

Learning Mathematics in context

Tower Hamlets College

Case study

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The Mathematics department at Tower Hamlets College has a long history of using innovative approaches to teaching and learning. In this project, a newly qualified Mathematics teacher worked with a Media Studies teacher to develop a session that would address some of the mathematics that the learners need to pass their Free Standing Mathematics Qualification at Level 2 but was set in the context of the rest of their programme.

The two teachers*, Nigel and Aminul, set aside time to plan a session together and decided that they would teach it jointly. The theme of the session was to be based around the use of numbers in the media, taking in issues such as bias and trust. The mathematics content was designed to help the learners develop their skills of presenting and interpreting data.

We use 'teaching and learning' and 'teacher' as generic terms to include:

- teaching, training and learning
- teachers, tutors, trainers, lecturers and instructors in the further education (FE) system.

The session was built around a short video piece by Errol Morris called 'The Fog of War'. This piece includes some fascinating and imaginative footage that uses numbers to visually represent bombs – a metaphor for the way Robert McNamara (the US Secretary of State) used statistics as a weapon of war. The learners then worked actively in small groups to analyse a newspaper article and to present the data in a variety of ways, including posters, to tell a range of stories. The completed posters provided a catalyst for some lively discussion about what story particular statistical measures and charts were actually telling us.

Afterwards, the learners talked about what they felt they had gained from the collaboration. They said that they had really enjoyed the session. One learner said that 'the maths actually helped with the media work'; another said that in spite of usually finding maths boring she felt that this had 'actually made us want to learn the maths' and that 'working together on the maths was really helpful'.

One of the teachers said:

'I wouldn't normally risk doing a lesson like this – where scissors and glue are involved – especially with a group who are generally not at all interested in mathematics...However, this experience has shown me otherwise. It was an extremely successful lesson and, most importantly, the students learned and thoroughly enjoyed what they were doing...it is something that I can use in the future'.

All too often teachers work alone. This project has reminded us that working collaboratively is really worthwhile and can produce some unexpected and pleasing outcomes. Putting aside some time to work together to plan a session, delivering it together, and then reflecting on the outcomes can be a really fruitful activity.

The two teachers used their reflective journals (attached) to capture their thoughts through the process. You may like to use them to help you do the same in your own area.