

Most Significant Change Insight 2016

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Evaluation of the Insight 2016 Programme using the Most Significant Change (MSC) Technique

Insight is a structured eight-month non formal training programme which immerses' participants over the age of 18 years in a learning experience about international development. There are three phases to the programme, phase 1 and phase 3 are based in Ireland, and phase 2 is based overseas. The programme aims to increase awareness and critical understanding of international development and global justice issues gained through experiential learning (Development Perspectives Strategic Plan 2016-2018).

The Most Significant Change (MSC) technique is a qualitative approach to monitoring and evaluation first developed by Dart and Davies in (2003). It involves the collection of stories of "significant change", the sharing of these stories and feedback on the significance of change they represent (Davis & Dart cited in Major & Swaffield, 2014) Both qualitative and quantitative analysis are valuable research tools to measure impact. However, intangible goals such as confidence, leadership and empowerment are difficult to measure using quantitative measuring tools (Choy & Lidstone, 2013). This is especially true in projects such as Insight which focus on social change, where one is trying to capture changes in attitudes, behaviours and beliefs. For this reason the MSC technique was used to collect stories from participants to explore changes in attitudes, engagement and knowledge, and to gain a greater understanding of what aspects of the programme were of significance to the participants.

Methodology

During Insight 2016 the MSC approach was used to see if the programme was having positive effects on the participants. Past research suggests that Insight has a positive immediate and longer term impact on participants ('Development Perspectives (2012): The story so far – impact enquiry (2006 – 2009)' and, 'Measuring the Impact of Development Perspective's Insight Programme on Participants' Active Citizenship 2015'). It was hoped that aspects of Insight 2016 which were of personal significance to participants would cause gradual transformations which in turn would prompt changes in attitudes, engagement and knowledge.

Each participant was asked to document their Most Significant Change after each phase of the programme and also invited to share their story with the group through a 30-60 minute focus group session after each phase. Participants were asked to provide written consent that their reflective stories and focus group discussions could be used for research purposes and publication. The central research question related to participants' perceptions of the most significant change that resulted from their involvement with Insight 2016.



Team building activities in Phase 1.

Data collection

Data were collected from two sources at the end of each of the three phases of the programme through; individual reflections and focus groups.

Individual reflections

Reflection is an essential part of participants' development, it forms the 'bridge between knowledge and practice' (Mason, 2014, p.169). Bringle, Hatcher and Jones (2011) suggest it is arguably even more important when working and engaging with people cross-culturally which is an essential component of Insight. Reflection is an opportunity for participants to think about their experiences, learn from their actions and to support even more effective actions in the future (UN Volunteer Toolkit, 2011). Reflection uses creative and critical thinking skills to help participants to learn from the experience. Participants highlighted the value of reflection when documenting their MSC stories. This was further discussed in the focus groups.

Individual reflections focused around three questions:

(1) From your point of view, what was the most significant change that resulted from your involvement in Insight 2016?

(2) Explain why you chose this particular change?

(3) Are there any lessons for Development Perspectives arising from the change you have written about?

Focus groups

Focus-group interviews are popular in social research when exploring what individuals believe or feel as well as why they behave in the way they do. Focus groups can provide information about a range of ideas and feelings that individuals have about certain topics, as well as revealing the differences in perspective between groups of individuals. The uniqueness of a focus group is its ability to generate data based on the interaction of the group (Green et al. 2003). Krueger & Casey (2000) point out that 'for some individual's self-disclosure is natural and comfortable, while for others it requires trust and effort'. The participants in Insight all stated they were comfortable to engage in the focus group and had gained the trust of the group prior to the first focus group taking place.

The focus group discussions were facilitated by the researcher. During the focus group participants discussed their Most Significant Change. Only a small amount of direction was given by the facilitator to allow for free flowing conversations. The facilitator documented the changes that were discussed during these focus groups. At the end of each focus group participants were asked if there was anything they wished to add to the discussion and asked to verify the changes documented by the facilitator.

Sample

Leaders and participants involved in Insight 2016 were invited to take part in the evaluation of Insight 2016 using the MSC approach. All participants agreed to take part in this research. Among them were 10 women and 5 men. Participants had a variety of work, volunteering and academic experience.

Data Analysis

Thematic coding is a form of qualitative analysis which involves identifying passages of texts that are linked by a common theme or idea (Gibbs 2007). Each individual reflection was coded and analysed to identify common themes around the Most Significant Changes (Tesch, 1990). The focus groups sessions were analysed and coded by the same approach. The coding's were compared to reach a set of codes which reflected the main themes.

Findings and discussion

All the participants' Most Significant Changes were positive in nature. Participant's were invited to share their most significant change in the focus groups. The key themes that emerged from the individual reflections and focus groups are highlighted below:

- Increase in self-confidence
- Greater ability to think critically
- Civic responsibility
- More accepting and respectful of others' opinions
- Greater understanding of development issues and enhanced ability to make informed decisions
- Becoming more politicised



Phase 2 takes places in Tanzania where Irish participants live and learn alongside participants from Tanzania.

