Skills for life

Effective strategies to support learner persistence and progress

Persistent learners are learners who engage in learning that is intensive and long enough to ensure significant progress towards their learning goals. Research included in LSIS' "*Review of Evidence to Support the National Improvement Strategy*" identified a number of the factors linked to this persistence, and to help progress learning amongst literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) learners. Underpinning all of these factors was the importance of finding ways of enhancing LLN learners' confidence and self-esteem.

Appropriate courses
The research shows that to begin with, persistence was enabled by careful placement on courses that were appropriate and at the right level. Learners were more likely to stay on programmes when the rationale was clearly explained and understood, and where there was an achievable and appropriate outcome.

Achievement
Promoting a sense of learner satisfaction and achievement was found to be particularly important for LLN learners. Most learners described learning gain and progress in terms of what their learning enabled them to do in real life situations. Some learners defined their achievements in terms of specific skills they had acquired. An important role for tutors was that they developed processes (such as records of learning) to support learners in recognising and reflecting on their learning gains and help them identify their next learning challenges. Most learners wanted to take the lead in assessing their own learning and considered that they were able to recognise when they had learned something. They used files and records of learning to inform themselves how far they had travelled. This recognition helped them to persist with their learning.

An enabling environment
Overt appreciation of the learners' efforts was a significant factor in persistence in learning. Learners stressed the value of tutor praise as a motivational tool and a key factor in building confidence and self-esteem. Conversely, perceived lack of interest or negative attitudes from teachers caused some learners to consider leaving or actually to leave their courses.

Group work
Facilitated group and pair work allowed learners to progress faster than individual tasks and worksheet-based learning did. Group approaches enabled learners to articulate, compare and reflect on their experiences and thus recognise progress and achievement. Learners pooled knowledge in groups. They used each other as mutual experts and to work out whether they had succeeded in learning tasks, using the tutor to confirm these judgements. This process also helped build their confidence and sense of self-worth.

Technology
Technology was identified in the review as having the potential to be fun and motivating, increase confidence, offer new ways of learning and make it possible for learners to learn in new places and at new times. However, it was recognised that technology on its own was not enough. Learners needed good introductions to applications, access to technical support and the opportunity to engage personally with a teacher face-to-face or by phone or email.

Incentives
Incentives (carefully chosen rewards for sticking with learning) played a role in encouraging learners to attend regularly. Learners were less motivated by less immediate or tangible rewards, such as getting a job, but carefully chosen rewards for sticking with learning played a part in keeping learners engaged. Particularly, they encouraged learners to stay beyond the crucial first weeks of their course. Success drove success. A sense of achievement motivated learners to stick with learning. This was further promoted by teachers recognising small steps of learning, such as growth in confidence.

Embedding
The review's findings suggested that embedding LLN provision across the learning programme not only supported skills development, but also helped to overcome the stigma associated with LLN classes, which were more marked for learners at level 2. Success rates in courses where literacy and numeracy were embedded in vocational courses were 15 per cent higher than in non-embedded courses.

Assessment
Diagnostic and ongoing formative assessment that encouraged active feedback from tutors to learners was found to be an effective way of improving persistence and raising achievement. Learners overwhelmingly preferred ongoing assessment based on discussion and portfolio building supported by teacher feedback and individual reflection. Although some saw formal assessment through tests and external exams as motivating and confidence boosting, other learners said that they would leave a course to avoid testing, and some built up their confidence to face formal tests as the course progressed.

Take action
Could you:
- find out from your learners what they think would help them to persist with learning and use what you find out to refine your practice?
- involve your learners more in their own assessment?