



COMPANY OVERVIEW

Mirrabook Development Trust CIC

Founded by Cathy Thomas-Varcoe

Former staff member in Faculty of Life Sciences

Funding Received: £4,700 Do It Award

cathy@mirrabook.co.uk

www.mirrabook.org.uk | [@MirrabookDT](https://twitter.com/MirrabookDT)



Three words to describe your journey so far... Circuitous, Fulfilling, Challenging!



Tell us a little bit about yourself, the Social Enterprise and your journey so far. I am Cathy Thomas-Varcoe and I am the Founder and Managing Director of Mirrabook Development Trust CIC. I'm an experienced online distance learning specialist and passionate about the potential for learning to change people's lives, particularly free online learning. Free online learning enables learning to be done by anyone, anywhere, anytime. It removes barriers to learning and provides equal opportunities.

Mirrabook offers socially responsible online learning. By employing our services for your online learning needs, you are giving back to the community. Our services include; developing online learning and learning strategies, conducting various learning needs assessments, conducting staff training, and evaluating online learning. We reinvest profits from our work to develop free online learning for children and young people. We coordinate 5 social projects to help focus this work:

- Inspired Minds – Online learning linked to the national curriculum, developed with and for schools in deprived area
- Living with... – Online learning develop with and for children and young people living with long-term health conditions, to educate them about their condition so they have improved health outcomes
- Like a Girl – Online learning for boys and girls to educate about gender equality in the workforce and sport
- In-Telly-Gent – Inspirational and aspirational video stories for children and young people, of people who overcame adversity to achieve
- Beautiful Minds – Instructional technology for children and young people living with learning difficulties

Mirrabook incorporated in December 2015. The UMIP Do It Award enabled us to invest in business advice, a website and promotional materials. Since then, I've been awarded a place on the competitive School for Social Entrepreneurs programme with additional funding, and was recently accepted into the NatWest Entrepreneurial Spark programme. I've had a very steep learning curve running a Social Enterprise and the support provided by UMIP and both programmes has been invaluable. We've secured Lottery Funding to develop a series of resources about diabetes for our Living with... project. We have also developed additional learning games for Key Stage 3 German and Spanish for Inspired Minds, as well as a series of learning resources about homophones for Inspired Minds and Beautiful Minds.

How was your idea conceived? I was the Distance Learning Lead for the Faculty of Life Sciences. In collaboration with Egyptologists and the eLearning team, I developed 5 online

learning resources for key stage 2 children about Ancient Egypt as a public engagement project. We had a lot of fun creating the resources, but most importantly, after a short

period of release, there were thousands of international downloads by teachers. As such, I considered developing an online learning platform that would connect teachers, researchers, public organisations (i.e. museums), and the press to develop and share these resources. In 2015 I left the University to develop this, however building a platform became difficult without the University infrastructure. So, the idea evolved to develop online learning that could be readily shared and didn't require hosting on a platform.

What is your company mission? Our social aim is to develop a free, quality digital learning experience for children and young people that will assist them to achieve their potential and not be limited by socio-economic background, race, gender, disability or learning difficulty.



At what point, did you realise that the idea had the potential for a Social Enterprise? I'd never heard of Social Enterprise, so I didn't realise that's what I was developing. I was talking to a colleague from UMIP about another project, but digressed into talking about Mirrabook. He loved it and suggested I talked to some of his colleagues who specialised in Social Enterprise. The rest is history! I'm now a real advocate for Social Enterprise and challenge everyone to think about how their business can be socially responsible.

What approaches did you first employ to develop the idea? I was referred to the Just Social series very early in the development of my thinking which enabled me to develop my concept and enterprise structure in a safe environment.

Why did you want to set up a Social Enterprise? Once I understood what a Social Enterprise was, and that this is what I was inadvertently developing, my main drivers were wanting to do good, but not be restricted by grant funding. Having the commercial side to what we do means that our 'social' work is far more sustainable.

How did you get involved with the Innovation Optimiser? A chance discussion with someone from UMIP resulted in an introduction to Laura and Ellie who run the Innovation Optimiser. They helped me develop my thinking, encouraged me to apply for funding and invited me to the Just Social workshops.

How did this engagement help you? I learned a lot about Social Enterprise including; social value, legal structures, stakeholder mapping, reporting... Everyone who attended the workshops supported one another. Despite leaving the University, I still have monthly videoconferences with two ladies I met at Just Social - we share knowledge and support one another. It's unlikely that I'd have continued without this early support.

What would you say was the greatest hurdle you overcame during the process? The biggest hurdle was pivoting my vision. When I abandoned the platform idea I felt as though the bottom fell out of my Social Enterprise and that I should give up. A meeting with Laura and Ellie saw me leave the room with a new vision and subsequent workshops helped me develop this.

Were there any standout moments from Innovation Optimiser that helped to propel your Social Enterprise forward? It was all new learning for me. I walked out of each session with pages of notes to digest.

What have been your major milestones and achievements so far? The Do It Award was the beginning... We also appointed great directors and incorporated the company. Since then I secured a place on the School for Social Entrepreneurs and the Entrepreneurial Spark programmes. I also secured Lottery Funding to progress the business, and won sponsorship to exhibit at Venturefest and give an elevator pitch to investors. However, our biggest achievement has been releasing our first 'social' learning resources for children and young people.

How has being involved with entrepreneurial activity benefitted you? Developing Mirrabook has taken me out of my comfort zone - I've learned to be more comfortable with being uncomfortable. I've acquired new knowledge and skills, and met some very inspirational people but most importantly I love leading this project because of its ability to make a difference.

What future support are you looking for to progress your business? We are hoping to grow the commercial work to generate more profits for reinvestment into our social projects.

Would you encourage other staff, academics and research students to seek support for their ideas through the Innovation Optimiser? Yes, in a heartbeat!