

Using the Women's Community Education Approach to Deliver Community Employment

Training: a case study from Longford Women's Link

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Abstract

The recent economic downturn and surge in unemployment has focused attention on education and training as a strategic response to Ireland's socio-economic crisis. However, that attention has been concentrated on training through statutory institutions, particularly FÁS and the VECs. Longford Women's Link, a Women's Community Education centre in Co Longford, presents a case study of delivery of the FÁS-funded Community Employment Scheme using the Women's Community Education approach. Evidence is presented that demonstrates effectiveness in personal, career and community capacity-building in addition to achieving labour-market activation with long-term unemployed and other disadvantaged groups of women. These outcomes argue that the Women's Community Education approach has a significant role to play in any education and training strategy.

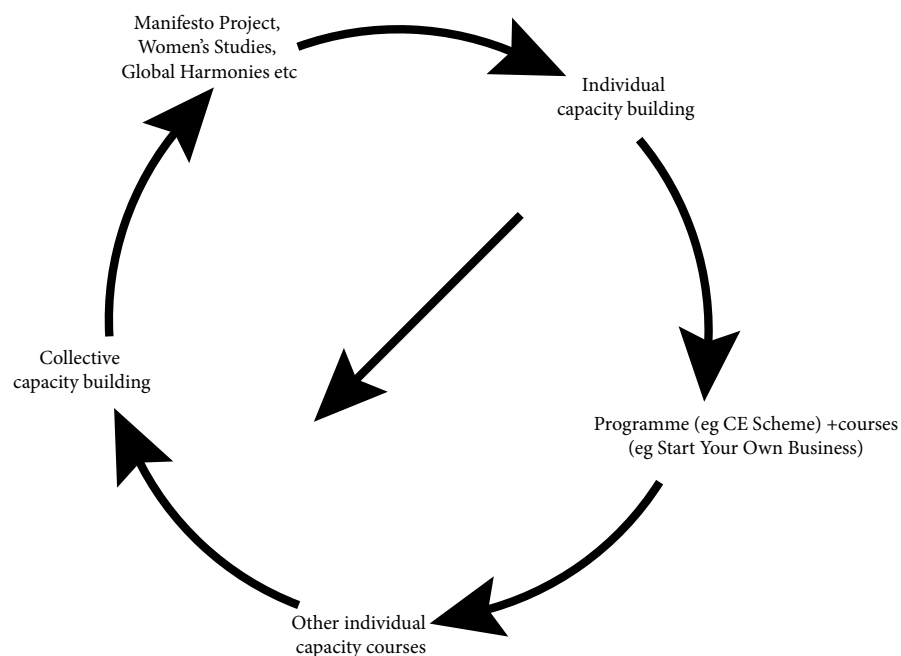
Context: Women and Disadvantage

As noted in the National Women's Strategy 2007, socio-economic opportunity and economic independence are key factors in ensuring women's full participation at all levels of society. For women who experience disadvantage through being a full or part-time carer, a lone parent, living in a rural area, or experiencing domestic violence, for example, lack of opportunities to engage in economic activity – whether through employment or self-employment – means that they frequently become trapped in a cycle of welfare dependency and isolation. This in turn impacts negatively on educational, economic and social outcomes for their children, families and communities. The compound positive effect of specifically supporting women has thus been described by UNICEF's State of the World's Children report (2007) as the 'double dividend'.

Longford Women's Link (LWL), a women's resource centre based in Co Longford, has delivered a number of effective labour-market programmes to women within the County over the last decade. LWL's three core programmes have focused on the areas of employment, particularly through the Community Employment ('CE') Scheme, the 'Gateway' (return to employment) programme¹², and also self-employment initiatives.

Longford Women's Link offers its CE scheme particularly through its 'Catkin's Nursery' childcare service, but also in administration through its Reception section. In addition to being a CE employer, LWL is also an ECDL and FETAC Quality-Assured and registered education centre, and thus able to offer 'in house' certified training to CE participants. The Women's Link does this using the Women's Community Education approach, a participant-led approach that focuses on women learning from, as well as with, other women.

Figure 1. The process of individual and collective capacity-building at Longford Women's Link



¹² The FÁS-funded 'Gateway' programme was discontinued nationally in early 2009.

