

# Reinvigorating Curriculum Design

## Case Study



### **Project title: Magnet: attracting and engaging learners in a community-led curriculum**

This case study explores how a local authority supported 15 providers (to whom it contracts out informal adult learning) to become more responsive to the needs of their local communities.

#### **Worth reading if you are interested in:**

- Adult and community learning
- Community responsiveness
- Managing curriculum change (when working with sub-contractors)
- Making use of a VLE
- Project-based learning

### **Contact information**

**Main contact:** Lynn Norris  
Email: [lynn.norris@cambridgeshire.gov.uk](mailto:lynn.norris@cambridgeshire.gov.uk)

#### **Participating organisation:**

Cambridgeshire County Council Adult Learning and Skills

### **What the project set out to do and why**

The local authority had become increasingly aware that, despite serving a changing population with changing needs, the curriculum offer – and the way in which it was being delivered – had largely stood still for many years. Enrolments were dropping and some providers had been unable to recruit sufficient numbers to retain their contracts.

A number of local authority staff had been inspired by an LSIS/NIACE Hot Topic event into re-thinking their curriculum approach in order to survive and thrive.

The project set out to:

- explore ways of transferring the decision-making about the informal adult learning curriculum offer from the learning providers to the community itself;
- find innovative delivery methods, such as project-based learning and the use of a virtual learning environment (VLE), to engage a wider range of learners including those facing the most complex barriers to learning.

## What the project has achieved so far

The local authority has established a co-ordinated approach to community responsiveness. They have chosen not to impose a centralised methodology but to delegate responsibility to their contracted providers (a group of 15 schools, village community colleges and FE colleges) to come up with their own strategies and to share their ideas with one another.

The providers attended three facilitated sessions to stimulate their thinking about:

- the need for change;
- who their communities are – including any under-represented groups;
- how to reach their communities to find out what provision is wanted.

As a result, they have each begun to identify a plan for engaging with, and listening to, their communities. Their ideas include:

- having a presence at school parents' evenings, in local libraries and village shops;
- 'piggy-backing' community events;
- talking to existing learners;
- working through children's centres;
- use of appropriate target-group incentives to attend a focus group or complete a survey;
- promoting coffee mornings in a range of venues such as health centres, garden centres and shops.

In parallel to this activity, the local authority has been preparing the ground for some new approaches to delivering the curriculum. They have negotiated the use of the school VLE at two centres and have identified four courses (Holiday French, IT, maths and digital photography) to be re-designed as blended provision. These pilot courses have been chosen on the basis that the tutors, two of whom are E-Guides, are enthusiastic and have the right skills to design and deliver blended-learning courses. They are being supported by a curriculum leader from the local authority who is undertaking an online course on making the most of a VLE (run by NIACE).

Examples of other providers' practice in innovative/alternative curriculum delivery have been gathered. The local authority currently contracts with 25 voluntary and community sector (VCS) providers on the basis that they offer provision that meets the specific needs of the communities they serve; this is proving to be a rich source of exemplars. Representatives of these organisations, and others from further afield (for example, City Lit), responded to a set of questions about their provision.

Two opportunities for developing project-based delivery have been identified and the local authority is now supporting the providers to explore how they might exploit these:

1. Tutors from across the providers, and from a wide range of curriculum areas, will be attending a facilitated session at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge where they will be encouraged to think about how they could use the exhibits as a stimulus within their curriculum with a view to establishing one or more cross-curricular projects.
2. A meeting with the local NHS obesity co-ordinator has led to a curriculum leader from the local authority working with a group of cookery tutors to consider how learning about healthy eating could be embedded into the cookery curriculum in a way that is attractive to learners. They will be exploring different project-based approaches (such as developing a recipe book) rather than using the traditional cookery lesson approach.

### **What the project still needs to do**

Each contracted provider will be sharing the messages that they are hearing from their local community and their resulting plans for changing their curriculum. The progress and ideas will be disseminated at a final meeting. Change is expected to be incremental with each provider introducing something new by September 2012, recruiting learners to the new provision and running the new courses. Each provider will be asked to evaluate their new provision including the use of learner voice although the detail of the evaluation methodology is still to be agreed – but whatever approach(es) adopted, the resulting analysis should enable the local authority to answer the following key questions:

- What are the best ways to find out what the community wants and needs?
- Which projects worked best and why?
- Which delivery methods were most successful?
- How can we develop good practice more widely?

The initial VLE training will be cascaded so that more tutors feel confident to develop blended-learning approaches. Examples of blended provision and project-based learning will be shared more widely to encourage providers to develop their own project-based approaches and to explore how to make use of a VLE. To support this, the local authority has already begun working with JISC to use space on their Moodle, which can be used by tutors, particularly those in schools who have no VLE or have one which cannot be accessed by ACL tutors.

### **Key learning points**

- It is essential to have someone with expertise and enthusiasm to inspire providers to embrace change and to help maintain momentum as they move forward.
- 'Innovative' practice does not necessarily mean doing something that is completely new and has never been done elsewhere by anybody else. It is about doing something differently, and better, than before; something that brings about positive change in a particular setting.
- If you make changes to one aspect of your curriculum, it is going to have a knock-on effect elsewhere. So, a new curriculum offer may mean new recruitment practices, a different sort of prospectus, a new approach to curriculum planning, using new venues etc.
- Local authority support is crucial to enable the different types of sub-contractors (VCS, school, village community college and FE college providers) to work together more often which will allow them to share ideas, learn from one another and plan progression routes across the provision.