

Transcript of ENHANCE Podcast Episode: Co-Creating Change: The Davina Project Story Recorded by: AONTAS

Speaker 1

You're listening to the Enhance Learner Voice podcast. I am your host, Rachel Ryan. And in this podcast series, we'll be hearing real life stories from adult learners and educators involved in community and adult education across Europe. The podcast is part of the Enhance Project, a European Commission funded initiative that brings together partners from all over Europe. Through this project, we're developing tools and strategies that support educators, organisations and policy makers to put learner voice at the heart of adult education. We really believe that your voice matters and by sharing your story, you can inspire others to learn, teach and lead in more inclusive and empowering ways. Today I am delighted to be joined by Rachel Fayne. She is coordinator of the Davina Project, a winner of an AONTAS Star Award in 2023. Rachel, you're very welcome to the podcast. How are you?

Speaker 2

Thanks so much for having me. I'm really looking forward to having a chat about the Davina Project and about SAOL as a whole.

Speaker 1

Yeah, absolutely. We're delighted to have you. I've heard really interesting things about the projects. So we might just begin with the SAOL project and if you could give us a sort of overview of what that is all about.

Speaker 2

Yeah, so the SAOL project is, we're turning 30 this year, so we're going quite a while. It was set up by a group of activists in the North inner city 30 years ago for women from the North inner city community who were using substances or who had substance use issues. And the idea was to engage them in education so that they had more choices in their life. We are a project that specifically works with people who use drugs or alcohol. And rather than a lot of drug and alcohol projects, really focus on drugs and alcohol and staying away from drugs and alcohol, whereas SAOL really focuses on what can enhance people's life and through having a more enhanced life, a more, better self-esteem, finding yourself, the need for drugs is less. So that's really our focus. We're more kind of harm reduction project as well. So we don't demand abstinence from the people who come to us. We're more about how can people who use substances engage fully in society, that everybody who uses drink or drugs have a right to



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engage in society. If they want to stop using drink or drugs, absolutely that's the ultimate harm reduction and we can support them with that, but it's not something that we demand of the people who come to us. The other thing that makes SAOL unique is that it's a women's specific service. So we were the first women's specific community drugs project in Ireland. We are pretty much still the only one. There's another service called Jane's Place. They also work with women who are homeless, so some of the people who go there don't necessarily have an addiction issue, but all the women who come to Sale have had an addiction issue in the past. So that was quite a unique service. And the reason why it was felt there was a need for that was to provide a safe space for women where they can explore their own gender issues as well, where they don't have to feel afraid of or at risk of gender-based violence or microaggression or anything like that. And it also means that we can look at gender-specific issues. So the idea is that addiction and experience of addiction is much different for a woman than it is for a man because of gender issues greater in life. So things like childcare, emotional labour, stigma is much, much bigger, higher rates of mental health issues, period poverty, all of those issues can quite easily be overlooked in a mixed gender service. So because we're a gender-specific service, we can look at those gender issues and how they intersect with addiction and offer support that's direct. And I suppose in some ways that's one of the things that led to Davina because obviously gender-based violence is a gendered issue. It doesn't discriminate in the sense that men obviously also experience domestic violence and abuse at times in their life, but... It's much more common among, it's a much more common experience for women. And a woman's experience of violence tends to be quite different because it tends to be more linked to domestic abuse, whereas male violence tends to be more community-based. Women's violence tends to be based within the home or family environment.

Speaker 1

Okay, Rachel, it sounds like an absolutely fantastic project. And I like the way it focuses so much on prevention, not just on prevention, but on kind of enhanced investment of people's lives, through something like education to give people something else to strive for. You mentioned briefly the Davina project. So this is kind of like 1 branch, say, of the overall sale project, which has been incredibly successful. I mentioned it won the Learner Voice Star Award at the AONTAS Star Awards back in 2023. So could you tell us a bit about what the Divina project specifically tackles?

