**Outstanding teaching, learning and assessment: case study on operational project led by St. Dominic’s Sixth Form College**

# Introduction

St. Dominic’s Sixth Form College is a Roman Catholic sixth form college located in Harrow. Many of its 1,100+ learners come from Catholic backgrounds, but there are also significant Hindu and Muslim minorities and a range of ethnic subgroups amongst the students. The college’s predominant curriculum offer is at level 3; specifically, A levels and BTECs.

The outstanding teaching, learning and assessment project at St. Dominic’s addressed an issue which was both particularly specialised for its own context, yet also a quite universal one in education and training, adding value to learner outcomes. This broad theme emerged from the discovery of some under-achievement of full learner potential at the college – as demonstrated in its recent patterns of Advanced Level Performance System (ALPS) value-added scores, for some of its learner groups.

The project looked at improving the learning, added-value and the ALPS scores through greater ‘stretch and challenge’, in two ways. The first was by boosting the degree of outstanding teaching at St. Dominic’s. The second explored how peer-to-peer learning can generate greater learner independence, towards academic progress. Although the college’s context means the project necessarily involved high-achieving students aiming at entry to higher education, its general principles are largely transferable to most kinds of further education and training provision and many types of learner cohorts.

# Approach

The project arose from the college’s ALPS data on value-added. Analysis revealed issues with certain groups and subjects, according to prior achievement, and ethnicity/gender. This suggested focused continuing professional development (CPD) to refine some staff’s differentiation skills, particularly regarding more targeted ‘stretch and challenge’ approaches and activities. Ten teachers, alongside 71 learners, attended joint developmental sessions.

The parallel strategy of creating, training and using a small team of ‘leaders of learning’ was also developed, using volunteer students. Teachers’ recommendations were used to invite selected learners to take on this role. Most of those approached agreed, undergoing induction and training before engaging in what constituted one-to-one micro-teaching sessions on agreed topics – for some 30 minutes per week of targeted additional learning.

This approach helped all stakeholders – learners with perceived extra needs in aspects of the course, the ‘leaders’ themselves, and indeed hard-pressed teaching staff. The leaders developed their own subject understanding, their inter-personal skills, their portfolio of ‘broadening activities’ (towards CVs and UCAS applications), and even in some cases the range of their potential career aims. In certain situations, this initiative also allowed for the cultural, gender and faith contexts of learner recipients of these sessions to be better recognised and reflected.

Those staff engaged in the project activities were further able to develop their personal appreciation of what does and doesn’t work in their teaching. This was especially so in terms of personalisation for learners who were not yet fulfilling their genuine potential, as well as through their engagement with the processes for the work of the leaders of learning within their own subjects and groups. It also helped in terms of expertise and skills for encouraging greater learner independence.

This project was restricted by its context and focus in collaborative terms, although some sharing and cross-fertilisation was a part of its activity.

# Outcomes and impact

The project further raised the profile of teaching and learning as a priority within the college – especially in shifting the emphasis from teaching to learning. In the end-of-course evaluation completed by Year 13 students, there was a slight decline in the overall satisfaction rating by learners (95% to 89%), yet there was an improvement regarding ‘teaching methodology’ for the majority of departments.

Within the college’s ‘quality cycle’, 62 developmental observations took place with a focus on differentiation. This allowed for a cross-college view of the project in action, and provided insight into some of its early outcomes. Although it was clear that the project had not been embraced by all staff, a significant number attempted to demonstrate best practice in terms of ‘stretch and challenge’ – linking to the methodology. Feedback about professional development ranged from *“stretch and challenge activities were embedded into the lesson”*, to *“the level of stretch was excellent”* and *“speech, handouts and questions were differentiated outstandingly”*.

The parallel ‘leaders of learning’ initiative was the project’s outstanding element, and was received positively by staff and students. It impacted both on the leaders themselves and the recipients of their coaching, in several ways. These included the sense of common purpose, co-learning, and improved understanding.

However, the immediate overall practical aim of the project was to improve A2 results, and can only be measured objectively when grades emerge in August 2015.

The project’s outcomes and impact were monitored in the interim through half-termly data collection points: student surveys, staff and student feedback, and via the lesson observation cycle. The NIACE planning tool was also used to record and track project progress.

Staff increased their engagement with the Professional Standards through developing their ability to meet diverse learner needs, inspire and motivate and help learners develop their own responsibility for progress.

# Lessons learned

The collaborative element of the project proved a significant challenge. The very specific nature of the project meant that it was difficult to work with partners.  However, the college attempted to overcome this by showcasing the project at various teaching and learning events, with feedback gained. Next time, the college would identify an area for development common to several institutions and work with them on developing, implementing and evaluating the project.

A further problem was finding meaningful interim milestone data to measure the progress and impact of project activities. Students’ half-term grades are not always an accurate reflection of the level they are actually working at, thus making it difficult to measure success reliably.  To counter this, we adopted a more qualitative approach, using surveys and lesson observations.

The leaders of learning became the main focus of the project, proving a real success. To succeed, staff and student support is essential. Allocating time to collect evidence and for liaison with the peer advisor matters, too. Most importantly, the target group must be included in the whole process, in order for them to realise the value of the project for themselves and engage fully.

# Sustainability and transferability

The project will definitely continue next year, as its potential further benefits are recognised as significant. The approaches explored and adopted can improve results, further boost the quality of teaching, promote more and better independent learning, empower learners generally, and help staff with the transition to linear A levels.

Achievement gaps will continue to be monitored, with greater ‘stretch and challenge’ remaining a priority – as demonstrated by its inclusion in the reformulated A level schemes of work, and the whole staff training at future college teaching and learning conferences. Although this project focused on level 3 learning in a very particular type of provider, some of the underlying principles – e.g., CPD involving learners alongside staff, and using evidence of ‘distance-travelled’ to explore how best to improve learning for individual and groups – are applicable in some way to virtually every context.

The ‘leaders of learning’ initiative was received very positively by staff and students and presents clear further appeal and opportunity for development. It too has relevance in most situations and providers, at most levels. The project’s ways of developing this (i.e., through teacher recommendations as opposed to just seeking volunteers, and training the ‘leaders’) will be suitable in other contexts.

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