

Reaching the Unreachable, Teaching the Unteachable.

The labels are holding us back.

National Learning Forum

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Goodenough College, London



A Campaign for Learning Event

Reaching the Unreachable, Teaching the Unteachable: The labels are holding us back!

The conference started from the premise that labelling groups 'Hard to Reach' might be holding us back from actually reaching them. Speakers were invited who were known for successful projects with the kind of learners who get labelled hard to reach. The aim was to showcase a variety of different styles and approaches that have had success in engaging people to access learning. The conference was attended by 140 delegates from a wide variety of organisations and backgrounds, and the debates around the tables were lively, if sometimes challenging and controversial.

Peter Honey

Made a very clear case for the importance of learning as a key capability and the only skill that will never become obsolete. He described an ideal world where people were able to describe, share and transfer their learning and be able to learn pro actively and re actively through motivation to learn. He also emphasised the need for learning to make a difference for the better and for it to "stick as long as it needs to". This issue of learning for immediate needs and circumstances was reiterated throughout the day. In any situation, there needs to be awareness of the learning possibilities and the individual's need for them; the prospect of the learning needs not to be too daunting and success of some kind needs to be not too far off. Sometimes we can acquire the need through trying the learning activity. He presented the ideas that there needs to be a trigger, a realisation of a 'lack' of some kind in order to motivate learning. He quoted the saying "You can take a horse to water but you can't make it drink" and suggested that there were many ways to make drinking more likely - the water is safe, the horse is thirsty, the water looks like it might be nice to drink, other horses are drinking happily etc. So his conclusion was that although the saying is true, sometimes there are ways of getting pretty close to making the horse drink...

Joe Baden

From his work in Widening Participation in Goldsmiths University in London, Joe has seen how the class system still operates in terms of holding learners back. He suggested that the need to 'get the working class to learn' was usually an economic imperative, like preparing peasants for working in the factories of the industrial revolution, rather than something thought through for any truly educational reasons. He highlighted the low percentage of working class people at universities even now. He asked the question "Why should anyone have difficulties reaching working class people? We're not unreachable! We can communicate perfectly well if someone will listen!" He argued that there is no excuse for people being put through inappropriate vocational courses or for perfectly articulate people being forced into low level basic skills courses and given accreditation for writing their name and address. "We have students on our project...with more thirst for knowledge than you would ever believe." He read out an extremely articulate piece from one of the people involved in the Goldsmiths Open Book project that highlighted how occasionally the attitudes of the people who were supposed to be working to help were in fact setting the limits on learning and ability.

He questioned the actions of some professionals. One ex-prisoner who now works on the project said that the social worker supposedly knew him better than he knew himself. He felt that criticism could be levelled at those who are "being understanding without really understanding anything." He said that in his own experience he preferred snide remarks from the police - "at least they're honest." Joe listed the negative qualities attributed to the working class by the middle classes working with them, and challenged people to think about how they themselves related to the people they worked with. His conclusion was: "If you need to read the latest piece of research to be engaging with the working class, perhaps you should be doing something else."

Round Table Discussions:

Working with men.

This project began with the same message from the men: “No-one ever asked us”. Strap line was ‘Putting Dads in the Picture’ – which was wrong because it meant that the men were being ‘put’. Dads have been committed to the project for over 2 years now – See *printed folder for Key Principles (The five Rs) underpinning the work. “The best coach for your kids is YOU!”*

Discussion included the following points:

- The importance of not making assumptions about what men like to do. ‘Dads don’t all like football’. What worked was asking them – “What shall we do next week?”
- Timing can be a problem: men often not free in the day time and too tired in the evenings.
- It’s hard to reach parents who are inactive/ stuck on a sofa. The most effective way to engage Dads to begin with is when the kids are the lobbyists. Or ask the children to draw who they’d like to come along on ‘Wanted’ posters.
- Grandparents/ grandfathers can be key too.
- If you go in with something too ‘off the wall’, you risk losing them.
- “Our funding depends on us working with people without a level 2 qualification” – so need to tread carefully.
- You have to be **flexible** when they don’t want to come.

