

## **Get Talking: community participation and neighbourhood learning**

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### **Introduction**

*The Learning Curve* (Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (NRU), 2002: 10) report argues that government strategy must aim to equip residents of communities with the skills and knowledge to participate in the processes of neighbourhood renewal and regeneration. *The Learning Curve* itself builds on the findings of the Social Exclusion Unit's (SEU) (2000a) Policy Action Team Report 16 (PAT 16). However, PAT 16, *Learning Lessons* (SEU, 2000a), is focused on upskilling professionals to deliver more effectively. There is little in government policy about practical mechanisms for diffusing skills to neighbourhood residents themselves in order to empower them to participate in policy planning, implementation and delivery.

The processes of continuing development for professionals and of skills diffusion to neighbourhood residents require very different forms of learning delivery. Barriers to participation mean that learning models for neighbourhoods have to be adapted to meet the needs of local people and many traditional learning institutions find this kind of flexibility difficult.

The Get Talking Community Consultation course developed at Staffordshire University begins to shift the balance (e.g. PAT 16 focused on professionals) in terms of skills acquisition for neighbourhood renewal. Get Talking was specifically developed to enable local people to gain skills in consultation and evaluation at the local community level. The Get Talking originators believe that the policy development and delivery process should be based on local needs, and that the people who best understand local needs are those who live in the local community. Thus, the right people to undertake consultation and policy definition are members of local communities.

Get Talking is a short course originally designed by Staffordshire University in partnership with Blurton Sure Start in Stoke-on-Trent. Sure Start is a government programme based on partnerships between agencies involved in early education, child care, health and family support designed to improve early years opportunities for children, particularly those from deprived communities, in England. The programme falls under the Department for Children, Schools and Families. (See Sure Start, n.d. and Pierson, 2008: 91.) Sure Start staff and parent volunteers joined university lecturers and an education and regeneration consultant in developing the course content. Get Talking is designed to be delivered to local people (not to professionals) and is distinctive in that it is practical, fun, creative and provides skills needed to further develop the work of voluntary, statutory and community organisations in better meeting the needs of local residents.

### **Learning and skills for neighbourhood renewal**

The current focus on the relationship between learning and skills on the one hand and neighbourhood renewal on the other can be traced back to developments in economic theory in the 1980s. Proponents of New Growth Theory argued that growth in productivity was closely correlated with human capital upgrading (Oster, 1982; Rosen, 1983; Romer, 1986). Human capital consists of skills as well as practical and conceptual knowledge relevant to participation in the labour force.

Members of the current Labour Government, particularly Gordon Brown, have been significantly influenced by the implications of New Growth Theory for the economic development and regeneration of the British economy. One of the key lessons from the Thatcher era was that privatisation and deregulation alone were not sufficient to sustain long-term economic growth. Government reports and policy documents from the early days of the Labour Government argued that attempts at the regeneration of urban areas had been undermined by knowledge and skills deficiencies among practitioners in urban settings (Urban Task Force, 1999; Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 2000). Moreover, the decline of traditional industries as well as changes in industry and the labour market created by technological innovation meant that the British workforce would require new skills and

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knowledge in order to participate in the globalised economy. The New Growth Theory approach closely links human capital upgrading, employment, economic growth and urban regeneration, and these connections continue to play a central role in the strategies of the public and voluntary sectors (see e.g. Groundwork, n.d.).

One of the most significant policies of the Labour Government in this area has been the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (NRU, 2001). The central pledge of the National Strategy is that ‘...within ten to twenty years, no one should be seriously disadvantaged by where they live’ (NRU, 2001: 8). This implies an ambitious programme of urban regeneration. Following on from the National Strategy, the Government launched the £21.6 million Neighbourhood Renewal Skills and Knowledge programme in December 2001. The launch of this programme was followed ten months later by the publication of *The Learning Curve* (NRU, 2002a, 2002b), which provides the learning and development strategy for the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal.

