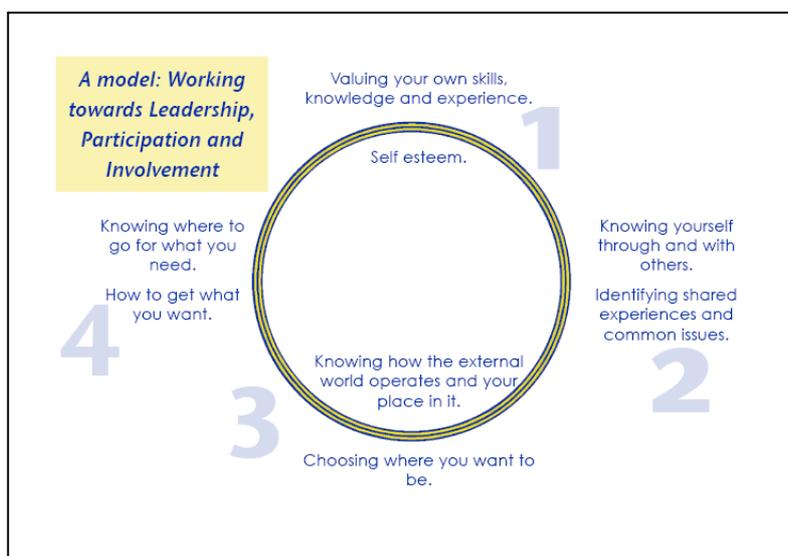


Figure 1: Four Essential Ingredients

Outcomes: The following is written by Lorna, a participant in the Women Take Part Learning Programme run in 2009.

One of the essential ingredients in the course is about valuing your own skills, and I'm slowly beginning to be conscious of the fact that I sometimes approach things differently to some people, and that it's a strength that I can use well as long as I'm aware of it and that I don't forget that not everyone is thinking what I am.

For me the work around assertiveness was a thread through the learning programme which was absolutely crucial, and which has led to significant change in situations in my personal life. It has been incredibly helpful to me to learn about the difference between confidence and assertiveness, and to realise when I'm not behaving assertively.

I feel that parts of the course that have caused the most obvious shift in my thinking are linked to the second essential ingredient, which is knowing yourself through and with others. The only day that I was unable to attend for the whole session was one in which we explored citizenship. But the few hours that I was participating for opened my eyes to so much, and prompted me to buy a copy of a book with the citizenship test questions in it. Some of the questions are crazy! I'd have no chance of becoming a British Citizen if someone was to make me sit the test tomorrow. Never mind if I had to sit the test in a language that wasn't my first language.

This example is one quite direct result of learning, but what I still can't figure out is at what point during the learning programme I started to really understand about issues which affect women in particular and the implications of women's place in society. Despite the fact that many of my best and closest friends and colleagues have a deep understanding of gender inequalities, I've never really felt that. I've listened to the arguments, I've argued back, but I never really truly understood what the big issue was. I am now starting to actually feel that inside me and connect with it, and so my understanding is growing - from an experiential perspective. I think this is the only way that I can grapple with the theory and arguments and have a true sense of what they are about, because I'm actually engaging with the arguments myself, with an understanding of who I am in relation to some of these issues.

One of the spine tingling moments on the course for me was after we'd had a morning session with someone from the Parliamentary Outreach programme. At the end of the day we all shared one thing we would do as a result of our learning that day. About 5 women said that they were going to write to their MP, about issues they were passionate about. They had never written to their MP before, and, I suppose, had never thought it would make a difference. It was really inspiring and is a small example of how the course incorporates the third essential ingredient - know how the external world operates and choosing where you want to be.

The fourth essential ingredient is knowing where to go to get what you want. In relation to this, from a professional perspective, the day we spent looking at campaigning and lobbying was invaluable. I am using the learning from this session in work in my organisation - we are launching a positive campaign around budget cuts.