

Sharing the learning on Adult Voluntary Learning ‘Explaining the Difference’

Background

Scottish Government and Learning Connections awarded a grant of £15,000 in April 2009 to Learning Link Scotland to work in partnership with ESS on a pilot project to articulate the outcomes of Scottish voluntary adult learning within the context of national outcomes and Single Outcome Agreement.

ESS facilitated an action learning set with 6 voluntary adult learning organisations. This ran over 6 sessions and was supported by site visits where one to one support was given on organisation outcomes and monitoring and evaluation materials. We fed back to a reference group of Scottish Government, HM Inspectorate of Education, Learning Connections and Lifelong Learning UK.

The 6 organisation involved in the project were: Learning Link Scotland, Amina The Muslim Women’s Resource Centre, Workers Education Association (WEA), Rosemount Lifelong Learning, LEAD (linking Education and Disability) and Craigowl.

What we wanted to achieve:

- Learning Link would have a model to describe the ‘outcomes journey’ of voluntary adult learning and the link to local and national strategic outcomes.
- Learning Link would have key evaluation questions and indicators to help measure the outcomes of voluntary adult learning.
- Learning Link would have a portfolio of examples of tools to measure voluntary adult learning.
- Participating organisations in the project would have increased skills, understanding and confidence to explain, measure and report on their work.

What we did

We built a **logic model** of voluntary adult learning activities and outcomes, which explained in broad terms what was unique about this sector and why they do things in the way they do. This emphasised:

- The importance of activities to engage disadvantaged learners and that a lot of support had to happen before people even entered a classroom. Organisations needed to reach people, build motivation and address barriers to learning. We called this pre-learning activity.
- Ongoing support is needed for many, even after they have started ‘learning’
- Key outcomes from learning and support activities are around three areas: developing skills and knowledge, learning how to learn and developing social networks.
- Longer term outcomes fit with many funders’ agendas.

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We mapped this against the National Performance Framework and a few local authority single outcome agreements. We learnt that we fit the national performance framework better than local outcome agreements, which tend to focus more on outputs than outcomes.

We identified **sample indicators** for each of the types of outcome. We agreed that at this stage it was not a good idea to develop a fuller bank of indicators, because this might encourage organisations to 'pick and mix' without fully thinking through what was right for them.

We identified some **measurement tools** which were being commonly used by organisations. Perhaps not surprisingly we identified that personal development tools, such as action plans, were a key resource. Not only did they allow for learner's reflections, they also provided a baseline and ongoing reviews of progress.

4 of the 6 organisations developed specific methods relevant to their own logic model: this included

- LEAD: A visual tool used in conjunction with a webcam photo.
- Craigowl: a computerised assessment questionnaire.
- Learning Link: use of statistics to monitor the impact of their website.
- Rosemount Lifelong Learning: tutor summary sheets, childcare staff feedback form and a framework for guidance staff to mark outcomes on their database.

More work could be done in this area to identify or develop a larger portfolio.

The difference we made

We increased skills, understanding and confidence. For the 4 organisations that completed them, the case studies demonstrated the learning in this area. The following quotes were taken from those case studies

"Development of the new logic model has helped us to reflect on our monitoring requirements and to simplify and revise our current methods. Current service users have been involved in this process. The new system will be in place for the start of a new cohort of parents and children from April 2010. The new Logic model has helped us to be more logical about gathering appropriate evidence of the impact of the programme. We are about to commission an external evaluation of the MAD programme, and expect that the quality of the evaluation will be enhanced by the clarity of the logic model. A positive evaluation will help us to make the case to housing providers for the roll out of the programme as an effective way of supporting a vulnerable group of tenants which also reduces rent arrears and tenancy problems."

"We wanted [and developed] a method of evaluation for the end of the programme which would be accessible and usable, taking cognisance of people's learning difficulties, literacy skills and their wholehearted enthusiasm for using technology. During the course reviews and the snapshot evaluations at the end of each session we noticed that participants tended to say "great" to everything and or "yes", "no" to questions asked. We wanted to have an

evaluation which would mean they took some initiative to tell us what they liked and how they felt about the course."

