



Museums
Libraries &
Archives

Opening Up Spaces

Bringing new people into museums, libraries and archives by supporting self-organised learning



The 'Open Space' movement offers a new way for museums, libraries and archives to reach out to their communities and support the many groups of adults who wish to organise their own learning.

It was introduced in the Government's White Paper on informal adult learning, 'The Learning Revolution', which called for organisations to open their spaces to adults who want to run their own learning groups; whether they wish to learn Ancient Greek, explore their family history or knit Egyptian socks.

The White Paper describes a new joined up vision for informal adult learning, suitable for the 21st century, which brings together partners across government, local authorities and the community sector to enable more people to enjoy learning throughout life.

Museums, libraries and archives are inspiring spaces that naturally support individuals and families to learn together and from each other. They can support the vision outlined in The White Paper by actively inviting groups of learners to use their space, at low or no cost. This is a great way of increasing the range of learning opportunities that local people can access and enjoy.

Opening up spaces

What are the benefits?

Increasing access to your facilities for self-organised learners:

- can draw new and different people into your museum, library or archive
- can raise your profile as group members tell friends about their project
- can make the wider learning community more aware of the valuable resources you have to offer
- can demonstrate that you offer a community space that can be used in different ways to bring people together
- can enhance your overall learning programme as the self-organised groups contribute more learning opportunities for local people
- can result in an increased number of people volunteering to work in your organisation.

Opening up your facilities and resources doesn't have to cost your organisation time or money, so why not join in and reap the rewards!

What do we mean by informal adult learning?

Informal adult learning is learning for its own sake rather than to gain a qualification. The term covers a wide variety of activities, from foreign language classes to local history clubs, and from reading groups to researching your family tree online.

This kind of learning makes a big contribution to the health and well-being of individuals, families and communities, and learning that starts off informally, or on a small scale, may lead to other things. Many people take up a new interest or start to learn a new skill in an informal way and then find they can use that skill to move into a new career, become active in their community or start their own business.



What do we mean by self-organised learning groups?

Self-organised learning groups are groups of people, not directly funded by the public purse, who get together to pursue a shared interest or learn a new skill. They include community choirs, reading groups, local heritage groups, University of the Third Age groups and many more.

“Informal Learning can at its best transform people’s lives. Whether it’s for personal fulfilment, keeping active and independent into old age, gaining increased confidence or opening a door to further opportunities, it can contribute hugely to the health and well-being of individuals and the wider society. Government fully recognises the vital contribution informal learning makes in creating the kind of society we want to live in.”

Taken from ‘The Learning Revolution’, page 11

The MLA Challenge Fund

The government has set a target to open up 7,000 free or low cost learning spaces for self-organised learning by the end of 2010. The MLA has actively supported this target by launching the MLA Challenge Fund in May 2009. This fund offered small grants of up to £5,000 to museums, libraries and archives willing to open up their space in this way.

The museums, libraries and archives who bid successfully to the fund have embraced a new way of working – to act as facilitators rather than deliverers of learning, and to allow self-organised groups to run their own activity in their own way.

“The MLA Challenge Fund has demonstrated what can be done with a relatively small amount of funding and a vibrant group of adult learners.”

Angie Weatherhead,
Librarian

Eighteen museums, libraries and archives received a grant from MLA. In this publication, nine projects describe their work and share lessons learnt to inspire you to open up your own spaces and resources. They are all at different stages of implementing this new way of working and we hope their experience will act as a guide to the wider museum, library and archive sector.



Ripping Yarns

supported by the Potteries Museum and Gallery,
Stoke on Trent

Ripping Yarns is a self-organised group of learners, passionate about textiles, who have used the inspiring space provided by the Potteries Museum to explore this interest.

The museum facilitated Ripping Yarns by using their grant to purchase craft equipment and materials to enable the group to use the gallery's collection as inspiration to make replica textiles.

Ripping Yarns has been a great success. The group enjoys using the museum as a base and has demonstrated high levels of inspiration and creativity. They have been generous with sharing and swapping their skills with new learners. Two women who had never knitted before, and spoke little English, joined the group. One of the women, Mahalakshmi, learnt how to knit her own hats and scarves and was then able to knit baby clothes when she became pregnant. The group has undertaken ambitious projects involving a lot of team work and the members are really benefiting from the shared learning environment that the museum has provided.

Hosting Ripping Yarns in the gallery has generated a lot of interest amongst other museum visitors with many people stopping to chat to them about what they are doing.

A number of the group members have gone on to volunteer at the museum and the group will continue to meet twice monthly in its gallery.



