



A week with the Urban Learning Academy

An investigation into the benefits of and difficulties
with free adult learning experiences.

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Introduction

I have spent the past week learning about the ULA, observing sessions, and speaking to learners and tutors about their experiences. I have focused on the benefits of free adult learning courses, the difficulties faced by learners, and the wider difficulties associated with free learning opportunities. I have collected themes that stood out from my research, and comments I deem important or interesting.

There are some key quotes I've lifted from my conversations, but the full conversations/email exchanges can be found in the 'interviews and experiences' section of the report. I have also included my observations from attending sessions / events, because these help to form an image of them, at least through my eyes. Finally, a section of 'recommendations,' with a few suggestions.

Note: any learners who are pictured and/or named have given their verbal consent to be included.

Themes from Research

The benefits of free learning opportunities:

Learning a new skill:

- The majority of learners and tutors I spoke to mentioned this as a key benefit of the ULA sessions. Whether this be to improve a transferrable skill (as with writing skills from poetry, or cookery skills from baking), or to learn a new skill for the fun of it and enjoying experimenting.
- Jane (ECI) discussed how the act of learning a new practical skill in a group session makes conversation easier, meaning learners are more easily able to connect with others.
- Sam (Writing for Children) explained that learning the skill of writing and sharing with the group is what bonds the group - the learners are sharing their personal creation with each another and interacting with it.
- Experimentation provides a new outlook on learning. Al (Sidwell Bakehouse) talked about the contrast between some learners she sees on paid courses (who take a strict, scientific approach) and learners on ULA courses who are more curious.

Meeting new people:

- This was also a common point of feedback.
- ULA courses bring together people from various backgrounds with different experiences. Both Sam (Writing for Children) and Pete (Co Create) mentioned that this not only benefits the learners, but also themselves, as it widens their own perspective.
- Pete discussed how meeting new people and the creation of community is important to keep people attending the sessions. His learners are looking for stability, which means it's important for Pete to reflect this is in the sessions and the community that is created.
- Clare (ULA learner) mentioned that ULA courses allow her to meet people with similar interests as her.

Mental Wellbeing:

- Learners and tutors discussed several ways ULA courses improve mental health.
- For Pete (Co Create), he observes that the poetry sessions allow learners to process experiences and acts as a 'productive outpouring of pain.'
- For Clare (ULA Learner), the courses act as something in her schedule to encourage her to leave the house, try something new, and meet new people. She says it has given her a huge confidence boost.

The creation of an inclusive, safe space:

- For all the tutors I spoke to, this was vital for their sessions.
- Many achieve this by setting ground rules about behaviour and language that is appropriate for sessions, and ensuring that sessions are fluid and adaptable to learners' needs as opposed to having a rigid structure.
- The tutors stressed it is important that learners understand they can leave the space if they need to, and don't have to do anything they don't want to.
- Both Al (Sidwell Bakehouse) and Sam (Writing for Children) emphasised that it's important for learning to be framed as a constructive, experimental experience without 'right and wrong' or criticism, especially because learning can be a frustrating and / or disappointing experience.
- Sam (Writing for Children) and Pete (Co Create) explained that group members show respect for one another out of reciprocity. (They enjoy when others listen to them, so offer the same respect to others.)

Developing confidence:

- Through being part of a group and speaking to new people, especially for those coming out of isolation.
- Sam (Writing for Children), Pete (Co Create), and Maddy Hearn (Exeter College) all talked about the importance of celebrating work that is shared, and how validating this can be.
- Pete (Co Create) said he has observed improved confidence in learning and writing when positive feedback and encouragement is given to learners, regardless of the 'level' they are at.

The 'Cons' or difficulties with free learning opportunities:

Attendance:

- The problems with attendance varied between courses, with some struggling more than others.
- Both Sam (Writing for Children) and Pete (Co Create) explained how their numbers had been low initially and that they had struggled with no-shows. However, over the course of a few months they both saw numbers pick up and remain steady. They talked about how it takes time for sessions to become established and for word of mouth to take hold.
- Most tutors were keen not to introduce a refundable deposit for courses, to retain the fundamental aspect of a complete free course to limit barriers to learning as much as possible.
- Al (Sidwell Bakehouse) discussed the potential for having certificates and badges for courses, perhaps ULA-wide to encourage attendance.
- Each tutor was asked about attendance (see 'Interviews and Experiences').

The Spaces:

- Jane (ECI) explained that it takes time to find and secure free spaces and materials. There is an opportunity cost here. Perhaps it would be easier and less costly time-wise to find locations if courses were paid-for, however that would sacrifice the reach and accessibility of the courses.
- Free spaces are not always the most accessible. For example, the meeting room above St Thomas library, where the Writing for Children course was held, is only accessible by stairs, limiting those who can take the course.

Staffing:

- It is not always possible to have more staff than the tutor alone.
- Sam (Writing for Children) shared an instance where an additional staff member would have been ideal, and would have meant a better experience for learners. (See page 19)

Barriers to Learning

Learning difficulties:

- Can be difficult to navigate in a group of potentially complete strangers, particularly if there is limited possibility for 1-1 time with the tutor.
- Al (Sidwell Bakehouse) explained that she had had learners with learning difficulties previously. To accommodate, she provides a print out and audio of the structure of the session. She also has two staff present to maximise the 1-1 time possible.

Accessibility, physical disability:

- The location of the session can prevent learners from attending (as with St Thomas library).
- Sam (Writing for Children) explained how she accommodated for a blind learner in the past, providing braille print-outs, and coordinating with a translator for another student.

Relationships with other learners:

- Pete (Co Create) explained how some learners may have had previous relationships with others, potentially unresolved. This can prevent an individual attending a session. Pete tries to create a space where exterior issues are left at the door, and he has never had an argument in one of his poetry sessions.

Key Quotes

I have compiled extracts from conversations that I found interesting, or thought reflected the experience of the ULA well. Any extracts that are word-for-word from the interviewee are in quotation marks, otherwise they are paraphrased.

The sessions are about playing and trying things out rather than getting it 'right or wrong'. If something does go wrong, there is someone there who can fix it, but having fun is the most important thing. - Al McLintock, Sidwell Bakehouse

The bakehouse is a "magical space" and it's nice to give the opportunity to explore it. - Al McLintock, Sidwell Bakehouse

It's extremely brave to share poetry because it's *theirs*. It's important to celebrate learners' work *because it's theirs*, not just because it's 'good'. - Pete Davies, Co Create

Poetry acts as a "productive outpouring of pain." - Pete Davies, Co Create

It's "magical" when the learners share their work with one another. - Sam, Writing for Children

"I would not like to even think about these courses stopping as I realise now just how much I enjoy them and just how much that they help me. They get me out even when I don't really think I want to." - Clare, ULA learner

"These courses massively help my mental health, my belief in myself and my abilities, and my overall happiness." - Clare, ULA learner

Interviews and Experiences

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Al McLintock – The Sidwell Street Bakehouse

Al McLintock organises (and has previously run) ULA sessions at the Sidwell Street Bakehouse, which is part of the Sidwell Street Community Centre.

Q: Were you involved in the process of partnering with CoLab / becoming part of the ULA? If so, how did this unfold?

Al met Mark Duckworth through Co Create. They met in the bakery space and conversation started. Al realised they could provide classes – part of the purpose of the bakery is teaching and sharing knowledge about baking, so they were keen to provide community classes. Al condensed traditionally long courses to make them accessible for this format of session.

Q: How do you develop sessions that are run?

Time is limited, and in a bakery that can prove difficult. Therefore, it was important to look at what can be done within the given time frame and ensure it's manageable. Learning can be a frustrating and sometimes disappointing experience, so Al likes to run something straightforward and something that can be done again at home, meaning learners gain an applicable skill.

Q: How does funding work for these free courses?

The ULA pay the Bakehouse to deliver the courses, and the Bakehouse offer as much as of a reduced price as possible to the ULA. In this way, it benefits both organisations: the running of the courses fits the charitable aims of the Bakehouse to provide community cookery spaces, but they don't have to do all the admin.

Q: What makes a successful course / session in your eyes?

Al explained that it's important to have clear boundaries at the start of each session about what people can expect about working together and creating a safe space. It's important to make the experience fun, and to enjoy being in the cookery space. It's about playing and trying things out rather than getting it 'right' or 'wrong'. If something does go wrong, there is someone there who can fix it, but having fun is the most important thing.

It's great to get people talking to one another, and connecting to someone they wouldn't usually speak to. Generally people can be quite shy, so it's beneficial when a learner in the session is quite chatty. Most conversation revolves around the task at hand, and Al encourages learners to share what they hope to get out of the session. How easy this is depends on the learners in the session.

Q: What benefits / skills do you believe people gain from attending the Bakehouse sessions?

Trying something new, trying new foods, and seeing a new space. Gaining confidence from going to a class, particularly if they're on their own, for the first time. That can be a positive experience, especially if the learner is struggling with feelings of isolation. Stepping into community after Covid. Safe space.

Food is important to people, and it's nice to give the opportunity to get into the space which you wouldn't necessarily think to explore. Al referred to it as a "magical space." Buying bread is expensive there, but there is a reason for that and a nutritional value that comes with it. Not everyone can afford that, and so it's nice to make it accessible for all learners to experience.

There have been cases where learners have enjoyed a free session so much that they have wanted to do more / longer courses. Al gave an example of one learner who came to a free session, and wanted to do more, so the team managed to offer them a free space on a two day bread class.

Al commented on how therapeutic community cooking is, and how it creates a safe space for people to come together and share experiences.

Q: How would you describe the dynamics of the learning space? What approach do people take to learning?

On the longer, paid-for courses, there can be people with previous experience who want to share their knowledge or might not listen. They are likely to be more interested in the science as opposed to experimenting. In contrast, learners on the ULA courses tend to be more curious, and more focused on the product rather than the technicalities of the process.

Q: Do you notice learners experiencing any barriers to learning? If so, are there ways you are able to alleviate these?

Al has had learners with learning difficulties in her sessions. To accommodate, Al tries to have a print-out sheet describing the structure of the session, as well as having audios. Al makes sure there is at least one member of staff and Mark, so that there are at least 2 people there to provide support. The group numbers are kept to 8 or less people so that there can be 1-1 time for the learners as much as possible where they would like it. Al tries not to be overly ambitious in the tasks that are planned and encourages learners to support one another.

Al also mentioned that she has learned from experience that it's important to set clear boundaries from the beginning of the session: to agree with learners to treat others respectfully and to be considerate of language and questions asked.

Q: What is attendance like at your sessions? How do you think issues of attendance might be addressed?

One of the biggest challenges of ULA sessions is that all the sessions get fully booked but there is a massive dropout rate. AL discussed the idea of offering certificates for courses attended, and perhaps a system of attendance badges across the ULA. This would mean learners have an example of commitment to provide for future employers.

Al also discussed the possibility of having a waitlist of those that could be contacted to fill spaces on the day. Al mentioned that she was not keen on the idea of a deposit for courses, as this might create an extra barrier.

Q: Has the process of developing and running these sessions taught you anything yourself?

Al said that she really enjoys seeing people try new things. She said that it's taught her what you can do in a short time, and how important it is to bring people together in a relaxed space and have fun. That there is power in not having rigid ways of delivering teaching, and not having to stick to a plan is fine because people have a good time. She said she's learned to be more adaptable and responsive of people's needs.

Pete Davies – Co Create Poetry and Spoken Word

Pete Davies runs the Co Create Poetry group who meet on Tuesday mornings. The sessions began as a 4-week taster course and have now been running for 14 months with 10-15 attendees every week.

Q: What makes a successful course / session in your eyes?

When people feel safe. Pete said people commonly commend the sessions for the safe space that is created. To do this, Pete said he makes sure not to run the sessions with an 'iron fist,' and makes room for conversation to meander. He isn't concerned with the productivity of the session, and understands that when you make room for people to be creative they will be. This is defeated if you demand that people keep up with a session. In addition, Pete's sessions are client-led, with a loose format, but always involve writing and sharing. Pete tries to host a 'culture of honour', placing focus on dignity, respect, listening, and good manners. No toleration for people talking over one another.

Pete discussed how important it is for the group to have respect for a member particularly when they are sharing their work. He commented that it's extremely brave to share poetry because it's theirs. It's important to celebrate learner's work because it's theirs, not just because it's 'good.' People's work improves when you celebrate them for who they are and what they brought to the table. 'None of us are claiming to be literary geniuses.' That's not what it's about. It's about 'sharing our hearts.'

Pete talked about the importance of stability in the presence of the poetry sessions – it's important to present it as a permanent fixture. He said this is important for the group of people who attend the sessions. Pete says this is because it takes time for a community to form, especially amongst adults. Once this is established, it keeps learners coming back, and when they attend regularly, they will benefit more.

Pete also mentioned that nice coffee and pastries make a big difference!

Q: What benefits / skills do you believe people gain from attending your courses?

A sense of community between learners and forming friendships, which is particularly important for those coming out of isolation. Growing confidence and improving writing skills, especially for those ‘who haven’t had a brilliant education.’ Provides an opportunity to process experience, and ‘put the pain somewhere.’ Poetry can act as a ‘productive outpouring of pain.’

Q: How would you describe the dynamics of the learning space? How easily do learners work together?

The learners sit around the same table and the sessions are very much client-led and conversational. This is balanced with quiet-time protected for writing. Pete said this can be hard to manage at times, in terms of encouraging learners to respect quiet writing time, but that this is an important aspect of the sessions. Pete makes it clear that the learners don’t have to do anything they don’t want to, and so can leave the room to talk if they would prefer. Pete says that making it clear that people can come and go as they like creates a better learning environment and learners are more likely to remain engaged.

Pete also explained that the group-learning dynamic relies on feelings of reciprocity, in the sense that when an individual is sharing their work, they are keen for others to listen, so will respect others’ time to share.

Pete shared that there are currently over 30 people in the WhatsApp group created for learners who have attended the sessions.

Q: Have you recognised any barriers to learning as a course provider? If so, how do you think these can be alleviated?

Barriers to learning include attention span, addiction, unsettled relationships. In the case of unsettled relationships, Pete said there have been instances of certain learners saying they ‘won’t be attending the session if X is there.’ In response to this, Pete tries to create an atmosphere where people leave their difficulties at the door. He’s never had any arguments in the space.

Q: Is discussion between learners common? If so, does it usually remain centred on the task they are doing?

Discussion is oriented by how people feel, which makes it varied and involve unprocessed thoughts a lot of the time. Some people compare it to group therapy in this way.

Q: What is attendance like at your sessions? Both in terms of getting people to sign up, but also cancellations / no shows. If attendance is bad, what do you think could help improve it?

The sessions are open – there is no booking system. And that’s the key to have people turn up; it’s a permanent fixture. Even if it is the middle of a series of a certain topic of sessions, Pere makes sure that each session can be attended in isolation, so that all learners can be involved, and that there is room for new learners.

Pete mentioned that he has seen lots of new learners recently. A number have been referred by their social workers, and many hear about it through word of mouth.

Q: Has the process of developing and running these sessions taught you anything yourself?

Pete says that he learns something every week because learners are often using poetry to tell stories and process experiences. This could be both positive and tough things. Pete said listening to learners’ work provides a vivid picture of life and takes you out of your own box, challenging prejudices and privilege.

Pete also mentioned that he is keen to organise a celebration event for the learners. Perhaps inviting family and friends to listen to performances to celebrate achievements.

Sam – Exeter College, 'Writing for Children'

I sat in on the final session of a 4-week creative writing for children course held at St Thomas library. Below is a description of the experience followed by notes from an interview with Sam after the session.

There were 7 learners at the final session, and from the laughter amongst the learners as they arrived, it was clear the group had gotten to know one another over the past month.

Maddy Hearn greeted the learners alongside Sam, and asked if they would like for the course to be run again. All learners said yes.

Sam started the session with a 5-minute prompted writing task. The group were calm and focused, as pictured [right].

Following this, the learners shared either their writing from this task, or the 'homework' from the week previous. The learners displayed respect for each other as they read and alongside Sam, gave feedback and suggestions for the work. This was given in a non-critical manner. Often the group would brainstorm ideas for a learner's piece.

I spoke to two learners about their confidence in sharing their work with the group. One learner told me that in school, they were never comfortable enough to read their work, but had felt happy to do so over the past 4 weeks. Another learners told me they had been taking writing courses for several years. They used to struggle with sharing aloud, particularly because writing is so personal - something they've created themselves.



Above: The learners working on the 5-minute warm-up task



Above: Sam and a learner listening to another learner share their work

Sam – Exeter College, Writing for Children



Above: The learners working on their piece

During the break, Sam handed out the evaluation forms. This sparked a conversation about the accessibility of the space. The room is located above the library. While it is a large space, with a table that the learners can fit round in a circle, the only way to access the room is stairs. One learner commented that they have a friend who would have enjoyed the sessions, but would not have been able to access the room without a lift. Sam encouraged the learner to write this in their form.

Sam kindly agreed to sit with me after the session and answer some questions:

Q: What makes a successful course / session in your eyes?

Enjoyment is the whole point of the course. Several times now I've had people tell me how much they enjoy the sharing process and each other's work. Sharing your own work to a group who actively listen serves as a source of validation – it's important that other learners are not critical, but listen and share feedback respectfully. This creates an inclusive and safe space.

Q: How do you go about developing sessions to run?

Sam explained that she takes inspiration for the structure of sessions from the books that she likes, and breaks it down into a 4-week course. The structure is not fixed and adjustments are made along the way to accommodate for the learners.

Q: How would you describe the dynamics of the learning space? How easily do learners work together?

A: Sam said that she makes sure the sessions are a safe space. The sessions are about the process of writing as therapeutic, and it's important learners feel included in the group. Sam said she likes to incorporate ice-breakers to help the learners mesh as a group.

Sam sets ‘homework’ for learners to do in between sessions if they wish. 99/100 times they do. She explained how impressed she is that they make time for this during their week, and that it’s ‘magical’ when they share it with one another.

Because the 2 hours pass by so quickly, there isn’t lots of time for chatter amongst learners. So Sam explained the key way the learners get to know one another is through sharing their work.

People want a safe space to do their writing and share it. Luckily the learners are aware that everyone feels the same and likely have the same reservations as them.

Q: Have you identified barriers to learning in the past? If so, how have you made sure individuals can get the most out of the experience?

Sam shared that she’s taught learners with physical difficulties in the past. Accommodations made have included printing extracts in brail, making space for a support worker who was able to translate for an individual and write for them. Sam said that learners are extremely tolerant of others’ needs, and this makes it easier to accommodate as many people as possible.

Sam said that she always has a main aim for the sessions, but that she leaves room for adaptation, so long as that doesn’t become disruptive.

Q: What is attendance like at your sessions? Both in terms of getting people to sign up, but also cancellations / no shows.

Attendance hasn’t been an issue for this course. Everyone has attended apart from a few exceptions (and they communicated that they were unable to make it and were apologetic). Attendance has improved for Sam. The 2-week courses in January had poor attendance (2/3 out of 7 for each). Since then it has been consistent, and several people return for multiple courses.

Q: Has the process of developing and running these sessions taught you anything yourself?

Sam discussed how the lessons for her have been subconscious. She has become more aware of the wider community and challenged prejudices about certain demographics. She said that, ‘You just don’t know what people are carrying.’

Sam shared an experience (that has been flagged with Maddy Hearn) where a class was being held in a library space and she had to leave the space to make sure a learner who had left the room was okay. Sam explained that she has learned people don’t always come to the sessions with a positive frame of mind, and that there is a potential for improvement in way of training for similar situations.

Q: What are the pros and cons of using the library space?

Pros: It means the session is not in a traditional classroom space, which some people are put-off by. It helps with creating a space which people understand they can leave if they need to. Additionally, coming into a college space heaving with young adults can be overwhelming. IN this sense the library spaces are more accessible.

It benefits both the library and Exeter College because it encourages learners to use the library space and sign up to the library. Sam said that a poster for the course was put up in the window of the library, which drew in members of the local community.

Free courses create bring together groups of people who wouldn’t perhaps have mixed otherwise and opens people up to different experiences.

Cons: Sam said that originally the con was that people don’t necessarily feel committed to attending the session because they are not losing any money. That’s not so much the case now, and Sam believes this is in part due to her placing stress on how valuable the funding for the courses is.

Jane Hawking, Exeter Community Initiatives (ECI)

Jane works on the Remade and Bike Bank projects with the ULA. The following is the transcript of an interview I conducted with her.

L: What is your role in terms of the ECI's partnership with the ULA? Do you run courses yourself?

J: Yes, I work on a couple of projects. There is one called Remade, which I do deliver myself, and there is one called Bike Bank which I do all the administration for.

L: What makes a session successful in your eyes?

J: People turning up. It's really good to get a good mix of people. Make them feel comfortable, that's just vital. It's important to make sure people are enjoying the session as opposed to critiquing what they're doing.

L: How do you go about making learners feel comfortable?

J: I explain that the session is really, really informal. From the advertising onwards, it's really informal. I do a brief introduction at the start, minimal paperwork – just evaluation at the end. Explain that they can talk if they want to, or not if they want to, and that they can work at their own pace.

L: Do you think this [the emphasis on the relaxed nature of the sessions] has an impact on the way learners interact with one another and yourself?

J: Yes, I mean it's great. It's a practical subject that I offer. [At Remade] we do hand-stitching and machine-stitching, so people are sat stitching and chatting as they go and sharing their memories [related to sewing e.g. family]. It generated conversation.

L: Do the conversations people have with one another revolve around the session/activity?

J: No! The learners are mainly women [in the Remade sessions], that's just the nature of it. They may start talking about their health and how they manage it. All sorts, but it's not usually as a whole group - usually they get comfortable with the person next to them.

L: What is involved in the running of Remade sessions?

J: It's basically an upcycle project. We had different pots of funding to do furniture recycling, which was amazing. At the moment, it's just my post that's funded. So I have to find free venues, and source all the materials and resources. But it's also about sharing the information that people can sit and make and not spend lots of money. It's something that's affordable and that they can take away with them and do.

L: How do you go about finding free venues?

J: I talk nicely to people! Existing craft shops that maybe want to boost their numbers – so it's quite good if they've actually got an event on, to get fresh faces in. We will advertise [their event] through the ULA and social media.

L: Have you recognised any barriers to learning for anyone that has come to your sessions?

J: Nothing that I can think of. If they've walked through the door, they've overcome that and I've made it very clear that the point of the session is to enjoy themselves.

L: Are most of the learners who attend each session new to your sessions?

J: A mix.

L: So how does that play out over the course of the session? Do people become comfortable with one another?

J: They seem to. Yesterday I went to an existing craft group. There were two new faces in there actually, and they were really made to feel at home by the other people who were regulars. There was one lady who was there who went along to a session 6 months ago as a newbie and had gone back as a regular.

L: During the sessions do you get any common or stand-out feedback?

J: That they've enjoyed it, that they'd like more. I always talk about whether, if it's a stand-alone session, if it's something they'd like to continue. There was one we did last week at Exminster, they're going to continue it.

L: Do you think anything could be done to approve attendance, in terms of encouraging people to attend the session after having signed up?

J: Attendance is pretty good to be honest. If it's an existing group, we've usually got the core there anyway. I think the kind of group that Mark works with have more challenges at home, so life is much more complicated. The attendees that I have, there is more stability there possibly.

L: If you had an unlimited pot of money, what are the first changes/developments you would make to your sessions?

J: I would love my own space. (Not for me!)

L: Tell me a bit about Bike Bank - how does it compare?

J: Bike Bank is a little different – we don't deliver that ourselves. That attracts people more on the recovery journey. Attendance isn't so good on that one.

L: How do people find out about that?

J: Advertised widely through CoLab, through the ULA. I do email partner organisations e.g. housing support, regularly as well.

L: Have you been able to receive feedback from learners of the Bike Bank?

J: The ones that manage to sustain and do the six sessions do really enjoy it.

L: Do you think the learning environment is different – the bikes compared to Remade?

J: It's based in a shop, but it's still a chill (but professional) environment. The learners there are amongst customers. Once they start, generally they will finish the six sessions.

End of transcript.

We also discussed the power that crafting/making has to facilitate conversation. Having a task to focus on really makes a difference when in a group, and conversations don't feel so formal or confronting.

Jola – 'You are a Midsummer Goddess'

I had the opportunity to take part in the yoga session that Jola ran as part of her 'You are a Midsummer Goddess' day course held in CoLab's meeting room.

I felt Jola managed to create a safe, judgement-free space, and led the session at the pace of the learners. There was both a respect for Jola from the learners and between learners, but also free conversation. It was nice to hear the learners speak about the benefits yoga brings to them.

Jola kindly answered some questions for me after the session:

Q: How often do you see new faces at your sessions?

She mentioned that the three women on Monday's session knew one another from previous courses of hers and that she sees many learners multiple times, but that she does see new faces often. Her last session was made up of 60% to 70% of learners she had not met before.

Q: How does the make-up of learners (new vs. repeated) alter the dynamics of the learning space?

Jola said that when there are new faces, the dynamic is understandably a little different, but that the nature of the sessions lends well to a collaborative, comfortable, and nurturing learning environment. As a result, learners tend to gain confidence throughout the session.

Q: How do you think attendance (in terms of cancellations / no-shows) might be improved?

Jola mentioned the idea of a small refundable deposit, and an event-reminder message.

Exeter College – Adult Learning Celebration

I attended Exeter College's celebration for those who were learners on an adult course. The courses included ones that EC runs in partnership with the ULA.

The event was a very happy and bright celebration of learners' achievements. Clearly lots of effort had gone into this event.

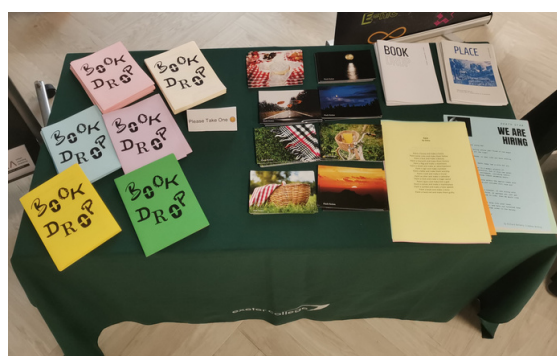
A representative from the University of Exeter talked about the power of mature students. They said that mature students bring a "wealth of live experience with them." They talked about students bringing different experiences into the classroom and how this creates a "rich platform for discussion."



Although they were referring to mature students studying at the university, this fact remains the same with all adult learning courses and is something that course providers must be mindful of, but also can utilise.

A great emphasis was placed on celebrating achievements. An award was given to a learner, and they were invited to read their word aloud. The community choir gave a brilliant performance, 10 weeks in the making in partnership with the ULA. It was a great space to applaud people for their hard work.

Lots of work was also displayed, including zines and flash fiction created in ULA sessions. I talked with Maddy Hearn about the benefit of creating a physical product that can be shared with others. She talked about the pride the learners on the flash fiction course felt in being able to produce postcards for their 'postcard fiction.'



Above: Table display of flash fiction work that could be taken away and enjoyed

Exeter College – Adult Learning Celebration



Above: The inside of one of the zines



Above: The zines were displayed hanging from the ceiling like an art installation



Above: A display of courses that had been run, including ULA courses

Clare - ULA Learner

I first spoke to Clare at the Exeter College Adult Learning Celebration. Clare is a very active participant in ULA courses, including being part of the choir singing at the event. Clare was overwhelming positive about her experience with the ULA, and was proud to show me the chopping board she had just finished that day! [See picture] She also showed me the purse she had tie-dyed and slow stitched on the first course she took. Clare displayed a proud ownership over what she had learned to make and explained that she loves trying new things and “making something I can use.”



Above: Clare holding her fish chopping board and slow-stitched purse

Clare explained how having a course in the diary benefits her by having something to attend, and that although the prospect of going out might be daunting for several reasons, once she's there it does her “the world of good.”

Clare kindly agreed to answer some questions via email:

Q: Can you remember the first course you went to? If so, how did you find out about it, and why did you choose to go?