Speaker 2

Yeah. So just before I go to that, I do want to talk a little bit, I suppose, how it developed because of sales approach, if that's okay. So sales approach is very much in line again with the learner



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voice. So we like to respond to the needs of the people that are coming to the service. So sort of as this kind of community-based education with a community focus on education. The first thing that was noticed was a gap in childcare for the women, so we set up a childcare centre. Then it was noticed that a lot of the women coming to the project had issues with criminality hadn't been involved in the criminal justice system, whether it be probation, time in prison. So out of that, the Brio Project was born. The You Choose Project was born out of realizing that just after a couple of years of CE, it's not enough to expect people to move on. So we try to be very, very responsive. And part of that responsivity was around how do we respond better to domestic violence and domestic abuse. So we did have a programme about 2015, I believe it was, called Solace of Sale. So it was a group of staff again in Sale that noticed that a lot of the women were presenting with an issue or an experience of domestic abuse. And we're looking for a way to tackle that. So one of our approaches tends to be around psychoeducation. So not just learning about reading, writing, maths, learning about yourself, who you are as a person within society, and gaining that deeper insight into yourself that can help you then cope with your day-to-day lives, learning coping strategies, things like that. So they worked with a project in London called the Solace Project, and they developed Solace to SAOL, which stands for Light in Life. And that was a an 8 module personal development program for women who'd experienced domestic violence. And that was an intervention that the staff knew was there. If a woman came to the project and said, I'm experiencing gender-based violence, I'm experiencing domestic abuse, the staff knew that they had a little tool there. They had this a personal development psychoeducational programme that they could use. It was run sometimes in groups. It was run in the Docus and the women's prison, Mount Joy. And the Brio programme also used it as well. But by and large, it wasn't, so in my time there, it hadn't been used maybe to the fullest extent. And then when COVID-19 came about, SAIL had to change its way of working. We couldn't have the women into the project because of restrictions. So we decided, but we were really worried about them. You know, they were very vulnerable, very lonely. You know, a lot of them had mental health issues, physical health issues. We didn't like the idea of them being in lockdown.

Speaker 1

And they were kind of all amplified because of COVID.

Speaker 2

All of these things. Absolutely, yeah, And you know, there was a lot of talk at the time about domestic violence and we knew we had to be sensitive to that as well. So we proposed to the health service that what we could do is to continue to work with the women that we were



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supporting, that we could visit their homes, that we could bring, hygiene items, food, worksheets, things for the kids, anything that they need like that. And during those interactions, we could assess their mental health, their physical health. any kind of poverty issues and also domestic violence to be aware of. And that true that then we can make referrals for any services that were still ongoing. And even though we were very aware that gender-based violence was a big issue for the women that came to Sale, I think we didn't realise how big it was until we were faced with it at the door. And you can't really ignore it, I suppose, when you're face to face with it at the door when you're seeing it. in front of you. So at that time, the CEO of SALE and the head of services, Gary Broderick and Radian Dawn, decided that they wanted to try to come up with a response to gender-based violence experienced by the women who were coming to SALE. So some of the key learnings for that, I suppose, was that we had to really ask ourselves, If these women trusted us and they did trust us and they knew us and we worked with them for many, many years, why weren't they disclosing to us? So we had to really own that we were missing something and decided that the best people to tell us what we were missing were the learners themselves and tell us what would have helped them. So born out of that, that's where the Divina Project came about. The first step.

Speaker 1

So it was really a direct reflection of learner voice, of asking the learners what they wanted and then implementing those changes.

Speaker 2

Yeah, so the first step actually was putting up an ad for people who'd been to sale, who'd been through substance use issues and domestic violence and saying, we want to hear from you. We want to set up a group of peer leaders who can tell us what's what. And those peer leaders are actually involved in the recruitment of the coordinator recruitment they saw on my interview panel and gave me the nods to come aboard. And then from that we did, we did, we worked with them to develop the strategy of the project using the theory of change approach. So they were involved in that as well. So they straight away was like, but we did focus groups with them around what would they love to see the Divina Project achieve and working backwards then what were the goals then of the project and how do we get there. So they were involved in recruitment to the coordinator, they're involved in setting up the strategic aims of the project through a theory of change approach. So they were really, it was very, one of the things that I'm very proud of with the Divina Project is that I think sometimes, How could I say it? Sometimes that consultation process can be very tokenistic as well. it can be like, well, we asked them, didn't we? So that's that box ticked. Whereas this was, it was very genuine. co-creation.



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Like it wasn't just that I was creating and then every now and again I asked for their approval. It was that we worked together.

