



# **OUTSTANDING TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT**

## **A SUMMARY OF PROJECTS IN THE OTLA PHASE 3 (NORTH EAST AND CUMBRIA) PROGRAMME**

Success North at Newcastle College, ccConsultancy, Skills Digital,  
The Education and Training Consortium (HUDCETT)



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# 1. Foreword

## **Julie Gibbings, Head of Teaching, Learning and Assessment, The Education and Training Foundation**

The Education and Training Foundation (ETF) is the government-backed, sector-owned national professional development body for the further education (FE) and training sector. Our role is to support the continuing transformation of our technical and vocational education system by ensuring the sector has world-class leaders, teachers and trainers. It is the expectation that this leads to ever-improving learner outcomes, a more highly skilled workforce for employers, and a stronger economy, country and society. We do this by improving, driving and championing the quality of leadership, teaching and training.

Alongside Leadership and Governance and support for Maths and English, Outstanding Teaching, Learning and Assessment (OTLA) is one of our flagship programmes, and includes training courses, collaborative projects and our regional Professional Exchanges.

Our collaborative projects aim to improve teaching, learning and assessment by giving practitioners the time and space to explore solutions to the challenges they face. There is a strong emphasis on collaboration, both within an organisation but also externally with other providers and employers.

The key principles of all of our collaborative project activity are:

- Enhancing teaching, learning and assessment towards outstanding.
- Implementing and promoting the use of the Professional Standards.
- Offering peer-led, collaborative development of teaching for leaders and practitioners.
- Creating sector-led solutions to sector defined problems.
- Evidence-based, research informed.

It is our belief that enabling practitioners to engage in action research or joint practice development activity (Fielding et al, 2005) supports a greater likelihood of longer-term change in practice. As solutions and strategies are tested, trialled and evaluated, practice becomes more embedded and honed.

Phase 3 of the OTLA programme was our first to support providers in the North-East, Cumbria and South Central areas of England. Projects in previous phases had taken place in London, Essex and Kent, the East Midlands, Yorkshire and the Humber and the South West. The projects focused on approaches to attainment, retention and progression.

Continuing with the theme of sharing and collaboration, we are excited and pleased to be able to share the learning from all of these projects with the sector.

## 2. Editorial

### Jean McNiff, Professor of Educational Research, York St John University

It has been an utter privilege and delight to work with the OTLA (North East and Cumbria) team, and with the amazing teachers and trainers involved in the project reported in these pages. Thank you to all, for your warm welcome, your friendship, and the opportunity to become part of a rigorous research-based and research-informed venture.

The individual projects, and the overall project they comprise, have been an outstanding success in terms of achieving the aims of the team, as these also communicate the wider aims of the Education and Training Foundation. Those aims have included throughout a consistent commitment to supporting participants in achieving the professional standards for teachers and trainers, as set out in current advice, available online at <http://www.et-foundation.co.uk/supporting/support-practitioners/improvements-in-teacher-learning-and-assessment/>.

The individual reports contained in this present document show that these standards have been fully and appropriately achieved by all participating projects. Further, all thirteen projects have to different degrees extended and surpassed the required levels of achievement in that they also demonstrate a keen sense of the need for practices to take the form of high quality practice-based research; they also demonstrate a strong awareness of the need for practitioner-researchers to articulate both how this has been achieved and the potential significance of the achievement for different constituencies.

These processes together have amounted to a realisation of Hoyle's original conceptualisation of 'the extended professional' (see Hoyle, 1974; Hoyle and John, 1995), a key feature of which is an ongoing awareness of the development of self as a researcher who is committed to the continual development of a research-based, research-active practice in the service of others.

The accounts presented here show that all participants have developed both practical strategies for improving practices and also the capacity to theorise

what they are doing: that is, they can offer descriptions and explanations for their practices, and produce evidence by which they may test the validity of their provisional knowledge claims.

Some accounts could also stand as reports of what is generally called 'academic research' in that authors test their ideas against those in the scholarly literatures and produce narratives that show the evolution of their own theories of practice, in which they incorporate those established theories. These processes have resulted in massive shifts in most participants' self-perceptions and self-identifications, with potential far-reaching implications for the development of teaching, learning and assessment for the teaching profession across the disciplines and sectors.

Yet the concept of extended professionalism, in this report, goes further; now to embrace the idea and requirement of 'demonstrating impact', as set out in Walker et al. (2016). 'Impact' is defined in terms of the continual improvement of a range of practical and intellectual capacities, specifically in relation to enhancing teaching, learning and assessment by and for teachers, trainers and learners. This is similar to the definition of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, 2016) in relation to the Research Excellence Framework, that 'impact' should be taken as meaning 'an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia' (see <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/rsrch/REFimpact/>). Participants in the projects reported here can show that they fulfil this Higher Education criterion as fully as that of the Education and Training Foundation; an achievement of which all should be justifiably proud.

Such excellence does not simply happen. It happens largely through the development of a culture that encourages awareness and capacity in achieving appropriate forms of understanding and their realisation in and through practices. Further, cultures do not come into being of themselves, rooted as they are in the everyday practices of participants in the discourses.

In the case of professional education initiatives, they are systematically and deliberately nurtured by providers (in this case, the OTLA North East and Cumbria team), often most effectively through the development of appropriate infrastructures, informed by specific values. In terms of the projects reported here, a core aim was to conceptualise and develop the whole initiative as a community of enquiry, an extension of Lave and Wenger's (1991) and Wenger's (1998) original concept of communities of practice, in which dialogue was a key feature. All thirteen projects were convened by project leaders who encouraged all participants to see themselves as a community in which all were entitled to speak for themselves and to be listened to respectfully. In this regard, project leaders were pivotal to the success of each project in terms of their capacity to coach, support, critique and hold fast to the realisation of dialogical values.

Each project had its independent status and dynamic trajectory, while also acknowledging its relationship with the other twelve projects. The thirteen projects then coalesced into one large project, including also as appropriate insider and outsider assessors, administrators and managers; many of the outsider visitors brought their learning from their observations of this project to developing their own home initiatives. The entire enterprise stands as a fine example of how the underlying values of respectful encouragement can manifest as the real-life development of critically independent thinkers and dialogical communities of educational enquiry – a most impressive achievement and one from which organisational managers and policy makers can learn.

Further, a contributing factor in the success of the different collaborative partnerships developed throughout the overall project has been the capacity of the core team to accept responsibility themselves for demonstrating the professional standards in action, in the same way as is required of those they support. This understanding has meant that the project has avoided taking a form in which professional providers do research on participants or give

them instructions about what to do and think, a situation that often results in what Easterly (2013) calls 'the tyranny of experts'. On the contrary, the core team have conducted their own self-evaluations in company with those they are supporting.

They have consistently judged their personal and collective practices by the same means as have all participants, that is, in terms of how the professional standards have provided ongoing principles of practices and evaluation by which they judge the quality of their own work. These self- and collective evaluations have been conducted through regularly convened team meetings, consultation with participants, and the production of ongoing progress reports. Throughout, and acting on participants' and one another's evaluative feedback, the team has articulated what is going well and what could be improved and further developed, with future actions identified, target dates set for their fulfilment and the means for their successful achievement negotiated.

A next step in the overall project therefore is for the core team formally to assess the quality of their research in light of participants' feedback, as per the requirement of Professional Standard 10 ('Evaluate your practice with others and assess its impact on learning') and then to make it public through texts, as per Stenhouse's definition of research as 'systematic enquiry made public' (see Skilbeck, 1983).

Their accounts of practice-based research, together with those of trainers and teachers, will contribute to a knowledge base that has the capacity to inform future research and policy formation. This knowledge base will incorporate all the accounts produced from this project, and others, where appropriate, with capacity for influencing the quality of education and educational provision in this sector and in this country, and potentially beyond.

### 3. Introduction

**Di Thurston, OTLA (North East and Cumbria) Project Director, Newcastle College**

**Claire Collins, OTLA (North East and Cumbria) Lead, ccConsultancy**

**David Prinn, OTLA (North East and Cumbria) Project Manager**



The 'Outstanding Teaching, Learning and Assessment' (OTLA) programme was led in the North East and Cumbria by Success North at Newcastle College, in partnership with cc Consultancy, The Education and Training Consortium / HUDCETT and Skills Digital.

The purpose of this booklet is to provide a summary and evaluation of the work undertaken by the programme and its associated projects which were funded by the Education and Training Foundation.

13 projects were awarded funding with the aim to develop outstanding teaching, learning and assessment within a variety of contexts in the further education and skills sector. The projects involved 42 providers which represent the breadth of the sector including colleges, adult and community learning, offender learning, third sector and independent training providers.

The projects were originally scheduled to run throughout the 2017 calendar year but some projects were extended to allow data to be collected for the full 2017-18 academic year.

Over 200 practitioners were actively involved in the projects including some, such as construction trainers and student support assistants who may have been excluded from participating in (and learning from) more academic research programmes. These collaborative projects have ensured that the changes that emerge from research into vocational teaching become implemented in classrooms and workshops by the practitioner-researchers themselves.



To further support the project teams' understanding of practitioner-led action research, a series of project-related professional development events were held. These have included: an initial event to bring the providers together and prepare them for their projects; an event on how to conduct practitioner-led action research, and a half-day event with Professor Jean McNiff, who is a leading international expert on practitioner-led research, to explore this topic further, once the project teams had begun their work.



An interim dissemination event was held where projects were able to share their early findings. At this event our 'conference artist' Graham Ogilvie<sup>1</sup> produced a number of illustrations to capture the main messages of the event and to represent the projects. We have used digitised versions of his work throughout this booklet.

The events were very well-received, with participants reporting on improvements in their understanding, changes to their personal identity as teachers, trainers, etc. and renewed enthusiasm and confidence to undertake research-informed practice.

### **Breaking into academic exclusion zones**

Through working on these projects, 22 teachers and trainers without degree qualifications, and who might often describe themselves as "non-academic" (or even "anti-academic"!!) began producing commentaries and research reports of their activities.

In prisons, FE Colleges and training providers, vocational teachers and support assistants followed Professor Jean McNiff's encouragement to "describe and explain" their inquiry activities and produce reports.

In five projects especially, vocational tutors and support staff without HE qualifications broke through the academic glass ceiling to present their insider research. Project leaders adapted research report writing frameworks and diary formats to help practitioners capture their experience.

Project leaders prompted teachers, trainers and SSAs to explain their practices and then used workshop activities to help them compare their practical thinking with published theory. This gave the self-styled "non-academic" staff confidence to begin researching and reporting in a pragmatic form; project leaders remained sensitively at hand to act as proof-readers and "critical friends" for their emerging writing.

As one SSA noted in her research diary (provided by the project lead):  
*"We were given a voice".*

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<sup>1</sup> [www.ogilviadesign.co.uk](http://www.ogilviadesign.co.uk)



In Section 4 we present an executive summary of each of the OTLA (North East and Cumbria) projects. Full reports and associated resources will be made available on the Education and Training Foundation's Improving Teaching exhibition site on the Excellence Gateway <https://improving-teaching.excellencegateway.org.uk/>.

In Section 5 of this booklet Dr. Andy Convery summarises the achievements of the OTLA (North East and Cumbria) programme and suggests that our practitioner-led action research approach has enabled us to go beyond 'practice development' to true 'professional development'. He argues that this programme has stimulated a research-active community of practitioners in the region who are not passively research-literate but are research-active and empowered to contribute their research findings to create theory.

## 4. The OTLA (North East and Cumbria) projects

In this section we present a summary of each of the OTLA (North East and Cumbria) projects. Full reports and associated resources will be made available on the Education and Training Foundation's Improving Teaching exhibition site on the Excellence Gateway.

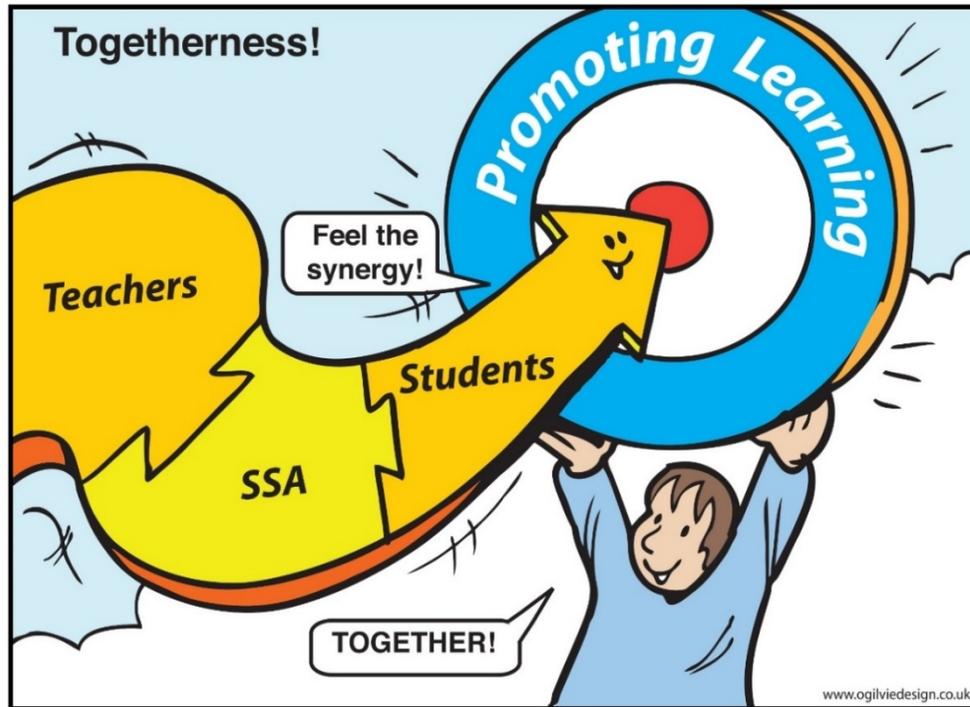
We have presented two separate summaries for the assessment and tracking project because, although the participating organisations met

regularly and shared ideas, they mainly worked independently on implementing those ideas within their organisations.

The projects to evaluate activities for supporting maths and English learners were nominally two separate projects but we have presented one combined summary because the rationale, methodology, participating organisations and outcomes were the same for both projects.

## 4.1. Synergy in learning: tutors and student support assistants (SSAs) working together to promote learner self-assessment

### Redcar & Cleveland College



#### Summary

The project promoted more effective partnerships between teachers and SSAs through a process of experimenting with strategies to aid learners' self-assessment, effectively stimulating more independent learning. Teachers and SSAs evaluated strategies designed to illuminate the learners' progress during sessions so that appropriate responses could be discussed between SSAs and tutors as challenges arose. Successful implementation of these approaches required effective organisational scheduling to ensure consistent teacher, SSA and learner deployment.

#### Rationale for the project

In-house observations and a recent College Ofsted report support published research (Sharples, Webster and Blatchford, 2015; Sanders, 2017) which indicated that learning support provision is often neglected and ineffectively utilised in classrooms and workshops. The extension enabled the team to further develop and extend the strategies used and firmly embed them into their practice.

#### Approach and Methodology

The Project Leader used her role as a college-wide Teaching and Learning Practitioner (TLP) to select a team of six tutors, six SSAs and three TLPs to promote more effective partnerships between tutors and SSAs in implementing strategies to aid learners' self-assessment. The team engaged in a regular programme of professional development activities to ensure that the learning support experience was rigorously researched.

Both SSAs and teachers were supported to engage in action research. Initial activities included comparing personal reflections on the student support experience with findings and guidance from published literature. Fortnightly team meetings monitored project progress and planned further actions, with the benefits of increasing both team cohesion and participants' professional learning. Data was collected from focus group discussion; questionnaires; observations of practice; artefacts produced by learners; and teachers' and SSAs' reflective diaries.

Team meetings, especially those held off-site, provided a forum for teachers and SSAs to meet and collaborate, and to rethink the taken for granted roles and relationships. The combination of OTLA regional events, visiting research consultants and off-site meetings created an enthusiasm for the novel research project shared between teachers and SSAs.

The research process was facilitated by the project leader organising research sessions and ensuring that all participants were provided with time away from teaching and bound research diaries, thus creating a motivating ethos of respect and purpose for all participants, and a pride in the newly-formed professional learning community.

Since the previous report a number of changes have been made to further encourage and support learner engagement with the introduction of 'Learning Mats' which have enabled learners to set both academic and personal targets in collaboration with tutors and SSAs. This has given learners more ownership and further encouraged and supported them to strive to improve their engagement in the learning process. Learners have reported increased confidence and self-belief as a result of the new approach.

### **Professional learning: Evidence of changes in teaching, learning and assessment practices.**

In subsequent classroom sessions, mind-maps and "stretch and challenge" question cards were used to enable sharing of information, peer discussion and identification of learning gaps. Similarly, the "exit card" was adapted and renamed for use at interim points during the lesson as an effective communication strategy linking teacher, SSA and learners. These resources encouraged learners to more fully express their learning experience and use of these strategies during teaching sessions enabled SSAs and tutors to tackle difficulties as they arose. When reflecting on using these resources both teachers and SSAs report enjoying improved classroom presence and greater capability to stimulate meaningful learner participation in overcoming "sticking points".

Towards the end of the project, team members were asked to evaluate their participation and identify any changes to their teaching, learning and assessment practices. The enclosed Padlets provide an overview of their findings and indicate that the whole process has been extremely beneficial to all participants. The points raised in the Padlets also provide further evidence of improved collaboration between tutors and SSAs and clearly relate to the Professional Standards. The organisation has supported the project and it is

hoped the good work carried out to date will be developed further in the coming academic year.

