

Educafe Podcast

Episode 3 – Chatty Corner

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Educafe, community projects, English language skills, refugee support, Chatty Corner, volunteer roles, social integration, language practice, informal learning, community navigation, cultural differences, volunteer dedication, practical support, community spaces, public perception.

SPEAKERS

Jamie Adam, Margaret Neville, Ning, Samera Abdas-Majid

Jamie Adam 00:13

Welcome back to Creating Communities, the Educafe podcast. In this series, we shine a light on the amazing work being done by Educafe, a non-profit organisation based in West Berkshire that delivers people centered projects that strengthen communities. In this episode, I'll be speaking to Margaret Neville, who manages the Chatty Corner at Educafe, alongside Samera Abdas-Majid from Reading Refugees. We will discuss how Educafe helps people improve their English language skills, the role that this plays in community navigation, and why community focused groups play such a big part in helping refugees and asylum seekers here in the UK. But first, I spoke to Ning, a service user and certified chatter who's gone on to volunteer with Educafe to hear a bit more about her story.

Ning 01:07

My name is Ning, I'm from China. Living in Beijing a capital city, is very different in Newbury. Now I live in Newbury with my sons, it's quite different. I like to go to library when a different space. From Newbery library I find Educafe, is free, talking free, everyone to join, and I can learning English from the volunteers. Yeah, that's good.

Jamie Adam 01:48

Do you feel like your English has improved a lot since you came to Educafe?

Ning 01:53

Yes, definitely. When I first come in, I can't speaking. I always translate from between Chinese to English, so I think I need more time for thinking, I can't speaking and listening also hard because the pronunciation is very different and the speaking. Speech is very faster, and words connected it a lot, so it's hard for me. Educafe, all the staff is friendly and have different

volunteers can help you, can talk with you, can teach you, can let you know which words is correct, what pronunciation is correct, so I can learn a lot. And I also have some problem from life, because very different life from China and the social rules is very different, so I don't know everything, everything is new for me. So, when I have a question, I just ask a volunteer. They all are friendly, they all the answer question for me and help me. And maybe I wanted to do something. I am yoga instructor in China, but language is my problem. So the Educafe give a lot of support, help on life and English, and also gave me an opportunity for teaching yoga, teaching chair yoga in sitting and well-being, that's big help for me. I can help the senior person make the better, make the body flexible, give me some problem, find solution and support them. Make them help happy in my lesson. Yeah, that's why I got help from Educafe, and I want to give them help for them. Yeah, that's my passion. I think.

Jamie Adam 04:37

Thank you, Ning, that was great. And I'll let you get off, because you're about to go and teach a seated well-being class right now, thank you. Margaret, Samera, thank you so much for joining us today on Creating Communities, really great to have you, before we get into our discussion, it's one that I'm really looking forward to today. But could you please just start by giving a quick introduction to yourself and your role and connection to Educafe.

Margaret Neville 05:02

My name is Margaret Neville, and I'm the Chatty Corner manager, which is a volunteer role, which I've been doing since the Chatty Corner was set up in 2021 and I go there every Wednesday to run it, as well as doing some admin jobs in between time, looking after the volunteers and making sure we've got everything we need for the Chatty Corner.

Samera Abdas-Majid 05:27

My name is Samera Abdas-Majid, I work for refugee support group. I'm the lead case worker there. So I mainly support refugee families in West Berkshire, that includes Assyrian and Afghani families so far, we started referring to Educafe from the start, from 2021 soon as they started, because we had some contact with the with the lead of Educafe, as she used to lead Berkshire School of English. So she told us about Educafe from the beginning. And we really liked the idea, and we started referring all the families that we supported, Syrian and Afghani, to Educafe.

Jamie Adam 06:09

Thank you both so much. And Margaret tell us, what is Chatty Corner?