Speaker 1

And also that the goals of the project came from the learners themselves. And I think that's really important that you weren't kind of setting the goals and asking for confirmation from the learners. It was coming from them themselves.

Speaker 2

Absolutely. And that meant that they had this extra buy-in and they were able to then recruit other women to be involved in the project. So we didn't just, I suppose, the way it was set up, the first thing we did was we set up obviously the strategy. And then we looked at Solace to Sale and we said, what do we want to keep, what do we not want to keep? Then we looked at kind of international resources and again, assess them for their value to them, how valuable they felt those resources were. and if there was anything that they'd like to use or anything they'd like to change. So they were empowered by being involved in that kind of research process. And then we talked about, looking back, what is it that you think staff need to know? What do teachers need to know before working with you? And that became section one of a toolkit that we developed, the Divina Manual. And then section 2 was going to be the psychoeducational programme. So we first worked together to develop what the title of the modules would be, what exactly were the topics that they wanted to cover. And then on each topic, it was like, what would you, looking back, what would you have liked to know then? And we researched this together and then put it together. So we had all that from the learner voice. But then what we also had after that was then we piloted it within SAIL with women who weren't peers. But they got to give feedback on how they found the material and if they found the material real useful or beneficial or accessible. Accessibility was a real big focus for us as well, because what I find accessible might not be accessible to other people. So we have to see about, is this clear? Are you getting the information you need from this? Is there anything that you feel is missing from this? So there was certain worksheets and things that came out of after the pilot, things that had been raised during the pilot.

Speaker 1

Was there anything from any of the learners in that process? that almost surprised you in terms of what they want, things that you never would have thought of if you hadn't involved them.

Speaker 2



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Yeah, definitely. One of the biggest things was actually the direction of the project. So I think when I applied for the position, I was very passionate about the intersectionality between substance use and gender-based violence. My experience having worked, when I got that job, I'd been about say 17 years in the field, something like that. And my experience of that time had been very much that inordinately high proportion of women that accessed addiction services experienced domestic abuse. And also my other experience was that as a worker looking for ways to support women, I found that there was a lot of closed doors. So when I got the role, I was really focused on how do we open these doors? And the focus was really on equality, was that everybody in Ireland is entitled to support with domestic abuse and that women who use drink or drugs or experiencing homelessness, very often don't get that equal access of service and equal access of information. So I think, when we talk about equality, sometimes we forget about the equality of access to information. That's absolutely huge in society because it's very difficult to engage in society if you don't have access to information that everybody else has. So that was a huge focus for me. But what I really learned from very early on working with, I call them peers, the learner leaders or whatever, was that it wasn't just access was the problem. It was that their experiences were quite unique to substance use. So say, for example, in a mainstream domestic violence service, you'd have examples of, you'd have very clear examples of abusive behaviour. A lot of the women who experience addiction didn't see their experience reflected in those examples. So then they didn't feel like that their experiences were valid. So things like women on methadone being, having their methadone withheld from them from their partner or them being locked in their flat so they can't get access to their methadone. Very specific. Very specific to. to their addiction and that the abuser would use their experience of addiction against them in a way of very specific abuses. So what that meant was we could actually take that learning and include it in the manual, in the programme. And that meant that women coming forward then after that could really see themselves truly reflected on that material. And that gave them a chance to open up without shame. They go, oh, that was me actually. And to be able to see their experiences reflected in a way where they never would have before gave them an opportunity to identify that the way they were treated wasn't okay.

Speaker 1

Yeah, I'm sure.

Speaker 2

And that it wasn't their fault.

Speaker 1



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Yeah, it helped them feel less alone as well when they see that, very similar situation happening at the same time. I'm wondering, Rachel, in engaging with these learners to develop this amazing project, a lot of the learners are people who are in very vulnerable situations and, maybe they have never had their voices heard or they don't even know how to express their voice. How did you support those learners to be comfortable in sharing their experience and having their voices heard? Was there tools you used to kind of draw that out of them, or were a lot of these participants, dying to share their thoughts?

