

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

Supported provider: Stoke on Trent College

Improvement partner: Dianne Robinson, LSIS Associate



Summary

Stoke on Trent College applied to LSIS for three days support from the English, maths and ESOL support programme, using their virtual account. The focus of the package was for advice and support with:

- a whole organisation approach to improving the quality of English and maths provision;
- embedding literacy, language and numeracy into Apprenticeship delivery; and
- developing assessment processes and procedures throughout the learner journey.

Introduction

Stoke on Trent College is a general further education (FE) college, offering a wide range of provision, which serves the city of Stoke on Trent, much of north Staffordshire, and parts of South Cheshire. Over half the learners are adults studying mainly on a part time basis. Most learners aged 16-18 study on a full time basis. The proportion of black and minority ethnic backgrounds has increased in recent years and was 18 per cent in 2010-2011. One thousand and fifty learners were on an Apprenticeship programme in 2010-2011.

What we wanted to achieve

The first meeting with Nicky Birch, Director for Skills for Life and Employment, was highly productive with clearly defined targets. Objectives were easily defined as they were set in response to findings from the recent Ofsted report and encompassed the following.

- To increase quality through a whole organisation approach to embedding literacy, language and numeracy.
- To revise the functional skills strategy and include Apprenticeships.
- To establish a more rigorous and consistent approach to assessment processes across College.
- To identify staff development opportunities for vocational tutors, enabling them to deliver functional skills more effectively.

- To improve the English and maths skills of all staff.
- To work towards a coordinated, consistent approach to functional skills.
- To develop functional skills teaching and learning resources.

Implementation

Nicky had a clear vision of what was needed and was keen to take on board the agreed actions, with the result that targets were addressed at a fast pace. The College was undergoing a restructuring with several appointments in the pipeline, including that of Team Leader for Functional Skills. So plenty of challenges ahead for the new academic year!

What we did

Action 1

A draft strategy was produced in November 2012 to reflect a whole organisation approach to functional skills which included assessments throughout the learner journey. This was presented to the senior management team in January 2012. The revised strategy encompassed study programmes for 2013-2014, Apprenticeships, GCSEs and adult provision. The main aim of the strategy was to drive the curriculum planning process so that English and Maths remained not only central, but also a consideration for full time courses.

Action 2

The second clear goal was to achieve a more rigorous and consistent approach in the use of individual learning plans (ILPS) and target setting. Dianne Robinson, a LSIS Associate, facilitated a workshop which included a cross section of tutors from all areas of the College. The purpose of the workshop was to review the current ILP, which had been trialled since the start of the academic year, and to produce a format which could be used across College. By the end of the workshop an ILP was produced which showed clear targets and progression. The next stage was gaining approval from the Director of Quality before rolling it out across College. Inevitably, some adaptation/extension would be needed to reflect the nature of the client group. Links with our learner tracking systems for full time learners were also considerations.

Action 3

All staff involved in the delivery of English and maths were required to undertake functional skills exams with the targets of 60 per cent to gain Level 2 functional English, and 50 per cent to gain Level 2 functional maths by June 2013. The College recognised that some staff may need support in up skilling their knowledge. Consequently English and maths classes were offered in addition to the ongoing support of the maths and English champions.

“The CPD menu has evolved really. We started by targeting support to those staff that were new to functional skills delivery, and the English and maths champions focussed on this cohort of staff. They provided one to one ad hoc support for individuals, as well as to small groups by curriculum areas. The focus was on how to deliver an aspect of functional skills and they offered staff the opportunity to work collaboratively and reciprocally on peer observations.”

Nicky Birch, Director of Skills for Life and Employment

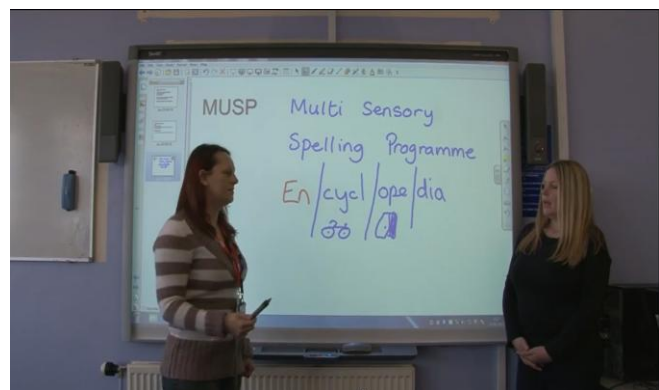
Action 4

Functional skills awareness raising sessions were offered in October 2012, followed by a further event in December aimed specifically at support staff. Nicky then went on to plan an annual menu of CPD sessions throughout the year. The following menu of CPD sessions were offered to all staff.

- English focussed on marking for spelling, punctuation and grammar.
- Maths focussed on sharing practice, developing kinaesthetic resources, starter activities and Moodle resources.

New developments include themed English and maths weeks which will run throughout the year. An example of this could be one week covers fractions, decimals and percentages where this theme runs through all functional and vocational sessions. Another example was that Martin Newton, the Functional Maths Champion ran CPD activity for all staff to look at how to embed maths into their sessions. He then extended the support creating a video and uploading this to Moodle, the College's virtual learning environment, demonstrating how to explain it to learners.

Making learning fun is important. Moodle has been extended with quizzes and prizes for learners to win. Another development is the spelling theme where by Val Wood produced a video of her demonstrating a spelling strategy. This is available on Moodle for all staff to access. The College has a planned English and maths theme to run every term.



