

Portland College

Effective Learning Support Strategies



Introduction

Portland College has responded to an influx of learners with complex communication and learning difficulties, low self esteem and low expectations by implementing effective learning support strategies. These challenges have encouraged the college to refocus and develop positive opportunities for staff and learners, as well as their families, to raise expectations and promote a “can do” attitude.

About Portland College

Portland College is a vibrant national residential college for people with a wide range of disabilities and learning difficulties. It strives to develop every learner’s unimagined potential, underpinned by a broad range of accredited qualifications in independence, sport, arts, business studies, computing, small animal care and horticulture. It delivers a specialised sensory curriculum for learners with more complex needs. Portland College provides first-class education and vocational training for 120 learners on the Foundation Learning Programme supported by 3 managers, 27 tutors, 6 curriculum support assistants and 53 learning support assistance, and 43 learners on the Employment Programme supported by 15 members of staff.

The learning support team at Portland includes the following disciplines:

- Augmentative Alternative Communication (AAC)
- Augmentative Alternative Technology (AAT)
- Speech and Language Therapy (SLT)
- Physiotherapy
- Hydrotherapy
- Autism Support
- Dyslexia Support
- Visual Impairment Support
- Occupational Therapy
- Transition Support
- Student Information and Guidance

Output

Portland College believes that learning support staff make a valuable contribution to the delivery of learning, and therefore it is essential that they are well trained, respected and appropriately supported to work jointly with teaching staff to deliver high quality learning and care to its students. Learning support staff help identify and deliver the additional support and resources required for students with learning difficulties and physical disabilities to access and achieve their potential within their chosen area of study.

Portland College provides stimulating learning opportunities that help learners to reach their full potential. Learning is tailored to meet individual learners' needs and interests. The needs of learners at Portland are such that communication, care and independence skills play vital roles in their learning.

Tutors and support staff work with learners through daily group and weekly individual tutorials, as well as regular observations by speech and language therapists (SLT), to determine the most effective medium with which to communicate. Specialist support facilitate, wherever necessary, the provision of alternative methods of communication, including variations in text, provision of sign language, symbols, communication aids, technical aids and any other adaptive or assistive equipment as required.

In an effort to help staff across the college to support learners with communication needs the SLT department put together boxes of resources to support communication in every base room and department. These boxes contain basic resources such as a communication book, sets of symbols and photos of locations around the college that will help support learners with understanding and making choices. This has provided staff and learners with access to basic communication resources, thus increasing accessibility and promoting consistency across the college.



Fig 1. Contents of a Communication Box See also annex 1

Learners receive support with regard to their health and well-being as well as maximising their educational opportunities. Good relationships are formed with learners which promote a sense of self worth, confidence and security. Learners are encouraged to build on existing skills, knowledge, experience and understanding, and are given support to help them in every aspect of their lives, to enable them to live as independently as possible.

Together the multi-disciplinary team at Portland develop constructive working relationships which promote and support the progress and development of learners.

Implementation

In order to implement effective support, Portland staff are capable of delivering and/or learning to deliver high quality support. New recruits undertake an initial two week induction period introducing them to their new roles where they are provided with mandatory and specialist training, and given the opportunity to shadow existing tutors and support staff. Portland College believes that by understanding what a learning difficulty or disability is, and the impact it has on the individual, staff can assist learners with regard to all aspects of their learning.

“As a Learning Support Assistant at Portland College I need to understand the needs of our learners to help me build good working relationships with them and support them effectively. Every year I undertake mandatory training in communication needs, manual handling, and eating and drinking. I have also completed Autism Awareness and NAPPI (Non Abusive Psychological & Physical Intervention) training as I regularly support learners on the autistic spectrum.”

Collete Brown, LSA

Staff are encouraged to build good working relationships with one another and develop an ability to work well both within a team and independently. An effective programme of relevant staff development and training ensures that all staff have the knowledge and skills necessary to fulfil their role to a good standard to meet individual needs.

Regular, appropriate and useful feedback on performance, through supervision, appraisal, observation and mentoring, enable staff to understand how they are doing and to develop new skills. Portland College continues to improve the quality of staff practice through reflection, evaluation of their own practice and continuing professional development. Additionally, effective communication systems support information sharing and liaison between all individuals and agencies working with learners, and facilitate consistent support for learning across the waking day curriculum. As a result, Portland College has been able to open its doors to learners with a wider spectrum of disabilities.

Case Study

Claire is a 22 year old young lady with Cerebro-Costo-Mandibular Syndrome. She has a tracheostomy with low speech intelligibility, learning difficulties, hypothyroidism, gastrostomy and autistic tendencies. Prior to starting at Portland College Claire's primary channel of communication was a small number of Makaton signs, gestures and body language.

