

## Helping learners to take more responsibility for their learning



Much research highlights the benefits of enabling learners to take more responsibility for their own learning. With this in mind, a recent study from Holland explored the benefits of a web-based development portfolio tool, designed to help learners monitor their progress and plan their future learning. They wanted to find out whether

giving learners (on a hairdressing programme) advice as well as feedback on how to use the tool, was more helpful for developing independent learning skills and enhancing learning than just giving learners feedback.

### The design of the portfolio tool

The portfolio tool was designed to help the learners:

- assess their own performance
- formulate their learning needs based on their weaknesses in a task, and
- select future learning tasks that would help them to fulfil the formulated learning needs.

The learners self-assessed their own performance against criteria such as 'applying hair dye in no more than 10 minutes' and 'being friendly to clients,' and used their assessments as a basis for formulating their future learning needs, for example, 'I need to learn to apply hair dye in less time'. The learner could then find out how to speed up hair dying time by:

- observing their tutor performing the skill
- dying the hair of a dummy, and
- dying the hair of a real client.

Thus, the portfolio helped to yield a working plan with learning tasks for every week.

### What the supervision meetings involved

Half the learners were given advice as well as feedback by the supervisor on how to improve their self-directed learning skills; half were only given feedback (i.e. no advice). For example, when learners identified needs in a general way, such as 'I need to talk more', they were given tips on how to make them more specific – as in 'I need to think about interesting topics I could talk about with clients'. The supervisors also gave advice on how to select learning tasks that would fulfil the formulated learning needs. For example, when learners selected learning tasks they had already mastered because they liked doing them, the learners were advised to also

include tasks that offered the opportunity to practise new skills or skills not yet adequately mastered.

### The difference the supervisors' advice made

The study found that when compared with the learners in the feedback only group, over the 30 weeks of the study, the learners in the advice group:

- were more able to diagnose weaknesses and possible cause(s) of their weaknesses and formulated their learning needs better
- selected slightly more suitable learning tasks
- completed more practical assignments (on average around 10 in the advice group compared with six in the feedback only group), and
- acquired the equivalent of, on average, around half a certificate more.

Drawing up a year plan was important for success. Learners in the feedback only group were more likely than those in the advice group to blame any lack of success on lack of planning (62 per cent of the learners in the feedback-only group mentioned this factor as a reason for not participating in a formal examination, whereas only 17 per cent of the learners in the advice and feedback group gave this as a reason).

But the advice given by the supervisors was not effective for all aspects of self-directed learning. The researchers noted how the learners did not reach a stage where they were able to assess their own performance sufficiently – the proportion of agreement with their teacher assessments was only about 65 per cent. Consequently, the researchers recommended also training learners in self-assessment through the tutor modelling assessment skills, and discussing with the learner the differences between their assessments and their learners' self-assessments.

## Take action

Could you:

- help your learners to devise a year plan that is appropriate to them personally?
- make formulating the key learning needs one of the main topics you discuss in supervision meetings to help learners practise new skills?
- model assessment skills and discuss with your learners any differences you notice between their and your ideas about assessments on tasks?

### Evidence Source

Kicken, W., Brand-Gruwel, S., Van Merriënboer, J., & Slot, W. (2009) The effects of portfolio-based advice on the development of self-directed learning skills in secondary vocational education. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 57, pp. 439-460.

*The study involved 43 students and four teacher supervisors from a school for secondary vocational education in the Netherlands. The researchers observed the supervision meetings, interviewed the learners and analysed log files.*