

# ***Soft Outcomes Universal Learning***

***By Brian Butcher and Lee Marsden, City College Norwich***

## **Introduction**

Monitoring systems for training and development initiatives have traditionally focussed on 'hard' or quantitative outcomes. These include the numbers of people gaining qualifications, or the numbers progressing to further training or paid employment. Providing evidence of such outcomes has proved relatively simple and straightforward. Unfortunately concentration on 'hard' outcomes has failed to adequately illustrate the progression achieved by clients in the voluntary and community sector. Here progression is seen in terms of 'soft' outcomes such as increased confidence, self-esteem and motivation. These soft outcomes are the building blocks upon which any subsequent progression depends, and yet there is a pressure on organisations to implement more formalised learning opportunities in order to access funding. Increasingly, even those funding agencies willing to support non-accredited learning require applicants to produce evidence of 'soft' outcomes to complement the 'hard' data.

In response to changing funding criteria, a number of Norfolk voluntary organisations approached the Research Centre at City College Norwich. They wished to understand how their work with clients nurtured progression and how this could be demonstrated. The intention was to inform their work and to access and justify funding. There was a fear that if 'soft' outcomes were not formally recognised, voluntary and community organisations and their projects might lose some of their innovative and dynamic qualities. The resulting collaboration produced a successful bid to the Big Lottery Fund and the inauguration of the SOUL (Soft Outcomes Universal Learning) Project in September 2003. The project continues until February 2006.

This article details the aims and objectives of the SOUL Project, before describing the research methodology employed and why this was considered to be the most appropriate. The results of the first phase of research, working with six voluntary and community organisations, are described

before outlining how the project will advance during the second phase of research.

## **Aims and Objectives**

The overall aim of the research is:

- To examine, analyse and document the informal learning process and the resultant soft outcomes in six identified voluntary organisations.
- To use this data to investigate the development of a model for mapping progression and soft outcomes through the use of soft indicators.

Once these initial aims have been achieved the objectives are:

- To pilot this model through forty voluntary organisations throughout Norfolk, supported by workshops.
- To produce a final report which will give an in-depth insight into informal learning, its processes and the resultant soft outcomes with the aim of enabling others to learn from the research.
- To make recommendations as to the viability of a soft outcomes process, or model, using soft indicators and its possible further development and dissemination.

In addition to the stated aims and objectives it was envisaged that participating organisations would benefit from being able to both reflect on their work and improve their practice as a consequence of that reflection. Although the research was restricted to organisations in Norfolk the lessons learned will have national significance and any resultant model could be utilised throughout the country.

## **Research Method**

The research has been undertaken using case study methodology. This approach enables the collection of qualitative and, where appropriate, quantitative data using a variety of research techniques. The aim of the research was to enhance understanding of the informal learning process and the experiences of project participants. In using a case study approach the researchers have sought to portray a holistic view of the

people, action and processes with enough of the context to promote understanding and offer learning opportunities to those interested in the soft outcomes of informal learning. Paradox and 'multiple realities' were to be expected (Stake, 1995) and the methods used had to be robust enough to handle the complexities of real life situations. The perceptions and experiences of the participants were systematically elicited to provide an efficient, comprehensive and satisfying way of creating understanding (Delamont, 1992).

Data analysis began from the premise of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1973). Grounded theory entailed using the analysis of data throughout the life of the case studies to enable issues and patterns to emerge, rather than starting with preconceived questions. Access was individually negotiated with each of the six organisations, selected on the basis of offering a wide range of client groups and geographical spread throughout the county. Data collection was achieved through a number of methods including an examination of organisations' documentation, observations, unstructured and semi-structured interviews with clients, staff, and volunteers, focus groups and questionnaire surveys. The researchers also took the opportunity to interview key personnel in other voluntary organisations with an interest in measuring soft outcomes.

The technique of naturalistic observation involved gathering impressions through all relevant faculties. The naturalness of the observer's role coupled with its non-direction makes it the least noticeably intrusive of all research techniques (Adler and Adler, 1998). Both participant and non-participant observation techniques were used as appropriate to the situations in which the researchers had deliberately placed themselves. These observations focussed on trends, patterns, styles of behaviour and other themes which emerged as the research progressed. Participant observation was employed wherever possible as being less intrusive and affording opportunities to engage with client groups in a way that would not be possible otherwise.