"I'm not involved at all apart from making the tea and booking the room."

**Cathy Shingler,
Interpretation Officer**



"The project has helped increase our experience of working with adult learners. Even among people who do not attend the group it seems to have 'humanised' the museum – an impression you get from the visitors who stop to chat to our knitters."

Cathy Shingler,
Interpretation Officer

Spreading Poetry for Pleasure

supported by Torbay Library Service

The Poetry for Pleasure group in Brixham was set up by a group of poetry enthusiasts who wanted to share this enthusiasm with others.

The library service opened up its meeting room space at no cost to support this group in spreading their passion for poetry and encouraging more local people to join.

The Poetry for Pleasure group has been a great success. The 25 adults involved meet monthly in the library meeting room and membership is growing at such a rate it may have to split into two groups to continue to use the space on offer.

The group have organised a number of open mic poetry sessions at the library and have produced a publication as well as poetry posters for display in vacant shop windows. The posters were launched with a poetry walk around the town, and the group performed at each poster on the route over loud hailer.

The Poetry for Pleasure group will continue to meet in the library and has inspired others too. Another Torbay library has been approached to host a poetry group and the original group has offered to help them get started.





"Thanks to all in the Poetry for Pleasure group who have been lighting up café windows and vacant premises with their colourful contributions."

Peter Kellick, Brixham,
from the Herald Express, Torquay
March 13, 2010



Open for Learning

supported by the Corinium Museum, Cirencester

The Corinium Museum took the opportunity presented by the MLA Challenge Fund to open up their space and resources to over 1,000 members of the University of the Third Age (U3A) in the Cotswolds.

The museum had no previous contact with the University of the Third Age and recognised that they could play a key role in supporting this enormous self-organised learning movement by establishing a long lasting relationship with the four U3A groups in their catchment area.

The Corinium has national and international expertise in archaeology and offered the U3A groups a free lecture series in archaeology plus free use of their lecture theatre and activity room to support their own learning activity.

Members of the U3A groups were amazed that they could access such large and varied collections – particularly some of the objects and artefacts not on public display.

Many members had never met each other before so the museum offered a valuable social opportunity for new friendships to flourish, a particularly important and unexpected benefit.

Open for Learning has led to further partnership opportunities for the Corinium. Some U3A members are also active in local history groups and have acted as ambassadors for the museum by spreading news about the learning resources on offer. However, it has also demonstrated that even established self-organised groups like the U3A may need to be offered support before they are able to use a museum, library or archive space.

The museum had hoped that the U3A groups would initiate how they would use the activity room themselves, but they seemed to be uncomfortable with this and wanted to be more directed.

An open day or briefing for self-organised learning group leaders to demonstrate use of resources, equipment or space might be enough to overcome this barrier. There are benefits that museums, libraries and archives can gain from supporting self-organised learners – for example, a number of the U3A members supported by the Corinium have joined the museum's volunteer team as a direct result.



“There was a fantastic response to the tours of the museum stores. It has encouraged the U3A to use the reserve collections, and develop a greater awareness of the full potential of museums to support self-organised learners.”

Judy Mills,
Collections Management Officer

Digitise

supported by North Yorkshire Archives

North Yorkshire Archives used the MLA grant to purchase specialist equipment to support five self-organised local heritage groups to create their own high quality digitised records.

The local heritage groups responded with great enthusiasm to the opportunity to use the space and resources in the Record Office. They are all proud of what they have achieved and are developing public exhibitions that will be displayed in their local communities.

The groups have supported each other and shared their learning. The West Burton Village group, for example, has created a guide to pass on the skills and knowledge they have gained in using the specialist equipment to other groups. One of the group members even travelled to the Northallerton Record Office to help another group get started.

The archives will continue to extend access to the new digitisation equipment, not only to the five self-organised groups involved so far, but to others who are interested in developing similar activity in future. The digitisation equipment is now a permanent part of their community engagement offer.

“A striking aspect of this project was the extent to which groups had ownership of the planning and delivery of activities. By providing them with the necessary equipment and work space they have been allowed to develop at their own pace, and according to their own priorities. Our staff are now much more open to the possibilities of working in this new way with self-organised heritage groups as a result of the challenge fund project.”

Keith Sweetmore,
Archives Development Manager

Green Bananas

supported by the Working Class Movement Library, Salford

The Working Class Movement Library contains a huge collection of rare, unique artefacts which document the lives of ordinary people over the last 200 years.