When Claire arrived at Portland College she had difficulty communicating with people and often did not respond when people talked to her. She did not initiate conversation and rarely used eye contact with others. During Claire's first term she spent a lot of time with the Alternative & Augmentative Communication (AAC) department trying out a variety of communication aid devices before being advised which device would be the most beneficial for her. Since then Claire's subsequent AAC sessions were structured to encourage her to use her communication aid effectively and practise sentence structure and spelling.



Fig 2. Claire using her Communication Book and Lightwriter Communication Aid

During her initial period at Portland College Claire found the transition difficult causing her to become stressed, have feelings of disorientation and exhibit challenging behaviour. Claire's pastoral tutor helped to create a symbol based picture book that she was able to use to help express her feelings easily and cope with new situations.



Fig 3. Claire's Communication Book, tailored to her needs

Regular meetings were also held between staff directly involved with Claire's education or residential needs including her pastoral tutor, 1:1 learning support assistant and key worker, as well as a number of other tutors involved with delivering her curriculum. Additionally her speech & language therapist

and an autism specialist were also invited to contribute. These meetings were used to discuss strategies that are now used with Claire to help with her behaviour issues.

Impact

Miriam Perrin, Claire's Pastoral Tutor, who has been involved heavily with Claire working closely with the learning support team at Portland to instigate effective support strategies for her, is pleased with the progress that she has made:

"Initially Claire required almost constant one to one attention from a tutor or LSA which affected the majority of sessions she attended. It was important to find the right media through which Claire could communicate effectively and put strategies in place to help her to settle and achieve greater independence. These strategies have had a positive bearing on Claire's behaviour and have encouraged Claire to make her choices known and participate more willingly and confidently in the social aspects of everyday life. Claire now exhibits a much greater awareness of the world around her, and an ability to organise herself and adapt to new situations."

Miriam Perrin, Pastoral Tutor

"When Claire first came to Portland she was very unsettled and each day was a challenge for Claire and the staff working with her. After a few months using a combination of strategies, structure and routine, Claire settled and has developed her skills, learnt new skills and has gone on to achieve many goals and targets set for her and is still achieving."

Sarah Goodwin, Claire's 1:1 LSA



Fig 4. Claire during one of her art sessions

"When I first started to teach Claire in art she was quite reluctant to do any other forms of art other than on a computer or by using crayons or pencils. Claire has really embraced trying new things to make some really excellent pieces of art. Claire is also trying new techniques to make these pieces of art. Claire recently made a ceramic mask and while doing so Claire was prepared to handle the clay"

without gloves on for a short period of time. This was quite an achievement for Claire as when she first started art she hated touching anything with her hands unless she had gloves on to do her work.”

Andrew Burton, Art Tutor

Outcome

The consistent approach of the support team at Portland has enabled learners to succeed and participate in all aspects of their learning. It has also had a cascading affect on showing team members how to work with learners and the results that can be achieved. Key support forums have been created to advise the team on how to work with individuals and promote effective support strategies.

Learners are consulted and involved in creating effective support at all times. A learner forum has been created to discuss support strategies and enable feedback to be given and evaluated. All achievement whether it be small or large is recognised by support staff and praise is always given to promote continuing progress. As a result Portland College has learners who are socially included, achieving academically, enjoying learning and whose self esteem is high.

Summary

Portland College places a strong emphasis on Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for all staff, which is underpinned by the appraisal process and reflective practise, so personal and professional targets can be set for the upcoming academic year.

Portland believes that the key to effective learning support is good communication between all parties involved with supporting learners including pastoral tutors, session tutors, LSAs, residential key workers, specialist support teams and, of course, the learners themselves.

Strategies used at Portland College to promote effective communication include:

- Support forums for tutors, specialist support teams, LSAs and learners where everyone has a voice and can contribute to creating effective support strategies
- Regular communication with parents or guardians of residential students to see if there are any home issues that may impact on education
- Day students carry with them communication diaries that are filled in by tutors and parents on a daily basis
- Communication boxes in all base rooms to promote consistency for staff and learners, and share good practise and resources for supporting learners with communication and comprehension difficulties
- Regular group and individual tutorials
- Short and long term targets are negotiated between pastoral tutors and the learners to promote ownership

Annex 1 Contents of the communication box

- Communication book (general)
- Signing book
- Symbol and photo sets

- Talking mat
- How to use Somerset Total Communication Symbols
- How to use Communicate in Print
- Talking mat leaflet
- Objects of reference leaflet
- Visual schedules leaflet
- Making information accessible
- AAC Golden rules
- Symbolised timetable templates
- Now and next board
- About my pain
- Transition resources