Interviews were recorded and provided an extra dimension to the research. A medium term longitudinal aspect arose from the same individuals recording their perceptions through time. A cross-sectional aspect was also gained from many individuals recording their perceptions on the same issue in an attempt to chart the dynamic social context of the project. There was also opportunity for interviewees to provide insight into events that had been observed by the researchers.

Focus groups gave groups of learners the chance to reflect on their experiences and provide feedback to the researchers on emerging themes and trends. Larger groups of learners were able to contribute to the research process by questionnaires. In the process, valuable information was provided on attitudes to different styles of questionnaires.

In order to ensure the research was rigorous, the researchers gave detailed attention to triangulation, an essential process in qualitative research, to confirm issues and avoid bias in data analysis. Three approaches to triangulation were adopted:

- **Methodological triangulation.** This is the process of using multiple data sources. Comparing and contrasting the data obtained helps the researchers to illuminate or minimise outside influences and examine what people do as opposed to what they say they do.
- **Data source triangulation.** Through this process the researchers had the opportunity to see the effects of the same event or phenomena occurring at different times, in other places or with different people.
- **Investigator triangulation.** The two researchers regularly attended an observation or an interview together or jointly conducted a focus group. This enabled them to consider some of the issues and data together, to explore alternative meanings (Denzin, 1984). Throughout the research process both researchers discussed and reflected on the data.

By linking data collection and analysis in this way the research process has been flexible

enough to alter its course and focus on the most informative areas. Data analysis has involved a search for meaning, through identifying and aggregating patterns and themes (Stake, 1995). The use of spreadsheets enabled issues to be clustered by conceptual groupings to illuminate connections. The researchers sought plausibility and to make intuitive sense of the data through being sensitive to the theoretical basis of the research (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The analysis also used the techniques of comparing and contrasting data and noting the relationship between variables, tactics which can sharpen understanding and assist in the generation of meaning.

In addition to the case studies the researchers engaged with practitioners involved in measuring outcomes, other projects, attended conferences on informal learning and conducted an extensive literature review (Butcher and Marsden, 2004).

### **Results from the first phase**

The six organisations selected during the first phase of the research comprised the Benjamin Foundation, BREAK, Creative Arts East, College in the Community, Norwich Community Workshop and the North Lynn Discovery Project. As a result of the analysis undertaken, over eighty soft outcomes were identified as being developed by the six organisations. These soft outcomes could usefully be grouped under three general headings of 'attitudinal skills', 'personal skills' and 'practical skills'. These included motivation, initiative, confidence, self-esteem and appropriate behaviour as attitudinal skills. Personal and inter-personal skills included such outcomes as improvement in social skills, personal hygiene, appearance, communication and team working. Practical skills included prioritising, basic skills, budgeting and the ability to carry out tasks.

Only two of the organisations had any involvement with accredited training and this was very much a peripheral activity for them. Rather, their outcomes were achieved as a result of informal learning or development initiatives with individuals. All the organisations undertook evaluation by

various methods, but none were currently monitoring and measuring soft outcomes in a systematic fashion. All were able to provide impressive anecdotal examples of success with clients. These had the potential to be persuasive case studies and a number were followed up by the researchers in semi-structured interviews.

All staff and volunteers had a real commitment to their organisations and were almost unfailingly positive about their work. Even when a sense of frustration was expressed at what were perceived as 'failures', individuals nevertheless concluded that they had made a difference to the lives of their clients. The research reveals a detailed and rich insight into the ethos of the voluntary sector organisations and their impact. The contribution of each of the six participating organisations is briefly described below.

### ***Benjamin Foundation***

The research was conducted at Winston Court, North Walsham, a homeless person project, working with young people from the age of 18 to 25. The research involved semi-structured interviews with staff, participant observation and informal conversations with the young people. The researchers also attended house and staff meetings and conducted a focus group with the residents. The staff revealed a shared vision of what they sought to achieve for the young people. One individual expressed this by saying:

*"The best part of the job is seeing the young people change. They come in quite traumatised and a lot of the time with a brick wall in front of them which they are determined nobody will get through and reach them. What the job is all about is building a relationship and bringing the wall down. We can then see them walk out of that door into their own accommodation a totally different person".*

The clients clearly valued the work being done and one young woman said that being at Winston Court was the first time in her life she had felt supported. As a focus group exercise the residents were asked individually to rate their levels of confidence at that time and when they first came to Winston Court. Every respondent indicated

that their confidence had increased over this time. The residents themselves were able to identify areas of development in soft outcomes, especially in the areas of confidence, teamwork, motivation, budgeting and social skills.

