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LEARNINGREP

unionlearn.org.uk | Summer 2020

Learning through lockdown and beyond

- ▶ *Promoting health and wellbeing*
- ▶ *New Learning @ Home campaign*
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- ▶ *Helping learners stay ShipShape*
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unionlearn
from the TUC



NEW SKILLS FOR THE FUTURE

WELCOME TO THIS LATEST EDITION OF *Learning Rep*, which we put together specifically with the aim of encouraging everyone to keep learning during lockdown and beyond with the help of all the resources we've put together through our new Learning @ Home campaign.

The benefits of learning during this unprecedented period are clear. When people are working from home when they don't usually do that, or if they have been furloughed by their employer, enrolling on a course provides structure to the days and weeks – which helps everyone look after their mental health.

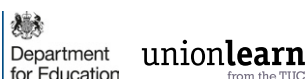
“Learning helps us concentrate on things we can control, like our confidence with calculating percentages, instead of getting lost in news reports about the impact of the pandemic.”

overcome the isolation and come out of this with a new skill, we will put ourselves in a stronger position all round. 

In addition, learning helps us concentrate on things we can control, like our confidence with calculating percentages, instead of getting lost in news reports about the impact of the pandemic that we can do very little about beyond staying safe at home.

And then there's the very real benefit of developing ourselves in preparation for life after lockdown, whenever the government begins to ease the restrictions that have been in place. We know that will bring its own challenges – and learning now can help us prepare ourselves for then. If we start learning to

Kevin Rowan is Director of unionlearn.

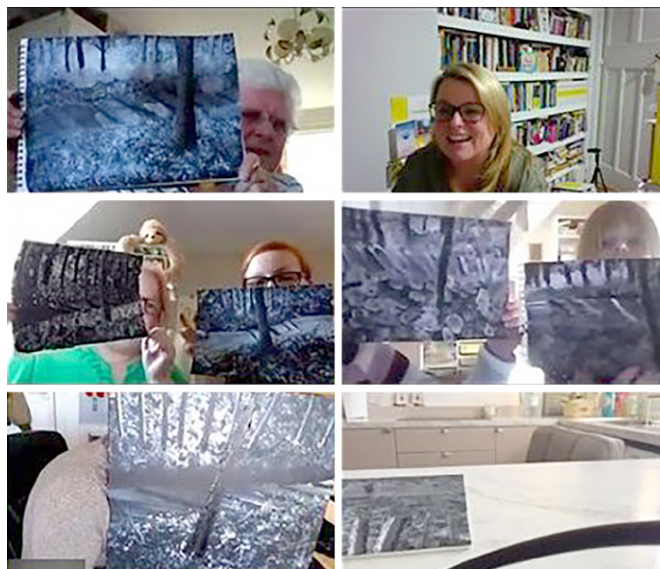


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NEWS + VIEWS

POA learning centre hosts art class on Zoom



The POA Learning centre in Eastchurch, on the Isle of Sheppey in Kent, has hosted its first online art class, enabling local artist Graham Benham to work with 12 learners all in their own homes.

Centre Manager Bev Nolker set up the two-hour session using video-conferencing software Zoom, which enabled participants to take part using the video-calling capacity of their phones, tablets and laptops.

“It was a lovely couple of hours painting and learning different art techniques,” Bev says. “I think the most important part of it was being able to see people smiling and laughing and generally joining in during the current pandemic.”

For participant Hazel Hancock, the class was a chance to return to an old hobby. “I used to attend art classes so it was lovely to do some painting at home. It also took my mind off the

current news for a few hours. And to top it all, I actually finished a picture!”

Jill Turner took part alongside her granddaughters Emily and Fraya, who both have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). “I didn't think the girls would be able to focus and concentrate for two hours but the tutor was brilliant and managed to keep their attention,” she says.

To help parents keep their children occupied with creative activity, POA Learning has collaborated with artist Richard Jefferies to make some of his illustrations available to work with. The images of Luna the Librarian can be downloaded at the link below for children to colour in to create their own stories.

 [Click here to download Richard Jefferies' images of Luna the Librarian](#)

Unite promoting 900 online courses

Unite's lifelong learning team has swung into action both to promote learning in lockdown and to gather solid data on one of the problematic aspects of the current crisis: the rise in harmful gambling online.

"We were in the fortunate position of having a suite of 900 online courses (including those offered through Litmos Heroes) available for members, which have been part of our offer for some time," says Data Collection and Reporting Coordinator Brian Davis.

"With lockdown, online learning has only gained relevance and we have an offer that is tailor-made to these circumstances."

In addition, the North East, Yorkshire & Humberside region is planning to convene an online conference for ULRs, bringing together learning reps from across the region to keep up to date with new initiatives and share best practice on supporting learners in the social distancing era.

With lockdown coinciding with a rise in online gambling as those managing addictions struggle without the support of co-workers and isolation increasing one of the key triggers for gambling – boredom – Unite has teamed up with Beacon Counselling Trust and Gambling Harms North West Alliance to conduct a survey to gather more evidence of the impact of lockdown on harmful online gambling.

"This is the first in a range of initiatives we will be

getting involved with over the coming months around the impact of harmful gambling in the workplace," says Unite Construction ULF National Project Manager Keith Lewis.

❑ [Click here](#) to take part in the *Unite/Beacon Counselling Trust/Gambling Harms North West Alliance gambling survey*

UNISON strikes new online deal



UNISON has given its members access to more than 550 free online courses during the coronavirus crisis through a new partnership with the Staff Skills Academy.

All the courses are CPD certified, which means members who complete any of the courses will have proof of their learning that they can show to their employers.

The courses cover a vast range of topics, including some that are especially pertinent, including time priority management, managing virtual teams and security for remote workers.

