

# ***The SOUL Record - A New Tool For Measuring Soft Outcomes***

***By Clayton Anderson, Harriet Foster and Jenny McKibben***, The Research Centre, City College, Norwich

## **Introduction**

Evaluating the outcomes from non-accredited learning and demonstrating that your organisation is making a difference has always been difficult for voluntary and community organisations. This is often a prerequisite for funders but is also useful for managers and learners. Now an easy-to-use evaluation system has been developed through a detailed, action research study by The Research Centre at City College Norwich. Called The SOUL Record (Soft Outcomes Universal Learning), the model is the product of two years of close collaboration between The Research Centre, Norfolk's voluntary sector, and Norwich and Norfolk Voluntary Services and is proving to be a huge success.

The project arose from a need identified within the voluntary and community sector for an effective system to evidence the soft outcomes of non-accredited learning. This was required to demonstrate project success and to provide the evaluations increasingly being demanded by funding bodies. There was also concern that the inability to measure soft outcomes in informal learning was contributing to an undervaluing and underfunding of informal learning projects. A consortium of Norfolk voluntary organisations approached the Research Centre and a successful joint bid was submitted to the Big Lottery Fund who provided two and a half years of funding, enabling the project to run until February 2006. A steering group was established, chaired by the chief executive of a local voluntary sector organisation, with project management provided by the lead partner, Norwich and Norfolk Voluntary Services. Research was conducted to map the soft outcomes achieved through non-accredited learning and the findings used to develop a practical system with which organisations could measure learner progression. Piloted in around fifty voluntary and community organisations in Norfolk, the resultant SOUL Record is learner centred and solution focussed. The system centres

on what an individual can do, rather than what they cannot and is therefore intended as a positive experience for learners. Soft outcomes are divided into three main areas: 'attitude', 'personal/interpersonal' and 'practical', and by measuring changes in these outcomes over time, organisations are able to show the distance learners have travelled.

## **Aims and objectives**

The aim of the project was to analyse the informal learning process and the soft outcomes achieved, and to use this knowledge to develop a practical system to measure soft outcomes and map progression. The objectives were:

- 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 or a process for mapping progression and soft outcomes through the use of soft indicators.
- To pilot this model (or process) through 40 voluntary organisations supported by workshops.
- To produce a final report which provides 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.

## **Developing the tool**

The research was conducted in two phases: in phase one the researchers worked closely with six local voluntary and community organisations, using longitudinal case study methodology to study the learning process, map the soft outcomes achieved and create a prototype model called The SOUL Record to measure them. In phase two a model was

developed, trialled and refined through action research with a wider range of users selected for geographical spread and the range of client group. Action research involves participants as 'researchers' and consists of a cyclic process which follows action with reflection which in turn informs renewed action (Dick, 1999). No participants were currently measuring soft outcomes in a systematic way and few had any involvement with accredited learning.

A number of qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques were deployed including participant and non-participant observation, focus groups, questionnaire surveys and semi-structured and unstructured interviews. The data was then triangulated using data source, methodological and investigator triangulation. Data analysis began from the premise of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1973): the researchers did not, therefore, start with preconceived questions but used the analysis of the data throughout the life of the case studies to enable issues and patterns to emerge. These were in turn used to focus subsequent data collection.

The analysis of phase one data showed that all six organisations were achieving significant soft outcomes with their client groups, that there were over eighty soft outcomes in total being developed by the six organisations confirmed the feasibility of producing a generic model, something which has seemed unattainable in other research (Butcher and Marsden, 2004).

The researchers postulated that informal learning promoted social inclusion and should be valued for the degree to which it achieved this. The relevant benchmark by which to judge organisations which delivered informal learning was therefore the extent to which they promoted social inclusion. This hypothesis was widely endorsed by participants at two events held to disseminate the first phase of research findings to the voluntary and community sector.

There was keen interest in the project from the sector with the result that the recruitment of nearly fifty voluntary and community organisations to participate in the second phase was easily achieved. In this phase

organisations took part in action research which involved developing and testing the model for measuring soft outcomes through to action research cycles. The organisations involved agreed to become action researchers, trialling the pilot system and reporting back their experiences of using it. They were encouraged to suggest amendments and developments to reflect the specific needs and contribution of their own organisation. Feedback was conducted through site visits, telephone and e-mail, and participation at a series of three workshops. Observations and group interviews were conducted to determine how useful learners felt The SOUL Record was in identifying the distance they had travelled.

