

Curriculum Development – co-designing learning with disadvantaged groups

Introduction

Co-design, also known as co-production or co-creation, is an approach to improving public services that brings interested parties together to design them. It is a creative response to the challenges of securing the meaningful involvement of local communities in shaping and delivering their services. For community learning, co-design means learning providers, community members, people who use services, learners, local groups and organisations and employers working together on an equal basis to plan and deliver learning that is very responsive to people's circumstances, interests and needs. There is, however, little research, debate or common understanding of co-design in community learning. Co-design is a relatively new concept for some community learning providers and voluntary and community organisations, but established practice in others.

This resource outlines the principles, benefits and challenges and sets out practical strategies for co-design. It draws on action research written up in the publication *A new Curriculum for Difficult Times* and the Community Learning Innovation Fund (CLIF)¹ and on suggestions from community learning providers and community and voluntary organisations made at a recent discussion event, *Meeting Community Needs*.

What is curriculum co-design?

The term *curriculum* refers to the content of a learning programme such as a course, a series of workshops, a day school or learning residential. It covers all types of

¹ https://www.niace.org.uk/community-learning/sites/default/files/resources/A_new_curriculumn_for_difficult_times.pdf
<https://www.niace.org.uk/community-learning/sites/default/files/resources/CLIF%20Projects%20Curriculum%20Development%20Approaches%20Nov.%202013.pdf>

learning, from informal community based activities to courses leading to formal qualifications. It is used in relation to whole subject areas such as health or arts, and to specific courses such as community leadership, tenancy management or creative recycling. A broad definition of curriculum includes the aims and content of the learning activities, materials, teaching and learning approaches, and assessment. The teaching, learning and review of achievement elements are often referred to as learning delivery. Curriculum co-design involves partners from different sectors, learners and people who use services pooling their complementary strengths, knowledge, skills and resources to design and deliver learning programmes for the benefit of their area.

Why is co-design different?

Prevalent approaches to curriculum development in community learning often, but not always, include some initial consultation with potential learners, followed by learning providers deciding the content of the learning programme and delivering the learning. Co-designing a curriculum is different because it goes beyond this to a much more inclusive, reciprocal approach in which partners, including the learners, contribute to both constructing and delivering the learning programme.

The literature on co-design² indicates the importance of moving from provider-led to user-led services. In practice, most community learning curriculum design falls on a spectrum between total provider control at one end and total learner control at the other (see fig. 1). The challenge in moving to a co-design approach is to develop realistic models where all the different areas of expertise, knowledge and capabilities are recognised as valid and valuable and used to create learning that has the maximum benefits for individuals and communities. The developmental nature of learning and expertise required for curriculum development and delivery means this is more likely to involve service users as equal partners than as leaders of curriculum development. Even so, this will be a radical change for many organisations and staff. Sharing curriculum design means giving up a position of total control over curriculum development and delivery. This can result in a fundamental shift in roles and the power dynamics between community educators, local organisations and groups, people who use services and learners.

A group of vulnerable housed people requested a course on managing tenancies. The co-design process drew on the expertise of advice and support organisations, the experiences and knowledge of the vulnerably housed people and the professional expertise of the adult and community learning service. The community organisation delivered the course, the other partners, including the vulnerably housed individuals suggested content and led some of the discussion and the adult and community learning service supported the programme.

² See for example www.neweconomics.org/publications/entry/the-challenge-of-co-production

Fig. 1: Levels of participation (Futurelab, 2006. *Learner Voice*. Bristol: Futurelab)

Type of participation	Type of involvement	Level of engagement
Manipulation	Learners are directed by staff and tend not to be informed of the issues. Learners may be asked to 'rubberstamp' decisions already taken by staff	Non participation
↓	↓	↓
Decoration	Learners may be indirectly involved in decisions or 'campaigns' but they are not fully aware of their rights, their possible involvement or how decisions might affect them	Non participation
↓	↓	↓
Informing	Learners are merely informed of action and changes but their views are not actively sought	Non participation
↓	↓	↓
Consultation	Learners are kept fully informed and encouraged to express their opinions but have little or no impact on outcomes	Tokenism
↓	↓	↓
Placation	Learners are consulted and informed. Learners views are listened to in order to inform the decision making process but this does not guarantee any changes learners may have wanted	Tokenism
↓	↓	↓
Partnership	Learners are consulted and informed in decision making processes. Outcomes are the result of negotiations between staff and learners	Tokenism
↓	↓	↓
Delegated power	Staff still inform agenda for action but learners are given responsibility for managing aspects or all of any initiatives or programmes that result. Decisions are shared with staff	Learner empowerment
↓	↓	↓
Learner control	Learners initiate agendas and are given responsibility and power for management of issues and to bring about change. Power is delegated to learners and they are active in designing their education	Learner empowerment

