

Encouraging the transition into adulthood by accessing the community and developing partnerships within interactive community based projects

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Under consideration here is the transition towards employment taking place during training. Following is a strategy offering individuals the experience of live work in a semi supported environment ahead of a traditional work placement. Specifically, it is planned, that a community based project will:

1. Develop the young person's understanding and knowledge about the world of work
2. Increase the young person's confidence
3. Assist the individual to identify a realistic career path and focus
4. Learn to recognise barriers that may need to be over come

It is of course recognised that other skills may need developing in order to find and sustain employment. For example,

1. Mobility
2. Independent living skills
3. Social skills
4. Communication skills in the widest sense
5. Problem solving skills

Any area of need emphasised during a project should be addressed later within a wider employability and independence programme. To be effective this strategy requires therefore quality time set aside for the individual and tutor to reflect on and analyse the experience.

On an ethical plane community learning may offer a vehicle for individuals to reflect and act upon moral issues too. This is essential if the student is to handle questions of value in real life situations. The individual then learns from experience whilst seeing for themselves what being a member of the community involves and how to influence the world.

This strategy will mean striking partnerships with other groups external to the institution. The plan being to work in partnership with local businesses, voluntary groups and the local authority to create opportunities for learning and ultimately employment. Joint activities could include, environmental projects, information and advice or entertainment.

Local authorities in the UK are well placed to develop partnerships by networking within its locality. The Local Government Act 2000 says councils must work together with local groups and develop strategies for their community. For example, local government is working with the National Youth Agency to promote active involvement in the democratic process to include local matters of concern to the young person ('Hear by Right' a www.lga.gov.uk).

Below are a number of practical suggestion on how to source, develop and sustain partnerships.

Managing the project

Project management is of course a profession in itself and there are many project management models to choose from. The over all aim though being to offer a structured approach for the planning and execution of a project. Following are a few points taken from several project management methodologies.

Many suggest that there are 5 key elements to project management:

1. Define the project
2. Plan the project
3. Implement the project
4. Control the project
5. Adjust the project

Ultimately this process will ensure that each task is planned and managed in a controlled way.

Before starting a single document should be produced setting out core elements agreed by management, internal and external partners. Everyone should own this document. It should:

1. Set out the project's objectives and benefits
2. Identify the project's team roles and responsibilities
3. Set down resources and costs
4. Set out the manner in which the project will be managed

Content should be described in non technical terms avoiding acronyms. From this, the project's plan will be drawn up.

The plan will paint a picture setting out partners, timeframe, resources and costs. For example, listed under the team's resources will be:

1. People
2. Equipment
3. Locations
4. Support – from, for example, outside agencies. This might include input from a mobility instructor charged with teaching the student any internal or external routes.

Importantly a risk assessment must be carried out. It is important here to identify the most significant risks that could impact on the project and ultimately the student. This document could also be used if necessary to reassure partners regarding any health and safety concerns stemming from the young person's visual impairment. This might particularly be the case if a partner was inexperienced when working with visually impaired people and harbour stereo-typical assumptions.

Reports

Whilst paperwork should be kept to a minimum reports to keep all interested parties informed should be written monthly. They should briefly set out achievements, tasks to be achieved, issues and risks

Reviewing the project

The project should be reviewed on completion and involve all key players. Generally, key questions asked should include:

1. Was the project successful
2. Where was the project unsuccessful
3. Areas where the project could be improved
4. Ways to make better use of resources
5. Ways to save time and limit costs

Monitoring and evaluating partnerships

Homing in on one key area of project management we find there are 4 main points to be made:

1. Each partner should be clear about their own needs and expectations whilst understanding how these can fit the needs and expectations of others.
2. The culture of the institution, to include its core values, should be laid out in a mission statement and be made clear to all concerned. Everyone should therefore be clear about the standards and values to which everyone is working.
3. Knowing who is in charge is important although ideally leadership will be shared. This also includes respecting the status and contribution of all concerned and not just the big and powerful
4. Bureaucracy involving the student should be kept to a minimum although account must be taken of
 - a. health and safety
 - b. risk assessment
 - c. the vulnerable nature of some involved

The aim here therefore being to create a positive opportunity for the individual to be directly involved regarding decision making and the recording and evaluating of work. (Joseph Rowntree Foundation www.jef.org.uk/home).

Setting up a community project

Three points worthy of note here are:

1. The student should be happy with the partner group
2. Funding must be available to fund the project to cover staff, materials and transport
3. Time must be made available:
 - a. for tutors to visit and assess progress resolving any issues raised
 - b. for students to carry out the programme
 - c. for student and tutor to record work
 - d. to plan, set up and run the project
 - e. for administration

Often this generally means the tutor is allocated time off normal timetable commitments to liaise so the project can be effective. Without sufficient time what begins as a small problem could soon become a big one.

