

The Marion City Lifelong Learning Festival

One excellent example of a Learning City Festival in action is the week-long Marion City Lifelong Learning Festival which has taken place each September since 2002. Marion is a go-ahead city, fortunate enough to contain a centre for lifelong learning and a dynamic mayor who makes it her mission to increase learning there. Among the many central activities taking place at the Festival were performances by choirs of all ages, brass, pipe and jazz bands, string orchestras, classical, modern and disco dancing groups and drama groups gymnastic displays. Interactive demonstrations of T'ai Chi, karate, taekwondo, dog-handling and model plane making abounded. Jugglers, stilt-walkers, belly-dancers, clowns, singers and fire-eaters plied their trade. Authors described their works, poets their poetry. Sixty-three taster courses were offered by local learning providers – from elementary Spanish, through cooking and floristry to internet surfing. In order to increase the potential audience, the event was planned around the annual Royal Adelaide Show bringing in people from all over the State and beyond. A one-stop learning shop occupied a central spot claiming to find a course to suit each individual's learning needs.

70 stands manned by representatives of all the major formal and informal learning providers, schools, universities, adult colleges, community centres, voluntary and special interest groups marketed the attractiveness of their learning offerings. Further stands included playgroups, companies eg Mitsubishi, theatre groups, carer associations, medical centres, scholarship groups, fitness centres, sports clubs, churches, state and local services, family groups, army, travel and tourism and U3A. The whole was designed to showcase the excitement of learning and the benefits it would bring to the people of Adelaide and South Australia.

According to Professor Denis Ralph, whose centre organised the first Festival, and the local 'Advertiser' which produced a special supplement also acting as a programme guide to the festival, the week was a great success.' Council proud to enrich community' said a message from the Mayor, 'Services to provide for the future' proclaimed the State Governor, and the Education Ministers extolled the pleasures of learning, the opportunities available to citizens and its importance to the prosperity of city and region. Even the manager of the local Westfield shopping centre, a community in its own right with 300 stores and 3500 workers, proudly described himself as a partner to the festival and a strong supporter of lifelong learning for all.

Special articles about seniors on-line, second chance learning opportunities, distance learning, careers, new educational methods were contained within its pages. Messages promoted the new images of old organisations. 'No - this is not typical of libraries' declared the State Library Board, depicting a particularly fusty set of bookshelves with a 'silence please' notice above. 'The Libraries of today are fully interactive information centres, they have computers, cafes, galleries, community activities, CDs and DVDs interactive storytelling sessions. They are meeting places for dynamic learners.' Adult learning providers were at pains to present themselves as modern fascinating, glamorous APEL-friendly places offering bridging courses, foundation courses and all the support needed for older students to settle back into learning, as well as courses on topics from organ transplants to understanding Brave New World.

There was even an article by the Astrology Academy offering to detect 'your learning in the stars,' and of course advertisements from learning providers, churches, schools, companies, educational suppliers and centres of all kinds.

The icing on the cake was a lifelong learning survey on the back page with a prize draw for those who completed it. It was almost the sort of learning audit described in chapter xx containing questions such as:

How do you prefer to find out information or to develop your skills for your hobbies and projects or at work?

A learning project is when you decide to find out something new, or how to do something better. It includes finding out new things about an existing hobby, trying a new project in your house or in your own time. Have you completed a learning project within the last year or are you working on projects at the moment (home or work)?

What was your most recent project?

If you had the time, money and opportunity to do anything you wanted what would really like to learn

What do you think of the learning opportunities and activities where you live.

How do you think they can be improved

Which of the following statements about learning do you personally agree with

- ✓ The more people learn, the better off your region will be
- ✓ Learning is most important for people who are making a change in their lives
- ✓ The only way to get ahead these days is to be learning and training all the time
- ✓ The way many people were taught at school has put them off learning for life
- ✓ Learning anything is valuable, even if it doesn't lead to a better job
- ✓ The only time people need to learn is when they are getting qualifications
- ✓ Everyone should invest their own time and effort to keep learning
- ✓ Life is too short to waste time learning

And many more, providing administrators and learning organisations with a wealth of information and insight about preferences, attitudes, desires and perceptions. Learning Festivals such as this need not be costly – indeed, run properly, they can bring in revenue to the organising body. The spin-off benefits however are immense. They include:

- Thousands more learners in cities and regions
- A concomitant reduction in crime and social unrest
- The opportunity for learning providers and administrations to showcase their achievements and their special characteristics
- The opportunity for other institutions to present their credentials as learning organisations
- A showcase focus for choirs, bands, dancers, gymnasts and other groups to display their talents and recruit new members
- An occasion for citizens to see and compare new learning opportunities
- The opportunity to gather up-to-date knowledge on peoples' learning preferences
- The presentation of learning as a necessary, beneficial and pleasurable activity within a fun environment.
- Potential income to learning providers
- The opportunity to showcase volunteering and invite active citizenship
- Another step towards the achievement of a Learning City and Region.

And probably a hundred more.

Denis Ralph, Director of the Lifelong Learning Centre which organised it, now unfortunately defunct, says 'The Marion Learning Festival was a great initiative and drew a terrific positive response from the public, business and government. It played an important role in bringing lifelong learning to the attention of more than 250,000 people each year when they visited the Marion Shopping Centre during the Festival and to over 1.3 million who saw the special feature in the State's newspaper, The Advertiser. The fact that it continued even after the closure of our Centre is testimony to it's success.'