The Community Employment Scheme

The Community Employment Scheme is designed to help long-term unemployed and other disadvantaged groups get back into work by offering part-time and temporary placements in jobs based within local communities, namely voluntary organisations and public bodies involved in not-for-profit activities. The criteria for participating in the Scheme are based on age (minimum 25 years old) and length of time in receipt of various social welfare payments. Placement is for at least one year and up to three to five years depending on age and circumstance, with specific criteria for Travellers, ex-offenders, refugees, people with disabilities and those referred by a Drugs Task Force. The Scheme is financed and delivered through FÁS, Ireland's training and employment authority. FÁS gives financial support in the form of allowances and funding to assist with the CE Scheme, for example participant wages, Supervisor salary, materials grants and specific skills training grants.

CE Supervisors provide individual support to participants through an 'Individual Learner Plan' process, which focuses on meeting the learning needs of participants. The Individual Learner Plan provides for the planning, organising and recording of the work experience, training and development that each participant receives while working on CE, assisting them to enhance both technical and personal skills. The training provided through Community Employment is delivered within a Quality Assurance framework.

Women's Community Education

Women live in a political, social and cultural environment that excludes many from equal access to education and employment, the exercise of real choice in their lives and from taking up leadership roles in society. Women's Community Education (WCE) provides on-going social analysis of gender equality and social inclusion issues. It is a potent collective education process that supports the empowerment of women and seeks to address the socio-political aspects of women's experience through collective activism. Women-centred and participative, WCE ensures that women experience affirmation, recognition, dignity and leadership through their learning experience (*A Guide to Best Practice in Women's Community Education*, AONTAS 2009)¹³. As Connolly has observed (2003),

¹³ For further reading on Women's Community Education, see also 'Women's Community Education in Ireland' (Connolly, 2001), and 'Women's Community Education Quality Assurance Framework 2003-2005 Project Report' (McCloy, 2005). Both reports are available as downloads from <http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/publications.html#communityeducation>

‘Women as a group have moulded community education, but, in doing so, they have advocated a model which has been adapted by others, to address particular social issues and disadvantage... Community education is a flexible, emancipating process, which enables people to become more agentic in their own lives, and to bring about change in their worlds.’

The White Paper, *Learning for Life* (2000), significantly influenced by the development and community impacts of Women’s Community Education, affirmed that all adult education should ensure ‘equality of access, participation and outcome.’

Figure 2. Traditional education characteristics vs. Women's Community Education characteristics

Traditional Education	Women’s Community Education
Apolitical	Aims to achieve women’s equality
Education developed for learners	Developed with learners
No gender analysis	Feminist/gender analysis
Can be run by men or women	Owned and directed by women
Provider-focused /hierarchical	Community-centred/collective empowerment
Does not usually provide childcare	Provision of childcare a priority

Delivery of the CE Scheme at LWL

Community Employment positions are advertised by LWL on the FÁS website. Applicants are required to contact their FÁS office to be assessed for eligibility; the applicant is then requested to send a CV to the CE Supervisor at LWL who arranges an interview. Finally, the CE Supervisor seeks Garda clearance¹⁴.

Acceptance for employment at LWL is followed by an induction process where the CE participants meet with the CE Supervisor on a one-to-one basis. Information on the centre and its services is provided, the job description is clarified and information on rights as an employee of LWL are provided.

¹⁴ As the Catkins childcare service is part of the LWL facility, all LWL staff require Garda vetting

This induction process ensures the participant has time to think about what she has already done in the line of work and education. With the support of the Supervisor, follow-up meetings help identify existing skills and areas that require refresher or additional training. These are built into an Individual Learning Plan. At the end of each meeting, the participant sets goals for herself and arranges a date for the next meeting.

The meetings thus create a framework for the participant to organise her time. It also provides an opportunity to look at different training options over her time on the Scheme. The fact that the participant constructs and reviews her Individual Learning Plan and its progress with the support of the CE Supervisor, imparts a real a sense of ownership.

