

# Making the most of learning

## Background

<b>Name:</b>	Christine Mulherron
<b>Learning representative:</b>	Five years
<b>Job-title:</b>	Mental health nurse
<b>Employer:</b>	NHS Tayside
<b>Setting/specialty:</b>	Community nursing



**“The example of a learning representative I was working with inspired me to get involved. She always knew what was going on in terms of learning and development for nurses and would leave fliers and other information she thought you might be interested in on your desk. When she retired, I stepped up and took over.”**

### Gaining new skills and experiences

Networking with other people, branching out from her current role, gaining personal confidence and exposure to issues impacting the wider nursing role are just some of the things Christine believes she’s gained from taking on the learning representative role. *“Becoming a learning representative has given me a lot. As a result, things don’t faze me the way they used to.”*

From attending conferences to meeting other workplace representatives, Christine has found all these experiences enjoyable and useful when it comes to her professional life. *“Speaking up at meetings used to be a big deal, but now if something needs to be said I will say it.”*

### Making change happen

Christine is part of the NHS Tayside Learning Group which was created to highlight and promote the need for lifelong learning for NHS staff. As a learning representative Christine is able to contribute her views and gain access to senior people she would not normally have the opportunity to speak to in her every day job. *“I really feel like I’m participating and making things change for the better for staff – and patients too.”*

The group has played a key role in creating a learning agreement in Tayside which enshrines the right that workplace learning representatives can be accessed by anyone – not just union members.

Last year the group carried out a survey of the learning needs, preferences and barriers to training of NHS Tayside staff. The responses from thousands of colleagues highlighted a lack of access to computers in some areas and the need for basic computer skills, which was addressed by running basic skills courses. Another survey will be carried out this year.

## A learning philosophy

Christine has a fundamental belief in learning and development as an important part of improving people's lives. As she says; *"I'm a great believer in making the best of yourself – I believe learning keeps you fresh and I like to help other people take opportunities and get the same satisfaction from learning that I do."*

To spread the word, she keeps a notice board up-to-date at her workplace and emails people as well as dropping information on people's desks if she thinks it would interest them. *"I don't always know if people take up the leads I give them, but I get great satisfaction from knowing I've done my bit to help people make the most of themselves, and do training they might not have thought of."*

Christine also participates with other learning representatives from the RCN, Unison and Unite to run stalls at learning shows. These were initiated through the Tayside learning group, originally being held at individual workplaces about once a month but now held about four times a year in bigger venues. Joining forces with local colleges, IT and training and development departments, amongst others, and using resources from the unions and the Open University, the representatives discuss people's learning and development needs and give them advice about how to proceed and access resources.

*"I think it is important if you are in a union to take advantage of everything it has to offer so I try to show people what is there for them and encourage them to get more active."*

## Stronger together

Christine admits she felt a bit isolated when she first became a learning representative and tried to set up

a network of other local representatives. Eventually a colleague of hers did her learning representatives training and they worked together for a while, which felt more dynamic, as Christine feels that it can be hard to move things forward on your own. Between the two of them they did a learning needs survey for RCN members in their workplaces which resulted in them running workshops for colleagues on how to do literature searches and on the use of the RCN library.

Christine feels strongly that people lose sight of what learning means in reality. *"Sometimes I think people believe that when you talk about learning you mean something formal and structured, with a certificate at the end of it, and I like to promote other kinds of learning."*

When it comes to promoting learning, Christine recognises many people are concerned about the commitment it might involve. *"I think colleagues are scared of the time commitment and worried they can't fit it in with everything else. It is difficult when you are busy to give learning enough time but I think you just need to make the time for it if it is important to you."*

Christine believes that she would get a lot more done and enjoy the role even more if she had more support from other representatives. She would still really like to set up a network with other RCN learning representatives locally to share experiences, keep each other motivated, and spark off ideas.

*"Different people have different roles in their day jobs which can make the learning representative role quite different. In some cases, it is similar to their actual job but you don't need to be in an education role to be a learning representative."*