**Outstanding teaching, learning and assessment: case study on operational project led by ELATT**

# Introduction

East London Advanced Technology Training (ELATT) is based in Hackney. Deprivation levels in its main delivery areas are amongst England’s highest, and Hackney’s unemployment exceeds London’s overall rate. In 2015, ELATT had 221 level 1-3 learners. Eighty-six undertook apprenticeships, and 10 did traineeships; others are on 16-18 study programmes. Its January 2015 inspection produced outstanding (grade 1) judgements across the board. It undertook a successful Education and Training Foundation joint practice development project in 2014.

ELATT’s outstanding teaching, learning and assessment project focused on peer observation, involving eight adult learning and study programme English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)/literacy and functional skills practitioners. It explored observation through video (not least to reduce time and scheduling demands), and compared this with traditional observations. Project partners included Mary Ward Centre, City and Islington College, and MI ComputSolutions. ‘Joint-practice’ methodology with non-directive, ungraded developmental peer observation sessions led to reflective practice sessions involving other staff. Tutors across the partnership:

* identified their own professional development needs;
* paired with a peer from the partnership (not their own organisation);
* undertook peer observations, observing both in person and ‘virtually’ (by video) to raise standards – considering video’s effectiveness in reducing time-commitment, and for easier partnering with other organisations;
* involved other colleagues, to consolidate the programme’s benefits.

# Approach

Building on the joint practice development experience, the project centred on collaborative observation sessions with ELATT staff and several delivery partners. One was conventionally ‘in-person’; two used small static video cameras. As well as aiming to maintain ELATT’s ‘outstanding’ status, the rationale also explored streamlining the significant time-demands of observation.

The initial and follow-up reflective sessions focused either on surveys and notes, or video/video-diary entries. Ensuing conversations considered individual observations, plus broad lessons about each approach.

Staff reactions were aggregated; learners’ comments about teaching and learning were also used. All were initially surveyed, scoring impressions of teaching and learning practice related to qualitative statements designed using the Professional Standards. Tutors and quality leads/managers then met to discuss survey results and shape forthcoming peer observations.

The Professional Standards offered fresh approaches to peer observation and maintaining outstanding teaching and learning. To account for diversity, surveys were written accessibly for all groups (e.g., lower-level learners), using appropriate language. Practitioners realised through surveying learners about course experiences that equality and diversity needed to be part of classroom culture and ‘stretch’, beyond induction. This enabled learner voice to be incorporated – for example, through embedding functional skills, and online safety awareness. Through filming, observation and feedback, practitioners considered equality issues like participation and differentiation.

Involving partners in peer observation allowed practitioners to re-examine their understanding of excellent practice. New sources of feedback about teaching and learning impacts helped practitioners think about more learner-led, rather than teacher-led, possibilities. Cross-partner observation of teaching and learning allowed sharing of methods and tools, promoting learner inclusion and planning for classroom learning. Being observed and/or being filmed in class can give learners an awareness of their own performance, encouraging greater ownership.

In total, 13 practitioners, quality leads and managers were involved. 57 learners from English, ESOL, and IT programmes incorporating the study programme were surveyed prior to observations.

# Outcomes and impact

New organisational partnerships for improving learners’ outcomes have emerged. One partner will use the videos to help develop a similar internal system, using a closed YouTube group.

Medium-term impacts include practitioners planning more effectively for learners’ needs. Practitioners report developing excellent practice over learner independence, even for low-level students, through peer- and self-correction. Survey tools are used more readily to help learners self-assess and reflect. Another reflection saw links between learners’ issues, contexts for learning, and changing their relationships with English. Practitioners can work in different ways, but filming sessions and sharing practice allows greater standardisation of resources and practices.

Follow-up surveys asked different questions of different groups, depending on initial surveying and tutor reflections. Lower-level learners better recognised their progress (e.g., through the scheme of work displayed as a ‘river’), and were more confident in carrying out classroom activities. The partner’s learner groups benefited from more classroom use of mobile technology – recording difficult pronunciation, practicing talks, using phone timers for exam preparation, and photographing whiteboard notes.

