Appendix 5 - Establishing a professional learning community for practitioner-led action research

Establishing a professional learning community for practitioner led action research

Bishop Auckland College, Darlington Learning & Skills Service and South West Durham Training

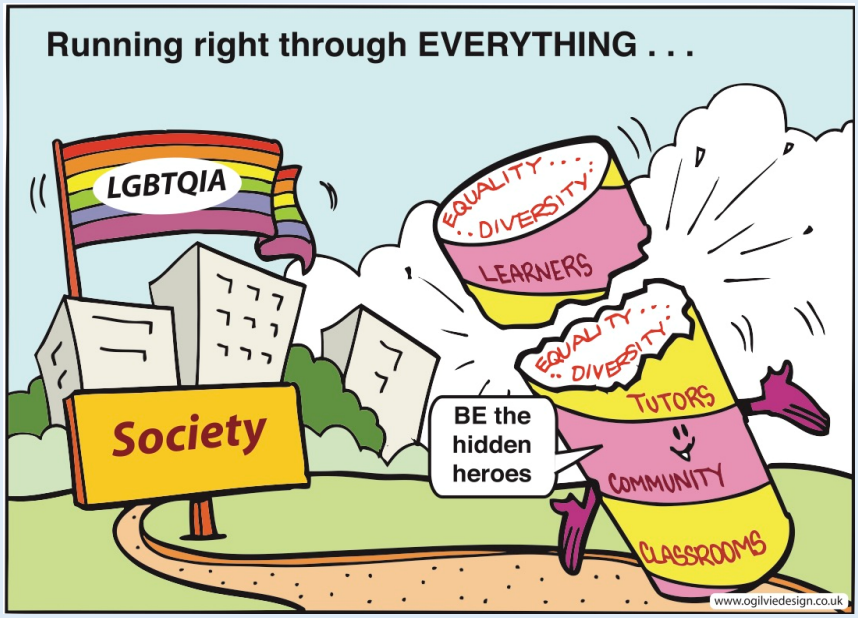
Our research theme... Equality and Diversity practices in FE and ACL

Reoccurring issues...

- Tokenistic practice
- E&D topics shoehorned into lessons
- E&D that is well meaning but ultimately disconnected from learners' lived experience and from the core flavour of their study.
- E&D pushed to the side of practice or left out completely.
- E&D as a metaphorical side salad!

With this in mind, we wondered how we could become better at promoting equality and celebrating diversity within our teaching and learning communities ?

Our overarching aim…



- To develop E&D practices that enrich rather than detract from subject specific TLA.
- To develop an ethos of respectful, mutual exploration of E&D topics and issues.
- To utilise naturally occurring opportunities to promote and celebrate E&D.
- To develop non-judgemental spaces to share worries and concerns.
- To foster a culture of shared responsibility for developing and maintaining E&D practice.

As one tutor commented…

'Doing E&D work is like opening a can of worms, you don't know where it's going to go and once opened, there's no putting it back in the tin!'

We hoped through setting up **communities of practice** (Vescio, Ross and Adams, 2008) within and between our settings, we might be able to help our staff embrace the wiggle…

Exploring our issues and concerns through communities of practice...

- Encouraging safe, non-judgemental spaces for staff
- Understanding underlying issues and concerns in relation to E&D practice within our settings.
- Professional challenge and support.
- Co-creation of E&D resources.
- Encouraging the 'deprivatization of (E&D) practice' Hembree, 2010.
- Shifting the focus from E&D leads/champions to collaborative practice and joint responsibility.

During the course of our research our community of practice put various things in place...

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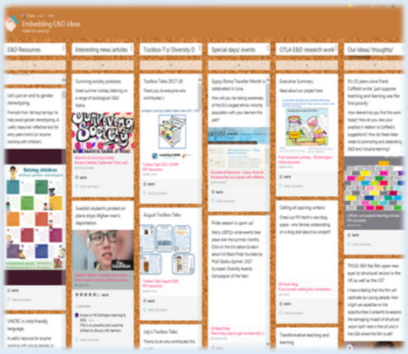
3. 

1. We formed 'constellations of [E&D] practice' (Mycroft and Sidebottom, 2018), within and between our settings and with external partners too.
2. Learners and staff co-created a series of portable Toolbox Talks, highlighting important issues in our local community, nationally and internationally.
3. We developed an E&D Padlet board to help foster a culture of shared responsibility for building resource to develop and maintain our E&D practice.

But how to get everyone involved – and how to sustain engagement?

- Time constraints – 'I'm fully behind what you're doing, I just don't have time to do it!'
- Issues with digital literacy – 'Can't you just print it out for me?'
- Feelings of detachment – 'Why do we need to know all this anyway?'
- Fear of failure – 'If I get this wrong my credibility as an educator will be undermined'

A stretch and challenge exercise for already competent staff?

'I'm picking up things I wouldn't have picked up before. Well not necessarily I wouldn't have picked up before, but I maybe wouldn't have proactively challenged. Engaging in this project has given me both a more explicit and nuanced view of E&D.' Alternative Education tutor.

'My approach is completely different now, completely different. I'm more critically engaged with the issues.... E&D is more co-constructed now and less about what I think, what I feel we should be discussing.' Access to HE tutor.

Or something more?

'Before this [project] my E&D knowledge was quite narrow, like I knew about what I was interested in, like LGBT stuff and politics and things whereas now I know a lot more about a range of E&D.' Business Support staff.

'I like that this group gives me the chance to say what worries me, to be honest I still worry where conversations will go, but now I've got the Padlet on favourites I can find resources or ask learners to look.'

I feel more confident, mostly, to open up spaces for discussion during learning.' Functional Skills Tutor.

Reading between the lines – the impact of renewed E&D practice upon our learners.

'You really started something when you got us on to making them Toolbox Talks … I went home and we were looking it up the rest of the night. You have no idea what you started.' Access to HE Learner.

'At work I've been explaining to people why they should vote, that women died so we could vote. I don't think everyone's aware of that.' L1 English learner.

'It's helped me in my volunteering role. I'm more aware of equality issues when I'm working with people.' L2 English learner.

'I used to let it go but now I feel more confident to say it's wrong if they're calling me because of my disability... and I could share what I know and be the teacher about it.' EL2 Functional Skills Maths learner.

'Our course already has a lot about equality, patient dignity and their choice about the care they want. We could teach what we know in schools as part of our course.' Health and Social Care Apprenticeship Learner.

'This is E&D. Look at us all here learning together. I would never have met them if we weren't doing this.' ESOL learner.

'A lot of old people need help and we could use our skills to fix things up around the house.' Joinery Apprenticeship learner.

Utilising professional learning communities to undertake action research – a couple of final reflections

- The importance of someone with the time and enthusiasm to drive the project forwards and bring people together.
- It's highly unlikely that everyone will engage, or remain engaged as the project progresses – this is ok!
- For those who did engage, distance travelled was most noticeable in relation to E&D practice, regardless of their initial starting point.
- Progress looked different for different staff, CoP offered a support network for those who engaged.

References…

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Contacts…

Vicky Meaby – OTLA Project Lead Darlington Borough Council Learning & Skills Service
Victoria.meaby@darlington.gov.uk @vickymeaby

Evaluating our OTLA Action Research Project

Empowering teaching and learning communities to promote equality and celebrate diversity

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