Speaker 2

Definitely, I think maybe a mix of both. I think they were really dying to share their experiences and really learn and found that really cathartic, really, I suppose they felt they really healed from that experience of sharing. They knew they were helping other women. And I think that was really important because women who experience domestic violence and domestic abuse, gender-based violence, their abusers always tell them that it was their fault and society can question, oh, how did you end up in that situation and things like that. So those women who experience that often experience feelings, intense feelings of shame and low self-esteem because, you know, if someone puts you down daily for years and years and years, that's going to impact on your mental health and your self-esteem. So I think the experience of, I can help another person, that's a really good way to kind of boost self-esteem and boost self-worth and find an identity, a place for yourself in your community. And I think that's really, really important. The other thing I suppose that was important was being respectful. And I think that in some ways active listening and respect is very second nature to some people and it's not for others and you can do courses on it. It's kind of built into the fabric of sale and what we do, we're very, very respectful. We're very, we try to be very aware that a lot of women have trauma and to support them and kind of managing their emotions and things like that. One of the things that was a focus was also supporting the women to not overshare, to not share too much of their story, to mind their safety in it. I think sometimes services in our bid to kind of, to show our value because we're constantly competing for money and funding and all this, can say, this is Mary. Mary, can you tell us why we're so great? Do you know what I mean? We didn't want to do that.

Speaker 1

But you wanted to be authentic.

Speaker 2



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Wanted to be authentic. And also, I didn't want the peers to feel that their value was in their story. Their value was in their humanity, their wisdom, their bravery, their immense personalities. You know, their value isn't in, oh, please help us sell our products. Do you know what I mean? So that was really important. And I think part of explaining or part of working with women to kind of go, do you really need to share that? Is that safe for you? Is it fair? Do people need to know that? Are you happy to share that? kind of was... It was a good way of kind of exploring to people the power that they have in their words as well and that they have a right to choose what to share and what not to share and that it's not a commodity.

Speaker 1

It's also a great example of responsibility within learner voice. Like you were saying, you know, so many organizations, learner voice is so important for getting their message across and for getting that funding across the line. But it's doing it in that responsible way where, you know, people are not putting themselves in any danger or they're not, they're not, they're not oversharing because you're kind of pushing them to do so.

Speaker 2

And we had to really make ethical considerations as well because some of the women would maybe have been still dabbling in substance use and stuff like that. So like we wouldn't bring them to like public events if they're affected or interview them while affected or things like that. So we really thought about safety and ethical issues then as well.

Speaker 1

Yeah, and you brought up earlier, and it's great to hear that, respect was really at the core of involving these learners in developing the Divina project. I'm wondering, did it ever lead to any kind of tension or conflict when you were asking learners to share their stories, even between the learners themselves? Because I'm sure all their situations, while they were similar in some ways, were, they're also, you know, completely different stories. And did it ever lead to any kind of conflict?

Speaker 2

The few conflicts that we had were really just around kind of feeling valuable. And feeling hurt. And I think that was one of the most important things. People will stop sharing if they feel that their sharing isn't getting anywhere. So I think I always tried to reinforce anytime something came from one of them, I'd say, look, here's your words. You know, this is what you helped do. This is why you helped create to kind of give that feedback. Because if people feel like they're



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sharing just for the sake of it, they might just stop sharing then, was that they're feeling the value of the words. I think that's what's really, really important. And the only conflict ever came from that, you know, insecurity arrange, is there a value to this? Yeah. And so it was really just tackled through kind of that reassurance that this is the value, this is working, keep talking, it's really helping and you're helping other women. And once people have that feeling, then they're happy. They're happy.

Speaker 1

Happy to go for it. I'm wondering, Rachel, for any educators maybe listening or practitioners or people in similar organisations who haven't really evoked that learner voice, yes, but they want to. And they're listening to you saying, wow, this, they've developed a whole project by involving learners. Can you tell me a bit about, you know, the practicalities of actually getting learners to share? We've talked a lot about, you know, how and why, but, you know, was it, was it, was it straightforward interviews that you did with them? Was it, you know, survey forums? Did you, have an open invitation? Did you hand select participants? How did you practically go about it?