### **Evidence of improved collaboration and changes in organisational practices**

Dedicated in-house and external CPD opportunities for SSAs, tutors and TLPs provided an excellent basis for practice development, as responsive strategies were introduced by classroom partnerships who were enjoying a new level of research-informed professional relationship.

Tutors and SSAs reported more effective working relationships. SSAs stated that during the project, their contributions, skills and knowledge have been more widely acknowledged, and teachers acknowledge a new recognition of the potential of SSAs contributions. Teachers and SSAs are using and contributing to educational theory. The practical resources and strategies from the project were rolled out to all 73 teaching staff in the Autumn term as part of an organisational CPD event.

Further in-house sessions have taken place following the project extension. A training session in March concentrated on effective use of formative assessment and feedback with the project team focussing on Hattie's model of feedback levels (Hattie and Timperley, 2007) and how these could be applied in practice. They also considered the work of Beere and Didau and the use of Directed Improvement and Reflection Time (DIRT) for learners (Beere, 2015; Didau, 2014). During this session the team agreed on new approaches to supporting learners which were implemented in April, May and June and regularly reviewed at fortnightly team meetings before final evaluation at the end of the project. The final session evaluation was attended by an ETF Evaluator who was impressed by the enthusiasm of the team, stating that the experience was 'uplifting'.

### **Evidence of improvement in learners' achievements, retention and progression.**

The resources developed within the project have enabled tutors and SSAs to engage in more effective formative assessment strategies collaboratively as they help identify and clarify difficulties experienced by learners. Learners with significant difficulties report that the new strategies help them to keep

track of where they are in their learning; to see what they need to do to improve; and how to learn from and with peers. Learners find it easier to ask for specific help through the “exit ticket” process. SSAs report being better able to use deeper questioning when a learner is stuck, enabling the learner to more independently overcome barriers. It became obvious that learners were trying to use the SSA to gain answers to classroom tasks; the new approaches made lessons more interactive, leading to more effective cooperation between herself, the SSA and the learners.

Learners have been very positive about the new approaches, with a number stating that they felt more included in the process and enjoyed setting their own targets as these were more meaningful to them, enabling them to work on areas they considered important for their learning.

### Learning from this project

- Learners’ prior school and college experiences of learning support had often unwittingly encouraged them to rely on SSAs to provide answers to classroom tasks; the new project approaches prompted learners to be more active and responsible for their progress.
- SSAs report being better able to use deeper questioning when a learner is stuck, challenging the learner to work out new learning strategies. This represents significant progress from learning support activity being limited to providing praise for (or criticism of) the learner.
- When SSAs and teachers use ‘exit tickets’ and ‘mind maps’ as interim assessment activities during the class (rather than at the end of the session), meaningful responses can rapidly be made to address learners’ problems that might otherwise have impeded their progress for the whole session.
- Within the protected space created by this project, SSAs reported “being noticed”, feeling valued and being listened to as equals. Teachers became more fully aware of SSAs’ potential contribution.
- Being equal participants on a research project created the foundation for shared practice development. SSAs and teachers report engaging in more thoughtful discussion as they reflect on their experiences and plan further improvements for learners.

- Teachers’ capacity to meet all learners’ needs can be greatly enhanced by listening to the combination of the ‘learner voice’ and the voice of the SSA.
- Management need to ensure that the benefits of the project are fully embedded into college practice and all staff receive appropriate support and training to ensure learning support is effectively used in classrooms in the coming academic year.

*“We have learned that it is possible to introduce change and that even small changes can make a huge difference to how people work together to promote learning.” (SSA)*

### Dissemination of Project Findings

- Information on the project was disseminated locally through the media.
- May 2018 Catherine McPartland (Project Lead) and Di Pearson (Project team member) attended the Teacher Education Advancement Network Meeting at Aston University, Birmingham. An article on the project is currently being written.
- July 2018 Catherine McPartland (Project Lead) and Di Pearson (Project team member) presented project findings at the Newcastle SET meeting Group.
- An article on the project will appear in the Teaching in Lifelong Learning Journal (McPartland, 2018).
- Members of the team are due to contribute to the BERA and CARN Conferences to be held in the Autumn term 2018.

### Evaluative Padlets

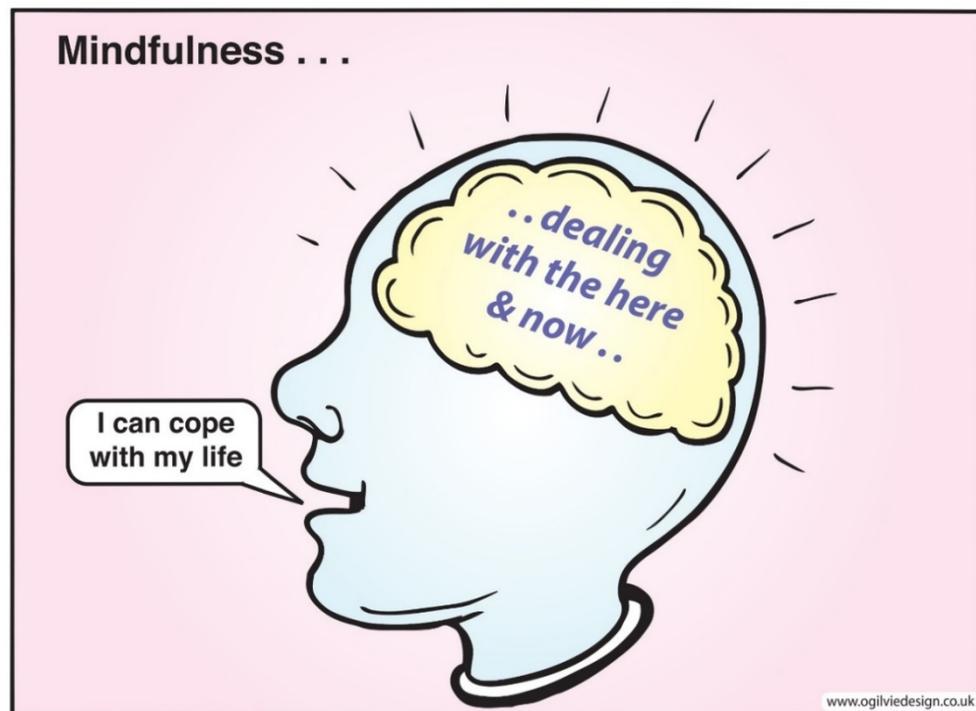
OTLA and Me. Participants identified personal growth and development as a result of the project: <https://padlet.com/cpmcpartlanduk/otlappd>

OTLA Evaluations, June 2018

<https://padlet.com/cpmcpartlanduk/otlaevaluation>

## 4.2. Improving Lives: exploring the effects of mindfulness training

Gateshead Council learningSkills, ALD Hair and Beauty Academy, Foundation of Light, North East Counselling Services and Darlington Borough Council



### Summary

Project partners were keen to explore ways in which they could further support learners, many of whom had complex social and emotional needs, in their struggle to manage the additional pressures of attending a learning programme.

The five partners released staff to attend a variety of 'mindfulness' training sessions designed to both help tutors deal with and recover from challenging situations with learners and equip them with a range of strategies to help learners cope with their studies. Each of the partners put a number of interventions in place and then cascaded their findings to the team.

### Rationale for the project

In an effort to reduce the percentage of 16-19 year olds not in education employment or training, which sits at 5.3% (Connexions, 2016), providers are committed to providing the support many young people need as they make the transition from school to further education and employment. However, through their self-assessment processes, project partners highlighted that many of these learners have such challenging lives that they are less likely to succeed, have poorer attendance and were more likely to leave their learning programme early.

Partners discussed possible strategies to improve the situation and buoyed by the success of a 12-week trial programme (Gateshead September 2016) in which improvements in punctuality, attendance, confidence and self-esteem were noted, they settled upon exploring the effects of embedding mindfulness techniques into their programmes.

### Approach and methodology

The project team selected 9 staff keen to explore the benefits of mindfulness and gave them the opportunity to attend extensive professional development sessions which would extend beyond the lifespan of the project. This training included:

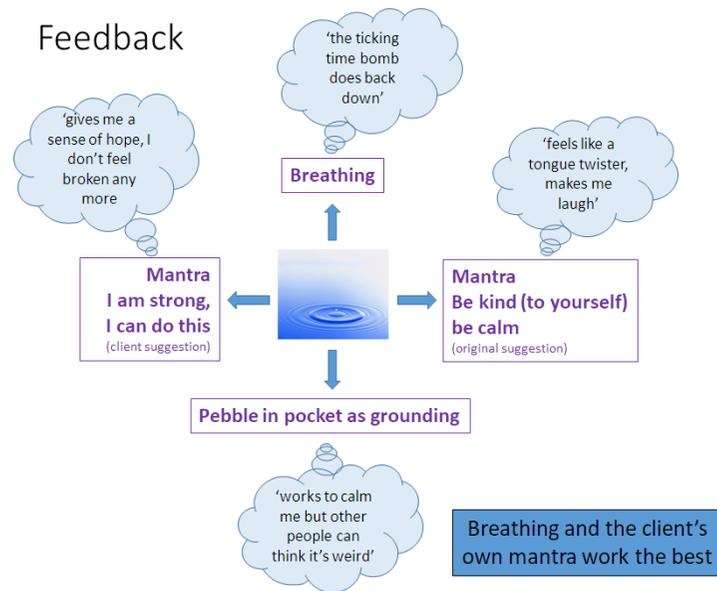
- A 16 hr Living Mindfully programme
- A 6-month Mindfulness Practitioner Support Programme and Personal Practice
- A 3-day, 24 hour Living Mindfully in Education Programme.

This training helped to inform the design of the 'mini-interventions' which ranged from techniques, to improve attendance, reduce college anxiety, defuse aggressive behaviour and bolster self-esteem, build confidence, use meditation to reduce stress, solution focussed therapy to create positive futures, etc. Staff explored a variety of approaches and then ...



Using circles to explore attendance issues with a learner

reflected on their usefulness with their learners and colleagues in a variety of ways.



Slide sharing a learner's view of strategies used to defuse aggressive responses

## Professional Learning: Evidence of changes in teaching, learning and assessment practices

Case studies reflecting upon the impact of each of the interventions are included in the appendices of the project report. Although the full impact of the project is yet to be realised the following has been noted.

- Tutors use a variety of techniques to assess learners' 'readiness to learn' and make adjustments to their planning to reflect this.
- Strategies to relax and reinforce the tutor/ learner relationship have resulted in more mature learner behaviour and improved classroom management.
- The organisation and content of sessions has become more learner centred and responsive to learner needs e.g. Access to classrooms 2 hrs before to catch up/revise resulting in lower anxiety levels for learners.
- Marking policy adjusted to allow more time for quality feedback.

Substantial impact on the health and well-being of tutors has been noted since the techniques have been adopted. This in turn has impacted upon the well-being of learners as staff have been able to confidently share techniques that have worked for them e.g. using breathing exercises to regain composure when stress levels increase, change mood, using the 'home base' and a body scan as a means of distraction when distressed or angry.

## Evidence of improved collaboration and changes in organisational practices

Through the project we have worked with a range of sub-contractors and services which has resulted in a more joined up approach, more accurate referrals and the acquisition of some simple but effective counselling skills for discussing concerns with learners which we can now implement.

The project has also resulted in a number of changes to organisational practice. A roll-on-roll-off programme for all new learners to be introduced to mindfulness on a one to one basis prior to joining the classes, has been rolled out. This prepares the learners for the meditation they complete within the sessions.

Similarly, a mindfulness curriculum, a designated team of mindfulness practitioners to be used for early intervention with staff and learners, the opportunity for staff to practise mindfulness and other similar programmes such as yoga and meditation have been introduced since starting the project. Learners have clearly benefitted from the techniques, with some asking for and being granted the chance to practise mindfulness independently within the centre.

### Evidence of improvement in learners' achievements, retention and progression

Although there have been extensive improvements to quality procedures, there is also strong evidence to suggest that mindfulness has contributed to improved performance at Gateshead learningSkills.

Measure	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18 (Predicted)
Study Programme and Traineeship Attendance	39.94%	72.4%	75.2%
Study Programme and Traineeship Attendance on English and Maths	14%	74.3%	75.6%
Success Rate	70%	72.5%	72.9%
Retention Rate	76.3%	79.7%	81.2%

### Learning from this project

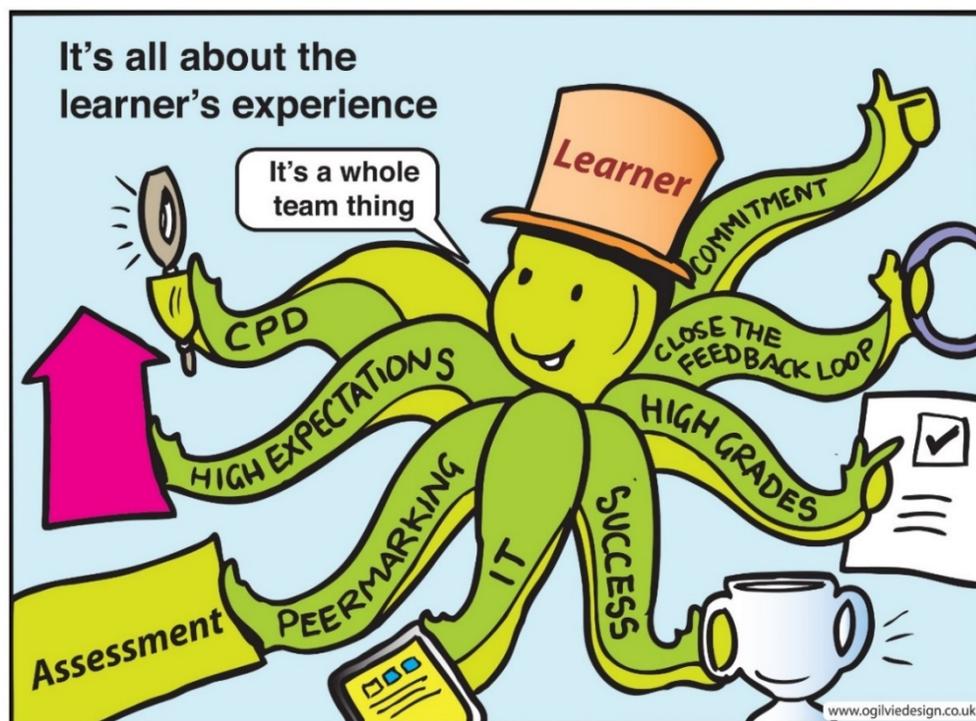
Although early days, findings indicate that many of the strategies have potential, with both practitioners and learners identifying improvements. The project provides examples of learners successfully adopting mindfulness to deal with ongoing stress and anxiety, enabling them to continue with their learning, others to overcome short term anxiety when facing exams, difficult tasks or challenging learner behaviour etc

Practitioners also feel they have benefitted from time to reflect on their teaching and believe that they can become better teachers, counsellors and support workers through practising mindfulness. They deal better with stressful situations and can manage their anxieties more effectively, while some feel more able to cope with challenges in the classroom and are more aware of how to reduce learner's anxiety levels.

*N.B. If considering taking up some of the training described, it is important to 'be mindful', do everything in stages, not impose unrealistic time constraints on yourselves and realise that events are often out of your control.*

## 4.3. Developing an action research-based model for College-wide Professional Development

### Bishop Auckland College, SWD Training and Bishop Auckland Community Learning



#### Summary

This “umbrella” action research project encouraged 21 staff across three sites and nine vocational and subject areas to trial improvements to their classroom and workshop practices.

Staff identified personal improvement priorities and then collaborated in Action Learning Sets in implementing and evaluating change.

The project was designed to support groups of teachers to regularly meet and share practitioner research outcomes as the foundation for a culture of organisational improvement.

Applying the model used within the initial project, the extension project enabled 11 LSAs and 2 teachers to engage in an action research CPD model. Researching resources, strategies and activities to best meet the individual needs of young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.

#### Rationale for the project

Prior to the project, a significant number of recently-qualified teachers did not register for QTLS following achievement of their DET (PG/Cert Ed programmes) and were not building on the significant personal progress realised through their initial teaching qualifications.

Local institutional research (Mattinson, 2018) indicated that some staff did not use generic CPD (Scales, 2012) to actively address issues that they identified as personal priorities. Through this project, both new and established staff engaged in a college-wide transformational approach to improvement.

LSAs of higher needs learners were not expected or given the opportunity to engage in the CPD model of the host institution. Given the highly effective work carried out by 2 LSAs during the initial phase of the research, it was imperative that LSAs were given comparable CPD to ensure they continually improve the support offered to their learners.

#### Approach and Methodology

An Advanced Practitioner organised a series of six sessions during the Summer and Autumn terms in which 21 staff from 9 areas identified areas of common interest, and Action Learning Sets were formed around four themes – use of ICT; peer assessment; encouraging learners’ planning to achieve success criteria and raising expectations.

Recently-qualified teachers drew upon personal development points from their DET to inform their chosen “change activities”, whilst experienced teachers reflected upon feedback from supportive walk-through observations. The teams of participants met at fortnightly intervals to plan and evaluate progress through their action research activities and were also supported through regional OTLA CPD and research-writing events. The extension project followed a comparable model of delivery to that within the initial project. The LSAs initially shared their concerns regarding the support they were offering to groups and individual learners; working in triads they each identified resources, strategies and activities to meet the needs of individual learners. The project lead and project mentor meet every three weeks and additional support was offered during lunch time “drop in” meetings.

