UNISON
the public service union

LEARN
2021

HOPE

NAVIGATING THE NEW NORMAL

THROUGH LEARNING

AND DEVELOPMENT

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Hope for the future

IN THE MOST DIFFICULT of times, learning gives us hope for the future. This year has brought that home. Even though the COVID-19 pandemic and the end of the Union Learning Fund combined to present us with challenges we'd never encountered before, we've kept on learning, and learning has given us hope.

Thanks to the versatility and creativity of learning reps and staff, we've been able to bring high-quality learning to UNISON members in new ways and, against all the odds, our member learning programme is broader than ever.

It isn't just member learning. Our activist training programme has adapted too.

At the height of the pandemic, thousands of new health and safety reps stepped forward to make sure that their colleagues were able to return to their workplaces safely and confidently – and we gave them the training to perform that task.

New stewards and learning reps have been trained in their roles; existing activists have received refresher and follow-on training.

This magazine is testament to all of that. I couldn't be prouder of what UNISON learning has achieved – and this year, that's more true than ever.

"Thanks to the versatility and creativity of learning reps and staff, we've been able to bring high-quality learning to UNISON members in new ways"

Christina McAnea

Christina McAnea, General Secretary ✱

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Investing in the future of learning

Nottingham University Hospitals Branch is one of several branches to continue to fund learning roles in the wake of the government's decision to close the Union Learning Fund (ULF).

NOTTINGHAM UNIVERSITY Hospitals and Allied Services Branch has signed a new lifelong learning agreement with the Trust, thanks to the work of new Learning Organiser Shantalee Mullings and her team of union learning reps (ULRs).

The new agreement vindicates the branch's decision to continue to fund the role even though the costs of Shantalee's release from her substantive post for three days a week had originally been covered by the Union Learning Fund (ULF).

"We absolutely would not had signed this learning agreement without the work Shantalee has been doing, not a chance," says Branch

Secretary Jamie Godber.

"This is no longer a project, it's a programme – it's built into the branch that we will be offering these learning opportunities and our members will be able to take part."

After taking on the learning organiser role in November last year, Shantalee's top priority was to recruit a team of ULRs. Already, the branch has seven trained ULRs (including Shantalee), spread across many of the key departments at the Trust.

The next priority is to put together a learning programme in response to what members indicate they want in the learning survey the branch has planned.

"For all members in Bands 1 to 4 to progress, we need to focus on English and maths," Shantalee says. "And although we do have members that do enjoy learning online, there are still people that prefer the classroom, so it's about us organising the courses using different models and looking at barriers to getting people released."

The new learning programme complements the branch's current campaign for progression for Black staff, who tend to be concentrated in the lowest-paid grades at the Trust.

"We're looking into developing a bespoke positive action learning programme to give Black members all the tools they need to progress into management grades, because while the Trust has the numbers of Black staff you would expect, they're all condensed in Bands 1 to 4," Jamie says. ✱

LINKING UP FOR LEARNING

Newcastle City Branch and the city council are jointly funding the Learning Zones project at the local authority in order to continue the work that was launched with the help of the Union Learning Fund (ULF).

Their decision means that union learning rep Linda Slasor is able to continue supporting council staff to access the learning they need, with the branch and the local authority each covering 50 per cent of the costs of her full-time release.

"Fundamentally, this is about helping our members continue to access learning," explains Branch Secretary Paul Gilroy.

"Secondly, it's a very good recruitment tool because we have picked up members by being able to say, 'If you join UNISON, you get access to all this training'.

"And the third aspect is that there's a great deal of respect within the authority for the Learning Zones, not just from the officers but also the elected members as well, which means we're sometimes pushing at an open door when we come forward with projects around other issues."

While the existing Learning Zones have had to be closed through the pandemic, a new Learning Zone based in the Civic Centre was launched in the autumn that is large enough to be opened with social distancing for some periods since then.

"That online learning was made available so speedily was down to close collaboration with providers"

Getting ready to get that job

Members in Yorkshire & Humberside are boosting their employability skills with the help of online sessions with the National Careers Service.

HUNDREDS OF MEMBERS in Yorkshire & Humberside are improving their employability skills through a set of free online workshops delivered by the National Careers Service.

