

Educafe Podcast

Episode 5 - Educafe Recipe

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Educafe podcast, community projects, volunteers, Janine Ford, Chris Bond, Aster Foundation, social incubator, place-based community work, partnerships, event planning, National Lottery funding, community impact, sustainability, burnout prevention, togetherness project.

SPEAKERS

Chris Bond, Jamie Adam, Alison, Janine Ford

Jamie Adam 00:13

Welcome back to Creating Communities the Educafe podcast. This is the final episode of the series where we have been shining a light on the incredible work that Educafe do in delivering people centered projects that strengthen communities. In this episode, I'm delighted to be joined by the co-director, Janine Ford and Chris Bond from the Aster Foundation. We'll be looking at the key components that make up Educafe. What goes into running a weekly event that makes a lasting impact, and the plans to continue to grow Educafe sustainably. One of the key components of this Educafe recipe is the volunteers, I spoke with Alison about her role at Educafe.

Alison 00:53

I'm Alison, and I think of myself as a sort of a meet and greet volunteer, so somebody who says hello to people as they arrive. I also do a lot of signposting to other services locally. But how I became involved was, I think I read something online or in the newspaper about the plans for Educafe. So, I started the very beginning, which I think is about three and a half years ago now, when we're based at The Globe and just loved it. Love everything about it, the concept, all the people I meet, it's just, you know, fabulous. I'm quite a sociable person, and I love seeing the old faces, but also saying hello to, you know, people have come in for the first time, and I like making them feel welcome. And people who look like they're not sure whether or not to come in, and they're hovering a bit at the door, you know, I like going over and asking them if they're going to come in for a cup of tea and just having a bit of a chat. And you meet some really, really interesting people as well, which I love, because you just never know who you're going to meet next do you. I suppose I think more about the individual impact on people, because I'll talk to people who might actually be having a hard time, and it's not till you really

get chatting that you realise that they could really benefit from support from the wider community. And because I've lived in Newbury a while, and I used to work in the Family and Children's Service, I know a fair bit about the different charities that are local and services, and so I've just really enjoy supporting people and signposting them to things that are useful. So, for example, I was chatting to somebody one day who is having trouble trying to organise moving out of temporary accommodation into more permanent accommodation. So, we just went over to the housing office and made an appointment and started chatting to somebody. I've also taken people over to Eight Bells For Mental Health and shown the way the building is looked at the opening times with them, talked to them about, you know, being a place where they can get a meal and get some support. So, I suppose I do really like the practical element of making sure people are just plugged into the right services, which can really make a huge difference to their lives, you know. And it's all available, and these amazing services run all over, you know, the local area by great volunteers. And it's just nice to, to know that somebody's getting the right help. I've just feel incredibly positive when I come in and when I leave, and some days I feel really quite touched by the experience of talking to people who you know have done something really interesting or valuable for the community, or people who've had a really hard time, but you see them, things getting better or improving, and especially, you know, seeing people make progress through a difficult time.

Jamie Adam 03:48

Allison, thank you for sharing your experience of volunteering at Educafe that was great. Janine, Chris, welcome to the podcast. So great to have you with us. Now, I gave a brief intro at the start to you both, but could you just tell us a little bit more about your roles and connection to Educafe, just to get things started?

Janine Ford 04:08

I'm Janine. I'm the director, one of the directors of Educafe, alongside Claire. And I joined in 2023 as a director, but I was actually involved from the start when Educafe opened in 2021 so I've been around through the whole lifetime of Educafe.

Chris Bond 04:26

Hi Jamie, and I'm Chris Bond. I'm the lead analytics and impact person at the Aster Foundation. The Aster Foundation is a charitable element of the Aster housing group, and I came in contact with Educafe through a program, a social incubator program that, yes, the foundation, runs every year with cohort of roughly 10 businesses, and Educafe was on that cohort of social businesses.

