

Functional skills: a catalyst for transforming teaching and learning in apprenticeships

Wiltshire County Council



The context: making the shift from Train to Gain to advanced apprenticeships

We have moved from training existing employees via Train to Gain, to running advanced apprenticeships (25+). The challenges of this transition are exacerbated by a number of factors:

- Wiltshire Council has no single Adult Learning Service. The management of the Adult Single Skills element of the funding and responsibility for the strategic development of the apprenticeship programme sits in a different department to the 20 or so staff who form the work based learning delivery team.
- Assessors have high levels of occupational expertise but lack confidence when faced with delivering maths and English.
- The maths and English specialists sit within a separate department again (adult and community learning) and are heavily committed elsewhere, for instance in family learning, so have limited capacity.

Supported provider

Wiltshire County Council:

- Tina West, Quality Manager

Improvement partner

Learning South West

- Marilyn Hartwell, Work-based learning and functional skills specialist

The support from Learning South West (LSW)

Learning South West were able to give the Council three days of support, provided by a functional skills and apprenticeships specialist. In order to achieve the maximum impact in a short time, the strategy was as follows:

- 1) diagnostic discussions between the quality manager and the specialist from LSW;
- 2) a workshop for all staff: work-based learning (WBL) assessors, maths and English specialists and internal quality specialists. Our aim: to review current practices and reach a consensus on how to move forward;
- 3) a follow-up workshop in which English and maths specialists would work together to co-create practical solutions.

The initial staff workshop: building consensus about the way forward

The outline for the initial workshop, attended by all staff involved in apprenticeships, was as follows:

- How do we see our role?
 - An exercise to reach consensus on a shared purpose.
- The work-based learning repertoire
 - 20 learning methods we can use in WBL
 - Which ones are we actually using?

- Which ones have the most potential for embedding functional skills?
- The Seven Deadly Pitfalls
 - Are we falling into any of these?
 - How can we work smarter in order to create more opportunities to focus on functional skills?

The way forward

As a result of this first workshop, we agreed on the need to widen our teaching and learning repertoire, in order to successfully embed functional skills. In particular, we decided that we need to be more proactive in creating learning opportunities in the workplace. We decided that we would encourage apprentices to undertake work-based projects that we intend to call 'business challenges'.

Business challenges:

- should address a real-life problem and bring about some kind of improvement in the way the team or department performs its work;
- are often things that the team or the manager have been meaning to do for some time, but have never got around to doing because of work pressures. The apprenticeship provides the ideal opportunity.
- need to be approved and supported by the apprentice's line manager;
- should provide stretch and challenge for the apprentice;
- should provide opportunities for developing and practising functional skills and personal, learning and thinking skills, alongside the development of vocational skills;
- should provide 'meaty' evidence for the vocational qualification, spanning several units.

Second staff workshop: building a resource bank of ideas for 'business challenges'

The work-based learning team agreed that they would meet for a second workshop in which we would start to create a bank of ideas for 'business challenges'. These would not be prescriptive. Rather they would be examples to show line managers and learners; 'starters for ten' that can be adapted to suit a particular context. Because the business challenges need to have a strong vocational element, the assessors worked in their vocational teams, namely: elderly care, business administration, supporting teaching and learning in schools, early years.

The workshop also involved creating a template for capturing the key features of each 'business challenge'.

The vocational teams were assisted by specialist English and maths tutors who helped to map the business challenges to functional skills and advised how to optimise the English and maths content.

Here is the first draft of an item for the resource bank.

Business challenge for advanced apprentices working in elderly care		
Scaffolding activities	Core idea	Extension ideas
Visit another care home to see what activities they organise. Talk to specialists about the best sorts of activities for residents with particular needs eg Alzheimer's. Learn how to do costings. Learn about different ways of collecting feedback from customers.	How do residents spend their time? How can we increase their engagement in activities?	Identify causes of lack of activities. Organise a visit for residents to an outside venue. Organise a new activity at the home. Make an improvement to how a particular space within the home is utilised by residents.
Maths skills	English skills	IT skills
Collect, analyse and represent data from a range of sources including observation and questionnaires. Carry out calculations involving time. Use 2D representations of 3D objects eg plan of areas used by residents in the home.	Read and summarise information about venues and potential activities. Formulate questions to ask residents. Present ideas logically and persuasively. Use different writing styles for different purposes. Discuss complex information with colleagues and present ideas clearly.	Decide what software to use to collect data and produce a report. Do internet research into local venues and activities for particular needs, such as Alzheimers.

Other vocational teams have produced ideas sheets for topics such as:

- Improving the engagement of pupils in extra-curricular activities
- Improving the organisation of staff training events
- Are we communicating effectively with parents and how can we improve?
- How can we ensure everyone gets to grips with the new early years curriculum?

Key considerations

The vocational teams found that there were key questions emerging:

- 1) What does the apprentice already know about the topic? What do they need to find out before they start the challenge? Are there experts they can speak to or is there internet research that needs to be done?

- 2) Does the apprentice need to build up any specific skills before starting on the challenge, such as how to design a questionnaire, handle percentages or use a spreadsheet?
- 3) Where might the challenge lead? What outcomes is the line manager seeking? Is the line manager fully supportive?

New insights and new confidence

While working on the resource bank of ideas for business challenges we began to realise that this approach takes us beyond notions of integrating or embedding functional skills. We started to understand that the functional skills are actually vocational skills because they are essential to being a competent employee. We realised that we have these skills ourselves and gained confidence in our ability to help apprentices develop and practise these skills. We also appreciated that English and maths specialists have an important role to play; helping us to expand the functional skills aspects of the 'business challenges', getting the level right and suggesting scaffolding activities. The assessors also highlighted the need for the specialists to give extra support to apprentices who are struggling and to support apprentices in the run up to taking the functional skills tests.

Our delivery model for functional skills

We have reached the point, after a year of development activity, where we feel we have a workable delivery model.

Assessors are responsible for embedding functional skills in their work with apprentices. The main vehicle for apprentices to practice their functional skills is through 'business challenges', as described above. In addition, there are regular drop-in workshops every Friday afternoon where apprentices can access personalised support from English and maths specialist tutors. The drop-in workshops include test preparation. This arrangement has taken the pressure off the assessors, enabling them to concentrate on the embedded elements.

Once every two months all the assessors meet for support, information and the sharing of good practice.

Our achievement rate for functional skills is running at 100 per cent.