INFLUENCING SERVICE IMPROVEMENT AND CHANGE THROUGH EDUCATION

Deirdre Corby of DCU explains how a new module draws teams of individuals together to work on projects specifically focused on improving and changing services for people with intellectual disability

People with intellectual disability are beginning to find opportunities opening up in post-Secondary and third-level education. Some institutions have been offering courses for a number of years, with specifically designed programmes being the most common. More recently more mainstream options are being developed which encourage all students to study together with awards achieved at different levels.

A module is a unit of education that allows its participants to explore one important area of life. In the module being explained in this article, we look at how three ordinary stakeholders of an intellectual disability service can bring about service change. Students who have attended this module in Dublin City University have reported feeling empowered to bring about changes and improvements in their services. The ability of this module to build capacity in individuals and services is supported by the evidence from informal and formal feedback of students and service providers and reflects the policies that are currently driving national and international practice changes. This module gives a voice to people with intellectual disability, family and ordinary staff members as they achieve personal and team goals. Based on early evaluations and feedback, it seems fair to say that this module can make real practical changes to the lives of people with intellectual disabilities who attend the services that have been involved in this project.

This module brings together teams of three people to work on a service improvement or change project. Teams consist of a staff member, a person with intellectual disability and a family member (not connected to the person with ID). There is equality among the team members, encouraging them to develop a collaborative attitude throughout the project. Called 'Improving Service with Cooperative Learning', the module teaches the students how to work together as a team and research options to complete a project that will make things better in their service. A minimum of four teams of three people undertake the module each academic year.

Team

Because the service is held in common by all participants in the team, they all have a stake in improving or changing things for the better. While teams apply together to Dublin City University to take the module, all students must make individual applications which are considered by the academic team. All students are registered with the university, have access to all facilities and receive a student card valid for one academic year. Informal learning (learning gained through

KEY ELEMENTS OF IMPROVING SERVICE WITH COOPERATIVE LEARNING
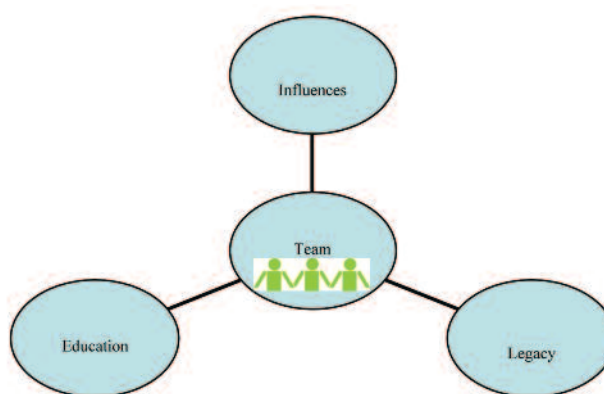
the experience of life) is equally valued as formal education. One person put it in her own words, saying: 'do you mean because I have lived in residential care for twenty years I know as much about this service as the staff?'

Influences

A significant influence to the development and maintenance of this module has been the commitment and support of a steering group which involves service providers, family members and representatives of advocacy organisations such as Inclusion Ireland and the National Parents and Siblings Alliance. When a service undertakes to nominate a team, this is just the beginning for them—they provide funding, and much more. This includes providing a mentor from the service who will facilitate the team to progress their project. In practical teams, this involves a senior member of staff giving their time as well as ensuring the team is provided with the resources required.

The University provides a focus for the educational aspect, while national policy will underpin much of the direction the projects take. Policies that focus on access to mainstream and involving people in decisions about their services are highlighted, and students are encouraged to consider these.

Education

The module uses a cooperative model of education, including practical recommendations made by the students themselves. This cooperative approach requires that students work collaboratively and simultaneously with each other, yet there is an understanding and provision made for individual

students' preferences and abilities. Classes all take place in the School of Nursing and Human Sciences in Dublin City University, where students attend one day a month during one academic year, from October to May. Three university lecturers facilitate the module, each taking responsibility for aspects of educational input and support for teams. Each team is allocated a lecturer who provides the team academic support, in addition to the practical support provided by the service-based mentor. Team teaching is the main classroom method employed—an approach that encourages students to participate in all activities.

Individual and team progress reports are essential elements of each university day and students are offered opportunities to present their ongoing work. Problem-solving within and between the teams is invaluable, providing a unique opportunity for all students to investigate what is positive within other services.

One student, Breda, gives her views and feedback

As a parent of a child with an intellectual disability, I was part of the team from Kildare services who attended this module. Our team began by picking a unit of 48 people within our services, in which to base ourproject. We asked people and discovered that they would like more choices, moremeaningful activities and more community participation. We then used a questionnaire to see the level of interest in expanding an existing community farming scheme and in the introduction of weaving. The result was that approximately 50% were interested in participating in social farming and a similar percentage in learning how to weave.

The team then decided on a two-fold plan for the project—to expand the social farming scheme and to introduce a weaving programme to the unit. We felt that giving these additional choices would address some of the issues raised. After a lot of hard work, many meetings, visits to other service providers, farms and wool suppliers, the project was up and running.

Four people took part in an expanded social farming scheme over a six week period. it is hoped to further expand the scheme to include more people. With regard to the weaving, a table loom and peg loom have been installed in the unit, staff members have been trained in weaving skills and lots of people are weaving successfully. Donations of looms and training of staff by another service provider, the financing of wool by the director of services in Kildare Services and the provision of wool by a well-known weaving company have all helped our efforts with the weaving project. We hope that the projects we started will continue into the future.

Our team found this course very educational and informative. The areas covered by the lectures included the different services available in the area of intellectual disability, social inclusion, project management, leadership, teamwork, various reports published regarding intellectual disability and future proposals in this area. Guest speakers also told of their experiences in arriving at satisfactory arrangements for day and residential services for their family member. A lecturer was assigned to each team and was available to assist the team whenever necessary. This included, in our case, visiting and assisting our team at the service headquarters and visiting the farm and weaving service involved in our project.

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Our team feels that the trialogue of a person with an intellectual disability, a staff member and a parent working together to achieve a goal can be a successful way of getting results. We feel that the success of our project as a result of the course at Dublin City University has brought about an improvement in the service we are involved with and has thus enhanced somewhat the quality of life of some individuals with intellectual disability. (Breda Pierse)

Legacy

The overall vision of this project is to create a 'legacy effect' of benefit, not only for the students but the organisations or services they represent. A sense of achievement and doing something practical and useful is reflected in student discussions at the end of the module. The university experience too has been very much enjoyed. While students identified that there was significant, and perhaps unexpected, work in progressing their project, the fact that the projects are their own ideas put into practice has resulted in students not wanting to leave. They speak about how they can continue to work together after the module, and friendships are begun and maintained. The ripple effect is felt with individuals, and also within services as staff, in particular, report feeling a stronger commitment and feel this module has helped them to understand what people with intellectual disability need and want from their service.

Conclusion

Past student feedback is really valued and influences improvements on how the next module is run. Anyone interested in applying for the programme, or with queriesabout it, should contact Deirdre Corby, at DCU (tel: 01 7008524; email deirdre.corby@dcu.ie. Those who have completed the module and service providers who have supported teams to attend are also happy to be contacted. **FL**

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Deirdre Corby is a lecturer in the School of Nursing and Human Sciences, Dublin City University and the module coordinator for the module "Improving Service with Cooperative Learning". She has a nursing background in services for people with intellectual disability and has been working in nurse education for over ten years. She is currently undertaking a PhD programme examining the experiences of people with intellectual disability in post secondary and third level education in the Republic of Ireland.