

How did I experience working with Learning Communities in the Xploit?

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Local learning centers and partnership are yet to be built into a coherent lifelong learning policy. Despite the numerous partnership and network initiatives of recent years, they remain occasional, interest-driven and short-lived. Policy development and local implementation are still lacking.
The European Association for the Education of Adults, 2006



I was thrilled when Judith James and Jean Preece approached my Service Manager to say that they would like me to participate in the Xploit Project with them - especially as we had worked extremely well together on previous local European Funded projects.

Since the start of the Xploit Project many changes have taken place at the City & County of Swansea one of which is that the Lifelong Learning Service and Employment Training Service have merged to form the Lifelong Learning and Employment Training Service (LLETS).

At the start of the Xploit project I did not know what to expect but I hoped that I would be able to bring some creative ideas and knowledge of how our longstanding partnership working across Swansea was developed.

Unfortunately almost as soon as the project began recession hit the UK and this had a knock on effect upon all Council Services. As a forward thinking Council Swansea had always supported and encouraged their staff to be involved with European projects knowing the huge benefits that this type of work can bring. However with the council facing huge cuts to its budget it had to make the difficult decision to restrict international travel. With this as the backdrop I attended our first meeting in Aarhus.



After that initial meeting I decided to focus my Xploit work with the group at Graigfelen. This involved organizing a road show utilizing many parts of our Service e.g. Employment Training (Construction skills and Hair & Beauty), Family Learning and Lifelong Learning (Jewelry and Needlecraft). As a result of this consultation work I was able to offer a taster programme to gauge demand.

The group has grown in confidence over the years and has recently been able to apply for funding in order to continue the courses which they found most beneficial.

I felt that I had a great deal of experience of working with community groups and on European Funded Projects but I had never been in charge of my part of a project before.

This has been a steep learning curve for me and whilst I had excellent support from everyone in Xploit and particularly Judith and Jean at Dace I have found it challenging.



I have learnt that within a three year project you do not have to rush headlong into it and that you need to work in a different manner to how you work in your everyday job.

I have also learnt that time spent preparing and reflecting are equally, if not more important than the time spent doing the tasks.

I will certainly aim to have a much longer term strategy in my development work in the future especially as I am about to become involved with a large scale project (very close to the Liberty Stadium) called CU@Swansea based on the development of the Hafod & Morfa Copperworks Site. This is very exciting because the site is currently derelict and is in the process of being cleared. It is hoped that the site will eventually have World Heritage Site status. For the history of the works please watch the attached clip.

<http://www.welshcopper.org.uk/en/copper-news.htm?id=21#.UWVa3zMpHU0.email>



Plans for the future include

- Restored buildings form part of a vibrant, multi-purpose hub for work, education, leisure, commercial activity and tourism which celebrates the past and looks to the future.
- The site's heritage is preserved and proudly displayed with interpretation trails and a living history laboratory providing opportunities for more visitors to learn about Swansea's leading role in the industrial revolution and development of the global economy.
- A site that breathes life back into the area, and builds creatively on the proud industrial past.

Included in the plans are incubator units linking with a Digital Centre run by Swansea University (this puts me in mind of the centre we visited at Nagykovácsi) along with an Education Centre which I will be closely involved with. There are also plans to encourage our engineering students to recreate a working model of the Musgrave uniflow steam engine which was used at the works from 1910 until its closure in the 1980s.

A huge re-organisation of the way that Community First is funded and set up meant that for a long time there was uncertainty relating to staff jobs. The areas within Swansea have now completely changed reducing from 10 areas to 5 larger areas with new relationships having to be rebuilt.

Another impact on me personally has been that due to the necessity for reducing the head count at the Local Authority my colleague has taken early retirement reducing

our Community Education Development Officer numbers by one third. Obviously this has had a big effect on my current workload.

LLETS has worked extremely well with the LILL Group (Leisure In Later Life) who are a driving force in the community at Graigfelen and have developed a programme of classes at the centre in partnership with DACE and the Community First Officer. The resources which they learn to create are being sold at the local craft fayre in order to make the activities sustainable.



It will be beneficial to work with the whole community including families when we develop the mosaic at the centre with the aim of encouraging new community members to begin to participate in activities which could lead to learning.

There have been sweeping changes to the UK benefit system not only in the amount of benefit that people can claim but also in the way that they claim it - which now has to be done online.

LLETS have plans in place to provide free IT classes in areas with high unemployment in order to help people to gain the skills they will need in order to complete the forms necessary to claim their benefits.

I have enjoyed being part of the Xploit team and meeting and making new friends.



Judith Porch Drawing 2011