ALCN Learning Forum on Community/Learning Needs Analysis held on 10 October 2024:

Introduction & Context:

The session was chaired by **Joanne Lockwood**, Coordinator at Ballarat Library and Learning, who introduced the forum by highlighting the importance of community engagement before developing a formal Learning Framework. The session was informal, with an emphasis on sharing experiences related to community and learning needs analysis. Joanne was particularly interested in learning from others as she begins her own community engagement efforts for Ballarat.

Key Topics and Discussions:

Purpose of Learning Needs Analysis:

Joanne framed the session by asking participants about the purpose of conducting community and learning needs analysis. The consensus was that these analyses help identify:

- **Gaps in learning opportunities**, such as missing programs or underserved groups.

- **Barriers to learning**, like cost, transport issues, time constraints, and a lack of confidence in learning.

Participants agreed that these insights are vital for tailoring learning programs to better meet community needs.

Engagement Methods Used:

Various methods of community engagement were discussed, with participants highlighting what worked best in their contexts:

- **Surveys and Focus Groups**: Joanne and several participants, including **Dianne Hillier** from Wollongong, shared their use of surveys and focus groups to gather input. Dianne explained how focus groups were conducted with specific community groups (e.g., CALD, First Nations communities) to identify barriers, such as cost, time, and digital access issues.

- **Face-to-face Engagement**: **Nicky Bolt** from Tasmania discussed the importance of physically going out to remote communities to conduct consultations. She explained how, in her experience, digital or online surveys weren't effective due to low internet access and low educational aspiration in the region. Nicky shared how they held community meetings and incentivised attendance with fuel vouchers, which helped address transport barriers.

- **Creative Engagement Tactics**: **Danielle Marie** from Brimbank City Council mentioned using informal, personal engagement methods to break the ice, such as bringing gifts to community craft groups. This helped build trust and encouraged participation in learning needs discussions. **Sylvia Velez** also mentioned conducting casual workshops on topics like financial literacy during craft groups, which made learning feel less formal and intimidating.

Use of Consultants:

Several participants shared how they used consultants to enhance their engagement efforts:

- **Danielle Marie** mentioned how a consultant helped tailor sessions for specific cohorts, such as young people or CALD communities, using interpreters and engaging exercises to ensure participation.

- **Jenny Thompson** highlighted that consultants are especially helpful when internal resources are limited, bringing in expertise in research and community engagement. However, she stressed the importance of being present during consultant-led sessions to gain firsthand insights from the community.

Challenges in Reaching Hard-to-Reach Groups:

Many participants discussed the difficulties in reaching underrepresented groups:

- **Donna Goldie** raised the issue of how some vulnerable groups, such as those with young children, might not participate in either formal or informal learning programs, making them particularly hard to reach.

- **Jenny Thompson** and **Sharyn Wheatcroft** pointed out that building trust with these groups, especially First Nations communities, is a slow process. Sharyn explained how Wyndham had to work hard to ensure that First Nations people saw themselves reflected in the new strategy after feeling underrepresented in previous Strategies.

- **Leone** Wheeler emphasized the importance of developing an ethics process, which is particularly important with vulnerable groups and young people (under the age of 18). This could be done by partnering with a University.

Impact of Community Engagement on Strategy:

The forum explored how the information gathered through community engagement was used to shape learning strategies:

- **Sharyn Wheatcroft** from Wyndham discussed how their community feedback was directly integrated into the Learning Community Strategy. They used a "You Said, We Did" approach, clearly showing the community how their input led to concrete actions. This built transparency and trust.

- **Danielle Marie** mentioned how Brimbank embedded community feedback directly into the different life stages of their strategy. However, she noted that many suggestions from the community were already being addressed, highlighting a communication gap that they needed to resolve.

Unexpected Insights and Lessons Learned:

Participants shared surprises from their community engagement efforts:

- **Joanne Lockwood** and **Danielle Marie** both noted that many community members asked for programs that already existed, which suggested a need for better communication about what was available.

- **Nicky Bolt** raised the challenge of low turnout at health-focused community events, despite extensive promotion. She found that even with free food and enticing incentives, attendance remained low, possibly due to fear or denial about health issues.

Conclusion & Next Steps:

The session wrapped up with Joanne thanking participants for sharing their experiences. She noted that the forum provided valuable insights, particularly as she prepares to start Ballarat's own community engagement and lifelong learning framework.

The final ALCN informal learning session of the year will be held on **8 December 2024**, focusing on planning topics for the next year. In the meantime, participants were encouraged to register for the upcoming **Climate Resilience and Community Education** webinar on **24 October 2024**.

This rich discussion highlighted the importance of a multi-faceted approach to community engagement and the need for trust, transparency, and creative methods to reach diverse groups.

Australian Digital Inclusion Index

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index measures the extent of digital inclusion in Australia. It is a digital inclusion measurement tool that will help inform and promote public policy and program responses to enhance digital inclusion in Australia.

Authors: Roy Morgan Research, Telstra, RMIT University, Swinburne University Centre for Social Impact.

Bradshaw, Jonathan (1972) **Taxonomy of social need.** In: McLachlan, Gordon, (ed.) Problems and progress in medical care : essays on current research, 7th series. Oxford University Press , London , pp. 71-82. Available from https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/118357/1/bradshaw_taxonomy.pdf

Community/Learning Needs Analysis

Community Centres South Australia. n.d. **Community Needs Analysis Toolkit.** Community Centres South Australia. Available at https://learning.communitycentressa.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Community-Needs-Analysis-Toolkit.pdf

This Community Needs Analysis Tool, developed by the Community Sector and Neighbourhood House Sector in South Australia, takes you through a step-by-step process on how to conduct such an analysis. Topics include understanding who lives in your community and who is under-represented; establishing who to consult with; designing questions; use of qualitative and quantitative methods and presenting the results. The Toolkit contains many useful templates that could be adapted. While it applies to one community centre the information could be adapted.

Marie, Danielle, 2023. 'Summary of the ALCN Friday Forum on the **Principles and Processes of Community Engagement**; reflecting on engaging with diverse communities.*' ALCN Friday Forum. Ripples December 2023. Available from https://us7.campaign-archive.com/?u=22f8ae4f7d480cb10154cb5c3&id=fde6e1f729

These are some steps Danielle recommended based on her experience at Brimbank City Council. More information is provided in the article.

1. Start early and gather background information.
2. Tap into existing networks.
3. Engage a consultant effectively with a clear and thorough consultant brief.
4. Collaborate with colleagues
5. Engage the community effectively

6. Continue the engagement process
7. Write the report/strategy incorporating feedback. Use plain English.
8. Measure success.

Our Community Pty Ltd, n.d. Conducting a community needs assessment. Ourcommunity.org.au.
https://www.ourcommunity.com.au/management/view_help_sheet.do?articleid=10

This well-known organisation set up to help Not for Profits in Australia has a useful 'fact sheet' about conducting community needs assessment. From identifying the assets and resources of your community; undertaking other background research; being realistic about what you can do with the resources available and a short sample community needs analysis survey. Helpful, and to the point with the following advice offered:

> "You may think you know what your community needs. You may even be right. Nevertheless, you must still consult the community first to find out what it wants - and you must do this genuinely, with a mind open to change."