Increase in Self-Confidence

At the final focus group stage, all participants confirmed that they experienced significant personal development. Of the six Most Significant Changes identified by the participants, the most common change was an increase in self-confidence. Participants discussed how this had an impact on themselves individually (personal development) but also how it led to changes in other areas. Participant's linked an increase in self-confidence to becoming more active citizens, having the confidence to engage with issues that were of importance to them.

One participant reflected on the programme and how it has facilitated changes in other areas: *'From taking part in Insight 2016, the most significant change for me was the increase in*

confidence. I feel that confidence levels in regards my ability to facilitate a programme increases. This significant change has allowed me an opportunity to personally develop in regards my career. It allowed me to create a project which has impacted the lives, awareness and actions of my family, friends and the wider community' (P14)

Another participant related this as: *'I feel my most significant change was personal development, and through this a chain reaction of changes has occurred' (P5)* Research has shown that people involved in community engagement report lower levels of depression increased life satisfaction and well-being (Community Engagement in Action, 2014)

Greater ability to reflect and think critically

Reflection and the ability to think and act critically was discussed in the focus groups and also by participants in their individual reflections. Participants spoke about Insight as journey of discovery over the 8-month timeframe with one participant stating that *'I have started to think much more critically about where opinions come from and question motivations' (P4).*

Participants spoke about the importance of active listening and the impact this has on the life of people around us *'I think this change (critical awareness) is important because it's made me aware that people bring experiences that's other might not have considered and that in order for something to be discussed all voices need to be represented(P3)*

Another participant talked about having her perceptions challenged:

'.....seeing the values and learning opportunities that we can gain from developing countries. Before this experience I would have been narrow minded and only seen how we could help/teach them. Through phase 2 I saw how we could learn about positive growth and cultural pride... By living and working alongside Tanzanian and Irish I had some of my preconceptions challenged' (P1)

During the focus group sessions, participants spoke about the importance of thinking and acting critically. Participants discussed the importance of developing empathy, tolerance and patience as these attributes support a heightened ability to think and act critically. Participants spoke about the relevance of critical thinking in their daily life and work with one participant stating that *'this is extremely relevant to me as I work with young people and try to encourage them to be open minded, critical thinkers'(P7).* Participants also spoke about the emotional challenges that come with critical thinking and the need for training around critical reflection alongside critical thinking.

Greater understanding of development issues and enhanced ability to make informed decisions

Participants spoke about increasing their awareness and understanding of development issues that affect people locally and globally. Participants discussed the importance of groups working in partnership whether it is at a local, national or international level. The participants felt strongly that community, voluntary and statutory agencies need to support each other rather than competing for limited resources. Participants spoke about the long-term benefits to all of

collaboration. One participant noted this as *'Probably the most significant change was working on development issues with people overseas and experiencing their realities and perceptions. I have become more aware of the importance of working in partnerships. I believe insight participants become more aware of their surroundings and has shown them possibilities of getting involved in their own community'* (P12)

Participant's also explained how they have become more aware of the impacts of their own actions for example (P5) said that they have a *'greater awareness of how my actions may affect someone else'*

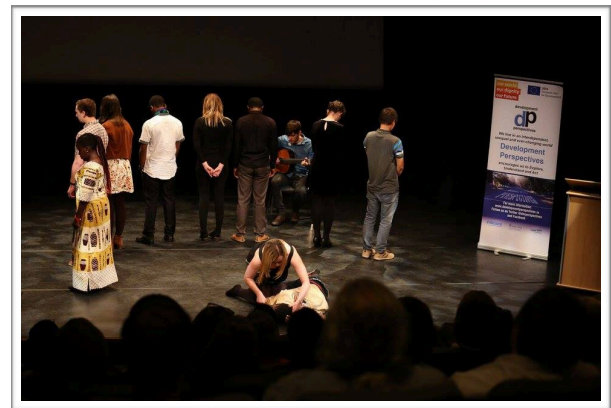
Participants also added that they now try to think about the root cause of issues that are affecting people in Ireland and overseas. Participants are now having more discussions about issues and their causes, questioning the status quo with friends and family *'I feel I am positively informing my friends and family of my adventure....to question the structured world we live in and see what are the root causes of problems not only in Ireland but in other places....I have matured'* (P5)

Becoming more politicised

Participants discussed the role of politics in development. Trade, democracy, corruption and political instability were all discussed within the focus groups. Trade laws were discussed in relation to high tariff barriers that developing countries face when exporting to richer countries. Trade agreements such as the Transatlantic Trade Investment Partnership and the EU-Canada CETA Comprehensive and Economic Trade Agreement were discussed and debated. Participants spoke about increased inequality, loss of jobs and welfare losses if CETA is signed. Some participants feel that CETA is a threat to democracy. *'If CETA is signed we are going to see increased inequality and welfare losses. We need to be active and protest against this agreement coming into place. CETA is worse than the failed TTIP agreement, we need to protest this agreement as much if not more so than the TTIP agreement .It's a threat to our democracy'* (P6)

Participants spoke about the obvious forms of corruption such as members of the government and policemen taking bribes. Participants also spoke about tax evasion which is illegal but also laws that allow corporations to avoid tax legally. Instability was discussed in relation to current European politics but also the devastating effects the conflicts can have on destabilising a nation.

