

Remembering the Beginnings of Countesthorpe U3A

By Vicky Armstrong

After the initial, very exclusive, meeting a few more people were drawn into the fold, myself included. This second cohort organised a general meeting at the beginning of November 1999. 40 people attended and we ended up with over 40 suggestions for interest groups! Also from this meeting came volunteers to form a Steering Committee.

The first meetings were very tentative. Most of the members of the Steering Committee had no previous experience so we were just feeling our way. I remember thinking that although I couldn't see where this might lead, it was definitely worth giving it a go.

We assigned ourselves responsibilities and made a start. I was group co-ordinator and I remember thinking that I was glad I hadn't got Dorothy's job (finding speakers for the monthly meetings), but then she was probably glad she hadn't got Ruth's job (Chair), who wouldn't have wanted Mike's job (Finance) who probably wouldn't have wanted mine . . .

After some research we decided that (aside from legal matters and getting members) the two most important parts of our U3A would be the monthly meetings and the interest groups. I know Dorothy agonised over the speakers and setting up the groups wasn't that easy either. The importance of the groups can be seen in the first Newsletter. The idea was that if someone had an interest or a speciality they could share this with others. Lots of people wanted to take part in various activities but significantly less people wanted to lead these! However, there were enough brave souls to get the first groups off the ground before the December monthly meeting.

This was held at the college where wines kindly supplied by Waitrose lured people in and enabled me to have a real push to set up a good variety of interest groups. I'd hung titles of possible activities all round the library in the hope that it would inspire people to offer their services as group leaders. Of course it was all new and no one had any idea what it would entail. So I softened the blow by saying that we just needed someone to start the group off, and other members could then take their turn. In a lot of cases this never happened and there are still some groups going strong 10 years later with their original leaders!

I do feel rather guilty at having cajoled and otherwise bullied people into starting a group, but it looks like the end justified the means as the groups got started and have evolved along the way. Some did change leader, some had revolving leaders and some fell by the wayside to be replaced by others. I set up coffee mornings for group leaders to offer support, help and advice; notice boards (large display boards on which I put titles for each group under which group leaders could put their notices); the 'market place' so that they could advertise what was happening in their groups; and notes in the Newsletters, all highlighted in Newsletter number 2.

When the Steering Committee ended and the first real committee began I was very pleased to continue as Group Co-ordinator. I was really sad to leave such an active role in the U3A when I went back to work, but everything was established by then and looked like it could carry on developing. The committee had put particular emphasis on the fact that committee members and the roles within the committee would change on a regular basis so that one person didn't do a job for years with no one wanting to replace them. 10 years on it looks as if this was a winning strategy. Long may it continue.