

# Your Learning – A new approach to ESOL course design, delivery, and review in the adult learning sector

## The City Academy



### Project synopsis

The project pilots a mechanism that enables learners to actively participate in the design of a course that is subsequently delivered to them and similar learners. Classroom delivery will be supported and supplemented with alternative, media based delivery. Feedback systems will be embedded into both strands to ensure continual improvement.

### Project aims

The aims of the project were:

- To put the learner in control of what they learn.
- To ensure course content is relevant to learner needs and that this content is delivered in a manner that engages the most disengaged and isolated learners as well as the more visible.
- To develop feedback systems and quality improvement mechanisms that are learner driven but organizationally owned

The changes that the Your learning project was intended to bring about included the creation of a methodological approach to the delivery of ESOL courses that will result in future provision being more appropriately tailored to the learners needs in terms of their desire to engage with the structures of British society such as the education, health, housing, benefits, political, and justice systems as well as to integrate socially.

The model will open up the learning control environment to the learner themselves through their involvement in the design and review process. It was anticipated that this would bring about a fundamental change to the way courses are designed resulting in a 'design with the learner' approach as opposed to the then current 'design for the learner' approach. Learning will become much more of an activity that is done with the learner rather than to the learner. The ongoing feedback mechanisms will ensure that the learner voice is continually heard in the attempts to improve service provision and the embedding of this mechanism in the organizational structure will ensure that voice is listened to at all levels of the organization.

The model will change the way learning is delivered to members of the community who cannot or will not access classroom based provision, whether that be community based such as ours, or more institutionally based provision in local Further Education colleges.

By utilizing radio as a medium to deliver ESOL provision we will open up provision to these individuals and support them in both the development of English language skills and their

understanding of the structure of British life. Further to this the radio broadcasts will change the way in which classroom learning is supported by adding a layer of real life to the service.

As a consequence of this project learners will be engaged in the design of the courses they receive to ensure relevancy, will input directly into the ongoing review and evaluation of both course content and the quality of provision at all levels of the organization, and the reach of provision will be extended to the most marginalized in society.

## **What was innovative about the Your Learning Project?**

Current sector practice does not include the learner in the design of the course that they will receive.

Whilst many colleges have a student representative structure these are often inaccessible for ESOL students, many of whom are culturally reluctant to make negative comments about their teacher in the context of a formal process. This project proposes the use of an intermediary figure who not only works with the learners in the course design process but also facilitates the review feedback process. This will remove those perceived barriers as there will be a different, more collaborative dynamic between the intermediary and the learners than is normally found between staff and learners in colleges and adult learning organizations.

Current sector practice does not cater to learners who for many reasons are not able to take part in traditional classroom study. Delivering classes through the radio with the supplementary materials and live phone in show means that students who for reasons of childcare, confidence or cost cannot come to the organization, are engaged and assisted with developing and learning.

Current sector practice in course delivery is of the reductionist approach, students of ESOL learn the basics of the English language but are not taught about aspects of life in Britain which will be great importance to them. This project proposes to create an interdisciplinary approach to ESOL in which the student will be encouraged to take a holistic view of learning. Students will be able to identify and analyse the broader societal, economic and community connections for the subject area. Through working with the learner and embedding topics which are of relevance to their everyday life we can begin to create an immediate difference to their lives. For example this interdisciplinary approach seeks to combine the course syllabus with understanding your rights and responsibilities at work.

## **Project delivery**

### **What did you learn from the project?**

The learning points that have come out of the project are best set beside the project aims.

- To put the learner in control of what they learn.

The project team learnt that not all ESOL students want to be put in control of what they are learning. Many ESOL students have little to no prior formal education and as a result lack the necessary study skills and discipline. The transition from traditional basic ESOL lesson through to a pilot project that utilises the medium of radio as well as embedding topics such as law, health, and education was overwhelming and intimidating for some students. The same students found learning through the radio somewhat problematic, distance learning requires a high level of self discipline as well as a high level of study skills, some students found the transition from traditional ESOL to this innovative method of delivery a significant leap in their academic journey.

- To ensure course content is relevant to learner needs and that this content is delivered in a manner that engages the most disengaged and isolated learners as well as the more visible.

The process of exploring the information needs of the student began with the establishment of the Learner Course Design Group. This representative sample of ESOL learners spoke at length about what information needs they felt they had. The group expressed these information needs often in broad terms. For example some of the ESOL students who were parents expressed a strong desire to learn all about the British Education System. The Project team found that there was not a sufficient amount of time to discuss and teach every aspect of the British Education system that would be of relevance to the students. Some students who were interested in going into higher education wanted a focus on The British University System whereas others wanted to gain a better understanding of the Primary and Secondary Education System. The project team learnt that an balance and a compromise had to be reached and through further consultation and dialogue an agreement was reached on which mini topics would be taught and how long would be spent on the differing topics.

- To develop feedback systems and quality improvement mechanisms that are learner driven but organizationally owned.

