

## Northern College Case Study Making the most of learning through IT to support flexibility

### Background

Northern College is a residential/non-residential college for adults with Beacon status, situated in the countryside near Barnsley. It is fairly small, but has 4,000+ learner registrations a year. Learners are from a range of backgrounds and ages (21 to 70+) and many start with no formal qualifications. The College has pioneered an innovative mix of full and part-time programmes, from literacy/numeracy through to Foundation degrees. The small Skills for Life team (4 teachers and a manager) teach across programmes, so have been able to embed the LLN skills needed in all courses, and e-technology is incorporated into all teaching.

Northern is committed to a Whole Organisation Approach (WOA) to Skills for Life and offers a high level of flexibility and support, including on-site residence. This enables learners to maximise the use of their time and the site facilities: the ICT rooms, library, Learning Resources Centre. Many Skills for Life courses are delivered using a 3-day model. Learners apply for a specific course, depending on need, from the variety on offer. Speaking and Presenting Yourself with Confidence, Learning to Learn, Freaky Fractions, Managing Money, Nature's Numbers, Read and Write for Healthy Living are some of the 20+ modules on offer. Many learners return again and again to take different modules and a strategic approach is taken by staff to support learners to build appropriate personalised programmes of study. When ready, learners are encouraged to take a Move On course to gain certification at Level 1 or Level 2.

### Aim

Northern have been involved in several previous classroom-based research projects, including collaborative writing research, and were confident that collaborative approaches facilitated learning for Skills for Life learners. However, they had noticed that, when using e-technology, learners tended to work alone. They wanted to see if a collaborative approach to the use of ICT would improve success rates, and to develop strategies to enable learners to make use of a blended model of delivery.

### Method

Staff developed a range of strategies to increase the use of IT in their classroom teaching and learning. They created writing tasks which required learners to work collaboratively to produce text, as well as developing activities aimed specifically at increasing students' confidence to work on tasks online outside the classroom. They used an online assessment 'toolbox' of different activities; a computer based Individual Learning Plan (ILP) and asked all learners to keep reflective learning journals on-line.

### Outcomes

Northern found these approaches worked well in supporting a flexible 'blended' delivery:

- The range of on-line assessments produced in depth analyses of learners' existing skills and areas of development, including preferred learning styles and any additional needs.
- All learners made use of the computer-based ILP and learning journal.  
Research showed that 82% of staff and learners found keeping the learning journal a positive and useful process.

## Skills for Life Improvement Programme

- Staff found a 3-step model to teaching a new strategy/ skill effective e.g. the tutor models a skill, a learner instructs another member of the group, then the group try it.
- Tutors selected resources and used them in a variety of different ways e.g. the same Move On or BBC Skillswise resource may be used in class with a whole group, by pairs working collaboratively or as an individual evening /homework activity.
- Web-based resources were blended with tutor-made materials and group work recorded on flipchart paper or on an interactive whiteboard, as appropriate.
- While all learners found the increased use of IT outside the classroom helped their progress and confidence, the research into the collaborative use of ICT found that although half liked the approach, half the learners didn't find it useful. This echoes other research which suggests that the more confident and speedy IT users tend to dominate the collaborative activity. Group and collaborative work was effective at the 'brainstorming' stage but more difficult to make work at the point of translating ideas into written outcomes.

An interview with Learner B, who is dyslexic, threw light on one reason. She was confident when using websites on her own, *"I go on websites in between courses..."*

*I was so inspired when I did Spelling with Confidence. Sue showed us IT sites..."* but when asked about collaborative ICT said, *"I prefer to work on my own on the computer... Groups need to be working at the same pace of learning. She (a learner in her group) was answering fast. It's good that in groups (you) can bounce off each other; it's also important how people learn."* The College intends to investigate this issue further to see if they can find ways to make the approach effective for more learners.

### Learning for other providers about developing flexible provision

- **Adopt a Whole Organisation Approach (WOA) to Skills for Life**  
Northern adopted a WOA to Skills for Life many years ago and the Principal is a Skills for Life expert.  
Academic and front-line staff had awareness training on the necessity of Skills for Life skills and team teaching was used temporarily, so Skills for Life staff could model embedded teaching. All programmes have embedded LLN skills and a strong focus on the use of e-learning.
- **Be flexible about when and where you offer courses**  
The Northern Skills for Life manager: *"We are a 7 day a week college and we offer short courses, day schools, evening workshops and a long residential programme... We have been very successful in facilitating students on our Trade Union programme achieving national test qualifications while they are studying Health and Safety on a week long course."*  
They also offer specific courses in the workplace e.g. maths for bakery workers.
- **Be flexible about how fast learners can learn**  
Progression is successfully promoted: 50% of learners on Foundation degree courses started on Skills for Life courses but learners dictate the pace.  
Learner T was interviewed just after completing a weekend Move On Level 1 course. When asked if she would she have attended a 30 week x 2 hour course, she responded: *"No. I wouldn't have done. When I'm working full-time, I can't get out. I think a lot of people are like that. Weekends and holidays are the only time ... I want a gap now. I'll probably do the Level 2 next Christmas but I want to do the Punctuation with Confidence course first. Gaps are important. I couldn't do the course straightaway now."*
- **Develop good practice within teaching and learning**  
Northern management empower staff to take responsibility for the teaching and learning on their courses, and actively encourage a research-based approach to improving the offer. Their key numeracy teacher wrote "Maths for kitchen design" to offer community adults a way to learn about measurement through a meaningful activity. Collaborative writing was researched, found effective and thus embedded into literacy. Collaboration using e-learning, however, was found effective only if group members were working at a similar pace, so further research is being done to determine best practice.
- **Share good practice**  
Improving the quality of teaching and learning is central to Northern College's ethos and good practice is cascaded systematically e.g. this month at the Academic Group the Skills for Life manager is leading a staff debate on 'personalisation' and the Principal on 'differentiation'.