**Focus Group**

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**The group**

A face to face focus group made up of students from the Granton campus of Edinburgh College. Despite invitations being sent to a large number of students via the Students’ Association along with the offer of a £10 Amazon voucher for attendance, only 3 students came along to the session.

**Aim of the session**

The aim of the session was to gather learners’ views on what is important to them.

**Method**

Face to face focus group meeting, using ‘recipe for a successful learning programme’ and ‘answers on a postcard’ questions as starter activities and then allowing the students present to talk about what they feel is important to them with minimal prompts.

Recipe for a successful learning programme

Ingredients:



500g of …   
250 ml of …   
a pinch of …   
2 cloves of ...

Recipe for a successful learning programme activity … participants were asked to think of the ingredients (things) and the method (practices) needed for a successful learning programme.

Answers on a postcard (1) If you were running a learning programme, what would you want to ask students?

Answers on a postcard (2) If you could wave a magic wand and change one thing for adult learning, what would you wish for?

The starter activities got the group talking amongst themselves about what really mattered to them about their learning. I allowed this to happen and didn’t want to interrupt the flow with a set of fixed questions and just added small prompts to guide the direction of the conversation.

**Resources**

Copies of the Recipe for Success handout, see x and copies of Answers on a Postcard, see y

**Timings**

The group in this instance completed the activities in an hour. In a different group the session could be shortened but could probably not be completed in less than 40 minutes.

The activities could be carried out by an individual but by sharing experiences, the learners start to engage with questions and share their experiences.

**The Results**

Although the turnout was disappointing, with only three students attending the session, they did all engage in an interesting conversation. The ‘recipe for a successful learning programme’ activity was well received and all three enjoyed coming up with their recipes, sharing what they had written and one even took a photo of his end result as he was feeling particularly proud of it. The ‘answers on a postcard’ activity generated less excitement … 2 cards were completed for each question. After getting warmed up with the recipe activity the group naturally started discussing what was most important to them in their learning. A note of the conversation is below.

**What impact might this activity have on the organisation involved?**

In all honesty this activity would have very little impact on the organisation. Graeme explained that students are constantly being asked to attend one focus group or another so it can be very difficult to persuade people to come along when they’re already so busy.

**What impact might this have on local or national planning for adult learning?**

Demonstrates that perhaps face to face focus groups aren’t always the best method for college students.

**How are expectations generated through engagement managed after meeting the group?**

All three participants were interested to read the final report from this project.

**Reflection on /evaluation of method**

The recipe activity worked well as an ice breaker and got everyone chatting.

On reflection, with the demands on college students’ time and a range of students being available at different times on different days, the face to face discussion did not work as well as the online discussions held on Facebook.

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**What the learners said about their learning:**

Please see separate files for the answers to the ‘recipe’ activity (3 files)

**Answers on a postcard**

1. If you were running a learning programme, what would you want to ask students?

Answers:

* I would ask them what they want to be asked, what they want to hear.
* What are your hopes and aspirations? How do you think your studies will assist you in reaching them?

1. If you could wave a magic wand and change one thing for adult learning, what would you wish for?

Answers:

* Better financial support
* Matrix funding. Put a solid communication layout in place.

**Discussion notes**

Abbreviated notes to capture the essence of the conversation between the three participants (A has been a student for 4 years, currently studying painting and decorating; B is in his first year studying games development and C is in his first year studying creative television):

A: There’s a cultural perception that if you’re honest and make a genuine criticism about the course it can be perceived as a personal attack against a lecturer. It’s a shame because small issues are best raised quickly and resolved but this can put people off speaking up.

B: Our class has come up with a list of everything that helps with the course … it’s been great. Lecturers and tutors need to be reflective though. An anxious lecturer makes for an anxious class! I’ve had one lecturer who had recently changed from secondary teaching to the college environment and it’s been a real culture shock for them!

A: People like to be taught in different ways.

B: If you want to learn in a different way you have to do it in your own time and work out how … it’s mainly taught as a group in the same way to everyone.

A: In one of my classes I suggested more interactive activities and that worked well. I think it’s important that lecturers ask people how they learn best.

B: I prefer group discussions but that doesn’t always happen.

A: Some styles of teaching are great, some are not so good. It’s not just about teaching methods, a lot of it’s down to communication.

B: It has to be flexible … change the font, make wider spacing, talk more, use media … these small things can make a huge impact.

A: I’ve suffered a head injury in the past and it can take me longer to process information. Sets of instructions don’t always work for me. Learning styles are really important, so’s knowing the student profile.

B: It takes quite a brave person to speak out and say what we need. A quiet or socially anxious person is much less likely to speak out.

A: The college needs to think about the support provided at the application and selection stages. With the right processes in place the necessary support can be made available.

B: I’m a class rep and I take anonymous messages and feed them back on behalf of the whole class.

A: Class reps need to make sure to feed back the positives as well as complaints. It also works better if they provide potential solutions and not just a list of problems. There aren’t class reps for every course unfortunately.

Facilitator: Do class reps get training?

A: Yes

B: Yes, it’s good training … it was fun.

B: I think maths is a particularly difficult area in a lot of courses for people.

C: There should be more interfaculty interaction and communication.

A: It does happen but perhaps just in pockets. Where it does happen it’s really good and should be celebrated more.

C: IT would be better if it was organised more formally though. At the moment it relies on students from different courses seeking each other out.

C: The good thing about being a mature student is that you’re more self assured and less scared to speak out for yourself. The transition from school to college is difficult for a lot of the younger students – they can be quite surprised that it’s much less formal and that they need to take more responsibility for themselves.

A: I think the most important thing for mature students is access to funding at all levels.

C: It’s also important that people realise that not everyone at college is young!

B If college wasn’t here I’d be in a dead end job because my qualifications from Greece don’t translate to anything of real value here.

A: I’m interested in the Nordic model where vocational strands of education are valued just as much as higher education.

At this point time ran out … all three students who had come along were on a tight timetable and could only spare half an hour.