Margaret Neville 06:15

Right, well, the Chatty Corner is aimed at anyone who doesn't have English as the first language. We do have a lot of Afghan refugees and refugees from other countries as well, but

any anybody from any country who doesn't have English as a first language is most welcome to come along. And there we have a number of tables, I have a volunteer on each table who is an English speaker first language, and that volunteer will sit with a group of, we call them chatters because they're not students, they're chatters to us. So the volunteer will sit with a group of chatters, and the aim is to have conversation, to try not to do reading and writing, not always easy when it's beginners, but we try to have just conversation.

Jamie Adam 07:05

And for those that haven't been down, what does a typical Wednesday look like?

Margaret Neville 07:09

Right well, it's chaos, to be honest. So, we never know who's turning up. It's organised chaos of course. We run from 11 o'clock till two o'clock, and we always say to everyone that it's totally informal and casual, it's not like English lessons or classes. So, they can come at any time, they can go at any time. They don't have to stay sitting at their table with their volunteer if they want to go off and have a drink in the cafe or chat to other people in the chatty corner, they're quite welcome to do that. And of course, that's exactly what happens, people do come and go, people arrive at all different times. We never know who's coming, we do obviously get the same people coming time and time again, but we tend to get new people. Not everybody comes every week, so we never know exactly who we've got. It's usually around about 40-45 chatters a week. This week was amazing, we had 50 in fact. It is just a very fluid environment, but it's delightful because it was, as you said, it was Claire's idea, Claire's baby, and she and I used to work at college together, teaching English. And of course, teaching English when it's funded and you have to get people through exams, you have to do reading, writing, speaking and listening. The speaking is very prescriptive, it's very hard to practice. It's just a joy to us to be able to chat and to talk to people and to encourage them to improve their spoken English without any, there's no schemes of work, there's no inspections, there's no homework. It's just lovely, you know, as a teacher, I really, really enjoy it.

Jamie Adam 08:58

And Margaret, just a quick note on your volunteers.

Margaret Neville 09:00

They are absolutely amazing, they're so reliable, they're so dedicated. I mentioned that it's chaos there, but they will handle that chaos, and they will work with it, and they don't mind me rocking up at their table and say, can I add to your group, which I do all the time. So, they'll have a little group, and they'll be in full flow with, you know, what they're doing, and then I'll come along and put someone else in, which is really annoying, but you know, they always accept it.

Jamie Adam 09:29

That flexibility for what both the volunteers and the service use at Educafe just seems to be a recurring theme, and it's amazing, because that must just benefit so many different people in so many different ways. Samera, you mentioned that you've been referring people to Educafe right from the start. What is the main benefit you've seen of referring people to Educafe, and how does it help those people that you're working with?

Samera Abdas-Majid 09:53

It was great help, to be honest, from the beginning, we noticed, like, the impact on the families especially ladies. So like, first of all, for example, we do the refer the families for formal classes like Newbury college or other formal classes. But at the end of the day, they need to practice, as Margaret said, they need to practice their speaking and listening. That's the most important. And this is the best place to practice their English, because they're practicing it with normal local people that speak the language correctly with the correct pronunciation. So, it's a perfect place to practice their like lessons weekly, whatever they learn in the college, they can practice some new words, and that's perfect. Plus, it's a safe place to get them to socialise between them. So especially when we have a new arrivals, like new families, the best way to introduce them to each other, because we can't force them to meet other families, it's the best place to meet each other without like anyone getting involved, is to just refer them to Educafe, and there they can meet up with other people from their community, or other communities, and they make friends. They, you know, they enjoy the environment, very safe place to share, you know, information, plus, it's a perfect place to in general, like they, they have flyers for other things, like for education, for driving theory test, for a lot of information would be shared in Educafe, and because we trust that they only share the correct information from the right reference, at least, we not worried that our client will be misled with any incorrect information or rumours. They always get the right information, especially with ladies with young children, because they are usually it's not just practicing their English could be the only option for them. Because they have little children, they can't go to formal classes, they can't go to any other classes, like ESOL classes with the little babies or children with Educafe, they can go there, they can chat to people who practice their like a little English, improve their language with their children, with their little children. So, there's no like, no formal formality, they can go there, as Margaret said their children start crying, they can stay on the side, look after the children when they're quiet, when they sleep, they can join in again. Plus, the main advantage, I would say, so far, is because West Berkshire wasn't like for some people that arrived West Berkshire in like, in 2018-2017 they didn't see the real local people. They think, oh, we might be like, they see themselves a little bit different in the area and like, a little bit isolated to the local people. And in Educafe, they started meeting the right people, like the welcoming people. And they start seeing, oh my god, that people are very nice and very welcoming, and which they didn't see in the street, for example, because in the street you just go do shopping, and especially if they were in traditional clothes. They didn't see that, probably the same welcoming as they see