"The use of this initial assessment process will allow us to better engage the client with the aims of the learning opportunities on the Skills for Success programme and, where the clients' needs do not match our programme outcomes, to identify where clients should be referred to other specialist service providers. It will enable staff to tailor PDPs to the client. By collecting information in the database on (i) initial assessment and PDP and (ii) reviewed assessment and reviewed PDP, we will be able to show client progression."

Two organisations did not complete the case study, but still benefitted from the learning set.

One organisation had a site visit and developed a logic model. They were better able to explain how and why they made a difference, but further support would be needed to build systems and confidence in measuring that impact.

One organisation was only able to attend half of the meetings and could not arrange a site visit because of other work commitments. They did not build a logic model or develop a full case study. Nevertheless they fed back that they had increased their understanding of monitoring and evaluation.

Unexpected outcomes

Building the understanding of influencers of voluntary adult education policy and provision

The reference group members were clearly enthused by the work we were undertaking. Shirley Grieve from Learning Link fed back the following the learning set

"Just wanted to feed back to all of you about how well the Reference Group went for the project. We were stowed out with Scottish Government folk, HMIE and LLUK. They all said how impressed and inspired they were and I quote; "this really chimes exactly with what Ministers are asking for". Lara and Emma were outstanding in their "double act" and really brought the project and what we were trying to achieve, to life. It meant that these policy makers went away with a much clearer idea of the kind of work that is taking place in all your organisations and the sector as a whole. They were particularly impressed at the range of organisations involved in the project and the work they're doing."

Scottish Government has committed a further £10,000 to build on the work of the learning set.

At a local level, the success has been variable. Lead used their model to present their case to one council for funding and was successful. By contrast in another

council LEAD were told that by one council official that the council wasn't interested in the logic model.

Increased understanding of local contexts and tactics for selling their case to the local authority

The group emphasised the importance of networking and the relaxed process that allowed the conversation to flow into common areas of concern, before being brought back to task.

The Learning

Learning Link was a great partner because:

- They were very clear about what they wanted and the role we could play.
- They bought a good mix of organisation to the table.
- They were open and honest about what worked and what didn't.
- They are very committed to making a difference for their sector and share our understanding of the importance of monitoring and evaluation.

Organisational readiness

The most progress was made by those organisations which we had caught at an opportune time. In Craigowl the chief officer was new and used the learning set to help her think through the changes she wanted to make. In LEAD the particular project was new and they could try a different approach. In the one with least change, the worker did not have the time to commit to the process.

The process of building a model

We established:

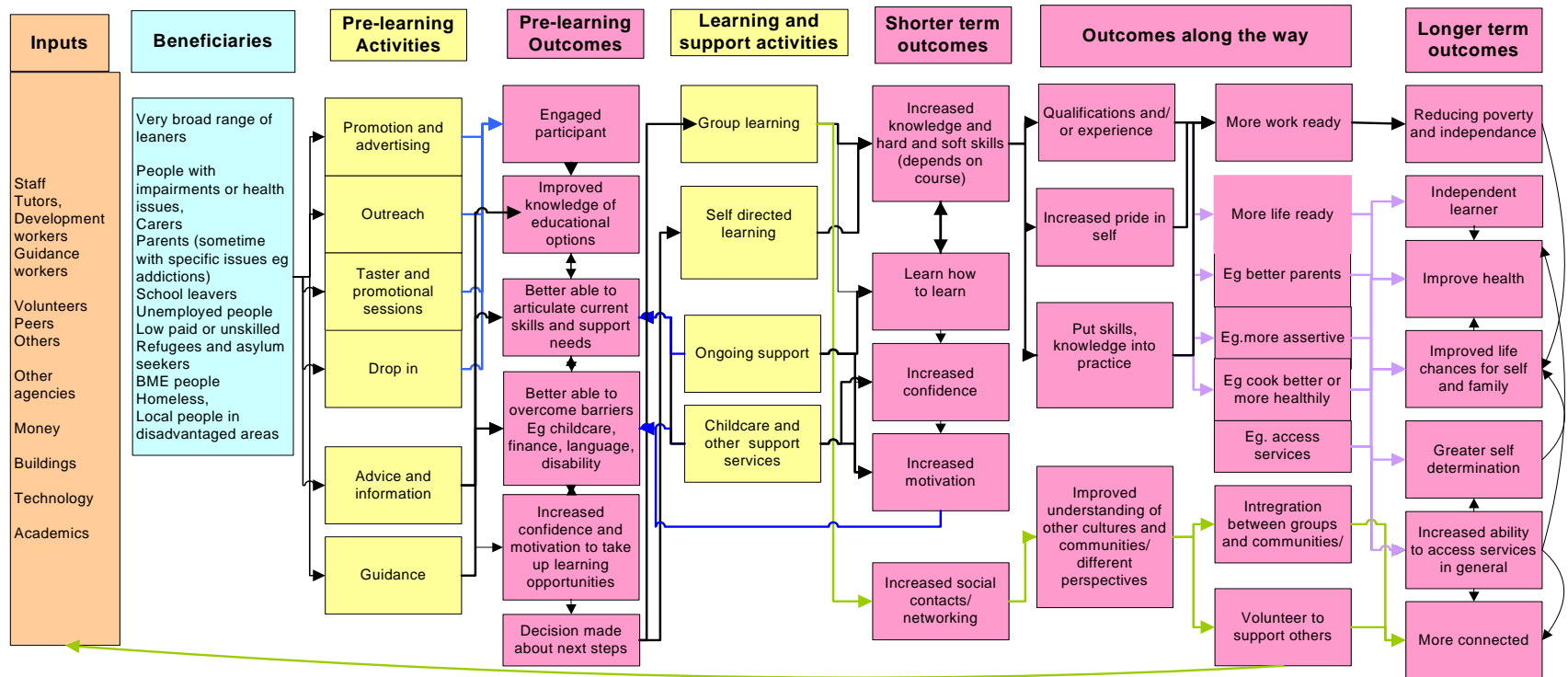
- The importance of looking at need: since the solutions and outcomes directly reflect that.
- It was helpful to go back and forward between different perspectives: the overall model, their experience at organisational level and the views of the reference group.
- The model doesn't stand alone: it needs to be explained.
- The danger of a collective model: it is too easy for people to pick and mix, rather than starting from scratch.
- The process is more important than product: the learning comes from the thinking and questioning.

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What we did: the Logic Model

Situation
 Currently there is a very diverse landscape of learning needs, which cannot be met solely through 'formal educational institutions'. Barriers to taking up mainstream educational routes include both 'perceived' and actual barriers such as:
 past negative experience of formal education
 lack of childcare
 language and culture
 disability
 social isolation
 Lack of knowledge, skills and qualifications prevent people from reaching their full potential leading to people not taking up the services they are entitled to, not able to access jobs and financially maintain their families, not having a full voice or being able to contribute to their communities. These issues affect them, their families, the community and service and support organisations.

Draft logic model for
 Voluntary Adult Education:
 focus on learners



Assumptions
 Everyone has a right to learning and the opportunities that stem from that, based on their individual needs and circumstances.
 Some individuals need extra support to identify what is possible in terms of their own development, to overcome barriers and to cross educational and life transitions
 A flexible approach to identifying and addressing gaps in services is needed and cannot always be provided by formal educational institutions
 The voluntary adult education services are uniquely placed to reach people, using a holistic, person-centred approach, non-judgemental approach that focuses on 'life relevant' skills and knowledge.
 They support and complement provision by other education providers, helping people to move towards mainstream education provision where appropriate
 They are able to help demystify educational systems and to build bridges between services