## **Results**

Throughout the action research process The SOUL Record was extensively revised to take into account the experiences of practitioners and learners. The finished product is a generic framework containing three tools which can be used flexibly: questionnaires, worksheets, and observation sheets, supported by a user guide and a spreadsheet results package. The adult questionnaires consist of a series of 21 positive statements geared to desired learning outcomes, which can be divided into the three soft outcome areas of attitude, personal and interpersonal skills, and practical skills. Learners choose a point at which to place themselves on a six point Likert scale in response to the statement, ranging from strongly disagree (one) to strongly agree (six). Analysis is simple: by drawing a vertical line between the values of three and four (*i.e.* between slightly disagree and slightly agree) it becomes immediately apparent in which areas the learner has difficulties since all those numbers on the left hand side of the line represent disagreement with the positive statement. By drawing horizontal lines between each section a grid is formed which highlights the main areas where help and development may be

needed. This can then be used to develop an action plan with the learner and set goals/targets.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ how do you feel today?



1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = slightly disagree; 4 = slightly agree; 5 = agree; 6 = strongly agree

ATTITUDE	1	I make a real effort to do those things that matter to me	1	2	3	4	5	6
	2	I feel good about myself	1	2	3	4	5	6
	3	I am a confident person	1	2	3	4	5	6
	4	I get on well with people	1	2	3	4	5	6
	5	I am able to receive advice	1	2	3	4	5	6
	6	I respect other people's property	1	2	3	4	5	6
	7	I use my initiative	1	2	3	4	5	6
PERSONAL/INTERPERSONAL	8	I communicate well with other people	1	2	3	4	5	6
	9	I feel part of the community	1	2	3	4	5	6
	10	I feel part of this organisation	1	2	3	4	5	6
	11	I am willing to take on responsibility	1	2	3	4	5	6
	12	I enjoy working as part of a team	1	2	3	4	5	6
	13	I take care of my appearance	1	2	3	4	5	6
	14	I am reliable and turn up to appointments on time	1	2	3	4	5	6
PRACTICAL	15	I am aware of health and safety issues	1	2	3	4	5	6
	16	I am able to find/share information	1	2	3	4	5	6
	17	I carry out any tasks that I am set or set myself	1	2	3	4	5	6
	18	I am well organised	1	2	3	4	5	6
	19	I am aware of my rights and responsibilities	1	2	3	4	5	6
	20	I am able to manage money well	1	2	3	4	5	6
	21	I can fill out forms properly	1	2	3	4	5	6

**Getting to Know You**

*Thanks for helping us to get to know you*

Statements in the children's and young people's questionnaires are grouped around the five outcomes areas of the Every Child Matters framework, of 'being healthy', 'staying safe', 'enjoying and achieving', 'making a positive contribution', and 'economic wellbeing'. The economic wellbeing section concurs with the 'Raising Aspirations' agenda identified by the Norfolk Learning Partnership and the Learning and Skills Council Norfolk. (NLP, 2005).

Adding up the values agreed by the learner enables a numerical score to be reached. When the questionnaire is repeated at a later date, following a service intervention for example, the user is able to track any increase in soft outcomes by noting score differences. Users are recommended to use The SOUL Record on at least three occasions to measure baseline, midpoint and end point scores.

A wide selection of worksheets allows focus on specific outcomes areas, such as gaining confidence and the setting of agreed goals to help further achievement. Users can select worksheets according to issues highlighted through a questionnaire or use them as a stand-alone tool. As with the questionnaires, a numerical score can be easily arrived at (e.g. by awarding points for goals achieved) and increases tracked, although this is optional and will not be appropriate for all groups. An 'Evidence of Progress' sheet for each learner enables this to be monitored. Worksheets have been developed for attitudinal outcomes, such as, 'Raising Aspirations', and 'Developing Potential', for personal and interpersonal skills, such as, 'How you deal with other people', and 'How you deal with new situations and events' and for practical skills, such as, 'Basic Skills', 'Steps to employment, training or volunteering' and entry level Literacy, Numeracy and English spoken as another language. The children's worksheets are again based around the Every Child Matters framework. For example, under the domain of 'Staying safe' there are worksheets on 'Keeping out of harm' and 'Being loved and cared for'. Observational worksheets enable The SOUL Record to be used with learners with high levels of learning difficulties.

### **Feedback from the sector**

Organisations using the finalised SOUL Record report that the framework provides a valuable diagnostic tool when working with new clients and is a useful resource for one-to-one working and group work. One organisation reported:

*"SOUL contains useful dialogue to help people in other ways than what you would otherwise be able to do."*

For the organisation it also helps pin-point where more support is needed and in this way can inform action planning. Talking a client through the record can be an important part of establishing a relationship and building up trust. This can be particularly valuable for organisations working with clients who are vulnerable or experiencing difficulties. For example, Victim Support Norfolk uses The SOUL Record with young victims of crime and with witness's service clients being supported at courts.