Benefits of co-designing the curriculum

Co-designing the curriculum has huge potential to improve the experiences of the people involved, whatever their role in the process. It offers a strong foundation for learning that empowers and equips learners to make positive changes that improve the quality of life for themselves, their families and the wider community. At the same time, it builds stronger, more inclusive and resilient communities. It can offer the following advantages:

- Sharing contacts, knowledge, understanding, capacity and funding supports the extension of learning to more groups, including those least likely to access learning.
- Partners can access different funding sources that can liberate community learning from narrow targets relating to numbers or outputs.
- Local people, including the most disadvantaged and marginalised, gain a voice in determining what learning is available, so that it reflects their needs, interests and aspirations.
- As development partners, learners feel more ownership and take more responsibility for their own learning which in turn enhances achievement and impact.

- Staff enrich their practice through learning what is most important to people and how their contributions can strengthen curriculum design and delivery.
- Co-creation breaks down some of the power differentials between staff and people who access services and/or learning.
- Communities benefit as people use the confidence and capabilities gained through taking part in curriculum co-design in other activity in their communities.
- The co-design process builds wider community awareness and support for community learning as more local people and groups gain a stake in it.

Challenges

Co-design poses a number of challenges that are not always easy to resolve but need to be taken into account in the design process. These include:

- the extent to which a curriculum working towards nationally determined outputs such as qualifications can be co-designed at local level;
- what equality means in practice and how to balance ‘professional’ expertise in teaching and learning with local expertise and knowledge;
- how to negotiating the complexities of power dynamics;
- how to balance local demand with externally set targets for numbers and outcomes from the Skills Funding Agency and others;
- lack of funding for co-design processes;
- how to define and maintain quality in the learning.

Practical steps

The learning interests of different groups, including disadvantaged and marginalised people, will be identified by different organisations or groups including community learning providers, voluntary and community organisations, learning champions, housing associations or employers. To respond to these, curriculum co-design requires:

- a positive vision and clear rationale;
- organisational cultures that value and integrate co-design approaches into the work;
- investment of time, energy, skills and training;
- inclusive approaches that recognise and value different types of knowledge, expertise and contributions and bring these together constructively;
- practical strategies that foster and enable participation in curriculum co-design;

- commissioning practices that integrate co-design principles and practice;
- monitoring and impact measures to capture evidence of changes resulting from co-design approaches.

Vision and rationale

It is important that learning providers and others leading curriculum development have a clear vision and rationale for adopting a co-design approach. They will need to communicate to staff and partners why they are adopting this approach as well as how to go about it.

Integrating co-design approaches can mean changing organisational cultures, especially where partner and learner/user involvement in design is not the norm. Shifting more power to partners and local residents and learners can be challenging and uncomfortable. It requires new mind sets and taking risks with different relationships and ways of working. Meaningful involvement of local people also requires accessible processes and a high level of support. It is important to support staff to understand the benefits of co-design and share control over the learning and make them feel their expertise is a valuable element of the process.

Identifying co-design partners

Contributors to co-design will usually include community learning providers, voluntary and community organisations, community members, people who use services and others with specific expertise. For example, a Housing Association might contribute to a tenant advocacy skills course or a local employer to work related courses.

Organisations should plan how to approach potential co-design partners and how to respond when they are approached. Voluntary and community organisations can develop strategies to approach potential community learning partners, for example by making links and drawing up initial proposals with evidence of need. Community learning providers can make sure that local organisations know what they do and how they operate. Some voluntary and community organisations that attended the *Meeting Community Needs* event said that they had believed that community learning only offered accredited or employability courses and were not aware of common ground in grass roots working practices and commitment to social justice.

