

A whole team approach to delivering English, maths and ICT at work

Supported provider: Aspire (Lincoln College)

Improvement partner: Claire Collins, Training Plus Merseyside



Aspire

Aspirational Training by Lincoln College

Summary

This case study focuses on the functional skills development work carried out by Aspire, a work-based learning company, which is a subsidiary of Lincoln College. What is notable about the project has been its breadth; from structural developments such as the creation of an Improvement Team to action research, peer review and whole team development days. As a result Aspire, with support from their improvement partner Training Plus Merseyside, now have a flexible, differentiated model of functional skills delivery, designed to meet the varied needs of learners studying Apprenticeships in the workplace.

Introduction

About Aspire

Aspire is a wholly owned subsidiary of Lincoln College, providing vocational and professional training nationally and from centres in Lincoln, Newark and Gainsborough. In addition to a range of business training solutions, Aspire and Lincoln College currently offer Apprenticeships in 31 occupational areas including hospitality and catering, dental nursing, health and social care, retail, management and customer services. You can find further information on Aspire's [website](#).

What Aspire wanted to achieve

When functional skills qualifications became compulsory elements of national Apprenticeship frameworks, Aspire's Employer Responsive Managers, Niki Rendall and Phil Measures, enrolled on the LSIS 'Support for English, Maths and ESOL' programme. It was vital to them and their team that work-based learners could access the best support possible to achieve English, maths and ICT functional skills qualifications.

Aspire were placed in partnership with Training Plus Merseyside, an LSIS improvement partner that had been working on functional skills developments for the previous five years. With support and facilitation from an organisation with an innate understanding of work-place learning, the team embarked on a whole-organisation change to their English, maths and ICT delivery.

Implementation

Getting the approach right

What mattered most to Niki and Phil was finding a model that suited work place learning. Apprenticeship learners in the workplace need flexible blended learning opportunities. The Aspire team had previously been delivering key skills qualifications and found that learners were most motivated when they could see clear links between, for example, reading strategies or calculations and their own lives and work. For this reason, key skills had been embedded into vocational learning and Niki and Phil were keen that this effective practice was preserved.

The Improvement Team

With a clear goal in mind, to deliver functional skills in the best way possible, the first step for Aspire was to establish a cross-company Improvement Team. People known to be keen to take part in English, maths and ICT development were invited along to an introductory meeting. Claire Collins, from Training Plus Merseyside, facilitated activities to help the new team identify their development objectives and design a plan for the coming months. According to Claire having a team of people, each with different specialisms and perspectives on learners and employers' needs, was a key success factor in the planning and development work. "I've worked with many organisations undertaking projects like this", said Claire, "in my experience, having a varied team of people steering the project generates great ideas and, in the case of Aspire, a creative and balanced approach to the work."

A differentiated model to suit learners' needs

Aspire's Improvement Team wanted to design a differentiated functional skills delivery model. For example, some people like to read things step-by-step in a book and then try them out on their own. Other people like doing e-learning activities or watching 'how to' videos online. These learning preferences, coupled with each learner's unique life and work experiences means a 'one size fits all' model would not suffice. From the start of each learner's programme, the team wanted to identify the following.

- If learners would be able to cope with the English, maths and ICT demands of an Apprenticeship or if they might need some pre-course learning.
- Learners' preferred learning approaches: face-to-face, online, self-study by worksheets or, frequently, a combination of them all.
- How much time learners would need to prepare for assessments.
- What access learners had to technology to enable them to do blended learning in work and at home.
- Exactly what learners needed to work on from the range of topics at each English, maths and ICT level.

Based on the above criteria, the team decided they would develop a flexible, blended functional skills delivery model. This would enable workplace assessors to allocate timescales, resources and support approaches based on learners' specific strengths and needs.