When Regional Learning and Development Organiser Rose Bent attended one of the workshops last year, she was so impressed that she reached out to the National Careers Service to look into programming the full suite of four courses specifically for members in the region.

"When I took the interview skills session, I thought it was brilliant and it could be something we could use that would complement what we were already delivering," Rose says.

The one-hour online sessions cover CVs and application forms; job search skills; helping mid-life workers identify transferable skills; and interview skills.

Careers adviser Simon Dowling, who has delivered many of the sessions, says the National Careers Service offers information, advice and guidance to help people make informed decisions on learning, training and work.

"We're here to provide impartial careers advice for everybody, whether they're employed or unemployed and we can support people at risk of redundancy and those looking to progress in their current career," he says.

After 50 members improved their interview skills on two pilot sessions late last year, Rose organised a full programme of all four courses between January and April that attracted almost 150 learners. A second round has followed in May and June.

Because the courses pack a lot into 60 minutes and are delivered online, more members can access them and improve the skills that will boost their job prospects.

"They are reaching a lot more people because it's just an hour of your time that you can log on and log off again to get to your next meeting and there's no travelling time," Rose says.

The feedback from learners has been very positive. "People were glad that these courses were available and they've found them valuable and useful, particularly when some members didn't know whether or not their jobs would be secure coming out of Covid," Rose says. "If you've been in a job for a long time and haven't had an interview, it can be overwhelming and even daunting for some."

One of the major benefits of the workshops is that the National Careers Service advisers are more than

happy to follow up with participants after the sessions.

For Simon and his colleagues, it's all about sustaining relationships with their customers and helping them get from where they are now to where they want to be.

"We want to support our customers through a journey," he says. "For some people, that's just one session and then they are on the right path for them. But other customers might need additional support, which could be via email or telephone, and we work flexibly to best meet their needs."

Simon and his colleagues are happy to offer suggestions to help people continue to improve after the sessions. "I've had emails from people afterwards saying, 'Can you look at my CV? or 'Am I on the right track with how I'm approaching these questions on an application form?'," he says.

"So I'll look at the CVs and put some notes on them, such as 'Maybe think about it this way'. We're not doing the CV for the customer or filling in the form for them: the content is always theirs, we're empowering them to do it."

As well as planning for a third round of courses in the autumn, Rose is looking further ahead to 2022. "Going forward, we'll aim to take a flexible approach in how we deliver these courses offering both online and face to face to meet the needs and preferences of our members," she says. ✱

"One of the major benefits of the workshops is that the National Careers Service advisers are more than happy to follow up with participants after the sessions"

TOP TIPS TO HELP YOU MOVE ON

We've produced a new booklet to help members who have to re-apply for their current jobs due to restructuring; who are facing redeployment or redundancy; or those who wish to strike out on a new career path.

Moving On: Everything You Need To Get That Job contains details of 17 different exercises to help you look for work, complete application forms, refine your CV and prepare for job interviews.

The publication comes in two versions: a learners edition for members and a ULR edition of learning reps to use to run employability sessions with members.

Download the ULR edition from **https://bit.ly/2VFga8o** and the Learners' edition from **https://bit.ly/3xsk0iw**

Surviving Covid through creativity

MARK HARVEY

Dozens of members in the Highlands and Islands are improving their wellbeing by learning about life writing.

MORE THAN 60 MEMBERS from all over the Highlands and Islands have been learning how to improve their resilience, wellbeing and mental health through a series of online life writing courses jointly run with the Royal Literary Fund (RLF).

The groups came together on Zoom to share their own stories of the past year through prompts and exercises suggested by professional writers Mary Colson and Amanda Dalton.

"It was a strange but completely silver lining of all the current restrictions and anxieties of life with Covid-19 that, for four evenings, the groups came together from a vast spatial expanse to experience the shared joy of life writing," says Mary.

