

Improving educational choices for young people in Post-16 education in Hertfordshire

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Summary:

We wanted to provide a personalised approach to the further education of a young man with complex autism. Our aim was to gradually extend the range of environments, people and situations this learner felt comfortable with, thereby increasing the choices available to him and so improving the quality of his everyday life.

We therefore created a more flexible timetable and curriculum centring around personal and social development (PSD), life skills, option choices and one wholly personalised 1:1 day which enabled him to engage in meaningful activities based around a routine he felt comfortable with. Teaching and support was consistently responsive to his needs; this led to increased participation in classes, as well as greater interaction with peers and staff, together with reports of generally lower stress levels and improved sleeping behaviours at home.

Key lessons learned:

- A person centred, flexible curriculum is essential for learners who cannot function within more traditional teaching programmes.
- Knowledge of individual learners – both the nature of their learning difficulty and the learners themselves – is crucial when building personalised learning programmes.
- Open communication and collaboration between all parties enables more effective working partnerships.
- Regular reviews of progress and goals are vital, as is the setting of realistic goals that are relevant to the learner; this also enables a better measure of progress over time.

Introduction:

About Hertford Regional College:

We are a College of Further Education (FE) offering the very best in practical, applied education and training, teaching real-life skills in realistic working environments. Based over a number of sites, Hertford Regional College has industry standard facilities in almost every area and exciting new courses for learners of all abilities. Learners come to us from London, Essex and Hertfordshire, thereby ensuring a diverse range of socio-economic backgrounds. Our inclusive learning programme covers accredited courses from entry level 1 to level 1, including learners with a range of learning disabilities, emotional and behavioural difficulties.

What we wanted to achieve:

We wanted to provide a personalised approach to the further education of a young man with complex autism. This learner had attended a specialist school for many years but his family felt it was no longer meeting his learning needs, particularly in relation to his extreme anxiety regarding daily activities and change. F can be extremely controlling and exhibit challenging behaviours when distressed but, more often, would simply refuse to do anything that varied from his established routine. This inability to cope with naturally occurring changes resulted in extreme agitation and an increasingly rigid existence.

The aim of this project was to gradually extend the range of environments, people and situations this learner felt comfortable with, thereby increasing the choices available to him and so improving the quality of his everyday life. Additional aims were to develop his communication and provide opportunities for him to achieve through the NOCN pathway to progression.

This learner's first year at college was successful in that he chose to attend each day but F continues to find many aspects of college life very difficult, in particular participating in activities with other learners and the waiting this would often involve. When agitated, F would hit himself and sometimes unwittingly hurt others; the stress experienced would leave him breathless and frightened but, more significantly, served to limit his life experiences.

The aim of this programme was to build on the successes of his first year in FE – particularly the strong relationships he had built with his 1:1 support staff – whilst adopting a more personalised approach to his learning.

Our long term aim was to equip F with the skills needed to cope with change so that he could become confident enough to move beyond what was becoming a series of extremely rigid routines, towards a richer, more rewarding, way of life. Central to this goal has been supporting F to generalise the skills he learns outside of the college environment so that he can progress at home and beyond.

Implementation:

Planning our approach:

Discussions at the end of F's first year at college, together with wider departmental changes, led to the recognition that a more personalised approach was required for F's learning.

F's personal tutor worked closely with his 1:1 support workers to discuss how best to support his progression and participation at college; his family were also consulted in this planning process through outlining how they envisaged his pathway to progression.

Actions and timescales were defined through the setting of targets and regular reviews, with the understanding that changes would be implemented as and when the need arose. As a visual learner, we aimed to make maximum use of digital cameras and interactive whiteboards in F's lessons, whilst working to incorporate his Ipad as much as possible (F associates his Ipad with 'home' and was initially reluctant to use it at college but now recognises that it helps him to establish his daily routines with college staff).

Our aim was, if this approach proved successful, to repeat the process in F's final year with an emphasis on his transition from college.

