

Stourbridge College and Queen Alexandra College Involving learners in shaping their own support



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This was a joint project between [Stourbridge College](#) (STB) and [Queen Alexandra College](#) (QAC). Both colleges are located in the West Midlands and deliver Entry Level to Level 3 qualifications. QAC is an Independent Specialist College specialising in visual impairment and/or other disabilities, including autistic spectrum disorders and has approximately 120 learners aged 16-24. Stourbridge College has 2,500 16-18 year old learners, including approximately 350 with a range of physical disabilities and learning difficulties including autistic spectrum disorders. Additional support is provided including speech and language, counselling, dyslexia, mobility, orientation and travel/mobility training. Both colleges assess individual needs to allocate learning support assistants with the qualifications, skills and training to work with learners with a range of disabilities. For both colleges talking to the learners about their ways of working is important because they want them to have as much control over their learning as possible.

ELS resources/materials used

The two colleges worked together to review the relevant LSIS Enhancement of Learning project resources in order to determine which might best meet the needs of their learners. They selected two to pilot - the working styles analysis and the accessible risk assessment.

Use/implementation of resources/materials

A joint learner reference group was established which met twice during the project to test the resources and provide feedback. The group consisted of eight male and two female students, of which four are on the autistic spectrum, one has physical disabilities, one has a sensory impairment and six have learning disabilities. The majority of learners have more than one disability. The accessible risk assessment was also trialled with specific groups within each college.

Outcomes

A) [Working Style Analysis Model](#)

The Working Styles Analysis tool is designed to enable learners to understand and communicate their preferred working styles to those that support/work with them. The online sample tool and paper based example were used since the cost of the full interactive version was beyond the colleges' budgets.

For the more literate learners this tool provided a good insight onto their preferred modes of working. They found the explanations used within the tool useful and summarised their preferences in writing. The tool was less effective for learners with lower levels of literacy and all learners would have preferred the more interactive version.

From this starting point a range of other currently used and new tools and approaches from the ELS suite of materials were shared and tested, focussing on how to involve learners more directly in evaluating outcomes and benefits.

At STB learning styles questionnaires are used at induction where all learners complete an online 'How do I learn best?' assessment, called VARK¹. This is then uploaded to the intranet and teaching staff use this information, along with initial assessment in literacy and numeracy to create a group profile which informs their planning process and guides learning support assistants. QAC currently use a range of methods including traditional VARK learning styles tools and observational assessment by the tutors (see Appendix One). It was felt that further involvement of learners in this process could enable them to identify preferred ways of working/being supported and encourage self awareness and self determination. Adaptations were made to the observational assessment usually carried out by QAC staff and learners trialled completing it themselves. During the trials not all learners were able to complete it in its usual format independently and provided the feedback that some of the language needed to be explained, pictures added and the tool made more colourful. The learners in the trial thought that the tool was useful if they had one to one staff guidance in explaining the sections and giving some examples. It was evident that for some learners the preferred learning style varied depending on the learning styles assessment tool.

Learners from both colleges identified that having learning support staff that “*know you, your style and understand your abilities*” was very important to them.

B) Accessible Risk Assessment

At both colleges, current practice is that staff complete risk assessments and share these with the learners. The LSIS accessible risk assessment resource was trialled in order to put the learner at the centre of this process, thus enabling them to say what they feel are the risks and how they should be supported to mitigate the risks. At QAC the tool was used with a group of Entry Level learners who were about to embark on a swimming enrichment session. At STB the tool was used with 19+ learners who were intending about to visit the local leisure centre.

Staff felt that the resource gave learners a chance to understand the process, that the use of symbols was positive and that it enhanced cognitive process and understanding. Some learners found the symbols too simple/childish and this reduced their motivation. Learners at STB preferred the photographs to the symbols. Learners at both colleges required the symbols (or photographs) to be consistent and not a mixture of the two. For learners who currently use symbols at QAC the use of a different symbol system was confusing and they would have preferred to use their existing symbols which will be addressed for the future. An important point in delivery is to break the process down for some learners so that pictures are given gradually, thus avoiding too much choice, and split into sections (e.g. travel, the pool). Overall, the students at both colleges enjoyed using the tool and it promoted discussion within the group around health and safety. Students at STB are keen to use the tool again to conduct a risk assessment in a different context.