"As one of the participants reflected,

How to survive a pandemic

* Sing!
* Watch every single episode of Orange is the New Black.
* Get on your bike!
* Do a daily meditation.
* Walk around the field with a mug of hot coffee.
* Live every day!
* Establish a routine; go outside every day; do yoga, speak to friends.
* Do joint yoga with distant daughter.
* Get involved in community volunteering.
* Spend every free minute pottering in your garden.
* Encourage colleagues to self kindness.
* Dance to happy music around the kitchen.
* Get out on your bike, watch YouTube videos and fix it yourself – you can do it!
* More time with kids.
* Zoom zoom zoom.
* Do it!
* Learn to love baking!
* Box sets all the way!
* Stay at home and embrace the peace, relax with your book and wine.
* Start up weekend Zoom quiz nights with friends and family.
* 'Three wee pals' group with parents and me – touch base every day on FB
* Get the garden tidied up.
* Swim at a local beach.
* Be there…

the alchemy lay in the fact that we created all these texts both together and apart without sharing a 'breath of the same air'."

Each session focused on a different aspect of living and working and coping with all the different challenges of the pandemic.

Participants learned different techniques they could use to write separately and together (see the group piece *How to Survive a Pandemic*, left).

And the four-week course finished with everyone writing the story of their near-future selves as a reminder of their own innate resilience.

Connecting with other members online was a big plus for participants. "I loved the comradely feeling that all the wee cube inhabitants were likewise engaged," said one person.

Many people recorded an increase in their confidence as a result of taking part and several have been submitting poems to magazines as a result. "These courses have kickstarted me to begin writing again – I knew I needed a kick but, surprisingly, it's the lack of pressure that I've found so enabling," said one member.

"The benefit of going to a part of your mind to channel 'creative writing' lasted longer than the session and can be revisited when needed," commented another. ✱

HELPING IN THE HIGHLANDS

More than 500 learners across the Highlands and Islands took part in a wide range of online courses in the first year of the pandemic, with large numbers of them enrolling on courses exploring different aspects of mental health.

The range of courses with a mental health theme was organised in response to ULR surveys showing that's what members most wanted support with, explains Marta Chaba, Regional Learning and Development Organiser in the Highlands and Islands.

And with regional unemployment rising from 2.4 per cent in July 2019 to 5.7 per cent in July 2020 and at a faster rate than across Scotland as a whole, many branches and ULRs began getting requests for accredited courses to help members gain new qualifications.

That's why Marta began organising online courses in team leading, first line management and leadership around the middle of last year.

"These courses are very helpful for people living in remote parts of the Highlands, far away from a college," Marta says. "And they are really making a big difference because they give them the opportunity to gain a qualification, so they have a better chance of finding better employment."

"These courses have kickstarted me to begin writing again – I knew I needed a kick but, surprisingly, it's the lack of pressure that I've found so enabling"

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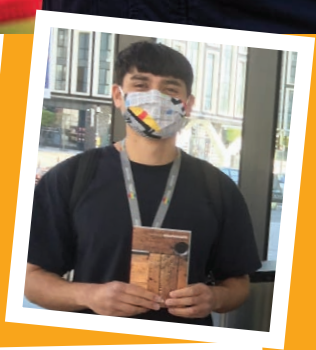
Challenging racism at work

Members and reps in the North West are putting into action what they have learned on the Anti-Racism Ambassadors course delivered by Show Racism the Red Card.



DOZENS OF MEMBERS in the North West have learned how to effectively challenge discrimination and prejudice at work on a series of six online workshops delivered by Show Racism the Red Card (SRtRC).

The action-oriented programme covers a wide range of issues in depth to give participants the tools they need to tackle racism in all its forms in the workplace.

"We want people who have been on the Ambassadors course to think about what problems there are in their workplace that they could now challenge or approach in a different way," explains SRtRC's North West Education Manager Keziah Major, who helped set up and deliver the course.

"Eventually we want nearly every workplace across the North West to have an Ambassador to keep anti-racism on the agenda."

Regional Education Organiser Bob Kelly had been keen to work with SRtRC for some time when Merseytravel and Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) Branch

approached him about funding the Ambassadors course for its reps.

Knowing that the regional Black Members Group was keen that the region deliver more anti-racist education, Bob decided to open the course to members and reps across the North West.

The decision paid off when so many people signed up that he had to run the course twice earlier this year to accommodate all 38 participants.