What we did:

Meetings between tutors, programme managers and support workers produced a flexible timetable, with F's 1:1 supports working closely with tutors on a daily basis to ensure lesson content was accessible and appropriate. F's family arranged a work experience placement and this was incorporated into his timetable for as long as F was happy to attend.

We provided F with a structured routine so that he would feel safe to learn but, within this, incorporated a number of trips and extra-curricular activities to achieve our aim of gradually extending the range of environments, people and situations he felt comfortable with. F was prepared for these through visual resources and preparatory visits whenever possible, with the option to return to college always available to ensure these new experiences remained positive.

Progress was reviewed regularly and F's family involved in formal review meetings every term. Overall, F has responded very positively to his college experiences throughout the year, perhaps because our approach remained responsive to his needs at all times, such as allowing him to dip in and out of activities as he wanted and enabling 'time out' as needed.

Outcomes and impacts:

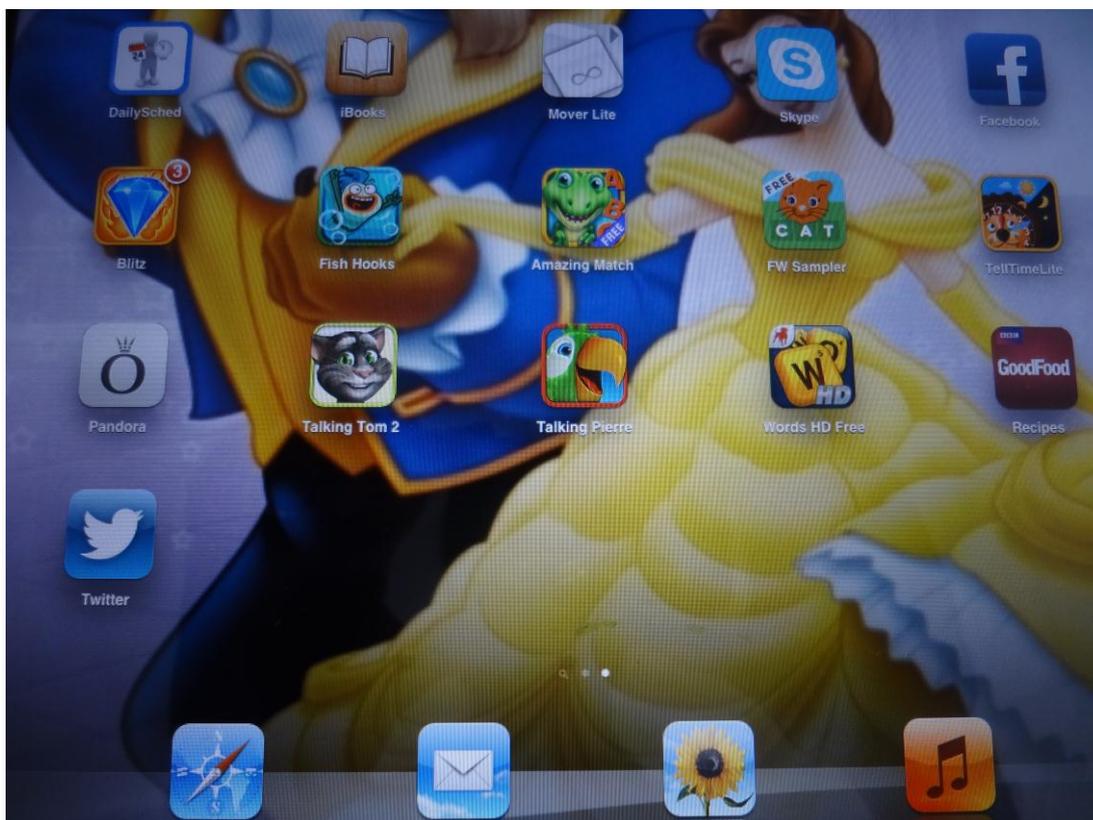
What we achieved:

Department-wide changes resulted in a more flexible timetable and curriculum centring round PSD, life skills and option choices; this enabled F to engage in meaningful activities which were less likely to confuse and therefore distress him.

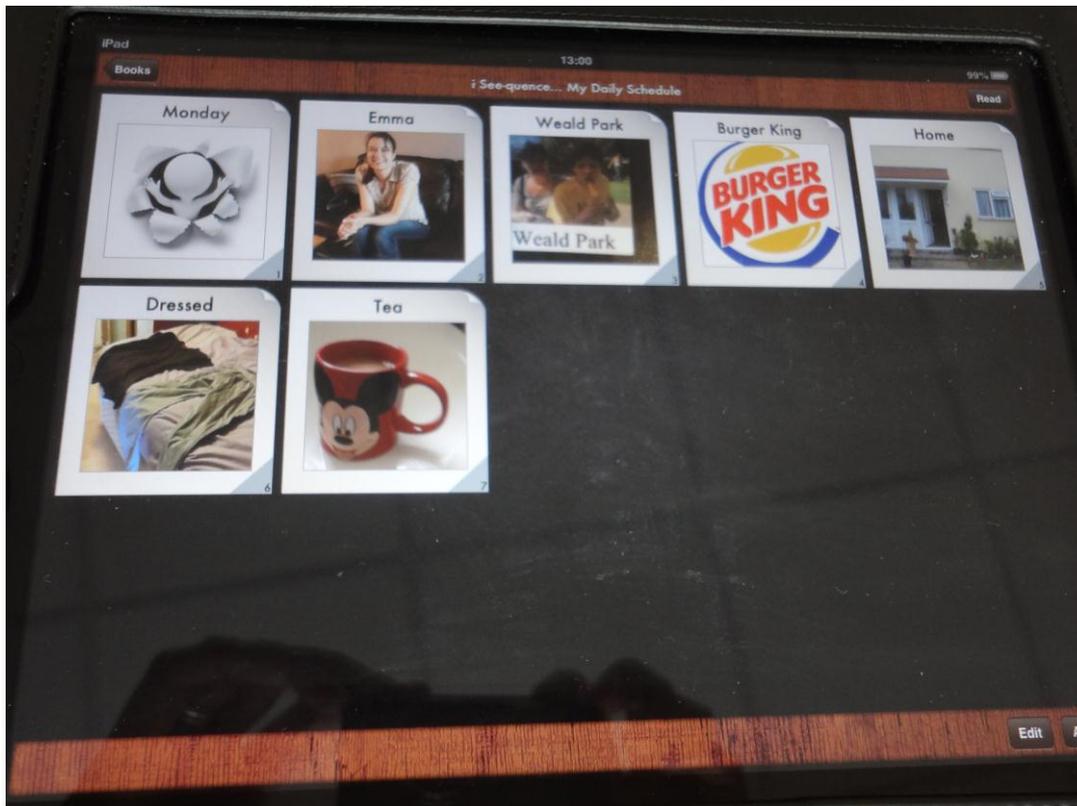
His timetable also featured one wholly personalised 1:1 day, with a programme of activities designed to reflect his interests, such as accessing shops, libraries, cafes; going to the park; spending time on the computer. This was delivered in such a way as to extend and vary the way he would engage in these activities outside of college.

Strong relationships have been formed between college and home, leading to increased continuity of practice and a focus on those areas his family consider central to his development.

When learners suffer acute anxiety, their fears must be dealt with if they are to progress. We have therefore incorporated **schedule planners**, such as the Ipad Daily Schedule app, into F's everyday routine.