### **Professional learning: Evidence of changes in teaching, learning and assessment practices.**

The 21 participants from FE College, community learning and training backgrounds critically compared new strategies and approaches to uses of ICT, peer-assessment, setting high expectations and recording learners’ planning activities. Narratives of their professional learning and changes in practice are detailed in the reports of individual and collaborative research.

Documentary evidence can also be found in revised lesson planning and Schemes of Work; re-designed resources together with evidence of learners’ planning, work and learners’ achievement outcomes; minutes from CPD and departmental meetings, departmental SARs for 2016-2017, and attendance and contributions to OTLA CPD events. Key changes included:

- vocational practitioners from five areas developed student-centred strategies and resources to promote learner mastery of the assessment process;
- teachers using ICT to improve learners’ proactive engagement with British Values;
- learners confidently addressing their British Values’ responsibilities.

21 participants contributed to 12 reports. Practitioners systematically evidenced their developing research practice by providing samples of revised

documents, together with targeted plans to “roll-out” their initiatives for both lower and higher-level learners.

The extension project saw 11 LSAs and 2 teachers planning, implementing and evaluating resources, strategies and activities to meet the individual needs of learners against their Educational Health Care Plans (EHCP) and Vocational qualifications in a supportive environment that was all-embracing in an action research based CPD model. LSAs and teachers were able to reflect critically on their practice to ensure sustained improvements were evident. Evidence of “before and after” EHCPs are available

### **Evidence of improved collaboration and changes in organisational practices**

Vocational specialists from across the organisation planned, implemented and evaluated practical improvements which were being tested and validated in their colleagues’ classrooms and workshops. Most importantly for organisational development, the separate practitioners’ initiatives were supportively evaluated in the regular twilight CPD sessions which provided a forum for new and experienced teachers to explore fresh thinking and evaluate proposed practical solutions to use in their classrooms.

Following this OTLA pilot, College management has noted the transformational impact on the culture of this collaboration and introduced the following enhancements to CPD:

- A revised CPD model has been “rolled out” across the college based upon the practitioner-led research evidenced in the OTLA project.
- There will be an annual bursary to support 6 teachers towards completion of QTLS.

The extension project has given the LSAs a sense of worth, permission to engage in researching their own practice to meet the individual needs of the learners and helped build trusting, professional relationships between themselves and the teachers.

One LSA applied for the Initial Teacher Education Programme inspired and enthused by the research she has carried out for this project.

## Evidence of improvement in learners' achievements, retention and progression.

Across all projects, teachers have gathered evidence of "distance-travelled" in improved learner outcomes, through measurable performance in sample assignments and assessed activities, and through observed changes in learner engagement, with learners' records demonstrating engagement with purposeful feedback on their performances.

100% of Level 3 BTEC IT students improved grades from Merit to Distinction in a pilot study trialling the use of exemplar assignments.

Level 1 and 2 learners demonstrated improved self-efficacy in these projects which has increased their participation in workshops and classrooms. These innovative self- and peer-assessment activities have resulted in more rapid independent skill development.

One identifiable benefit and validation of the self-and peer-assessment "change activities" has been the practitioners' roll-out of successful approaches to the most challenging classes, thus engaging and motivating learners who might not have been expected to take this level of responsibility for their learning.

The extension project has seen one young person develop their fine manipulative skills and write their name correctly for the first time without adult support. Another learner has developed their independence and is now consistently using the toilet as a result of a request and reward chart.

After experimenting with various techniques, one LSA supported an adult learner to write her name for the first time in her life.

Two LSAs designed a "request and reward" chart to enable a learner to develop independence in managing toileting.

## Learning from this project

Effective CPD was based upon a commitment from the organisation at all levels, and a supportive rhythm of activities (meetings based around research processes) ensured that individual interest was sustained into action. External specialist input was designed into the CPD programme, and changes were driven by interests and contextualised in published research.

Several characteristics from this practitioner-focused project may have wider significance for the FE sector:

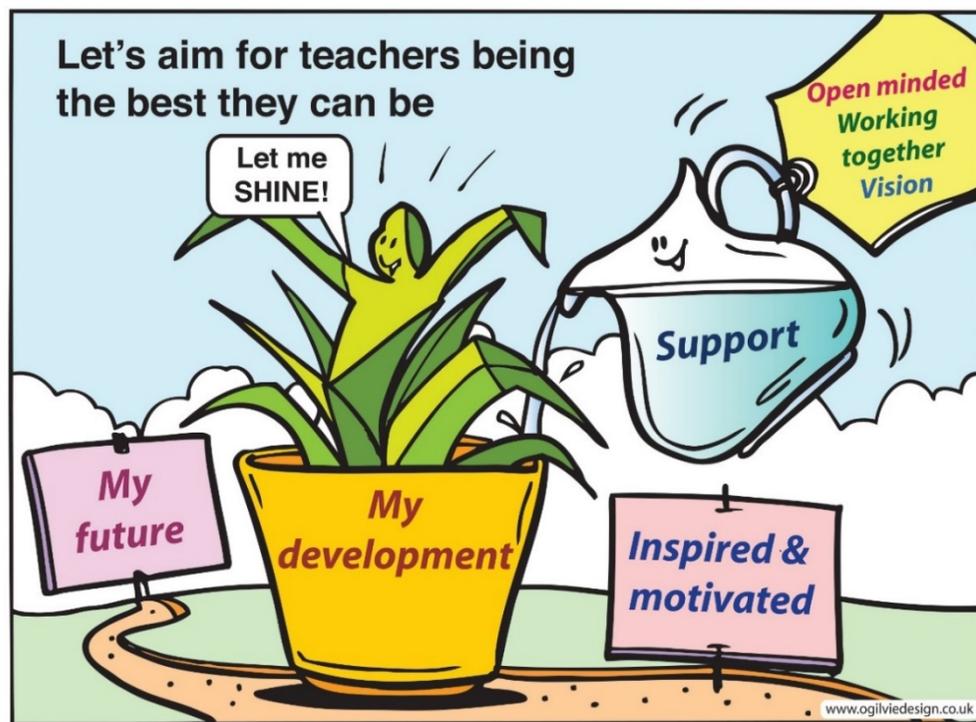
- The project was led by a teacher-educator (confident with both teaching strategies and inspection requirements) who enjoyed a working knowledge of teachers' practice from supportive observation.
- Vocational trainers were guided through the practitioner research process towards a one-side report detailing aims, 'change activities', findings, and evidence from the activity leading to 'next steps'. They were supported through the writing process when relevant research evidence was discussed.
- Staff across different areas collaborated effectively (usually supported by a peer from their specialism). Subject-specialist approaches were collaboratively developed from generic good practice.

## Extension project

- LSAs need to be reassured that their work is invaluable to the teacher and the learners they support.
- LSAs need access to meaningful CPD that complements their role within the classroom and college setting.
- LSAs working with higher needs learner must be given the permission and time to research their practice and support in sharing the findings widely across the college, as the work is transferrable to mainstream learners and the LSAs who support.
- As the image on the first page of this research illustrates, it really is a "whole team thing": without the work and support of the LSAs the role of teaching higher needs learners would be much less effective.

## 4.4. Collaborative approaches to support construction apprenticeship trainers to develop their teaching skills

**Tyne Metropolitan College, East Durham College, Stockton Riverside College and Maersk Training**



### Summary

This project was initiated at a College whose Apprenticeship Construction Training experienced very high turnover of trainers, leading to new trainers experiencing significant immediate teaching challenges. The project leader engaged two other colleges to explore approaches for developing new trainers' more confident use of responsive, student-centred strategies. The project then focused on helping an additional independent training provider to adopt more active learning.

### Rationale for the project

Construction trainers are typically employed for their industrial skills and knowledge and new trainers are not expected to have teaching experience. There are challenges of 'learning on the job' and being immediately expected to teach learners where some learners may have low levels of maths and English skills, in groups of very mixed abilities (sometimes working towards different levels of qualifications). This has led to high trainer turnover, which then impacts upon student attendance, retention and progression. This project encouraged new Construction trainers to adopt peer-review and "lesson study" approaches to spread good practice and develop trainers' confidence to adopt more active learning.

### Approach and Methodology

As there were variations in the four training contexts being researched, each centre developed and shared a different approach. College A focused on developing trainers' awareness of differentiation needs and responses, and in weekly meetings the new trainers were encouraged to share strategies which they had developed to inspire "hard to reach" learners. The trainers were then encouraged to observe a peer who was using this strategy, guided by a modified Lesson Study proforma. College B focused upon the development of English and maths within the trainers' specialism, and the teacher-educator linked this focus to their in-service teacher-training assignments. At College C, two trainers worked closely with the teacher-educator as mentor to explore how trainers might differentiate effectively in Construction sessions. All the teacher-educators agreed to tailor their approach to the expressed needs of the trainers (building on the responses of their own students). In the extension project, the project lead and a lead instructor collaboratively designed an activity to make it more student-centred whilst also generating evidence to address multiple assessment criteria. This was

then evaluated in use and the resources and results were shared by the project lead with other instructors on an individual basis. The combination of peer investigation supported by teacher expertise was intended to help trainers to take confidence from adopting “what works best” for fellow practitioners.

### **Professional learning: Evidence of changes in teaching, learning and assessment practices.**

Trainers from both phases of the project appreciated the focus on practical experimentation. Trainers from the three centres met at College A for a research and development day where they shared and exchanged experiences. Trainers at College B realised the benefits of the collaborative research element of their teacher training programme as their teacher educator’s focus helped them appreciate their learners’ barriers. This was reinforced in College C where each trainer drew on sustained support to refine dedicated strategies and resources. In the training provider, instructors were supported to progress from teacher-led Power-point presentations and direct instruction, and to begin designing students’ problem-solving activities based on labelling exercises.

### **Evidence of improved collaboration and changes in organisational practices**

At College A, where regular scheduled meetings were held, the group of 11 trainers exchanged resources which they had designed and discussed strategies to adapt them more closely into their practice context. At College B, new trainers used their teacher-education class as an opportunity to open their research findings to teachers and trainers from their own college and other local providers. The trainers from College C found they were frequently redeployed to cover different classes at short notice; the sustained support from the teacher-educator provided stability in retaining their focus both on “what works” and “why it works”. At the ITP, the Project leader used her role as Internal Quality Assessor to promote changes that enabled more student-led assessment activities which she consolidated through joint development activities with the participating tutors.

### **Evidence of improvement in learners’ achievements, retention and progression.**

Trainers on all strands of the project provided evidence of their learners making more assured progress in Construction activities and related theory as a consequence of trainers’ more informed strategies and resources. At all centres both trainers’ reports and teacher-educators’ observations indicate that a wider range of learners were being engaged and challenged using the shared resources. There is evidence from trainers’ lesson plans and trainees’ workbooks that both lower and higher-achieving students’ needs are being meaningfully addressed through more confident use of resources. Trainers are increasingly investigating the reasons for their learners’ disadvantages. At the ITP, the high success rates have been sustained and both trainers and learners record improved satisfaction and better working understanding of concepts where student-centred assessments have been introduced (July 2018).

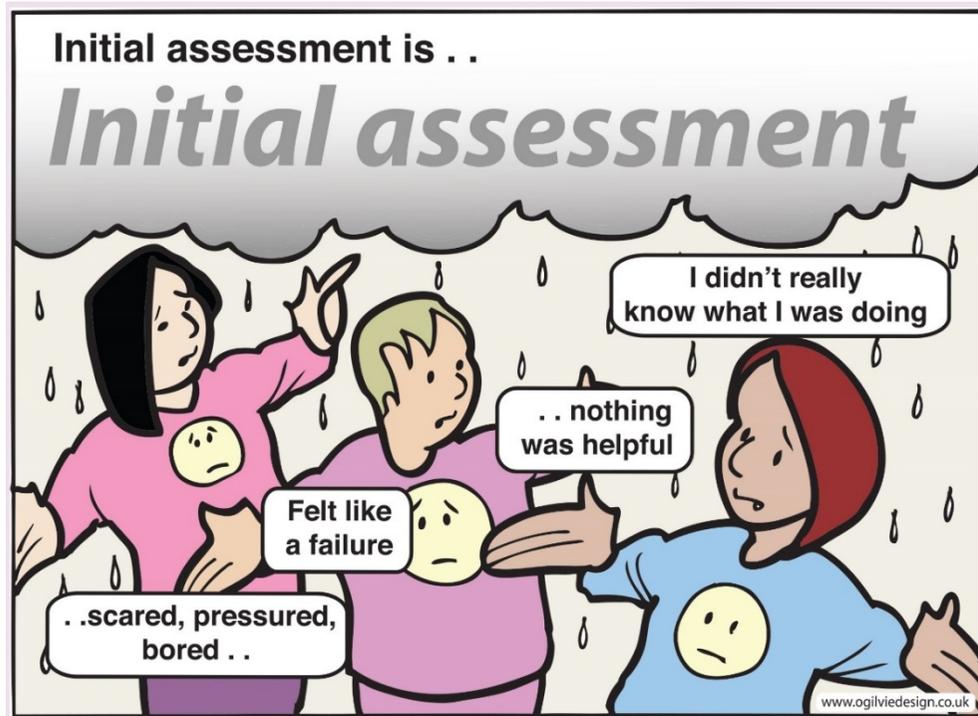
### **Learning from this project**

- Because Construction is a shortage skill, there were significant frustrations in attempting to get appropriate cover for trainers to attend any developments in timetabled teaching time. Almost all contact with the trainers had to be scheduled in twilight and evening sessions.
- Trainees’ commitment to the project and the prioritising of the sustained gathering of data was more evident when it was integrated into a formal procedure such as a teacher-training qualification or programme quality assurance process. Trainers appreciated seeing the practical relevance of any research and development activities.
- The practical sessions investigating strategies and resources prompted several trainers to develop an interest in following-up the underlying causes of learners’ difficulties with the subject matter; this suggests that the trainers were securing a professional identity as teachers.
- Retention of Construction staff remained an issue across the project. Although there is evidence that those who remained were providing an enhanced provision for their learners, at College A, of the 8 trainers who began the programme, 4 had left by the next academic year.

- Collaborative activity needed to be organised creatively to be effective. Where scheduling for collaborative meetings could not be achieved, the project leader worked one by one with individual trainers to introduce more active assessment approaches. The project leader had developed the new strategies together with an experienced instructor, and this link gave the new approach credibility with the other Construction practitioners in the department. The project leader's subsequent individual meetings with trainers meant that she could address individuals' concerns in their particular training context. The sharing of good practice represented "linked collaboration" rather than group collaboration.
- Organisational culture is all important. Despite having achieved CET teaching qualifications, trainers in an ITP found it difficult to initiate student-centred learning activities where other colleagues' practices, and the organisation's teaching resources, invited more instructor-led styles of delivery. The project leader, in her role as Internal Quality Assurer, achieved some limited success in effecting change by simplifying assessment procedures, thus giving trainers permission to change "the way things are done here".
- Construction departments can prioritise content-knowledge CPD events over trainers' teaching development needs. Trainers' pedagogical competence was often regarded as a completed experience if they had achieved the CET award, whereas subject-updating was more likely to be acknowledged as an ongoing CPD need.

## 4.5. Initial and Diagnostic Assessment: effective approaches for adult and community learning.

### South Tyneside Council, Community First North East and AutismAble



#### Summary

South Tyneside Council brought together community-based partners commissioned to provide education and training by the Business, Employment and Skills (BES) service of the council to undertake an evaluation of their current initial and diagnostic assessment tools and approaches. The project team analysed and evaluated initial and diagnostic assessment processes, which they had identified were not working effectively, with the aim of developing processes tailored to the needs of the individual, as opposed to a comprehensive and standardised approach for all South Tyneside Council service providers.

#### Rationale for the project

A report (Ofsted, 2011) stated that 'the initial assessment of learners'... skills was no better than satisfactory in 19 of the 35 providers of full-time vocational provision visited. The weaker providers either did not assess all their learners effectively, or tutors did not use the results of the assessments in sufficient detail to plan learning.' The South Tyneside Council project team were concerned that the situation had not improved since 2011 and partners reported that the assessment practices they were contracted to carry out by the council were leading to disengagement in learning.

Local quality assurance work also indicated that many learners were not being effectively assessed in order to sufficiently plan learning. The project, therefore, aimed to improve the quality and consistency of initial and diagnostic assessments made by BES-commissioned providers. It was hoped that this would lead to more effective personalised learning, better outcomes and a more positive learning experience for students.

#### Approach and Methodology

All teaching and support staff from the two community partners were involved in the project, with their management teams working closely with the council's BES manager to coordinate and validate project activities. Providers participated in a self-assessment and peer review of their current practice against national effective practice guidelines (EPGs) for assessment and tracking (Education and Training Foundation, 2017), as well as research with learners about the impact of assessment practices on them.

Providers used six focus groups with different groups of young people and adult learners. The results were distilled into an impact document which evidenced particularly the mostly negative effects of the process; e.g. re-enforcing a sense of failure, 'it's a test', etc. Staff additionally attended a CPD

event focussing on the EPGs and completed their own 'exit ticket'. This event made staff particularly aware of EPG 7 (assess for self-belief and motivation) which has subsequently been incorporated into provider processes.