The Your Learning Project has learnt that for some of our learners providing critical feedback to the teacher about the course maybe culturally inappropriate. For this reason it was decided that the teaching staff would not conduct feedback sessions with the learners. Instead the Project Coordinator would be given a specific responsibility to collect and collate student feedback. The Project Coordinator who was known to the students as the Learner Liaison Officer specifically developed a special relationship with the students in order to ease any possible tension between providing frank feedback and contravening cultural etiquette.

- The benefit of utilizing a variety of existing skills and experience to create a solution that meets the common need of a group.

The Learner Course Design Group consists of a group of learners who have a significant difference in academic ability, ethnicity, gender, and age. The group has a variety of skills and experiences which were drawn upon by the Project team during the LCDG consultation period. The initial phase of the consultation period consisted of identifying the common needs of the group. This involved changing the common power dynamic between a group of ESOL learners and a project team within an organisation. Traditionally, organisations would design for the learner rather than with the learner. The Your Learning project team began these sessions by posing the question 'what are the individual needs of ESOL learners.' Members of the LCDG used this opportunity to either draw on their own personal needs or on the needs of their peers. The session served as the basis for identifying the two common needs of ESOL learners, that is, learning the English language, learning about systems and institutions that are prevalent to life in Britain.

- A thorough analysis of the clients' ability to receive the service is of paramount importance. Understanding possible obstacles allows time to produce solutions to potential problems.

The Your Learning Project has learnt that whilst course content is important, the mode of delivery and the relative accessibility of the information is also of paramount importance to the successful completion of this project. Prioritizing the mode of delivery and the practicality of physical accessibility for the client group enables the disengaged and isolated learner to participate. This has been done through working with internet cafes to ensure students who are

unable to access computers at home are able to access them through other means. Conversation clubs have ensured that students who are on the distance learning aspect of the project receive the space and environment to build upon their speaking and listening skills.

An understanding of the practical, cultural, and personal difficulties the client group may have in expressing feedback enables the project team to co-develop a process which is driven by the needs of the client group, but also meets the needs of the project by gathering feedback which is direct and honest.

The individual members of the project team have extensive knowledge of working with the ESOL community, it is through this experience and the interaction with the LCDG that the project team have learnt about some of the cultural and religious difficulties students have in expressing feedback which maybe deemed critical. The project team also understand that many ESOL learners may not feel fully confident about their ability to give feedback in the traditional written format. The practicality of providing feedback is also very important, students are often rushing and in out of class and may not have time to provide sufficient feedback in the traditional way. As a result of the initial consultation period the project team were able to anticipate and prevent some of the potential pitfalls in creating feedback systems. A potential pitfall would be to develop a feedback system that is based on the traditional customer survey model, this type of model is inappropriate for ESOL learners because it does not take into account some of the difficulties learners may have in providing a clear and comprehensive overview of the service they are receiving.

## **What were the views of key stakeholders?**

The key stakeholders were partner providers such as the City of Bristol College, community based adult learning providers, the local radio station Bristol Community Fm and the Bristol City Council Learning Communities Team.

BCfm were pleased with the structure of the radio shows and felt that the design and delivery of the shows met the BCfm quality standards. BCfm supported the project in providing a link to a website in which students would be able to access the podcasts as well as any additional study materials.

BCfm were only able to offer the project airtime between 3pm and 4pm on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The timing of the radio shows meant that many of the learners were unable to tune into the live radio shows, BCfm were of the opinion that if the project was started three months prior to the actual start date they would have been able to offer the project an alternative time slot. Unfortunately funding for the Your Learning Project from LSIS was confirmed in March 2010, the schedule for allocated airtime was decided in January 2010. BCfm were particularly positive about being involved in an innovative pilot project that increased listener participation. BCfm supported the project team in providing access to a telephone in the studio, this enabled the project team to phone students that wanted to participate in the radio shows but could not due to being on a low income.

The Learning Communities Team within Bristol City Council were positive in particular about the design with the learner rather than for the learner ethos. The department showed particular interest in the distance learning element of the project. However they feel that one year would be insufficient when trying to really ascertain whether this method of learning worked for ESOL students. The reason for this view was due to the low academic attainment amongst many ESOL students. Whilst it was true that the classes were of a mixed academic background, the representative from the college and from the adult learning providers were concerned for the attainment of the students who did not have the study skills and academic discipline and rigor to engage with a distance learning course which utilises the medium of radio.

## **Were there any unforeseen issues?**

The course had originally been designed to have five separate groups of fifteen learners each group would have an hour long ESOL class. After the consultation period with the LCDG it was felt that ESOL learners required much more classroom time. As a result of this the number of classes had to be reduced from five to two classes. Each class had four hours of class time a week with the teacher. The relevant milestone was altered due to the complex nature of the course and the amount of information students were aiming to learn. The two classroom based ESOL classes are both very well attended with attendance figures both at 90%.