Well used by academics and students, the library took advantage of the opportunity that the Challenge Fund presented to inspire a broader cross-section of local people to use its facilities. A local group involved in the annual 'Lighting the Legend' community celebration at Salford Docks were invited to use the rich resources in the library to inspire their performance which they called 'Green Bananas'.

The group researched stories about the dockers who worked at the Quays and used them to compose songs to celebrate their working lives which were performed at the 'Lighting the Legend' event.

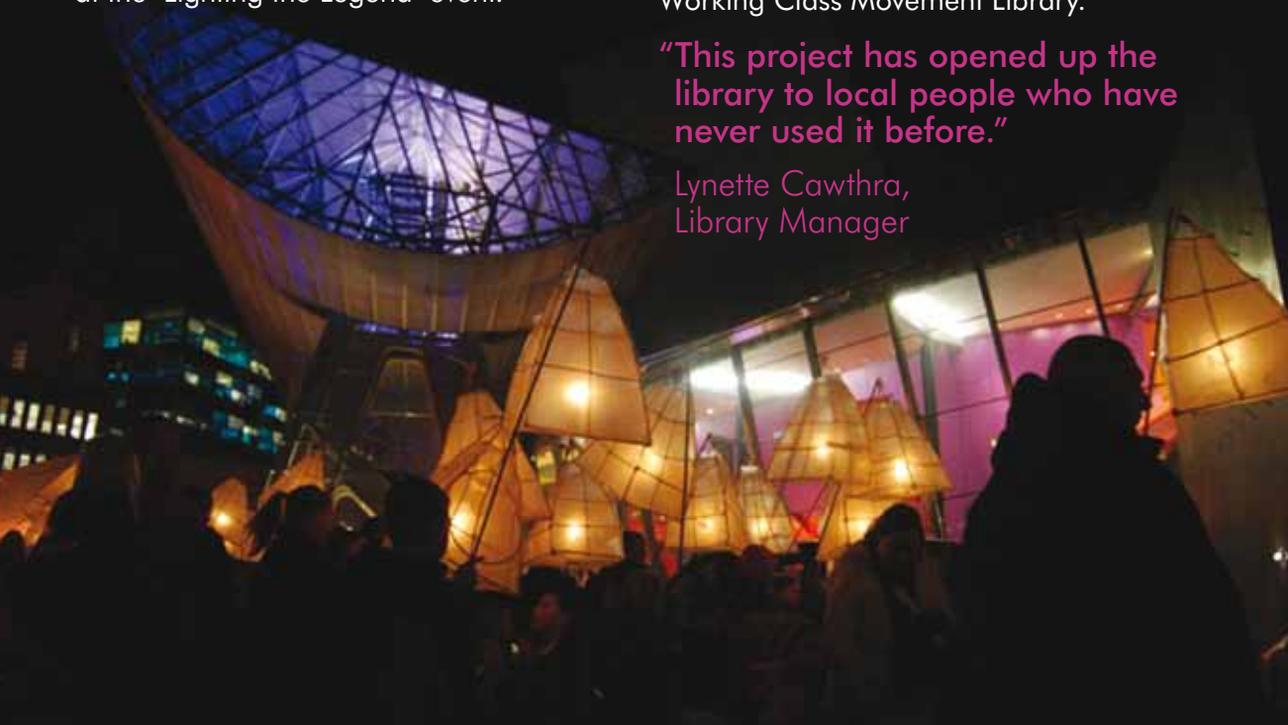
An unexpected outcome was the introduction of a group of young people to the library. They were creating artwork for the performance and were unsure about coming into the library at all ("ugh, a library, do we have to go, sssh") but once the group brought them through the doors they were amazed by the range of artefacts in the collection and used the old photographs to inspire their work.

The main group performed their song in front of 2,000 people and the sense of pride from developing, recording and performing their song live was enormous. For an inner city area with little self-organised community activism, this was hugely important.

The group continues to meet and use the library resources to inspire them and library staff have acknowledged that this approach has widened community access to the Working Class Movement Library.

"This project has opened up the library to local people who have never used it before."

Lynette Cawthra,
Library Manager



Sock It!

supported by the Petrie Museum
of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL, London

The Petrie Museum developed Sock It! – making ancient Egyptian socks from scratch – to open up its space for self-organised learning groups in partnership with the University of the Third Age. Sock It! was also advertised on knitting blogs and through Twitter.

The museum had to think differently to create an open space for learning that they themselves weren't involved in organising.

The group knitted socks in ancient Egyptian style using the two-toed Egyptian socks on display in the museum as inspiration.

