

Putting young people on the path to work



Lambeth College working with Turney School, Oak Lodge School and The Camden Society

Summary

This case study focuses on the way in which partnership-working between a Further Education (FE) college, two of its link special schools and a supported employment agency can enable young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to have meaningful experience of the workplace. It will be of interest to other FE colleges and special schools looking to offer high quality work-related learning to young people while they are still at school and to organisations interested in exploring partnership-working as a problem-solving technique.

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Sector coverage: FE College, special schools and supported employment agency

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Introduction

About the partners

Lambeth College is a large inner London general FE college. Turney School offers primary and secondary education up to the age of 16 for learners with learning difficulties, speech and language difficulties and autistic spectrum disorders in the London borough of Lambeth. Oak Lodge School, just over the border in Wandsworth, is a residential and day school for young people aged 10-19 with hearing, speech, language and communication needs. The Camden Society, which has an established partnership with Lambeth College, is a London-based charitable organisation which runs person-centred services to support people with disabilities to live, work and socialise in the ways they choose.

What we wanted to achieve

The partners were all members of an LSIS-funded cluster who had elected to work together to improve the post-college outcomes for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, in particular in relation to work. This sub-group chose to focus on the pre-college experience, enabling meaningful learning about work to begin while the young people were still at school.

Turney School sought the college's help in finding real life work experience for learners with more complex needs, whom they were struggling to place. Oak Lodge School wanted a group of its deaf learners to experience learning in the workplace rather than just at school or at college and asked the college to design some link provision that would take the learners out of the classroom environment – and their comfort zone - and into the workplace.

The college wanted to improve the way in which it worked with its link schools, to be more responsive to their needs and to help set learners on a path towards employment while still at school. They were aware that they had resources and facilities that could be hugely beneficial to the schools. In the same way, The Camden Society was keen to share its experience of supporting young people in the work place and to provide the schools and college with useful tools, materials and approaches. They were also interested in developing their own understanding of a wider range of young people, with differing needs and at an age younger than their own usual clientele.

Implementation

The partners set up a task group to explore the options for the school learners. Each school was given a named manager from Lambeth College's learning difficulties and disabilities team to work with and two college tutors were also assigned to the project. They worked closely together, with The Camden Society in an advisory role, to identify, for the Turney School learners, in-college work placement opportunities and, for the Oak Lodge learners, a real-life painting and decorating commission from a local charitable organisation.

The college staff took time to get to know the learners, who were already on link courses at the college, and to explore with the school staff what they wanted to achieve for the young people. Turney School was interested in finding work placements for four learners for whom they had not managed to find positions with external employers, despite their best efforts. They did not want simply to place them in their own school environment and saw the college, with its range of on-site enterprises, as offering a valuable 'half way house' between the security of school and an absolutely independent placement, with knowledgeable staff on hand if needed. The college set about finding suitable placements to match the learners' interests and abilities. Three learners worked in the postal service on Lambeth College's Clapham site, an enterprise specifically set up to give their own Entry 1 learners experience of work, and one travelled independently to the Brixton site to work in the Healthy Gourmet Café.

Oak Lodge School wanted to challenge its learners. 'We wanted to move the students away from what was a 'vocationally safe' area, to something that was more reflective of the real life work situations for deaf students.' They also wanted a more realistic working environment in which the learners could acquire vocational skills. At the college, the learners were carrying out painting and decorating in rooms set up for teaching purposes.

'There is a big difference between stripping several layers of wall paper off a wall that has been up for 15 years, compared to taking the wall paper off that has only one or two layers and has been up for 6 months.'

The college explored a number of possible avenues, including work placements, before finding the Organisation for Sickle Cell Anaemia Research (OSCAR) based in Brixton which asked them to decorate several of its rooms and became a rich teaching and learning environment for acquiring new painting and decorating skills.



Outcomes and impacts

What we achieved

All the learners involved gained knowledge of the workplace, acquired new skills and increased their confidence. They responded very positively to the challenges laid down for them. The Oak Lodge learners welcomed the opportunity to contribute to the local community through helping a charitable organisation. They also appreciated the fact the rooms they were decorating would not be redecorated by another set of learners within a couple of months! Parents have also commented on how good it has been for them to have experience of work.

Turney School has been inspired by the experience to add a 'work skills' lesson into the KS4 curriculum where learners will be out and about in the school and community engaged in practical tasks. They plan to focus on developing this area of their curriculum, building an even wider portfolio of external work experience providers, developing the links made with Lambeth College and using some of the supporting resources that The Camden Society helped them to create.

Oak Lodge is planning to replicate the experience of this group of learners by sourcing more 'real life' work experiences within the community that will link with the vocational training the students will receive at the college. They plan to draw on the good local contacts of many of the college staff so their learners can get work out in the community.

Through the work required for this project, the college and schools have developed a much closer partnership than they had before. They now have a better understanding of each other's provision, priorities and needs, and have established a mutual sense of trust which will underpin future working together, as they continue to build progression pathways towards employment for their learners.

Thanks to the involvement of The Camden Society, they also have a legacy of useful resources to support work experience. In particular, two log books have been developed which are accessible to learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, working at different levels. These should enable learners to record and reflect on their experiences of work in a way that is appropriate to them. These log books are available as part of the series of outputs arising from the LSIS SEN Green Paper cluster project.

What we learned

- An FE college can provide a rich source of work experience placements for special school pupils, particularly those who need a slightly sheltered environment
- Close working between special schools and a college, during KS4, makes the experience of transition a much more positive one for young people
- Partnership-working with a variety of different organisations takes time to get going but is worth the investment as it leads to pooling resources and sharing knowledge and expertise – to the benefit of the learners
- Special schools need to think clearly about what they want from their local FE college and work closely with named college counterparts to achieve it
- All young people – even those with the most complex needs – can be found an experience of work which is appropriate for them, if you work with partners to achieve it
- Taking an innovative approach to vocational teaching and learning can motivate not just the learners but also their tutors
- Offering young people meaningful experiences of real-life work while still at school means that you've set them on a journey that will hopefully lead to paid work in the future.

What we are taking forward

Lambeth College will continue to work with Turney and Oak Lodge Schools to provide work experience and facilitate community-based learning experiences for the school pupils. They plan to extend this style of working to other local special schools. They also intend to evaluate their approach, seeking learner and parent feedback as well as input from the teaching staff at both the schools and the college – and to refine it accordingly.