Reaching In To Museums and Galleries:

The session was led by one of the young people who had been involved in the Re: Evolution project. Laura had been in supported accommodation when she joined the project and was quite open about some of the difficulties she had faced in accessing mainstream learning provision. She talked about how the project had been different from usual learning experiences because it had been hands on, fun and non-threatening. She also discussed how important it was that the young people had been able to take decisions and shape the project round their needs and interests. She felt that the input of the group was valued and they all enjoyed the exhibition launches and being invited to openings and art previews.

The following tips were offered:

- Engage young people by listening to them but providing a menu of possibilities to get discussion going when they are stuck
- Use young people as a way of mediating between young visitors and their preconceptions about the Museum-&-Gallery-Don’t-Touch ethos
- ‘Ask the hoodies!’
- Look carefully at front of house delivery and get young people in as consultants to provide feedback and training.

The Arts Work!

This discussion started with the idea that: “*There’s no such thing as a bad student – only a bad teacher. If you can’t reach someone you’re doing it wrong.*”

From working with prisoners and others with varying literacy skills – don’t do story writing, especially to begin with. Build up a story simply by asking questions eg.

- What character would you like to have in the story?
- What would s/he look like?
- What unusual talent might s/he have?
- What other character...?
- What object..?
- What can the object do? And so on. Play at reversing stereotypes.

Feed back summary of the information so far to the group

Break them into smaller groups to work out what happens.

Use a story bag with single words to be drawn out- these words have to be added too. After 5 mins go round and ask them if they'd like to swap their card.

5 mins later offer groups an invisible word card – what do you want to add to the story?

Groups then tell their stories. Can be written down or turned into drama with one scribe per group...

Or try building characters using a mind-map approach with requirements written round central circle eg age, height, skills etc. Include what the character most wishes for and what s/he most fears - essential. Last one is their name – put it in centre of circle.

Group enjoyed suggesting characters and characteristics and would easily have completed a story and enjoyed it too.

Keepsakes

The session started with a brief resume of the project and a practical exercise – “What have these hands achieved?” Not a large number of delegates attended but there was keen discussion covering some of the following topics:

- How parents in prison can learn to better connect with their children through improving their own literacy skills
- The importance of informality in the ‘teaching’ process
- Valuing the end product
- Never underestimating what those involved can achieve
- Taking the focus off learning and putting it on to communicating with their child

Learning to Learn

The session was based around the Campaign for Learning’ s Learning to Learn in Schools project.

An overview of the project and its findings were given. The group then examined the 5Rs framework of the project and discussed if these could and if so how they could be transferred to their own environment. The 5Rs are:

Readiness

Resourcefulness

Resilience

Reflectiveness

Responsibility

TEACH

Teaching European Active Citizenship trains adult educators from all over Europe to use exciting and innovative methods to teach and encourage citizenship. The programme offers opportunities to reflect on individual attitudes towards one’s own citizenship as part of one’s identity, and to explore it within an international context.

The course is based upon 2 years of research by a Danish social scientist who interviewed key active citizens throughout Europe, and from them distilled 8 competencies which were common to all. One of those competencies is **values**. The activity was based on a no-right-answer narrative in which each of the characters could be seen as bad or not so. Discussion was lively and forthright, even though (or because?) the group members were new to each other. Each participant was encouraged to reflect on the changing dynamics of the situation due to individual values, and to seek out and identify one’s own values as a basis for decision making for the future.

Selling the Unsellable

Julia Wright and Rachel Johnstone from the Campaign for Learning shared with delegates five approaches to selling the unsellable:

1. Focus on selling the benefits of the learning as opposed to the learning offer itself. Relating this to the marketing of a product, like floor polish: you buy the product for the clean floor (the benefit), not the liquid in the bottle (the product).
2. When devising a motivational message in order to people to take up the learning you are offering, it helps to think not only about the benefits (the ladder), but the downside of not taking up the learning (snake). The “Don’t get by, get on” strap line uses this approach.
3. Use the AIDA decision-making process as a basis for selling learning to the unsellable. The first stage is to raise awareness (A) of what you are offering, the second stage is to capture people’s interest (I), thirdly, you need to promote learning in such a way that they desire (D) the learning, and lastly, you want them to take action (A).
4. Segmentation, segmentation, segmentation! There is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to learning; selling the unsellable involves segmenting your target audience – which can be very costly in terms of budget and people resources.
5. Remember to ‘ask the audience!’ If you really want to know how to sell the unsellable you need to engage your target audience and get their buy-in from the outset of your marketing learning campaign. Don’t underestimate the importance of focus group research.