Merseytravel and LCRCA Branch ULR and Branch Education Officer Norman Hunter, who attended the sessions with members of the branch's new equality and diversity group, was especially impressed with the personal testimony of many of the specialist speakers.

They included Smajo Beso, whose family fled genocide during the Balkan wars of the 1990s, Rehana Faisal from the Luton Council of Mosques who examined Islamophobia and members of Friends, Families and Travellers, who discussed prejudice against the Gypsies, Roma and Travellers.

"All of the equality and diversity group really enjoyed the course," Norman says.

As a result, one participant has become the branch women's officer and another the first branch disabilities officer in some time, while a member who became active on equality is now working with Norman to set up an older members' group in the LCRCA.

In addition, as part of The Reading Agency's World Book Night initiative in April, the equality and diversity group helped distribute copies of *To Sir, With Love*, the 1959 novel by the Guyana-born writer E.R. Braithwaite, which he based on his own experiences facing racism in post-war London as a teacher in the East End. ✱

NOT BACKING AWAY FROM DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Members and activists are learning effective techniques for challenging prejudice and discrimination in the workplace through the online workshops being delivered by Hope Not Hate.

Holding Difficult Conversations is a 90-minute session that focuses on finding constructive ways to call out offensive remarks without inflaming further conflict.

South East Regional Education Officer Sam Raymond ran the session four times earlier this year, with a mix of members and activists (and some staff) taking up the 25 spaces available each time.

"The sessions are delivered by very knowledgeable people: they structure them very well with a PowerPoint presentation but there is lots of discussion and people contributing in the chat," Sam says.

"Because it's a smaller group, there is time for people to have those discussions around how you tackle having difficult conversations with people not only in the workplace but outside of the workplace and within your own family," Sam says.

For Sam – and for many members in the South East in the workshops – the big takeaway from the session was finding more effective ways of engaging with people when they make prejudiced comments.

"I think it helped me to take a step back," she says. "You don't have to have those confrontational discussions. You can actually find out why they have those beliefs and opinions and maybe talk about it rather than having a stand-up row."

And the Hope Not Hate approach definitely pays off in moments of tension out in the world. "I have actually used the techniques since I've done the workshop and they work!" Sam says.

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Getting creative in the classroom

Wales school staff picked up lots of ideas about working with language, film and animation at a fun-filled webinar over Easter.

DURING THIS YEAR'S Easter break, UNISON Cymru Wales Learning delivered a creative, innovative and fun online event for school staff packed with inspiring ideas to take back into their classrooms in the summer term.

The Supporting Learning Through Creativity webinar featured contributions from award-winning Guyanese playwright, poet and children's author John Agard; Rhyl-based training company G2G Communities, the UK's first community focused LEGO Education Innovation Studio; and Into Film Cymru, which helps young people watch, review and make films.

All three contributors focused on offering practical suggestions for expanding creativity in the classroom.

"UNISON Cymru Wales learning projects have a long history of using arts and creativity in our events and Teaching Assistants and Learning Support Assistants often use different strategies to engage kids in learning, so the two things came together in this event," explains North Wales Area Learning & Development Organiser Richard Speight.

Delivered on the morning of the first Saturday of the Easter holidays, the webinar was designed to be enjoyed while sat on the sofa with a tablet or a laptop and a cup of tea or coffee.

"We wanted to put together something that would be a reward for all the work school staff have put in, something just for them, where they could sit back, relax and enjoy, rather than having to do one more thing," explains Wales Union Learning Fund (WULF) Project Manager Jenny Griffin.

Bill Lockitt from G2G Communities shared a presentation about how the

company uses stop-motion animation; who they use it with; and the effects it can have on the children and their different learning abilities.

Making stop-motion animation needn't be expensive, Bill pointed out. All anyone needs is a smartphone or tablet and the same free software that G2G use with parents, schools and children. "When you see the children and the staff making animations, the atmosphere is absolutely amazing."

John Agard told participants he'd prepared for the event by researching the work of schools staff online, where he'd found one website that suggested one key role of a teaching assistant was to act as a 'sounding board'.

"I thought to myself, I like the sound of 'sounding board' – as a poet, it's not a bad thought, aspiring to be a sounding board – and within that 'sounding board', maybe there's a 'sounding bard' waiting to come out!" John said.

