

'Interchange' is a member of the EU-sponsored Science Shop movement, which fosters 'knowledge for the community' by facilitating affordable, grass-roots research. One of only two Science Shops in the UK, Interchange is a registered charity which was conceived and set up by social scientists at the University of Liverpool.



Like any other business, community organisations need to evaluate how effectively they are pursuing their mission, how their clients, workers and other stakeholders view the services they offer, and how they might do better – but many can't afford to pay for professional researchers and lack the time or expertise to carry out their own research with confidence.

Twelve years ago, a Liverpool University sociologist applied some creative thinking to this problem. Dr David Hall realised that every year Liverpool's three universities were teaching substantial numbers of students to carry out applied social research. They all needed practical projects to tackle, and their project work was closely supervised by their academic tutors, providing a means of quality control.

David Hall and Irene Hall, then a sociologist at Liverpool Hope University, set up Interchange as an independent charity in 1994. Its mission

Creative thinking

is to liaise with community and voluntary organisations on Merseyside, translate their needs into an outline project brief and find local students interested in carrying out the research. The students are generally drawn from sociology, psychology, management or social work courses.

HOW IT WORKS

Undergraduate students can volunteer to do a field-based study brokered by Interchange as their final year project, instead of desk research, and get academic credits for their work. They devote one day per week to the project over two and a half terms in their final year, producing their research report in May. Masters students work on projects for a full twelve months, starting in October one year and producing their research report the following October.

The students negotiate with the community group to ensure the research will meet their needs. They collect the relevant background information; carry out fieldwork to obtain the data required; analyse the data; summarise the findings; make recommendations and write a structured report covering these five areas. The organisation concerned pays the students' expenses and receives a copy of the report which it can use

for internal purposes, or to support funding bids or publicity campaigns.

REFINING AND ROLLING OUT THE CONCEPT

Thanks to a grant from the Higher Education Funding Council for England, Interchange has been able to promote the basic concept to other higher education institutions in England through its website, videos and workbooks.

Last year Interchange organised an international conference, The Reality of Partnership; Celebrating Community and University Working Together and a local Community Research Forum, which was designed to identify community groups' key needs. "This revealed that community groups want to learn how to understand and use the results of research, and some of them want to be empowered to conduct their own research, through research training", says Interchange's Co-ordinator, Sharon Lockley. "We are considering how Interchange might respond to these challenges."

Examples of recent projects brokered by Interchange can be found below, and on p5.

A NHS Trust in Liverpool has gained valuable insights into ways it could strengthen its infection control strategy following a project carried out by local students of applied social research. The students and academic supervisors were identified by Interchange.

Pioneering research

Going into hospital can be a risky business: your chances of picking up an infection while you're there are close to one in ten in England. There are over 100,000 cases every year, and these 'nosocomial' infections are the direct cause of 5,000 deaths and may contribute to another 15,000.

In Liverpool Aintree Hospitals NHS Trust appointed a dedicated Nurse Consultant in Infection Control to address this problem. Julie Hughes' remit included developing and promoting guidelines and protocols for care professionals to help them to minimise and manage nosocomial infection. Before tackling this, she felt she should find out how well senior nurses, matrons and managers understood infection control. She also realised that it was vital to investigate how well hospital volunteers understood the issues and how to respond to them. "The Trust has about 400 volunteers, and some of them have been helping the hospital for 20-30 years", she explains. "They serve food to patients, help to lift or escort them, and so on. This gives us two causes for concern: volunteers could inadvertently pass on an infection, and they themselves could succumb to a nosocomial infection."



GROUNDING RESEARCH

Julie Hughes felt it was important for these investigations to be carried out by independent researchers, so she was happy to accept Interchange's offer to help. Interchange helped prepare research briefs – for Julie and for the manager of the Aintree Volunteers Scheme, who also wanted to explore possible links between volunteering and training as a nurse – and recruited three students to carry out the research.