"The 1st course I went on was natural tie dye held above the cafe at the top of the hill just up from the iron bridge (community learning?) this event I found on Eventbrite and it was 2 weeks, week 1 tie dye, week 2 slow stitch a purse with the material, I chose the course because it was fun, free, the venue was easy to get to and it was a usable item I could keep and show anyone that would listen and it was such a good skill to learn being natural I knew I could have some great and very easy fun at home with my son saving any marked/stained items from landfill.

I thoroughly enjoyed this course and wished it wasn't only 2 weeks, the tutor was lovely, it was perfectly explained and so no nerves doing something new, really gorgeous cafe downstairs where we had lunch which was delicious. This course being so enjoyable and friendly gave me the bug after learning that getting out mixing with people again felt really empowering."

Q: What benefits have you gained from the ULA courses, and what do you like most about them?

"I had very quickly realised that these courses massively help my mental health (didn't realise I had this until lockdown) my belief in myself and my abilities, my overall happiness, and I rely on these courses to mix with others that have the same interests as me in a venue/situation that is controlled by being fully inclusive to everyone (one of the 1st things you see/read when you fill in the paperwork) I think this is massively important! I like the new friendships I have made through these courses as every single person brings something different to the table.

Q: Are there any courses you haven't enjoyed? Or liked less? Why?

There have been a few courses that I struggled with but I'm so glad that I persevered and finished. This was merely me pushing my own boundaries and learning to ask for help rather than walk away, and this was by no means down to the instructor, item, or course choice, it was me stepping out of my comfort zone, trying new things and pushing through the unusual for me times, when I needed the company of a safe inclusive group just as much as I needed a new challenge.

I have been utterly overwhelmed to discover that the tutors seem to pick up on it when you feel slight unease and then do another tutorial or reminder without singling you out as having got it wrong, this feels really nice and keeps the mood light, there has never been any feeling of unease or disappointment from me about getting something wrong. I cannot stress enough that the correct people run the correct courses, there were 2 ladies that ran a leather tester course in their own time and with such kindness (I made a phone case from scraps)

And a gentleman that ran an evening course again in his own time making a wooden vase using test tubes that they couldn't find a use for, again so kind and great relaxed fun, this guy could not have been more helpful and went above and beyond to help everyone's designs come to fruition."

Q: What would you change/improve about the courses?

"I do not believe that these courses could be improved, other than maybe create more day courses with lunch included (like the pottery one where we all had soup together each week) this could maybe be done with a small charge? I did find that anyone that was nervous in the morning about approaching others and even talking to each other on the course were a lot more relaxed in the afternoon after sharing a meal and laughter about the experiences of the mornings events together as a group, weeks 2,3&4, it meant that people were then greeting each other by name when they arrived. I think this mingling and eating together is sometimes just as important as the course itself as this is when you open up and discover that you're all just the same.

I would not like to even think about these courses stopping as I realise now just how much I enjoy them and just how much that they help me, they get me out even when I don't really think I want to. I have never wished I never went after pushing myself to get out there, I have only ever realised that I felt better afterwards, I have had courses with urban learning academy, CoLab, Positive Lights and ECI I've recently discovered make tank but I've not visited yet. I have discovered each group by recommendation when I went to tie dye I was told about the bake house/urban learning, when I went there I was told about positive lights, then co lab etc.

And everyone and all the tutors are literally the best that they can be.

I love it love it love it."

Recommendations

Future research

- Continue to speak to individual learners and course providers. I learned so much about their experiences learning and running sessions. If there is time to conduct more interviews, I think this is a really valuable exercise.
- If I had had more time I would have loved to interview Maddy Hearn. She was extremely passionate about the power of adult learning!

Celebration event / learner showcase?

- The EC learner celebration was such a positive experience.
- Perhaps a similar event held at CoLab for those who have attended ULA courses would be a good way to share products of learning experiences.
 - Could be in the form of an exhibition?
- Pete (Co Create) discussed wanting to set something like this up himself for his poetry group, and the importance of harnessing the power of celebration of and validation for the work you've produced.

Conclusion

Over the past week I have heard huge amounts of positivity towards the ULA and free adult learning opportunities more generally. I spoke to a limited number of people and attended only 2 sessions, but to me the benefits shine through. The passion of the tutors is astounding, and leave me hopeful that the academy will continue to grow and strengthen.