Hywel Roberts, Programme Coordinator for Into Film Cymru, explained how the organisation aimed to show how schools could use film in a positive way in any classroom or learning environment.

"You can use film to learn about cultures, languages, life lessons or any topics that you're looking at in the classroom," he said. ✱

MANAGING CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR IN CLASS

Schools staff across the South East got up to date with their rights at work and learned new ways of dealing with challenging behaviour in the classroom during two online sessions during Easter half-term.

Ensuring schools staff know their rights and giving them the tools they need to handle challenging behaviour are two sides of the same coin, says Area Organiser Vicki Gibbs.

"It's a two-pronged approach: we want the employers to be held to account when they're not actually protecting our members' health and safety but we also want to help our members to help themselves when dealing with children with very difficult behaviour management issues," Vicki says.

Vicki herself delivered the Know Your Rights session, focussing on the changes wrought by Covid-19 such as vaccination and testing, while The Open University (OU) adapted its Managing Challenging Behaviour session for online delivery.

The region chose half-term to give more schools staff the chance to take part, explains Area Organiser Abbey Dunn.

"Schools members are always really keen to take part in education opportunities but it's really hard for them to get time away from work during the working day, which is why we chose half-term," Abbey says.

With more than 35 members in both the Easter sessions, Vicki and Abbey then followed up with two more online sessions in the Spring half-term break on effective ways of dealing with pupil violence, delivered by a tutor from 2Resolve Training and Development.

Even when face-to-face learning becomes possible again, the region intends to continue to offer some online delivery.

"We've reached different people through online because we can see it's a great opportunity for some members," Vicki says. "So when we do get back into the classroom, we're looking at providing a blended approach."

Making sense of history

More than 50 learners in the West Midlands have started tracing their family trees using the skills they've developed one of the region's most popular courses.

THE WEST MIDLANDS Introduction to Family History course has proved so popular that the region has run it four times in the last six months.

Learners have been so keen to keep digging that the region has run its first intermediate course this summer, with both courses delivered by Workers' Educational Association (WEA) tutor Pat McCarthy.

Based on a one-day classroom course Pat originally taught in the Birmingham UNISON office a couple of years ago, the online version of the introductory course was broken down into five 90-minute weekly sessions.

"The one-day version meant people never had time to go away and embed what they'd learned, whereas after the online sessions, I could give learners other things to go away and look at during that week and they could email me about things I could then incorporate in the next session," Pat explains.

"So the students are learning gradually; they're then going away and reinforcing and embedding; and then coming back and discussing any problems before moving forward again."

Over the five sessions, learners looked into the information they could find on birth certificates, marriage certificates, death certificates and census records; how reliable those different documents might be; and the best ways of recording everything they discover in a family tree.

In addition, Pat also encouraged learners to bring their own family myths into the process, to cast a critical eye on stories that have been handed down through the generations and think about what those stories might tell them and how they could mislead them.

One thing that the 14 learners, all women, discovered on the intermediate course is the absence of women's lives from many historical sources, Pat points out.

"They have learned that effectively they don't count in history: they are not recorded, their voices do not sing out, their employment doesn't sing out and that's very important," he says.

Denise Jacques, who recently took voluntary redundancy from her IT support job at the University of Wolverhampton, is one of 14 learners who completed the introductory course in May and moved straight

on to the intermediate course in June and July.

The intermediate course is built around the 'one name study' technique, where learners focus on a single figure in the family tree, fleshing out details about their life by using censuses, area studies, employment records and legal sources.

The approach perfectly suited Denise, as she had been keen to find out more about her paternal grandfather, whose early life is currently shrouded in mystery.

"The story is that my grandad was born in Ireland but went to live with relatives on the Isle of Man after his parents died when he was very young," Denise says. "After the First World War, he moved to Coventry and that's where he met my gran they settled in that area."

But Denise and her brother Colin have yet to find the records that support that story. "We only know what Auntie Betty told Colin a few years ago and she would have been told the story by gran or grandad, so it's a bit third-hand and we've never been able to find anything concrete," Denise says.

