

Whole organisation approaches to managing the transition to functional skills with a strategic focus

Providers: MaTReC, Open Door and Swarthmore

Summary

The three organisations are all adult and community providers with charitable status. Two of the organisations are based in Sheffield and one in Leeds. The providers offer a range of learning opportunities to people of all ages and abilities and in particular to those with skills below Level 2 and furthest away from the labour market. The range of learning provision on offer includes, Skills for Life, ICT, Arts and Crafts, Business Administration, Languages including Sign Language, Alternative Therapies, Dance, Music, Exercise and Counselling. All organisations have participated in a variety of LSIS improvement projects previously and have a history of working collaboratively. Work funded through the Skills Funding Agency contracts has now formalised the group because of minimum contract levels. It was decided that the three providers should pool their LSIS account to move forward with the transition to functional skills

Supported providers

MaTReC, Sheffield
Open Door, Sheffield
Swarthmore, Leeds

Improvement partner

Dilys Taylor, LSIS
Associate

Approach to accessing support as a group

At the initial meeting with the LSIS Consultant, Dilys Taylor, held at MaTReC in Sheffield in mid-November 2012, representatives from the three organisations, Alison, Julie and Mandy, decided to arrange an all staff development day at the beginning of January 2013. Mandy from Swarthmore offered their venue in Leeds as the base and ideas for the session were formulated together with the action plan for the three providers. Relevant staff would be invited to attend the **awareness-raising session** which would include references to initial assessment and if there was time, to consider resources. It transpired that across the providers there was a range of confidence with functional skills. Some staff had been involved with functional skills already and were just finding their way; others had little or no experience or knowledge of them at all. None of the providers were back into the swing of teaching when the event was scheduled to take place in the first week of January, so it was an ideal time to hold the event.

Implementation

What we did

First event

The 4 January 2013 arrived and everyone made his or her way over to Leeds. The MaTReC and Open Door staff arrived by train and met up with the Swarthmore team. Staff introduced themselves and the icebreaker was the “F” word exercise where participants say, using a word beginning with the letter F, how they were feeling about functional skills at that moment in time. Responses ranged from *fine* to *frustrated* and *flummoxed*. This exercise enabled fears,

concerns and misconceptions to be aired in a safe and friendly environment. This took quite a long time but was worthwhile in determining where individual positives and negatives were as well as some of the **fears** that people naturally have with something new.

The second part of the morning was based around initial assessment and the importance this plays in identifying learning needs and gaps. Tools and techniques were discussed and the pros and cons debated. The 'Being Functional' self-assessment card sort activity went down really well, with participants thinking creatively about using them alongside some of their wider provision. One such example was of using them with non-teaching staff. Alison asked if she could use the activity as part of a whole organisation standardisation day planned at MaTReC the following week. She wanted to use it as a starting point for implementing a whole organisation approach to embedding functional skills as she could see the benefits the activity would have with other members of the organisation.

The afternoon was spent thinking about how to ensure functional skills learners have as much experience of different contexts and scenarios as possible. A "thinking outside the box" activity was undertaken by everyone. It really made people think about functional skills for life, for work and for learning across all the various "examples" to be found in the boxes. A variety of "tokens" which could represent such things as planning an event for family and friends, or a holiday or even learning to drive were discussed and debated and it was clear that functional skills are everywhere – it is just a case of looking for them.

Participants then examined some resources for teaching and learning which were originally produced some time ago as part of the key skills support programme but are still relevant today. These were the packs for Motor Vehicle, Travel, Hospitality Elderly Care, Child Care, Retail and Hairdressing. The topics can be used to extend and expand the range of contexts and scenarios learners are likely to come across in the functional skills tests. The group also looked at a speaking and listening toolkit as well as some of the repurposed key skills assignments; again for ideas for contexts.

It was decided that the next session would be hosted at Open Door premises in Sheffield and as many people who could attend would do so. The plan would be to bring along some tried and tested resources already being used by teachers. In the meantime, we would think about the top ten or top twenty topics for English and maths that the majority of learners would most likely need help with.