"This is a worrying time for public services workers, whether they've found themselves dealing with an increased workload, been put on furlough, or are self-isolating," says UNISON Head of Learning and Organising Services (LAOS) Teresa Donegan.

"We're hoping that this new opportunity will enable our members to get access to the training they need to adapt to the situation and build their skills for the future."

UNISON members simply need to ask for a Staff Skills Academy account in order to take advantage of the new online offer: details in the clickthrough below.

While the union has postponed all activists' face-to-face training, it has at the same time quadrupled the number of spaces available on its online course, The Organising Steward.

❑ [Click here](#) to email LAOS, quoting 'Skills Academy' in the email subject line

❑ [Click here](#) to find out more about The Organising Steward online course

Upload your reviews to Isolation Book Club

Unionlearn is asking union learners to review their favourite books for the new online Isolation Book Club that is part of the new Learning @ Home campaign to help members improve their skills during lockdown (see page 06).

Launched to tie in with this year's World Book Night, the Isolation Book Club kicked off with a review by unionlearn Project Worker Matt Pointon of one of the titles on the 2020 World Book Night list – Elizabeth Gaskell's *North And South*.

First published in 1854, *North And South* sympathetically portrays



the northern working class struggling against exploitation by the mill-owners of the era and is nowadays regarded as a classic novel of the Industrial Revolution.

"We thought it would be a nice idea to have people review their favourite books and encourage friends and colleagues to share suggestions," Matt says.

❑ [Click here](#) to email Matt for details of the format required for your book review

❑ [Click here](#) to find out more about this year's virtual World Book Night

Reading Ahead launches special Facebook group

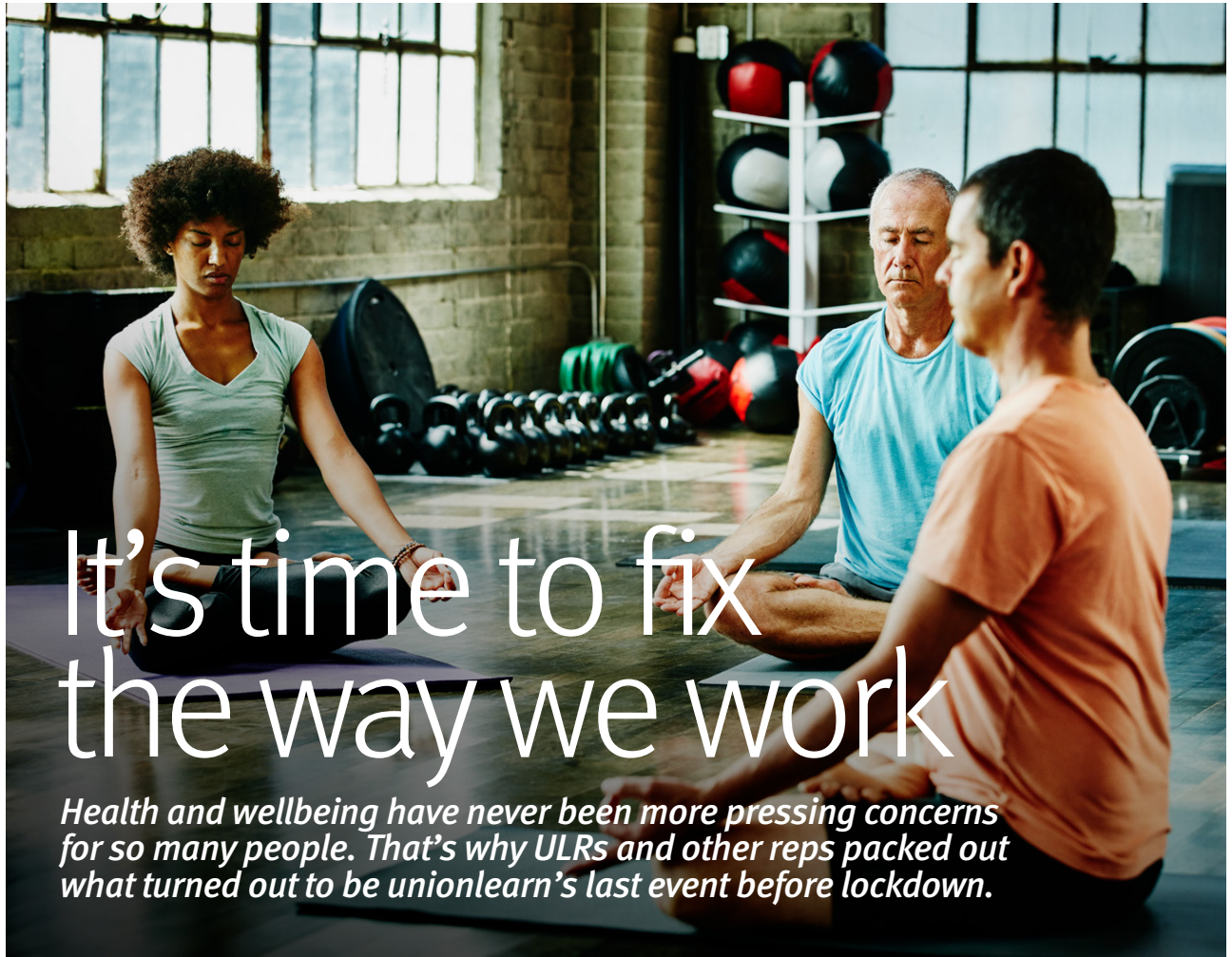
The Reading Agency has launched a closed Facebook group to help ULRs and others who are continuing to run Reading Ahead share ideas about how to keep it going digitally.