Pat's helped Denise by sharing what he knows about where to find information in Ireland. "Google can't replace talking to someone who knows what they're doing," she says.

And working her way through the course with other UNISON members has also helped, she adds. "You get to learn what they've found out, where they've found it from and how they might have looked where Patrick suggested and that's led them on to somewhere else," she says. ✱

NEW LEARNING CENTRE FOR LONDON HOSPITAL STAFF

Members at Guy's and St Thomas's NHS Trust in London can check their payslips, update their CVs or catch up with their email inside the brand new learning suite opened on the Guy's Hospital site in April this year.

The Tabard Hub, which occupies an entire floor of an annexe at the back of the hospital, is a joint partnership between the Guy's and St Thomas' Branch and Essentia, the estates, facilities, capital development and IT directorate at the Trust.

"We spoke to our facilities management team about opening a specialised suite for staff because Covid had shown us that a lot of people don't have access to computers at home or in their job," explains Branch Secretary Dino Williams.

"We decided to cover half of the costs of the suite in partnership with the Trust so we could make it exclusively available to our members 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in order to promote lifelong learning."

This means that NHS support staff who don't use computers as part of their job can now access their email and check their payslips by working a workstation in the Hub, explains ULR Tom Jenkins.

"If you're a porter, for example, who didn't use IT as part of your job, the only option was using your team leader's laptop, and many people wouldn't want to look at their personal information on their manager's IT equipment," he says. "Now they have the option of booking into The Tabard Hub and doing it on a workstation there."

The branch has already used the hub to train health and safety reps through the online UNISON course and plans to offer classroom learning and training in future.

Learning from family history

When Debbie Rowden organised a lunchtime session to spotlight the experiences of Caribbean migrants, she ended up telling her own family's story.

WITH THE WINDRUSH scandal making the news before the pandemic, Norwich City UNISON Lifelong Learning Coordinator Debbie Rowden put together an event to help people connect to the human lives behind the headlines.

Tracing her own family history from North Africa, India and the Caribbean for the 70 people at the lunchtime event in October 2019, Debbie also shared her memories of growing up in the 1970s.

"We lived on a council estate and I didn't realise at the time why my mum was always washing the front door and why I wasn't allowed to pick up the post – she hid that from me," she says.

While violent racism was less prevalent by the time Debbie moved to Norwich many years later, she still faced discrimination in the job market.

"I had a double-barrelled name, my original name and my married name, Sahadeo-Rowden, but when I applied for jobs I wasn't getting any interviews," she recalls.

"But when the agency said, 'Let's not go double-barrelled and see what happens', 'I got five interviews and five job offers within the space of a week!"

People attending were keen to continue the conversation after the event, Debbie says.

"People would stop me in the corridors afterwards to talk about the Windrush scandal: it was beneficial because they hadn't really understood what it meant and why it was impacting people in the way it was."

Only a week before, had Debbie put together an event on menopause at work, where her own GP, Dr Christine Green, was the guest speaker (the subject is a specialism of hers) alongside Cllr Marion Maxwell.

And earlier in the year, Debbie organised an event for World Refugee Week. "I invited a refugee from Zambia from my church, Emmie Le Merveilliuex Yvon, to speak from his personal experience, alongside the leader of the council and Simon Shreeve from the council's People from Abroad team," Debbie says. "The event was really well attended – it was huge!"

Debbie's looking forward to re-starting real-world learning, especially as she was in the middle of organising an event about the Victorian-era British-Jamaican nurse Mary Seacole when the pandemic hit.

"With the kind assistance of the leader of the council, we had access to a room in Dragon Hall, which is one of the oldest buildings in the city," Debbie says. "We were going to set it up in the style of the time and I was going to dress as Mary Seacole and read her book, so as soon as we open up again we'll do it, even if we have to do it in a different way." *

Mary Seacole travelled to the Black Sea by herself in the 1850s to treat soldiers wounded in the Crimean War after the War Office refused her application to join the official British contingent of nurses.

"People would stop me in the corridors afterwards to talk about the Windrush scandal: it was beneficial"

NURSING SUPPORT

Fifty members in Northern Ireland are working their way through an online 12-week human biology course to help them prepare for, or progress on, the Open University (OU) nursing programme.