Jamie Adam 04:55

Thank you both. And in today's episode, we're discussing what we're calling, The Educafe recipe. So, looking at an overview of the key components of Educafe, the practicalities and

logistics delivering that weekly community event. And so with that in mind, I wonder, Janine, if you could just tell us a little bit more about the team and the volunteers and the partners that go into making Educafe possible.

Janine Ford 05:22

Yeah, so you've just mentioned a couple of the key components there. So breaking it down, I'm trying to think simply, it's people, it's place, it's partnerships, which, again, is about people and place, and I think also it's the activities that we offer. I think you hear this term place-based commissioning or place based community work, and that's kind of what we do. So, the people on our team include volunteers. We've got about 50, about, you know, 30 to 40 of those are very active, and maybe 10 of those are behind the scenes and helping us at more of a street strategic level. And then we have all of our visitors that come each week. They are a key component as well. Without them, without the community showing up, it wouldn't be Educafe. And then my team is actually very small. So apart from me and Claire, we've got a volunteer manager, part time volunteer manager, part time operations manager, part time communication support and part time Parent Village manager. We also have teachers that support our educational work outside of Educafe Newbury on a Wednesday. So we do have other kind of support and contractors that we bring on for different projects. But for our Wednesday event at Newbury library, those are the main groups, the people, the visitors from the community, complete melting pot, complete wide range of different ages, backgrounds, life stages. Yeah, and the volunteers who are the main part of that.

Jamie Adam 07:09

And what about the partners that you work with?

Janine Ford 07:11

The partners are really varied. So again, we have different partners for different areas of what we do. A lot of early years partners, local businesses, other local voluntary sector organisations, charities and services like Home Start, Family Hubs, West Berkshire Council, different teams within West Berkshire Council. And also, big one for me to mention is the library, who offer the space for free every week. So, in terms of place, you know, that's where we're located, and you know, we wouldn't be able to offer, I think what we do in a place where we were paying rent, or we were having to manage a space without an incredible amount of extra funding. So, you know, that's allowed us to really put our money right into the community, pay for people to coordinate those activities.

Jamie Adam 08:13

So just a few things that go into the recipe of making Educafe what it is. How do you, how do your team sort of manage that and make it such a success with so many different moving parts and so many different elements to it?

Janine Ford 08:27

A lot of careful coordination, project management skills, meticulous planning these days, it used to be a lot more free and easy, but we are very, very crafty about how we organise things. For example, you'll speak to Subia and how she chooses the activities and the people who lead those activities, and the organisations we bring into Parent Village, they're very carefully selected based on what people need. Everything that we do over the last four years has been an organic kind of, it's been organically shaped from finding out what people need and what people want. We operate like a event planning committee organisation. We run an event for 150 people every week. So as an event planner, you're carefully managing your time, your people, your resources. So yeah, in terms of the logistical elements of that event planning that takes up a big part of our time. Communications, actually telling people what we're doing when we're doing them. So never underestimate the need for good communications I think, that's been one of our strengths. So I think that's where we've been quite lucky, and we've again, got a team with a really lovely combination of professional skills that aren't just, you know, organising a cup of tea in a village hall. This is like a much bigger, more professional scale that we're talking about now, you know, we're quite innovative, we're quite agile as a team. We're creative, but most of all, I think we care, like nobody on my team would say this is just a job, then not just showing up and clock watching, which I'm sure is the same throughout much of the voluntary sector. You wouldn't be doing it if you didn't care.

Jamie Adam 10:36

I mean, it sounds like you have an amazing team, but yeah, I'm sure you're absolutely right about the voluntary sector. Now, Chris, could you tell us a little bit more about the Aster Foundation, the incubator program that you run, and how it was that you came to work with Educafe.

