

The transition from literacy and numeracy to functional skills

Young Offenders Institute, Ashfield



Problems to solve

For the learners at YOI, Ashfield we recognise that personal, learning and thinking skills must take equal weight with vocational studies and English, maths and ESOL. The language demands of problem solving tasks were acknowledged to be a barrier to capable learners achieving accreditation. We needed to be able to help our staff with the transition from literacy and numeracy to final assessment for functional skills within the thirteen week model in which they work, and with including active learning methodologies within sessions to allow learners to develop and apply skills in real-life contexts.

As a privately run prison facility on the outskirts of Bristol, our learners are aged from fifteen to eighteen and education is compulsory. Review of our educational programmes and their staffing levels meant that we wished to maintain our key performance levels. Our action plan for the support programme included the appointment of functional skills champions; an update to the strategic plan and development strategy so that functional skills were encompassed within all educational provision; quality monitoring developed through teaching and learning observations (OTL) and problem solving embedded across the curriculum to provide maximum exposure to functionality.

Supported provider

YOI Ashfield:

- Neil Payne, Numeracy Co-ordinator
- Marcel Celter, Literacy Co-ordinator

Improvement partner

Bridgwater College:

- Ann White, Head of Skills for Life
- Janet Smithers, Project Co-ordinator

Maths

“By spoonfeeding learners you remove all functionality, so even the most functional resource can be useless...it’s not about what you use, it’s how you use it”.

- Teacher

Some of our solutions

Although this journey is at an early, staff development stage, we have been able to undertake curriculum development and initiatives which will ultimately embed problem-solving tasks within all subjects. So far, we have been able to:

- Develop partnerships between English and maths teachers and other curriculum areas

- Engage all educational staff in a session on active learning in order to raise awareness of functional skills
- Appoint functional skills champions from curriculum areas and pair them with English, ESOL and maths teachers, tasking them with working with their course teams on problem solving and how to embed this, with English and ESOL, into their subject

This has resulted in:

- English and maths becoming a focus in all education programmes offered in a problem solving context
- Collaborative planning sessions with English, maths and ESOL specialists
- Holding regular “Learning Hubs” around functional skills to raise awareness and share best practice

Art

“The resources we have produced have really helped in showing the links between the Arts and maths”.

- Teacher

Results already

We have been able to implement a whole organisation approach to embedding functional English and maths in our educational strategy. This has resulted in improved teaching and learning grades, and meeting our key performance target for functional skills with an increase in success rates from 62% to 69%; part way through our current year the rate has risen further to 73%. We know that this is because we now have staff across the institution enthused with curriculum change, “owning” and supporting delivery of functional skills across all academic and vocational areas and sharing good practice. Active learning approaches have improved teaching and learning experiences, reflected in increased learner satisfaction.

Building on success

We have learned how important it is to have a clear, written action plan with set expectations and deadlines to support course teams with developments and maintain the project plan. We are conscious of the need to have senior managers on board with change and development, and are willing to recognise the time key staff will need to ensure its implementation. We have experienced the value of external support and resources, and learned not to be afraid to access them – “a problem shared is often a problem halved”.

We are going to:

- Schedule regular meeting for our champions and specialist functional skills teachers
- Schedule a whole organisation event to share development, strategies and resources that each course team has produced. We will ask that these presentations highlight the impact the project has had on each course team and, most importantly, our young people
- Work with the IT team to explore online testing for functional English and maths to make it more accessible

- Increase use of the Learning Resource Centre for English and maths homework support
- Maintain our links with other providers and awarding bodies to stay abreast of changes in functional skills delivery and assessment

Achieving independent learners

It is early days yet; we are still in the stages of staff development. However, we are confident that the impact on staff will trickle down to learners as we go on and will effectively improve learner functionality and confidence.

Craft Design Technology

“I am already experiencing that eureka moment with learners where they move away from dependency and start to problem solve even in aspects of the lesson which are not embedded”.

- Teacher