With its flexibility The SOUL Record has proved to be highly adaptable and sensitive to different client groups. For example, MIND use the record for evaluating work with people with mental health issues, The Magdalene Project evaluate their work with sex workers using The SOUL Record, whilst The Benjamin Foundation measure progression in life skills among homeless young people. The tool can be used effectively with clients with low literacy levels. Lastly, The SOUL Record has proved affirming for project workers by providing evidence of the impact of their work with learners. As one organisation reported, 'The SOUL Record builds confidence amongst staff with them being able to see the progress their learner has made.'

### **Conclusions**

The aims of The SOUL Project were clear and specific and the project team has succeeded in delivering them. In doing so it has created an innovative product that fills a need, is user friendly, works effectively in a broad range of organisations and with a wide range of client groups including the vulnerable, is winning endorsement and recognition from other organisations, has additional benefits for organisations beyond

the original aims, and which has considerable potential for expansion into other sectors and for commercial development. Its success can be attributed in part to the close collaboration with the voluntary and community sector and the detailed work with practitioners through the action research process which informed the product development at all stages.

The research has provided an insight into informal learning, its processes and resultant soft outcomes. It has shown that the soft outcomes of informal learning are significant and often undervalued and should be valued primarily as a means of social inclusion rather than being perceived as a stepping stone to a hard outcome such as getting a job or qualification. Accredited learning or employment was not a viable choice for many individuals until their personal soft skills were developed. In delivering soft outcomes voluntary and community organisations minimise the extent to which individuals need to rely on support from statutory health and caring agencies.

The work has shown that although a generic measurement model is not effective, a generic framework that is learner centred, simple to use and supported by practitioner training provides a successful means to evidence soft outcome achievement.

### **Where next?**

The challenge for the team now is to secure the funding necessary to roll out The SOUL Record nationally. Growth is important for a number of reasons: an evaluation tool that is only used within Norfolk will have limited validity; many voluntary organisations are part of national networks or multi-agency partnerships and need systems that are compatible with those of their partners. Secondly, part of the success of The SOUL Record comes from its ability to be adapted to suit the individual requirements of different organisations and to meet changes in national policy such as the introduction of the Every Child Matters outcomes framework. Some continued specialist input is required to maintain this responsiveness.

The demand for growth is clear, word has spread across the voluntary sector nationally and now that The SOUL Record has been

shown to be RARPA (Recognising and recording Progress and Achievement) compliant and has been endorsed by the Learning and Skills Council Norfolk, interest is growing in the statutory sector too. Funders are also interested in the tool as a means of evaluating projects. The Norwich Primary Care Trust has approved the use of The SOUL Record by organisations that they fund and the team are seeking endorsements from other funders, with the goal of making use of The SOUL Record a prerequisite attached to certain grants. This in turn could generate further growth and investment in The SOUL Record.

The aim for future growth is to develop a sustainable business model such as a social enterprise that would allow The SOUL Record to be disseminated nationally without losing any of the support available for voluntary and community organisations. Development work will be needed to ensure the applicability of the model for statutory or commercial organisations. Expansion is planned to start first in the East of England, working with the voluntary sector, for which funding is now sought. At the same time the team aim to develop a computerised version of The SOUL Record, in response to demand, and will be exploring the most efficient and user friendly method. The potential for income generation is clear but this also has to be balanced against the need to ensure affordability for the voluntary and community sector which has been so pivotal to the project development.

The final report on The SOUL Record will be launched at a conference on 9 February 2006 at the John Innes Centre in Norwich. It is hoped that funding will have been secured by this stage, enabling more organisations to make use of this exciting new product.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors acknowledge the work of Dr Brian Butcher and Dr Lee Marsden who between them conducted this research with Clayton Anderson. We are pleased to conclude the project but all credit for the development of The SOUL Record itself should rest with them. We would also like to thank the voluntary and community

organisations who have participated in this project and whose input has been invaluable.

## References

Butcher, B. and Marsden, L. (2004). 'Measuring soft outcomes: A literature review'. *The Research and Development Bulletin*, 2(3), pp31-36. Norwich: The Research Centre, City College, Norwich.

Dick, B., (1999). *What is action research?* <http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/whatisar.html> [accessed 19.11.04].

Glaser, B and Strauss, A. (1973). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Chicago: Aldine Press.

NLP, (2005). *Reaching Our Potential Developing a Strategy for Raising Aspirations in Norfolk 2005-2015*

<http://www.learning.shapingthefuture.org.uk/attachments/Resources/Raising%20Aspirations%20Report%20%20summarv%20of%20issues%20Nov%202005.doc> [accessed 21.12.05]

## **Notes**