The group will enable ULRs and others to communicate with each other and with the Reading Agency and to ask for resources that would be helpful. The agency is continuing to share digital resources in the resources database as usual, as well as through the Facebook group.

❑ [Click here](#) to ask to join the Reading Ahead Facebook 2019/2020 group

❑ [Click here](#) if you have any difficulties joining the group or would like to contact the Reading Agency directly

❑ [Click here](#) for the briefing on Reading Ahead during Covid-19



It's time to fix the way we work

Health and wellbeing have never been more pressing concerns for so many people. That's why ULRs and other reps packed out what turned out to be unionlearn's last event before lockdown.

Unionlearn's learning, health and wellbeing event in March could not have been more timely, as dozens of ULRs and other union reps explored issues that gained even greater significance when the government announced the UK lockdown one week later.

That the event sold out within days of being advertised earlier in the year demonstrates how ULRs and other union reps have taken this agenda to heart in recent years, long before the Covid-19 crisis, as unionlearn Director Kevin Rowan pointed out.

"The popularity of this event shows how important these issues are to you and to the people you represent at work," Kevin told the participants at Congress House.

But the battle to contain coronavirus showed how workers' rights and public health were two sides of the same coin, he said. It was union pressure that convinced

"The popularity of this event shows how important these issues are to you and to the people you represent at work."

firms like ISS, Sodexo and Greggs to pay workers full pay when they had to self-isolate to prevent the spread of the disease.

"The presence of trade unions in our workplaces always makes such a positive difference – we know that where we have trained health and safety reps, workplaces are literally twice as safe as non-unionised workplaces," he said.

"And where we've got trained and supported union learning reps, we know that workers are much more likely to be able to develop their skills, participate in learning and

have a more rewarding and more secure career as a result."

National Projects Officers Jane Warwick and Louisa Smith put together a packed agenda to help ULRs and other reps promote health and wellbeing at work; find out about resources and campaigns that could be useful; learn more about some key mental health issues; and share their ideas and best practice.

Jane highlighted the organising potential of promoting health and wellbeing in the workplace. "By raising topics like health and wellbeing, you can engage people who don't normally engage in trade union activities, which is one way to build the network of union members in your workplace," Jane pointed out.

Reading Agency Creative Director Debbie Hicks highlighted the benefits of the organisation's Reading Well scheme, which aims to help people better understand

“What they say is the issue is not with what we’re asking you to do, the issue is with you the employee, it’s your problem, so let’s help you deal better with the stress we’re putting on you.”

and manage their health and wellbeing through five book lists, covering mental health, dementia, long-term conditions, children and young people.

“Reading really can connect us up with other people and combat the devastating impact of loneliness,” Debbie said. “All the evidence shows loneliness is as bad for you as smoking 15 cigarettes a day; there’s a proven link between loneliness, depression and dementia; and people who are lonely are more likely to die prematurely.”

Author James Withey, whose first book *The Recovery Letters* features on the Reading Well for mental health list, spoke openly about his struggle with clinical depression (his tips for good mental health are in the sidebar and he talks about his new book on pp14&15).

TUC Policy Officer Quinn Roache set out the union case against employer-led stress management and resilience programmes that are predicated on fixing individual workers rather than dealing with the workplace issues that are making them ill.

“What they say is the issue is not with what we’re asking you to do, the issue is with you the employee, it’s your problem, so let’s help you deal better with the stress we’re putting on you,” he said.

In addition to the main presentations, the workshops looked at menopause, mindfulness, self-esteem, creative writing,

LOOKING AFTER OUR MENTAL HEALTH

Author James Withey made eight recommendations for managing depression, based on his own experience of living with the illness.

Taken together with the NHS’s own advice of mental health and wellbeing, they could help all of us look after our mental health during lockdown and after.

- 1 Rest. “Rest is absolutely crucial with depression. Your brain is so active you have to have these periods of resting. For me, that meant not working for a year and a half. My husband and I took a hit with money but it was crucial for me to get better.”
- 2 Exercise. “I hate exercise. But I got on my bike and cycled up and down beside the sea. I resented every pedal stroke but it did me good. Then I resented exercise even more because it was doing me good and proving me wrong for hating it. But I still do it.”
- 3 Talking. “There’s all this stuff going round in your head and it has to come out because it’s eating you up, it’s like a poison. The best way for that stuff to come out is through talking.”
- 4 Stress. “Avoiding stress is essential. I stopped working at my job and now I work in a library, which I love. It’s part-time and less money but it doesn’t matter because the stress is significantly less.”
- 5 Voices. “You have to learn to tell the difference between your voice and depression’s voice. Depression will tell you things – you are not worthy, you shouldn’t carry on, it’s all your fault – but you have to ask, Is this me talking or is this depression talking?”
- 6 Anger. “You have to get angry with depression. It’s trying to take you down by telling you you’re a terrible person and nothing will get better. You have to fight back and talk back.”
- 7 Medication. “Controversial but for me it’s been paramount. I’ve been on hundreds of anti-depressants. The key is to find the right one for you where the side-effects aren’t too hideous.”
- 8 Hope. “Stories about recovery and about hope are really important. Hope is the antidote to depression.”



supporting people with suicidal thoughts and running a health and wellbeing event at work. **LR**

▶ [Click here](#) to read some of the presentations from the event

▶ [Click here](#) to read the new *Mental Health* theme on the union learning Climbing Frame (registration required)



Improving your skills while staying safe at home

Learning @ Home is unionlearn's new campaign to help everyone make the move to online learning, explains Service Manager Ian Borkett (below).

Unionlearn's new Learning @ Home campaign is the one-stop shop for union learners looking to improve their skills online during and after the coronavirus crisis.