The group recorded the progress of Sock It! on a blog and posted the Egyptian sock pattern card they developed on the internet for others to share.

The Petrie intends to sustain its support for self-organised learners. Their relationship with the University of the Third Age has progressed well and they are working with them to further promote their facilities to older learners.

The museum will continue to promote its space and resources through social networking to reach out to a wider range of self-organised learning groups and encourage them to develop similar exciting activities to Sock It!.





"We examined the Petrie socks in the museum by torchlight which was fascinating. Can't wait to start."

Make and Mend

supported by Leeds Museums and Galleries

Leeds Museums and Galleries used the grant they received from the MLA to build up a bank of equipment to encourage greater use of their museum spaces and collections by the local craft community.

A number of successful workshops have since been run by self-organised groups at Leeds Museum Discovery Centre, which stores the costume and textile collections. Many of those taking part had no idea the Discovery Centre existed or that they could make use of the collection.

An online portal, 'Craftsville', has been set up by the craft community using the MLA grant to advertise relevant local events and create an online community where self-organised learners can share ideas and tips. The museum intends to use the portal to directly advertise their open space and resources to the local craft community and encourage them to make more use of it. They also plan to offer opportunities for more informal craft activities in their galleries and café spaces as well as at the Discovery Centre.

Make and Mend has led to a real shift in the relationship between Leeds Museums and the local craft community. They intend to continue supporting the self-organised groups to take full advantage of their resources and space. A craft celebration day at Leeds City Museum in October 2010 will showcase the range of self-organised learning opportunities offered by the craft community to a wider audience.





"I haven't done anything like this since attending art school a long time ago and it has fired up my creative interests again."



Creative Arts

supported by Bruce Castle Museum, Haringey

Bruce Castle Museum tried a different approach to encourage local adults to use their space in a self-organised way.

Instead of working with an existing group, they invited local residents, interested in the creative arts, to a range of taster sessions in the hope that they would continue to use the space and resources available to develop their own arts activity.

Opportunities to explore behind the scenes were again popular, with many of those taking part commenting on feeling privileged to be able to use the wider collection not on display.

The group soon got to know each other. They reminisced whilst they learnt, talking about their mothers and grandmothers making rag rugs in Jamaica using coffee bean sacks, for example.

Some of the group's work will be displayed at Bruce Castle Museum during Adult Learners' Week and it was a successful programme. However, the group was not functioning in a self-organised way by the end of the programme as planned.

Museums, libraries and archives that want to open up their spaces to adults who are not part of an existing group need to consider what support they may need to provide in order to enable them to become self-sufficient in the future.



“Working with others with similar interests alleviates my loneliness.”

Birtley Heritage Group

supported by Gateshead Libraries

Birtley Heritage Group is a collection of local people who came together to find out about the influx of Belgian refugees into Birtley during World War 2.

They had already approached the library service for support in establishing themselves as a heritage group, so the Challenge Fund provided the service with an ideal opportunity to help and to develop their role as a facilitator rather than a deliverer of learning activity.

The group has now collected unrecorded stories about the Belgian refugees and created an extensive database which is being added to the local history resource in the library. It has developed into a cohesive self-organised learning group. At first the group relied on the library for support but they are now confidently making independent decisions.

An unexpected outcome for this group was meeting and getting to know a group of young people who also used the library as their base. They got on so well that the young people have developed a brand and identity for the heritage group and this intergenerational spin-off has been a source of great pleasure for all concerned.

Supporting a self-organised group has been a learning curve for the library staff but they recognise that this approach has meant that what is being delivered is what the group is truly interested in.

The Birtley Heritage Group will continue to meet in the library once a fortnight to use the resources to support their research. Most of the members have talked about the benefits of getting out and about and sharing interests and experiences.

“It has been a very valuable learning experience for Gateshead Libraries. We are now much more confident about responding positively to self-organised groups of learners who wish to use the library to develop their own learning activity.”

Stephen Walters,
Principal Library Manager

What we've learnt from the Challenge Fund

- Supporting self-organised learning groups has enhanced the overall learning programme offered by each of the participating museums, libraries and archives.
- You may attract wider and more diverse audiences. The young people introduced to the Working Class Movement Library, for example, were won over by what was on offer but would never have walked through the door by themselves.
- Working in this way can raise your profile in the local community. The Ripping Yarns group in the Potteries Museum, for example, is a visible sign to others that this is a community space that can be used in a variety of ways.
- There is real value in offering more opportunities for adult learners to use the resources not usually on public display.
- Many of the members of the self-organised groups have gone on to become volunteers at the museum, library or archive that supported them.
- Some self-organised groups may need support to be able to make use of your space and resources. An introductory tour to show groups what is available and how it could be used is a positive invitation to do so.



