Synergy: u3a Bridge and Bridge Clubs

Up and down the country, many u3a groups offer bridge teaching and playing sessions for their members, but have little or no contact with the bridge clubs which operate in their area. Might there be a perception that u3a bridge is more for beginners and casual bridge, and that bridge clubs are stuffy and elitist, and are only interested in catering for serious and experienced players?

If that were the case, it would be a great shame for the future of bridge in the UK. On the one hand, u3a groups do a brilliant job of bringing people into the great game of bridge, and offering it as a social outlet, but perhaps don't have an obvious route for people who want to go further in developing their skills. On the other hand, many bridge clubs are struggling for members. The age demographic is not favourable; even before Covid, bridge club membership nationally was on the decline, as not enough new players were joining to replace those who were lost, sadly through death or infirmity. Covid has made things rather worse, and most clubs are seeing face-to-face playing numbers around 2/3 of pre-Covid levels, as players have not returned after the long hiatus, or are confining themselves to playing on-line.

There is a solution available, with mutual benefit to the local u3a bridge group and the local bridge club: to get together and explore how they can help each other.

In Warrington, we began this process in 2019, between Warrington u3a Bridge Group and Warrington Bridge Club, and the relationship has really blossomed, to the benefit of both, and of people who want to learn bridge or play bridge in the Warrington area. As we have worked together, new ideas of synergy have come up, and new offerings have been made available, including joint guided playing sessions.

We had to start somewhere. In our case, the u3a bridge group had been successfully providing casual playing sessions and a Beginners and an Improvers course, for many years, but now had an idea to put on an Intermediate course to cater for those who had completed the Improvers course. But they didn't have adequate resource or expertise to run it. Warrington Bridge Club in the meantime had made contact with the u3a Bridge Group leader, looking for opportunities to work together in the hope of finding a way of attracting new members. So we kicked things off in September 2019 by running a u3a Intermediate course, administered by u3a, but with tuition led by volunteers from Warrington Bridge Club.

Unfortunately this was cut short by Covid in March 2020, but we kept people involved during the long months of lockdown by offering on-line lessons on Zoom, and on-line guided duplicate pairs sessions, which proved popular.

We started face-to-face play and courses again in September 2021, this time with the Intermediate course administered and run by the Bridge Club, and the Beginners and Improvers courses run by u3a. Every so often the Bridge Club ran some joint guided duplicate sessions between the Improvers and the Intermediate classes, which built relationships and confidence, and broke down any potential barriers to being involved with a Bridge Club. We worked closely with the tutors across all three courses to share teaching materials, prepared hands, etc, and to ensure consistency of course content.

We have come a long way in 3 years or so, and bridge is now healthier and more active both in Warrington u3a and Warrington Bridge Club, and getting better all the time.

Obviously the detail of how a bridge club and a u3a bridge group might work best together will depend on local circumstances, resources, and personalities, but it's worth making an approach, to see what might be done.