The project focussing on hospital volunteers' views and understanding of infection control was carried out by Hameera Waheed, a final year student from Liverpool Hope University. Hameera researched the literature, discussed the issues with the Infection Control Team and opted for a grounded

approach to the research. This involved some participant observation and the construction of a semi-structured questionnaire to guide in-depth interviews she carried out with eight volunteers. The results of this pilot phase led her to revise the set of questions she subsequently asked in a postal survey sent to a random sample of 60 volunteers.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Hameera found that the hospital offered two accredited courses in basic food hygiene and health and safety, but they were not mandatory. New volunteers received a pack with information on personal and food hygiene, but the research revealed that they didn't necessarily connect this with infection control – possibly due to changes in the terminology used, or because the information was not presented in a way which was easy to understand, or they had paid little attention to it. Some volunteers had a very narrow view of infection control practices and were not complying with all the recommended practices. Many volunteers did not perceive infection control to present a problem – from the patients' perspective or their own, and they saw no need to improve or update their understanding.

In her report to the Infection Control Unit and Aintree Volunteers Service, Hameera recommended that the hospital should review the volunteer pack and incorporate new material explaining very clearly why infection control is important, and why everyone in the hospital should comply with risk reduction measures. The orientation programme should be extended to cover infection control measures, and ward managers should be trained to monitor and reinforce compliance. Further research should be undertaken to evaluate the most effective methods of refreshing and updating volunteers' understanding of infection control issues and procedures on a regular basis.

"We've incorporated the findings of both projects in our Trust education programmes", says Julie Hughes. "We presented the results at the Annual Conferences of the National Infection Control Nurses Association and we've been asked to publish them in a peer reviewed journal. The students provided an essential service to the Trust, which might not have been available otherwise. I would definitely recommend this programme to other organisations." "The finished project gave me everything I wanted", confirms Terry Owen, Manager of the Aintree Volunteers Scheme.

For 25 years a charity set up by residents of the Walton district of Liverpool has been using nature to help local youngsters become fulfilled individuals and useful members of society. Recently Interchange – an organisation set up by a Liverpool University sociologist – helped the charity to evaluate its effectiveness and identify how it could do better or do more.

Mission accomplished

Historically, the area was dedicated to death: there were two splendid lodges and a mortuary chapel, row after row of well-tended gravestones, some war graves and a section where paupers were buried. This is where Robert Tressell, author of The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists, was interred; where England's first public health officer and an engineer who perished in the Titanic were laid to rest.

In the 1970s, a hideous transformation took place. The burial ground was closed, vandalised, taken over by drug users and festooned with used needles, rubbish and stolen cars. Since then, it has undergone an altogether more beneficial transformation: it forms part of a city farm whose mission is to provide practical education and training for young people – especially disadvantaged young people.

HIVE OF ACTIVITY

Rice Lane City Farm (RLCF) was set up in 1979 by local residents in Walton, Liverpool, who leased Walton burial ground and its grade II listed buildings from St Nicholas Church. Since then, RLCF has taken on several acres of adjoining woodland. It now has 24 acres which support rare livestock breeds, wildlife conservation, indigenous planting, coppicing, horticulture, organic gardening – and a football pitch.

The RLCF runs play schemes; puts on activities for children with learning



Children grooming a horse and planting a tree at Rice Lane City Farm

Liverpool Cares is a Business in the Community initiative. It helps businesses and their employees undertake short voluntary projects for community organisations. Thanks to Interchange, Liverpool Cares has been able to research the impact of these projects.

Win : win : win ?

Based in a dilapidated old building in the Toxteth area of Liverpool, the Golden Gloves Boxing Club provides training facilities for local young people. The club's small kitchen and lounge were in such a bad state, nobody used them. Now the area has been transformed, thanks to a 'challenge' publicised by Liverpool Cares and taken up by Liverpool Daily Post and Echo and its staff.

Businesses which join Liverpool Cares undertake between two and eight challenges a year. They are usually carried out during the working week by teams of employees who volunteer their services. They generally involve physical labour – renovation, decoration, tidying up, gardening etc – for organisations which are struggling to help disadvantaged people. Liverpool Cares helps businesses to prepare for their chosen challenge by undertaking site visits and risk assessments, and by briefing team leaders.

