

Connecting Family Learning and Active Citizenship

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Introduction

In Ireland family learning and active citizenship has not been linked together until 2006. It was while the Clare Family Learning Project was involved in a family learning EU learning network project, that a suggestion to create a new partnership project linking both areas was made and FACE IT! was born (Families and Active Citizenship Education – an Integrated Training, www.faceitproject.org). FACE IT! was a two year European Project, funded through the Socrates programme from October 2006 to September 2008. In response to recent political developments in Romania the host partner, EuroEd, initiated the project to provide education for democracy. The experience of making decisions locally was new to a generation of people. The family leads and guides children and targeting parents was felt the best option to create awareness and develop skills for active citizenship.

A central aim of family learning is to value the learning that happens in a very natural way in the home and family. Parents are children's first and most important teachers and the values, attitudes and culture that are learned from the family stay with each individual throughout their life.

Family learning is informal by nature...outcomes include the development of skills and knowledge that are relevant to life in a modern society: learning about roles, how to take responsibility and make decisions in relation to a wider society in which the family is a foundation for citizenship.... The learning journeys of families may vary but if this course provision enables them to see that working and learning together as a family can be fun and fulfilling, then this may be viewed as a first step to active citizenship.

(FACE IT! Handbook, 2008 p.3).

Family learning has been successful in widening participation particularly among families experiencing the disadvantages of educational underachievement, low self-esteem, and poor life chances. It has the capacity to improve learning for adults and their children through building confidence. By using family learning to deliver active citizenship, families are empowered to get more involved in the life of their local community as well as to recognise their own important role in the development of their locality.

FACE IT! Project

A partnership of eleven organisations from six countries was involved in the work of the project. The FACE IT! approach provided a unique opportunity for partners to work on the development of training and materials. The wealth of knowledge, skills and experience ensured that there was a well-rounded approach to family learning and active citizenship. As a result of the provision of international and national training in Europe, the FACE IT! project maximised the potential for cascading the central message to families. It provided an innovative approach to meeting the needs of migrant/socially isolated and disadvantaged families who require support to become more informed and active citizens. It was developed in the following stages:

- Project meetings to share practice, plan training events and develop website support.
- International trainer training events in Ireland and France.
- Cascaded national/regional/local training events in Ireland, France, Romania and Italy.
- Project meetings to share outcomes from training and to collate materials for dissemination through the handbook, CD Rom and website.
- The organisation of an integrated training and international conference with three equally important components: learning, promoting and networking.
- The FACE IT! project culminated with the launch of the handbook at a conference in Romania in July 2008.

(FACE IT! Handbook, 2008, p.6)

At the first project meeting, getting the group to agree common ground on how to develop the project at one stage seemed an impossible task. We discovered that not only did Romania (the partnership host country) not have any family learning or active citizenship programmes, there was no adult education service. EuroEd, had seen on a previous Grundtvig project, the usefulness of fam-

ily learning as a way of engaging with parents. We needed to engage with those working in social and community work as well as teacher training to deliver the programme to parents. This meant including adult education methodologies in addition to the core elements, as formal education in Romania is delivered in a more didactic fashion.

The training programme focused on increasing families' skills and knowledge in the areas of active citizenship and participatory democracy competencies, such as:

- Awareness of their rights and responsibilities as citizens
- Being informed about the social and political world
- Being concerned about the welfare of others
- Being able to articulate their opinions and arguments
- Raising the relevance of participation to the families' own lives
- Being active in their communities
- Being responsible in how they act as citizens

The training programme was developed by the FACE IT! partners with experience in designing materials to attract hard to reach learners and bringing disadvantaged and isolated families into education. It offered the opportunity for professionals working in a range of community settings to become involved with family learning and intergenerational learning. It included methods and easy to use materials for a non-threatening and empowering non-formal/informal learning (family learning).

Clare involvement

The Clare Family Learning Project led discussions on curriculum development for the training course. They successfully applied to the EU to run the training as a Grundtvig Training for Trainers. The course *How to develop a family approach to active citizenship* was delivered in Ennis to an international group of 22 in November 2007 and to a national training group of 15 in February 2008. A cascaded training programme also took place in Ennis to a local group of eight in May 2008 and to a group of ten in October 2008. Two groups of learners (13 men and 12 women) attended active citizenship courses locally up to December 2008.

Adult learning methodologies

The participants lived experience was used as a starting point, valuing the existing knowledge within the group. Facilitation included the use of a wide variety of methods to suit visual, auditory and kinesthetic learning styles and to maintain interest during the sessions. These included:

- Workshops
- Group work
- Study Circles
- Role-play
- Blended learning using computers and internet
- Experiential learning
- Self-reflection
- Walking debates
- Autobiographical copybooks
- Case studies
- Course work

Training

The main outcome of project FACE IT! was a wave of international trainer training followed by training at national level. The international training was held in France (Marseille), Ireland (Ennis) and Romania (Iasi) in November 2007 and included three days face to face training and two days online pre and post training with national training taking place in these three countries and Italy in Spring 2008. Participants at these events have found the materials to be flexible and very suitable for modification according to the diverse needs of learners.