The campaign is aimed at everyone: people currently working from home instead of at their usual workplaces; key workers in hospitals, supermarkets, delivery services and elsewhere; and workers who have been furloughed.

The Learning @ Home landing page on the unionlearn website is your ever-expanding guide to learning new skills during lockdown and beyond, packed with online resources from unionlearn itself and many of its key partners.

Whether you were already planning to sign up on a course or looking into what's out there as a result of the pandemic, Learning @ Home is the best place to start, explains unionlearn Service



"This is going to be an open-ended campaign that's going to continually develop as more resources become available."

Manager Ian Borkett.

"This is going to be an open-ended campaign that's going to continually develop as more resources become available – and when they do, we will put them up on the landing page," Ian says.

"It's the one-stop shop for learners, for ULRs and for other reps promoting and supporting learning, which they can visit to see what new developments are taking place in this space."

In addition to supporting learners, the new campaign will be supporting ULRs and other reps promoting learning, too.

"By regularly visiting the landing page, ULRs and other reps will be able to signpost and encourage and support learners they've worked with to these online tools, resources and free courses," Ian points out.

"In addition, we're going to be looking at offering ULRs and learners a series of interactive

“At this challenging time, learning is a great way of helping to ensure your positive mental health and wellbeing remains high by participating in some new and interesting and exciting learning opportunities.”

webinars and vlogs on a series of learning and skills issues including positive mental health and wellbeing, creative writing and learning at home in a range of initiatives and activities planned over the coming months.”

With the temporary closure of many workplaces making face-to-face contact between ULRs and learners all but impossible, many ULRs are already embracing the challenge of supporting learners remotely – and unionlearn is determined to offer more help as the weeks go by.

“ULRs are looking at alternative methods of support – keeping in touch through picking up the phone, over Facetime or Skype calls or online messaging services or setting up support groups on Facebook and other social media platforms,” Ian says.

“The real thing about ULRs is how creative and innovative they are and they always come up with amazing solutions to challenges – I don’t see this as any different and I know they will be out there now looking at different methods that they can use to best support their learners.”

Learning new skills has long been part of the NHS’s five-step journey to better mental health and wellbeing.

And the new NHS guidance to looking after ourselves during the crisis spells out how it’s important to keep your mind active through enjoyable activities like pursuing a favourite hobby or picking up something new.

“At this challenging time, learning is a great way of helping to ensure your positive mental health and wellbeing remains high by participating in some new and interesting and exciting learning opportunities,” Ian says.

But learning a new skill in lockdown has the added advantage of helping learners adapt to changing circumstances when restrictions ease, he says.

“As well as helping with their mental wellbeing during this period, learning will also ensure they are better prepared for when we get through the other side of this crisis.” **LR**

► [Click here](#) to check out the NHS’s five steps to mental wellbeing

► [Click here](#) to look at the NHS’s 10 tips to help if you are worried about coronavirus

HOW YOU CAN LEARN ONLINE

- **Careerzone:** Unionlearn-online resource that provides a one-stop shop for careers information, with a comprehensive careers directory, data analysis, videos, guidance and many other resources.
- **SkillCheck:** Unionlearn tool to help deliver learning in the workplace, with five learning themes designed to help engage with learners, including initial assessments for English, maths and IT.
- **Apprenticeship Essentials:** Unionlearn app and web-based tool for apprentices and reps supporting apprentices, including guidance, interactive tools, bite-sized learning, job search and more.
- **Climbing Frame:** Unionlearn online resource with a wealth of information about a wide range of topics to help ULRs and other reps promoting learning, including apprenticeships, English and maths, digital skills, equality and diversity, mental health, mid-life development and learning at home.
- **National Numeracy:** Take the National Numeracy Challenge to work out where you are with your maths skills – and how to move them on.
- **Learn My Way:** Access free courses on using a computer, browsing the web, sending an email and finding work online. Use the unionlearn access code when registering.
- **Wranx:** Improve your English and maths at functional skills or GCSE levels using the bite-sized online training provided by unionlearn’s partner, Wranx.
- **The Skills Network:** Enrol on one of the wide range of fully accredited distance learning courses through unionlearn’s partner, The Skills Network.
- **The Open University:** Try one of the six free online courses to help you progress your career, developed by the OU Social Partnerships Network, which counts unionlearn as a member.
- **TUC Education:** Enrol on an online course for union reps and professionals through TUC Education.

► [Click here](#) to find out everything that’s available on the [Learning @ Home](#) landing page



© PG Trade/Getty Images

We heart retail and distribution workers

Writers Clare Shaw and Mary Colson (above) wanted to make sure the Usdaw learners they have helped are recognised for their vital work in the current crisis. So they decided to give shape to their feelings.

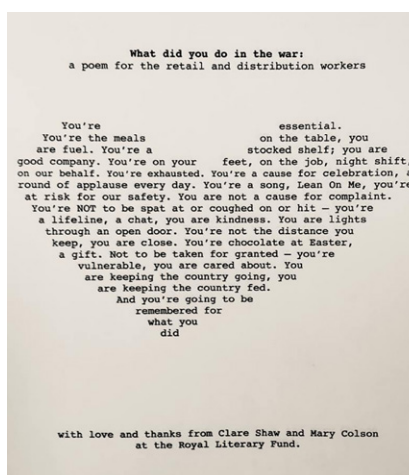
♦♦ Martin Moriarty

After working with Usdaw members on a range of writing projects over the past 18 months, poet Clare Shaw has written a heart-shaped thank you to all the retail and distribution workers who are working so hard to keep us all going during lockdown.

The poem *What Did You Do in the War* was written as a message of solidarity from Clare and her colleague Mary Colson (pictured above), who have been helping warehouse and shop workers boost their reading and writing skills through Usdaw's lifelong learning project.

