

# Creating a Learning Community – Reach Out and Reaching Families



**Reach Out is a well established project in the Aberdeen area which originally began in response to the need for a dynamic project for adults who were long-term unemployed and struggled to fit into mainstream educational provision.**

Through a wide range of diverse and exciting activities the project has been successful in engaging and maintaining non-traditional learners, particularly men. The use of innovative methods and approaches is the starting point but more important is the creation of a learning community. Students have a real say in the running of the project and feel valued because they are listened to and given the opportunity to take charge of their own learning. The educational focus is centred around increasing skills which will improve their quality of life rather than the narrower focus on core skills for employability.

The project participants, the learners, are a very diverse group and either self refer or come to the project through its network of city agencies, mainly social work, employment and health agencies.

The approach creates a genuine sense of belonging, which leads on to individual growth and development.

Learners gain improved confidence, self worth and motivation - which lead to improved coping skills.

Individual learners are more able to start participating in community life. This breaks down isolation and improves the quality of life for their whole family.

*“I’ve learned a great many new things and relearned skills I already had. Now I know how to use my skills and to just be me. Before, I was really lacking in confidence, I found it difficult to speak to folk and deal with life. Now I’ve learned to trust and that’s been the hardest part. Without Reach Out, I don’t think I would have survived.”*

Mike Buchan (pictured)



*“A model of really good community based practice, reacting to the needs and ideas of the learners and working with them. I wish more literacy projects worked like this.”*

Pru Pullen, Learning Connections, Communities Scotland

# The Public Value of Adult Education

## Reach Out and Reaching Families

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### Implications for other providers

Reach Out shows that learners can influence policy through user groups and community participation.

The programme is too eclectic, dynamic and responsive to student need to be part of a curriculum development programme, although cascading the approach could be of benefit to other education providers. Through sharing examples of good practice we can help partner agencies to develop similar programmes.

Reach Out has found that the approach does not work for everyone, especially those who have not had free choice in attending or who find it difficult to cope with the organic structure and diverse student body.

Being valued and part of a stimulating community improves mental health and well being. Learners who are recovering from addiction issues are introduced to a structured use of time and given the opportunity to try different things and build a new social network.

Learner confidence and participation skills are nurtured within the project and learners are encouraged to join forums, focus groups and consultation exercises outside Reach Out too, ensuring that their voices begin to get heard.

Reach Out includes a fortnightly Students' Forum, input from learners into course development and decisions regarding the daily running of the project. Learners also have an input into staff appointments including sitting on interview panels.

The main emphasis is not on entering the employment market – but many learners do so after realising they are a valued member of a community.

### Learning Connections Evaluation

Reach Out received a glowing evaluation recently from Learning Connections, a government agency which supports community learning and development policy and practice in Scotland.

Reach Out students have been using Information and Communications Technology (ICT) creatively to look at everyday problems in new ways while at the same time improving their computer and literacy skills. The group produced a comic-strip style Survival Manual, centred on a fictional family whose members face a wide range of problems. The Survival Manual describes how these problems are tackled by the members of the family using the support agencies available to people in the Aberdeen area – with a happy ending to each. It will be made available for use by WEA students and others in the area, and was distributed to educators from around Scotland as an example of innovative work at a Learning Connections seminar in June. The students are also working on an animation to accompany the manual, using their own illustrations, photographs and scripts – the photos below show this work in progress on a computer.

This aspect of the work of Reach Out was funded by a grant from Learning Connections' Innovations in ICT and Literacies Fund, hence the evaluation visit in late February 2007. Evaluator Pru Pullen spoke to students and tutors, and mapped out the process Reach Out had taken to achieve its outcomes. She described the work as “a good example of ICT seamlessly integrated into the project – I see a move from the 'add-on' use of IT to this kind of project based work, where the two are inseparable. Excellent!”.

### WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE

Contact the project team on 01224 640811 or at [reachout@weascotland.org.uk](mailto:reachout@weascotland.org.uk)