

Learning in Company: Designing The U

July 2011



Executive Summary

Our founding belief is that engaging training in a range of useful skills such as first aid, saving energy and intervening safely to defuse conflict will encourage more effective responses to social challenges by citizens who participate in The U.

This belief is grounded in strong evidence that people want to live in communities where their family, friends and neighbours have the confidence and skills to respond effectively to low level social problems. People consistently declare that citizens should do more in their local communities. For example, 82% of citizens feel that they should be more involved with tackling antisocial behaviour and crimeⁱ. Community action is valued highly as the means of developing social bonds and of bringing people together. A “desire to improve things, help people” is identified by 95% of studentsⁱⁱ and 53% of the general population as the key motivation for participating locallyⁱⁱⁱ.

Given this, The U believes that supporting citizens to have the necessary confidence and willingness to take action on the small things will make a huge difference in our communities.

The U stimulates bottom up, citizen-led action on a host of issues that concern us all by recruiting and training volunteers to deliver authoritative, fun and interactive ninety minute sessions that build confidence, capacity and a strong sense of local community.

We do this by:

1. Developing short, impactful, interactive learning sessions with national partners such as the British Red Cross, Sustainable Homes and the Royal College of GPs. These training sessions offer seven easy to action skills in each topic, leading to an increased confidence and propensity to act for our participants.
2. Training volunteers to go into communities and host sessions for local people
 - a. Bringing communities together to increase their confidence
 - b. Increase their willingness to intervene, and
 - c. Create stronger community links

We believe that a strong set of simple skills delivered in a fun and engaging way in a local setting can be the catalyst to citizens become healthier, happier and more involved in their communities. We are exploring ways to further develop this model to enable more people across the country to take part.

For more information on The U please visit: www.the-u.org.uk

What drives The U

Social Drivers	Design Principles	Delivery Style
Evidenced need	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draw on robust evidence • Prioritise key areas • Work with authoritative partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embed 7 authoritative skills in every session • Use reliable resources • Refer back to delivery partners
Personal benefit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build confidence • Build knowledge • Convey easy-to-action skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop volunteer-led sessions • Put the learner first • Emphasise recall
Community benefit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build willingness to act • Build community links • Signpost local opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address barriers to action • Bring varied groups together • Emphasise going on to do more

Areas of Need

Selecting our topics

In developing The U we were looking for learning that:

- Responded to a well-evidenced social need;
- Would generate human capital – confidence, knowledge and useful skills – for individual participants; and
- Would build social capital within communities.

We commissioned a survey of 1,000 people to determine those areas of need in which citizens felt most motivated to act. We also conducted 12 focus groups in which we talked to over 60 people from a variety of ages, backgrounds and places about their motivations to participate in a project that would encourage low level civic action through an innovative learning initiative. Finally we carried out a further 18 in-depth interviews with respondents on their learning and community involvement.

We found that the following four topics were consistently identified as areas in which need was well aligned with motivation to learn:

First Aid

Need and motivation to learn on this topic aligned closely, highlighting emergency response as a key topic area for The U.

Social need

- Only 7% of the population have adequate first aid skills^{iv}.
- An ambulance responding to a call for a life-threatening situation can take up to eight minutes to arrive^v. These eight minutes can make the crucial difference in saving a life.
- Nearly 900 people choke to death, 2,500 asphyxiate from a blocked airway and 29,000 die from heart attacks every year because first aid is not administered in time.^{vi}
- 50% of people do not feel confident to administer first aid^{vii}.

Motivation to learn

Our focus group findings were clear. First Aid was chosen as the most important potential topic for community learning by the majority of respondents in all focus groups.

Typical comments included: “everyone needs to know”, “everyone needs to take this”, and “it’s important”; some respondents elaborated on this need and specifically touched on the social capital inherent to first aid training: “accidents are always happening ... in public places and it would be good to know what to do” and “this can really make a difference to the community”.

Reducing Energy and Water Use

The U believes that spreading knowledge and skills on reducing energy and water use in the home to larger numbers of people will help residents to reduce their environmental impact and save them money.

Social need

- Homes alone contribute 27% of the UK's emissions. Added to the global concern of climate change are the local implications of high and rising fuel bills, fuel poverty and energy security. These combine to make energy efficiency a critical social and economic issue for individuals, their families and local communities.
- The lack of effective communication with residents and a widespread failure to understand energy performance are fundamental flaws in energy saving initiatives^{viii}.
- Residents who understand their homes often save more money and energy than hi-tech solutions^{ix}. These findings point towards the potential of a learning initiative that spreads knowledge and skills on reducing energy and water use in the home to larger numbers of people.

Motivation to learn

Our survey and focus groups consistently found that greening their homes and reducing emissions in their neighbourhoods were central concerns for respondents. Respondents in the focus groups rated energy reduction particularly highly when asked to consider their communities. Typical comments included: "this is a skill for the future", "we all know we should be greener, but we don't know how to do it", and "because of global warming this is the most important topic for society". Again, as with first aid, an evidenced social need aligned with a clear motivation from respondents in our research.

Self-Care

Informed self-care has been identified for some years as a necessary adjunct to professional treatment delivered by clinical professionals within the NHS. The U believes that there is a need for better dissemination of the principles of self-care to improve each citizen's ability to look after herself and her family and to strengthen community resilience.

Social need

- 55% of patients with long-term conditions valued 'talking to someone' as the most important feature of self-care^x.
- 80% of all GP consultations are for long-term conditions^{xi}.
- 40% of GP time is spent dealing with self-treatable illness^{xii}.
- Many studies highlight the importance of the authoritative dissemination of accurate, easy to recall information on effective self-care through the wider population. For example in one study:
 - Half of those aged 15-24 identified obesity as symptomatic of underlying health conditions rather than the cause of them; and
 - A third of all respondents in the survey did not identify eating fatty foods and failing to take exercise as drivers of excessive weight gain^{xiii}.

Motivation to learn

This need was echoed by our own survey and focus groups which ranked family healthcare as a high need and a key interest amongst all groups. Respondents in our focus groups consistently ranked skills training in supporting the health of their families as a top 5 choice. It was felt in particular by respondents that citizens lack confidence in managing their health and the health of their families. One respondent spoke for many when she noted that "it might seem like common sense but people need reassurance".

Defusing Conflict

It is clear that concern about low level crime is a problem area for Britain's citizens, with surveys showing that people identify levels of anti-social behaviour as a major influence on their quality of life^{xiv}. The U believes that communities can become more skilled to respond to these concerns themselves.^{xv}

Social need

- 90% of people believe that it is the police (either solely or jointly) who are responsible for responding to antisocial behaviour. Only 15% thought it was the responsibility of communities^{xvi}.
- 82% of citizens believe that they should do more to help the police with tackling antisocial behaviour and crime^{xvii}.
- In our own survey 69% of respondents identified a lack of confidence in intervening when they see anti-social behaviour.

Motivation to learn

50% of respondents in our own survey were interested in accessing training in this area, showing a strong correlation between need and interest in taking action to promote street safety in local communities. Our focus group respondents agreed, and defusing conflict ranked second only to first aid in overall choices by participants. Comments by respondents included: "knowing how to stop things from escalating is useful" and "it would make everyone in the community safer if people were more confident [in this area]".

Strong evidence of potential impact and the importance of these topics in the eyes of our respondents determined the choice of these first four topics for development as learning modules for The U.

Learning in Company

The pub is as important as the quiz

Learning is often a means of kick-starting change in an individual's life by expanding the range of knowledge and skills on which they can draw and by creating useful networks and channels for putting these into practice. As well as stimulating change at the personal level, learning can also be the means of generating long-lasting change in communities, building capacity and creating a stronger sense of belonging.

Throughout the process of designing The U we have been guided by the belief that catalysing simple, low level civic action through easy to learn and authoritative knowledge and skills is in the best interests of both individual citizens – who gain as they learn – and their communities – whose capacity and resilience is increased. The roots of that belief are neatly encapsulated in the words of one of our interview respondents: “small things can be really significant^{xviii}.” The U aims to stimulate those small actions that have a significance far beyond the time and effort required to perform them; acts such as opening an airway and saving a life.

Research^{xix} shows that people feel a strong emotional connection to their communities and find it highly motivating to act on a local level. By embedding our learning initiative firmly within communities we will draw on that emotional connection and sense of belonging as a driver to change behaviours and encourage a greater sense of civic responsiveness amongst participants.

This initiative is a timely one. In 2000 the Department for Education published a report on informal learning^{xx} that underlined the importance of the social space of adult learning to communities. The report highlighted the ways in which informal learning shifts the focus away from individual activity leading to personally ‘held’ skills towards a wider range of outcomes and benefits associated with social capital, capacity-building and citizenship. Ten years later, the 2010 report of the Inquiry into the Future of Lifelong Learning noted that learning could “act as a catalyst in securing improved mental health, and an active and engaged civil society^{xxi}.” There is, then, a strong sense within the sector that the time has come for an initiative of exactly this kind.

The DfE report also noted that “informal learning can help make people better-informed – even, through participating in the local ‘pub quiz’”. Having fun, the authors underlined, is the key to successful informal learning initiatives and ‘hiding’ learning can be an effective means of maintaining that level of enjoyment. This was a driver in our mission to unlock civic potential by making useful learning fun. We know that in generating wide involvement from community members, the pub is just as important as the quiz.

This encouraged us at The U to put the social at the heart of our delivery. We wanted to bring people together to share a range of useful and immediately applicable skills in the kind of topics outlined above. We believe that this learning in company will be an active stimulus to building capacity and community. This is why all our modules are developed to a fun and interactive style and delivery, and why we are keen to recruit our guests widely within communities. If The U is effective in its aims, much of its success will be down to the sheer fun of the sessions and the community feel engendered amongst the varied participants who attend them and who might not otherwise have an opportunity to meet and engage with each other. It is our belief that the collective spirit developed during our sessions can only help to build that sense of emotional connection that will spur ongoing action beyond them. This is the principle value of learning in company.

Doing by Learning

Sparking local action

The U addresses areas in greatest need of community level intervention by actively encouraging citizens to consider themselves capable, effective and empowered agents who really can make a difference. The U aims to encourage citizens to overcome their reluctance to act, and build their confidence and ability to draw people into effective collective action. The potential of such an approach is clear from the evidence of British Red Cross research showing an increased willingness to act when citizens have recently undertaken first aid training^{xxii}. We believe that learning can provide that vital spark that promotes responsiveness to others; that learning can be the stimulus that encourages citizens to do more.

Our own primary research showed how learning can be the spark for everyday action. One of our respondents told us that he believed: “that the most important thing in learning is to make it useful, to make it relevant – it has to be applicable to your every day life”.

Our respondents’ experiences showed how learning had stimulated their community activity. A retired interviewee cited “broadening the horizons” as an important factor that stimulated her involvement in learning. She spoke of her skills as having “made me what I am”. She shared those skills performing on the piano with the Dorcas Project, a befriending project run by a local church, as well as playing at church hall concerts. This respondent’s experience showed how skill sharing can provide the impetus for connecting to new networks and local institutions.

In order to generate responsive, community-building citizen behaviours of this kind, every session at The U has a central activity that addresses the barriers to taking proactive civic action. Our first aid session foregrounds the bystander effect and the ways in which crowds can inhibit helping behaviours in emergencies. Our energy saving module considers the cultural barriers that may prevent people from developing simple environmentally friendly habits. Every new module addresses these issues.

The U is also committed to foregrounding opportunities for action beyond our sessions. A key finding of the DfE report on informal learning was the importance of making sessions directly relevant to participants in just the ways our interview respondent highlighted. The report’s authors noted that progression routes should be local, immediately engaging and available in the near future to offer real opportunities to informal learners.