Chris Bond 10:52

So we had a group of 10 businesses that we looked for every year that had some sort of social purpose. They didn't have to be charitable; you'd didn't have to be CICS or set up for those things. they could be limited companies, they could be set up for profit, it didn't really matter. But they had to have some sort of social element which tied in with the foundation's desire to help people in terms of poverty, and that was across three different programs, that was mental wellness, financial inclusivity and employment. So, if anybody ticks any of those or more than one of those boxes, then there was a good chance they would be invited to or would be able to apply to come on to the incubator. And that was a 10-month program at the time. Took them through quite a lot of standard sort of business planning and business startup sessions and some mentoring and some other development, and quite a lot of contact internally with people they would like to talk to in Aster, in terms of business development and things like that as well. So depending on where you fitted into that was, depending on the kind of help that you got

through that program. We saw Janine, actually, I hate to be, well I don't hate to say it, but I was the one that found Educafe, and I'm proud of that to this day. And so Educafe came on board, and we had a fairly tailored program then to understand at what point they were at, at that point, two- and a-bit years ago, two and a half years ago, nearly, and where they thought that was going to go. And I think it probably safe to say that it had expanded even at that point, way past what anybody thought it was going to be or thought it or certainly probably what it was funded for at that point. So I was, there was another person working with me at the time, and the two of us kind of interacted with businesses at different elements. The lady I was with very much a people person, very interested in the people element. Me, not so much, but very interested in the structure and the numbers around the business and the social impact, and understanding how it would be a sustainable business, rather than just a charitable enterprise that was set up for a year or two because of the funding, and then disappeared. So yeah, so we went on a quite a journey, quite a journey with Educafe, and we're still going on that journey, which is great.

Jamie Adam 13:16

And, and I think one of the first sessions you had, you referred to as the beautiful mind session, where you all came together and looked a bit more closely in depth that at Educafe and looked at it like a business, as you say, Chris. What were some of the key learnings or realisations from that?

Chris Bond 13:35

I think one thing was because Educafe had expanded so quickly that they were kind of going back and then trying to catch up with themselves and the point they'd got to, but also think it was safe to say that you've not had any quality time outside of Educafe to look at Educafe. I think the saying at the time was you're either in the business doing it, or you're outside of the business, improving it, or working on the business. You in the business or are you on the business. And it was clear that that they were in the business doing it, but not necessarily stepping back and under understanding how it was going to look in a year's time, or two years' time, or five years' time. I think I recognised that what they had was really good product. And I come from a private industry background, so I look at things in those ways. They had really good products, but they but they didn't look at them as that. They looked at something, some big thing that happened once a week in the library, and it was all part of that big thing, and I was breaking it down in the constituent parts, and, well this is a product that's a product, Chatty Corner is a product Knit and Natter as a product. So can you break them down, and can you then look at those as individual businesses and see how sustainable they are, and how you're going to fund them, and how there are resourced, and how much it costs, and things like that. And I think it was the first time that you, you kind of stepped away from the business, and looked at it.