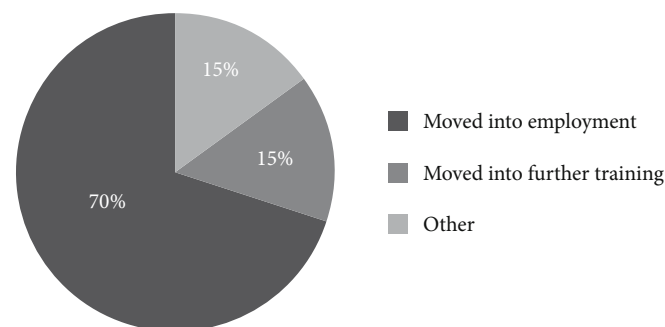
Each participant meets with the CE Supervisor at least once every two months and additional meetings can be requested if required. As members of either the LWL Childcare or Reception teams, regular team meetings take place within the organisation. Moreover, the CE participants themselves elect two representatives to these meetings. These representatives bring forward CE issues to the full Catkins Nursery meetings and feed back to their colleagues.

Impact of CE Scheme and Training at Longford Women’s Link

Thirty four women have participated in LWL’s CE programme over the last three years.

- Of these 34, fourteen currently remain employed at LWL, that is 41 % of total CE participants
- Of the 20 women who have left LWL having completed their CE placement, fourteen have secured some further form of employment, that is 70% of leavers
- Having developed an awareness of their specific goals through participation in the CE Scheme, together with the confidence to pursue further training/education opportunities with LWL, a further three are currently under-taking further education having finished the Scheme, that is a further 15% of leavers

Figure 3. Progression impact of LWL CE scheme



While this progression-potential is welcome, most of this further employment has nevertheless been restricted to low-income jobs. This has usually occurred as a result of:

- Caring commitments /lack of access to affordable childcare
- Work in low-valued, low-paid employment sectors, particularly childcare
- A lack of appropriate certification
- The gender pay-gap

In addition to addressing the issue of certification, LWL intends to undertake long-term evaluation of its sustained approach to supporting women, in order to determine progression to economic independence through personal capacity building and provision of certified training.

Self-Evaluation

In Longford Women’s Link, all aspects of work are subjected to three fundamental questions:

- What were the achievements?
- What were the challenges?
- What was the learning?

The evaluation process of the CE Scheme involved the CE participants themselves, relevant LWL staff and management, and the External Authenticator for FETAC who evaluated LWL’s learning and assessment processes in addition to participant portfolio evidence.

Creation of evaluation ‘space’ with CE participants

Organisational ‘space’ was created in September 2009 for facilitated evaluation-workshops with the CE participants. The participation of women themselves, as always, is central to design, delivery and evaluation of education and training programmes at the Women’s Link. 13 Participants took part in the workshops. At the time of evaluation, participants had been on the CE Scheme from periods ranging from 2 weeks, 2 months, 5 months, 1 year, 2 years, and 3 years, providing an excellent cross-section of the timeframe of the Scheme.

Overall, the socio-economic profile of women engaging in the CE Scheme at LWL is predominantly that of women experiencing multiple disadvantage. Of the women in the Scheme during 2009:

Figure 4. Multiple-disadvantage amongst CE Scheme participants at LWL

Status	%
Unemployed	100
Rural (ie. experiencing isolation as well as economic hardship)	58
Early school leaver	52
Lone parent	46
Elder-carer	17
Disability	17
Ethnic-minority	11
Traveller	5

Evaluation feedback

In relation to the issues of achievements, challenges and learning, the CE participants were asked to address the following specific questions:

There was a mixed level of knowledge about the CE Scheme within the group when they first heard about it/were introduced to it. The widespread perception was that Community Employment was something you did ‘if you couldn’t

get a proper job'. However, the part-time nature of the Scheme and particularly the family-friendly hours offered at LWL, were seen as critical incentives as this facilitated caring responsibilities. This was seen as equally important as the provision of income.

The perception regarding training was also mixed. Some participants were aware that training would be largely certification-based and this was seen as advantageous in gaining future employment. Nevertheless, there was a great deal of worry over abilities to successfully engage in certification training as half the Participants were early school-leavers. An initial lack of confidence as well as fear of being compelled to participate in training were major issues.

The main hope for participants was overwhelmingly 'to get a job'. The group was evenly split between those who specifically wished to work in childcare and those who were prepared to work in childcare in the hope of getting a subsequent job in a different sector. In addition, a number of the participants had multiple objectives, including to 'get out of the house', 'mix with other people', and 'be doing something'.

The longer the participants had been on the Scheme, the more positive their experience. Participants identified a number of very specific reasons for this transformation.