Speaker 2

Yeah, so we had an open invitation for the peer rolls, so for the women with the lived experience to help inform the development of the project. And they would have participated in interviews. And as part of that, it would have been established whether or not they were in a place to do that, if it was safe for them to do it, if they had, if it was worthwhile for them to do it. We really didn't want it to be like a mining exercise where it was like, we're just going to take from you. And we really wanted to focus to try to support them in their goals as well, so that they, as well as getting, as well as having the time to steer us, that we gave back to them by offering extra support around kind of education and things like that. So that was a kind of mutually beneficial arrangement. So the first step, sir, was the interviews and then there was the selection process. We ended up with six learners as a core group that would kind of first year on the project with myself. And then after that, so the first thing, as I was saying, what we did was we looked at, so that was all carried out through developmental groups. That was kind of exploration. What do we want to get out of this? What do we want to learn? Is this any good? Is this not any good? what's missing and how can we make this more accessible. So they were involved in every kind of step of the way with us. That was step one. And then once we had the programme, then we piloted it. And with the pilot, the peers were also involved in the pilot. So they were involved in the first pilot as participants and then involved until they were able to kind of reflect on that. Yeah, that worked, that didn't work. And then the second pilot, they were involved as facilitators. So again, they could see how it worked from a facilitation point of view as well. And it also



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provided a source of, I suppose, inspiration for the other women in SAIL and the women of the DOCAS, where you see a woman who'd been in a situation like yourself to then come in as a facilitator. It was really inspirational for a lot of the women just to experience that. So after then, after in terms of getting feedback from those pilot groups, it was very much, again, the peers would feedback on how they felt the group went if they thought that something came up in the group and obviously the facilitators as well. So there would be like a discussion between the peers and the facilitator of what went well, what didn't go well. Is there anything that needs changing? Is there anything that needs adding in? And then We'd also get feedback kind of at the end of the pilot, then just a general discussion with the group. How do they think the group was? But we'd constantly elicit feedback kind of every step of the way. Do you know what I mean? Like we read ongoing. Yeah, And I suppose it's hard to kind of capture that because it's such it's such a big part of how we work in sale. Like it's even though it's education, it's very much community-based education. And the focus is on, this is what we're going to learn today. What do you think about this? What do you know about it already? What do you want more to know about? Do you have any questions? What are your experiences? Can you share your learning with other people? So it becomes, it's very kind of, rather than like a lecture, it's more of a.

Speaker 1

More of collaboration really is what it is. And so having really successfully involved these learners in the development of the project, can you tell us a bit about what actually was in the project? What do people learn on it? Like what was the actual content?

Speaker 2

So the content is great, actually. Well, I'm biased. So one of the things that actually we wanted to do was to not just have this programme for sale, So SAIL has a long experience of trying to contribute to knowledge in the area. So we had a project a few years ago, one of the manuals that we developed called Reduced Use, which was a recovery psychoeducational programme using CBT skills. So we use that as kind of that's kind of almost like the blueprint for a sale program is that you, for your facilitator guidelines, you have a check in, you have an introduction of the topic, you have a group discussion on the topic, then you have a worksheet to reflect on the learning and then you have a check out and that's your structure. And it's really important for people who have trauma to have a very specific structure because it helps them feel safe in that group setting. And it's also very community focused because everybody gets space to share and to be active in their learning and things like that. So we use that as kind of a base of where to start and the modules we identified were how to identify abuse. So what



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does abuse look like? What way does abuse play out in relationships? how to cope when making big changes in your life. So looking at the wheel of change, happiness, motivation, looking at MIT Boston. So what are the things that, what are the harmful things that society says to us about being in abusive relationships? What are harmful things we might say to ourselves about abusive relationships? It then looks at how to create safety. So creating safety within an abusive relationship, doing a safety plan. And that, crucially, the thing with safety plan is it doesn't have to be just at the end of a relationship. It can be when the relationship is ongoing. So again, the people who are participating in the course learn how to create a safety plan themselves. So that way they can create a safety plan that's relevant to them. Or again, they can support a friend to create a safety plan that's relevant to them. One of the tools that we use to kind of keep the group safe is that we have a character. So Davina, Davina stands for domestic abuse violence is never acceptable, but she's also a character within the module where she carries us through with case studies for each individual module. So when we're doing safety planning, for example, what we'll talk about is what are the high risks in her relationship. So that way they're learning themselves, what are high risks within the relationships, how those risks can be mitigated. After that, we learn about Davina's legal rights. So again, the women are learning about what is the difference between civil and criminal law and what are the orders that they can get off of the Domestic Violence Act 2018. What are the, you know, what are possibly some of the barriers they can explore all of that. Also exploring the parent control dynamics within a relationship. The other modules include, there's one on mental health. So how does domestic abuse impact on your mental health? How does addiction impact on your mental health and how the two things are linked? How does domestic abuse impact on the child and how that can lead to intergenerational trauma? What services are available? That's module 7. And then 8 and 9 is all about healthy relationships, communication skills, consent within sexually intimate relationships. So yeah, it covers a lot.

