

BEULAH

- A CASE STUDY

The vision to bring IT to remote rural areas in Ceredigion was a goal sought by South Wales WEA, and one, which is now a reality. Traditionally, because of its large geographical area, the region had proved difficult to penetrate, particularly the logistics of supplying sufficient laptops and sourcing the services of qualified tutors willing to travel to this relatively remote area.

The solution however presented itself in an opportune and timely way. Grace Hagen WEA Learning Manager for the region was contacted by Dafydd Ladd, a former Governor of Beulah Primary School, who had successfully sourced funds to bring laptops to the school. However to run classes he needed a partner, and being a long time supporter of the work of the WEA felt it was the ideal organisation with which to work. "It just perfectly dovetailed with what I wanted to do" recalls Grace "it supplied me with laptops which was just the most marvellous thing". What followed can only be described as a frenzy of activity. Grace produced hundreds of bilingual promotional posters, delivering them by hand to newsagents' shops Post Offices and Libraries in the County, anywhere she felt might reach potential learners. In line with the WEAs democratic approach to learning the aim was to hold a number of taster sessions in order to consult with learners and gauge response to the proposed IT classes.

Grace subsequently arranged a number of taster sessions with the support of tutor Eleanor Jones. In the spirit of what can only be described as cautious optimism both turned up on the day not quite knowing what to expect. Grace recalls saying to Eleanor "At least it will be a nice morning out with a cup of tea..." In the event the sessions were a great success. Many more people than anticipated came through the door to express interest in the course. Perhaps the most useful outcome was to discover that individuals found it reassuring to talk directly to the tutor and have the opportunity to express apprehension and concern about their ability to cope with IT.

Many expressed the view that they did not want to go to a college, some because of the travel distance and others because they wanted to attend classes at a more convenient time, and in a more informal setting in their own community. What had begun as a small initiative to test the water quickly escalated into one where demand greatly exceeded expectation. While Eleanor was able to deliver two courses back to back, this was not sufficient to meet the ever-increasing demand. Grace, now inundated with telephone calls from individuals keen to attend the classes, had to resort to drawing up a waiting list until a second tutor, Sarah Tarbutt, was appointed.

Like many successful WEA ventures before it the enterprise was not without some initial teething problems. The school had 6 laptops but not all in working order, so Eleanor had to bring additional laptops from Swansea and with only one mains and one portable printer, the students had to learn to share. However, such was their keenness

to learn, this was considered a minor inconvenience and did nothing to dampen enthusiasm. In response to this challenge Regional Education Manager Gareth Morris, through discussions with Neath Port Talbot New Learning Network, eventually managed to secure 12 new laptops. The laptops that had been provided through Objective 1 money were then, through cross county partnership working, transferred to Beulah. In this way a major stumbling block was overcome ensuring the classes became a success for everyone involved. For the learners there has been a variety of positive outcomes; Llinos Jones believes that developing IT skills has given her a positive advantage in the job market, and that attending the course probably helped secure her appointment as a Health Care Assistant. Her employers were “thrilled” when she told them at interview she was attending the course. Subsequently in work her IT skills have proved essential “Because I’m a Health Care Assistant, I take bloods and I have to enter details into the computer, so it’s essential” Similarly, Wendy Jones, a part time teacher, is now far more confident and competent in using computers with her pupils. “I had been working on the computer ...but it was a no-go area really...I always needed backup – this has helped build my confidence so that I don’t feel it’s going to pack up on me”. Her newly developed skills have also been useful in other aspects of her life “ I don’t have to depend so much on the girls when I’m doing work at home – my daughter’s are quite impressed as I’m using the Internet and emailing my brother in Australia!”

For retired members of the group IT skills are no less important. One member, a retired barrister, uses his newly developed skills to keep records while Pauline Oliver is now able to communicate with her daughter via email “In this age of technology I have sons and a daughter who want to send me emails and I hadn’t a clue, I didn’t even know how to turn the computer on. I also wanted to send letters but as I have arthritis in my fingers I find it difficult to write” I’m proud of the way I’ve come on, I’ve surprised myself”. Sallie Martin on the other hand is simply enjoying learning to use the computer. Since suffering a brain haemorrhage in 1995 she had found it difficult to sit in front of a computer but has now overcome these difficulties. In the small community of Beulah there are a number of self employed business people and those attending the course have been so impressed that they now intend to enrol their staff on the course. Some of the learners are farmer’s wives who now use their IT skills to help their husbands run the business. Perhaps most importantly of all, learners are unanimous in voicing the pure enjoyment they get from learning and being part of a community group. Pauline had considered, but then decided against, a college course “Here the classes are local, free and at a time that suits me. It’s nice to get out of the house into this lovely little school,” another learner agrees “the group get on very well which is down to the tutor. We are all mates here -... it’s good to meet people from the community”.

While these examples underline the importance of bringing IT to this rural community, the wider benefits are also significant and should not be underestimated. Increasingly small communities like Beulah are losing their schools for reasons of viability, but in extending resources to the wider community it strengthens the argument against the threat of possible closure. As Dafydd Ladd explains “It provides a focal point for local

people giving them a chance to get to know each other (which is important for older students); it is environmentally friendly as there are not so many driving longer distances...and the small rural school is being used beyond normal school times, which could help in discussions about keeping such facilities open”.

Of course none of this success would be possible without the skills of the WEA tutors. Learning Manager Grace Hagen acknowledges this fact ” Sarah has an IT background but as well as being technically proficient has proved to be a wonderfully resourceful tutor”. Eleanor, prior to becoming a WEA tutor, was an Administration Assistant in the WEA office in Swansea. Here she was encouraged to take an ICT course and gain other relevant qualifications, eventually undertaking a Teacher Training certificate before progressing to become an IT Tutor and “a great asset to the WEA “.

A skill much appreciated by the learners in Beulah, is Eleanor’s ability to conduct her classes bilingually. “It’s so good ” observes Llinos “ my first language is Welsh so when I find some words difficult I can just ask her in Welsh“ and “She is able to switch from Welsh to English, which helps put us at ease” comments Wendy. Welsh learners also value the opportunity to practice their language skills and in so doing the course has helped promote the Welsh language. Another valued resource are the work sheets produced by Eleanor with common IT terms translated into Welsh. On occasion she has even translated whole sessions into Welsh, thus ensuring that part of the course is taught in Welsh. All the learners hold their tutor in high regard “Everybody’s at different stages and working at different speeds but she has such patience” says Llinos “...she knows her work and if we are stuck, she is there, nothing’s too much for her” “She’s brilliant” agrees Pauline “she makes you go over and over it until she’s sure you’ve got it and then she makes us use the book which is good. We’re not relying on her telling us all the time, she makes you use your brain!”

Now that Learners have had a taste of learning the WEA way they are keen to progress and the WEA will help by offering progression through a variety of accredited courses. “We know that there is a demand for other types of courses” observes Dafydd. It is through effective partnership working such as this that the WEA is able to succeed in its mission to take education to those who are least well served by mainstream provision.