"We offer a pathway for our members to go from any position in the health service to a nursing degree," says Regional Education Organiser Caitlin NiCathail.

"But a lot of members (and a lot of tutors) were telling us that people were really struggling with the human biology element because many people had left school 15 or 20 years ago and either couldn't remember or had never taken biology."

Caitlin has worked with tutor Wesley Sterling to organise the 12-week course, which is divided into 45-minute sessions learners can join online in their lunch break (or catch up with later using the recordings Wesley circulates).

"It's been hugely successful and the feedback we've been getting so far is that people are really enjoying it," Caitlin says.

New reps rush to online training courses

New stewards, health and safety reps, union learning reps and branch welfare officers are all preparing for their roles with the help of online courses.

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JUST WEEKS INTO THE first national lockdown last March, 90 new UNISON reps were getting trained on an online course instead of inside a classroom.

That so many were able to take part was down to Education Officer Suzanne Tipping, West Thames College tutor Michael Cudjoe and TUC Education's Anna Kalsi working together to ensure reps could enrol on virtual courses while face-to-face learning was impossible.

"It was very important that we found a way to continue to train new stewards and safety reps, especially given the position they're in with Covid, the demands of their workplaces and the support their members need," Suzanne says.

The three of them had already developed the online training course for UNISON stewards in response to the squeeze on facility time, long before the pandemic.

But while just 30 reps a year were signing up for online training before the pandemic, 90 reps enrolled when the first lockdown course was announced in April – and the same happened the next time it ran in July.

Now, in addition to the national course, all UNISON regions are running online stewards' training, after a successful regional pilot in the South West.

And in response to requests from regions to support learners who weren't comfortable with exclusively online delivery, Suzanne has adapted the UNISON stewards' classroom course into a blended version that has also been rolled out across the regions, this time after a successful pilot in Yorkshire & Humberside in spring 2021.

Throughout the development of the online training offer, the Learning and Organising Services (LAOS) team has worked closely with the UNISON Equality Unit to ensure all virtual learning and training is accessible and inclusive.

While the majority of the online stewards' course is self-guided learning, West Thames tutor Michael Cudjoe offers reps on the national course three virtual live tutorial sessions using Microsoft Teams.

"I've been working with UNISON on the online programme long before the pandemic and we always have good attendance and engagement on those programmes," Michael says.

"But I think this offered us the opportunity to really look for ways to improve and deal with some of the challenges and hurdles that

come with online learning."

Suzanne and Michael also adapted the health and safety reps' classroom course for online delivery last spring, and it's proved an enormous success in the last year. In fact, UNISON nationally trained more health and safety reps online last year (479) than it did in classrooms the year before (431).

And now, union learning reps (ULRs) and branch welfare officers can also access nationally delivered online training, with the first online ULR course running in June.

"With so many of our members using the lockdowns as an opportunity to re-discover learning, the role of the ULR has never been more important, as learning reps are able to reach out to and engage with members in their own workplaces," Suzanne says.

"We are aware there are people who couldn't take part because they don't have access to the technology but people have tried hard to engage – one woman borrowed her son's laptop to take part in the training, which was really positive!" Suzanne says.

Suzanne herself says she has learned a massive amount through the whole process.

"Now we have developed the main courses, we have the chance to think about the future and take a more strategic approach because the benefits and the numbers coming through means there is going to be continued demand for online learning." ✱

For all the latest information on course availability, visit: **learning.unison.org.uk/events**

ENGAGING IN THE EAST MIDLANDS

Almost 500 learners in the East Midlands took more than 45 different courses in the first three months of this year, thanks to the strength of the county learning forums in the region and the local organiser who supported them.

"It's been extraordinary," says Regional Learning and Development Organiser Gavin McCann. "In Derbyshire, we ran 12 courses; in Lincolnshire, we ran nine; in Leicestershire, we ran 12; and in Northants, we ran 14."

Local Organiser Ella Smith-Gibbs, whose post used to be funded by the Union Learning Fund (ULF) until it closed at the end of March, played a key role in supporting the county learning forums, Gavin says.