Janine Ford 15:09

We knew we needed to do this. This was in the back of mine and Claire's minds all this stuff. But we had had our heads down, running from 2021 to 2023. We knew that our contract with West Berkshire Council was coming to an end. We thought that we might get a bit of an extension and breathing space, but it ended up being zero. And so what we knew we had to do was look for funding and make ourselves sustainable in other ways. Otherwise, we weren't going to work. So when this beautiful mind happened in early 2024 it must have been, you know, Claire and I had had our heads down, running, shoelaces untied, as many people liked to tell us afterwards, but we just didn't have the headspace. And I think this is the same for loads of grassroots, smaller organisations. We had zero headspace, like any headspace we had we were fundraising. You were trying to raise funds to pay, well, not just ourselves part time, but other people. And the fact is, we were working way more than we should have done. So, burnout is one of the challenges I'll be very happy to talk about later. But this beautiful minds session was the first time we had the headspace to step back and think. And I think this is, you know, really important message for funders, for community investors, you know, without that kind of headspace, without Aster Foundation, and that time that Chris and his team were offering us, we would have been probably on the same trajectory. I don't understand where that support would have come from otherwise. And you know, we were trying to fundraise in the wrong way, because running fundraising events and doing online platform fundraising was taking, we didn't have the capacity as a team to do that. So those might work really well for bigger organisations, but for us, we needed immediate grants, relief support funding. So actually, that came from the National Lottery, not just from their Reaching Communities fund, but we also got a bit of breathing space from their awards for all, for Parents Village. So, the National Lottery have been one of the big kind of sailing graces. But going back to that day, yeah, the beautiful minds day, we sat down, and it was posters on the walls, blue tack, highlighters, pens, writing everything down. You know, being asked lots of questions. I wouldn't say they were difficult questions, but it was the first time we've been asked, though, does anyone cared enough to actually ask what is it that you do to make Parents Village or Chatty Corner happen? What is it? How do you describe it? And, you know, goes back to comms, even having the time to get your communication straight to describe it. And to this day, Claire and I sometimes struggle. We're so in it still to talk about it and to introduce it and describe it, we could spend days and weeks doing that. That's kind of what we've done for the last four years, but it doesn't make it any easier. So, sitting down and mapping out all of that stuff made us realise we do really have a blueprint here for amazing community impact. And when I talk about community impact, I mean genuinely making a difference to people's lives, not over a long period of time, but literally on the day they show up, within an hour of them showing up, I'm so glad I came. I didn't know this was happening. This is amazing. I've never seen anything like it, you know. And we have that impact. We see that impact every week for the last four years, but actually unpacking all of that, which is what I think these podcasts will do as well, unpacking what goes into creating that life changing moment where someone's like, actually,

my life isn't so bad. I've now found a community, and it changes everything, understanding what makes that happen, and understand the value of that was definitely a turning point for Claire and me, and Educafe, because it made us realise, we actually were confident and eligible for asking and applying for this level of funding which we now have.

Chris Bond 19:53

I would just add to that that, obviously, the other part of that, I think, was to ask the question, how would you replicate this if you did it somewhere else? And I think that was the light bulb probably for both of you that came on to say, well, if I'm not here doing this, or if we want to do it somewhere else, how do we set it up so that that can, that can work, so we can replicate Educafe in another location, whether it's all of it, some of it, one part of it doesn't really matter. As soon as they got their heads around that I think it turned into something slightly different for you.

Janine Ford 20:28

Yeah, and I guess we had always wanted that. Our vision from early days was not just we can do this amazing thing here in Newbury, here in West Berkshire, but when we realised how powerful it was. We were like, why hasn't this happened everywhere? Why doesn't this happen? You know, I grew up in London, and I just think I say, I never come across any community activity or event like this. And I know that there are loads of other community hubs out there doing similar stuff, but to live into my 40s in various countries, cities and towns, and never see that. I think there is a real opportunity, and so that light bulb moment of knowing that we could replicate it and it should be replicated, was, yeah, it was quite a kind of inspiring moment,

Janine Ford 21:20

Amazing so you had that realisation, and then what was the thought process from there around, sort of scaling up? Was there any next steps or anything in particular you discussed that day or sort of soon after?

Chris Bond 21:33

It's nothing specific I don't think in terms of anything that you got from us in terms of documents, or there was nothing, you know, there was nothing specific in terms of that. I think it was just the mindset of, look at these things as products, look at them as something as that you need to turn into a sustainable business. Because, however wonderful they are, if they only last as long as the funding does then, then doesn't really solve any problem for anyone. So they have to be sustainable, they have to have a source of funding, whether that private, public, lottery, it doesn't really matter, but you have to know where that's going to come from. You have to know how much things cost. You have to run it so it's a sustainable business, because it does good there, it carries on doing good for for those people. And it was interesting

