**Outstanding teaching, learning and assessment: case study on operational project led by Stanmore College**

# Introduction

Stanmore College was established in 1987. It provides a range of vocational as well as academic provision. The college has grown within the sector by developing its higher education provision. Bespoke training is available to businesses (delivered in house or at business premises) and the college is also involved with apprenticeships.

Stanmore College currently works with an external provider (‘LetMePlay’) who works specifically with hard to reach communities of young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) in the Greater London area. NEETs, school refusers and disaffected teenagers outside of the traditional college environment often have deep rooted negative perceptions about ‘traditional’ subjects and ways of teaching.  With the introduction of compulsory English and maths it was found that pass rates and student engagement dwindled considerably with this external cohort, with students (and non-subject specialist staff delivering English within their curriculum of sports and performing arts) not 'buying in' to the importance of these skills within the wider curriculum. Functional skills pass rates at ‘LetMePlay’ are significantly below average and fall way below college targets. Stanmore College wanted to determine the reasons for this, and provide support to the provider in developing and improving their English delivery through a college support and training network.

This project focussed on initial perceptions (both teacher and learner) of literacy learning and how these may affect learning, and aimed to set up a support network to support these remote courses through the English department at Stanmore College and developing the LetMePlay staff’s confidence in delivering functional skills literacy through shared resources, training based on their own experiences and the trying out of new techniques in the classroom. Specifically, the project intended to:

* improve non-specialist teachers confidence in developing English within their curriculum;
* determine factors preventing teacher and student engagement;
* develop and deliver training and support to develop teachers’ confidence in delivery;
* set up a support college network that external providers could access;
* ultimately improve student pass rates and attendance in functional skills, through outstanding teaching, learning and assessment.

**Approach**

A key aspect of the project was to develop understanding of students’ and teachers’ perceptions; this was to be undertaken through online questionnaires – timetabled at the beginning and end of the project, coupled with an initial needs analysis of LetMePlay tutors’ development needs, followed by collaborative training delivered by Stanmore College literacy specialists (two sessions planned – originally these were for mid- and end of May). The training sessions would be based on the teachers’ perceptions survey and identified key areas for development for further 'in house' training sessions. There would then be a comparison of end of project feedback from LetMePlay tutors with initial needs analysis. If possible, there would also be some feedback from learners incorporated.

As this was possibly an unfamiliar or less explored context for this kind of embedding - football/performing arts with ‘school refusers’ /NEETs – it was felt that this project may reveal specific issues/opportunities around similar contexts, especially as the project was very much driven by the unsatisfactory pass rates for these learners.

The project involved three practitioners at Stanmore College (project lead plus two literacy trainers) and eight subject tutors (out a possible 14), plus two managers at LetMePlay, with one of these acting as the main point of contact. 80 learners were involved as participants.

The Professional Standards were used as reference through the project, particularly in terms of observation strategies used with the tutors: at this stage, it is clear that the project has opened up discussion on several levels, and that particular standards can be highlighted as having key relevance to the project:

* Evaluate and challenge your practice, values and beliefs
* Build positive and collaborative relationships with colleagues and learners
* Evaluate your practice with others and assess its impact on learning

# Outcomes and impact

The project has achieved a number of its aims to some degree: through the needs analysis and subsequent discussions with tutors, it has begun to identify and develop an understanding of how subject specific resources can be used to support English. Two members of LetMePlay staff have completed English enhancement programmes

Because the planned training has been based on teachers’ own concerns, some improved confidence in delivering embedded English can be reported, along with a wider understanding of the implications of not developing English skills explicitly in teaching. These impacts should be borne out by the final perceptions survey to map changes in self-graded skills and confidence, although this has had to be postponed until the end of June.

One key change made by the project which should have broad medium-long term impact is the changed mode of delivery for exams – these will be taken in the vocational teaching venues to improve accessibility for students and remove some of the ‘fear’ elements provoked by having to attend at a more remote and alien organisation.

