# Neil

For me, it was really just a different aspect to learning, because I didn't, ever really engage with the formal learning programme and I guess I probably was slightly forced into it just through, I suppose employment wise, really just to widen my opportunities. Maybe not forced, maybe that’s not the right word, but it certainly was encouraged as a different way of learning I think, in the difference being not such a formal model.

My first learning experience would have been on site really, working and learning upholstery. It was a way of enhancing - traditional upholstery was the first course I ever did, which was a practical course, it was very very interesting. I've done several other courses as well, but that was the one that really got me got me into it because it was practical, and I could see the difference between that and formal learning. It was more relaxed and just all the aspects of the community based was there. It was based in an accessible place for myself, it was a nice safe community, and I was learning. So, all three aspects in one.

And that then really got me moving onto going back into a college setting for some other learning, adult learners’ stuff which was more based on technology and I've done several technology modules, but most of my technology modules have all been done through the Community based learning model.

When I first started the learning, I guess I was initially slightly nervous, just because of what had gone before. But that was soon dispelled just by the relaxed style. And having the time to do it at your own pace, not having any pressure put on you. Although I mean that there is a little bit, you know you want to succeed, there’s pressures on that. But no formal pressure and no failing or fear of failing, it was very much at your own pace which meant I think it was certainly a lot easier to do and made it a lot more enjoyable. And I mean, I think that was part of my problem before. I didn't enjoy learning, so I didn't really engage with it, so actually to enjoy it was part of it as well.

After finishing the first course, there was just an amazing feeling to having actually completed, I think it was a 10-week course if I remember correctly. But having done that, it was just amazing. It didn't feel like learning, and you gained all these skills without actually being aware that you were, you know, being pushed or being challenged or challenging yourself. It was just completely different from whatever I’d had before with any sort of educational stuff. It really was just a joy to be doing it and the feeling at the end of it was amazing, you know because it was a practical course, you completed quite a big project at the end. I've still got the piece of furniture that I made. I've kept it all these years and that was just such an achievement. And like I said, it didn't feel like you’d actually been taught anything. You’d achieved so much just on a practical level. Just working at your own pace makes a difference and not forced or having to worry about falling behind or not coping.

I think with the barriers, I mean, there were very few because I think that the accessibility side of it was really good. There seemed a little more time spent on discussing that before we got started. I think previously with the formal stuff there were loads of barriers, and that again probably didn’t help me engage either. But later on, when I did the sort of more techy courses, the barriers were there, but part of the course was almost about getting rid of the barriers through technology. That was the motivation I suppose. Because technology has definitely got ridden of a lot of barriers. Although there still are some barriers, even with finding locations sometimes, just different locations, inaccessible locations, course work sometimes not being accessible. But I think those barriers are less and less now. And, certainly with more learning technology you should be able to decrease the barriers.

For me, the biggest support was peer support. I think the fact you’re doing it as a group, that was the biggest support. I mean, yeah, there was some support with the materials that were made as accessible as much as they could be, but to me the peer support is invaluable. I think that every course I’ve done I think it’s always been the peer based and again, well it’s in the title, it’s community-based, and I think that that’s what peer means – community. You do it together, you learn together, you support each other. It enhanced my whole career path. I changed careers halfway through. I did upholstery with those courses but after learning the technology, it enabled me to be able to then move on to office-based work, and then promotions, and then…a whole career path. And really, any success career wise I’ve had, has been due to the community-based stuff I’ve done. Because like I said, I didn’t engage before, and I’ve always wanted to push myself a bit further. Knowing that I could and that the support was there, through the community-based model rather than the formal model, that was the good thing, knowing that you weren’t scared of the learning, and previously I had probably been very anti-learning and very scared of it, but it was the opposite.

Approach it with a completely open mind, because it’s really not what you think, it’s a completely different style of learning, and I think if you have an open mind and give it a go, you’ll definitely reap the rewards. And I think the peer support and even the friendships you develop are incredible. It’s really important that cost and finance shouldn’t be a barrier either and in most cases isn’t a barrier and there is support, I’ll just put that out there as well, so there shouldn’t be any financial restrictions or barriers to it.