*The Learning Curve* initially targets community residents as one of the key groups identified for skills and knowledge upgrading. However, in the section which describes for whom *The Learning Curve* is intended, residents become just one of seven groups targeted for upskilling (NRU, 2002a: 9). In deconstructing *The Learning Curve*, it becomes apparent that the target recipients, community residents, are misidentified in the implementation of the policy. The section which outlines the ways in which the Government will provide what is needed identifies 23 actions, most of which are directed at practitioners, professionals, policy makers and organisations. The implementation structure of *The Learning Curve* is essentially top-down, and what the knowledge and skills for neighbourhood renewal agenda needs is more democratic participation of residents, not only in planning learning outcomes, but also in their delivery and evaluation.

## **Community participation and learning**

The creators of the Get Talking Community Consultation course share a commitment to principles of participatory action. Although participatory approaches take many forms, such as participatory action research (Rahman, 1993; Smith, 1997), participatory arts (Webster and

Buglass, 2005) and participatory appraisal (Chambers, 1992), all have in common the belief that social change can only be achieved through community participation. While the concept of community is essentially contested, it is only through the fundamental democratisation of the policy planning and implementation processes that lasting social transformation, from greater respect for diversity to development in the global south and urban regeneration in Britain, can be achieved.

The central principle of participation is the ‘active involvement and empowerment of stakeholders’ (University of Wolverhampton, n.d.). Oxfam’s principles for Participation for Action state that participatory action should be empowering, involve continuous learning, be proactively inclusive, challenge established beliefs and power relations, and be robust and ethical (Participatory Practitioners for Change, n.d.). Participatory action methods use a variety of tools and techniques that are creative and are adapted to specific situations. The relationship between knowledge and social change is central to participatory action which, like other critical theoretical approaches, traces its ideological roots in part back to Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach* with the assertion that ‘The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it’ (Tucker, 1972: 109, emphasis in original). In participatory action, knowledge and critical reflection are key elements of a learning process which is part of a broader agenda of social change.

Commitment to the principles and methods of participatory action on the part of educators involves non-traditional approaches to learning. The formal learning process has traditionally taken a top-down approach in which expert teachers prepare lessons and then impart knowledge to the students who sit quietly absorbing wisdom. Participatory approaches to teaching involve valuing the existing knowledge and experiences of learners, and involving them in the preparation, delivery and evaluation of the course. Therefore, lessons might be prepared in partnership with students, reflecting what students need or want to know; delivery might draw on sharing student experiences as part of the learning process, and would take more interactive, and above all fun, forms; and student reflection on the course would be crucial to its evaluation and the planning for subsequent delivery.

## Let's Get Talking

The Get Talking Community Consultation course was designed with principles of participatory action in mind by Staffordshire University in partnership with Blurton Sure Start in Stoke-on-Trent (Gant, 2004). The Sure Start staff and parent board had worked previously with university staff in strategy development for and evaluation of the Sure Start programme. As Sure Start staff and volunteers became more acutely aware of the need for skills upgrading on the part of local residents, an opportunity emerged for the university and Sure Start to apply in partnership to the Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities (NLDC) fund to develop a course specifically for community members. Sure Start staff and parent volunteers joined university lecturers Mark Webster and the present author, and education and regeneration consultant Kate Gant in developing the course content.

Blurton Sure Start envisioned a short course that would help local residents gain skills relating to consultation. It is a common feeling among Blurton residents that they are constantly consulted by government agencies, yet little improvement in their environment or in service delivery seems to occur. Sure Start staff and volunteers felt that if local residents could develop the confidence and skills to undertake consultation themselves, then Sure Start and the community could together begin to address issues of neighbourhood renewal and improved service delivery. Therefore, Blurton Sure Start was eager to find a course that would deliver these objectives in a manner appropriate to the learners in the local area, as well as helping community members develop greater confidence about engaging with local groups and returning to learning.