¹ Visual, Aural, Read/write, and Kinaesthetic sensory assessment

Summary of outcomes

In relation to assessment tools, both colleges felt that there may not be one single tool that could cover the wide range of learner needs and thus a variety of tools developed for different levels of learners with a variety of learning, social and communication needs is essential. A range of different alternative online tools were explored as part of the project and learners preferred the tools which used images and colours, although results across different packages were not always consistent. Students and staff were positive that involving learners to drive the processes would be beneficial whichever tool was to be used.

It was felt that the use of accessible risk assessment will enable all learners to develop their understanding of risk and the actions that they need to take to limit risks, giving them transferable skills, enabling them to be more risk aware and able to live their lives with greater autonomy. Overall, this is felt to be a valuable tool for Entry level learners but will require adaptations for Picture Exchange Communication System (PECs) users, so that it uses the symbols that they are familiar with, as well as further adaptations for learners with higher level literacy skills.

Impact – the benefits

For both colleges practice has developed as a result of completing this project. It has enabled staff teams to reflect on current practice and make further improvements. Collaborative working has enabled a sharing of effective practice, to improve the experience and the learning environment for learners in both colleges. Current practice has been strengthened to support the transition of learners from school to college and to ensure that learners' needs are catered for and that the learner is at the centre of the process and involved from the start.

For one QAC learner inclusion in this project was particularly valuable as he is progressing to STB in the next academic year and involvement in the project has enabled him to become familiar with the college and some key staff together with awareness of the process for shaping his own learning support. STB learners benefitted from the collaborative working with the learners from QAC. Some learners in the group now feel more confident in shaping their support needs and identifying which activities they feel confident to complete unaided.

Next steps and future plans

Before the project STB learners completed the same learning styles questionnaire regardless of ability level. As a result of the project the adaptation of the learning styles questionnaires has been implemented with immediate effect within the learning difficulties and disabilities department, however this requires careful planning with cross college students because it is important that they do not feel different to their peers. The range of questions has also been expanded to pick up learners' personal and social needs, starting pre-enrolment, so that learners can discuss and identify the broad range of their needs. (Appendix Two).

At QAC the current observational learning styles tool will be developed to further involve learners' discussion in individual tutorials. The language and layout will also be adapted to enable a greater range of learners to contribute to discussions on their preferred ways of working and support needs.

The accessible risk assessment was particularly valuable and both colleges are looking to extend this practice through adapting the resource for learners with higher literacy skills. The concept of learners being involved in completing their own risk assessments is welcomed by both colleges. The practicalities of developing these resources for a range of learners is onerous and resources developed for one cohort of learners may not be transferable to learners in other settings or contexts as the pictures or symbols used in one setting may not have relevance to the learners in this setting. In effect, adopting this approach more widely would need to be embedded within curriculum and learning policies.

Overall summary

Involving learners more directly in shaping their own support has wide reaching benefits. Both colleges have a strong focus on the development of personal and social skills for learners and are now looking to include a tool to assess and develop learner awareness of these learning skills which could impact on learners' learning by developing greater self awareness and autonomy in the support that they receive. The ELS accessible catching confidence resource will be reviewed as part of this.

One key quote from learners involved in this project, when asked how to best find out about their learning styles was "*just ask us*". It is worth remembering that online tools are no substitute for learners being asked directly how they would like to be supported and for staff having the confidence to ask.

Case Study prepared by Gill Coldicott, Stourbridge College and Nicky Wojciechowski , Queen Alexandra College

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Appendix One



Queen Alexandra College

Learning Styles for:

Name

Communication:
Expressing myself

Communication:
Understanding others

I learn best when

I need the following equipment

My disability affects learning by/when

My attention span is

My learning is distracted by

My learning is motivated by

I lose loses focus when

I am brought back into focus by

My response to touch is

I don't feel safe when

Tips for tutors

Tips for support staff

Appendix Two



Interview Questions /Prompts

- Ask about Connexions forms – has a meeting taken place and has the Moving forward Plan been sent to them for signature yet?
- Do they work well in a team/with others?
- Do they prefer working on their own or with others?
- Have they been in trouble at school?
- Can they travel independently, if not, are they prepared to undertake travel training?
- How do they like to be supported in the classroom?
- How do you think you learn things best of all?
- How do you feel about talking about your support needs?