

Observing teaching and learning to improve English, maths and ESOL sessions

Gateshead Council, Adult and Community Learning



About us

Gateshead Council's Skills for Life (SfL) team deliver English, maths and ESOL programmes in over 20 community venues throughout Gateshead, particularly focusing on areas of deprivation and targeting hard-to-reach learners with few or no qualifications. We address many barriers to enable local people to access learning including low levels of confidence and childcare needs. We welcomed involvement in the support programme as part of our staff development strategy.

Using observations of teaching and learning as a development tool

The SfL team had been involved in a cross-organisational project to develop resources to support managers in conducting observations of teaching and learning. The SfL manager, Ashley Davies, was keen to build on this and to develop further guidance to support and inform the observation process. In our work with our improvement partner, our main priority was the exploration of processes to support tutor development and maintain the focus on excellence in teaching and learning. An observation window had been set for February 2012 during which it was planned for managers at Gateshead to observe all maths and English tutors. Ashley was keen to ensure that the process would be developmental and would encourage continuous improvement. Staff also needed to fully understand and support the criteria used during teaching and learning observations.

Supported provider

Gateshead Council:

- Ashley Davies, Skills for Life Manager

Improvement partner

Teaching Development Centre, Newcastle College:

- Diane Thurston, Business Development Manager

“The Skills for Life manager was well-prepared for the initial meeting and had a very clear vision of the development work she wanted to carry out— this supported her in achieving her goals.”

Diane Thurston, Teaching Development Centre, Newcastle College

As part of the support work, Diane Thurston from Newcastle College Teaching Development Centre set up discussions with experienced English and maths observers. We recorded key points from these discussions and shared them with other adult and community teams in the region. What came across clearly in this development work was the need for managers to have the opportunity to discuss the principles and the evidence which underpin their grading judgements. This is something which should not be underestimated as such discussion supports observers' confidence in their judgements and helps equip them to explain these judgements to teaching staff after observation.

Future development work

The work completed to date is only part of the development activity that the SfL manager has identified. Future work is focused on targeting specific areas for development arising from the observations. One area of focus is the integration of technology into English, maths and ESOL lessons, particularly in equipping tutors to exploit the potential of interactive whiteboards and the use of note-book functions to support maths and English learning.

The benefits of our involvement in the support programme

- The flexibility of the support programme meant that development work has been tailored to our organisational objectives.
- The SfL manager has developed a strong understanding of the range of criteria to support grading judgements, and is now in a better position to support the professional development of her teaching teams. She is also more confident in sharing this learning with colleagues inside her organisation and beyond.
- Engagement with the support programme has encouraged continuing collaboration with other adult and community learning (ACL) providers in the northern region.
- Resources from professional discussions were shared with South Tyneside and Sunderland ACL managers, and led to further collaboration through a regional numeracy network. formed by SfLLN providers.
- Relationships have also been strengthened between Success North Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training (CETT), led by the Teaching Development Centre which will support further development work planned for summer 2012 and beyond.

Our tips for successful improvement projects

- Ensure senior manager support is in place and that development activity is aligned with organisational priorities.
- Set realistic targets in action planning and be ready to respond to a changing environment.
- Establish a partnership with a provider that has a similar philosophy and an understanding of your setting.
- Establish contacts with your peers in other organisations and seek out opportunities to compare your practice with colleagues in similar roles.