Citation:
Wilkinson, K (2010) Reflection: The Learn With Leeds Met project. Assessment, Teaching & Learning Journal, 9. pp. 42-43. ISSN 1756-8781

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The Learn With Leeds Met project

Karli Wilkinson

Learn with Leeds Met is a project funded by the Learning Revolution Transformation Fund. The £20 million Transformation Fund, funded by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in response to *The Learning Revolution* White Paper (2009), supports informal adult learning, seeking to promote learning for pleasure, self-development and community development. By building on the University's links with rugby league clubs, the project aimed to take educational taster sessions out into the heart of communities. Over the course of one month, 16 recent Leeds Met graduates delivered sessions on art, health, business and events management at rugby league clubs across the region. The use of such a location allowed us to take education into an environment where people feel comfortable and not threatened in order to make them more receptive to the opportunities.

The project was completed in a two-stage process. Stage 1, the pilot stage, involved using a local club to deliver four sessions over two days. This allowed the project team to try different marketing tools and look at the most effective way of managing the logistical aspects of the month of learning. During the pilot stage many lessons were learned that were fed back into the planning for the main stage of the project. The road from the pilot stage to the month of learning was often a rocky one with the two members of the project team still getting to know each other and roles and differences of opinions needing to be negotiated. This was a valuable learning process which contributed to the project team being more self-critical, resulting in a better final product.

Sessions were given by recent graduates who were trained and guided through the process of planning and delivery. The rationale for the project was that by utilising non-traditional learning venues we could encourage those who were disengaged with education to participate in 'taster sessions' that could help to build their confidence and encourage them back into education or training. Each subject was taught once at each of the eight venues over the one-month duration of the project.

Education and learning: for some these words are filled with curiosity and passion. A thirst for the 'who, what, why, when and how' is a drive too strong to ignore, a passion that finds you in the office, library or study with your head in a book, journal or report, morning, noon and night. Many reading this will relate, at least partially, to these comments. Education has helped you find your passion and continues to motivate you, and now you aim to help others find their passion. Now imagine that instead of curiosity and passion these words filled you with trepidation as memories of cold, dark classrooms, feelings of inferiority and the dreaded report card highlighting your inadequacies came flooding back. Our education system does have its failures; there are individuals who have become disengaged with education for one reason or another. For these individuals the thought of returning to school is too intimidating to entertain – but the thought of a few hours at the local rugby club? That might be more attractive.

One key selling point for this project was the range of learning experiences it provided. All those involved were given the opportunity to learn and develop, including the project team and the graduates delivering the sessions. The initial bid writing was completed by myself as part of my final placement on the University's graduate trainee scheme. As this was my first experience of bid writing the process was at first slightly daunting; however, the support and guidance I received helped translate what was an alien language of requirements and expectations into an achievable task.

The project team included myself, a former graduate trainee acting as project manager, and a recent graduate in Events Management as project officer. Following late notification of the success of the bid, the project team had to hit the ground running, with deadlines for work plans and budgets fast approaching and a pilot programme to organise before Christmas. For me this was another learning experience. Budgets, finance and work plans again represented a new language to learn and set of skills to develop, but again teamwork, support and guidance helped me complete these challenges successfully. The other half of the project management team, thankfully well versed in events planning and management, agreed to look after event logistics for the pilot and main programmes. As we worked together, bouncing ideas between each other through the various stages, both parties continued to learn valuable lessons in logistics and teamwork.

The graduates who were employed to deliver the sessions also had the opportunity to learn. This may sound odd: however, part of the commitment in the initial bid was to facilitate the development of the graduates' skills and employability in these tough economic times. The graduates had the opportunity to attend a Masterclass run by Professor Phil Race and benefited from a programme of support and mentoring as they produced lesson plans and worked their way through the expectations

and responsibilities of delivering sessions. The development of these recent graduates as they progressed through the training and into the delivery of their sessions demonstrated the versatility of the graduates our University produces.

The final and most obvious group of learners was the programme participants themselves. For many of our participants we were providing their first experience of learning for a number of years, possibly after negative experiences in the past, and it was important that we recognised and acted on this knowledge. The project did not aim to make participants experts in their chosen area, but rather provided a gentle introduction to learning and the possibilities it affords. This was illustrated throughout all sessions, which were planned so as to allow the participants to dictate the pace and content to suit themselves and help them develop the skills they wanted.

The pilot programme was a success; despite relatively small numbers the feedback was positive and lessons were learned by all involved, which were then applied to the main project. The project itself was also successful: the target number of participants was surpassed and the feedback was positive, particularly the feedback on the standard of our graduates with over 95% of the participants describing them as 'very good' and praising them on the delivery of the sessions. Looking back there were many lessons to be learned and difficult decisions made but the positive experience had by all made it worthwhile. The overriding lesson for me is that if someone has become disengaged with education they have done so for a reason which often runs far deeper than a small-scale project such as this can tackle.

For many the ivory tower of a university seems like a solar system away, a long, slow, painful trek to achieve a degree: for others it seems like an impossible dream. But learning for pleasure is within everyone's reach. Projects like these may just be a small step, but it's a step in the right direction, a move closer to opening the doors to a wonderful world of knowledge, curiosity and self-fulfilment. Like a pebble in a pond we may not cause tidal waves but we can send ripples of confidence through an individual's life and open up a world of learning for pleasure through positive informal experiences.

Karli Wilkinson
Project Officer, Office of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic)