

Inside Evidence

Issue 5

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Working with disaffected young people

What strategies help to engage them in learning?

Motivation is one of the biggest barriers to learning for disaffected young people. They often lead chaotic lifestyles, lack positive role models, have few goals or ambitions for the future, poor social and communication skills, poor literacy and numeracy skills, and see few, if any, benefits of learning. Creating an interest in learning amongst such students is challenging.

Responding to these needs, a college collaborated with an organisation that delivered a free learning and work advice service to marginalised people. Together they set out to devise teaching and learning strategies that would be effective with one of the most resistant learner groups – young offenders. They were aware that such learners would probably be wary of formal education and critical of structured, paper-based learning activities such as worksheets. The project facilitators decided to introduce the 17 students involved to appropriate citizenship and social skills through new and creative ways of learning that would also help to develop their literacy and numeracy skills.

How were the sessions organised?

The four-hour classroom-based sessions alternated between visual, auditory and kinaesthetic (involving physical activity) learning activities, each lasting no more than ten minutes. Each session also had at least two set breaks. This had the effect of breaking up the amount of time the young people had to concentrate for.

The style of material and the topics covered were also designed to help the student's concentrate. Activities included:

- using money as a hook to engage the students in numeracy, such as written exercises on budgeting skills and effective weekly food shopping, and
- reading books on crime and individual criminals' case studies to unpick the myths behind gang culture (not as glamorous as many young people imagine) whilst enhancing the students' literacy skills.

During each session, the project facilitators used a purpose-made spinning wheel device of foamex plastic (for health and safety) to determine which student went first or answered a question etc, giving the students the opportunity to play a game of chance. The spinning wheel forced the students get out of their chairs and become actively involved in the session.

What impact did the new approaches have on the students?

The programme helped many of the students become engaged in both learning and self-development. One student obtained his first valid reference for a place on a vehicle mechanics course – a step towards his stated goal of working in the motor trade. The students variously commented how it was “good to do something different”, how they “enjoyed the chance to win or take a chance” and how the programme helped them “think about what I am doing with my life”.

Perhaps surprisingly, although the students readily engaged with the material, they did not relate the experience to literacy and numeracy learning. When the learners were asked to provide feedback on what they had learned that day, they reported on factual details, such as how to open a bank account, but not on spelling personal information correctly.

Sadly, the programme was not successful for all students. Some – those who continued to involve themselves with petty crime and social disorder offences – struggled to make regular attendance and this affected their progress.

Take action

Could you:

- collaborate with colleagues to devise a variety of 10-minute activities that are relevant to struggling learners' particular areas of interest whilst enhancing core skills that would promote the group's engagement?
- plan to use a mix of brief visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learning activities to maintain your students' concentration levels?

Evidence source

Addison, E. & Bucklee, A. (2007) Spectrum: working to engage young offenders NRDC 2007 www.nrdc.org.uk/download.asp?f=3600&e=pdf