Delegates were then encouraged to apply the five approaches to market their own learning services, and come up with a memorable message to motivate their target audience.

The Top 10 Tips

Top Ten Tips

1. Build Trusting relationships based on honesty mutual respect and listening
2. Avoid stereotypes and set aside previous assumptions – don’t be judgemental
3. Facilitate learning rather than “teaching” start from where the learners are help them set achievable goals but encourage them to have high aspirations
4. Make it relevant and look for ways to motivate learners by lining into what’s important to them
5. Be flexible versatile and responsive
6. Recognise and address barriers physical, financial, emotional confidence
7. Look forward but try to learn from the past
8. Give positive and realistic feedback not just vacuous praise
9. Be aware of non verbal cues, yours and the learners
10. 10 Make it fun, active, stimulating and even silly – be engaging and good-humoured but not frivolous!

Stories from individual delegates

1. The first had come to last year's conference, having worked only with children for 6 years. The conference inspired her to move into working with families and she had found that the learning impacts had been much greater than she had expected. As she explained: "You can't expect one branch of a tree to grow and develop well if its not properly supported by the rest of the tree. "
2. This delegate found that the discussion on Table 3 was largely a moaning session which was disappointing. She was 'not sure what we were supposed to be doing'. But the second Table Discussion had given her some useful ideas and a website that she knew she could use with her reluctant 16+ students back in college - 'really useful.'
3. The third delegate believed the 'unreachable' are the managers who don't listen/ the middle class people who think they know it all. These are the ones who need to change. 'It's a division between the doers and the done-to.' Staff lower in the hierarchy who do know how to 'reach' aren't listened to either.

Afternoon:

Lisa Vernon

She approached her presentation with a slightly different style in order to show the more active and participatory way she works with young people and their families. She began with a case study of a young man facing school exclusion because of lack of concentration and poor behaviour. He attended Saturday school with his mum and through playing games and focussing on his abilities and talents he was able to find ways to manage his own behaviour and take control of his learning. Lisa used the analogy of fishing to suggest that the best way to catch a fish is to get your waders on and head out to sea, taking the opportunity to encourage delegates to have an after dinner stretch and deep breath to improve concentration for the afternoon - reminding us that physically we are only human and that learning must take account of tiredness and concentration spans. She emphasised that to get people hooked on learning we have to go to where they are and work with them on their own terms, needs and territory first.

Rick Hall

Rick began with a series of statistics about young people including the issues that 7% of young people self-harm and 60% believe they will be 'discovered' on a talent show or otherwise. There is a widening gap between reality and such aspirations, and helping young people deal with this is essential. In the future they are likely to have 12 – 20 job changes in their working lives, including many jobs that have not been invented yet. He presented the work of Ignite!, an organisation that promotes creativity and learning, suggesting that creativity is the essential skill for life that will help young people to prepare for this flexible work pattern. He used a five R's model for creativity: Resilience, Resourcefulness, Reflection, Relationships, Risk-taking and used the illustration of the world above 600 metres to show how we are removing risk taking opportunities from each child's daily life. He also gave some examples of divergent thinking and that we are far more divergent when we are younger. He wondered what it was that happened to most children to suppress divergent thinking between the ages of 5 and 18? Rick suggested the current climate of testing and valuing only that which is measurable constrains the possibilities of creativity, and he left us to consider that 'Every child invents'.