Finally, the group decided that it would be useful to have a repository for all the resources so that organisations and individuals could share what they had already, as well as devising new materials. The repository needed to be accessible for outreach provision as well as provision held on main sites. Initial thoughts were around a learning platform but cost would be an influencing factor. Julie would ask her colleague Terry for his input at the next meeting, as it was felt his technical expertise would be invaluable.

Second event

On the 18 February 2013, members of the three organisations came together to work on identifying the range of resources that they could share. Fourteen participants took part in the session at Open Door premises in Sheffield. Terry McHale, the Centre Co-ordinator of Open Door gave a presentation to the group on the pros and cons of learning platforms which they might like to consider. A lot of discussion followed and it was eventually decided to opt for "Skydrive." This was free, did not require any technical or user support and a prime consideration was that it would pass the "Mandy from Swarthmore test!" It was also important to be able to access resources from remote centres out in the community.

This meant that everyone could access stored resources and upload materials and information for functional skills, English and maths. It was felt that there should be three areas initially to cover English, maths and other more general resources such as learning plans, schemes of work, feedback templates and so on.

The group then split into three to begin work on defining the structure of the site covering key areas for the topics. Participants initially set up files and folders into which a number of resources were uploaded. The benefits of having English and maths specialists in the group meant that files were created and labelled from a shared understanding of what was needed. For example, it was felt that ESOL resources should be put into a file area in the English “cabinet.”

The English “cabinet” contained the following topics.

English		
Assessment materials	Punctuation	Spellings
Creative Writing	Reading activities	Writing for purpose
<i>Embedding</i>	Social site materials	Useful links
Grammar	Speaking and listening	Study skills
Induction materials	Special education needs	ESOL

Each of the above topic folders contains a range of sub folders and further resources. For example in the *Embedding* folder there are a further three sub folders:

- 1) English;
- 2) Maths; and
- 3) Vocational.

In turn, these sub folders contain a range of resources that can be used by staff. An example of this is the **1) English** sub folder. This contains further topics such as *Employment* or *Hospitality* or *ICT* and within these there are a range of resources as illustrated below.

Employment	Hospitality	ICT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparing for an interview 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dealing with problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Checking and editing text • Checking what to do • Graphs and charts • Tables • Writing an email

Typical content for the maths “cabinet’ for example is shown below.

Data handling	Fractions, decimals, percentages	Measure and shape
<i>Multidisciplinary problems</i>	Practice tests and assessment	Whole number

Again, each topic folder contains a range of resources. For example within the *Multidisciplinary problems* folder there is a Garden activity, which contains 16 resources related to gardening including one which is an amended version of an original embedded materials resource from an in-house MaTReC resource.

The whole day was found to be extremely useful and enjoyable, with everybody gelling as a cohesive group working together for the benefit of students in all the organisations. Participants found that uploading resources is straightforward and therefore they can continue to do so to enhance the facility.

Outcomes and impacts

What we are taking forward

Additional resources are being uploaded on a regular basis and it is intended to have at least two follow up events later in the year, not only to develop the site further but also to maintain and modify content. New staff will be included in CPD events, as part of their induction, to familiarize them with materials and resources for teaching and learning available on the Skydrive. Each organisation will encourage staff from across all programme areas to become familiar with, use and develop resources for the site.

A “notes page” is to be added which teachers can use to reflect on the usefulness and effectiveness of particular resources which will help with the editing of resources when the time comes.

What we achieved

On reflection, the three organisations felt that there were a number of benefits derived from the resource repository not only for their staff but for learners as well. These are listed below.

- Eliminates duplication and saves time and effort.
- Improves choice and widens range of learning materials available.
- Sharing of good practice within team and across organisations.
- Provided a discussion platform between tutors and practitioners enabling them to share experiences and ideas.
- Increased efficiency and effectiveness of teaching and learning.
- Cost savings and efficiency gains for all organisations.
- Good form of CPD for everyone bringing the group even closer together.
- A wealth of contexts and scenarios to bring meaning and relevance of functional skills to learners.

Contact information

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