

Training literacy teachers to teach in prisons

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Mike Westwood, Dianne Robinson and Steve Wade

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In August Derby College took on the contract for providing education at four prisons in the West Midlands¹. An immediate priority was to increase the number of fully qualified teachers, particularly in Skills for Life. Dianne Robinson, Professional Development Co-ordinator at Derby College, applied for Improvement Programme funding to devise a ‘fast track’ literacy teacher training course specifically for Skills for Life teachers working with offenders. She had an impressive take-up of 17, and with only the portfolios left to deliver, 15 are on track to qualify.

Dianne faced the logistical problems familiar to those who work in prisons: fitting in with prison timetabling, restricted web access, difficult communication challenges, and a huge range of security issues. Dianne commented: ‘For the first time, many of these teachers were working in an environment which was not primarily focused on education. The prime function of

prison is to provide secure and safe incarceration. This gives a very different set of priorities for most people working in prisons.’

The teacher training course

The course consisted of four units, each of which was covered at the four residential weekends, spread over 16 weeks. In between the residentials, the trainee teachers were given assignments to complete, gaining online support from their tutor.

The trainee teachers

Like most of the 17 teachers who started the course, Steve Wade and Mike Westwood preferred the residential format to doing half-a-day-a-week all year, though they found the work hard: ‘Sundays were especially tough,’ said Steve, ‘without having any recovery time from our employers.’

Having previously worked in a solicitor’s office, Steve decided to become a Further Education teacher. A colleague suggested working in prisons, and he now teaches literacy and numeracy

(1) HMP Featherstone (Wolverhampton), HMP Birmingham (Winson Green), Brinsford YOI (Wolverhampton) and Swinfen Hall YOI (Lichfield).

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in prison, as well as being an Information and Guidance Adviser. Mike Westwood trained as a mathematics teacher in the 1970s, but actually worked in IT for many years. Now nearing the end of his career, he thought he would like to finally put his teaching into practice and finds work in the prison very rewarding. He started a ‘traditional style’ (one evening a week) literacy teacher training course last year, but gave it up. He felt the ‘intensive’ approach offered by Derby College was much easier to fit in.

Teachers who work in prison do not get many opportunities to meet people in similar establishments, and the opportunity afforded by the residential format to mingle with colleagues from Young Offender Institutions as well as open and closed prisons was invaluable.

‘It was good to meet other teachers from similar places. There was lots of talk about teaching during the weekends. It’s always good meeting people in a similar position to yourself.’
Steve

Both Mike and Steve thought the course content good, especially the focus on language analysis and the opportunities to reflect on practice.

‘I’ve always been interested in language, it’s just in my background I suppose. I wasn’t expecting to get so much depth of knowledge of language. It was really interesting.’

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Mike

Mike told us: ‘In the days when I did my BEd it was all about what you knew and whether you did it properly. I find this reflecting on how I do something very difficult. It’s a completely different approach.’ Steve, being new to

teaching, found the reflective part ‘very easy, very enjoyable’.

The prison context

Steve and Mike appreciated being on a course where all the trainees shared an understanding of prison contexts. For example, some prisoners see the education part as a component of the sentence and can be very negative.

The constant new arrivals and sudden departures make planning very difficult. ‘It would be nice sometimes to have a class that you had all the way from September to July, so you could really see their progress,’ said Steve.

As Mike pointed out, teachers quickly become very good at initial assessment. He actually enjoys the constantly changing nature of a class. ‘Sometimes it does get worse with a change, but just as often it is suddenly better with a couple of new faces.’ Both agreed, though, that the lack of informative paperwork accompanying new arrivals to the prison was deeply frustrating for everyone concerned.

The teacher trainer’s perspective

‘I was delighted that so many teachers started the course, and I’m even more pleased that nearly all have completed – or virtually completed,’ said Dianne. ‘Although one person decided teaching wasn’t for them, and one other dropped out for other reasons, this course has been much more successful than our normal one-evening-a-week courses. Giving the staff pre-course reading and being explicit about the criteria for entry helped ensure everyone was aware how intense this programme would be. I also think that that the concentrated nature of the course was a key factor in the high completion rate.’

The prison service teams found the ‘fast track’ approach much easier to cope with and a very positive way of getting staff through to qualification.

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A challenge for the trainers, however, was managing the observations. Prison timetabling is always challenging, and the fast route made this even more so.

Dianne said that she didn't think she could have run the course without the contribution made by the Skills for Life Improvement Programme. The 'Creative Routes' provided the extra funding for the costs of contextualisation and the residentials. Contextualising the programme to the offender setting was a key factor in its success, though very demanding and time-consuming.

When asked about potential for improvement, Dianne thought that it may have been just a bit too fast-track, and perhaps six weeks between the residentials would be more appropriate. She would also be keen to build on the experience at the Winson Green prison where the trainees set up their own study group, and offer tutorials in each prison.

Derby College, recently awarded a Grade 1², is applying for funding to run a similar programme for staff to qualify as literacy teachers next year.

Steve Logan, Vice Principal at Derby College, commented, 'We were pleased to deliver this exciting and innovative course. We wanted to move away from the traditional one-session-a-week and design a course to meet the needs of tutors working in Offender Learning contexts within the West Midlands. We were delighted to hear the positive comments from the trainee teachers. All credit to them. They worked extremely hard in keeping to challenging deadlines.'

Heads of Offender Learning have identified a further 14 staff needing the Additional Diploma for Literacy; we would therefore hope to take this forward and offer an intensive fast-track course in the New Year.'

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(2) This is Grade 1 (interim) until finally announced towards the end of December.

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See page 11 for details or visit www.sflip.org.uk for application information.