

Building on What Works Well to Deliver New English and maths Qualifications

Supported provider: HMP Onley (and Milton Keynes College)

Improvement partner: Claire Collins, Training Plus Merseyside



Summary

This case study focuses on the work to design and implement new English and maths courses for adult male learners at HMP Onley, a male category C prison in Rugby, Warwickshire. During the development work HMP Onley developed active, collaborative learning approaches. They also built on work carried out in previous years to develop prisoners' employability skills and work with them to set meaningful targets in realistic contexts. The success of their work is embodied in learners who are more motivated and engaged in their learning.

Introduction

About the education team at HMP Onley

HMP Onley is a category C prison close to Rugby, housing over 700 adult male offenders at any one time. Education at the prison is largely managed by Milton Keynes College and includes classroom based English, maths and ICT delivery, as well as a broad range of personal, social and occupational learning programmes. These programmes take place in the education and training blocks and in workshops around the prison.

What we wanted to achieve

The team at HMP Onley have been working together undertaking English, maths and ESOL development work for a number of years, focussing each year on new aspects of the learning programmes they deliver. In 2011, LSIS published a case study about HMP Onley called [Active learning towards meaningful targets in a prison setting](#), which explored their work on employability, active learning and recording learner progress.

In August 2012, prison education teams, along with all learning providers had to stop delivering Adult Literacy and Numeracy Certificates at Levels 1 and 2. Entry level ceases in August 2013.

The first qualifications to replace these tests were functional English and maths. In late 2012, these were followed by 'unitised' qualifications in English and maths. In light of these significant changes affecting the education team, Geoff Treadgold, the Skills for Life and Functional Skills Manager, did not want to send a message out that the work they had done on employability, active learning and differentiation in the past was no longer relevant. He wanted to continue to build on this and embed the new qualifications into existing working practices.

Implementation

What we did

In order to prepare for delivery of the new qualifications, Geoff received support from HMP Onley's improvement partner, Training Plus Merseyside. The specialist development adviser, Claire Collins, had worked with the team for the past two years and knew exactly what they could build on to meet their current development goals. Geoff and Claire devised an action plan, drawing on input from the education team to do the following.

Identifying the issues

- People in the team did not fully understand the requirements of the new qualifications. Functional skills are assessed through summative papers, in controlled exam conditions. The unitised English and maths qualifications, in the case of the awarding body used by HMP Onley, are portfolio-based.
- Not everyone copes well with formal exams so the team needed flexible qualification options, which included course work for those learners who were on shorter sentences and/or not ready for functional skills.
- The functional skills qualifications require a long time to prepare for. If learners are going to achieve, they need to be in prison long enough to do so.
- Classroom delivery models were needed to include prisoners attempting full functional skills qualifications, and those doing course work for their English and maths unitised qualifications.

Get to know the qualifications better

Geoff decided it would be wise to introduce the new qualifications in stages, starting with Levels 1 and 2 functional English and maths. To help the team learn about the requirements of these qualifications, they did sample papers during team meetings and peer-marked each other's work. This was a very useful approach, which allowed people the opportunity to work out for themselves what functional skills qualifications are all about.

Following on from this introduction to functional skills, at the next session, the team explored the new English and maths units and imagined how learners could build portfolios that would allow for multi-modal assessment techniques. For examples techniques such as photographs of tasks where learners had used measurements and scale, or labelled diagrams showing the ability to extract information from a text.

Develop new assessment processes

The team identified early on in the project that they needed diagnostic assessment processes that would help identify English and maths topics for learners to work on and could help to assess how well learners could use maths and English to solve complex problems in unfamiliar contexts.

Claire was able to support the team to undertake this task, as she had worked with other prison teams on similar tasks. Claire suggested that HMP Onley could build on a functional skills diagnostic assessment designed at HMP North Sea Camp in 2011 and 2012. Further information is available in their case study on the [Excellence Gateway](#). The Education Manager at HMP North Sea Camp readily shared the resources her team had developed and this gave HMP Onley ideas to build on and absorb into their own work.

Focus on teaching and learning approaches

There were two key areas for development as shown below.

1. Introduce more active/collaborative group learning

The need for this had been highlighted during the previous year's development work and Claire had spent time with the team developing this aspect of their delivery. As Geoff explained, "previously prisoners tended to work on their learning by themselves, each one doing his own work with support from the teacher."

2. Design classroom teaching models

Claire used a graphic approach to help the team discuss the challenges of delivering functional skills and unitised English/maths qualifications. First, she introduced an example session model, explaining how a group problem/task could be introduced, expanded, explored and then re-visited in different contexts, using a diamond shape to show this. The team then worked in groups to draw their own pictures of session delivery, reaching very similar conclusions across the team about what they could do to blend delivery of functional skills and English and maths unitised qualifications for groups of prisoners with different strengths and needs.

Develop a bank of situations/problems and tasks

The team discussed the importance of using realistic scenarios in which to situate learning. This is essential for people in prison, who are excluded from many practices that take place in the outside world and who need to become confident to do them on release. There are countless ideas for introducing complex problems. These can be in familiar contexts for prisoners, such as a gym or less familiar contexts, such as a decorating job for an imagined self-employed trader.

Geoff explained that, "Prisoners are (now) working collaboratively on real-life problems, such as how to go about painting a room, where they first have to decide what needs to be done, then what skills are needed and how to apply the skills in the context. In other words, following the functional skills problem-solving model and reflecting the skills needed in the world of work."

Outcomes and impacts

What we achieved

Developed a new set of learning programmes for prisoners

The education team at HMP Onley were one of the first prisons to deliver functional skills and the new English and maths unitised qualifications. The team are delivering the new courses using collaborative, active techniques and situating learning in realistic contexts. As Geoff explained, the new approaches have been, "popular with learners in the prison, some of whom had previously underachieved, or even hated their previous educational experiences. They found it to be motivational and enjoyable and particularly enjoyed the opportunities to talk. Teachers need to be cautious however, as discussions can on occasions become lively and unfocused (so they need to) make sure that they have a structure."

Shared approaches with other learning organisations

In March 2013, Geoff presented at one of the 2013 LSIS Functional Skills Conferences. Geoff focussed on sharing the problem solving approaches he and the team have been working on with learners. He also shared ways in which his team had used graphic-based discussion tools to help them design classroom sessions, sharing the 'diamond approach' they had started out with and the teaching ideas that had grown from this. You can view Geoff's presentation on the [Excellence Gateway](#).

Key lessons learned

- Build on existing good practice and do not lose sight of wider goals, for example developing new English and maths courses in prison whilst helping people develop employability skills for their release.
- Work collaboratively as a team; sharing ideas can break through barriers that had seemed insurmountable, such as how to deliver learning to people with different needs and working towards different qualifications in the same class.
- Use visual methods to help teachers design new delivery approaches.
- Find tasks and problem-solving scenarios that both reflect learners' current lives, in prison, and help them to imagine unfamiliar tasks and practices they may do in the future on release.

Next steps

The team at HMP Onley will continue to design and develop their approaches to English and maths delivery. They have a good grounding from their participation in LSIS support programmes and hope that their learners succeed in their qualifications and grow in their confidence as a result.

Contact information

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