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**Developing Leadership Practice in Voluntary Organisations and Collaborative Leadership in Voluntary Organisations**

**Learner pack**

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**WELCOME**

Welcome to the Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership’s (CVSL) open online courses designed especially for staff, volunteers, and trustees in voluntary organisations. CVSL is an Academic Centre of Excellence within the Business School of the Open University. The Centre provides Voluntary Sector Organisations with access to leadership development resources and research-led insight. At the heart of the team’s work are two open access leadership development courses.

This pack is designed to support you as a learner and participant of a Learning Club – a group of learners meeting together to support one another through one or both of CVSL’s leadership courses.

Learning Clubs may take place in a wide range of civil society settings, including community groups, small and large voluntary organisations, faith groups, and unions. They may be organisation or locality based, in a physical space or virtually.

We would be delighted to hear about your experience of being a learner in CVSL’s leadership courses, and to understand more about how the courses are useful for practitioners. We welcome your feedback on how we can improve the materials to enable more learners to use them to develop their leadership practice. You can email the CVSL team at [cvsl-oubs@open.ac.uk](mailto:cvsl-oubs@open.ac.uk).

1. Introduction:

The Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership (CVSL) at The Open University (OU) provides the following open educational resources:

• Developing leadership practice in voluntary organisations (DL)

• Collaborative leadership in voluntary organisations (CL)

They have been created as an online resource that supports anyone in the voluntary sector (and beyond in other civil society contexts) to reflect on their leadership practice, and to develop new leadership practices. The courses are not designed to teach about the basics of different approaches to leadership – there are other resources that will do that. These courses help learners to think again about how leadership is practiced – by people with a formal leadership position and those without.

We know that leadership development is often expensive to access, beyond the resources of smaller voluntary organisations and community groups. In addition, many leadership development resources adopt a more traditional approach than you will find in CVSL’s courses.

CVSL’s leadership courses are specifically designed to meet the needs of voluntary organisations, and to do so in an innovative way, building on research and addressing real challenges from practice. The courses build on the expertise and research of CVSL team members – in leadership development, the voluntary sector, and collaborative leadership.

You can find out more about CVSL’s research and team members, including the course co-authors Dr. Owain Smolovic-Jones and Dr. Carol Jacklin-Jarvis, on CVSL’s website [The Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership | (open.ac.uk)](https://www.open.ac.uk/centres/voluntary-sector-leadership/).

The leadership courses have been constructed with the aim of creating a learning community, where peers engage with and learn from one another in an online space. The primary mechanism for this is through online discussion forums. However, we know from our experience at the OU that many online learners also value meeting with their peers to support and challenge one another – whether in person or via IT applications such as Adobe Connect, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or similar. We refer to this as ‘blended learning’. As it is impossible for CVSL team members to travel the length and breadth of the UK (or beyond) to support groups of learners working through our courses, we have provided this learner pack to enable you to do this in your organisation, locality or online network. CVSL calls these local groups of learners ‘Leadership Learning Clubs’. You may have a role as a development worker, training officer, or learning champion, or be someone interested in leadership in the voluntary sector who is enthusiastic about learning with others. You will not need lots of knowledge about leadership to be part of a Learning Club, nor do you need qualifications – just enthusiasm. In addition, you should be willing first to reflect on your own experience; second to be open in sharing and reflecting with others; third to respect agreed timetables with others and fourth to learn from others. Based on CVSL experience, learning clubs work best when there is trust among group members. This may not happen from the beginning unless group members know each other. An inclusive, open, supportive and respectful environment helps in building up trust. To help you as a learner of a Learning Club, in this pack, we provide a brief introduction to OpenLearn, the OU’s open access online platform; share some thoughts on the key ideas that inform the courses; provide an overview of the two courses; and offer advice on the practicalities of being a learner. However, we know that in practice, every learner will draw on their own experience and local knowledge to adapt the courses to their context. You may want to use social media applications to help you be part of a local learning community around the online courses.

1. Introduction to OpenLearn

CVSL’s courses are hosted on the OU’s online learning platform OpenLearn. OpenLearn hosts a vast range of learning opportunities on topics as diverse as the environment, managing your money, and learning another language. You will find a link to CVSL’s leadership courses and to other courses relevant to leading and managing voluntary organisations on the CVSL OpenLearn section.