Get Talking is focused on the principles, process and methods of community consultation. The principles of community consultation include honesty, listening, participation and respect. The process of community consultation involves planning, undertaking the consultation, crosschecking information and feedback into policy or service changes. The methods of community consultation comprise a set of easy, fun and creative exercises that can be used by anyone to consult groups or evaluate projects and services. The exercises frequently involve flip chart paper and a variety of amusingly-shaped post-it notes, and include simple techniques such

as dot voting, modified force field analyses and semi-structured interviews that allow the interviewers to collect information about the preferences of the group. The information can then be analysed to produce a largely qualitative report on the issues investigated.

The Get Talking course is designed to be delivered over four short days during school hours. Of the four sessions, three are often delivered in local venues. Participants experiment with the techniques, and plan and carry out a brief practical consultation exercise with groups in the local community. The final session often involves learners coming into Staffordshire University to experience the higher education environment. In this session, the activity groups report back on the results of their consultation and the lessons learned. Participants are assessed on the group presentation and on an individual workbook. Originally, learners had the opportunity to gain Open College Network (OCN) levels one or two qualifications (equivalent to secondary level qualifications), and almost all early participants reached OCN level two. The OCN qualification has since been replaced by a university foundation level (level zero) qualification. The course is distinctive in that it is practical, fun, creative and provides skills needed to further develop the work of organisations such as Sure Start in order to better meet the needs of local residents.

The original Get Talking was first delivered in the spring of 2004 to parent volunteers and Sure Start staff in Blurton. Since then, it has evolved and changed to meet the needs of the different groups that have commissioned it. It has been delivered to Sure Starts in the West Midlands, to community groups focusing on refugee issues (Manchester) and on regeneration (Scotland), and to local authority staff members in the West Midlands and Wales. It has also been validated at university foundation level (level zero), at level one and at master's level to provide a version for managers. The foundation level module brings higher education accreditation right into local communities.

## Conclusion

British government policy relating to learning and skills for neighbourhood renewal, from PAT 16 to *The Learning Curve* (NRU, 2002a), focuses on the delivery of education to practitioners, professionals and policy makers. While *The*

*Learning Curve* identifies the need for learning and skills delivery to neighbourhood residents, planning in the document for implementation appears to misidentify the key recipients. Most of the suggested learning opportunities are designed for local authority and voluntary sector staff, rather than for members of local communities. The Get Talking Community Consultation course begins to shift the balance in the delivery of learning and skills for neighbourhood renewal with the development of learning opportunities designed for and by local residents.

Participatory approaches to teaching involve valuing the existing knowledge and experiences of learners, and involving them in the preparation, delivery and evaluation of the course. The Get Talking Community Consultation course was designed with principles of participatory action in mind by a steering group consisting of teaching staff, Blurton Sure Start staff and parent volunteers. The effectiveness of the course may be seen in student completion rates. For example, the first cohort of 20 students had a completion rate of 95 per cent and, in evaluations of the service, students commented on its appropriateness (Rose, 2006: 6). Get Talking demonstrates that, with the right approach, higher education institutions can widen participation and address the needs of local residents involved in neighbourhood renewal.

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However, users will now benefit from the integration of the several previously discrete information sources maintained by the BEI office at the University of Leeds.

Each record is produced and validated in Leeds by indexers who have sight of the information and who make full use of the British Education Thesaurus, enabling the most relevant information to be found quickly and easily. In addition, significant work has been carried out in harmonising the BEI authority lists to minimise duplication and ensure that search and retrieve processes are streamlined.

Simple methods may still be used to obtain the widest results but the enhanced interface now allows for precise searching to produce a more refined list of records. Furthermore, an enhanced degree of connectivity means that navigation both between and within records is efficient and quick, enabling the user to make better sense of the ever-expanding amount of information to which they now have access. While use of the full BEI database remains contingent on subscription, visitors to the new BEI site have free access to over 9000 BEI records.

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