Handbook

The aim of the project and handbook was to encourage practitioners across Europe to engage with the FACE IT! approach to active citizenship and family learning as a mechanism for meeting the lifelong learning needs and encouraging civic participation of isolated, hard-to-reach, passive or disadvantaged group. All the materials of the training programme, the experience of its delivery in the project countries, and background information and research on family learning / active citizenship make up the contents of the FACE IT! handbook. This material is available online to download at www.faceitproject.org/index.html

Pilot Project

A pilot project was developed by The Clare Family Learning project and piloted in Ennis in 2007, just prior to the national elections in May. Topics can be downloaded from the website at <http://www.clarefamilylearning.org/course/12>. Three groups of learners were involved using an integrated approach.

Results of running the pilot project in Clare Family Learning Project show the active engagement of learners in the active citizenship process. The outcomes of this included:

- Six learners voted for the first time as a result of attending the classes
- Some learners identified issues for local action
- All learners asked questions and raised issues with the local politicians
- Learners were observed engaging in political discussion among themselves
- All learners reported greater understanding and enthusiasm for becoming more active citizens

One of the Clare pilot groups, a Traveller Parent Support Group, were very engaged in the activities and found themselves developing a book of their own lived history and experiences in order to pass that knowledge on to the next generation. The recent past has seen huge changes in the lives of Travellers, and the parents in this group were eager to have an input into the future lives of their children. This book *Traveller Life* is available from Clare Family Learning Project.

Unexpected outcomes

The standard of second and third languages used at the project meetings was embarrassing for some of the Irish attending. It would inspire participants to make another effort to learn a European language.

At times during the first project meeting, those familiar with family learning were frustrated by the amount of time spent discussing the use of the internet as a marketing and dissemination tool, as the project had yet to begin. FACE IT! did take up a lot of our time, but I can say that The Clare Family Learning Project benefited in equal to the effort put we into the work. We learned many things as the project progressed, not just that family learning and active citizenship can work well together and develop into a top quality training programme. As original Grundtvig projects were probably intended, we learned

about other countries and their cultures, peoples' histories and struggles especially in less well off countries, eventually discovering friendships and that people have families and similar worries and hopes for them in every country.

Reflection

We are confident that similar outcomes can be duplicated across Europe as a result of the cascading effect of the FACE IT! training. Tutors have been trained and can adapt the handbook contents to suit the needs of the group. Parents will have the opportunity to become more aware, more active and learn to become critical thinkers.

The FACE IT! project was very ambitious with a heavy schedule of tasks within a very short two-year framework. At first it appeared that it was mainly those who had access to adult learners and practitioners in family learning who would be able to deliver the training. Some members of the partnership were experts in specific areas, such as information technology but had no access to groups. This seemed very frustrating and challenging at the start, but as the project grew we reaped the benefits of having a wider skills set in the group. Knowing who was willing and able to carry out specific roles in advance of a partnership starting, could have helped ease a 'stormy' first meeting.

Having a host partner, with a lot of experience working on other EU projects certainly helped the project to succeed and drive the work at the required momentum. The opportunity to engage with experts in fields normally not part of our work was of great benefit to project participants. In this case The Clare Family Learning Project had access to expertise in active citizenship, evaluation, website development and internet dissemination. Some members of the project had years of experience hosting EU projects, while others were involved in adult education at national level in their own countries.

For many learners, particularly those from disadvantaged communities, seeing a course advertised as Active Citizenship may not immediately appeal. Active Citizenship is a difficult concept to grasp and the title of the course may need to be changed. For local groups *Getting to know your community* and for those new to Ireland *Living in Ireland* could be used as alternative titles. Learning from our own pilot project showed that integrating an active citizenship course into an existing group is a good option. For example, getting a two hour slot once a week for six to eight weeks has been a successful way of reaching a Youthreach Progression group.

Conclusion

As citizenship is one of the key pillars in the Irish Government's 'Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education' (2000), having a programme developed and ready to adapt and deliver to suit a groups needs, encourages tutors to include citizenship as part and parcel of their adult education work. The FACE IT! project work appeals to adult education providers because of its emphasis on best practice in the appropriate methodologies, activities and blended learning as used in the training. Evaluations have shown the training content is both relevant and interesting for trainees and their target families once they have got the opportunity to experience it. The FACE IT! training programme is easily transferable as any country could take up these themes and develop their own programme to meet the needs of their individual target groups.

Mary Flanagan is Co-ordinator of Clare Family Learning Project part of Clare Adult Basic Education Service and has helped set up the Clare Active Citizenship Network.

References

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