Spelling strategy being demonstrated

The longer term aim is to run more bite sized CPD activities for staff to access on Moodle. This should enable more people to access the training at a time which is convenient to them. Experience has shown that this strategy proves far more successful than trying to get to everyone in the College at the same time and place. The above CPD activity is for all tutors, and provides an opportunity to work with vocational tutors in supporting the embedding process as well as developing and sharing practice.

“With regards to the apprentices, the English and maths champions are able to focus their time on up skilling assessors involved in the supported delivery on functional skills. They are initially focussing on feedback around spelling, punctuation and grammar so that they can address this whilst assessing for the vocational element of their Apprenticeship programme. We now have a new Director of Apprenticeships who has put in place processes to ensure learners are being assessed for English and maths and their suitability for the Apprenticeship is right for the learner.”

Nicky Birch, Director of Skills for Life and Employment

The Skills for Life Co-ordinator, dedicated to the Apprenticeship area, Angela Waters is running a series of sessions for the assessors on actually achieving the functional skills qualifications themselves. She provides ad hoc support which complements that provided by the champions. Although the work with the assessors and champions is in its early stages, Nicky is clear that:

“We very much want the content of their CPD to be driven by them rather than us laying out a list of sessions for them to attend. We really need it to be relevant and purposeful so that we can get the best possible outcomes for the learners.”

Peer exchange visit

Stoke on Trent College were keen to visit a work based learning provider as part of their LSIS support package. They particularly wanted to meet a provider who had made progress with delivering functional skills in an Apprenticeship framework. When they requested a visit to Valkyrie Support Services, Sue Morgan and Richard Hicks were only too happy to host this. Chris Capper-English and Maths Team Leader and Anthony Pointon-Assistant Director in Employer Engagement, attended what proved to be a highly useful meeting. Topics covered included the following.

- Delivery models.
- Staff qualifications in the light of the Lingfield report.
- CPD
- Awarding Organisations-pros and cons.
- Assessment tools-advantages and disadvantages.
- Resources and much, much more.

“Sue and Richard were extremely helpful, sharing good practice and discussing their delivery with small groups. It was good to see how others recruit both staff and students and that their learners were ‘wanting to do’ and willing to pay for their qualifications.”

Chris Capper, English and Maths Team Leader

“I found the advice and guidance offered by Valkyrie to be informative, valid and credible. I would particularly like to record my appreciation for their candour and willingness to unreservedly share their hard gained experience with the College. I think the discussion firmed up some of my own thoughts and clarified the issues around planning, staff development and the holistic approach to the delivery of functional skills that is required in order to establish an effective programme.”

Anthony Pointon, Assistant Director in Employer Engagement

Outcomes and impacts

What we achieved

Lesson observations are underway and learners are starting to sit their tests. Until we finish the year it is difficult to demonstrate the impact from a data perspective.

However, what we have achieved and can demonstrate, is raising the profile of English and maths throughout the College, and demonstrating and articulating its importance in curriculum and employability/career progression for our learners. This has been supported by the introduction of the “Stoke Approach” to planning learning, which has been developed to help staff focus on the key components of a session that will improve learning and learners’ progress. This includes English and maths with emphasis given to generic employability skills.

There is much more consistency throughout the College in terms of the messages we give to learners about our expectations of them, as well as what we expect from delivery and support staff. Functional skills progress for our learners in terms of attendance, retention and ongoing achievement, as well as CPD activity for staff, is reported on and progress tracked through management team meetings as well as local levels in curriculum areas with tutors and coordinators across the organisation.

What we learned

A lot of effort needs to go into working with learners and employers to help develop their understanding of why English and maths is so important, and how it can help them to progress. This can only work with a whole organisational approach and with the full support of the senior management team which we have here.

In order to promote English and maths it has to be made fun for learners and the staff in order to engage with as many people as possible. It is really important to listen to the different views of staff and learners to continue to improve and develop. There have been lots of little suggestions about processes and procedures, access to information and how we organise our Moodle that have been taken on board or we are in the process of changing. Every idea and suggestion counts. It has been interesting to open up all sorts of debates about what, why and how, which has helped us to reflect on what we are doing.

What we are taking forward

A further identified ongoing goal was that of developing functional skills resources. Tutors will be encouraged to up load on to Moodle resources and video clips of themselves delivering 3-5 minute topics. These are all methods of sharing practice.

The English and maths themed weeks have enabled us to engage with many more vocational tutors and work based assessors than before. It is a big task to up skill so many staff and prepare them for the themed weeks by rolling out CPD throughout the College, as it can be time consuming and quite lengthy. We tried two different approaches with Martin Newton delivering lots of CPD in all areas and then Val Wood doing fewer sessions, but having more demonstrations and forums with English on Moodle. The latter model is definitely the one we will take forward as the videos, links and forums on our Moodle site have encouraged staff to participate because it can be something they can do from their desk, at any time wherever they may be located.

The development of Moodle and ensuring our virtual learning environment is fit for purpose has been an area that has been highlighted throughout this process. This is something that we need to work on ready for the next academic year.

How we are sharing it

We participated in a "Learning Raid" at Salford College that included other Colleges in the North West Region where we discussed practice. This was really useful for everyone involved and a follow up meeting is being planned around Easter time so that we can share our developments.

What advice we would give to others

Have a clear vision of what you want to achieve and identify the key people that will help you get there. Be clear about your starting point and listen to staff, students and other stakeholders about their expectations and understanding so that you get a holistic view. You need support from your senior management team to drive changes through all aspects of the business. You must be consistent and persistent about the message you want to be received.

Contact Information

Date published: June 2013
Provider name: Stoke on Trent College
Contact: Nicky Birch, Director of Skills for Life and Employment
nicola.birch@stokecoll.ac.uk