- It was felt that the length of the CE Scheme provided 'space' to develop confidence and learn or re-learn skills. This contrasted specifically with the experience of some 20% of trainees who participated in the same or similar courses previously at an adult education centre, where they reported feeling under enormous pressure to complete assignments within the established educational schedule.
- The attitude and approach of the CE Supervisor, LWL trainer, and contracted external trainers, were all seen as critically supportive – 'I wouldn't have stuck with it unless it has been for them', 'I didn't feel intimidated – the atmosphere made all the difference', 'It's completely different here'.
- The 'collective' philosophy at LWL. A number of the participants formed themselves into a peer-support study group and this was identified as an essential factor in the successful completion of a full FETAC Award in childcare – 'we helped each other, and encouraged each other', 'We got the work done and had a laugh.'

- The 'Individual Learning Plan' focus of the CE Scheme, which meant that training - at, or through, LWL - offered options that met the individual needs, aspirations and learning pace of the participants. The extended time factor of the Scheme also meant that participants could think about what they wanted to do without feeling under pressure to make an early decision.

Growing confidence was repeatedly expressed and affirmed as one of the most important outcomes for participants.

Participants made two specific suggestions in relation to improving the Scheme at LWL, namely that:

- The organisation continue to support the 'homework club', the peer-support study group that the participants had formed and organised themselves
- Sample FETAC portfolios be provided so that learners can picture in advance the sort of evidence they will have to create for each FETAC Level of work

The FETAC External Authenticator had already noted the 'enthusiasm' and 'involvement' of the learners; the quality of the theoretical and practical teaching and evidence preparation; and the supportive learning environment of the provider (ie. LWL). The FETAC Extern encouraged LWL to provide further education opportunities as she felt the standard of work exhibited in the Level 5 portfolios clearly demonstrated the potential of the Community Employment learners to progress to FETAC Level 6. As some of the participants had already expressed interest in Level 6 modules, and having explored the implications of offering Level 6 training for the first time, LWL began to deliver Level 6 Childcare in late 2009.

It was explicitly stated that Community Employment as a Scheme was undervalued and under-promoted nationally – 'It could be sold better', 'More women should be encouraged to do CE.' This latter comment specifically referred to the flexibility of hours that supported the caring responsibilities of the participants.

Summary

Evaluation and critical reflection are fundamental elements of the Women's Community Education approach. The evaluation of the CE Scheme at LWL confirms its importance. Feedback clearly emphasises the importance of having time and space to grow as individuals; to develop confidence, knowledge and awareness; and to make importance life and career decisions. LWL's Women's Community Education approach and ethos underpin a number of significant elements as identified by CE participants, including:

- The safe and supportive 'atmosphere' for learning and growing.
- The emphasis on 'the collective' that facilitated peer-support and learning
- Achieving a full FETAC Level 5 Award in Childcare
- The identification by the FETAC External Authenticator of progression potential if the level of organisational support was maintained. For some participants, this has already led to progression into FETAC Level 6 learning
- The change in expectations over their time at LWL. An essential element of Women's Community Education is critical analysis of gender inequality, empowerment of women, and activism to address socio-political inequality

The importance of securing relevant labour-market certification cannot be over-stated and the CE Scheme provides funding for this specific element. The findings suggest that greater funding should be allocated to certification training in order to build on its importance and to provide progression paths at the higher education levels now being requested by employers.

Being more confident was seen to tie directly into securing future employment. Critically, increased confidence combined with increased knowledge was also seen to correlate with securing above minimum-wage employment. That 70% of the participants who have completed their CE placement at LWL progress to employment is a remarkable outcome. Nevertheless, it remains partial progress in that all of this employment continues to be minimum wage or low wage, particularly in the childcare sector. LWL intends to undertake long-term evaluation of its sustained approach to supporting women, in order to determine progression to economic independence.

Conclusion

The White Paper, Learning for Life, acknowledges the substantial impact that local women's groups using the 'responsive' principles and practices that became known as Women's Community Education, had on their communities during the recession of the 1980s. Longford Women's Link, building on this tradition and commitment to gender equality, has found that the integration of the Community Employment Scheme within these principles and practices, represents outstanding value for women: the supporting evidence includes educational engagement and attainments, growth in participant expectations, labour-market certification and employment outcomes. Moreover, this value extends beyond the usual labour-market activation objective, and demonstrates that Women's Community Education remains a catalyst for personal, career and community capacity-building.

References:

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