After checking in with learners they had connected with on the courses, it was the ugly experiences they heard about in response that prompted Clare to write the piece.

"This is an industry where people are every day knowingly and consciously putting themselves at risk and working really long hours to bring



us services we need," Clare says.

"These people, who have been so under-valued, are now some of the most important people in the nation, but we were hearing how some people are swearing at them and threatening them – those are the massive realities I wanted to capture in a poem."

"These people, who have been so under-valued, are now some of the most important people in the nation."

Clare started with the shape the words would make on the page, using the heart to convey her sense of gratitude with an eye to what would be immediately recognisable when pinned to a work noticeboard.

"I wanted to write something that said, 'Thank you, we see you and we appreciate you' and I wanted something that would visually symbolise how we felt – that's where the love-heart came in."

"And I've been in enough workplaces to know a poem on a wall isn't going to necessarily get read

so it needs to be something you can see straightaway and even if you don't read it, it's a nice thing to see," she says.

Clare and Mary have been working with Usdaw through a partnership between union's lifelong learning project and the Royal Literary Fund (RLF), where they both deliver reading and writing workshops to students, former prisoners and children and teenagers with mental health issues.

It was Usdaw learning rep Sean Dixon, who manages The Learning Zone at the Castleford Distribution Centre, who clocked the potential for collaboration with the RLF when he heard author Ian McMillan mentioning the RLF's work in universities.

"I went to a Mental Wealth festival in Barnsley a couple of years ago and Ian McMillan mentioned how the RLF attached writers to universities and made this throwaway comment that you ought to look at this when you get back to your workplaces," Sean recalls.

"I emailed the RLF to ask if they'd thought about attaching a writer to a workplace and they said they were looking at a couple of projects in the near future so I forwarded the reply to my project worker, Martyn Warwick."

Martyn then organised a meeting in Leeds with the RLF's Fellowship Officer Steve Cook to discuss how the two organisations might work together.

"Steve talked about how the RLF embedded writers in universities to teach students how to write good essays and my brain started firing about note taking, minute taking and report writing skills and life writing for members," Martyn says.

They agreed to set up a multi-stranded pilot, with a life writing course to capture stories from people in the workplace and a Reading Round group at Castleford; and a reps' skills course at Next in Bradford.

"All three were really well received by everybody involved and a lot of that is down to Mary and Clare and their personality and their approach – they got immediately what we were



"Their quirky approach really resonates with people, the way they use fairy tales in activities, like a note-taking exercise telling the story of Cinderella in 50 words."

looking for and brought everything to life," Martyn says.

"Their quirky approach really resonates with people, the way they use fairy tales in activities, like a note-taking exercise telling the story of Cinderella in 50 words or writing a grievance on behalf of Snow White who's been forced to live with seven strange blokes!"

The partnership has gone from strength to strength since the pilot, with more workplaces taking up the opportunities and the offer itself expanding to include sessions targeted at team leaders and managers to help them better communicate over email and when writing reports.

"We are driven by this belief that being able to write a note to school to request time off in term time or writing a disciplinary report as a union rep or life writing where you're saying 'My voice is important and my story is interesting' – these are really key skills to having a sense of empowerment in your life," Clare says.

Mary and Clare themselves have loved working with Usdaw. "I like how by the end of a course, there's a mindfulness about expression on a page but there's also a carefreeness," Mary says. "People who have been so worried about writing in the workplace are starting to get to the point where they're thinking more about it but not in an anxious way – it's liberating."

For Mary, a fiction and non-fiction writer who spent 25 years teaching English at secondary level to classes of 30 or more, the union approach of teaching groups of between eight and 12 is a revelation.

"I used to get to the end of a half-term sometimes and I'd look at the register and think 'I have not spoken to that child one-to-one this half-term' but in these courses we get so much time one-to-one and you can see the learners lap up that close attention," Mary says.

"These are collaborative, supportive, shared learning environments where there's peer learning and support going on – it's what every person's experience of learning should be, regardless of age or ability," she says.

The challenge now is to move this online, which Clare and Mary are currently working on with Martyn and Usdaw National Lifelong Learning Coordinator Ann Murphy. "I'm happy to say we are exploring our online offer and options around webinars with RLF," Ann says.

And at Castleford, where Sainsbury's Argos is pushing on with its plans to close the distribution centre, even though physical distancing protocols makes face-to-face redundancy support all but impossible, Usdaw is working on a plan to deliver one-to-one CV writing advice sessions with Mary and Clare using video-calling IT software.

In the meantime, Sean has made sure the poem is pinned up on noticeboards throughout the distribution centre. "We've got it up on the union noticeboards and in the canteen and people have seen it and talked about it," he says. "They're both brilliant, Mary and Clare, they're so interested in everything: they're wonderful people." **LR**

Supporting learners through lockdown and beyond

We can all improve or expand our skills, thanks to the wide range of online learning opportunities available through unionlearn, explains Director Kevin Rowan.

🔗 Martin Moriarty

When Covid-19 forced a temporary halt to classroom courses, unionlearn

Director Kevin Rowan and his team swiftly launched a new campaign to help people make the switch to online learning.

"I'm really pleased that we've launched Learning @ Home campaign: it's a really positive contribution that unionlearn can make, and that unions can make, to help people through this difficult period," Kevin says.

"We know that people in isolation need to fill their time productively and what better way to do that than learning new skills?"

The organisation was able to move so quickly within days of the lockdown announcement thanks to the knowledge and skills that staff have developed through the creation of digital tools like SkillCheck and the Apprenticeship Essentials

"We know that people in isolation need to fill their time productively and what better way to do that than learning new skills?"

app, the expansion of the webinar programme and design and delivery of online training courses for ULRs and other reps.

"This is the direction of travel we were travelling in before we went into lockdown: in recent years, we've seen an exponential growth in the demand for the online and digital and e-learning facilities we've developed," Kevin says.

"Some of that growth is in response

to the way we're all living these days and some of it is because our core audience are increasingly under pressure in terms of the time they have, especially the ULRs and other workplace reps."

As well as putting together the new campaign, which resides on its own landing page on the website, unionlearn was also swift to produce a briefing for union reps to help them support apprentices.

Like their student counterparts, many apprentices who were expecting to be completing their programmes around now found themselves facing enormous uncertainty given the problems posed for end-point assessments (EPAs) by the need for physical distancing.

The briefing, also on the unionlearn website, covers rescheduling of EPAs; breaks in apprenticeships; and employment issues including pay, furlough and redundancy.

It's exactly the sort of support apprentices would always expect from their union – as Kevin knows first-hand, since he began his working life as an apprentice shipwright in the Barrow shipyard (he switched to the draughtsman programme shortly afterwards).

When Kevin arrived as a cocky teenager in the mid-1980s, his mentor appeared in the shape of Glaswegian convenor Danny Pearson, the kind of labour movement veteran who could forgive a kid's big mouth when he saw their union potential.

"I was probably a bit gobby," Kevin laughs. "And Danny said to me, 'Rather than just being a gobby little so-and-so, you should use it to make a difference and become active in the union'."

That was how Kevin came to take on his first union role, elected as a rep for TASS (now part of Unite) one week shy of his 18th birthday.

The new activist would need all his innate verbal skills, plus all the knowledge he acquired on trade union education courses, through the latter part of the '80s, since management at the recently-privatised shipyard launched a massive programme of job cuts to slash the workforce from 14,000 to 5,000 in just six years.

But Kevin wasn't just standing up for his members in the shipyard: he was also taking the argument about the value of trade unions into local schools, raising the level of debate among the pupils he met in an era when the labour movement was enduring overwhelmingly negative coverage in the media.

"Terry Molloy and Val Pilson at Preston College got me into doing Trade Unions into Schools as a way of developing my communication and education skills," Kevin says.

"And that very quickly progressed into me getting time off to deliver some trade union education throughout the North West in Preston, Liverpool and other parts of the region."

When the shipyard cuts programme eventually came for his job too, Kevin (by this time in his mid-20s) used his redundancy money to fund a university degree, and after graduating went on to help set up the Carlisle Trade Union Education Unit.

"When I hear from treasury officials that no one does learning and engagement better than trade unions, you can say we've made progress."

After working as the GMB's education officer in the late 1990s, Kevin became Regional Secretary of the Northern TUC in 2002, where he also later (and uniquely) managed the regional unionlearn team as well.

After moving into a national role as Head of Organisation and Services at the TUC in 2013, Kevin took on the role of unionlearn director in 2017.

The first challenge Kevin faced as director was external: to overcome the last vestiges of cynicism about union learning among some politicians and civil servants. And he is hopeful that this argument has been won.

"When you get to a point where a Conservative chancellor stands up two years ago at the budget and says unionlearn are part of the solution to our skills challenges in the country, and when I hear from treasury officials that no one does learning and engagement better than trade unions, you can say we've made progress," Kevin says.

The second challenge was internal: to combine the learning and industrial agendas so that those two key strands of union work could fully support each other. "Three years ago, it still felt that the learning agenda was separate from the industrial and organising agenda, so it's been important to synergise our work as unionlearn with the TUC's industrial agenda," he says.

For Kevin, it remains a high priority to continue to create new resources of all varieties to support union learning reps and all reps promoting learning – even while so many workplaces remain closed – since ULRs are the rock on which unionlearn is built.

"We're absolutely standing on the shoulders of giants – the union learning reps who are the ones making



Main photo, opposite: Kevin speaking at unionlearn's annual conference last year

Top photo: day shift workers leave the VSEL shipyard in the 1980s, when Kevin was a union rep on site

Bottom photo: Kevin in his former role as Regional Secretary of the Northern TUC

the difference on a daily basis," he says. "Our job as TUC officials and union officials is to give them a bit of wind in their sails."

They will all need every bit of help they can get to meet the challenges that lie ahead – from using learning and skills to help rebuild the economy once we overcome the Covid-19 crisis, to supporting people with the skills they need for the era of expanding automation and artificial intelligence, with the union contribution towards carbon net-zero. But Kevin is optimistic about what can be done.

"Nobody can rest on their laurels because the challenges ahead for us are much greater than the achievements we've had so far," he says. "But while we've got major challenges ahead, we've also got great strengths to meet them." **LR**



Helping Sheffield learners stay ShipShape

Community's new learning hub in Sheffield has engaged dozens of new learners – and they are keeping connected while staying safe at home.

A successful partnership between the union Community and Sheffield's ShipShape health and wellbeing centre has engaged dozens of new learners in one of the most deprived parts of the city. And even though Covid-19 has meant the premises have had to close, the learners have been keeping connected while staying safe at home.

Last autumn, with the help of the Union Learning Fund (ULF), Community bought laptops and other equipment to help learning get under way at ShipShape. And after a successful pilot programme of English and IT classes, the new ShipShape Community Learning Hub launched in December.

Anchor organisation ShipShape is a well-established fixture in the Sheffield community, helping people improve their health and wellbeing through free and low-cost one-to-one and group sessions at its centre in Sharrow and in outreach venues across the city.

ShipShape works with some of the most vulnerable members of the community: many are isolated and find it hard to get involved in any activity outside their homes; others have long-term health conditions or struggle with

their mental health and are at risk of suicide. The centre also works with people living with dementia and their carers and people who have suffered domestic abuse.