The two providers and staff met regularly to share good practice for the benefit of learners. Centre managers for the two providers have promoted their research and outcomes at local training provider network meetings. Each provider is now implementing changes to their process which will be in turn subject to practitioner and peer review.

### **Professional learning: Evidence of changes in teaching, learning and assessment practices.**

Organisational changes are now being piloted that will enable practitioners to better understand the starting points of learners. These changes will support the creation of an inclusive culture which enables all learners to fully participate in the learning process and achieve their full potential.

From the starting point of considering initial and diagnostic assessment, the project team members soon learned that they needed to focus on the impact of the process of assessment on learners. In addition, they needed to make better use of assessment outcomes, particularly within the embedding of maths and English in vocational subjects (Hunter & Brown, 2018).

### **Evidence of improved collaboration and changes in organisational practices**

Providers are now in the process of implementing changes which include much wider assessment of the learner as a whole e.g. their emotional and social needs and mind sets. Such factors influence the way feedback is best given to individual learners, their group skills development and how these will be transferred to work. This information is contained with detailed group profiles. Through the widening of assessment, learners have much more individualised targets, linked to all aspects of themselves, not just their academic goals.

As a result of lesson study ideas introduced by the OTLA team, alongside action research approaches, project team members are now involved in peer observations in a more structured way.

Tutor reviews/appraisals in the first term of the project were based fully around the 2014 Professional Standards self-assessment questionnaire introduced by the OTLA team. This then informed the action plan for all tutors. Due to raised awareness of these standards, all tutors identified keeping up to date with research as an area they all realised they needed to develop. The group is now considering how to manage its future, particularly in relation to reflective practice and how to ensure sustainability of further shared research. Providers have indicated support for the development of a wider Community of Practice for South Tyneside. This includes, participation in the regional Professional Exchange networks and embedding the use of the 2014 professional standards in their own quality assurance procedures.

### **Evidence of improvement in learners' engagement and progression.**

556 learners were directly involved and have benefitted from the project through the three project partners, with over 5000 more learners, from across South Tyneside Council commissioned partners, potentially benefitting from changes to assessment processes.

Improvements include; one provider introducing Growth Mindset training to the curriculum and another evening and daytime drop-in sessions to ensure that adult learners can be assessed fully and sensitively in accordance with their revised procedures. Both of these changes are directly benefitting learners.

### **Learning from this project**

- Staff have significantly improved their own knowledge and understanding of initial and diagnostic assessment and where it fits into the continuum of assessment for learning.
- Providers have developed their own 'professional exchange' within and outside this project,
- Practitioners have developed their practice when measured against the Professional Standards.
- The project team hopes that their collaboration will lead to a more sustainable approach and the development of a wider Community of Practice for the benefit of all South Tyneside learners.

## Ongoing impact of the project

Community First North East has continued to evolve its processes for initial and diagnostic assessment, with input derived from tutors and learners.

New focus groups have been carried out with adults and young people, using the same action research methodology that was used for initial findings. The feelings outlined earlier in this summary ('it's a test', 'scared', 'pressured', 'bored', 'I failed it for 5 years, so why do more of it') have been replaced by more positive learner statements, including:

- Easy to join/friendly
- Course explained well
- Calm environment
- Approachable staff
- Worried before but fine once got started
- Supported
- Put at ease
- Expected it to be like school but it was more relaxed
- I didn't really know I was being assessed at the time (commonly expressed)

A Good Practice Guide has been developed which covers:

- What do we want to know from initial assessment?
- How the information can be used
- Who needs to know the outcomes of the initial assessment?
- What needs to be taken into account when carrying out initial assessments
- What are the organizational and management issues?

CFNE plans to continue the reflective practice into the next academic year, involving both tutors and learners in evaluating the initial and diagnostic assessment processes to determine the extent of continued and sustained improvements.

CFNE Good Practice Guidelines will be used and disseminated by South Tyneside Council at all Tutor Induction sessions from August 2018. It is

anticipated that over 100 tutors from up to 30 training providers will attend these sessions.

AutismAble has continued to refine its processes for supporting those learners with autism. A comprehensive and outstanding Baseline Assessment has been developed which is learner-centred and establishes the starting points of learners in fine detail. This enables the provider to accurately measure distance travelled whilst in learning, along with the achievement of regulated and non-regulated goals. Devised in partnership with an autism specialist consultant, the document is presented so that learners can complete it as independently as possible. Sections include:

### Views, aspirations and interests

**Educational needs** – includes communication and interaction, cognition and learning, independence, daily living and self-help, employability and vocational skills, social and emotional skills, including mental health.

### Sensory and physical needs

### Health care and social needs

This in-depth assessment is used to inform the type of regulated and non-regulated programmes suitable for the learner.

## Additional impact and outcomes

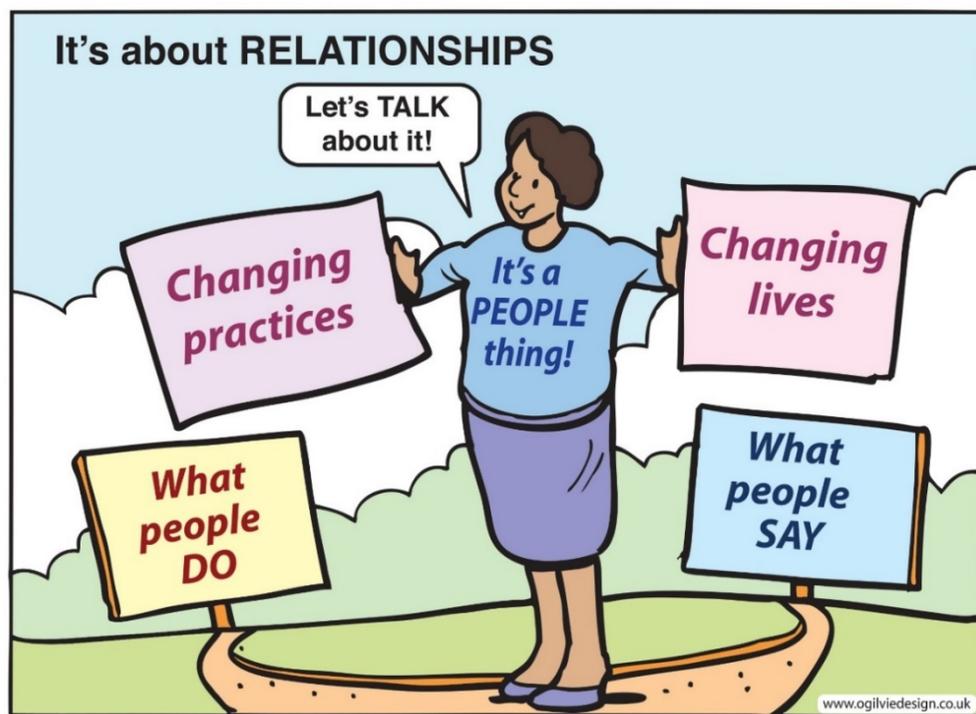
Both training providers have continued to work together on other initiatives. For example, both are involved in the ETF supported digital OTLA project and working towards developing a digital community of practice.

Working collaboratively has also led both providers to develop an ESF-funded project. Titled 'REACH', it is an inclusion programme designed for those over 18s who are more difficult to reach and engage.

It is an intensive programme that focuses on individual needs, including beliefs, values and emotions. They will work with other key professionals and local employers. Their development of high quality initial and diagnostic assessment processes will be utilised on this project.

## 4.6. Breaking the cycle: making a fresh start

### Newcastle College and Community First North East



#### Summary

This project was originally designed to encourage collaboration and research among practitioners working in alternative education, however, initial findings soon flagged its potential for most programmes targeting 16-19 year olds. It provided a cost-effective opportunity to explore the ingredients needed to create truly 'alternative' education programmes divorced from negative past experience and designed to focus on securing the skills and qualifications needed to prepare learners for further study and secure employment.

The project addressed 3 questions considered key to providing a successful fresh start and to ensure that we encourage our learners to take their next steps with the confidence, independence and resilience to succeed.

1. What do we need to know about these learners before they start on programme?
2. How does the 'alternative' curriculum need to differ to engage and prepare learners for progression?
3. What TLA strategies work well with these learners?

#### Rationale for the project

Self-assessment reviews identified that attendance, behaviour, and retention were causing concern on some programmes. Partners were keen to explore why this was happening and what could be done to improve the situation.

#### Approach and Methodology

A mixed methodology approach which included learner focus groups, staff surveys, desk-based review, teaching experiments and peer observation was used to explore the three areas identified. Progress was reported against these areas and resulted in the development of a learner profile and guidance, an induction curriculum based on findings from the project and reflections on TLA resources and strategies used to overcome skills gaps all of which was collated on a Padlet site to be shared.

#### Professional learning: Evidence of changes in teaching, learning and assessment practices.

Staff were able to shape project objectives following a review of recent academic research, government surveys, reports etc, reflecting on their own practice and the effectiveness of existing organisational procedures. This resulted in the collaborative development of a generic learner profile template and guidance document identifying the information /process needed to

facilitate the induction of learners and the exploration of Growth Mindset assessments with one partner in particular.

A variety of learner focus groups highlighted possible reasons for learners struggling to stay on programme which subsequently informed the development of an induction curriculum. Teaching experiments and peer observations were used to explore strategies to be incorporated in the curriculum. These involved a range of different approaches including digital technologies, scaffolded learning techniques and collaborative learning all of which were designed to encourage confidence and support independence.

The lesson experiments conducted by Improvement Practitioners and the reciprocal peer observations conducted in the first phase of the project impacted explicitly on both practitioner and organisational practices. An experiment with a maths group, for example, focussed on ways of improving the learners' attitudes to tackling new maths concepts and increasing their motivation to persevere when gaps in their previous knowledge cause them to give up. The experiment looked at the effect that learner support vs scaffolded tasks had on learner motivation. The findings which identified learners' dependence on support staff for motivation resonated with the project team and has resulted in changes to the induction curriculum and has prompted more research into the effective use of support staff, a very valuable but diminishing resource.

### **Evidence of improved collaboration and changes in organisational practices**

Adopting a bottom up research methodology firmly grounded in what the learner thinks and needs has resulted in greater collaboration between learner, support staff and tutors. This has impacted on the development of curriculum content, organisational practices e.g. IAG/ recruitment, and the identification of staff development needs e.g. embedding the development of character skills into the curriculum.

The project extension has improved collaboration within and between schools, with Improvement Practitioners acting as conduits for sharing ideas and project findings through project meetings and through the observation process. Experiments have been valued highly by staff as they feel that they have made it easier to understand individual learners *'...especially those who had behavioural issues, to try to understand at what point they became distracted.'* and have relished the chance to *'use new techniques & methodologies and be observed in a non-judgemental environment.'*

### **Evidence of improvement in learners' achievements, retention and progression.**

Despite the fact that the profile and curriculum is not due to roll out until 2018/19 we were able to capture some evidence of how the project has impacted on either those directly influenced by the research process or those affected by the engagement of their tutors in the project. Attendance on these programmes has improved by 5% and performs well compared with vocational attendance. Retention has risen by 3% with a further 3% predicted rise in achievement. Behavioural issues also appear to have benefitted from the project with a reduction in the need for stage 3 disciplinaries.

Similarly, strategies to promote more collaborative working methods demonstrate improvements in learners' confidence, ability to think of ideas, share opinions etc *'Group work skills have improved. She readily asks questions but is still learning how to keep these to the point and focussed and also has a target of pausing to think before responding to others.'*

Improvement Practitioner observations and peer observation feedback have shown that learners are responding well to more responsibility, peer marking, scaffolded tasks etc and these approaches are being taken up by other members of the team

*"Since observing X, I have already used her idea with an elementary class."*

## Learning from this project

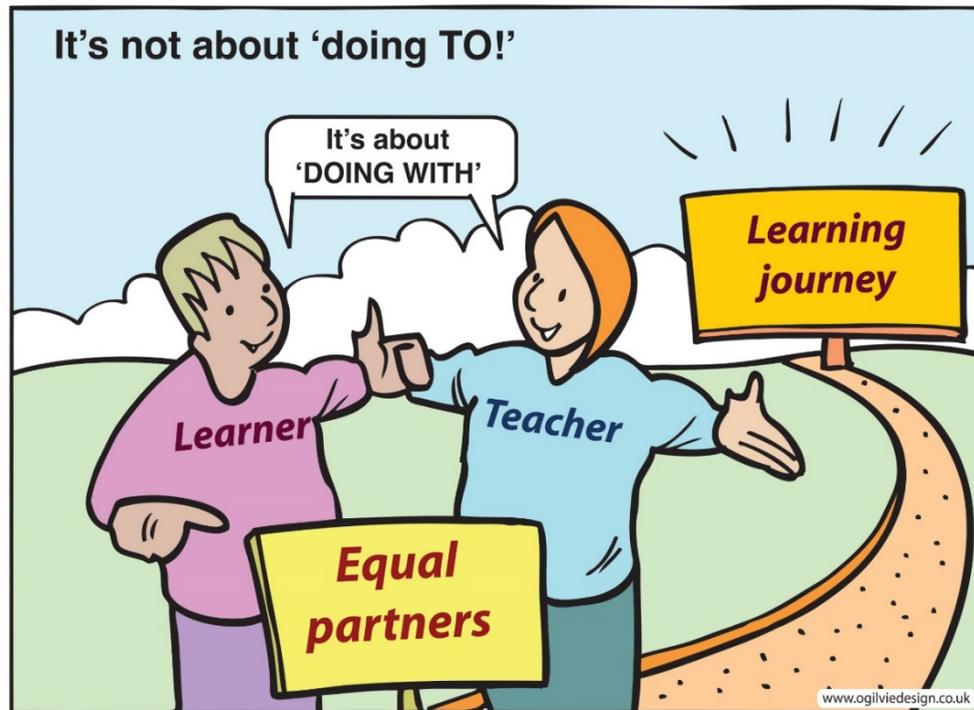
The significance of learners' past experience cannot be underestimated. It is essential that we provide every opportunity for learners to develop the skills and confidence needed to make a successful 'fresh start' in order to access further study and/or employment.

We found that:

- Learner profiles must be more than administrative exercises. They can open dialogues, personalise learning, make programmes more relevant and help anxious learners settle in.
- Curriculum content needs to reflect the interests and needs of all learners. Focussing on the intrapersonal skills needed to deal with feedback, time management etc; the interpersonal skills needed to work in teams, listen, share ideas etc; and the skills of enquiry, all of which are often underdeveloped.
- The usefulness of every learning activity needs to be maximised so that every opportunity is taken to develop skills further. These need to be recognised in the learning scheme (SoW) and any assessment of learning.
- The project grew organically from the first learner focus groups and an inductive approach was adopted to ensure that everyone had a voice in shaping the direction of the project and took ownership of decisions. This approach has increased the momentum for change, resulting in more peer observations/ experimentation, a new induction curriculum and continued collaboration.

## 4.7. Step Forward: Closing the feedback loop through learner-generated targets.

### South Tyneside College and Tyne Metropolitan College



#### Summary

This project details how merging partners, South Tyneside College and Tyne Metropolitan College, sought progressive approaches to prompt adult GCSE and Access students to make more effective use of feedback leading to them setting their own short-term targets and giving them control over their learning.

The development of feed forward templates emerged as a positive development, and staff experimented with redesigning the paperwork, and then evaluating their uses in different contexts (as homework or as classwork with tutorial support available).

#### Rationale for the project

Project group members agreed that within their community of practice, learners do not consistently act on their written feedback. The project aimed to enhance learners' scholarly skills and prepare them more fully for employment or studying at a higher level.

Both partners were interested in effectively closing the feedback loop to create meaningful stretch targets for learners in the Maths and English context. Since learners enrol with a variety of academic starting points, the project group expected that closing the feedback loop and guiding learners to meaningful, self-generated targets for maths and English would constitute a meaningful intervention.

#### Approach and Methodology

Initially, the project team members compared practices to identify common problems within their constituent organisations, then both staff and student surveys were used to clarify student experience and preferred feedback practices. Both project teams adopted an action research approach to planning, implementing then evaluating their experimental use of new feedback forms and approaches. Tyne Met staff experimented with using feedback and feed-forward sheets with a group of Access Pathways to Higher Education (APHE) learners. APHE was targeted for intervention as exemplifying community learning (Sharp, 2011).

Following 55 survey responses to the existing feedback forms, in stage 2, Tyne Met staff then gave students feed forward forms with their assignment feedback from the tutor. 78% of the students found the feed forward form useful. At South Tyneside College the project group focused on creating or amending feedback sheets so that adult learners were prompted to reflect on and the act on their feedback from teachers.

Initially, there was a focus on maths and English, then the potential for applying the feed forward system across curriculum areas became apparent and the development of the feed forward templates across the College became the primary concern of the group. Staff at South Tyneside College experimented with feed forward forms being completed in class with the tutor as a resource. All students' assignment work improved in this small-scale experiment.

### **Professional learning: Evidence of changes in teaching, learning and assessment practices.**

Staff across both centres used the results of the initial survey to design feed forward forms which would encourage learners at all levels to set their own goals. The action research approach enabled staff to revise their use of the forms with different learners and in different contexts. As part of sharing this revised feed-forward approach with colleagues, in August 2017 feedforward templates were distributed to 74 staff members from across the Professional and Vocational College in South Tyneside. Foundation and Supported Learning refined, adapted and redesigned the feed forward forms to meet learner needs; for some learners, the feed forward system was designed to be simpler and highly visual.

