



A O N T A S

Community Education Network

**Developing a voice for the non-formal adult education sector:
A case study of the AONTAS Community Education Network**

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Summary

This paper gives an overview of the AONTAS community education network. It shares the experience of setting up a network that is dedicated to raising the profile and recognition of, and ensuring resources for, community education. The paper describes community education in terms of its many definitions and how united agreement is needed in order to create a strong and effective network that works towards a common vision. The evolution of the network is outlined, in terms of its inception, development and growth over 2.5 years. The initial phase focused on creating a work plan, agreeing a definition of community education and creating a harmonious and inclusive Network that benefits from academic inputs to facilitate critical reflection. The role of advocacy and lobbying in the second year was highlighted in terms of the projects undertaken, including lobbying training, research to provide evidence for lobbying work and the creation of manifestoes. The start of the third year focused on the consolidation of the work achieved and looked to developing a Network that maintains an ethos congruent with community education and focuses on its long-term objective which is also capable of short-term actions as required. One outcome of the Network was the creation of a set of television programmes entitled 'Beyond the Classroom' that describes the theory, practice and outcomes of community education.

1. Introduction

1.1 Community Education

Defining community education is not a straightforward task. In Ireland, two definitions exist within the Governmental White Paper; on the one hand community education is viewed as an extension of the service provided by second and third-level education institutions into the wider community. Equally, it is also viewed as a process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and a collective level...it is as an interactive, challenging process, not only in terms of its content but also in terms of its methodologies and decision making processes.¹ In terms of creating a Network agreement on a definition of community education was essential to ensure a cohesive, focused and united group. Following extensive discussion and consultation the Community Education Network definition of community education is:

"Community education is a process of personal and community transformation, empowerment, challenge, social change and collective responsiveness. It is community-led reflecting and valuing the lived experiences

1 2000, 'Learning for Life', White Paper on Adult Education, Dublin.



of individuals and their community. Through its ethos and holistic approach community education builds the capacity of groups to engage in developing a social teaching and learning process that is creative, participative and needs-based. Community education is grounded on principles of justice, equality and inclusiveness. It differs from general adult education provision due to its political and radical methodologies."

Community education can be considered non-formal adult education in that it exhibits the following features: it provides short, part-time courses, it is self-governing and democratic, learners determine entry requirements and it is output led. (Adapted by Fordham 1993 from Simkins 1977: 12-15)

1.2 What is the community education network?

The Community Education Network is a political platform of independent community education groups within the AONTAS membership and serves under the organizational development section of the AONTAS Strategic Plan. The Network directs its work and actively participates in developing immediate and long term strategies in order to achieve the aim of securing a distinct funding stream for community education through actions based on the three themes of: resource, recognition and raise profile. This is the only national network dedicated to independent community education groups at national level and it constantly works to ensure that it operates effectively through engaging in ongoing evaluation and critical reflection. It has been in existence for over two years and has met on seven occasions, a report and details of all meetings are available from the AONTAS website: <http://www.aontas.com/commed/networkcen.html>

Any local, self-managed, independent community education organisation that is committed to raising the profile of, and lobbying for, a community education sector that is committed to social change can join the Network. A total of 134 organisations from 19 Irish counties have registered to be part of the Community Education Network. The mission statement of the Network is: "to achieve a greater public understanding of the value of community education and have it recognised as a distinctly funded sector of the Irish Education system."

A steering group guides the work of the Community Education Network by providing guidance on specific areas: long-term objectives, planning and reviewing Network meetings and other opportunities that are available for the Network. The success of the steering group is that it is working well together and the dynamic is motivational, productive and challenging. The group is also committed, supportive and eager to assist in the running of the Network meetings.



2. Evolution of the Community Education Network

2.1. Year 1: Establishment and defining its role

In the first year of the Network it focused on three key points:

1. Creating a work plan for the Network
2. Agreeing a definition of community education
3. Creating a harmonious and inclusive Network

A strategic work plan for the Network was created using the outcomes of the first meeting and the inputs and guidance from the steering group. It drew on the basic plan for the Network and used the wealth of experience from the group to identify the aims and objectives of the Network together with the opportunities for development.

The aims and objectives of the Community Education Network emerged in three themes: Resource community education, Recognition for the value and distinctive nature of community education and Raise Profile of community education and lobby for its needs.

The Aims of the Community Education Network are:

- To lobby for the independent resourcing of the community education sector (finance and human resources).
- To ensure recognition for community education in terms of its distinctive nature, value and role in lifelong learning, community development and active citizenship.
- To have a strong, collective and distinctive voice for community education that raises awareness on its achievements and contribution to society.

The Objectives of the Community Education Network are:

- To ensure community education is resourced appropriately by gaining commitment from the



Department of Education for core funding of activities which will be carried out by lobbying; including that of specific departments.

- To gain increase recognition through data collection and an agreed definition of community education.
- To increase awareness of community education through: increased communication; linking with the media; revisiting the White Paper; sharing of best practice and; promotion and development of the Network.

