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Liz Foster

Title :

Mirrors of Life : An EU Project Linking Four Countries

Abstract :

This paper describes the development of an EU funded transnational project with partners in Bolton, UK; Aarhus, Denmark; Dublin, Eire and Timisoara, Romania. The project focused on developing innovative educational provision for adults who experience mental health problems, mainly through the use of multi-media approaches. A distinctive strand of the project was that, as well as staff from the partner countries visiting each other, additional funding enabled the students, who had been communicating, via e-mail, to meet face to face. The paper was originally published in Breakthrough Vol. 7, Issue I April/May 2001

For further information contact:

Karen Barton (k.barton@bolton.ac.uk), Bolton Institute, Chadwick Street, Bolton, BL2 1JW, England

Mirrors of Life : an EU Project linking four countries.

For the past fifteen years, I have worked with people who experience mental health problems. Initially, I was based within a large psychiatric institution where I developed basic education for long-stay patients. Then, in move mirroring that being made by many of the patients, I went into the more precarious world out in the community. There, I had the interesting role of developing educational provision for people with mental health problems in Bolton. For much of this time, I had a vision of linking with mental health service users and practitioners in other countries. I had a theory that there would be more similarities than differences in the experiences of service users and that there would be real benefits in developing partnerships which transcended national boundaries,

I have had to wait a long time for this vision to become reality, but in 1998 our proposal to develop educational initiatives for adults with mental health problems with partners in Denmark, Romania and Southern Ireland was accepted for European Union funding.

At an initial meeting in Bolton in January 1999, it immediately became apparent that our partners, although working in very different organizations, shared our philosophy and values. Flesh was put on the bones of the Project when we all met again in Timisoara, Romania, in October 1999. The Asosiatia Armonia in Timisoara is a non-profit-making organization which aims to bring harmony into the lives of those who experience mental health problems and their families. It offers programmes to restore skills and to assist people in reintegrating into the community. The atmosphere in the Centre was reminiscent of that in the mental health day centers in Bolton. Centre users sang for us, showed us their art work and joined in impassioned discussions about advocacy for mental health service users as a human rights' issue. The work of the Association is truly innovatory in a country in which the language does not even contain a word for advocacy!

In May 2000, we visited the Amtsskolen in Aarhus, Denmark. From the outside it reminded us of the large red-brick building which forms the main site of Bolton Community Education Service. Inside the Amtsskolen, however, the Danish skill in interior design became apparent. The old building had been transformed by vivid blue and yellow décor, stylish lighting and pale

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beech furniture. Unusually, the Amtsskolen is a college exclusively for people with mental health problems. The particular focus is on multimedia IT courses and these are networked to a variety of other locations including hospital wards.

Our links with the Open Training College in Dublin have enabled us to write open learning training packs for mental health support workers and have them produced in an eye-catching and accessible format.

Our students have been e-mailing each other and creating friendships with those who have been down similar paths to themselves and with whom they have a greater degree of shared experience than with many people in their own country. They have produced a net magazine which can be found on www.bolton-community-college.ac.uk/socrates/index.htm. And they can be e-mailed on gaysocrates@yahoo.com

The magazine is entitled *Mirrors of Life*, a title suggested by a user of the Association in Timisoara and immediately greeted with enthusiasm by the rest of us.

What continued to concern me, however, was that it was still us practitioners who were privileged to be able to visit our partner countries. I wanted the students to have this experience too. With additional funding generously donated by the Barrow Cadbury Trust, we succeeded in holding a Conference in Bolton in November 2000 which was attended by both staff and students from Aarhus and Timisoara, as well as mental health service users from Greater Manchester; thirty-four people in total. We offered a choice of four workshops: computer graphics, experiential drama, art and sharing experiences and life stories. The art workshop was run by a student from Aarhus who was herself a highly qualified artist. Sharing experiences and life stories was also run by an Aarhus student whose sensitivity and empathy encouraged others to look positively at their life experiences.

In the evening, the common room at our main site was filled to capacity with mental health service users from near and far. We served a hundred hot-pot suppers and were entertained by musicians and actors from the mental health drop-in centers in Bolton. One of the short plays which was performed demonstrated society's attitudes towards mental health service users.

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Another, written by a service user, had a twist in its tail, as the psychiatrist who had been sectioning people right, left and center, was himself sectioned. A massive cheer went up from the audience at this point, but this could well have been on account of mis-translation on the part of our foreign guests....

We have other plans afoot for our Project. Following the example of our colleagues in Timisoara, we are going to offer a short course in Family Education to help those whose lives have been affected by the impact of mental health problems of a family member. We are continuing our Training the Trainers course to equip mental health service users with the presentation skills they need to deliver training on mental health issues. We are taking IT, creative writing, cookery and art classes on to the psychiatric wards at the Royal Bolton Hospital. Later this year, we are holding a conference for practitioners in the north of England to share experiences of interesting initiatives in this field. And the students are, of course, continuing to communicate with each other.

Sten, one of the students from Aarhus, said of his stay in Bolton:

“I am tired. Very tired. But I have had more positive experiences in these last four days than in the past six months”.

Petrica from Romania said:

“It was a good opportunity to meet new people, new culture and a bigger culture indeed”

It is this “bigger culture” which we find both moving and exciting; it is a culture of both sadness and hope.

Liz Foster, Staff Development Manager, Bolton Community College.