Speaker 1

A lot. It's really, really thorough, really detailed. And I like the way it kind of ends and giving people tools on how to build a healthy relationship or what a healthy relationship might look like, which some of your participants might not have seen before, which is fantastic.

Speaker 2

Yeah, absolutely. And that was a huge thing. Again, with the learners, it was like, well, we came up with the modules, we came up with the topics, researched the topics, and then we said, what order will we put them in? And again, the learner was involved in that. So one of the things that we were very concerned about was where to push, where to put the impact on the child,



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because we were afraid if we put it too early, it'd be too traumatic. But if we put it too late, it'd be too late. So we really had a, we had a whole discussion on that. We decided to put it in six, I think.

Speaker 1

Well, listen, Rachel, the power of, learn a voice within this project is, it's radiating from everything that you're saying. It's also proof in the pudding in that you won the Ain't the Star Award in 2023. Tell us a little bit about, you know, being nominated and, you know, going to those awards and, you know, the excitement of that.

Speaker 2

Well, the whole experience was just really fabulous. I suppose it was a real, it was great to have that recognition for the peers. It was just before the manual was published, so we hadn't actually published it at that point. But we had the rough draft, it was all developed, we'd done the two pilots. So I suppose even getting the nomination was really exciting and going up to do the interviews and do the camera was, it was a very special day and they were made to, were all made to feel very, very special, which was really nice. And then, the awards at Crow Park were like four or five, five star, like we were, got like Hollywood treatment, it was great, the little swag bag and stuff like that, it was brilliant. I did think the seeds were chocolates at one point. The seeds. The seed balls.

Speaker 1

Oh, God.

Speaker 2

They look like truffles. I hope you didn't do a taste test. I didn't do a taste test, no. Because yeah, we figured it out. But it was really nice to get all dressed up and to really celebrate the achievements of the past few years. I'll always remember we met in the kitchen of Sale that day and all the peers came in that were accompanying. And it was like a parade show. It was like, oh, this is what I'm wearing. And to see them, everybody all done up in their dresses and makeup and where that wouldn't be, one of the things you've low self-esteem that gets impacted is, how you take care of yourself and stuff like that. So to see that turnaround was just lovely. We got our pictures taken up at the balcony and it was absolutely amazing. Yeah, we couldn't believe it when we won. We were so excited.

Speaker 1



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It's such a massive achievement, like having worked on the awards for a couple of years, even to be nominated is amazing.

Speaker 2

No, it really meant a lot. Yeah, my heart was pumping. Like the Oscars. Yeah, it was. It was like, I was like, this is, it's just such an honour to be nominated, but my heart was like leaping at my chest. Yeah.

Speaker 1

Oh, such a such a fantastic achievement. Yeah, it was great. Rachel Fain, coordinator of the Davina Project, part of the SAOL Project. Thank you so much for joining us on the Enhanced Learner.

Speaker 2

Thank you so much for having me.

Speaker 1

Where can people find out a bit more about SAOL if they want to?

Speaker 2

Yeah, so there's a SAOL website at www.saolproject.ie and in that there's also a Davina site within that. We offer training in how to deliver the Davina course within your own work if you're working in community education or addiction or homelessness. Though all of that training is also co-facilitated by the learners themselves, the peers. So it's co-facilitated, one peer and one staff member from SAOL. And if you do the training, then you get access to the modules as well, all the modules as well.

Speaker 1

Brilliant. Brilliant. I'm sure lots of people will be going to check that out now after your fantastic story. Thank you for sharing it with us. If you want to check out more of the Enhance podcasts and find out more about the project, you can head to enhancelearnervoice.com.



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