What the team did

Bringing the Business Advisers on board

It became clear, early on, that Aspire's Business Advisers needed to provide completely clear information, advice and guidance regarding functional skills. This would help learners and employers understand what the qualifications were about and what learners would need to do to

achieve them. In order to identify learners who would struggle to achieve the English, maths and ICT components of their Apprenticeship, Business Advisers also needed to administer initial assessments, for which training and guidance was provided. The team decided that they would set a minimum level for Apprenticeship sign up of Entry Level 3 in English, maths (and, if required, ICT). This was not an easy decision and meant that the Business Advisers also needed a clear set of signposts for people who needed to do some work on English, maths and/or ICT before they could do their Apprenticeship.

“There is often a lot of apprehension from both employers and learners so we needed to ensure that their confidence and buy-in was secured at all stages. This could only be achieved through a whole organisation approach by the full Aspire team. The Business Advisers are key to the process as they provide the initial advice and guidance, which must be of a consistent, high standard. This ensures that the right course is identified at the right time and we never set any of our learners up to fail.”

Niki Rendall and Phil Measures, Employer Responsive Managers

A toolkit, blended-learning and a well-used guillotine

The Improvement Team recognised that assessors and learners would need a portable ‘toolkit’ of learning and formative assessment resources for functional English, maths and ICT.

To make this happen, the team undertook the following actions.

- Identified existing materials on Lincoln College’s virtual learning environment.
- Asked Aspire’s assessors what they had liked using for key skills delivery.
- Reviewed commercial products and
- Researched materials available on the [Excellence Gateway](#) and other resource sites like [Skills Workshop](#).

Claire also delivered professional development sessions to the full staff team on active learning, how to design projects and on introductions to teaching literacy, language and numeracy. The result was plenty of time spent cutting up laminated cards and making interactive resources to give everyone a toolkit of resources/memory stick to take out on the road.

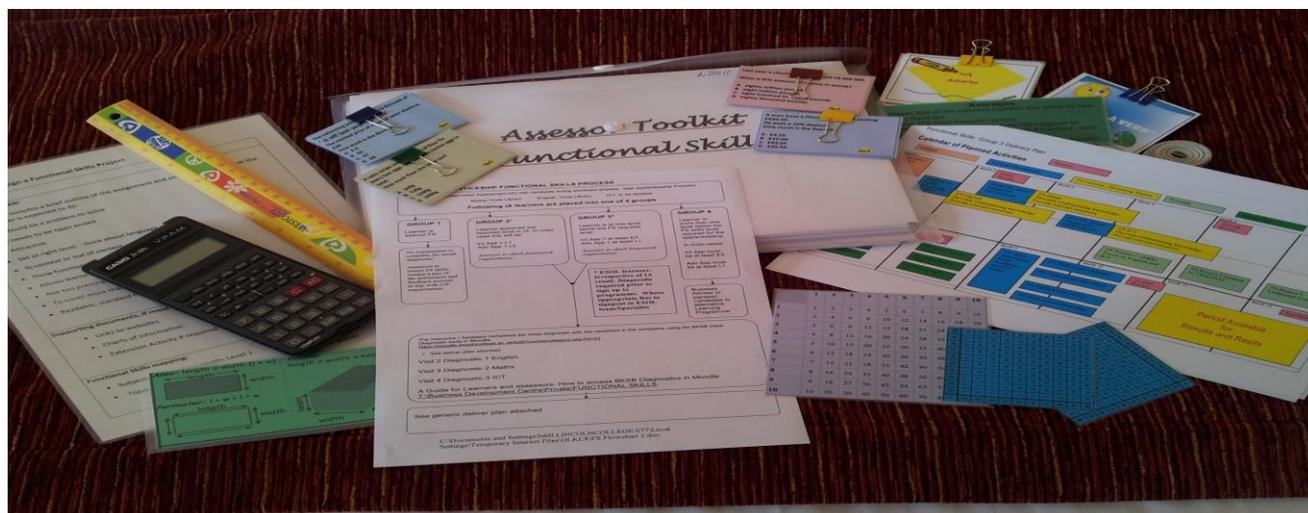


Figure 1: Picture of toolkit and resources

Action research: new approaches to our work

Two members of the Improvement Team Lucy Pears and Linda Still, with support from their managers and Claire, decided they would apply to take part in the [LSIS Action Research](#) project. The aim was to develop new research skills and, at the same time, support the work Aspire were doing on functional skills. Linda and Lucy attended residential events and worked with colleagues from across England to refine their research ideas and identify their findings.