We have taken this to heart:

- Each session at The U is an opportunity for citizens to learn valuable civic skills and to engage with others in taking action.
- Each blast session at The U ends with the clear signposting of ways in which learners can make a small difference to their community. Our ‘Magnificent Seven’ suggestions include: sharing a skill with friends, family and colleagues; progressing towards more in-depth learning with our delivery partners and local groups; and taking up a more formal volunteering role.
- These actions are always local and relevant.
- We aim to support The U’s participants to navigate local voluntary sector activity but also to think about the ways in which they could galvanise and direct new informal action at a local level. Our research highlighted the importance of autonomous actions of this kind, with one highly engaged respondent noting that community involvement is: “worth it [...] if you have some valuable input, some creative input”.

By providing a straightforward route into making those small informal gestures that have an impact out of all proportion to the time and effort they demand, The U aims to encourage more citizens to bring that valuable and creative input into their communities. Through its national platform, The U will recognise and celebrate the small daily actions that are the bedrock of a healthy, happy and engaged society and make them – and the citizens who perform them – as visible as they deserve to be.

The Magnificent 7

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PASS IT ON: When you're with your family or friends next over dinner or a pint, tell them two of the skills you learned. For extra spice, run a mini pub quiz and award a pint to the winner.
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GIVE IT BACK: The British Red Cross has amazing volunteering opportunities around the country. For more on what's going on in your area, check out www.redcross.org.uk.
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LEARN SOME MORE: The British Red Cross offers lots of opportunities to learn more about First Aid. To register for courses or to learn more in their online resource area go to www.redcross.org.uk.
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HAVE A GO: We hope our Be a Lifesaver session showed it's always better to do something than nothing. If you see someone who needs help today, remember: you're the one to act.
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PASS IT ON: If you know someone who would benefit from learning about First Aid in the "Be a Lifesaver" course at The U, drop them a line with a link to our website.
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GIVE IT BACK: The Volunteer Centre in Sutton connects people with great volunteer opportunities across Sutton. They've got opportunities to suit any interest, from befriending to gardening at www.vcsutton.org.uk.
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LEARN SOME MORE: The U is offering more sessions in useful, practical skills. The next sessions in August and September are Green your Home. We will send you an invitation, and be sure to RSVP!

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- ⁱ (2010) *Capable Communities*. London: ippr
- ⁱⁱ (2010) Georgina Brewis et al. *Bursting the Bubble*. London: Institute for Volunteering Research
- ⁱⁱⁱ (2007) Natalie Lowe et al. *Helping Out*. London: National Centre for Social Research and Institute for Volunteering Research
- ^{iv} (2009) British Red Cross Survey.
- ^v St. John Ambulance
- ^{vi} Office for National Statistics
- ^{vii} BRC Survey, as above.
- ^{viii} Sustainable Homes Research
- ^{ix} http://www.sustainablehomes.co.uk/home_energy_awareness.aspx
- ^x (April 2010) Challis, D. et al. Self-Care and Case Management in Long-Term Conditions. Report for the National Institute for Health Research Service Delivery and Organisation programme.
- ^{xi} (2011) Mike Pringle. Self Care Presentation. Collingham Healthcare Education Centre.
- ^{xii} Ibid.
- ^{xiii} (1999) Ipsos Mori. <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oltemId=1885>
- ^{xiv} (2007) ENCAMS. Measuring Quality of Life, Does Environmental Quality Matter?
- ^{xv} (July 2010). Rogers, B. *The Woolwich Model: Can Citizens Tackle Anti-Social Behaviour?* RSA.
- ^{xvi} (2010) Ipsos Mori. *Policing antisocial behaviour: the public perspective*. London: HMIC
- ^{xvii} Ippr. *Capable Communities*.
- ^{xviii} Respondent in Young Foundation focus group, January 2011.
- ^{xix} Brand Democracy (January 2011) *Big Society and Harnessing the Power of the UK*.
- ^{xx} (2000) Cullen et al. *Informal Learning and Widening Participation*. London: Department for Education.
- ^{xxi} (2010) Tom Schuller & David Watson. *Learning Through Life: Inquiry into the future of Lifelong Learning*. London: NIACE
- p.xiii
- ^{xxii} (2009) BRC first aid quantitative research.