to hear Janine say earlier that it's almost turned into an event plan, or event organisation type organisation now. It was a bit, you know, it was organic, and it was, it was a bit adult, ad hoc, and it had grown because there was a need for it. But it's starting, and it's interesting, use the word organisation quite a lot now, because it is starting to, it's turning into something which is bigger than the sum of its parts, probably now bigger than the people that are in it. And it's, you know, and it is in a position now where that mindset can take it other places and take it to places and understand how to do it in other places, not the detail of how it works. And we can all go through detail and have templates for everything and anything in a business it that isn't the important thing. It's the mindset of how it works, why it works, and how it's going to sustain itself over a long period of time. I mean, we started the incubator and found it in the foundation, primarily because there was a stat that 90% of business startups fail after two years. So we wanted to do something about ethical businesses that wanted to do good out in the community, and to be able to do that, they need to last. They can't just be something that lasts for six months or 12 months or two years. They need to carry on doing good. And I think that's the thing now, I think that you look at stuff in that way now, doesn't matter what it is where you go, you'll ask those similar questions that we asked you probably in in that session.

Jamie Adam 23:54

Janine, in this phase, where you were growing and, as you say, taking yourself out of the business slightly to give you that much needed headspace. What were, if any, the challenges or difficulties that you and the team faced?

Janine Ford 24:09

I think, fighting to keep our caring, human person centered warmth and you know what works against the backdrop of that, that is probably the biggest challenge. And like Chris has said, you know, you're in the business or you're just outside it, trying to make it work. And now, thanks to National Lottery, Claire and I have been able to do that step outside to strengthen what we do so we can be sustainable in the long term, and that will be through not just grant funding and not just through fundraising, but hopefully through generating an income, either passively, through maybe guidance, resources and tools that we can share with people. We want to share them for free as well really. But we might have to pay, you know, might have to charge for some elements, and perhaps offering bespoke coaching and mentoring to either organisations or other groups if funding allows, and turning ourselves into that kind of almost consultancy type model. I don't like to say consultancy, because I feel like the way that we work with people is just, again, it's very organic and person centered. But that's where we're heading, and that's what becoming sustainable will mean, is that we don't have to rely purely on grant funding and donations.

Jamie Adam 25:37

Yeah, so just on funding. I mean, Educafe received funding from the National Lottery. How has that helped in terms of your growth and expansion plans?

Janine Ford 25:47

The reaching communities funding that we've got, part of it is for the Newbury Educafe, but part of it is actually for a two-year project to explore how we do scale it up. So that's not to say that, you know, within two years, there's going to be an Educafe in every town. We'd love that, but that's probably not going to happen in two years. But what we want to do, and what we are doing now, we're six months in to our reaching communities fund, is to carry on building what we did at the building the beautiful minds workshop of encapsulating what we do, breaking it down, describing it and understanding it, and starting to share that with other people and explore what happens when we apply what we've learned at Educafe and work with other community organisations to help them to do something similar. And there might be completely different organisations and locations to us. So, we're working with NM Trust, Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre, and there's a couple of other possible ones in the pipeline that we're speaking to as well. And they'll all be very different organisations, cultures, communities, and what they're trying to achieve in their community is even different. But we've found already, and we know that by taking what we've learned at Educafe and just giving other people the headspace to explore how they can create this stronger community within whatever location they are, we can hopefully scale up our model, not so that there is a an Educafe in every single library that would also be lovely, but that the ethos or the ideas behind what we do are kind of seeded beyond West Berkshire,

Jamie Adam 27:44

Chris, I mean, from from your side, how was it hearing that Educafe had received the funding?

Chris Bond 27:48

Yeah, it was an amazing moment find out that they got it. I was never in any doubt really, to be quite honest, you know, a good idea is a good idea, isn't it? So, you know, it's just just a matter of doing it really. And, yeah, great to be a part of it. Great to be part of it.

Jamie Adam 28:04

Absolutely great idea. We are sadly coming towards the end of today's episode, but I just wondered if you could maybe reflect back on the last few years and maybe what has been the biggest learning, or maybe you had any advice for anyone that was going through a similar process with their own community group or looking to start something new themselves.