Points to consider when actually setting up a partnership

1. Regular contact with partner organisation is essential if the project is to be well run
2. Contact other organisations involved in similar projects for information and advice
3. Meet all concerned face-to-face, sign agreements ascertain information about the programme and secure named people to be contacted by all concerned
4. Recruit volunteers – volunteers might be able to add to the scope of tasks the student can then under take
5. Inform parents/carers about the project. Whilst consent may not be legally needed a letter outlining the project may encourage someone to volunteer to support the project. Also, with parents/carers aware about what is happening misunderstanding may be avoided
6. Identify the student's support needs

Assessment and tracking of the student's work

Evidence of the young person's work can be drawn from a number of completed tasks. Each task should have an assessment focus with each student being assessed on one or two tasks. Much evidence could also be recorded in the student's placement diary. Other sources of evidence could include:

- a. Tutor/assessor report detailing activities undertaken and successfully completed
- b. Products produced by the student
- c. Appraisals and general reports of the student's work
- d. Written work which confirms knowledge of the project
- e. Witness statements
- f. Evidence of oral questions to confirm underpinning knowledge
- g. Personal statements by the student
- h. Completion of the project

The delivery of a new idea in a traditional institution

In many long established institutions there are often many employed who have been there many years. Doing something new might require different work patterns, taking on board new ideas and generally involve stepping outside a well trodden comfort zone. An instinctive reaction therefore might be to avoid change and use knowledge of the institution to place obstacles in front of the new idea and generally block progress. This may of course stem from legitimate concerns around the notion that any new concept will need fitting into an already busy timetable. There are however strategies which can be employed to ease the introduction of a new concept.

Change management

Most of us will commit to a new concept and change when we understand why it is occurring and why it will benefit the student, us and the institution.

From the outset there should therefore be three clear stages:

1. Plan the change
2. Negotiate and agree the change and its introduction
3. Implement, evaluate and monitor the change

Above all, communicate changes and the benefits to all concerned. This means providing clear and accurate information letting all those affected know about the proposed changes.

Vignette

Following are a few points of note stemming from a project involving the accessing of a community drama group.

K at the time was a 17 year old female who has no sight. Generally she found it hard working in an age appropriate way. Often she would resort to immature behaviour seemingly to gain attention. At her mainstream education and training placement she spent most of her spare time alone or with people at least one year younger. To hold their attention she mimicked animals – particularly mice. After one lesson at school K became very interested in herbs. Then, after a short while, she was able to list and describe 10s of them by memory. Socially she was inept and didn't follow age appropriate interests.

At home neither parents, younger brothers or sisters spent time with her. Consequently she spent her life alone in her bedroom listening to the radio. She was particularly interested in one radio soap opera. This interest soon became the focal point for a career. That is, she then wanted to act on the radio or be a radio presenter.

Following are some of the points raised whilst accessing a community drama group to develop K's skills. Reasons for choosing this placement were:

1. To offer a social activity independent of family within a requested subject area with a chance to work with people who have the same interest and who are of similar age. It was hoped that such an activity would present an opportunity to engage in something of general interest and not specific to any one person. This way, at least one barrier to interaction should have been removed
2. To develop social skills
3. Foster age appropriate behaviour

4. To address social isolation
5. A mainstream placement and not a special one was chosen because:
 - a. after an assessment it was clear that she had the skills to manage a mainstream activity
 - b. a 'special' group might compound communication difficulties between the group and K
 - c. the chosen group had a very able group leader who was prepared to support the situation
 - d. its mainstream make up and closeness to home might encourage her family to support the situation

Preparation

To begin, an assessment was carried out involving the young person and her parents. Networking then took place to find a suitable placement. This involved several meetings with the group leader to discuss K's needs on a need to know basis.

Having secured a placement a risk assessment was carried out. Then, mobility, orientation and general awareness training within the theatre and involving the drama group occurred. None of the group had any experience interacting with a blind person. Information about the play currently being produced was provided for K in an accessible format along with one to one support during the drama sessions until the group had the confidence and experience to support K on their own.

Support

Over the first few weeks three options were considered to support K. To facilitate peer interaction and social learning age appropriate support was needed. The tendency was for the group to talk through me someone more than twice K's age rather than speak directly to K. Options considered were:

1. Involve a sibling – this was not chosen because the drama group was for K's development and not brothers or sisters. If they joined K might be sidelined as she was at home
2. A volunteer external to the group – unfortunately the right person could not be found.
3. A group member – one of the group had already taken on the role of support without being asked

Some difficulties

The two areas presenting most problems were transport and support. That is:

1. Encouraging her parents to attend performances and transport her to sessions was extremely difficult

2. After only a few weeks the individual who initially jumped at the chance to support K began disliking the demands placed upon her time and the general responsibility involved – arguments spread throughout the group
3. In today's climate a male supporting a female alone whilst for example transporting her too and from sessions is problematic. In fact, more time and effort was spent avoiding this situation than setting up the placement
4. Some friction occurred in her family when a brother began attending sessions too. He knew many in the group through attending the same college and he complained to his parents that K embarrassed him. Through his attendance though the parents became much more supportive of the situation

Over all, the greatest difficulties did not directly result from K's visual impairment but instead the sighted community who had decided what she could or could not do. With input K became much more aware though of this and particularly the barriers others put in her path. The actual performance of the play developed her confidence especially when several of her family turned up to see her act.

Those closest to her also noticed an increased maturity after the placement which probably resulted from general maturation during sessions and the temporary respite from social isolation.

A year later she successfully applied for a drama course at a specialist residential college with a view to working on the radio. It is arguable therefore whether the experience helped identify a realistic career path although it did give her a focus for the next stage in her development.

Conclusion

The three most often under estimated areas regarding community projects are time to assess and monitor the project, transport to and from the project and support of the young person at the project.

Regarding the introduction of a new concept in a well established institution. To begin, get everyone involved and allow everyone time to comment and help in the planning. This will help identify potential obstacles too. Then, continually make the case for the new concept and back this up with a convincing rationale.

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www.lga.gov.uk Hear by Right

www.jef.org.uk/home Joseph Rowntree Foundation