

Capacitar Working with a Local Community Groups

I worked with an urban-based Community Group comprised of long-term unemployed, lone parents, youth at risk/early school leavers, older people, ethnic minorities and people on low incomes. The aim of this Community Group is to counter disadvantage, exclusion and marginalisation within the community and to restore dignity. It also works in partnership and networks with other agencies working towards social inclusion and improving quality of life of those living in the same part of the town. This community group is part of Clare Local Development Company, a new organisation responsible for the delivery of a range of rural and enterprise development, social inclusion, community development and environmental initiatives in Co Clare.

My previous experience with this Community Group was very different from Capacitar. Between October and December last I had taught the group basic Irish with a view to their being able to help their children in Primary Schools with their Irish homework. This had been challenging because concentrating for even the shortest period of time was extremely difficult for many in the group. And also they were at different levels. Some, from Africa, had never heard a word of Irish while others had spent four or five years in secondary school.

I knew they were taking some health related modules this term so I talked to the coordinator about Capacitar. Having spoken to the group before Christmas and explained what was involved, they agreed to take part. I was pleased that Capacitar was something that they were choosing rather than something being imposed on them.

I only got to do two sessions because of the rather unusual weather conditions experienced in Ireland during January. This accounted for the fact that six out of the sixteen were missing from the group for the first session. I began the first session with the exercises based on Tai Chi. Everyone in the group had heard of Tai Chi so I began by explaining that Chi means 'energy flow' and we played a bit with energy by rubbing the palms of hands together and pulling them apart slowly and bringing the hands close together again. Some reported feeling heat between their hands. We did the rocking from side to side exercises and the relaxation exercise of placing the hands beneath the navel and breathing. At this point, it was obvious that I needed to do some input on breathing so we spent some time practising abdominal breathing. The image I gave was that of a newly born baby because from the moment of birth one can see that babies are expert at abdominal breathing. When the Tai Chi exercises were completed, the group worked in pairs, sharing what they remembered and which

exercises worked for them. The feedback was very positive. Many said they felt more relaxed, that they had been tired and now felt more energetic and that tension had moved especially from the shoulders. They were very aware of bones 'cracking' in the ankles and tension between the shoulder blades.

Following this, we did the finger holds. This was brief and they remembered that I had told them about this protocol when I met them to discuss Capacitar before Christmas. Something remarkable happened while they were doing the finger holds. A silence descended on the group and I had never experienced anything like it before. They seemed so much at ease and relaxed. As a result of this, I changed course and decided to do the holds. I thought it might follow logically on from the finger holds. During the course of this practice, two members of the group told the person working with them that they didn't want the heart hold on the front of the chest and two others didn't want any of the holds touching the body. I was absolutely delighted that they felt sufficiently free to say this. There were two who talked and laughed all through the practice. I was unsure how to deal with this so I suggested occasionally that this exercise works better for some if they can close their eyes while practising. However, the coordinator of the group suggested that if they couldn't do the exercise that they ought to go out for a while. They chose to stay in the room. In the feedback, most people felt very relaxed, two felt tired and some who had been tired felt full of energy. One felt tired and 'headachy'. Most people said they really trusted the person who was their partner for the exercise. Some could feel heat from the hands of their partner. A few felt pain and tension easing in their bodies and were able to pinpoint the moment of this change. One of the African women said that she has had a pain in her chest since she came to Ireland and for the first time she could feel the pain draining away during the practice. Of the three practices done at this first session, the holds was the most powerful.

The second session was quite different. Everyone in the group had turned up (16 in all). We began this session by getting each person to draw one of their hands. And then they wrote the emotion associated with each finger. We then did the guided meditation on the finger holds using the CD. There wasn't a sound in the room. I did notice, however, that three people did not take part and spent the time drawing on the sketch of their hands or fiddling with the mobile phone. Afterwards, they shared in pairs and later with the full group how the exercise went. Those who had taken part really enjoyed it. They didn't listen to every word on the CD but moved from finger to finger as the CD suggested. One girl said she found it difficult to hold her third, ring and little finger. One of the people who didn't take part said she finds it hard to do anything a group leader asks.

Following this, I did the Pal Dan Gum exercises. Half way through, we were interrupted because an electrician had come to do some work in the room. We took a coffee break and resumed in a smaller room. The energy in the room changed completely after the break and I don't know if any group ever enjoyed Pal Dan Gum as much as this group did. They particularly enjoyed Opening the Bow, Punching with Fists and the Lion's Roar. They laughed so much, I'm not sure if they breathed at all but if they did, it certainly wasn't abdominal breathing and as far as they were concerned Pal Dan Gum was 'great fun'.

We concluded the second session with the acupressure points. With hindsight, I think I tried to give too much information during this exercise and it would have been better to give less information because we were running out of time and I was too anxious to cover everything.

I saw huge changes in this group during the Capacitar sessions. They calmed down and became still in a way I didn't dream was possible. If I were more experienced, I would have chosen other exercises that would have lent themselves to the group becoming even more relaxed. The challenge of getting people to listen to each other was still very real and perhaps it would have been better not to introduce feedback to the full group at such an early stage.

The feedback from the two sessions was very positive and I felt grateful to be able to introduce this group to some aspects of Capacitar.