It is very powerful when people who are usually in the 'problem' or service recipient role are encouraged to become co-creators of learning. They make valuable contributions but can need intensive support and creative processes to enable them to take part. It can take time for them to develop confidence and capabilities and it is important to demonstrate that their views are being heard and taken seriously as this

will trigger greater trust and enthusiasm.

The Telling and Sharing our Histories CLIF project brought together Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities in learning to support them to develop activity to support their heritage and cultural exchange. Community members worked with the voluntary association to design, plan and deliver the learning and some went on to initiate learning programmes in their own communities.

Working practices

Taking time to identify working practices that support people with a range of different backgrounds to contribute will support success. They might include the following:

- Make sure that everyone involved is committed to the process and has the appropriate remit, knowledge, skills and time to take part. Use their time well.
- Negotiate shared understandings before starting the design processes. Make sure that people know what they can expect from getting involved, what they are expected to contribute and that everyone is supported to play a role.
- Identify the different experiences, knowledge, skills and perspectives that partners bring. Value them as assets and resources to foster mutual respect. Service users are there to contribute as equal partners not as 'problems' to be solved.
- Use inclusive practices to enable the least articulate people and those least used to having any say in their services to take part. Take account of language and literacy skills, physical access needs, timing and travel and childcare costs.
- Encourage members to share ideas, value contributions, take part in robust but respectful debate and offer constructive critique.
- Make sure partners feel they have a genuine voice and are not just there for the provider's benefit (for example to tick an inclusion box).
- Review the language you use to make it understandable and accessible:
 - use plain English in all communication - jargon and acronyms are a useful shortcut for people who understand them but lock out and alienate those who don't;
 - make sure that everyone understands technical terms where you do have to use them;
 - beware of 'them and us' talk - labels can have a profound impact on power dynamics so ask people how they like to be referred to. Are they comfortable with being called learners or service users or would they like a different term?

Designing the content

The co-design partners will need to consider:

- Where has the demand originated?

- What do you need to know? (e.g. the learner group - their interests and aspirations, their previous learning) and how will you find out?
- What is the best way to satisfy the demand?
- Are there any constraints such as an externally determined curriculum. This is more likely in accredited courses that lead to standard assessments but even here there can be scope for creativity in the actual content or teaching methods.
- Who will teach or facilitate? (e.g. community learning staff, partner organisation staff). Who will contribute to the teaching (e.g. employers, participants)
- What will be determined before the start and how much scope is there for ongoing development in response to expanding interests or participant critique?

Establish how often you will meet, who needs to attend and what other ways of contributing there might be. Some community members will take part in planning groups but, as this will involve a very small number of people, additional strategies should include a wider range of people. It is important to devise creative activity to stimulate discussion and support decision-making with potential learners. Activity with a clearly defined group such as a group of women domestic violence survivors might be carried out by project workers and community learning staff in their meeting place. Designing a curriculum for a large cross section of people such as residents of an estate could use a variety of approaches. The multitude of consultation tools available include surveys, consultation events in local venues, social media, peer research, participatory appraisal and community of inquiry.

A project working with young employed people in a disadvantaged area of Bristol engaged them in dialogue about local problems and supported them to set about solving them. The curriculum was formed through a creative problem-solving activity undertaken by the local community, supported by learning professionals, who reported that it is vital to involve learners in determining the content of the curriculum but intensive support and creative approaches are needed to do this.

A Herefordshire community learning provider project worked with local partners to enable local people to identify a curriculum for their community centre. They used a very effective approach of knocking on doors and talking to people, which also identified people who took a leadership role in the development and went on to a community leaders' course.

The CLIF Empowering Families - Creating Stronger Communities project trained Asian heritage parents to take on a peer mentor role with families whose children were at risk. The mentors went on to establish and facilitate peer mentor groups designing the curriculum in consultation with parents with support from the training organisation.

Delivering the learning

The co-designers will need to decide the most appropriate way to deliver the learning. Different models will depend on factors such as funding and where the expertise lies. The community learning provider might be delivering all the learning but many services now commission out some or all of their funded provision to other organisations including the voluntary and community sector. Local people might set up and run their own learning groups. In these circumstances, Community Learning providers have a role as enablers of learning, where groups and organisations will draw on their expertise, for example to train community teachers and volunteers, to advise on materials and access to resources, to make sure the learning is a high standard and to gather evidence of impact.

