

Inside Evidence

Issue 5

Author: Curee Ltd
Date: 9th January 2009



Learner persistence

How can we help motivate learners to persist and succeed?

We all know that motivation is a vital ingredient for success. But what can we do to support older learners' motivation towards achieving their goals? To find out, four tutors working with learners on adult literacy and numeracy courses in college and in the workplace carried out their own small-scale research enquiries. They found the key was to explore with learners their motivations and aspirations then match teaching to the needs and motivations of the learners as individuals and as a group.

A focus on the learners' point of view

Sometimes this involved responding to specific interests and preferences, or worries the learners had about the course and life in general. For example, the tutor working with a group of armed-forces learners was aware of potential resistance from this group because it was a mandatory programme and some of the learners had negative prior experiences of learning. She began the first formal session by inviting the learners to write down any positive or negative thoughts they had, so that she could take them into account and help the learners recognise, as the course progressed, how they were overcoming their obstacles.

In some cases, the tutors adapted learning and teaching styles to address wider lifestyle issues for groups of learners. For example, a group of shift workers reported that a key demotivating factor for them was that they were often tired after completing a long shift before coming to their class. The tutor therefore aimed to provide very relaxed sessions, supported by more games and discussion sessions than she would usually do, to keep learners alert and engaged.

Specific teaching strategies helped too

Motivation was also enhanced through formative assessment. Regular, targeted feedback helped learners to relate their learning to their immediate goal (eg obtaining a qualification) and their long-term aims. The key features for success were to include a clear acknowledgement of progress made, identify a manageable area for improvement and provide guidelines on how that improvement should be made.

Resources that were designed to appeal to learners' kinaesthetic and visual modes of learning were helpful too. In one successful lesson, the learners folded cut out words to show the contraction, held together with a clothes peg on which a big apostrophe was drawn. Computers were found to be useful, for two main reasons. Firstly, they were motivating in their own right. Learners wanted to get to grips with computers, either as part of a general desire to get 'up to date' with their skills, or achieve specific tasks such as writing e-mails. They also found that devices such as spell-checks and the 'delete' key were reassuring 'safety nets' that protected them from feeling embarrassed by their mistakes.

Interestingly, taking part in the research was motivating too. Learners liked the idea that others might benefit from finding out about their experience. It enabled more consultation than usual and made the learners aware that they were not alone; that people were working to find ways to help them and learners like them.

Crucially, the research showed how no one standard technique or method will necessarily work for all learners. What is important is that tutors identify and use the teaching and learning methods that are most appropriate for their particular learners.

Evidence source

Kenwright, H. *et al* (2007) Learner-centred practice: meeting the goals and motivation of learners on *Skills for Life* programmes NRDC www.nrdc.org.uk/download.asp?f=3603&e=pdf

Take action

Could you:

- find out more about the aspirations and motivations learners on your courses have?
- act upon this knowledge by providing sessions specifically tailored to your learner's needs?
- investigate particular teaching techniques and practices, such as formative assessment, that can be used to enable learners to reach their goals?
- let your learners know they are part of your research?