Before becoming a learner of a Learning Club, you should take a few minutes to familiarise yourself with the site. OpenLearn courses are produced under Creative Commons Licensing. This means that they are freely available for individuals to access and make use of in their own context and at their own pace. Content can also be downloaded into other formats, including Word and Kindle. Each course has an estimated time for completion, but learners can move through the content at their own rate. For the Learning Club, we recommend that you work with your facilitator to agree a pace to work together through the leadership course(s), so that there is a sense of creating a community of learners who can reflect together on the content and activities. In clubs facilitated by CVSL, we have found that this development of a learning community plays a key role in participants’ learning experience.

To complete the activities, and join the linked discussions, learners will need to register on the website and enrol in each course – this is through the links on the CVSL landing page. You will need to do this yourself before the Learning Club begins.

1. Key course ideas

In this section we share some key ideas that may be helpful to you as learners to engage with CVSL’s leadership courses.

Reflective learning

The courses adopt a particular approach to learning which starts with an individual’s own experiences and observations, and encourages them to reflect on those experiences, and adapt their practice. Through case examples, definitional work, activities, and provocative questioning, we encourage learners to ask themselves questions, extend their experiences, and try out new practices – and then reflect on these too. Reflective learning requires the student to engage with the subject, to practice, stop and think, change, and make a difference in the real world through their learning. A learning journal can be a useful aid to reflective practice. We have included an online journal in the courses, but participants may prefer to use a notebook. Either way, we suggest you use a learning journal to facilitate reflective learning.

Leadership as practice and process

Being a participant of a learning club is an opportunity to develop leadership, rather than simply to learn about leadership. There are thousands of books about leadership, and probably nearly as many definitions of leadership. You will find that we offer you a definition of leadership at the start of each course. Our concern is not to persuade learners to agree with us, but rather to encourage learners to engage with and debate an understanding of leadership as something that people do – a practice. We don’t equate leadership with hierarchy and position but argue that leadership happens because people with and without position make it happen.

Learning is a social process

Although you can complete CVSL’s leadership courses working by yourself, they have been designed with an understanding that human beings learn best when they interact with one another. With this in mind, the courses are supported by linked online discussion forums where our learners can interact. The forum provides an opportunity to ‘talk’ with other learners, share your thoughts, receive feedback from peers, and become part of a learning community. However, we know that learning online can be a lonely process, and even with the discussion forums, learners can feel distant from one another, become demotivated, and unfortunately, disengage. Learning Clubs build on the idea that learning is a social process by providing opportunities for people to come together to discuss what they have learned, and how to put their learning into practice.

1. Course outline

This section of the guide provides an overview of CVSL’s leadership courses.

*Developing leadership practice in voluntary organisations* involves approximately 15 hours of online learning, designed to be completed over five weeks. It provides an opportunity for people who work within voluntary organisations, as paid employees or volunteers, to develop energetic, practical and thoughtful leadership practice. The course explores this rich concept from a number of different perspectives but emphasises that any group of willing people is capable of energetic, collaborative leadership. Learners will gain insights and practices to facilitate stepping into leadership. Core to the course will be developing a vibrant community of leadership within the voluntary sector, one that connects the academic, voluntary and political worlds, bringing together people committed to fresh thinking.

Content outline

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| Week 1: | Thinking leadership |
| Week 2: | Leadership as person: traits leadership |
| Week 3: | Transformational leadership and power |
| Week 4: | Leadership as ethics |
| Week 5: | Leadership as practice |

Each session contains case study content (including video and audio), activities, and questions to provoke reflection and responses in the linked discussion forum. It is the activities and questions that are likely to promote most discussion in your Learning Club meetings, and you may want to focus on one or more of those activities in the sessions. There is also a linked learning journal for learners to record their individual reflections. Learners who complete the course can gain a statement of participation which can be shown to current and future employers as evidence of professional development.

*Collaborative Leadership in Voluntary Organisations* helps learners to reflect on and develop collaborative leadership practices that will make a difference. Collaborative leadership has achieved prominence in recent times as a way of leading that engages and energises a wider group of people, often working across organisational and sector boundaries. The course is aimed at people who work within voluntary organisations as paid staff or as volunteers, or for people who work regularly with voluntary organisations, such as public sector staff or politicians. This course involves around 24 hours of learning, designed to be completed over eight weeks.

Content outline

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| --- | --- |
| Week 1: | Thinking about collaborative leadership |
| Week 2: | Identity and participative practice in collaborative leadership |
| Week 3: | Working with identity, reflection, and difference |
| Week 4: | Collaborative leadership and exploring the unknown |
| Week 5: | Generating good challenge in collaborative leadership |
| Week 6: | Collaborating across organisational boundaries |
| Week 7: | Collaborative leadership and power |
| Week 8: | Weaving the collaborative fabric |

Again, each session includes case studies, audio-visual, activities, linked discussion forum and learning journal. Additionally Collaborative Leadership is constructed around a fictionalised case which extends throughout the course in audio format – remind learners to listen in to this case as it is designed to take them deeper into key course ideas. In addition, there are quizzes at the end of each session to check your learning, and these provide evidence that the learner has completed the course. Collaborative Leadership is a Badged Open Course (BOC). This means that completers can claim a digital badge that provides evidence of their learning and is useful for evidencing continuous professional development.