The project has resulted in the development of a variety of resources, including:

* a Yammer network for LetMePlay and college English specialists;
* a skills audit for teachers, which could be used elsewhere;
* perceptions’ survey (teachers and students), again which could be used elsewhere;
* subject specific resources and ideas for embedding within sports and performing arts;
* training sessions targeted to teachers needs at LetMePlay.

Whilst the immediate impact of the project has been quite limited, some other medium term impacts can be reasonably expected the short term:

* More visible embedding of English in LetMePlay schemes of work from September 2015;
* Higher uptake of functional skills exams (estimated to improve by minimum 50% - partly as a result of venue change).
* Embedding of English positively identified in all observations (by November 2015)

# Lessons learned

Although the gains made by this project have been modest when judged within the formal lifetime of the project, there is much to be learned from this story of a dialogue between two organisations, that although already working together, were seeking to establish a more collaborative partnership. There were resistances to deal with throughout, ranging from the reluctance of the learners themselves to engage with functional skills/ literacy interaction, to the model of embedding that seemed to result in unsupported subject tutors feeling that ‘teaching English was not their job’.

*“Getting 'buy in' from staff of other provider has been difficult – perceptions are deeply embedded and staff do not see it as 'their job' to deliver functional skills. Impossible to change perceptions in a revolutionary manner [as the timescale of this project would hope for!]  Meant that responses to surveys were limited.”*

*Project lead*

As a result, it’s perhaps true to say that the greatest level of activity in this project has been the ongoing dialogue between managers at the two organisations seeking to find collaborative ways of working, rather than ‘on the ground’ teacher development. As the project lead put it:

*“[There has been] increased dialogue and visibility of English…. [but] collaboration was judged to be not very effective.”*

However, the project, ‘*acted as a lever from which to get LetMePlay to identify weaknesses in delivery*’ and has certainly opened up increased dialogue (and perhaps honest exchange of views) between the two organisations in relation to an understanding of how to work towards outstanding teaching, learning and assessment. In many ways, this could be seen to be laying the foundations for further collaboration that could build on these conversations.

The project funding, which enabled the payment of staff to attend training sessions and the use of subject experts to deliver, was also crucial in establishing the basis for future collaborative practice. Without the funding, it is unlikely that these dialogues would have taken place. The ability to access the English enhancement programme also played a role in the steps forward the project was able to take.

Reflective feedback from the project lead in her evaluation highlights some key recommendations/lessons learned:

* Increased visibility of project for all stakeholders from inception is essential;
* More input from staff – short lead in time made this hard to achieve;
* Meet with all stakeholders early in process to explain project fully, rather than rely on managers of other provider;
* Recognising good or outstanding practice in house.

Overall, in any follow up project, more use of face-to-face and more personalised collaboration at ‘ground level’ would be of benefit – the initial, rather ‘top down’, distant, and instrumental approach taken may have limited the engagement of some tutors and possibly learners.

Additionally, the timing of project has resulted in a clash between desire to develop more embedded forms of teaching practice and the need to prepare students for very imminent functional skills and other exams. This impacted on the shape of the project – so that the second training session was planned to focus on exam training rather than embedding – and also probably delayed the impact of changes made to the scheme of work, and to classroom practice. This further reinforces the likelihood that changes to staff attitude/intentions will be the main impact so far, with actual practice changes following in September onwards.

The value of the beginnings of collaborative dialogue established, and the possible increases in mutual understanding achieved by the two organisations, have laid useful groundwork for future collaboration.

*“Over a longer timescale, where quantitative measurements were possible and more steps taken would make this an extremely valuable project, one which I will continue with the provider.”*

*Project lead*

# Sustainability and transferability

Several aspects of this project will continue into the future: notably,

* the continued use of Yammer account to improve communications between staff;
* the new local sitting of exams to encourage participation;
* continued promotion of college resources for LetMePlay use;
* continued cross-organisational training with a focus on outstanding practice.

In fact the relationship between the two organisations can be seen as itself key to the sustainability of the provision this project focused on. Establishment of further critical and reflective dialogue between managers and practitioners at the two organisations will play an important role in the sustainability of the project.

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