The focus of the strategic work plan

In order to achieve the aims and objectives of the Community Education Network the work plan will focus on the following areas:

1. Resource – through active lobbying work
2. Recognition – through discussion, debate and clarification on the definition, and locations, of community education
3. Raise Profile – through local and national media work.

One major piece of work which the Network undertook was agreeing a definition of community education. The development of this work was as valuable as the outcome because it involved the following processes:

- Personal reflection on the role of each participant in their provision of community education
- Reflection on the two definitions of community education as per the White Paper – Learning for Life: Community education as the provision of a service in the community and as a process of empowerment both at individual and community level
- Identification of the participants' position on the continuum of the two definitions: this enabled the Network to understand the position of each member in relation to the two definitions, where their work fit and the limitations of their work in relation to their beliefs and aspirations



- Keynote addresses from academics on the theory of community education facilitated reflection on the reality of practice at grassroots level in relation to theoretical perspectives
- The recognition and valuing of all members of the Network with the aim to ensure an accepting, inclusive and vibrant Network that has strength in its diversity. The majority of the participants were aiming for the empowerment definition.
- Reflection on a proposed definition that captures the words and identification on the implication of this definition on the work of the participants
- Final agreement, definition, explanation and describing the practice of community education.

2.2 Year 2: Supporting Advocacy

In the second year of the Network it focused on three key points:

1. Building the capacity of the Network to lobby at local level
2. Create lobbying tools that reflect a united lobbying position for the Network
3. Initiate the creation of television programmes on community education

In keeping with the work plan themes a number of initiatives were undertaken to *raise the profile*, achieve *recognition* and to *resource* community education namely: initiate the production of television programmes regarding community education, run lobbying training and create a manifesto for the Network respectively. These initiatives were run through, and along side, the national network meetings.

Given the Local and European elections which took place in 2009 it was essential for the Network to use the opportunity to lobby for community education. Funding was secured in order to run specific lobbying training for members of the Community Education Network. The aim of which was to build the Network's collective capacity to effectively articulate the needs of, and to provide a rationale for investing in, the sector. A total of 39 individuals from 11 organisations participated in the training with a manual being produced. A manifesto for community education was also created which was used during the training as a basis for the lobbying campaign. The process of creating the manifesto involved extensive discussion



and consultation which resulted in much debate regarding the common vision for the Network in terms its needs. A part of the consultation process was undertaken via the online Network's discussion forum.

Meetings of the Network included inputs and discussion sessions with politicians: councillors, TDs and MEPs; which provided the opportunity to build alliances, promote the value of community education and to use their experience in shaping an effective lobbying strategy for the Network.

In a joint application with Dublin Community Television funding from the Sound and Vision scheme of Broadcasting Authority of Ireland was secured in order to develop television programmes that highlight, promote the value, methodology and ethos of community education. The preliminary research was put into action and initial filming undertaken.

2.3 Year 3: Developing an effective Network

In the third year of the Network it is focusing on three key points:

1. Developing and expanding the Network to balance long term work with responsive action
2. Creating partnerships with civil servants and government departments
3. Launch of television programmes on community education and developing as a tool for the sector

The work of the third year came at a vital time for the sector as it faces challenges due to the current economic situation, through funding cuts and restructuring. It is experiencing a higher demand for courses with less resources. Therefore the focus of the work was to ensure that the network was strong and effective by striking a balance of lobbying work and network development. If lobbying is always undertaken in a fire-fighting capacity it is to the detriment of the long term goal of the Network, likewise if scant attention is paid to creating a strong Network it will reduce the efficacy to collectively affect change. In response to these plans a national meeting was devoted to creating a new shape for the Network which identified the specific areas for development and proposed what the attributes of the Network should be. Also a new manifesto was created in response to the changing conditions of the sector, and a subgroup was proposed to create a position paper on the funding mechanisms for community education.

National meetings of the Network were evaluated and the following recommendations were implemented:



increased inter-agency dialogue; creating a more welcoming space; introducing half-day sessions; ensuring speakers are present in the morning; and an increase in the number discussion groups and questions and answers sessions.

'Beyond the Classroom', a set of three television programmes that provides an insight community education, was launched during the AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival in February. The programmes cover community education from three themes: The Practitioners, which focus on the theory of community education; The Communities which cover 4 case studies of community education in action; and The Learners which provides the learners' experience and view of community education. Initially transmitted on Dublin Community Television, they will be sequentially released online each week and will form a set of DVDs that will act as a learning tool, as a means to promote community education to potential learners, for lobbying and for raising the profile to the general public.

Conclusion

The AONTAS Community Education Network has created a strong united voice for independent community education organisations. By incorporating participative methodologies into the action-focused Network meetings ownership of the work and direction of the Network has been facilitated. Implementation of the strategic work plan has ensured tangible outcomes such as: a Network definition of community education, lobbying skills and tools, television programmes which will ensure the three themes of resource, recognition and raise the profile of community education. It seeks to increase its membership nationwide, strengthen its voice and successfully secure a distinct funding stream for community education.

Further information:

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About the AONTAS Community Education Network <http://www.aontas.com/commed/networkcen.html>

'Beyond the Classroom' television programmes <http://www.dctv.ie/main/?p=1545>