in Eduafe. So there they had their confident increase that actually we were welcomed, a lot of people helping us, a lot of people volunteering to like to help us. I mean, the volunteers were amazing, they visit their clients houses, they sometimes they drop them off, they pick them up from their houses if they live too far. So amazing support, and they even help the children with their homework, when they visit their houses. So overall, it's just all good, to be honest,

Samera Abdas-Majid 10:39

You've touched on it a little bit already, but just to go into a bit more detail, what might be some of the challenges that some of the people you're working with could be facing, and how does Eduafe and Chatty Corner help them overcome some of those challenges?

Samera Abdas-Majid 13:53

I'd say the main challenge that we feel start with, especially in the first few months of the after their arrival, they send. Sometimes feel isolated, and they feel oh, like no friends, no neighbours, they like they come came from very busy, like big families, and suddenly on their own, like small families with their children. So, they feel completely isolated, scared sometimes that they don't know much about the area. They don't know if it's safe or not safe. So the best place we always advise them to start going to Eduafe before anything else, because things takes time to register them with formal classes. It takes time, sometimes only at the beginning of the academic year or specific months, and the formal registration will take time. So during that time, we just say, from the first week, from like after they arrive, if they arrive on Friday, we say, next Wednesday, go to Eduafe. We give them the address, one of us will go with them, most of the times, our interpreter will go, will join them to just introduce them to Eduafe. And then at least we feel that at least one day of the week they go in out, they are seeing people. So, then they get so surprised, because when they arrive to the area, they think, am I the only one? I The only Afghani family in this area? Or are there any other like people from Muslim communities in West Berkshire? They don't know when they arrive. When they go to Eduafe, they meet all these families. They're all laughing, joking. They're enjoying their times, straight away, their kind of perception to the area, to the country in general, they change their views. They think, oh, well, we seem like everyone is happy there, they meet people. They talk to them about their experience since they arrive, they tell each other information. So we just feel okay, this family is now, at least they are coming out of their house, and they're meeting people.

Jamie Adam 15:48

There's a real common thread I'm seeing which is so lovely, and I think it's, you know, a huge part of what makes Eduafe, Eduafe, and what makes it special. But alongside the practical help, which is, you know, in this case, the opportunity to practice your English and learn English, you were able to develop friendships and socialise within others, within the community, which can then go on to have such a big impact in people's lives and have that

ripple effect as well. So how kind of is that seeing, seeing these friendships develop the communities form on a Wednesday morning, and I guess beyond that now too as well.

Margaret Neville 16:26

Oh, it's amazing. Absolutely amazing. Yes, and so many of them have made friends with people from other countries, because inevitably, they will sit on tables with people from other countries. And the ladies who come with their children. Sometimes they're going down to the parent village now as well, especially if they, A if they've got very young children, or if they speak reasonable English. I mean, even if they don't, we make sure they're looked after down there and they, you know, they can go down and join in, it's important for them. So, it's just great the way that the community comes together in Educafe and in Chatty Corner.

Jamie Adam 17:08

And would there be many places where you could go and get this practical support alongside having the opportunity to foster friendships and relationships after arriving here in the UK? Or is it something that would be quite unique to Educafe?

