**Outstanding teaching, learning and assessment: case study on operational project led by West Thames College**

# Introduction

West Thames College is a medium-sized further/higher education provider in Isleworth and Feltham, offering a wide spectrum of academic and vocational courses: A levels, BTECs, national vocational qualifications (NVQs), City & Guilds, foundation degrees and higher national diplomas (HNDs). It also offers apprenticeships and traineeships. In 2014, it had approximately 6,500 learners, and was rated as ‘good’ overall in Ofsted’s inspection during that year.

The college’s very broad intake entails significant numbers of learners with literacy problems, across most curriculum types and levels. West Thames’ outstanding teaching, learning and assessment project explored several ways of improving its support for learners in this field.

First, the blended-learning self-study offer (in particular, online tools and activities) was enhanced for those on specific literacy and English pathways. This included specific continuing professional development (CPD) activities aimed at helping staff to support such learning, and to better embed that within their subject teaching.

Second, it aimed to enhance learner awareness, demand and progress across the college generally in this field, through creating a cohort of ‘literacy legend’ learner volunteers. They will widen engagement with learner voice, lead learning activities with peers, and act as ‘ambassadors’ on this issue and the college’s support, especially with the 2015/16 cohort, providing direction in developing the college’s bespoke virtual learning environment (VLE) literacy package.

# Approach

Existing literacy online resources were mainly commercial and considered too generic and inflexible to serve the learner cohort effectively – especially in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) contexts. Literacy and ESOL staff co-developed more tailored materials (technically assisted by college ICT staff). Originally, the materials’ scope and ‘reach’ were intended to span ESOL, basic literacy/functional skills, and iGCSE/GCSE provision. This subsequently narrowed, for practical reasons.

The toolkit writing team also engaged learners in creating, structuring and testing materials in ‘wire-frame’ and live formats. This linked to the project’s parallel ‘literacy legends’ aspect. Eight learners were recruited (on a voluntary, self-selected basis) to join the initiative – to raise awareness and stimulate demand, and ultimately to mentor learners with the toolkit. The ‘legends’ requested and designed new project approaches, such as a website, and helped design and test the toolkit’s content and navigation as it evolved.

Other teaching staff were kept informed; CPD sessions to help them integrate the new initiative within their teaching from September 2015 are planned.

Staff stakeholders involved included: the director of learning and student support and the e-learning development manager; a functional skills English specialist, and ESOL specialist; a learning technologist, a game and animation developer, and a librarian. Amongst learners, the project engaged eight ‘literacy legends’ and initially consulted and surveyed 80 learners aged 16 to 19. Other teaching staff were initially consulted as well. Some sharing on approaches to e-learning in English with another provider consortium informed both sides’ projects.

The college’s equality and diversity policy aims to provide aspirations for all. The project helped in developing engagement, personalisation and differentiation for learning English via the ‘legends’, who reflect the college’s ethnically-diverse learner population well. Resources embody accessibility guidelines, with differentiated versions of the materials.

The staff involved refined their judgements on successful online pedagogy, and to better understand learner motivation, inspiration, and independence.

# Outcomes and impact

The project enabled a sense of ownership amongst the stakeholders it engaged, especially regarding new ways that English skills and learning can be developed and delivered at the college. The students involved as ‘legends’ were enthusiastic about the differences that they could make to their peers’ progress, such as in broad engagement, goal-setting and independent learning. Moreover, the partnership between them and the staff involved helped shape the project in a way that would not have been possible without their inclusion – for example, a dedicated website. Other college staff, such as librarians, felt that they directly contributed to curriculum development through involvement with the project. The toolkit writing staff developed their skills, and can see ways that those can be further deployed in their teaching, as well as with their colleagues.

Project outcomes have been regularly monitored internally through discussions amongst the team, as well as through contact with the project peer advisor.

The college sees this project as a beginning: it is a strategy which will begin to benefit the direct achievement of learners (other than the ‘legends’ team, already involved in the development phase) from the start of the next academic year. The outcomes will see resources being embedded into the college’s independent learning (‘i-Learn’) sessions, which will be further championed and supported by an expanded literacy legends team.

Potentially, the benefits to the college learners should be apparent in their level ranges of English skills and attainment (including through qualifications). It could also be manifested in their wider assimilation, engagement and independence. This can be within their individual contexts, the college environment, employment and the wider community. All these aspects can be tracked through the college’s management information systems, and use to develop the initiative further, with all kinds of stakeholders.

# Lessons learned

Recruiting the legends was problematic. Initially, many learners showed interest, but disengaged after receiving more details. This delayed the project, as the team recruitment approach switched where learners were recommended by English/ESOL teachers. In future, the college will also emphasise potential benefits for legends themselves, and create greater rewards for involvement.

The in-year timing of much of the project, after Easter, meant clashes with the pragmatic focus on exam and achievement for learners and staff, producing a drop in the rate of project progress. A different project calendar will be needed.

The legends’ enthusiasm for English learning in general, and particularly for supporting their peers to do so (and successfully), was a pleasing initial outcome to be nurtured for the future. Another key project legacy is embedding the legends approach within departmental English and maths planning.

The toolkit now has a visual theme used across all resources, evolved through ideas co-developed by the staff and students directly involved. In future, such an overall theme could be produced based on initial student survey results, before the development of fresh material. Subsequently, too, focus groups involving staff and students could be used to for specific refinements and improvements.

# Sustainability and transferability

The ‘literacy legends’ team will engage in the 2015/16 academic year’s induction period, especially – through the learning centre and its existing ‘i-Learn’ programme. They will also be cross-college ambassadors for developing English skills. The roll-out across programmes of study could cater for 2,000 16 to 18-year-olds.

The English e-learning programme was not new, but the project’s online self-study tools further enhanced its capabilities and capacity. Project staff’s learning about blended-learning pedagogy, and those resources, will be disseminated through two college teacher education programmes, as well as other ‘outstanding teaching, learning and assessment’ CPD activities across many college teams – all for implementation from September 2015. The lead subject specialist materials developers will champion the resources, and online learning, amongst staff.

Both the online toolkit’s approaches and the ‘literacy legends’ initiative to promote and support this learning can transfer in broad terms to many kinds of further education and skills provision. The materials’ presentational and pedagogical techniques can provide effective general models and examples. Methods for recruiting and training learners as ‘legends’ also offer valuable lessons and pointers for other contexts and settings.

Another project legacy will be to examine how to engage apprentices and offsite provision in such approaches.

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