A staff survey overwhelmingly appreciated the potential to focus on specific issues with learners using these forms which were seen as giving learners greater direction and control over their subsequent learning.

### **Evidence of improved collaboration and changes in organisational practices**

The project demonstrated how staff on the project and across departments and institutions valued initiatives that had been shown to work within the institution. The structured project meetings provided a framework for sustained development along the principles of the project, although logistics meant that the partners concentrated upon their individual programmes.

Access teaching staff valued collaboratively researching assessment. Usually feedback only features in standardisation meetings following student assessment, but the Step Up project gave staff a chance to consider the importance of feedback as the route to improving student assessment.

### **Evidence of improvement in learners' achievements, retention and progression.**

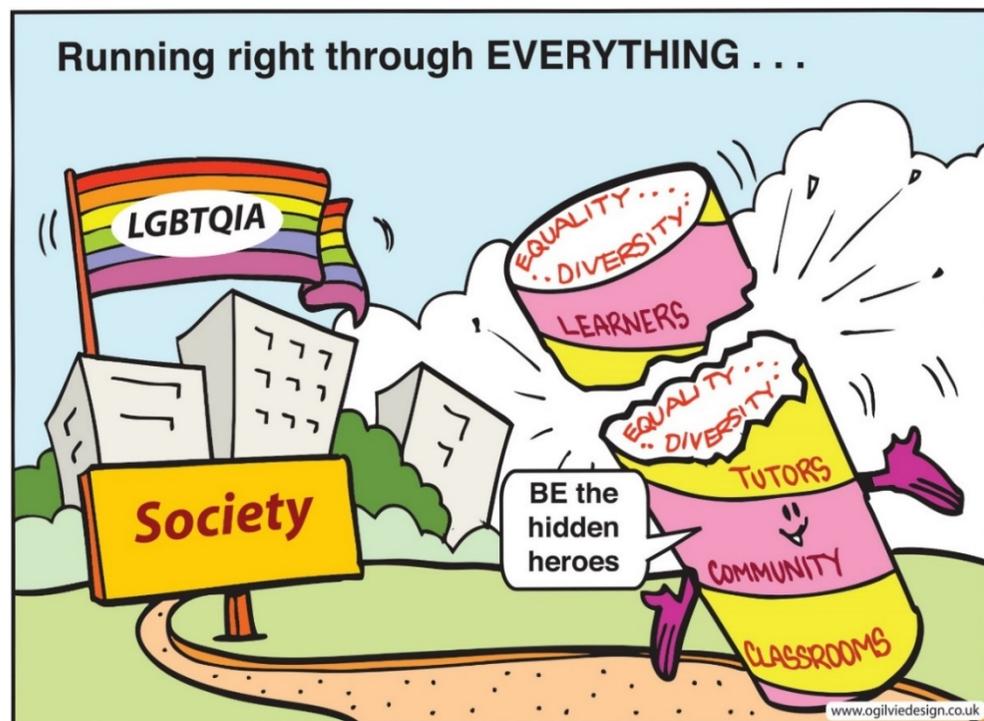
Learners from across level two and three provision were given the feedback forms to complete during their GCSE English classes and Access Social Science classes. 100% of learners improved their grade or score after completing the feed forward forms. Learners were observed synthesising material from comments in the margins of written work as well as the summative comments that appear alongside the grade. Across both colleges, 78% of the participants wrote that they found the feed-forward form useful as a prompt for goal-setting, for identifying areas of weakness, and for clarifying academic expectations. However, 22% of participants indicated that feed-forward forms would not enable them to confidently improve; many felt they still needed further tutorial guidance.

### **Learning from this project**

- Learners were most positive about feedback and feed-forward where tutors had intervened to demonstrate how improvements could be achieved, and this was specific, directive and manageable. Learners were negative about tutor comments which pointed to a weakness – e.g. inadequate proof-reading – followed by general reminders to apply themselves more diligently.
- Learners benefit from time to work on their feedback in class, when feedback is given and tutors are available to provide clarification and additional direction. This enables them to better address the challenge of knowing what they must do and how they might do it.
- Feedback and feed-forward forms make tutorial sessions more structured, focused and purposeful.
- Learners may benefit from getting feedback on their English skills through annotation on their work and from the feedback sheet through theory and illustration.
- Ongoing support is needed from tutors to ensure that feed-forward sheets become meaningful for individuals. When successfully used, positive learners' comments indicate their confidence about their academic ability and potential in the subject area, thus indicating it will contribute to establishing more positive mind-sets.

## 4.8. Empowering teaching and learning communities to promote equality and celebrate diversity

### Darlington Borough Council, Bishop Auckland College and South West Durham Training



#### Summary

A local authority community learning provider, a further education college and a local training provider shared common concerns about the limited confidence of staff when addressing equality and diversity (E&D) issues through their teaching, learning and assessment practices.

Leaders in each provider developed new ways of working (often building upon existing policies and structures) to enable staff to work in communities of shared practice, which had demonstrable influences on both their learners and their localities.

Key developments revolved around establishing opportunities for open dialogue and collaborative E&D practice. Forums such as Padlet and the creation of E&D "Toolbox Talks", also aided processes of shared practice and collaborative exploration. High profile CPD and community events were also utilised to help empower staff to confidently promote equality and celebrate diversity. As the project progressed, learners became more actively engaged in shaping E&D practices within each setting, as the project team spent focused time with learners, exploring their ideas for how E&D teaching, learning and assessment might better reflect learners' own concerns, experiences and gaps in knowledge.

#### Approach and Methodology

The core project team was headed by the local authority team lead and included twelve representatives across each institution.

The project aimed to use collaborative practice and high quality CPD to improve staff knowledge and skills so they felt better equipped to promote and celebrate E&D. The aspiration was that staff would feel more confident exploring E&D within their teaching, learning and assessment practices. It was also hoped that staff would feel better empowered to create space for meaningful dialogue, as well as respond effectively to prevailing issues as and when they arose.

The project research approach involved colleagues investigating their local practices and was initiated by a collaborative CPD event led by an experienced facilitator. This participative approach was consolidated by CPD activities that sought and valued learner contributions at all stages, as they were the ultimate recipients (and evaluators) of the project's effectiveness of raising staff confidence. Eight case studies illuminating the cycle of planning, implementation, individual and collaborative evaluation leading to wider adoption of approaches can be found in the full project report.

Improving staff confidence relied on a strong participative institutional ethos to create communities of practice; thus the process of Joinery students constructing signs for the FE College's Pride event was considered as important as their attendance at the event. "Toolbox talks" were designed as opportunities to foreground the discussion of fundamental issues in the Local Authority provision. As the project progressed, the 'Toolbox Talks' became increasingly informed by learners and by staff, with the project team facilitating, rather than determining their content.

The final phase of the project focused upon strengthening learner voice, as well as collecting staff narratives in relation to how their engagement in the project had affected both their confidence and ability to open up spaces of enquiry for E&D within their teaching, learning and assessment practices.

### **Professional learning: Evidence of changes in teaching, learning and assessment practices.**

There was high staff participation in pedagogic and research events, and these evaluated very positively. Changes in staff practice were evident in revised lesson plans, schemes of work and assignment briefs; staff and learner self-assessments of fresh approaches to E&D practice within their sessions; learner testimonies; and resources from local initiatives (annotated with staff and learner reflections).

Encouraging staff to 'try one thing and reflect upon it' led to a rich data set and generated a locally tested and validated bank of resources and reworked ideas for E&D teaching. Some staff reported reduced levels of fear to take risks and try new things as a result of the project's emphasis on supportive, collaborative practice and shared problem solving (Meaby, 2018).

### **Evidence of improved collaboration and changes in organisational practices**

Both the established FE College and the small local authority provider benefited from sustained exploration of their comparative approaches. Within both contexts, staff collaboration and opportunities for focused "teacher talk" proved the basis for organisational change. This was evidenced through the adoption of new practices across both organisations; through

contributions to the online shared spaces such as Padlet, and from staff testimonies which report on individuals' personal and professional growth.

Each setting had an existing 'enrichment calendar', or 'diversity diary', and the potential for these E&D topics to be brought to life through the project were explored by the project leads for each setting. Meaningful debate also took place about how "naturally-occurring" opportunities to promote E&D might be better exploited; with suggestions tested and constructively evaluated within the newly established communities of practice. This "re-centring" of E&D was a progression from previous tokenistic approaches where E&D was regarded as another "add-on" in sessions. Staff more confidently assumed responsibility for introducing topics into their teaching and as such the E&D "champion" in the Local Authority now operates more as a facilitator than a director of activity.

The cultures of both organisations have been influenced as E&D became more actively highlighted through organisation of flagship events, redesign of institutional logos to visually reinforce organisational commitment and active engagement on social media. Working more closely with organisational LGBTQ and SEND specialist groups ensured minority learner voices informed each settings' inclusive approaches.

### **Evidence of improvement in learners' achievements, retention and progression.**

There was evidence of learners experiencing a broader curriculum as redesigned assignments more explicitly explored E&D issues. Teachers also developed activities that supported learners' assessed and formative work. These practical outcomes are complemented by staff and learner testimonies in reflective diaries and online on message boards. Some staff reported learners' increased confidence to raise issues as a result of revised classroom activities, including the 'Toolbox Talks' sessions. Learners' participation in the design and running of E&D events, as well as their attendance, signifies the value of E&D contributory activities.

Some learners reported their increased input into the nature and scope of E&D practices within their settings helped their E&D work feel more relevant, engaging and accessible. Learners were also keen to share the more implicit

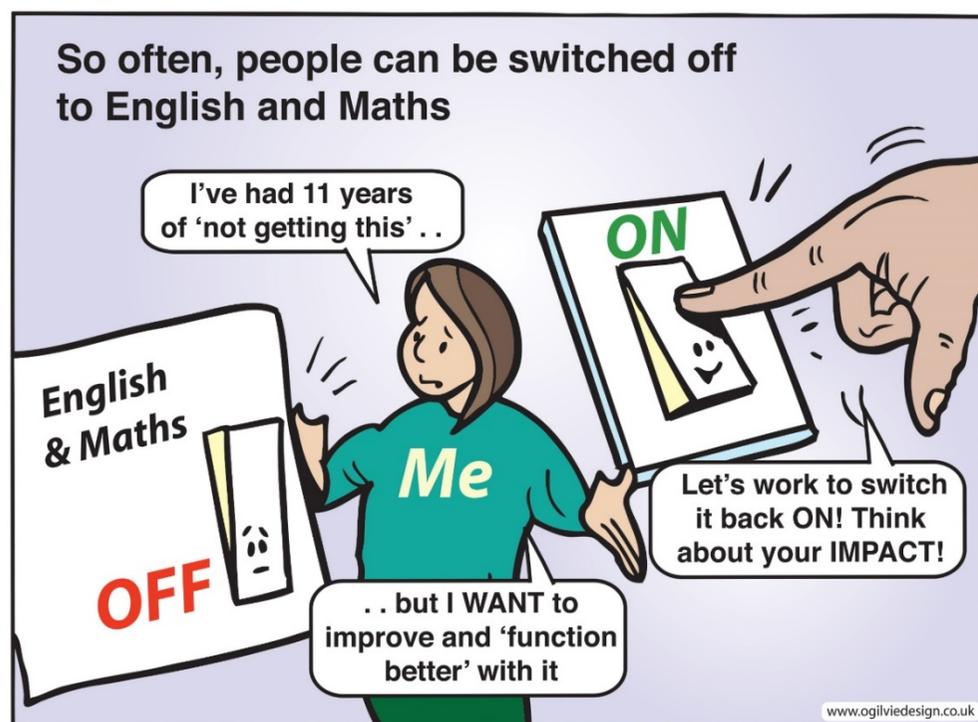
aspects of E&D exposure that being in learning had afforded them (e.g. ESOL as a way for learners to connect with their communities, make friends and access employment opportunities; or the simple process of 'learning together' as a way of exploring rich and diverse local, national and international identities).

### Learning from this project

- The project built upon existing E & D policies and structures in each organisation. This supportive ethos helped staff go beyond "tokenism" to actively explore E&D and address prevailing issues.
  - Creating a "community of practice" required project leaders to create: time and space; a focus for discussion; support to try new things; encouragement for teachers and learners to share all outcomes; and constructive feedback to stimulate continuing experimentation.
  - Encouraging staff to 'try one thing and reflect upon it' proved effective in changing knowledge, skills and attitudes, as evidenced by fresh resources and ideas to share.
  - The foregrounding of E & D at the start of sessions in "Toolbox Talks" has helped raise its status with staff and ensured that learners' contributions reflect an active and constructive learner "voice".
  - For some staff, a secondary outcome of the project was that it helped develop digital confidence as the use of online discussion and new opportunities to 'virtually' share resources were embraced. However, this open forum inhibited other staff who feared sharing their views and resources online in case they were "getting it wrong".
  - Vocational Qualifications' assessment criteria sometimes appear to "allow" rather than "require" sustained exploration of diversity. This can reduce aspiration and permit merely tokenistic approaches to diversity.
  - The relative success of this initiative may stem from the fact that both organisational leads who headed up the project saw it as "an opportunity" rather than as "a responsibility". As such, learning from the other institutions was stimulating and highly productive.
- Both institutions experienced positive impacts from this project. Initial aspirations to explore external practices beyond this project were scaled back as energies became focused on internal reach and effectiveness.
  - Those who were actively involved in the project reported the greatest differences in levels of confidence between the beginning and end of the project, regardless of their initial starting point. This finding supports the importance of allowing staff opportunities to engage in focused communities of practice as a way of developing teaching, learning and assessment practices, as well as pushing for organisational change when required. Reasons staff gave for increased confidence tended to centre around: 'being supported to take a risk and open up conversations with learners'; feeling a sense of responsibility as part of the project team to 'model and share good practice'; having structured opportunity to 'reflect upon practice, problem solve, ask questions and engage in innovative processes for E&D teaching, learning and assessment'.
  - Some staff felt that 'reconnecting with E&D themed literature' helped support them to reflect upon their own teaching, learning and assessment practices and the impact of them upon their learners.
  - Discussions with observation teams across each setting revealed that whilst overall E&D practices appear to be improving, aside from within the core project team, the greatest improvements in practice came from teachers who were already engaged and interested in E&D. The feeling was that some staff continued to 'drag their feet' and that other approaches would need to be initiated to encourage and motivate change.
  - Discussions with the observation team also heightened their own sensitivity in relation to how they conceptualised the E&D practices they were observing. For some, this encapsulated movement away from merely 'ticking off' E&D to a more considered and critical analysis of how E&D practices were both explicitly and implicitly unfolding before them.

## 4.9. Improving Learner Outcomes in GCSE Maths

Stockton Riverside College, Darlington College, Hartlepool College of FE and Egglecliffe School



### Summary

This project focussed on three local colleges working collaboratively to get ready to deliver the new 9-1 specification and improve GCSE outcomes.

The project involved three local colleges and a high performing local school, with a track record of outcomes above national and local averages and graded outstanding during their previous inspection.

All organisations worked together to design a diagnostic assessment tailored to the new 9-1 specification and develop a scheme of work that was tailored to the individual learners' needs identified through the diagnostic.

### Rationale for the project

Since 2015 it has been a condition of funding that learners who achieved a grade D/3 in GCSE at school must continue to work towards achieving a grade C/4 or better.

The number of learners continuing to study GCSE has grown rapidly, with partner colleges seeing their numbers increase by up to 600%.

This growth has resulted in a shortage of maths practitioners and those who were delivering in the colleges had in the majority been delivering functional skills, leaving not only a capacity issue but a skills/experience gap. Where staff were experienced many had only ever delivered to learners who were motivated to achieve.

The reality for many practitioners going into a classroom of mandated learners is very different. Learners are disengaged and unmotivated.

Another issue identified by practitioners is that there are several initial and diagnostic packages available. These are tailored very well to functional skills but do not provide enough information to support teaching for the new GCSE specification.

This and the limited resources available to support the new specification, a lack of experience within organisations in isolation and the time constraints on already stretched teams were making it difficult for individual organisations to dedicate time to evaluate the issues and develop resources, which would be better suited for assessing GCSE learners.

### Approach and Methodology

In the first stage of the project the two colleges with negative progress measures were mentored by a college with positive progress measures.

Staff CPD sessions on theoretical approaches to GCSE maths delivery in FE were delivered to participating organisations. Colleges worked collaboratively

with the high performing local school and peer observations were carried out to identify teaching approaches that support positive outcomes.

Assessment methods were evaluated and a new assessment and tracking system was developed. Participants worked collaboratively to develop a 1-year scheme of work for the new 9-1 specification.

In the second stage of the project the new assessment and tracking system and the 1-year scheme of work developed in stage one were implemented with a new cohort of learners.

### **Professional learning: Evidence of changes in teaching, learning and assessment practices.**

The teaching practices that were taken from the school were linking each element of delivery and assessment to the exam assessment criteria and building learners' understanding of the mark schemes.

Existing packages did not effectively initially assess and diagnostic assessments did not provide sufficient information to support teaching. A new assessment and tracking system has been developed that links directly to assessment criteria. The system uses previous exam questions in a way that then generates topic weaknesses at learner level. This was also linked to the mark scheme and grade boundaries to enable a current working at grade to be estimated.

*"The new diagnostic has given me more confidence with my predictions".*  
(Project Participant).

Target setting has now been linked directly to each of the assessment criteria and the tracking system RAG rates the learner based on interim assessments.