The Urban Academy – David and Jamal

David introduced the work of Kids Company, a drop-in centre for around 800 young people and the Urban Academy, a learning opportunity for 220 young people. David talked about working with young people who have had no 'consistent adult' in their lives. They use therapies, massage, reiki, anything

to provide personal support and enable individuals to move on/ grow. 'Life is a personal experience'. They work from the premise that learning is whatever they need for now. He suggested the strength is in *witnessing* their growth, in letting them find their own way and learning not to be afraid of their own anger. Not only are the young people 'emotionally empty' (- many are stuck emotionally at age 7 or 8 -), but they often have nothing material either. The project provides them with food, clothes, money and trips.

Jamal told his story of abuse and exploitation in the sex industry. The room was silent to hear this devastating story and the resilience and bravery of this young man. Having taken control of his learning with help of David, he is now taking time to find emotional resilience again. He described his plans to go to university and study. The Urban Academy were asked " Can someone middle class, white and old like me still reach out (or should we not try?)" David felt that the answer was "Yes you can, if you go about it the right way." He stressed that it is all about the ability to overcome fear, be aware of ourselves and be human. He suggested that "the middle classes often don't seem to want to do this".

Jayne Hathway

Jayne referred to the Scarman report, which indicated, "If there isn't to be a breakdown of society then we need to engage." From experience she observed that people often feel overwhelmed, scared and have had negative experiences; they need their own space to develop in their own time. She told the story of a boy who found his way through music and has now come back to run courses for others in the community. She also emphasised the need to have 'a broader definition of learning' because 'No-one is inspired by 'literacy' or 'numeracy'".

She suggested a rethinking of the word 'learning' in the same way that many are rethinking 'disability' – the disability is in our perceptions, not the person. Working 'with assets and strengths rather than deficits and weaknesses' is key. If you're told you're stupid or hard-to-reach that is very damaging. It's essential we trust people, whatever their past. And we have to stick with people for the duration, until they feel whole inside.

Debate

There are some problems with rolling out projects nationally. Some felt that it doesn't always work and that working locally is good. We need to get it right for local contexts and circumstances.

It was also felt that money should be spent on facilitating rather than research. There is a need for national funding to get local projects going. "How many government representatives are there here? How many people responsible for funding? You can see the converted nodding in agreement but where are the people with the money?" "No one has mentioned the B word (budget) this morning!"

David from Urban Academy replied that government money is usually for rolling things out to the schools, not for the cutting edge stuff. At the Urban Academy "we just like to have people come and see what we do and roll it out that way."

There was discussion about leaving the past alone and that research is about the past when we need to move forward - but this was countered by a wish to retain what was good from the past.

Delegates were reminded to respond to the Government consultation on Informal Learning in the 21st Century which is open until May.

Comment that lots of conferences happen at the end of March, as that's when funding rounds end and projects finish. Project funding means that initiatives come and go and are cyclical. It was felt that the continual change meant that working over a long period of time with individuals was difficult.

Comment about need to deliver learning by embedding it in more active/ attractive stuff.

Comment that more emphasis on the **quality** of learning is needed was countered with the observation that it's important to 'speak the language of funders' and 'funders like numbers'. David suggested more corporate sponsorships and learning to communicate with funders through powerful personal testimony. He also suggested we need to work on the common ground we have. There was a comment from a delegate that the most powerful part of the day has been the case studies.

It was suggested that people need a change of job description – **everyone** should have to help with getting the message across. And 10% of project money should be for evaluation.

There was a comment on the need for role models from all walks of life and David from Urban Academy suggested a need to learn from those we have labelled – 'We need to ask what **we** can learn from **them** – the people in the streets'

There was some concern that its not only young people that are hard to reach. Older learners, particularly those in residential care, are very easy to ignore but would benefit from learning.

It would seem that the conclusion from the day was that whilst there may be groups and individuals that have more barriers to learning than others its is often the methods that are used that put them out of reach rather than their own intrinsic qualities. The many speakers and workshops indicated that there are a variety of methods and approaches that can be used. Labelling individuals 'hard to reach' is often a way of putting them out of reach and making them easier to ignore. Whilst many brought up the issue of class and poverty as major issues in reaching out, others emphasised that it is the willingness to listen and to learn from one another that make a difference and that class is irrelevant if you are prepared to see things from another's perspective, to meet them where they are and work alongside them in partnership.