Samira Abdus-Majid 17:22

To be honest, for me, I would say this is the only place that we can see that many similar like people from similar backgrounds, similar like that is they sharing something between them, and they all meeting in the same place, for the safe place. I would say this is one of the main place, if there are any others, this is the place that actually like, they're reliable every week they are there. We know there are lots of volunteers to help, so we know when we send them there that we never had any issue. Even if they're safeguarding issue, they would someone would contact us straight away and would let us know, or with call the ambulance, we would do that what they needed like so we actually feel safe that we know they've been looked after.

Jamie Adam 18:08

We'll be talking a lot throughout this series about the impact that the Educafe has on the wider community. It's a big, big part of what we're going to cover. But how important is a space like Educafe and Chatty Corner in particular in this case, in helping people feel welcomed and part of that community themselves.

Samira Abdus-Majid 18:30

So, I think, yeah, it's very important to see the real community in the area just to meet the people that actually welcoming them to meet other people from different countries, because then they know that that this area is actually it's not just, you know, one type of people. There's everything, all the religions all the cultures are like in West Berkshire. So, they see the real like environment. So, I think it's very, very important. Otherwise, they would think, oh, are we the only like Muslim people, or are we the only Afghani people? But when they see that many, and

also even going to the mosque, simple thing to practice their religion. Even going to the mosque, they can see that other families are going to the same mosque, so they are going today or going on Friday. So, they start going together, or start going shopping together. So, it's not just we started with Educafe, but then, once they meet each other, they swap contacts with each other from the same country or different countries, as Margaret said, they sometimes they meet people and make friends with others from other countries, and that would improve their English, because they will go out on other days. They will go shopping together, they will do things together, which kind of even for take children to play together in somewhere like Costa or somewhere. But the starting point is Educafe, and they will encourage each other to meet up again on Wednesday. So it's very good start. Yeah.

Margaret Neville 19:56

I mean, if I can add a bit to that, you know, we always. To make sure that if any of the chatters have got any questions about just generally, life in the UK or life in Newbury, of course, all our volunteers are locals, and most of us are retirees or similar age. So, you know, we've got good life experience and a good knowledge of just sort of how to tell people you know what to do if they've got a problem, or what they should be doing or what they could do. And we do help them with particular things, such as passing their driving theory test, we've done a lot on that. Encouraging them to talk to the teachers at their children's school and giving them the vocabulary that they need around that, and just telling them that they can do it, you know, because I don't know, you know, when they start school, it must be such a big thing for them. So just generally, trying to integrate them into the community is a really, it's a top priority for us. And all the volunteers know that.

Jamie Adam 21:07

At the start of this episode, we heard from Ning, who was someone who was a chatter herself and is now a volunteer and utilising her skills as a yoga instructor to teach some of the seated well-being classes on a Wednesday at Educafe. Margaret, how nice is it to see someone like Ning go on that journey with Educafe, with Chatty Corner and, yeah, get to where she is, where she is now?

Margaret Neville 21:34

Amazing, absolutely amazing, yeah. And Ning is such a special person, and has fitted in so well and tried so hard from the start, and yes, it still comes back to us for chats as well. So she's still very much a chatter as well as a volunteer. And we've had, sort of several other success stories. I mean, a lot of our chatters do go and volunteer, and we if anybody sort of tells us that they want to volunteer, and we can't find something within Educafe to suit them, then, I mean, we will even take them around the charity shops in the marketplace to, you know, to try and encourage them to do that. So yes, we've had quite a few people coming from us, either, you know, going on volunteering and then sometimes going into some sort of full

time education, which is wonderful if they do that. So, we've got an Iranian lad at the moment who came over as an asylum seeker has now got right to remain and is doing a motor vehicle course at Newbury College.

Jamie Adam 22:37

So great to hear those success stories. And I'm sure we've not even scratched the surface. I'm sure there's so many more.