A note on contextualisation:

CVSL’s leadership courses have been produced from a UK perspective. Case study material is mainly from the UK and the conceptualisation of the ‘voluntary organisation’ draws on UK policy and practice. Our early learning clubs were UK based. However, we are increasingly working with online learners across the world. This means, for example, bringing case examples forward from the learners’ context and reflecting on differences in policy and societal context from those represented in the course material. Please get in touch with us via the email address at the bottom of this pack if you would like to talk with a member of the CVSL team about contextualising the courses to your learners’ context.

1. Practical bits and pieces

Sustaining learning

When becoming a participant of a learning club, we suggest that you agree that you will be in contact regularly – beyond any face to face meetings. This contact could be from your facilitator, perhaps via email or different social media platforms. Engaging between the group between learning club sessions is also key to building trust and dealing with individual leadership challenges in real time. Social media applications can be useful tools for building trust and communicating between learning club sessions, but there can also be issues about managing boundaries. All social media applications involve sharing some personal information. Also, these applications are used by many people for social purposes. We suggest you work with your facilitator and other learners in the group to reach an agreement about the boundaries of their engagement. CVSL team members will usually contact learning clubs through email and will not usually engage via other applications unless for a particular purpose.

Wellbeing and learning

Encouraging regular contact between learning club sessions helps build trust and to deal with individual challenges. However, leadership learning clubs are learning rather than social spaces. This means that we advise learners to take care in deciding whether to engage in one-to-one contact outside of the group communication mechanism that has been agreed. When meeting with others, this should be in a public space, and indeed, meeting in a public space can lead to a rich group conversation.

It is worth giving some thought to the concept of starting and exiting learning clubs. Learners are free to leave learning clubs at any point and, when doing so, should have any contact details removed from group communication mechanisms. This is the responsibility of the facilitator. A learning club starts when the group meets for the first time to learn and reflect on the course materials. CVSL considers learning clubs to have been completed at the point that the online course materials are no longer used as the basis for discussion. This means that any learning club wishing to continue to communicate outside or beyond the learning club should agree on what that might look like going forward, with active thought given to wellbeing and to avoiding placing any expectations on individuals who wish to withdraw at that point.

In the unlikely event that something goes wrong in the learning clubs, it is important that all learners are clear about where they should go to in order to find support. Learning clubs are not accountable to the Open University, as learning clubs are formed via free, open access resources. The first option should be for the learner to approach their organisation directly if the learning club is organisationally based. Alternatively, where learning clubs have been set up by a local infrastructure organisation (or similar), the first option for learners would be to approach the local infrastructure organisation (or similar).

Working in an online space

You will be learning around the core online learning. The courses are easy to access and do not require any great technical skills beyond those that many people use to engage online in everyday life. You may, however, want to explore with your fellow group members whether they have studied online before, and whether they are encountering, or expect to encounter, any barriers. In addition, we suggest that you look at the guidance on posting into online discussion forums, and learners can also find other guidance on learning online on the OpenLearn website.

1. Continuing the learning journey

Learning is a lifelong journey, but learning and development opportunities are often limited in the context of voluntary organisations with limited budgets to spend on personal and professional development. There is a wide range of open access courses on the OU’s platforms OpenLearn, OpenLearn Create, and FutureLearn, where you will find everything from business skills and book-keeping, to digital skills. In addition the CVSL website is available for you to find resources that will be useful to understand and engage with leadership in the voluntary sector and updates from our research projects. The website also has a link to this document in its most recent version. When you download the pack, we will ask you for consent to keep in touch with you to evaluate our work and learn more about how best to support leadership development in the voluntary sector.

Good luck with your learning journey from the CVSL team at The Open University.

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Contact us

Don’t forget to contact the team to tell us about your experiences of accessing CVSL’s free courses and using this learner pack. We are especially interested to hear how the courses might have influenced leadership practice, and how we in turn can improve the courses to meet your needs.

Contact the CVSL Team [cvsl-oubs@open.ac.uk](mailto:cvsl-oubs@open.ac.uk), or Carol Jacklin-Jarvis, CVSL Director at [carol.jacklin-jarvis@open.ac.uk](mailto:carol.jacklin-jarvis@open.ac.uk)