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Peer Education:

Development of the 'Norfolk Blurbl'

In January 2003, a small group of young people were recruited to begin a piece of work that, unknown to them, would become one of the Norfolk County Council's most innovative resources in engaging and improving the well being of young people.

Transforming Youth Work

In 2003, I found myself Project Coordinator of a new project that only existed in concept in the minds of a few individuals including Bernadette Kerbey, an immensely experienced and skilled Youth Worker, who has recently left the Service. Bernadette had been seconded from her role as District Team Leader for the Youth Service in Norwich and was leading on Quality Assurance within the 'Transforming Youth Work'¹ agenda in Norfolk.

Youth Standard Six of the specification outlined the Government's target for 'access to on-line youth information services'. In response, Norfolk County Council set aside a small amount of money from its Transforming Youth Work Development Fund to set up a website for young people.

Peer Education

Norfolk County Council employed me as a peer educator in 2003. Peer Education has been described as 'a late arrival to the vocabulary of youth and community workers outside the formal framework of education'.² In formal education its 'origins lie in the eighteenth century models of Bell and Lancaster (Adamson, 1964) that they developed to support learning in the newly developing school system'.³

In Norfolk, Peer Education had been around in pockets of good practice for many

years. This included projects such as the Peer Listeners project, Peer Literacy project, Young Mums project and Outdoor Education projects, but the concept of a paid peer educator was highly contentious and resisted.

I found many of Norfolk County Council's employees including Youth Workers didn't really understand my role and they didn't know how to relate to a paid peer educator. Bernadette Kerbey was one of the few individuals that understood the value and saw the potential in the role. Kerbey suggested that perhaps she 'recognised the unique value of peer education in cyber space where young people had an advantage of understanding over their adult supporters, rather than peer education in general, which I think most youth workers understand'.

The brief

My brief was to coordinate the development of an online resource for young people created by young people. Once recruited, the team and I worked on everything ranging from developing the branding, to writing the content and producing the publicity materials. The hard work that both the team and I had put in was recognised by the local media and this helped in attracting attention to the website, now known as 'Norfolk Blurbl'. We were ready to launch in May 2003 and the project became an overnight success.

Agony Aunt

Many young people had made requests for specific developments to the website. One of which was a request for the

development of an 'Agony Aunt' service. After extensive planning and consultation with a variety of professionals including Norfolk's 'Off Centre' counselling and advice team and after the securing of funding from Connexions, we responded by developing 'Aunty Blurb', an agony aunt service offering peer support. A young person, who underwent a variety of training on topics including Child Protection and Sexual Health, was employed to provide peer support under the name of Aunty Blurb. To safeguard the young person, and to ensure appropriate support was provided, an approval process was undertaken in which an Information and Advice (I/A) worker would check each question and answer before it was published online. On occasions, the I/A worker would also contribute a response.

By September 2003, Aunty Blurb proved a big hit and helped Norfolk Blurb win a LAYSER (Local Authority Youth Services in the Eastern Region) Award.

Chat room

Among the many other requests for developments was a suggestion that Norfolk Blurb should have a chat room. The team and I were enthusiastic about the idea but at the time were conscious that it would need to be safe and secure. Further funding was attracted from Connexions and a development process began. A residential provided the opportunity to have an in-depth discussion about all the issues surrounding the chat room. After two days of intense planning, a brief was written which outlined the various safety procedures, which would be required to safeguard users of the chat room now known as 'Blurbchat'. These included having a registration process, a moderator, a 4 second delay and at least one youth worker online during all chat events.

The creation of Blurbchat helped Norfolk Blurb win another award in April 2004. A prestigious award was granted from the International Childnet Academy for our

work around Internet safety.

It is now nearly four years since Norfolk Blurb launched and both the project and my role has transformed dramatically. Norfolk Blurb provided the opportunity for personal development in a way that formal education and youth groups could not. I still currently hold the position of Project Coordinator, however I am now employed as a full time youth worker based within Norfolk's Active Citizenship team and I am currently studying on a Foundation Degree course in Working with Young People.

The current Blurb team are working on issue 2 of the 'Best of Blurb' magazine, which will be distributed to every single pupil in High Schools across Norfolk and will also be available to view online.

Text Pal

Norfolk Blurb will also be launching an online version of Text Pal, which is part of the county's 'My Norfolk' bid for the £7m Digital Challenge - a national competition, sponsored by the Department for Community and Local Government, aimed at developing the country's most digitally inclusive community. Text Pal began as a pilot, which saw the use of text messaging being used to enable young people to support each other. Now an online version has been developed which takes the form of social networking sites similar to 'Bebo' and 'MySpace' but will enable users to hook up and exchange messages within a safe environment. All messages will be moderated prior to being published.

There are many reasons why Norfolk Blurb is such a success, but I believe the main reason is the true active involvement of young people right from the start of the project.

References

1. DfES, (2002). Transforming Youth Work - Resourcing Excellent Youth Services. London DfES.
2. Factor, F., Chauhan, V., & Pitts, J. (Eds). (2001). The RHP companion to working with young people, Russel House Publishing.

3 *ibid* page102.