Whatever the challenge, the aim is to create a win:win:win situation, benefitting the business and the individual volunteers, as well as the community organisation – but is this what happens in practice? "Cares is a great programme but we don't have any independent evidence to back this up. We don't have the expertise or the resources required to research this ourselves", says Liverpool Cares' project manager, Jo McGrath, "so we asked Interchange to help us."

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Following discussions with Liverpool Cares, Interchange prepared a research brief and recruited a final year sociology student from Liverpool University to carry out the study. Supervised by the University, Kristen White devised a sample frame and a semi-structured questionnaire and conducted a series of face to face interviews. The participants were drawn from three community organisations which had recently specified challenges, the three businesses which had responded, and the employees who had risen to these challenges.

The businesses were from the public, private and education sectors: HM Customs & Excise, Liverpool Daily Post and Echo, and Liverpool John Moores University. Between them, they had already notched up 11 challenges for a range of community organisations, but Kristen focussed on projects undertaken for Liverpool Central Citizens' Advice Bureau, the Golden Gloves Boxing Club and St Joseph's Hospice in Merseyside.

ENCOURAGING RESULTS

Kristen's research revealed that in some cases, their challenge had taken volunteers to territory they had not experienced before – geographically or socially, creating a deep impression and a wish to do more. Many of them had not known

difficulties; provides work experience for teenage school children; offers arts and crafts, cooking, dance and performance classes; and runs a football club for local youngsters. It collaborates with a wide range of organisations. "For instance, Liverpool Community College sends us students taking NVQ level I in Agriculture, Environment Conservation or Horticulture and NVQ level II in Livestock Production to get hands-on experience", says RLCF's Projects Manager, Colin Barry. "We take New Deal trainees, and schools regularly bring classes here for science and art lessons."

The RLCF has had its work evaluated from a conservation perspective, and in terms of the use it makes of the available space. In 2003, the charity decided it was time to find out whether people felt it was pursuing its mission effectively; how users rated its services; which services it might expand; and how to communicate what it was achieving.

GOOD NEWS

Interchange recruited two students studying applied social research methods to carry out two separate research projects on RLCF's behalf. Juliet Kariuki, a sociology student from Liverpool University, used qualitative and quantitative research methods in her project. She did some participant observation, designed a questionnaire and carried out telephone and face to face interviews with young people and organisations using RLCF's facilities.

Juliet's key findings were encouraging. Her informants perceived RLCF to provide a safe haven for vulnerable young people. Its quiet woodland, its organic produce and its sports sessions promote healthy living. It helps young people to recognise their capabilities and strengths and become motivated and confident enough to try to realise their potential. It is a good example of equal opportunities in action. These are all positive messages which RLCF needs to communicate as effectively as possible – via a website, leaflets and posters, and by establishing a 'Friends of RLCF' network. Juliet's research also flagged up two or three areas in which RLCF could work more effectively.

"Juliet Kariuki had very good interpersonal skills", comments Colin Barry. "All the volunteers and staff at RLCF found her very engaging, and she communicated well with our users, who come from very different backgrounds. She was flexible in her approach to her research, and I think this got good results. We'd be delighted to work with Interchange again."



their fellow volunteers when they embarked on the challenge, but they had learned to work as a team, organise themselves and manage their time well, and this had helped them back at work.

The community organisations had received the help they needed – and raised awareness of their activities. The employers felt that their businesses had gained from the experience – in terms of better morale, team spirit and productivity, as well as a better image in the community. For some, it was also eye-opening from a staff development perspective. "Some unexpected people rose to the challenge", said one employer. Kristen's study also identified steps which Liverpool Cares could take to improve its service – creating a website to advertise the latest challenges and celebrate completed challenges; ensuring that risk assessments are undertaken jointly by the community organisation, the business and Liverpool Cares; promoting good communication between the three parties; and redesigning its post-challenge evaluation forms.