“We have thoroughly enjoyed our experience and have been inspired by the Exploratory Action Research Project we have completed. The SUNCETT and LSIS team have provided us with dedicated support, guidance and feedback throughout our project, which has been invaluable. It has given us newfound confidence in our own skills and the knowledge we have gained has been instrumental in assisting us to provide support within the whole team.”

Lucy Pears and Linda Still, Instructor/Assessor/IQA

Cascading ideas and trying things out

Part of the action research was about cascading the toolkit and support approaches to the whole Aspire team and measuring people’s confidence to take them out to work with learners. As such, Linda and Lucy ran full team training sessions and gathered their colleagues’ feedback along the way.

Sharing the journey with other learning providers

As an additional check on the quality of the work that they had done and as an opportunity to share practice, Linda, Lucy and Niki agreed to deliver a workshop at the East Midlands LSIS Functional Skills Conference. The workshop was a resounding success and, not only did delegates go away with lots of ideas but, Aspire took back ideas and resources people had shared with them on the day.

Key lessons learned

- Have clear, aspirational goals and be prepared to make difficult decisions to achieve them.
- Create a steering group (or Improvement Team) that includes managers and people from all areas of the organisation.
- Dedicate time to enable the team to make good ideas into real working practices.
- Listen to the teams you are trying to support; assessors have extensive knowledge of their learners’ strengths and needs.
- Build on work done for previous qualifications and value the existing knowledge people have.
- Challenge yourself to go and do new things that can add value to your work; action research and workshop presentations, for example.
- Make activities you do fun and light-hearted so that people want to come to training days.

Outcomes and impacts

What we achieved

To date the team at Aspire has achieved the following outcomes.

1. An Improvement Team in place to steer and quality assure the development and delivery of functional skills qualifications.
2. A differentiated model for delivering functional skills in workplace learning with minimum levels to ensure learners have realistic chances of achieving.

3. New initial assessment processes to place learners correctly on course and develop their individual programmes.
4. A toolkit and in-house library of resources, including active learning and self-study blended tools for learners and staff to develop functional English, maths and ICT.
5. New skills in the team, including presentation and action research to assist in future planning and development work.
6. Apprehension within the team has been overcome and the team now have increased confidence regarding the delivery of functional skills in the workplace.

Final Team Event.... A Mad-Hatter's Tea Party

When developing programmes that include English, maths and ICT, it is so easy for people, learners and staff to become anxious and disengaged. However, development work at Aspire has included laughter and shared confidence building every step of the way.



“Part of the joy of working with Aspire has been the spirit of fun they bring to their work.”

Claire Collins
LSIS Improvement partner

Figure 2: Improvement Team at Aspire’s Mad-Hatter’s Tea Party on 23 April 2013



Figure 3: Niki Rendall, Lucy Pears and Claire Collins



Figure 4: The Aspire Delivery Team

As Claire explained, “I can't imagine that any member of the team would feel uncomfortable about asking their colleagues for advice and practical help. Everyone has pulled together to try and get this right and, to me, that's been the great success so far.”

Next Steps for Aspire

With the Improvement Team now firmly established Aspire are well placed to move forward with their whole organisational approach to the delivery of functional skills in the workplace. The full team will be involved in the further development of resources and they will continue to extend their skills and knowledge to ensure that they are able to offer the best support to their learners. The laughter will continue and the shared confidence will continue to grow as the journey continues.

Contact information:

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Sector coverage: Relevant to all further education sectors but especially work-based learning providers engaging in functional skills development and implementation projects and adopting a whole organisation approach.

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