### **BREAK**

The researchers studied day centre provision at Sheringham for adults with mental health issues. This involved interviews with staff members, participation in group activities and observation in order to gauge development. As with the Benjamin Foundation, staff were found to have a shared ethos and gained tremendous personal satisfaction from the achievements of the clients. The work produced by the clients was displayed prominently on the walls, demonstrating what clients were capable of and reinforcing those achievements.

Clients were enthusiastic about their involvement in the day centre. On one occasion a group of clients was accompanied by the researchers to an afternoon of ten pin bowling. The participants were particularly animated, engaged and mutually supportive. They praised each others' efforts and took great delight in achieving a strike. After the bowling the clients returned to the minibus and one served squash and crisps to the others. One client told the researchers that she really enjoyed it at BREAK and it was better than anywhere else she had been. Observations were spread over a six month period during which time the researchers saw the development of soft outcomes including regard for others, appropriate behaviour and conversation, listening and the ability to carry out tasks.

### **Creative Arts East**

The project, selected by the researchers, was designed to demonstrate the soft outcomes being achieved in isolated rural communities. The Rural Touring Initiative enables small villages to put on quality arts events at a heavily subsidised price to help develop community spirit and an appreciation of the arts. The Welborne Village Hall Committee was selected as an example of an organisation tackling rural isolation. The

village is inhabited by 150 people, an eclectic mix of incomers and those who have lived there all their lives. The village has few amenities other than a village hall and adjacent church building. The trustees of the Village Hall organise a number of arts performances throughout the year to appeal to all age groups and stage an impressive annual arts festival.

Although the trustees are all volunteers their views on what they are achieving have echoes with those of paid staff in other organisations. One individual saw the main benefit of their activities as 'people coming together'; this view was endorsed by another committee member who confessed that:

*"There's one or two of the people that I do definitely get on with and respect a lot more because of the work they've done and everything. And I would never have thought that I would have done before".*

Creative Arts East have served as the catalyst to introduce arts events as a part of village life and the Village Hall Committee have now gone on to produce many events in their own right. A questionnaire to evaluate the success of the Arts Festival, produced by the researchers, revealed some of the outcomes being produced in the village. Of the respondents, 91% felt that the festival assisted with building community spirit, 79% said that they were more likely to attend arts events in the future as a result of having attended the festival and 68% claimed that they were more likely to participate in the arts rather than simply attend in the future.

### **College in the Community**

College in the Community serves as an umbrella organisation encouraging community builders to attend workshops and training to develop the attitudinal, personal and practical skills necessary to make a difference in their communities. Research was conducted by attending these courses as participants, observing and interacting with the community builders. Interviews and focus groups were also conducted with clients, volunteers and staff members. One member of staff, who had herself been a former client, had a clear view of what was being achieved for clients:

*“The confidence is just amazing. To see the people blossom. Even from when I was on it as a learner. You have to ask questions and you get the people who wouldn’t have said a word are now taking part and almost leading things and you can just see them blossom”.*

One of the focus groups revealed the real difference informal learning had made to their lives. There was unanimity across the group as a whole that they would have not been able or willing to access accredited courses at the time they returned to learning. Participants were asked to list specific things they were doing now, which had resulted from their participation in informal learning. Impressive detail was provided on positions of active responsibility with a variety of community and voluntary organisations. The One parent had formed a martial arts club for young people and another chaired a parents’ panel. There was absolute clarity from the participants that such activity would not have taken place but for their increased confidence gained through informal learning. One woman talked of ‘just being a mum’. Informal learning had, ‘made me feel like a real person with something to offer’.

### **Norwich Community Workshop**

The Community Workshop works with individuals having mental health issues and learning difficulties. The researchers interviewed staff, volunteers and clients within the organisation, took part in the various craft sessions as participant observers and conducted a focus group. Informal conversations with the clients gave a detailed insight into the value of this organisation. As the client focus group was dispersing one participant made the telling comment about the workshop that:

*“It’s a reason to get out of bed in the morning.”*

The tutors were enthusiastic about the work they do with clients and this was reciprocated, with clients experiencing a real sense of belonging to a community. The clients when asked, without exception, stated that they would be put off from getting involved in the workshop if they had been made to take an accredited course at the outset. The staff and volunteers are very

aware that their role is greater than simply teaching clients how to make craft items. One tutor put it this way:

*“And I think we teach them a better sense of being, if you know what I mean. People who come here have sometimes they - how shall I put it – are a little bit down in the dumps and we cheer them up a bit and that’s basically what we do and we try to teach them the best way to do it, to look after themselves, without having any stress or as less stress as possible. So that’s what we do”.*

### **North Lynn Discovery Project**

The client group for the North Lynn Discovery Project was younger than for the other five groups and yet the views of the staff and clients were remarkably similar to other groups. The Discovery Project is a youth centre working with young people from the age of six to 22 in one of the most socially and economically deprived areas of Norfolk. The researchers attended the Centre on a number of occasions, talking to the young people and observing projects from beginning to end. These projects included the publication of a young person’s magazine, a dance group which went on to give a public performance and making an anti-drugs video. Research was carried out by means of interview, observation, focus group, questionnaire and examining the organisation’s documentation.

The young people in the Discovery Centre were similar to the other client groups observed in that they were not aware of learning at the Centre, unless they reflected on it. Learning is by example and the staff encouraging and motivating them to achieve things they had not believed possible. A member of staff described how one eight year old with behavioural problems and a family history of drug abuse had developed since joining the Centre:

*“What I feel we have achieved with these children is, for one, they now have an understanding that there is rules. You can’t just go around doing what you want to do. The young one was constantly being asked to go home because of his behaviour. You don’t hardly talk to the lad no more. He got into one of the football teams which he very much*

*enjoys. That keeps him on track with his behaviour. If there was anything like a school for excellence for pool, he would be in it. His confidence has grown. The trouble he was having was he thought he couldn't compete. Now I will put him in charge; give him responsibilities even at that young age. His self esteem has soared. A nice little lad and everyone up here thinks the world of him. His school work has picked up. He is learning all the time".*

## **Phase Two – the next stage**

The first phase of research produced a wealth of valuable data providing evidence of the achievements of voluntary and community sector organisations. The next stage of the research involves developing a model that will measure the soft outcomes that these organisations encourage among their client group. The researchers have produced a framework that demonstrates progression with individual clients through a system of questionnaires and worksheets which can measure the client's progress in the areas of attitudinal, personal, and practical skills. The framework is very much work in progress and extends to a separate framework, based on similar principles, for measuring soft outcomes with children and young people.

As part of the process of developing a model, that is sufficiently robust to meet the needs of a large and diverse sector, the second phase of the research includes forty community and voluntary organisations spread across the county. These organisations have been selected from over ninety organisations represented at two dissemination events that occurred in Norwich and King's Lynn at the end of September 2004. The mix of organisations reflects the diversity of the sector and indicates how seriously they take the desirability/necessity of measuring soft outcomes.

The forty participating organisations will trial the framework, known as the SOUL Record, across parts or all of their projects. The process is supported by regular contact with the researchers and three one day workshops spread over the course of the year. The workshops provide training in using

the SOUL Record. There is an opportunity to report back on how the framework works in practice, suggest changes and improve the framework to develop a finished product that will meet the needs of the voluntary and community sector. The research will continue with the researchers involved in site visits, interviewing clients and staff and recording the comments of practitioners' experience of the process. This stage continues until October 2005 when the revised model will be completed.

## **Interim Conclusions**

The first phase of research revealed that each of the six voluntary and community organisations were producing significant soft outcomes with their client groups. Whether the client was aware of it or not, informal learning made a significant difference to the quality of their lives. The staff were highly motivated and eager to develop the life skills and confidence of their clients. For clients, participation in the activities provided could be seen to have beneficial effect in terms of improved behaviour, increased confidence, community involvement, self esteem, and motivation. Focus groups and discussions with practitioners outside the initial research cohort revealed that organisations throughout the sector were achieving similar outcomes. Very few such organisations measure soft outcomes in a systematic way and yet they have become increasingly aware of the need to do so.

A review of the soft outcomes literature reveals that the government-led focus on measuring outcomes concentrates on soft outcomes as a stepping stone to employment or accredited training (Butcher and Marsden, 2004). The evidence from the first phase of research would seem to indicate that there is a value to the client and society as a whole, in soft outcomes being viewed holistically in terms of social inclusion rather than simply fitness for work.

The similarity of many of the soft outcomes achieved by varying organisations tends to suggest that there is a possibility that a generic framework, if not a model, could provide a valuable resource for the sector. The willingness of forty organisations to get

involved in the second phase of research suggests that such a possibility represents a tremendous opportunity to reveal the achievements of clients and organisations to themselves as well as to funding bodies. The research over the next twelve months will reveal whether or not such a model will work in practice.

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## Notes