Reviews and observations of teaching and learning indicated learners were more aware of their targets and could see the links between teaching, learning and assessment.

The new system enabled a tailored response and quicker interventions than previously.

The system was implemented at the two supported colleges. The diagnostic assessment process has been much smoother at each organisation and feedback from returning learners has been positive.

*"I know the areas I need to work on".* (Learner A).

*"Much better than sitting on a computer answering daft questions".*  
(Learner B).

Ideas from the CPD sessions informed planning and the one-year scheme of work was planned and disseminated across all practitioners in all three colleges to support delivery in 2017/18. The two colleges with negative progress measures implemented the new diagnostic and scheme of work.

### **Evidence of improved collaboration and changes in organisational practices**

All participating organisations contributed fully to the project. Project participants enjoyed working collaboratively and all outcomes were achieved.

*"The whole process has been a good experience and it has been very beneficial being able to discuss ideas across organisations. Our diagnostic process has run much smoother and been far more informative than previous years."* (Project Participant).

Participating organisations felt prepared to deliver the new 9-1 specification and all organisations have reported improved staff morale.

### **Evidence of improvement in learners' achievements, retention and progression.**

**Attendance on GCSE courses** at both participating colleges **has improved.** Attendance at one college has improved by 4.5% compared to the previous year and the other college has improved by 1%.

Both colleges have experienced a **high rate of attendance** at exams with 95.7% and 93% attendance.

In a learner survey conducted by one of the participating colleges 95% of learners agreed their course was well organised; showing an improvement of 7% compared to the previous year.

A further improvement of 3% was recorded in the same survey with 96% of learners agreeing that assessment tasks were clear; with 94% agreeing that feedback tells them what they are doing well and need to improve on.

Both colleges have also recorded an improvement in learners moving from a grade 3 to a grade 4 or better.

One college **improved from 17% to 34%** in June 2018 and the other improved from **22.7% to 27.6%** of learners who come in with a grade 3 achieving a grade 4 or better.

### Learning from this project

- All assessment tasks developed are paper based and it has been identified that it would promote more enjoyment to have a mixed method approach incorporating interactive and practical assessment activities.
- Scheduling meetings for collaborative practice was a challenge but proved to be extremely beneficial for sharing good practice and contributing to new developments.
- Completing everything in the short time scale originally attached to the project was a challenge. The extension of the project to include a full academic year enabled us to monitor and evaluate the full impact.

## 4.10. Assessment and tracking progress

### a. Kendal College and HMP Haverigg



#### Summary

The OTLA assessment and tracking project built on a previous Education and Training Foundation programme we had undertaken at Kendal College that piloted effective practice guidelines (EPGs) for assessment and tracking (Education and Training Foundation, 2017). For the OTLA project, Kendal College, HMP Haverigg and our validation partner, North Tyneside Council Adult Learning (NTCAL), continued to test approaches recommended in the EPGs, such as 'limiting assessment to what is necessary' and 'assessing for self-belief and motivation'.

Using the EPGs, we developed and applied these principles to focus on learners' progress (or lack of it) at a microscopic level with the intention of

enabling them to recognise, record and 'own' their progress. Alongside this, we used expectancy value measures to let learners express their belief in their ability to make progress and the value they attached to it. We could then ask them to compare this to their actual progress.

#### Rationale for the project

The rationale for the project derived from a pilot project into the development and implementation of the EPGs as a tool for promoting assessment for learning in the sector. The decision to commit wholeheartedly to the project derived from the College's disappointing exam results from 2015/2016.

While attendance in maths and English sessions were improving and stable at 82-84%, this did not translate positively to high grade achievement rates for these learners. Rigorous college quality processes confirmed that the quality of teaching through classroom observations was firmly within the good and outstanding range, yet not enough learners were achieving high grades.

There was a strong feeling amongst teaching staff of learners merely being 'there in body, but not in mind' and not motivated to learn. The resultant deep professional reflection and questioning identified that we had been focussing on producing better teachers and that the returns on this approach were diminishing.

Ruling out increasing the costs of delivery we realised that where we needed to make further progress was with developing better learners. We needed to find a pedagogy which enabled this.

With the support of the OTLA project we embarked on a College wide approach to transforming the approach to assessment for learning with the emphasis on learners owning their progress via the transparency of assessment.

## Approach and Methodology

Kendal College established a cross-college team, comprised of teachers, learning support assistants, assessors, managers and senior managers. The project team planned and implemented a range of measures, aimed to focus on learners being participants in a transparent tracking of progress.

Theoretical understanding of behavioural science and metacognition, suggests that motivation is derived from their self-belief as learners. Our learners' prior attainment and experience of the assessment system had a perception of failure and a natural instinct to avoid this failure by not engaging or limiting their involvement in tasks (Covington, 1997). We developed the use of an expectancy value test based on the work of Vroom (1964) that requires learners to measure their belief and motivation explicitly. This then became part of classroom discussion.

The focus for the first year was GCSE and FS maths. The maths team worked collaboratively to research and develop an individual learner plan. We provided CPD on assessment for learning, but with the emphasis and recognition that assessment **as** learning was a necessary aspect to incorporate into every lesson. As a result of a greater staff awareness of motivational theory, particular interest lay with the initial self-assessment of learners' perceptions of their own ability to succeed and achieve and the value they attached to English and Maths when they first arrived in College.

We measured their motivational drivers and not their subject knowledge. This was done via a basic Expectancy Value questionnaire (Do you think you'll succeed by achieving a 'C'?/Do you want to succeed by achieving a 'C'?). Whilst it is recognised that some learners may have paid lip service to the task 90% rated themselves and had the opportunity to add a narrative. Learners were encouraged to be truthful and that negativity would not be criticised.

From this point forward, the teams began an approach of using assessment for learning to make all progress visible to the learner. Having stripped initial and diagnostic assessment to the minimum (a teacher assessment after 6

weeks on programme) staff would ask learners to assess their progress on a weekly/sessional basis. Stripping away testing within the first few weeks reduced the negativity towards the English and maths experience for learners. The notion of working together to achieve was presented and the ownership and responsibility to achieve shared between learner and staff.

The primary mechanism for this was a Personal Progress Record (PPR) which supported the planned assessment journey. Learners were asked to set goals and then would RAG rate<sup>2</sup> their progress in each session/topic. Interestingly, the complexities of having an online E- profile was found to be a hindrance, and we quickly adopted a paper-based format which was to be kept at the front of each learners' maths folder. This made the PPR visible in each session. We introduced an audit check on these documents that was a check on engagement with the form. Students were not challenged for low goal setting or RAG ratings against them but were expected not to graffiti the document. Staff would make comments with feedforward to the student on a half termly basis.

Reflective time was embedded into every session with time allocated for learners to engage with the session content and their own personal achievement and progress within the session. This focused on emphasising the peer and self-assessments, working towards learning how to assess their own work correctly, recognising the success criteria and how they are performing against these. Explicit links were made to exam criteria so that the learners were better equipped to make an informed judgement and become able to take ownership of their own progress.

Ongoing learner self-monitoring was supported by a significantly increased emphasis on 1:1 work with learners. Because of the additional cost of this for the college, the team wanted to test their belief that motivation and confidence was enabled by learners taking ownership of the progress they were making, hence the importance of feedback and forward, and the visibility of this.

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<sup>2</sup> Ratings according to traffic lights: red, amber and green.

## Professional learning: Evidence of changes in teaching, learning and assessment practices.

The following AfL approaches have been adopted in the college's English and maths classes:

- Learners respond to carefully-planned diagnostic questions on sheets that are inserted into their PPRs.
- Learners then identify how they feel about their responses to the questions, via RAG-rating (i.e. red = 'I guessed! I'm totally stuck on this one', amber = 'I'm OK but not sure if I could do this again', green = 'I get this!'). This reflection is visible in the PPR and discussed during reviews.
- Learners agree with their tutor at these reviews what information will be sent to the college learner tracking systems, agreeing with their teacher a score from 1 - 4.

Changes in practice for maths teachers are evident in new tracking documents (PPRs) and procedures and in classroom assessment for learning practices.

The English team have, in year 2 of the project adapted some of these practices for use with their learners, with a particular focus on micro skills that nudge learners towards being grade 4 standard and constant feedback around whether work has achieved this.

## Evidence of improved collaboration and changes in organisational practices

The college's work-based learning lead, after a successful trial, is now working with her team of functional skills assessors to implement new AfL approaches.

As well as validating progress internally across college departments, and with the team doing a parallel project at NTCAL, Kendal's project leaders shared their approaches with their local prison, HMP Haverigg. Dissemination of the EPG project outcomes there, via the prison's head of reducing reoffending, has sparked an extension project involving all industries staff and maths and English teachers in the prison.

The project is focussing on embedding maths and English in social enterprise projects (and also draws heavily on outcomes from an OTLA offender learning project at HMP Kirklevington). To further support this work, vocational trainers and industrial officers from HMP Haverigg and Kendal College will visit one another and share/ review AfL and other aspects of their practice.

## Evidence of improvement in learners' achievements, retention and progression.

The 2017 maths GCSE results provided the project team with tangible evidence that assessment for learning (AfL) strategies developed through the OTLA project and the ETF's earlier EPG pilots have proved effective.

The 2018 GCSE results in both maths and English provided further evidence of the effectiveness of the new approaches.

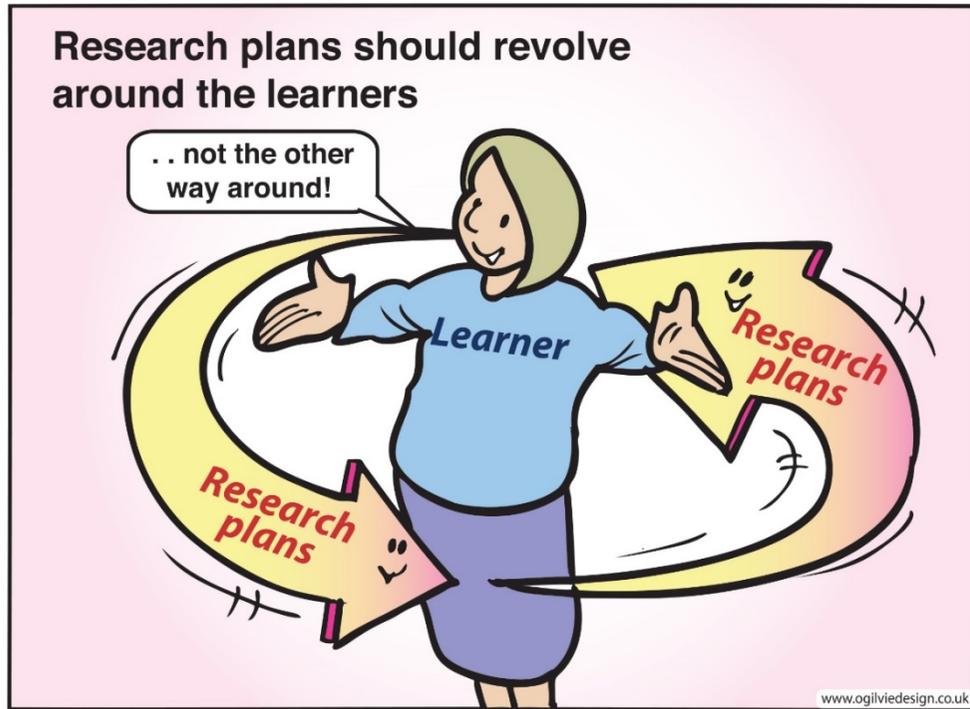
The college received **significantly improved GCSE maths results** in 2017 **up from 21% to 31%** high grade scores and maintained this high grade rate in 2018.

GCSE English scores, where AfL strategies had not yet been implemented successfully, were lower and showed significantly less increase in 2017 but after implementing the AfL strategies in 2018 **high grade scores improved from 20% to 41%**.

## Learning from this project

- The foregrounding of AfL in classroom activities has helped learners use scaffolded strategies to monitor and value their own learning, and this has had a positive impact in their progress and overall achievements.
- Encouraging teachers to try simple AfL strategies, with sound theoretical groundings, such as 'Expectancy Value' questioning, proved effective in changing knowledge, skills and attitudes, as evidenced by new assessment and tracking processes designed.
- Teachers and assessors need to understand the value of approaches that require them and learners to make significant changes to practice.
- Not all practitioners will appreciate the value of new approaches initially and may need internal and wider evidence and support, even performance management, to break out of existing practices.
- Validation is an effective form of collaboration and can be done at all stages of a project, from initial action planning to final dissemination.

## b. North Tyneside Council



### Summary

The aim of this action research project was to identify and develop assessment for learning methodologies that can help promote learners' self-belief and their capacity to be successful on mandated DWP programmes. The project focused on assessing and tracking the communication skills of learners on two employability programmes. Practitioner research outcomes were shared with Kendal College, where an assessment and tracking project with similar objectives was being undertaken.

### Rationale for the project

Learners are mandated by Job Centre Plus (JCP+) to attend employability courses, which are designed to enable them to gain the knowledge and skills they need to apply for jobs. Many learners have just come off long term

sickness benefits and have been out of work for long periods of time and can be reluctant to attend.

Learners often lack the self-confidence to communicate effectively in a workplace setting. The rationale for the project was to develop an assessment and tracking approach that helps support learner motivation, confidence and success.

### Approach and Methodology

The core project team comprised a Project Lead and Deputy Project Lead, both of whom are members of the North Tyneside Council Senior Management team, and six Employability Tutors.

The team designed, trialled and piloted two individual learning plans (ILPs) for each of the two employability programmes that aimed to:

- Enable learners to recognise their strengths, areas for development, self-confidence and motivation to learn and improve
- Enable tutors to personalise learning, signpost learners to additional support and help them meet summative assessment requirements, with a focus on written and verbal communication skills
- Embed the Effective Practice Guidelines (EPGs) (Education and Training Foundation, 2017).

The project team met each month to plan and evaluate their action research activity, and the Project Leads met with staff from Kendal College on three occasions to share outcomes.

Feedback was also gathered from DWP colleagues on the effectiveness of the assessment and tracking materials from a JCP+ perspective.

Subsequently tutors have researched the impact of the revised ILPs and assessment processes in supporting learners into employment.

## **Professional learning: Evidence of changes in teaching, learning and assessment practices.**

There was a strong focus on the EPG's throughout the ILP design process. Tutors' awareness and understanding of the EPG's increased, and they were able to use them to guide and inform their approach to the design, e.g. by ensuring that assessment is embedded in the job search context (EPG 10) and that the ILP is a learner-led and living document (EPG 11).

There was also ongoing reference to the Professional Standards, with tutors being encouraged by the Project Leads to self-assess against these throughout the project.

Tutors reported that feedback on the ILPs from learners, teaching colleagues from other departments and DWP managers has enabled them to evaluate and challenge their own practices, values and beliefs.

Tutors felt that the specialist led CPD on action research offered to them through the project enabled them to become more confident in their abilities as researchers. Evidence of professional learning and changes in practice can also be found in the ILP's produced, minutes from project team meetings and attendance at and contributions to OTLA CPD events.

## **Evidence of improved collaboration and changes in organisational practices**

Staff involved in the development of the ILPs felt they benefitted from being able to meet peers from other organisations, and from the chance to exchange ideas on teaching, learning and assessment. They also valued the opportunity to build new, collaborative relationships with colleagues teaching in different contexts.

The outcomes of the project were shared with staff from Kendal College and from South Tyneside Council, where a similar approach to ILP development is now being considered.

The process of designing and trialling the new ILPs has challenged existing practices and helped shaped new ones, with the new ILPs now being used successfully across the respective employability programmes.

## **Evidence of improvement in learners' achievements, retention and progression.**

Learner behaviour and motivation improved: the new ILPs helped learners to focus on how their skills are developing, so that they experienced success and were more likely to complete their programme and progress into employment.

The new ILPs also:

- provided a basis for the planning and delivery of effective learning sessions for learners with a wide variety of health needs and other barriers to learning
- supported greater learner engagement with new technology associated with job search activity
- enabled learners to take responsibility for their own learning and to set and monitor their own goals
- promoted learners' belief in their capacity to successfully gain sustainable and worthwhile employment.

As a result of their research tutors made adjustments to the entire assessment processes. These included providing 1:1 support; adapting the assessment process so that it was limited to what was necessary and assessing for self-belief and motivation (EPG 6 & 7). These adaptations successfully supported tutors and learners in negotiating effective strategies to overcome issues with low self-esteem.

One learner who had had a longstanding conviction that she would never be able to gain employment was supported into gaining a work experience placement which subsequently resulted in her obtaining paid work with the same employer.