Janine Ford 28:26

I think when you're in this kind of world and you know this, I didn't, I haven't done this my entire life. I haven't worked in the voluntary sector up until, you know, the last couple of years, so it's

new to me. I'd known people very well who worked in this industry, and I knew how challenging it was. But when you're trying to do good things, and it's very difficult, you know, sometimes you do kind of think is it worth but yes, I do think it's worth it. And if there's one thing that I would say it's just about being aware of the importance of self-care, avoiding burnout. You know, I think we've come quite close to it, if not been in it a couple of times. And I think that's probably, it's a huge challenge, not just in our sector. I think it's just across every sector at the moment, but I do think that in order to have a positive impact in your life and your community, I think looking after yourself and your team is really important. That's one thing that I think having the right team and having the right culture and having the right relationships within our team, our organisation, our community, has been the thing that's helped us to survive. And again, it goes back to what we're trying to do with Educafe, I guess, which is by building community, by having healthy relationships, you can live a really not just healthy life, but you can actually unlock so much potential and thrive and use your skills to do good. And that's what we see in Educafe and everyone that visits, you know, people change and they're able to, they're equipped and able to be happier and live a happier, better life and to help others. So, I think that kind of circle is really visible in everything I do, in my work with Educafe, but a lot of it does come down to caring, I think, caring for yourself and caring for other people. And I'm hoping that's a positive message to end on. You know, in 2020, at the end of 2025, when it feels like the world has gone mad and we should be doing better than this. And I think that's what the last four years have been about. It's like, what can, what can we do to make things better for people,

Chris Bond 31:03

I'd say it was balanced, to be honest, that question of, are you working in the business or on the business? That's a really important one for all of the startups that have come through the incubator, because you do need to have bit of both. You can't always be good at everything. So find somebody that is that's another probably big, really big takeaway. Not everybody you know, and people are willing to do things for you. People are willing to help. But it partly, partly, like the founders of the small, smaller ones that have come through the incubator, want to protect it. Want to protect their idea, their business, to such an extent that that they want to be able to do all of it, and it's not possible for people, so if you know you need somebody who's good at really good at something, find them, ask them if they'll help. A lot of people will, most people will, most people will, will jump at the chance to being involved with something that does good.

Jamie Adam 31:57

And Janine, this is, sadly, the last episode of the series. Is there any final message you have to anyone listening who would like to find out more or support Educafe in any way?

Janine Ford 32:08

Well, come visit us. Obviously, if you don't live too far away, drop in. I've had people, my mum's visited from London. Have people from all over Bristol and further southwest. We'd love to see some people from up north come and see us. And yeah, obviously we've got a donations page. You can buy us a coffee or, you know, send money our way always. And yeah, reach out to us, connect with us, even just drop us an email. If you are a community organisation doing something similar. Wanting to do something similar. We want to hear from you, we want to connect, because we are finally in a position where we can do that. So we would love to know what other people are doing, learn from other people as well, and do some knowledge exchange. We've got a project called The Togetherness project. This is part of the T and L funding that is allowing us to have those conversations. So reach out, Google, you know, and get in touch, please.

Jamie Adam 33:08

Thank you both so much for such a fascinating discussion. We could have talked for hours more, but it's been super interesting to hear a bit more about what goes into making Educafe what it is and the plans for the future. And a huge thank you to everyone that has contributed to the series, of course, and a big thank you to everyone that has listened. I hope you have enjoyed it just as much as we have enjoyed making it. And as Janine said, if you would like to get in contact, please do you can head to the Educafe website or find Educafe on socials, which is at EducafeUK. Educafe is a nonprofit organisation. If you would like to support them, to continue to grow the thriving community that is helping so many people, you can donate by the link in the show notes, please remember to subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. This has been a Research Podcasts production, produced and hosted by Jamie Adam.