Anxiety reducing app



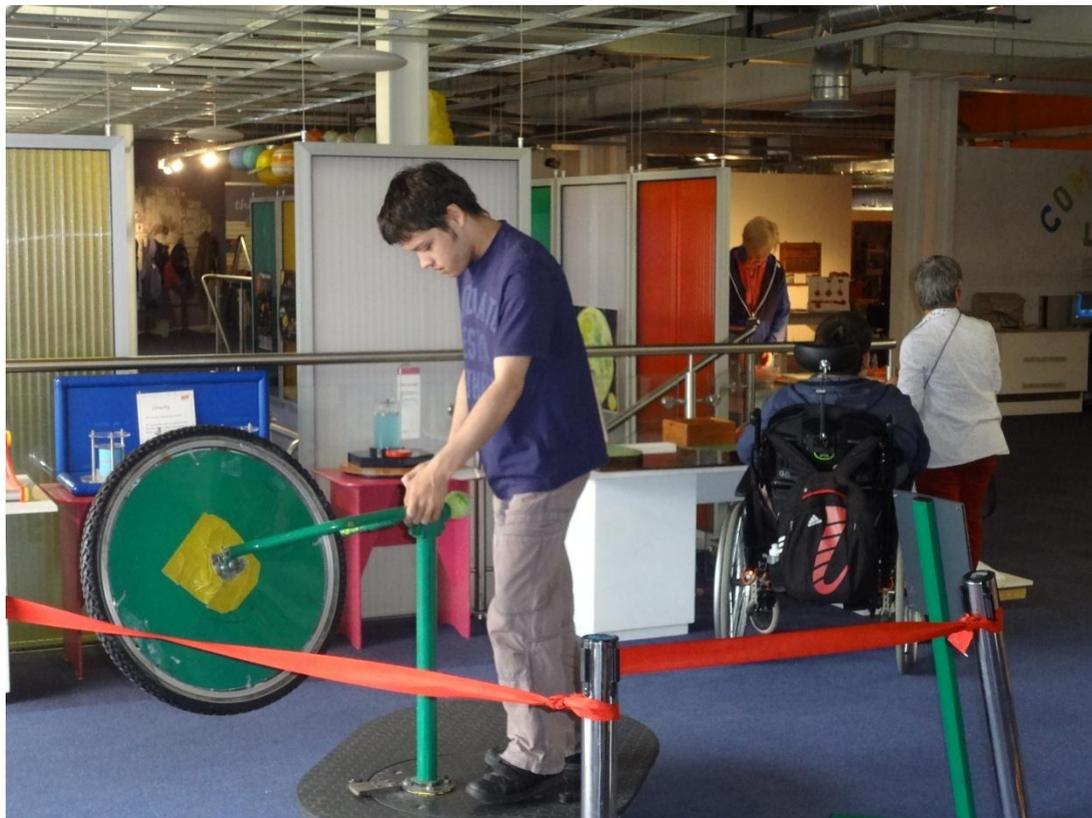
Using photographs to plan routines and reduce anxiety has allowed F to understand what will happen each day and to make/request changes, thereby giving him a sense of control over his own life. This has helped him to relax and so to learn. Training regarding anxiety in autism has been recommended by another member of the cluster group.

As a result of these changes, the learners' progress has exceeded all expectations. He is generally much calmer and happier whilst at college and this has led to increased participation in all classes, as well as greater interaction with peers and staff. Most significantly, he has engaged in and enjoyed a number of extra-curricular activities, including drum workshops, trips off-site and a pantomime, which he would not have been able to cope with previously. The learner is coping with change calmly and responding positively to praise, all of which has helped to make him a more integrated member of the college.

This has been possible primarily because of the close working relationship between the learner and his 1:1 support workers which has, in turn, been enabled by the willingness of tutors and managers to involve them in planning decisions, providing the freedom to work with F in accordance with his own unique learning needs. Activities involving preparatory visits, photo resources and individual timetables have enabled F to feel secure enough to deal with change and willing to approach it.