"We're very much about helping people to live healthier lives in their communities through practical and creative ways," explains CEO Tanya Basharat, who has been working at ShipShape for 11 years now.

"We run cooking on a budget activities, physical activities, one-to-one counselling and specialist support with long-term health conditions including – but not limited to – diabetes or chronic pain. And we work with the community, statutory and non-statutory partners to ensure we shape services to meet people's needs."

But while Tanya and her team had long been interested in adding learning into the mix of services at ShipShape to meet the demand voiced by the local community at their co-production workshops, they hadn't been able to find a suitable partner to work with – until Community made it possible.

It was when Community National Organiser Sidra Nisa started attending ShipShape's partnership network meetings that the two

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organisations began to explore the potential of working together.

“We have been trying to increase our presence within the community, which is something we need to do in order to create tangible learning solutions that can be instrumental towards achieving the government’s learning agenda,” Sidra explains.

At an open day promoting learning opportunities early last year, a learning needs survey identified a demand for English and digital skills in particular.

Community Learning Organiser Hannah Smith worked with ShipShape’s Community Development Worker Nur Ali and Publicity and Admin Worker Iram Fareen to set out a clear learning strategy to engage people, which has involved delivery of English, digital skills, handwriting and other courses.

Iram has now completed her TUC Stage 1 Union Learning Representative course, becoming the union’s first ULR in a community setting.

“The training was a great leap forward because it bridged some of the gaps we had not envisioned,” Tanya says. “Iram speaks several different languages, which is important because we have a diverse community across this neighbourhood.”

The English and IT classes that launched last autumn were a massive success, with the first group of learners presented with their certificates by Sheffield Lord Mayor Tony Downing, who officially opened the hub last December alongside Community General Secretary Roy Rickhuss CBE and National Executive Council member Douglas Fairbairn.

“It is great to see people come together to help each other learn: I just wish there were many more places like this set up across the city,” Tony said.

Roy Rickhuss emphasised how the economy was changing through the fourth industrial revolution.

“We know that we have to help people who

“Not only do Community members have a point where they can come and learn but also the wider community – those people who need it more than anyone else – now have access to education and lifelong learning and skills development.”

are in work but also those who are working in the community. Learning and skills are crucial for economic growth and for social justice, and as a union we have launched a commission to look into how technology is influencing and changing our daily life,” Roy said.

“We are pleased to work with ShipShape, and our aim through provisioning the learning hub is that Community members and ShipShape clientele have the skills to fulfill their current and future personal, social and employment needs.”

After the launch, one of the learner’s daughters phoned Tanya crying tears of gratitude about how the course had changed her mum. “She said her mum was speaking more at home, more confident about doing things for herself, going to the local shops independently rather than relying on others all the time – she gained this confidence, simply by attending her classes and being given the opportunity,” Tanya says.

Courses including hair and beauty with embedded functional and digital skills and handwriting workshops, which had enrolled over 30 learners, had already started before the lockdown.

“Because the induction day had already taken place, the good thing was that learners could take laptops with them,” Tanya says. “The team have set up Zoom and Skype group accounts for learners, who now have the basic digital skills to continue their courses online.”

Tanya says working in partnership has always been ShipShape’s strength. “We are delighted to work with Community to ignite a curiosity for learning and help people gain qualifications,” she says.

And Sidra feels very happy with the way Community has contributed to help set up the new learning hub. “Not only do Community members have a point where they can come and learn but also the wider community – those people who need it more than anyone else – now have access to education and lifelong learning and skills development,” she says. **LR**



Keeping on an even keel in trying times

Author James Withey has helped countless people improve their mental health through his Recovery Letters project. Now he's written a new book on managing depression, which has a lot to teach us all during the current crisis.

♦♦ Martin Moriarty

A couple of weeks after the start of the lockdown, author James Withey was out on his daily walk around Brighton when he spotted something that made him smile: a pair of pigeons splashing around in a puddle.

As someone who has lived with depression for many years, James has learned that moments of joy like this may be small and may be fleeting but paying attention to them can make a massive contribution to remaining on an even keel in trying times.

"I write these moments down now because these are the things that help

us through times like these: they really are the stuff of life even though they are often the things you wouldn't have noticed normally," he says.

Although James was formally diagnosed with clinical depression a decade ago, he has been living with mental health issues for almost as long as he can remember.

First visited by suicidal thoughts during his early teens, it was only much later, when the pain grew so great that he attempted to take his own life, that he began to learn what he was really dealing with.

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‘This is clinical depression,’ that I realised I was really unwell,” he recalls. “It seems crazy now but I didn’t take on the diagnosis before then because of the stigma that was holding me back.”

After he was admitted to Mill View Hospital in Hove, it was the compassionate care at the Maytree respite centre in north London that helped James survive that suicidal crisis.

But when he went looking for stories of recovery, all he could find were huge, forbidding tomes by specialist practitioners and nothing by people who had been taken to the edge by their depression – and still managed to get through.

“What I wanted was to hear stories of hope and recovery and what people did to carry on and live their lives and I couldn’t find anything like that,” he says.

That was when he first set up The Recovery Letters website, through which people suffering from depression can read letters from people who are recovering from it.

He wrote the first letter himself and then set about securing more contributions from people he knew and from people he didn’t via social media. It was when mental health charity MIND re-tweeted his call for contributions that researchers on the Radio 4 programme *All In The Mind* found out about the project and invited him on to talk about it.

“Everything went ballistic after that,” he recalls. “I think it really struck a chord because people with

depression wanted to help other people with depression.”

