

Supporting learners to 'find' their voices



A group of six learners at Hackney Community College are taking part in a programme entitled 'Speak up for yourself and your future', designed to support person centred planning and a curriculum with a focus on an adult life. The group is a mixed ability group of learners with severe learning difficulties, including some with significant speech, language and communication difficulties. The focus of the programme is on underpinning skills rather than context-based activities.

Key lessons learned

- Learners are already clear about the aims of the programme and are very positive about being involved.
- The group facilitator uses video each session so they can continually review previous work and note progress themselves.
- A variety of techniques encourage learners to build on previous achievements
- In only 6 weeks (1.75 hours a week), significant progress is being made.
- Learners' awareness of each other is showing marked improvement.

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Organisations involved: Hackney Community College

Sector: FE fulltime learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities

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Hackney Community College is a medium sized GFE college, formed in 1993 by the merger of Hackney Adult Education, Hackney 6th Form College and Hackney Further Education College. They now have a single, purpose built site in Shoreditch. The college is strongly committed to serving the needs of the community, which is highly diverse and includes many families with significant social and economic needs. The college has always provided courses for learners with moderate learning difficulties and/or disabilities, but in 2009 it was asked to make provision for a small group of young people with a higher level of need.

The college responded to this with a rapid transformation of support facilities and a complete re-think of curriculum. They worked closely with the Health Authority to prepare to meet these young peoples' needs, and were required to have a different profile of staff to meet those needs, including staff to provide a range of therapies. Curriculum had to be designed around each individual learner. This year there are 48 learners with complex needs attending the college, which has won a Beacon Award for curriculum design and innovation.

Following one of the recommendations of the Green Paper, *Support and Aspiration*, (March 2011), the college began to build on their relationship with the Health Authority to develop an interactive person-centred learning plan that linked to the health plan. They then began to review their entire curriculum so as to provide effective preparation for adulthood. They were aware of one area they were not addressing

with a strong enough focus - that of developing learners' skills to express their likes, dislikes and opinions, and to make realistic choices and to give voice to those choices, and to have an awareness of the implications of making choices and voicing them.

What they wanted to explore

The college wanted to develop curriculum through which learners could develop the skills they need to be confident to express their own ideas, wishes and choices, and in particular to be able to take a more active role in person-centred planning for their own futures. College staff were unsure at the outset what approach to learning would be most effective to achieve the aim.

Planning the approach

A whole afternoon session was identified for the programme, and a mixed ability group of young people with severe learning difficulties and/or disabilities was identified. The tutor worked with some of the learners conducting a session entitled 'storytelling' as a means of finding out what was working/not working for them. The tutor is experienced in working with young people of different ages in a range of settings – all with the focus of the individual learning to be clearer about what he or she wants and exploring ways of expressing choice. She has a particular expertise with puppet work to enable young people to speak more freely.

It was planned that the programme would concentrate on developing and improving individual skills, practising them, reflecting on them, and discussing progress, with an emphasis on self-awareness and ongoing discussion about the impact of having the skills. Extending and applying the skills was planned to happen across the rest of the learners' curriculum (although the mechanisms for monitoring this have yet been fully developed). The application to a variety of community or work contexts would be addressed at a later stage.

The tutor reviewed some published outline programmes, and chose one – but after meeting the learners wrote her own set of six overall aims and began to write the course, lesson by lesson, based on identifying individual goals. She wrote a monitoring checklist initially, but this didn't work for the group of learners because they were all working at such different levels and speeds, so she is now working on a new approach to monitoring which should be completed by the end of the first course.

Implementation

In each session, the activity changes regularly, with some familiar activities and some new ones. Regular activities include an introductory discussion about how the learners are feeling today. The tutor noted early on that the learners has a set answer to 'how are you today?' which was always the same and tended to be 'fine', 'good', 'OK'. The tutor encourages learners to spend a little time thinking about how they are feeling and then explore what has happened to bring about this feeling. This may be followed by a language-based game which require learners to make choices and listen and remember other peoples' choices, and singing – they make up simple 'raps' which express their own needs. Every change of activity is noted, Do you want to do this? Why are we doing this? If there are different ways to go about it, how should we do it? (Individual preferences are encouraged and accommodated). Learners are learning to take responsibility for their individual choices and decisions and are expected to follow them through.

Puppet work, uses the puppet's 'voice' to interact with the learners, produces a visibly higher level of interaction. One of the puppets, Jazza, himself has learning difficulties and discusses with the group the issues of living at home with parents and wanting to make their own decisions about basic things like what to wear and eat.

Outcomes and impacts

The learners regularly discuss how they feel about the work they're involved with.

- 'It makes me feel more confident' - Sukmit
- 'I can tell people what I want my life to be like when I leave college' - Peter
- 'I feel happy watching myself' – Deborah (she would not speak out in the group at the outset of the programme).

- 'I'm pleased because I was listening well' – Peter after watching himself interviewing a fellow student.
- 'It was good to hear me talking – it sounded better than I thought' – Sukmit

All the aims are being addressed and built upon in every session, and reinforced in every session. The tutor is reviewing the approach and aims, and keeping a clear record.

The programme will be reviewed and written up, and then will be rolled out. There will be training for more staff to deliver it, specific training for learning assistants on how to support it, and training for all the staff team to implement the emerging skills across the curriculum.

At this stage there is evidence that the approach is successful. Initial lessons from the pilot work are:

- Match aims to learners, and continually review
- Take very small steps
- Continually re-cap and reinforce
- Use of video is effective to prompt memory, and build confidence
- Keep each activity short.
- Although the sessions are tutor lead, every decision on activities is discussed and every possible opportunity for making choices, listening to each other, and stating opinions is taken.

Colleagues from other colleges have already visited, seen the work and shown an interest. They are being supported to develop and introduce similar programmes.

Appendix 1; Speak Up for Yourself and Your Future!

Outline scheme of work

Aim: To gather information about the interests we have in college and school

I know what I like to do in college

I know what I like to do at home

I can tell someone about the things I like to do at college

I can tell someone about the things I like to do at home

Aim: To introduce expectations we have for our future lives, home and work

I can say what where I would like to live in the future

I can say what work I would like to do

Aim: To work together to record evidence as a song

I can speak in a clear voice

I can listen to others

I can work with others

I can practise making a steady rhythm

Aim: To have an understanding of my own and other people's personal space

I know what my personal space means

I can stay in my own personal space

I know how to behave with other people

I know what to say if someone touches me in a way that I don't like

I can put my hand up and say stop I don't like it

I know it is not okay to try and kiss someone or touch their private parts

I can name comfortable feelings

I can name uncomfortable feelings

Aim: Identifying strengths and identifying areas for improvement

I can name personal qualities I have

I can say what areas I have difficulty with

I can say what I would like to improve

I can say what help I need at college
I can say what help I need outside college
I can say who helps me to be more independent

Aim: Understand how choices can help us to be more independent

I can say what choices I can make at home/ shopping/ college
I can make choices on my own
I can make choices with help
I can say who helps me to make choices
I can say what I would like to be able to do on my own
I can say how I feel about making choices on my own
I can think about the steps I need to make my own choices