The most significant outcomes to date have been this learner's participation and enjoyment in whole group – sometimes multiple groups – activities, as the photographs which follow clearly demonstrate. Reports from home confirm that F is experiencing lower stress levels and has

improved sleeping behaviours. The project can therefore be said to have achieved its aim of extending the range of environments, people and situations F feels comfortable with but our intention is to continue this approach in order to further improve the choices available to this learner and to prepare him for the transition from college to post-college life.



F interacting with activities at Science Alive on a combined group outing.



F interacting with a 'new' person in a new place on a class outing.



F at his work experience placement.



F engaging in personalised activities on his 1:1 day at college:



At the college library.



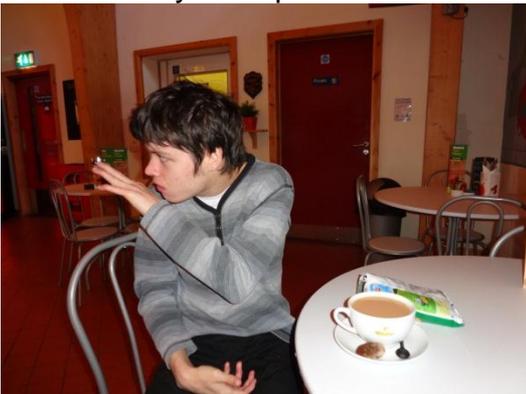
In Ware's public library.



At Lea Valley Park park.



Litter picking in the park.



At the YHA cafe.



At a coffee shop in town.



A preparatory visit to the college's Broxbourne site, prior to a drum workshop there.





Browsing in a charity shop.



Buying his soya milk in Tesco.



Choosing his gluten free bread in Tesco.



Waiting in the post office.

What we learned:

We learned that a person centred, flexible curriculum is essential for learners who cannot function within more traditional teaching programmes. This necessitates input and a commitment to inclusivity from tutors, support workers and managers.

Knowledge of individual learners – both the nature of their learning difficulty and the learners themselves – is crucial when designing personalised learning programmes. Regular and relevant training in these areas is highly beneficial for all staff.

Open communication and collaboration between all parties enables more effective working partnerships. This also helps to ensure consistency for the learner.

Regular reviews of progress and goals are vital, as is the setting of realistic goals which are relevant to the learner; this also enables a better measure of progress over time. Sometimes an approach will take time before it begins to benefit the learner; other times, they may stop responding to something which once worked. Deciding whether to continue or not can be difficult, hence the importance of involving as many relevant parties as possible in the review process.

What we are taking forward:

Our aim now is to focus on generalising positive behaviours beyond the college environment, e.g. using his Ipad at home and college and visiting the places he access through college with his family/external supports, so as to enable our goal of promoting a richer, more rewarding, way of life.

In January, we started a work experience placement in which F helped to sort materials at a local recycling centre. Through taking a gradual approach and allowing F to stay only as long as he was comfortable each week, F came to enjoy his time at 'the Square' but has recently chosen not to attend. The reasons for this are unclear but we are committed to finding another suitable work placement for next year.

We will also be looking to design and implement a transition package for F in his final year at college (2013-14) so that he is fully prepared for and happy with what comes next. Furthermore, we will be extending this person-centred approach to other learners who find it difficult to function within more traditional teaching programmes.

How we are sharing it:

Gathering information prior to the start of the academic year and sharing this with all those working with F helped to ensure staff were informed and taking a consistent approach to his learning. Our **personalised planning** and **Individual Learning Plan** documents enable an informed, person-centred approach which we have found is essential for our learners to progress (Outputs 1 & 2).

What advice we would give to others:

Person centred, flexible curriculums can be quite daunting to begin with but, once in place, they tend to evolve quite naturally. It helps to involve staff who really know the learner in the initial stages, at least, as such knowledge is essential to establishing a person-centred approach.

Open communication and collaboration between all parties enables more effective working partnerships. It also provides a wealth of knowledge, opportunities and resources for progression.

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