As the letters arrived, James would work with their authors to help them refine how they told their stories, to make sure that they included some material about their own mental health experiences and always ended on the hopeful note that is the hallmark of the project.

“They were all incredibly moving: people made themselves very vulnerable to write these letters,” he says.

“But as time went on, what became

clear was that writing the letters was incredibly useful for them: I knew as the letters started coming in they would be really powerful for the readers but I hadn’t appreciated how powerful they would be for the writers.”

The success of the website led to a book deal with Jessica Kingsley. The paperback, co-edited with Olivia Sagan, has become part of the Reading Agency’s

Reading Well for mental health reading list and was part of the World Book Night reading promotion scheme in 2018.

“From the beginning, I always wanted it to become a book because having a physical object you can take around with you is a very different experience from reading a screen – it’s like a comfort blanket,” he says.

“I still look at the book a lot: I read it on the train when I came to talk at the unionlearn health and wellbeing event and it’s incredibly moving – the compassion and the hope in those letters is just unbelievable.”

And now James’s new book, *How To Tell Depression To Piss Off*, is arriving just in time to help all of us look after our mental health during lockdown and beyond.

Like *The Recovery Letters*, the new book is made up of short chapters of personal testimony.

But this time, the material is all James’ own. And the choice of title is a pointer to how he’s approaching the subject from a slightly different angle.

“If I’m talking about suicide and the depths of my painful soul the whole time, it’s going to be a hard read, so without dismissing the seriousness of depression, I thought ‘Let’s present this in a more light-hearted way’,” he says.

Which brings us back to the pigeons in the puddle. James is hoping, once we emerge from the worst of the current crisis, that we find a way to hang on to the positives that many people have been able to experience while furloughed or working from home.

“I hope we’ll look back on this period and go, ‘It was a really difficult period but I had time with my kids or my partner.’”

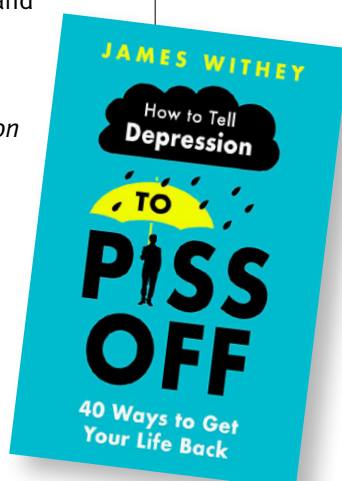
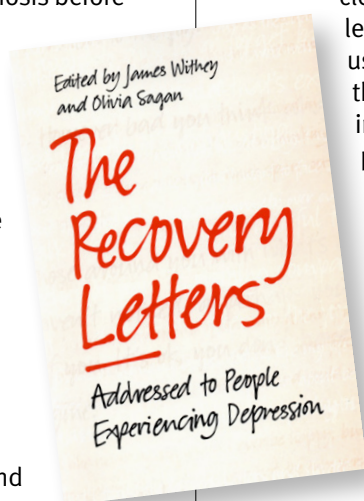
“I hope we’ll look back on this period and go, ‘It was a really difficult period but I had time with my kids or my partner and I was able to have quiet moments in the day’ and I hope that does make people reflect about balance, I really do,” he says. **LR**

▶ [Click here](#) for the Reading Agency’s Reading Well for mental health list

▶ [Click here](#) to order ‘How To Tell Depression To Piss Off’ in paperback or ebook

▶ [Click here](#) to visit The Recovery Letters website

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Tony passes the taste test

A retired FBU member who volunteers cooking meals for vulnerable members of his local community has expanded his knowledge of health and nutrition by completing a distance-learning course on the topic during lockdown.

Former mess manager Tony Purnell was determined to do something useful with his time while staying safe at home, so he asked if the FBU distance-learning courses were available to retired members – which they are.

“I noticed that the FBU were offering free distance learning courses so I decided to explore the possibilities on offer,” Tony explains.

“I decided to study for the Level 2 Certificate in Understanding Nutrition and Health as I volunteer my time as a cook and thought that I could do with some knowledge based around this subject to help me provide nutritional healthy meals.”

FBU Project Support Organiser Tim Davis contacted Tony to explain how distance learning works, the division of the course into modules, the timeframe for completing assessments and how to submit work.

He also set out the arrangements for advice, guidance and support by phone, email and video calls.

“The modular learning system is easy to grasp: you read through the work books, carry out the exercises as

you go and then, at the end of each module, carry out an assessment and send it off in the post,” Tony says.

“The best thing for me was that you can study where and when it suits you from the comfort of your own home and get a recognised qualification.”

Completing the course, which he did in a matter of weeks, has helped Tony learn more about how to cook for the different groups he helps look after.

“I found the course really useful in gaining the knowledge to help me plan meals and get the best nutrition from our food,” he explains.

“One group in particular are quite elderly and I wanted to find out about their nutritional requirements so that I could fulfil their nutritional needs.”

He also enjoyed learning about kitchen hygiene and food safety. “I felt that it was practical knowledge that I could immediately make use of, as it is quite a responsibility preparing someone else’s food and I want to get it right!” he says.

“I would recommend this course to anyone: it’s well designed and enjoyable to follow. I was awarded a pass and I am really looking forward to

“I would recommend this course to anyone: it’s well designed and enjoyable to follow. I was awarded a pass and I am really looking forward to getting my certificate.”

getting my certificate – and it did not cost me a single penny!”

Tim says the FBULearn team is very impressed at how Tony has used the period of lockdown to expand his knowledge and skills so he can provide better support for all the people he cooks for.

“All of us at FBULearn are in admiration of Tony as he now volunteers his time preparing food for those vulnerable in the local community and that he also wanted to find out more about health and nutrition to benefit not only himself but others,” Tim says. **LR**