Engaging vocational tutors in the full assessment process ensured that everyone involved was fully aware of the assistance learners needed (EPG4). As a direct result of this one learner was given tailored support in achieving a qualification that he had repeatedly failed. This resulted in him progressing straight from the course into work on a construction site

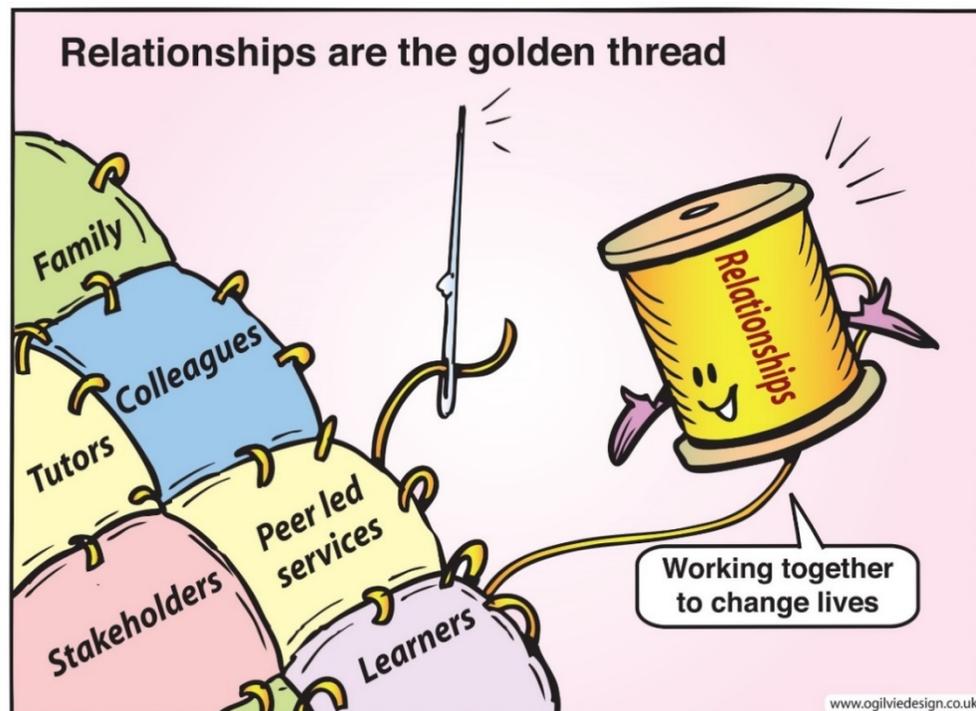
The revised ILPs have proved so successful that learners have reported using them as prompts during interviews with employers. As a result of this, one learner was successful in gaining a role as housekeeper in a local hotel. She has since applied for and been successful in a further role with the same organisation and is now in a supervisory position.

### **Learning from this project**

- The project team adopted a collaborative approach to enable them to make changes to their teaching, learning and assessment practices, drawing on the theories of practice architectures and ecologies of practices they had been introduced to by the OTLA Research Lead. They invited all the interested parties: learners, tutors, DWP staff and administrative staff, to join a sincere and genuine “conversation” about how they could work together to bring about change (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon, (2014). This collaborative, whole organisation approach was key to the success of the project.
- Specialist input on action research was a feature of the CPD programme. This enabled the project team to gain confidence in the validity of their observations and in their capabilities as researchers.
- The EPG’s provided a framework for the action research. The team embedded the EPG’s into their research, using them as the basis for the development of successful assessment for learning methodologies.
- The ‘time out’ to reflect on and develop their own practice was particularly valued by practitioners.
- The collaborative approach supported organisational development and quality improvement.

## 4.11. Offender Learning

Novus, HMP Deerbolt, HMP Durham, HMP Frankland, HMP Holme House, HMP Kirklevington Grange, HMP Low Newton & HMP Northumberland



### Summary

All seven prisons in the North East of England took part in the OTLA (North East and Cumbria) programme, along with the only prison in Cumbria, as a dissemination partner. This regional prison project was led by Novus, the offender learning and skills service (OLASS) provider that provides education in all of these prisons. Teams from across the prison estate took part in the project; including a Category A 'high security' establishment, a reception prison, a female prison, two Category C working prisons, one young offender institution and a Category D 'open' prison. Teams in these prisons meet a wide range of challenges and, although there are curriculum groups to

support their practice development, they often work on solutions to their challenges in isolation.

### Rationale for the project

The original aim of the project was to design and implement a 'teach-meet' approach to promoting outstanding practice through the creation of three teach-meet events, focussing on English, maths and ICT. The original idea was that each of the events would see a group of practitioners coming together to share ideas from their teaching practice and they would then use their project time to further develop, trial and evaluate these ideas, with support from their peers at later events.

As the project developed, the idea evolved. The events became steps on a journey for the prison-based practitioners, with practice developed and progress and findings shared, both within individual prisons and across the regional teams. At the first event, each prison team identified a project focus, with practitioners given the freedom to explore and implement solutions to areas of challenge. Alongside this, staff were supported by relevant professional development activities, offered both internally and through the OTLA programme, as well as learning from the skills and experience of their colleagues.

### Approach and Methodology

In order to provide guidance to the seven prison teams and facilitate project activities, a project leader was appointed, a deputy education manager from one of the prisons, with experience in undertaking practitioner-led research and managing project teams. Each of the OLASS managers in the seven prisons involved then chose two practitioners, through discussion with the project leader. These individuals were chosen for their ability to lead their project and effectively involve other staff and prisoners. They also needed to

be able to work well with others across all the establishments, so that they could support one another's project and professional development.

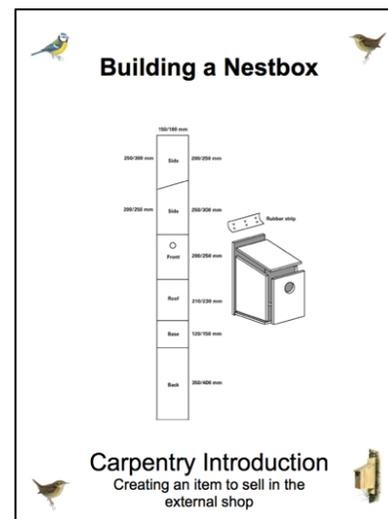
During the first regional project meeting and through meetings with the project leader in their prisons, practitioners were supported to reflect on their practice and to explore common issues, challenges and development opportunities. The project members were tasked to consider the relationships they could develop within their establishment and with their project partners in other prisons. This theme of relationships deepened as the projects progressed and became, in the words of the practitioners, their 'Golden Thread'.

### **Professional learning: Evidence of changes in teaching, learning and assessment practices.**

Practitioners, supported by their project leader and the OTLA (North East and Cumbria) team, developed ideas of where they would like to improve practice and how, as a partnership, they could work together to create solutions and evaluate the impact on teaching, learning and assessment.

They focussed on a wide range of areas, illustrated by the project titles below:

- The Nest Box Project – embedding English and maths in prison industry through social enterprise (HMP Kirklevington Grange)
- Developing outstanding starters (HMP Frankland)
- Embedding English and maths in a family learning programme (HMP Durham)
- Developing family learning in the female estate (HMP Low Newton)
- Introducing learners to the benefits of embedding English and maths in vocational training (VT) provision (HMP Northumberland)



- Developing outstanding teaching, learning and assessment in Deerbolt's construction academy (HMP Deerbolt)
- Developing classroom teaching in English and maths through VT activities (HMP Holme House)

The project participants included English and maths teachers, learning support specialists, managers and vocational trainers, as well as representatives from Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) and prisoners, who took part in project learning activities. Evidence of the project teams' professional learning and changes in their practice can be found in their reports of individual and collaborative research; in revised lesson planning and vocational project plans; re-designed resources together with evidence of learners' planning, work and learners' achievement outcomes; and presentations for the regional project events.

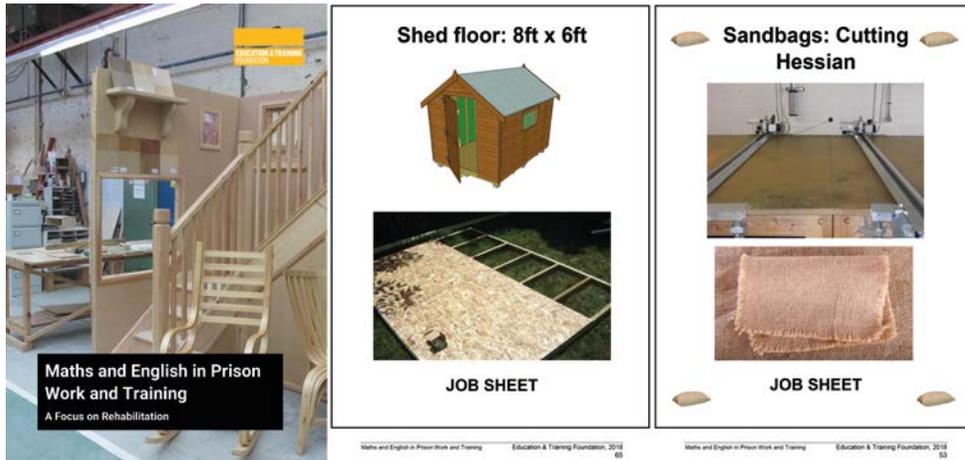
Key changes included:

- a new 'template' for project-based learning, incorporating maths and English into social enterprise projects;
- identification of changes required for prison inductions, so that prisoners can see the value of developing maths and English in vocational training;
- stronger relationships with prison colleagues, e.g. to plan family learning activities.
- better understanding of how to include prisoners in designing learning.

### **Evidence of improved collaboration and changes in organisational practices**

As well as collaboration within establishments and across the NE prisons, the 'Nest box project' was disseminated and further developed at HMP Haverigg in Cumbria. This team is predominantly comprised of prison service industries staff and learning support practitioners, working alongside peer mentors (prisoners) and teachers. This transfer of responsibility for leading the development of 'task based' learning approaches in prison workshops, from teachers to industries teams, is critical for prison projects to sustain and reach prisoners, not all of whom are allocated to education.

A national guide to 'Maths and English in Prison Work and Training' was developed as a result of this innovative OTLA project carried out at HMP Kirklevington Grange and HMP Haverigg. This has, in turn, inspired other prisons to design their own projects and 'job sheets', specific to the departments and workshops within their prisons.



Another important national outcome of the NE and Cumbria prison OTLA projects resulted from the work at HMP Northumberland. The team here had started their project focussing on embedding English and maths in painting and decorating workshops but soon recognised that prisoners' perceptions of the benefits of learning this way were shaped by the induction practices that take place at the start of their sentence/ when they are moved to a new prison.

The HMP Northumberland team highlighted some important elements of prison induction practices that could be improved and this work is now being developed by Novus as part of a national induction working group, to design approaches that can be shared across the prison estate. The work was also recognised in a report in assessment and tracking, commissioned through the Education and Training Foundation by HMPPS and is contributing to a wider understanding of what can be done to improve prisoners' experiences of maths and English assessments at the start of their prison learning journeys.

## Making a difference in the prison classroom

At HMP Holme House, learning from the workshops transferred into classroom practice, with vocational trainers supporting maths and English teachers to develop 'hands on' approaches to engage their learners. For example, kitchen units used in a joinery workshop were carried across into a maths classroom to give learners practice in measuring, transferring 3D shapes to 2D drawings and in developing their understanding of scale. The project is now focussing on how to make learning at Entry Level equally 'hands on', in a move to bring learning to life across the educational levels on offer.

## Evidence of improvement in learners' engagement and progression.

Across all seven projects, prison learners have been involved in testing approaches and validating findings. For example, female prisoners at HMP Low Newton helped develop and evaluate activities being planned for family visits and prisoners undertaking vocational training completed practical assessment tasks with embedded English and maths. The team at HMP Low Newton found that prisoners, mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters and carers, felt unable to support their children's learning and development on family days because they didn't understand, e.g. the Key Stages, SATs or new GCSE curricula. Similarly, the team identified that some schools found it difficult to connect children's learning and development with that of their family members in prison. This work has led to Novus taking part in a new OTLA project in the region, focussing on how to share information about learning in schools and prisons on a digital platform.

In prison contexts such as HMP Low Newton, improved engagement in education is a key success measure, as many prisoners who might benefit from education support prefer not to enter classrooms and opt/ are sent to work instead. In at least two of the projects, prisoner engagement in education improved.

## Learning from this project

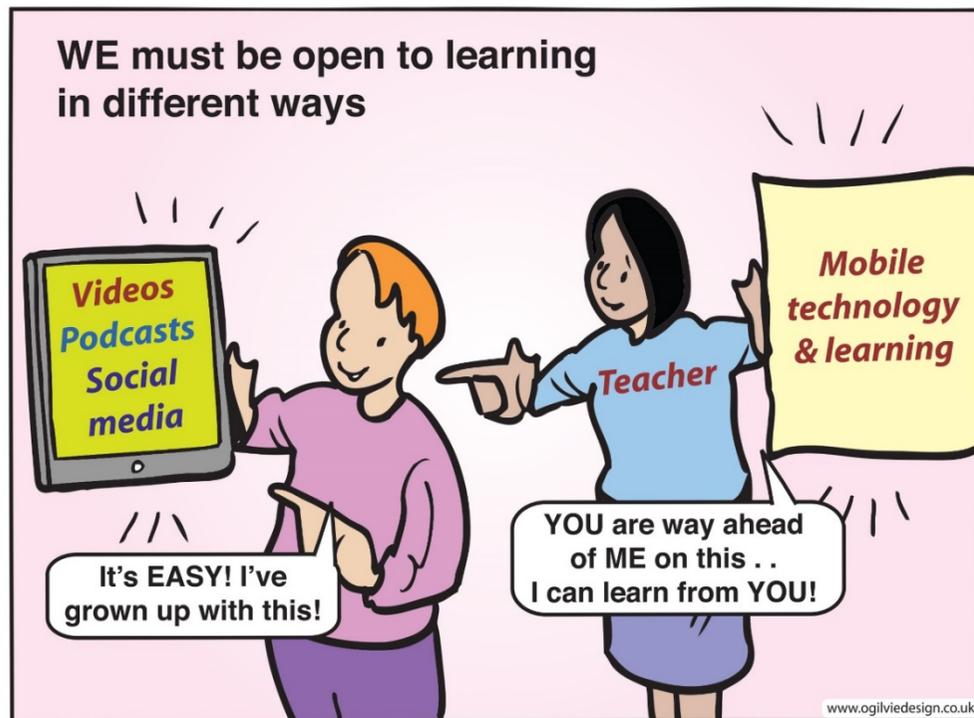
We began by noting that prison educators can feel isolated in their practice and it is also rare that practice developed in prisons is shared with the wider education and training sector. However, the prison-based OTLA (North East and Cumbria) projects have many outcomes which would be of interest to the wider sector. For example:

- Practitioners undertaking professional and practice development need a 'flow' of CPD in terms of how they use the learning they encounter. Effective professional development needs to empower practitioners to develop their own practice, supported by relevant, developmental CPD.
- 'Cross curriculum' projects, such as those for vocational training, require multidisciplinary project teams. If you need to design holistic learning approaches, it takes specialists working together to ensure the projects have authenticity and meet broad curriculum aims.
- Relationships are the 'golden thread' for a project's success; with project colleagues, learners and, in this case, wider prison teams.

Practitioners in the prison-based project teams overwhelmingly reported feeling 'uplifted' by their work and have enjoyed opportunities to write about it for national dissemination. This is a sector that has a lot to say; about learning for some of the most marginalised members of society and about learning that can make a significant difference to people's lives.

## 4.12. Activities for supporting maths and English learners

North Tyneside Council, Northumberland County Council, HMP Northumberland, Darlington Borough Council, North Yorkshire County Council and Springboard (Sunderland)



### Summary

Practitioners from six organisations trialled new exemplar activities that had been developed on behalf of the Education and Training Foundation. Participants adopted a 'learning study' approach to trialling the activities.

In some cases, sessions were observed by a representative from a partner organisation but this was often difficult to arrange. Where this was not possible, sessions were observed by a colleague.

Participants did meet regularly throughout the project to share experiences of trialling the activities and to learn from each other's experiences.

### Rationale for the project

The aim of the project was to investigate the newly created exemplar activities, to evaluate and report on the effectiveness of these resources and teaching approaches in meeting the needs of maths and English learners and to report on the training that other teachers may need before using the exemplar activities.

Participating organisations welcomed the opportunity for their specialist, experienced tutors to contribute to the national debate around the new Functional Skills Maths and English activities.

They were able to trial the new activities with learners from some of the most economically deprived areas of the country.

### Approach and Methodology

The project team met regularly throughout the project. At an initial meeting it was agreed that the organisations would work collaboratively in pairs based on geographical location.

Participants attended a research CPD day where a 'learning study' approach was proposed. This was particularly effective in this project as the participants were being asked to evaluate a solution that had already been developed.

Collaboration with partner organisations proved to be difficult to arrange in some cases so 'learning study' observations were carried out with colleagues from within the organisation.

Participants collected evidence such as lesson plans, photographic evidence of activities being undertaken and learner completed work.

They sought feedback from learners about the activities they had undertaken and received feedback from the observer of the session. They were able to focus on the effect of the activities on specific learners.

### **Professional learning: Evidence of changes in teaching, learning and assessment practices.**

Traditionally maths has been taught didactically and learners often fail to see the relevance of maths in everyday life. Through this project participants have been able to explore ways in which they could make lessons more engaging and enabling.

More opportunities for mathematical discussions and investigational work have been introduced within teaching sessions enabling learners to develop problem solving strategies.

Being able to network with other providers, enabled practitioners to gain an insight into how other organisations teach and how they would best use the resources in future practice. It was agreed that they could be integrated into current teaching programmes easily - either as stand-alone sessions, after the various skills have been grasped, or as dissected, 'bite-size' portions to fit the needs of the learners.

In a roll-on roll-off class, learners are typically working at different levels and on different topic areas so this project provided an opportunity to bring the learners together as a team, improving collaboration between them. Learners were very positive about the activity and it promoted lots of discussion and opportunities for further learning.

Tutors have been able to spend time specifically focussing on their own key learning points from evaluating the activities, something that they often feel that they do not have the time for.