Margaret Neville 22:43

Oh yeah, for sure. And lots we don't know about as well, you know, we don't always know how much influence we've had. And we had two Hong Kong, we get lots of Hong Kong nationals coming in because they, you know, they are refugees, really. And we had to come in this week, a mother and a daughter, sort of an old mother, sort of my age, and her daughter who used to come to us when we first set up, and they left because they moved, they bought a house in Coventry because it was cheaper. They moved two and a half years ago, and they hadn't been back since, and they popped in to see us yesterday with a big box of chocolates. And there still lots of people there that they knew, even a few chatters there that they knew, but lots of volunteers. And, you know, they said, there's nothing like it in Coventry, and they miss it, as you know, we all know it's quite unique.

Jamie Adam 23:34

That's so lovely that they came back and shows what a long, lasting impact Educafe has, and raises one of the key points is, I suppose that not every town has an Educafe, and it would be great if that that is the case. I mean, we'll be speaking to Janine Ford later on in the series about how, or what their plans are to grow Educafe in a sustainable way. But I know that, you know, in an ideal world, we'd love to be seeing lots more Educafe's kind of crop up, because we know that a lot of the problems that it helps tackle are absolutely not isolated to Newbury or to West Berkshire. So yeah, but very nice that they came back and more on the growth plans of Educafe and how we can do that sustainably in future episodes. Samera, one thing I think is really important that we touch on it be missed to not talk about it is, you know, in the current climate, with all of the stories we hear in the news about the public perception of refugees and those seeking asylum in the UK, is, I guess, you know, how important is a space like Educafe and even just the physical space of the library, in helping people, helping people that you work with, feel like they have somewhere safe, that they can go. And this is maybe a massive question, but what more can we be doing, or what more can be done to see more spaces like this open up.

Samera Abdas-Majid 24:58

Definitely we started seeing smile on their face. They go, they get excited about it. Oh yeah, tomorrow we go into cafe. I would say it's very important, from the point of, as I said, seeing

the local people that welcoming them. So they feeling this that they are actually welcomed. So regardless of the rumours they hear or the other voices outside Educafe or outside West Berkshire, when they go to Educafe, they don't see that, they see local people, all of them, welcoming them, smiling to them, talking to them in their languages, I mean in English, but respecting their culture, respecting their main language, trying to get them interpreters, trying to get to register them with all the services or help them with any question they have. So, they seeing this side of things, rather than being always, everything you hear on the news is negative about refugees, about asylum seekers. And suddenly they go to this, this nice place, and to see all these people actually welcoming them. Then they think, oh well, whenever then they start even changing their views like his, if you ask them, first week will be, I don't know, I don't know. Maybe people don't like us, maybe we're not welcomed in this area. But after a few weeks going there and seeing the real people and the nice, lovely ladies or gentlemen welcoming them, then they say, oh actually, we don't feel that anymore. We think that we are welcomed in this area, and they're just, you know. They're always positive about it, instead of being you know.

Jamie Adam 26:26

Thank you, Samera, and I think that just speaks even more, really, to the need to have more community groups and spaces in other parts of the country that can foster and develop these communities in the relationships in what is undoubtedly a challenging period. That is, sadly, all we have time for on today's episode of creating communities. Thank you both so much for your time and for telling us all about the incredible work that you both do, and all of the Educafe team continues to do. And thank you to Ning, of course, for speaking to me at the start of this episode. Join us next time where I'll be speaking to Subia Azmat and Dr Wenjin Dai about the Educafe's, parent and child group, Parent Village. If you would like to find out more about Educafe, you can visit their website or follow them on social media at EducafeUK. Contact information will be available in the show notes of this episode. If you've been listening to this and have been inspired to set up something similar in your local area, then please do reach out to Educafe. There's lots of information and toolkits available to help with this process. And thank you for listening. Please remember to subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. Educafe is a non-profit organisation. If you would like to support them, to continue to grow the thriving community that is helping so many people, you can donate via the link in the show notes. This has been a Research Podcasts production, produced and hosted by Jamie Adam.