"The success of the programme has been down to having somebody in place to coordinate and oversee it," he says. "Organising 50 courses in three months takes a lot of work and ULRs need support to do that when they also have very important jobs to do."

The activists who campaigned against HIV / AIDS discrimination in the 1980s and ’90s have plenty to teach us today, says Mark Everden.

COURTESY OF THE GORDON RAINSFORD ARCHIVE, BISHOPSGATE INSTITUTE

Learning the lessons from HIV activism

SOUTH WEST REGIONAL Organiser Mark Everden has drawn on his own experience of the 1980s AIDS crisis to put together a webinar on the events behind Channel 4’s hugely successful drama series, *It’s A Sin*, by award-winning writer Russell T. Davies.

“We thought it would be good to look back at the history because it’s not been widely told in this country, certainly not before *It’s a Sin*,” Mark says.

“The focus of it was what we could learn from then about changing attitudes to HIV / AIDS and what we can learn as a union from the organising model used by the activist group, ACT UP, that came out of the sheer urgency of what was needed at the time.”

Delivered in February while *It’s A Sin* was screening, the webinar featured contributions from Mark himself, South West Regional Manager Tanya Palmer (who was an AIDS nurse in London in the 1980s) and a Q&A with participants.

As well as sharing research on the extreme homophobia of tabloid coverage of the crisis (sample *Sun* headline: ‘I’d shoot my son if he had AIDS, says vicar!’), Mark was also able to draw on his own memories of losing friends to the disease at the time.

“During my 20th year, I probably went to 20 funerals – and that’s not what a 20-year-old should be doing – and being in that grief and fear became the norm,” he says.

Mark also used some of the material he had included in an essay on trade unions’ uneven track record that he wrote as part of the MA he later completed at Ruskin College.

It was one of UNISON’s forerunners, COHSE, that was the first UK union to publish unbiased advice on AIDS at work in the shape of a 50-page guide sent direct

to every branch in 1981.

ACT UP London was formed in late 1988 to target all the key institutions standing in the way of concerted action to tackle the crisis – government, corporations, even the churches.

The group's embrace of political theatre meant it "set a new bar in visual activism" comparable to groups like Extinction Rebellion today, Mark says. But its activists also conducted deep research into what pharmaceutical companies should be developing that directly led to the development of the drugs people with AIDS needed.

While the webinar focuses on ACT UP, Mark is quick to point out that the AIDS crisis should not be examined through an exclusively Western lens, since African countries have borne the brunt of the disease and today two-thirds of all HIV-infected people worldwide are Africans – more than 25.5 million people.

Mark was thinking about the similarities and the differences between the 1980s AIDS crisis and today's Covid pandemic while he was putting together the presentation.

"Where Covid can affect anybody, with HIV / AIDS it was really easy to turn round and say it was happening to 'them', not us," he says.

"AIDS is the story of those with power not caring about marginalised people who didn't have power. ACT UP gave them that power," Mark says, finishing the presentation with the question: "How can we as a union be 'more ACT UP'?" *

LEARNING TO BE SUPERHEROINES

Dozens of members learned new skills to boost their confidence during online workshops in the South West and across the country that tied in with International Women's Day in March.

Regional Learning & Development Organiser Natalie Chadwick and National Learning and Workforce Development Officer Stephanie Milward put together the workshops in response to requests from members in a regional survey last year.

More than 70 women enrolled on the national Women's Confidence Bitesize Session, while half a dozen joined the smaller South West session.

"When we had that many applications come in for the national offer, it showed this was obviously something that had piqued the interest of our members, which was really good," Natalie says.

"And although we had a smaller group in the South West, I think they probably got more out of the session, so that worked really well."

Feedback was very positive from both workshops and participants enjoyed learning new tips and techniques to boost their confidence, including the power of the superhero pose – standing tall, feet apart, chin up, hands on the hips, elbows bent.

"Even if you adopt that pose for just a few moments before you're about to do a task, or if you're feeling a bit low, you do feel better," Natalie says.

"And I did some research and found that it does actually increase testosterone in the body so there is actually some science behind it!"

"Mark was thinking about the similarities and the differences between the 1980s AIDS crisis and today's Covid pandemic"

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