One of the original project milestones included the delivery of three radio shows which would be broadcast in Somali Urdu and Polish. Again, after consultation with both the LCDG and a wider pool of ESOL learners it was suggested that a two hour radio show covering the material in the workbook and conducted mainly in English by an experienced ESOL tutor would be a more appropriate way for students to improve their understanding of the English language. The radio shows include two co presenters who occasionally translate terms or phrases that maybe have been problematic for the learners. This change in approach to delivery meant that students were able to build upon their speaking and listening skills.

Another of the original project milestones also included the creation of an ESOL workbook that would be translated and printed in three main languages, Somali, Urdu, Polish. Through the initial consultation period the LCDG decided that it would be much more beneficial to have the workbooks written and printed in English in order to aid their reading and writing skills. The LCDG felt that having several languages in the main body of a ESOL workbook would prove to be distracting and confusing when it came to revision. After this consultation it was felt that the workbooks should be written in English but that the terminology used should be appropriate to the reading levels of our students. This has been done and the project team have created three ESOL workbooks which become popular.

The original project bid also included a Learner Liaison Officer post. This post was advertised and recruited to. Unfortunately the LLO resigned from the post in order to take up travelling. It was at this time that the post of the LLO was reviewed it was felt that many of the functions of the LLO were infact coordination roles. The LCDG had been consulted on the change of the name for the post from LLO to Project Coordinator, the LCDG supported this change and the post was revised and re-advertised as a Project Coordinator post. The functions of the Project Coordinator post include conducting feedback sessions and liaising between the project team and the learners. The new Project Coordinator is very popular with learners and has had extensive experience of working with ESOL learners.

## **Would you do things differently next time?**

The Your Learning Project would have forged and maintained links with experienced sector professionals and leading ESOL providers before embarking on the delivery of the pilot project. The project highlighted consultation and communication with learners as a priority, however upon reflection the project has learnt that it would have benefitted immensely from the support and guidance of leading researchers in the field.

The Your Learning Project would have introduced an initial study skills module in order to identify which students would require additional face to face contact and support in addition to this the study skills module would prepare students for a more disciplined independent learning style. The project would have negotiated with BCfm to secure an evening slot on the air waves,

this would have given the wider general public a chance to get involved in the discussions and learning. The students began to identify the project coordinator as a close member of the project team, this connection of association meant that the feedback received from students changed from a position of honesty to politeness. The alternative approach that the project team would have taken in this situation would have been to employ an independent individual who may well have been a previous ESOL student that would only conduct feedback from the students. This alteration would ensure that the feedback given would have been more likely to be frank and honest.

## Project outcomes

The statistical outcome of the project is as follows.

- 27% of distance learners passed their reading exams
- 75% of distance learners passed their writing exams
- 100% of distance learners passed their speaking and listening exams
- 50% of classroom learners passed their reading exams
- 25% of learners passed their writing exams
- 91% of classroom learners passed their speaking and listening exams

The project did achieve its original aims illustrated in this report. There have been unforeseen circumstances that have led to the reshuffling of the project at various times, however the project team and the students were pleased with the eventual outcome of the project. The project had some impact on the organization, namely the Community Engagement & Partnership Department. This project highlighted the need to provide contextual information for ESOL learners so that they may improve their understanding of various aspects of life in Britain. A different project delivered through the same department took on this learning and set up A ESOL with City Academy School class, the classes were designed to help parents who cannot speak English learn more about the education system whilst learning the English language.

Students who took part in the project have said they now feel more confident in either their child's school, at work or when dealing with the police. The students appreciated the holistic view on learning that the project established. Students said that for so long they waited to have a course which combined the science of learning a language but also the simple practical advice and rules on engaging in a society. This project, they felt, did both things. Other students complained that the additional information was irrelevant and boring. Those students were in the main students who had a distinguished foreign academic background, yet who nevertheless enrolled on the ESOL course to improve their language skills, these student wanted more time to spent on topics such as grammar and pronunciation. The project team did their best in accommodating these conflicting view points by posting additional grammar based work onto the website, students could therefore download the additional material and submit it to the tutor before their next tutorial.

The impact of the project will be sustained by the key stakeholder organisations who see particular merit in this form of delivery. Transferable aspect of this project will be sustained by the Community Engagement and Partnership Department. The participating organisation BCFM, have said they would like to continue working on delivering educational radio shows and will in the future seek out such opportunities. Opportunities to work more closely with a national charity called People Can has recently emerged. The organisation has recently employed the project manager for this project and very keen to build on the findings of this project in a way that is innovative and inclusive. Discussions are currently underway with People Can to see if this project can in the future be expanded to include learners for whom English is a first language, but who nevertheless experience difficulty in deciphering organisational jargon and who in particular feel just as isolated and alienated from institutions and organisations in Britain.

The statistical data shows a considerable lead in the distance learning programme. This is very unusual in the field, however a contributing factor may have been that some of the students enrolled on the distance learning programme were in fact from academic backgrounds. These students in main had the study skills which supported them in passing their exams.

### **Sharing of project findings**

The podcasts and the ESOL workbooks will be made available to partner providers. The Project Manager will conduct a series of short workshops for organisations in the area on the methodology and outcome of the project. Key stakeholders and interested parties in the sector will be sent a copy of the report.