Opening up spaces out of hours

The Challenge Fund focused on opening up spaces in museums, libraries and archives during existing opening hours. Leicestershire Library Service, as a partner in a successful Authority-wide bid to the Learning Revolution Transformation Fund, has taken this initiative even further by offering self-organised groups of learners access to 10 library buildings out of hours. The overall vision was to establish a network of multi-access learning spaces to directly benefit self-organised learners in Leicestershire.

Keypad technology is enabling self-organised groups, who enter into an agreement with the County Council, to use these spaces out of hours and without the need for a member of staff to be present. The agreement is important as it ensures that the group is covered by public liability insurance and health and safety guidelines are adhered to.

This example provides real inspiration for how technology can increasingly enable the open space movement to go from strength to strength.



Help with joining the open space movement

There are a number of resources to support organisations, including museums, libraries and archives, to open up their spaces to self-organised learners.

1. The 'Making Space for Learning' guide, NIACE

NIACE was commissioned by the government to produce the 'Making Space for Learning' guide. It provides organisations with information and support to make their facilities available to self-organised groups, including:

- relevant legislation and what you need to do to comply with it
- advice on practical issues such as costs, charging and security
- checklists, templates and top tips to download, use and adapt
- case studies with practical examples of how a wide range of organisations have opened up their spaces for informal adult learning and what they have gained from it.

The 'Making Space for Learning' guide is available on the School of Everything site at www.schoolofeverything.com

2. The School of Everything

The School of Everything is an online portal that supports self-organised groups of learners to find spaces in their local area where they can meet and learn together.

It is easy to use and provides museums, libraries and archives with a free facility to market resources, activities and space to a wide audience.

To make use of this opportunity simply register on the website and you can then add:

- information about the free or low-cost spaces that self-organised groups of learners could use in your museum, library or archive
- information about informal adult learning activities and events you offer, to promote them to a wider audience – the site is searchable by postcode
- learning resources (word documents, PDFs, images, videos) that support informal adult learning.

A free, customisable 'search widget' is also available that you can add to your own museum, library or archive website.

www.schoolofeverything.com

3. Learning Clubs and Groups toolkit

The Learning Clubs and Groups toolkit is an online resource that supports groups who want to organise their own learning. It has been developed by NIACE in collaboration with the University of the Third Age and provides information, advice and materials on all aspects of setting up, running and keeping a group going.

www.selforganisedlearning.com



4. Community Learning Champions support programme

Community Learning Champions promote the value of learning to friends, relatives and workmates and encourage them to get involved. The Champions are volunteers who are active in their communities and can signpost learning opportunities to others.

A Community Learning Champion support programme has been developed to help use the community learning champion approach to open up more opportunities for informal learning.

The support programme is developing a toolkit and regional networks to support the Champions to flourish, and MLA is exploring opportunities to link the extensive volunteer workforce in museums, libraries and archives to these networks and broker mutually beneficial partnerships.

Find out more at the Community Learning Champion website
www.communitylearningchampions.org.uk

5. Community Leaders Training Programme – The Horniman Museum

The Horniman Museum offers a training programme, 'Community Projects with Our Objects', to help community leaders learn how to best use their spaces and collections (see pictures opposite). Whilst not specifically designed to support the open space movement, it is an excellent example of an existing programme that could be adapted by other museums, libraries and archives to open up their space.

The museum has a unique learning space, the 'Hands on Base', with over 3,000 objects linked to its diverse collection. The one day training programme was developed nearly three years ago to ensure the space was used effectively by the local community and it has been successful in widening the range of local groups who now use this space.

More information about the 'Hands On Base' is available at
<http://research.mla.gov.uk/case-studies/>

How you can get involved

Local Authorities will be exploring how they can make the most of all available resources, including spaces, as they become Lead Accountable Bodies for Informal Adult Learning.

The MLA Challenge Fund has kick-started thinking on how museums, libraries and archives could open up their spaces in new ways to support self-organised learners.

There are other partnerships you could build to bring in new audiences to your spaces. Many employers now support a network of union learning representatives and learning centres, for example. Why not use this network to widen use?

We hope we have inspired you to consider how you could support self-organised learners to run their own activities in your space. With a bit of imagination, you too could liberate your space and resource to create more and different demand.

If you already open up your space to support self-organised learning or intend to do so, we'd love to hear about your experiences and future plans.

To find out more contact:

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