One participant spoke about her increased awareness of the links between politics and development have led her to become more involved in activism. *'On a personal level I started to realise that politics is a huge aspect of development and I became more politicised throughout the 8 months. Development can and is seen very differently from various parties and sectors. I became more interested in community –led activism and development and have the desire to connect with global movements overseas and challenge structural causes of poverty'* (p12)



Participants taking part in a showcase event to highlight what they learned with the Irish public.

More accepting and respectful of others' opinions

During the focus group sessions participants spoke about learning, working and living together in Tanzania. At times this raised challenges for participants as everyone has their own individual upbringings and experiences with differences of opinions on many issues. One participant spoke about phase 2 and how much he enjoyed staying in both Dar Es Salaam and Kilimanjaro but also the positives and challenges this brought.

' My favourite part of Insight was phase 2 when the Irish and Tanzanian participants lived together in Tanzania. I loved becoming friends with the Tanzanian and Irish participants and becoming more aware and understanding of Tanzanian culture and the things that affecting people in Tanzania. It was also challenging at times as some of the participants had different views to me on issues that are very important to me' (P2)

Participants spoke about becoming more accepting, tolerant and less judgemental of others views. Participant 2 added that he *' learned to take time to listen to other people's views and acknowledge them and to also be confident to express my own'(P2)*

One participant who documented this as her most significant change stated that 'The MSC for me (which are still developing) is the realisation that people's opinions and beliefs not only need to be heard but also need to try to understand/question where their opinions and beliefs come from as opposed to disregarding or dismissing their opinion...'

Civic responsibility

Participants discussed their civic responsibility in terms of engaging in communities activities. Participants have become more engaged in their communities and also have a desire to continue to engage frequently and to also engage with groups overseas. One participant said she has *' became more interested in community –led activism and development and have the desire to connect with global movements overseas and challenge structural causes of poverty' (p12).* Another participant noted that he is *' becoming more active in campaigning and also volunteering in the community '(P8).*

Participants also mentioned that through engaging with community groups they are learning from other people involved. They emphasised the value of peer learning through their community engagement within and external to DP. *' I feel I am continuously learning and also contributing to other learning' (P7).* Participants spoke about their community engagement and how this has increased their understanding of justice, social responsibility and empathy

On a personal level participants spoke about their own personal achievement from partaking in Insight becoming more mature, confident and more capable to express their opinions in a clam manner. Research has shown that people involved in volunteering report lower levels of depression increased life satisfaction and well-being (Community Engagement in Action, 2014)

Participant's recommendations

Participants were asked to reflect on the programme to share any recommendations or suggestions for improvement arising from their experience. Participants identified some aspects of the programme that they felt could be improved. Three themes emerged from the participant's individual reflections and discussions relating to recommendations for future Insight programmes:

Clearer framing of the programme

An issue which was discussed by the participants was a lack of clarity around the programme. One participant felt there was a lack of clarity as to what her role was within Insight *'Were we part of a development education course or were we volunteering' (P12)*. Another participant spoke about Development Perspectives giving the participants a guidebook during the first weekend of Insight outlining the aims of the programme and also a timetable outlining the schedule of workshops throughout all three phases. *'A lesson for DP could be a guidebook for those on Insight' (P5)*

More space for both individual and group reflection

The participants had differing opinions on the amount of structured reflection included in the programme. One participant stated that *'DP offered a very good amount of space and time to evaluate and reflect upon how this project affected us which was great' (P1-Niamh)* whereas another participant felt *'more space was needed for individual and group reflection' (J. T*

Theoretical component of the programme

Participants had different views as to the amount of theoretical information they would like included in the programme. Some participants expressed a desire to have more content information sessions *'I would like to have more workshops learning about development theories especially by African theorists'(P12)* while others expressed the opinion that they had enough time on theoretical content information. *'For me Insight reiterated what is needed within a high quality development education programme i.e. group bonding and development, theory, practical elements, meeting the needs of different learning styles' (P14).*

Overall, the analysis shows that Insight 2016 was a valuable learning experience for the participants and the leaders. Those involved have become more aware of social and environmental issues and feel the programme has given them a platform to make positive changes within themselves which will have an impact on their wider social network.

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