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DIY your future...

The value of informal learning



Acknowledgements



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Finally and most importantly, sincere thanks must go to the group of learners themselves who have engaged so enthusiastically in the project and made it such a success.



The Women in SET Team
March 2010

**Women in
science**
Engineering
and Technology

To find out more about women in science, engineering, technology and the built environment, and to get access to resources including publications and posters, please visit:

www.wiset.org.uk

DIY your future...

The value of informal learning



Foreword

The *DIY Your Future* project offers a working example of successful collaboration between the public, voluntary and Higher Education sectors to achieve real engagement of hard-to-reach learners.

At its heart is the desire to offer women from local communities the opportunity to experience non-traditional learning. Through working together to reach a diverse group of learners, the DIY Your Future project team were able to offer thirty women from the Fir Vale area of Sheffield a varied programme in home repairs and maintenance and confidence building.

The women have described the DIY Your Future experience as 'equivalent to learning a life skill', and their confidence levels have soared as a result of their involvement.

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At the time of writing the UK is experiencing the continuing results of recession and is facing the possibility of political upheaval. It is to be hoped that informal learning will continue to be a priority for decision-makers and budget-holders in the future, as it is uniquely placed to play a vital role in social mobility and community engagement.

Denise Eaton
Project Manager

*"I used to be scared
looking at a drill –
just looking at it!"*



Background and context

The *DIY Your Future* project arose out of an existing partnership between the Women in SET team at Sheffield Hallam University and two voluntary sector organisations, South Yorkshire Women's Development Trust, and Tradeswomen South Yorkshire.

All three organisations share a commitment to encouraging women and girls into science, engineering, technology and the built environment, to increase rates of recruitment, retention and progression of women in non-traditional learning and work. This is achieved through working with employers, learning providers, careers professionals, community organisations and individuals who are considering their education options or a career change.

To complement these activities, a further partner in the form of Sheffield Homes was added, and together they developed an innovative programme of activities to engage women from the Fir Vale area of Sheffield in non-traditional learning.

The ultimate aim of the DIY Your Future project was to increase confidence levels and raise interest in lifelong learning both for the women themselves and for their families and the communities in which they live.



The *DIY Your Future* project supported thirty women from Sheffield to develop their confidence and self-advocacy skills. Building on popular interest in 'home make-overs', the project focused on maintenance, saving energy and DIY. Through developing practical skills in an informal setting, the women were encouraged to re-engage with learning.



"One of the best things is that the tutors have all been women - you see them doing plumbing, tiling, painting and electrics, and one tutor was a female building surveyor."



"In our culture, it's easy to think that these are men's jobs; they do the plumbing and we should just stick to the cooking. But this is a life skill - it really is!"

The project

Through a varied programme of hands-on activities, the DIY Your Future learners developed knowledge and skills in identifying defects and planning repairs and improvements in the home.

Practical skills included tiling, painting and decorating, plumbing and electrics and the women showed real enthusiasm for 'getting their hands dirty'. Negotiating with builders was also included in the eight-week programme, as was saving energy in the home.

The majority of the women started the course feeling very underconfident about tackling DIY jobs in the home, considering this to be a 'male preserve'. Many of the women were from the local Asian community and felt this issue keenly.



The women who participated in the course now feel that they have the skills, knowledge and confidence to take control of their own environment and act as powerful role models in their own families and communities. In fact, a number of them have described the experience as 'the equivalent of learning a life skill', realising that these skills and increased knowledge enables them not only to save money, but also to take greater control of their own lives and physical environment.

A number of the group said that they felt empowered as a result of the course and liked the feeling of not having to wait around for someone else to complete jobs in the home.

Throughout the course, a team of volunteer film and media students have documented the group's experiences. It is clear from their comments that the learners have enjoyed challenging stereotypes within their own communities.

Partnership working

Although the partnerships were long-standing and well-developed, new projects can pose teething troubles and unforeseen difficulties. In order to prevent this happening, the partners agreed a detailed work plan and met regularly throughout the project to ensure targets were being met and activities were being delivered as planned.

It had been intended to invite applications from Sheffield Homes tenants and residents to join the course, but outreach proved more difficult than at first anticipated. Although target numbers were reached in terms of total learners, fewer residents were able to take advantage of the opportunity than had been planned. A learning point for the project partners is to share outreach expertise and play to individual staff strengths.

The partners were also supported by South Yorkshire Energy Centre in the form of Nick Parsons who delivered an inspiring session on saving energy in the home.