Readiness to learn was also improved. Some began working more co-operatively, gaining from clearer expectations from practitioners (e.g., through nests of tables, differentiating activities). Another group reported improved English and employability skills, becoming more active learners – i.e., completing tasks/projects, or asking questions. Some learners reported more confident use of computers for employability, understanding they needed to be better-equipped for work. Other examples included achieved more than hoped, and feeling more motivated for job-seeking.

Medium-term impacts include changing observation management and using learner voice towards peer observation. Recording observations opened up new avenues for continuing professional development (CPD) and reflective practice through self-observation, and disseminating excellence. It also produced renewed focus on important teaching and learning themes – e.g., learner independence and responsibility, embedding learning technology, and employability.

Gradually, peer observation will become part of the observational infrastructure, with learner voice built-in. Learners may become fuller stakeholders, so capturing learner voice will encourage confidence in helping improve teaching and learning.

Outcomes and impact were managed per partner involved; each had separate meetings and reflective sessions. Meetings determined objectives and expectations: for reflective practice, embedding the Professional Standards, and gaining necessary consent. E-mail and phone contact ensured progress – with feedback, impacts and outcomes gathered during the final reflective practice sessions.

# Lessons learned

Gathering learner consent for recording was difficult – cultural and/or other reasons may mean virtual observation remains problematic. Setting up ‘virtual observation infrastructure’ (e.g., sharing videos securely online) was resolved, but took time. One project partner kept a ‘reflective video diary’ on shared recordings, in keeping with project aims.

During the reflective practice, we discussed how recorded observation could be used generally in CPD/training events, standardisation and one-to-one appraisal. However, work with one partner using conventional methods meant that peer observers met and visited each other’s classes in person. This produced very positive rapport which may be missing from the virtual method’s greater reliance on ‘Google hangouts’.

Some reflections suggested that videoing helps to detach, which supports feedback and clarification, and allows teachers to demonstrate and share methods. Others suggested that ‘teacher performance’ might increase over learner activity, or that in-person observation allows more detailed perceptions.

Practitioners variously suggested that: video offers learners real understanding of excellent teaching and learning; or that capturing learner voice via focus-groups rather than surveys might be more useful.

Survey wordings didn’t always resonate with learners (e.g., ‘learner independence’). Although focus-groups are a qualitative approach, this would have led to richer depth, rather than ‘flat’ responses to surveys. In future, ELATT would use a mix of methods for gathering learner voice.

Recommendations include: practical methods to gather learner and tutor voice, pre- and post-observation; ensuring tutors are well-paired (e.g., subject specialism and/or level of English) for practice-sharing; and considering ethical issues (e.g., gathering consent, sharing videos online).

# Sustainability and transferability

ELATT plans to incorporate virtual observation alongside its peer and institutional systems, allowing new partners. Plans are in place with one organisation for more video-sharing.

When determining peer and virtual observation focus, ELATT will use learner voice systematically (i.e., asking learners what they need to improve on and what they would like more of in the classroom). Learners will also be invited to observe sessions in person or via video playback, to assess teaching and learning quality. Through end-of-course surveys and feedback, learners could give more detailed feedback, also demonstrating their own ‘distance-travelled’. Managers say filming observation standardises practice and disseminates excellence across team effectively, as well as supporting one-to-ones and appraisals. Virtual observation also boosts organisational collaboration, when previously that was logistically difficult. Virtual peer observation can thus be a component of observation and an approach for collaborating on that.

Virtual observation is very transferable, with various kinds of organisation. It encourages cross-organisational working, and transferable practice on new or challenging delivery aspects (e.g., supporting visually-impaired learners). It can also potentially fit other contexts – e.g., using video in CPD, as evidence for observation reports, and for feedback in one-to-ones. Thus, virtual recordings could become part of normal observation practice.

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