The CLIF @SidwellStreetOnline project was run by community partners to train community learning champions who then assisted them to design and run local courses.

Learners as co-designers during courses

Co-design involves learners and teachers collaborating as partners to deliver the learning, and to undertake ongoing critique and renegotiation during the course. This alters the traditional view of teachers as experts who pass on knowledge to the learners and can be challenging for both learners and teachers. Clarity about what and how each can contribute is essential and learners are likely to need training and support to step into this role. Some will not want to get involved and this should be respected.

Assumptions about learning and past experience might produce resistance to the idea that learners can co-create their own learning. Widening their horizons, discovering what they want to achieve and articulating this is a developmental process. Space should be opened up for co-creation of learning during the course to enable participants to move from consumers of knowledge to become co-creators by contributing to the content and delivery as well as engaging in a process of reflection and constructive critique to refine the learning offer.

Developing generic capabilities through the learning will support people to develop their role as co-producers of learning. These are the same capabilities that enable people to develop as informed, active citizens and include critical thinking and problem-solving skills, confidence to grasp information, to reflect, challenge and make judgements, to engage in constructive debate, respond to divergent views, and to take part in decision making. There are many methods to foster these capabilities, which include:

- collaborative peer approaches to learning where learners draw on their experiences and insights to act as co-educators and learn from each other as well as the teacher or facilitator;
- group activities;
- arts-based activities;
- action or project based approaches.

The Northern Lines CLIF project worked in an area of deprivation with economically depressed and socially isolated individuals. It used Theatre of the Oppressed³ techniques to enable people to identify community issues and to develop skills that supported them to challenge and start to address shared community problems. They developed a drama performance to stimulate discussion with wider community members.

The CLIF Employment through refurbishment, maintenance and retrofit project was led by a Housing Association that worked with tenants. One strand trained tenants to become qualified trainers. They then used their cultural and language knowledge to design courses and enable tenants to move from passive recipients of courses to taking an active part in shaping them.

Learning to sow, cook and grow was a CLIF project led by a community organisation that offered residents an opportunity to learn about growing and cooking food by developing food growing spaces on derelict land in their community. From the start they supported some of the learners to form a steering group to plan site activity including the learning.

Conclusion

Co-production has the potential for a transformative effect on the culture of organisations who take the risk of integrating curriculum co-design and more service user involvement into their working practices. Others might initiate valuable but smaller scale development and all will need to work out the optimum point for their provision on the spectrum between total provider and total user control. Maintaining involvement with partners over time will build expertise and knowledge of curriculum co-design processes across an area. The reward can be an extended learning offer that makes tangible differences to the lives of individuals and their communities.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theatre_of_the_Oppressed

Further reading

Co-production one page profile

http://www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/library/COPRODUCTION/1_page_profile_for_coproduction_2.pdf

Co-production self assessment framework

http://api.ning.com/files/Ub6y1Cqcgwfnt0vDAwX*WoTW6LSu0Pe6-Yf3IbJX3zp8Qal3epzy0HHyGjh1btWEAT9QXAsPde1Vq*TsDKeTKajdaIN9czsi/nefCoproductiionselfreflectiontool.pdf

Co-production Practitioners' Network <http://www.coproductionnetwork.com/>

NEF (2009) *The Challenge of Co-production*

<http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/entry/the-challenge-of-co-production>

NEF (2010) *Right Here Right Now*

<http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/entry/right-here-right-now>

NIACE (2013) *A New Curriculum for Difficult Times*

https://www.niace.org.uk/community-learning/sites/default/files/resources/A_new_curriculum_for_difficult_times.pdf

NIACE (2013) *NIACE Community Learning Innovation Fund (CLIF) projects:*

curriculum approaches <https://www.niace.org.uk/community-learning/sites/default/files/resources/CLIF%20Projects%20Curriculum%20Development%20Approaches%20Nov.%202013.pdf>

About NIACE

The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) is an independent non-governmental organisation and charity. It is a membership body with corporate and individual members drawn from a range of places where adults learn: in further education colleges, workplaces, local community settings, universities, prisons and in their own homes via technology. NIACE activities aim to secure more, different and better quality opportunities for adult learners in the UK, particularly those who have benefited least from their initial education and training.

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