*"The teacher found that by providing the materials, but then stepping back to allow the learners to self-correct was empowering for them. This teacher felt that the use of action research had allowed her the opportunity to reflect on her own teaching practices which had not happened for many years and discover habits which she felt she should change.*

*One example of changes in her teaching, learning and assessment practice were that instead of stepping in all the time to help or tell learners what was right or wrong, she was able to encourage them to make their own decisions.*

*She realised when she did this her learners displayed more confidence than before in correcting their own work and in setting their own targets. Using reflective practice had a big impact on this teacher".*

For some it was their first opportunity to use action research and this has had a profound effect on them. One teacher described it as a revelation, an opportunity to stop and take stock of just where they were in terms of their teaching, learning and assessment practice and really concentrate on the needs of the learners and how best they are met.

*"My background is Functional Skills English and this project came at a nice point in the evolution of a practising English teacher.*

*In my prior experience I have already seen so many changes; Basic skills, Key Skills, Adult Literacy, Functional Skills to mention a few, but what next? To be a part of this research and to be able to make a contribution is quite an honour.*

*I hope my research not only credits, but also supports the next generation of functional skills standards and that my study will also help in the long-term success, skills and progress of any learner who ever undertakes a Functional Skills English course."*

## Evidence of improved collaboration and changes in organisational practices

The participants feel that they have benefitted from being able to meet peers from other organisations and being given the opportunity to discuss teaching strategies and resources in a variety of contexts.

Attending meetings such as the dissemination event allowed time to explore and share ideas about what was working or not in the projects they were running. Learning study observations also created an additional dimension to the project and allowed for further exploration of practices.

This would have been further enhanced if the teachers had been able to observe sessions in other organisations but due to timetable commitments that wasn't possible.

The project gave teachers time to reflect on their current practice and what worked in their teaching and learning. This led to evaluation and changes to practice and these new ways of working provided challenge and motivation.

Evidence was captured by learning study observations and reflective discussion. The template 'A Guidance Framework - Planning a Learning Study' which was introduced at an OTLA research CPD day was an excellent resource as it provided structure and a system for future improvement, in that both the host and visitor were forced to consider alternative ways to develop the activity for future use.

At one organisation the project has prompted staff to question the Roll-on/Roll-off principle of permitting constant additions through enrolment to a class as this can interfere with the smooth and coherent delivery of topics and of the development of skills.

One tutor commented that she had completely changed her usual way of teaching from sequential to concrete whereby she used 'real life travel enquiries' to look at holidays for some learners who were planning a holiday, a train journey for another learner who was planning to go to London and a bus journey for two other learners who were planning to go on a day trip.

## Evidence of improvement in learners' achievements, retention and progression.

Keeping learners engaged and motivated is key to retaining individuals on course especially for lower level learners.

The learners really enjoyed the activities and this can only help to motivate them to continue with their learning. The activities are current and purposeful; learners were able to see the direct link from maths and English to everyday life.

One organisation compared groups being taught using the new approaches with groups who were not part of the project and found:

- Better attendance with OTLA projects (**11% for English and 14% for maths**) as learners saw the sessions as more interactive and fun.
- Achievement rates were the same with both groups.
- Progression rates were better on OTLA projects with lower level adult groups as some of the learners enjoyed the sessions and saw the relevance so moved on from E2 to E3 (**overall 22% for maths and English**).

One teacher gathered feedback from learners about the activities:

Paul *"It was relevant to what we do and it can only help me"*.

Grant: *"I liked how we did things that can visibly help us in the long term, I hate doing stuff that's pointless"*.

When I asked the learners what they felt that they had actually learned this morning they clearly stated:

Paul: *"I know how to fill in the reflections now for my portfolio without thinking I'll look stupid."*

Grant: *"Writing my reflections was good but I feel more confident with being able to use joining words too."*

## Learning from this project

- Learners reacted positively to the activities and overwhelmingly embraced the opportunity to try something new whilst recognising that the contextualisation of activities made it very relevant to them as individuals.
- The activities have allowed more opportunities for group and paired work even in mixed ability classes, providing opportunity for discussion, peer support and more independent working.
- An experienced subject specialist teacher would be able to use the activities but an inexperienced teacher would struggle without guidance.
- The activities are geared more towards subject specialist teachers and not as useful for vocational tutors as there is little guidance on how to teach the activities and prior teaching may be needed before introducing the topic.
- Teachers need to be able to adapt the resources to meet the needs of their learners. Pre-planning in advance is still needed.
- Some of the resources rely on availability of ICT and would have to be adapted for use in situations where it is not available.
- The wide variety of activities available ensured teachers had a choice in how topics were delivered and they were able to pick the best match for their learners.
- Project participants valued the collaborative action research approach. They welcomed the opportunity to work with representatives of other organisations but it was often impossible to arrange reciprocal visits because of timetable constraints.

## Ongoing impact of the project

After the final report for this project was submitted to the maths and English team at the ETF they commissioned a suite of webinars and CPD courses to introduce the materials and provide guidance on how they can be used effectively. Details of the webinars and courses can be found on the ETF's website <https://www.et-foundation.co.uk/supporting/support-practitioners/maths-and-english/courses/>

## 5. Outstanding Teaching Learning and Assessment: What have we learned from the North East and Cumbria collaborative projects?

**Dr. Andy Convery, OTLA (North East and Cumbria) Professional Development Lead**



As we reach the end of the programme, it is helpful to reflect on what we think that we have learned from participants' creative responses to the challenges and opportunities that their projects presented.

### **What did successful practitioner action research actually look like?**

Successful practitioner action research was evident in many contexts across the programme: in prisons, where joinery teachers reshaped the workshop to encourage learners to engage with theory in practical sessions; in training providers, where trainers redesigned assessments so that learners were actively engaged in recording their achievements; in

adult education centres, where practitioners and learners worked co-operatively with Job Centre staff to build literacy confidence in claimants; in staffrooms, where support assistants and teachers devised feedback forms so that supported learners could explain their sticking points; and in colleges, where Sports learners eventually overcame their resistance to giving peers feedback on their assignment drafts.

These are a small sample of the individual initiatives that raised learners' expectations of who they could be – as more successful learners, and as more confident members of society.

However, successful action research was more than changing a lesson plan, a resource or a classroom seating arrangement strategy in order to improve results, important though that is. Action research helped practitioners become more confident in their decision-making and more secure about asking their learners about what they were getting from sessions and using learners' feedback to shift blockages in the system. Action research helped participants to feel more responsible, more responsive – and more professional.

When support assistants began talking with teachers and gained the confidence to simplify a formative assessment activity, or when practitioners agreed to change the induction process to relieve new learners' anxieties, practitioners began to change their view of themselves. They began to see themselves as active and reflective professionals, rather than as deliverers of "good practice" handed down from above. Successful practitioner action research involved the participants feeling free to listen to learners, to make changes, and then to listen again. Successful action research moved beyond one-off changes to practice, and it involved a long-term change in participants' understanding of what being "professional"

actually means – for themselves, for their learners and for their communities.

### **Participants were motivated and enthusiastic**

We have been very impressed by the desire of support assistants, administrative workers, trainers, teachers and managers to take responsibility for investigating everyday teaching situations, and to provide valuable insights and intelligence about “what works” for our sector across this region. Most colleagues were interested (if a little apprehensive) to be contributing to the OTLA programme, but they quickly became reassured by working with their close colleagues at project meetings and at programme events.

Teams of staff fed each other’s enthusiasm and rediscovered an excitement from working together to make meaningful changes to their teaching. The programme approach valued participants’ insider expertise, and teams grasped the opportunity to get to grips with long-standing blockages for practitioners, such as obstructive ILP procedures, demotivating “sheep-dip” CPD processes, tokenistic Diversity exercises, and nominal engagement with embedded maths and English.

### **Collaboration begins at home**

We had expected that participants would begin working with the other providers in their projects, but we quickly realised that teams were mainly concerned with working within their own institution. Participants were energised by an opportunity to focus on recognisable classroom events, often with colleagues with whom they already worked alongside in staffrooms. They appreciated the chance to review – and replace – some of the tired, taken-for-granted ways of working that were designed for another time but had gradually become established.

In-house collaboration proved satisfying in giving participants the opportunity to share their working understandings about what was (and what wasn’t) actually happening in classrooms, and this provided huge emotional support as colleagues brought their common concerns to the table. There is a great pressure to be seen to be coping in our sector, and the project provided a space for colleagues to step back and share their

difficulties and uncertainties, leading to colleagues designing more learner-centred (and practitioner-friendly) alternatives.

In one provider, it might be that the ILP documentation which management stipulated was causing difficulties when inducting new learners; in another provider, it could be that the constant rescheduling of support staff prevented effective relationships being established. This was an opportunity to work together to change things for learners.

We initially thought that peer-to-peer discussions would take place naturally when participants met their peers from linked organisations. However, we began to appreciate that, whereas it was easy to exchange “teaching tips” across institutions, participants often needed space to explore what the specific barriers were for learners within their own institutions. Colleagues seemed wary of revealing organisational difficulties to other providers during the early stages of projects, so project leaders often encouraged each organisation to work on their own priorities as a workable compromise.

Once teams felt they had achieved some success in their own provision, they were then more confident to share with the other providers in their project, often at whole programme review events, which often triggered wider interest and some collaboration across projects. In general, productive collaborative exchanges usually developed only after teams had been given time and space to stand back and explore issues within their own communities.

### **The importance of the community for practitioner researchers**

Practitioners working in all roles – teachers, trainers, learning support assistants (LSAs), admin workers and managers – demonstrated their capacity to engage in action research activities when they enjoyed communal support. Participants often began with a simple focus which explored why learners might have difficulty in some teaching situations. Most new researchers then needed further encouragement to take on the more demanding role of “action researcher” where they had not only to try out their proposed solutions, but they also had to gather information to

show the effects of their experiments and to share these results with other participants in the project.

Where project leaders had set up regular in-house meetings, enthusiastic project participants usually gave each other encouragement to make classroom changes, and the regular meetings created informal “deadlines” which gave them a structure to work fully through the research activities. These regular project meetings (often squeezed into the beginning or ends of days to maximise attendance) created an expectation that colleagues would have something to share, and meetings enabled the sharing of practical resources for practitioners to review.

Participants appreciated the new materials, and more importantly, they enjoyed sharing experiences of how these had actually worked in “the real world”. Often, the project communities shared an excitement that they were making changes happen, and this enthusiasm from their “community of practice” helped individuals persist with their approach. Participants in all roles benefited from this communal support, especially when things did not go as planned.

The collaborative communities provided practical ideas along with vital comfort and reassurance which helped practitioner researchers to keep going. Carrying on with their research and overcoming new obstacles was important for the projects, but even more important for the participants’ professional self-image.

Some organisations changed their practices in the light of project activities, which further added to participants’ improved professional self-image and projects sometimes helped improve communication between staff and managers. However, sometimes project leaders needed to be sensitive in presenting project findings to avoid managerial anxieties that might impede the progress of the project (and fortunately, they were almost always successful in their handling of these situations). In future projects, can we find better ways to include managers more fully in the learning communities?

### **Keeping going – building practitioners’ research resilience**

Participants needed support to persist with implementing meaningful change. Practitioners could be understandably cautious about trying new approaches, and sometimes learners resisted when teaching staff tried to move them out of their comfort zones (for example, by asking them to give peers feedback on their draft assignments). When learners challenged the new approaches, staff were tempted to back away from the research and go back to safe but limited teaching and learning activities.

Project leaders used group meetings to help practitioners persist with changes to practice when first attempts didn’t go as planned. These proved most effective when they encouraged despondent researchers in meetings to share why an activity “had gone down like a lead balloon”, and to use colleagues’ feedback to rework their approach for the next session. Effective project leaders used the community to build practitioners’ research resilience, and this social and practical support helped participants to gradually build a more confident in taking on their professional responsibilities.

### **Project leaders: making practitioner research happen**

Project leaders’ skilful organisation could be critical to help participants reach their research potential. From the start, effective project leaders chose participants who would commit to, and benefit from the project experience. These project leaders (who often held a staff development role within an organisation) began with a working understanding of the teaching strengths and motivation of individual practitioners and they would help participants to tailor their experiments to fit into particular teaching situations. They helped individuals to understand how their attempts to methodically change their practice and to act on evidence from these experiments were research activities. Participants gradually began to see themselves as action researchers.

## From research activity to research literacy – getting permission to do things differently

Some participants were hesitant about having to get involved with published research, which seemed difficult to read and not often relevant to their work. Project leaders had to tread a careful balance when introducing research ideas, and they tended to do this by showing participants how good practices had support in the research world.

Generally, project leaders had a confident understanding of the research into teaching which was relevant to participants' experiments (such as Dylan Wiliam's work on formative assessment, or Carol Dweck's work on "mindsets") and they shared this information sensitively so that participants felt supported when engaging with research.

Project leaders usually began the research process by inviting teams to identify key issues and possible solutions to project issues. Once a practical way forward had been agreed, then project leaders introduced any accessible research evidence that might support that particular approach. Usually, teaching staff felt reasonably relaxed about testing research in practice.

Knowing that the changes they were suggesting could be backed up by "official" research seemed to give the participants permission to trial these changes to their usual teaching. Project leaders needed to be pragmatic in helping practitioner-researchers to access research. Often, project leaders would listen to individual practitioners' reports of their classroom or workshop experiments and then show them how this linked to theories of learning (such as "formative assessment" or "learner resilience").

This "testing theory against practice" – showing how research might be relevant to practice – seemed to help participants become more comfortable with discussing (and using) research and relating it to our sector. They moved from becoming research active to research-literate practitioners. All literacy development begins with a search for meaning, and participants needed to see the practical relevance of research before they could engage with it.

## Writing up research – not just an academic exercise....

If participants were apprehensive about doing research or reading research, they were often more anxious about suggestions that they might write reports of their research. However, programme and project leaders needed insiders' reports to give us a good understanding about what is really happening in problematic areas such as developing English and maths and improving learners' management of their learning.

Successful project leaders were sensitive to individual participants' "research readiness" and appreciated that some practitioners might be apprehensive about writing up their research, so they used a variety of useful devices to help practitioners record their progress. Some project leaders helped beginning researchers to record their research activities by providing simple templates on one side of A4 with boxes titled "Problem", "Suggested solution", "Findings", and "Next Steps". This meant that practitioners who were nervous about the "writing-up" aspect of research could be freed to focus meaningfully on the research process and the effects of their experiments.

Writing up these reports proved invaluable in several ways. Primarily, it gave practitioners and project leaders an understanding about the change activities. However, draft reports were also useful in moving research towards completion, as project leaders could use the opportunity to prompt participants to risk taking their changes even further - to the "next steps". Also, through giving feedback on the drafts, it helped all practitioner researchers to become more confident about continuing writing and sharing their insider insights to a wider audience. Through action research, participants were developing their professional practices and their academic confidence.

This developmental writing up process was further helped by programme leaders inviting Professor Jean McNiff to meet project teams in the organisations where they worked. Everyone appreciated Jean's practitioner-friendly style of research leadership, where she urged all participants to celebrate what they do; to investigate how to do it even better; and to develop strong voices to produce and share informed

research into our professional practices. As a result of our collaborative efforts, project leaders produced more detailed reports, participants have presented at conferences, and several have been published in the academic journals.

### **Developing communities within our programme**

When we planned the programme, we knew that we had to build in regular events that would encourage participants to feel that they belonged to the programme and were not only given regular encouragement to move onto the next stage of their research, but also had frequent opportunities to share their issues and concerns with others in the communities across projects.

We were surprised and delighted how, when we created the spaces, participants and project teams developed those projects and made informal links between projects that could have never been anticipated. We could not have predicted how projects would evolve, though we now recognise some stimuli that we would try and replicate again.

We discovered that dissemination events were best used by organising project exchanges rather than by project presentations – so that participants could be active learners, searching for their interests rather than being a polite audience listening to a variety of accounts which were often unrelated to their concerns.

We found that using external events with attractive catering could be replicated in local projects – successful commitment was created by practitioners arriving with high expectations that the projects valued their insights rather than needed their attendance at scheduled professional learning. We also found that the framework of programme events was often backed up by their own in-house project meetings – this provided a way of participants checking their understanding.

### **Learning from this programme**

The aim of the programme was to support and equip teams of practitioners in the education and training sector to develop their practice and improve learner outcomes. By giving practitioners both guidance and permission to experiment with new ways of challenging a wide range of learners to track their achievements, we achieved this aim. When practitioners were helped to establish expected learner outcomes that would evidence the success of their innovations, they were more confident about making further changes. Practitioners benefited from engaging in the action research ‘cycle’ at any stage; inviting practitioners to evaluate externally-produced materials helped to build practitioners’ confidence to use research approaches and exercise their informed professional judgement.

The impetus of these projects often enabled existing organisational policies to be practically operationalised, and demonstrated how promising strategies could be effectively implemented in practice. There were many instances where projects were effective in making policies which had been devised in management meetings begin working more effectively in practical classroom and workshop settings. Projects showed how policies on promoting diversity, tracking learners’ progress and using classroom support expertise could be implemented effectively.

We found that the most productive research projects were led by experienced in-house facilitators who had some experience of teacher research, who recognised individual practitioners’ needs, and who could contribute practical teaching strategies that met organisational requirements. Further, we found that individual teachers contributed most when the project lead adopted the role of “research mentor”, offering insight and direction as well as support. Such relationships sustained practitioners’ inquiry into their practice, and their practice development matured into professional development.

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