As the project was managed by and based within Sheffield Hallam University, project staff here were able to draw on the experience and expertise of colleagues in relevant departments including Pat Morton, Chartered Building Surveyor, and Construction and Surveying Lecturer, Richard Kebbel.



"Lots of us had never been inside a university before so we've been impressed. It's not what we imagined."

Informal learning and its value for learners

The course has given the women involved a chance to try out new things in a safe and supportive environment. Being able to provide opportunities for informal learning enables training deliverers to be very creative when planning courses, and allows for flexibility and a responsive approach. The project partners were able to respond to requests from the learners for particular types of activity to make it even more relevant to their interests and needs.

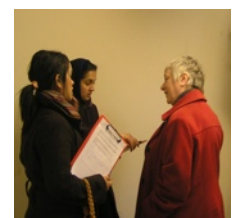
The DIY Your Future group were drawn from the Fir Vale family of schools area in Sheffield, an area classed formally as an area of deprivation. The majority of the women on the course were from the local Asian community, and had to overcome a range of barriers to engage in informal learning around DIY, energy efficiency and home repairs. Potential barriers to participation have included the need to balance care responsibilities with learning, and traditional views within the Asian community about the role of women.

"I am not scared of a drill any more" said one of the women on the last day of the course. The group have overcome fears of undertaking practical tasks in their own homes, and have developed the confidence to take on new challenges. They have encouraged each other to "have a go" and have shown incredible commitment and enthusiasm for the project. Many now plan to put their new-found skills into practice in their own homes and communities, and will share their skills and expertise between themselves to offer mutual support. A number of the group have expressed the desire to enrol on follow-up courses and opportunities, including one woman who has applied to attend an HE course in property development.

The session highlighting the challenges posed when negotiating with a builder or landlord really served to illustrate how greatly the women grew in confidence as a result of attending the course. The group recognised that their increased knowledge about defects and repairs helped them stand their ground more effectively, and helped them to negotiate with more assurance. This will not only save the women money in the future, as they will be able to feel confident questioning tradespeople and builders about repairs, it will also serve to increase their confidence in general in their everyday lives.

In interview footage shot for the short film commissioned by the project, the group have used words like 'empowered' and 'confident' to describe how they now feel as a result of taking part in the experience. In the group's own community, challenging views and stereotypes of the role of women can be perceived as difficult, but the DIY Your Future group have done just that. This group have already acted as incredible role models within their families and communities, and will continue to encourage other women and girls to develop what they have described in their own words as 'essential life skills'.

The course also involved sessions delivered at Sheffield Hallam University and it was really encouraging to hear the group saying that University was not like they had imagined, and that they now had a very positive view of the experience. This will not only impact on the women themselves, but also on their families and communities, and will reinforce the principles of lifelong learning.



Reflection and evaluation

In order to gain a full picture of the value of the project for learners, informal feedback was requested at each session. We asked the participants what they had enjoyed most, what they had learned, and what they would change. We also created a formal evaluation form which was completed at the end of the course.

Feedback was positive about all aspects of the course and a full evaluation document has been created and is available on request. In order to capture individual perceptions of the course, we also arranged for the film students to conduct some informal interviews with some of the participants. We have included extracts from these interviews in the film and they highlight the general enjoyment of the experience and point to the valuable lessons learnt.

On the last day we also asked all the women to create an image of how they felt as a result of completing the course. Some examples of their reflections are included in this document. The most important outcome from the project has been the group's increased confidence and re-awakened interest in learning.

The future

The DIY Your Future project ended on 31 March 2010. At the time of writing, one of the partner organisations, the South Yorkshire Women's Development Trust, is in the process of winding up in its current form. For over five years its Construction Centre has offered opportunities to women and girls to learn construction trades in a safe and supportive environment, and it had provided a route into employment and further study for countless trainees.

The Centre will be greatly missed and those who have spent time there learning their trade will feel disappointed that they cannot encourage friends and family to follow in their footsteps. It is hoped that the experience and resources developed by the Centre will not be lost and that its presence will continue, albeit in a different form.

The Women in SET team at Sheffield Hallam University will continue their work to raise awareness of opportunities for study and work in non-traditional areas, and will continue to work collaboratively with Tradeswomen South Yorkshire to challenge stereotypes and encourage women and girls to realise their ambitions.

Women in SET

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"We have had great fun and now we can do it ourselves. If you put your mind to it, you can do it. We feel equal now".

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