

CO-CREATION IN ACTION: EXAMPLES OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

Case study 1

West Suffolk College co-creation of a pre-entry maths curriculum



At West Suffolk College, staff had observed that many learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) arrived at college highly dependent on adults to shape their lives for them. They believed strongly that if these learners were going to progress successfully into adulthood and take control of their lives, they needed to develop the skills and confidence to make decisions for themselves. They decided to experiment with co-creation of the curriculum as a vehicle for enabling the learners to enter into adult-to-adult relationships and make choices that would give them a sense of empowerment.

Amanda O'Neill, Subject Leader in Supported Learning, identified a group of ten learners on a pre-Entry maths course who experience severe difficulties with learning and communication, with whom to test out her theory that co-creating the curriculum would be of huge benefit to learners in developing greater autonomy.

ARE YOU UP FOR A CHALLENGE?

Amanda began by exploring with the group if co-creation was something they would like to do. She used the following prompts in a group discussion to introduce the idea:

Learning Activity: Group Discussion

- Who makes decisions for you in your everyday life – what to wear, what to eat....?
- Who plans your lessons for you?
- Are you up for a challenge? Do you want to plan your maths with me?

Having identified that the group was enthusiastic about co-creation, she negotiated with the learners what exactly they wanted to plan with her. Was it a scheme of work, a lesson, or a few learning activities? Full of ambition, the group chose to plan a scheme of work for the whole year.

WHERE TO START?

Amanda decided that the first step was to ensure that the learners understood how maths skills related to their everyday lives and future aspirations. She set up an activity to help the learners explore the relevance of maths.

Learning Activity: Everyday Maths Display

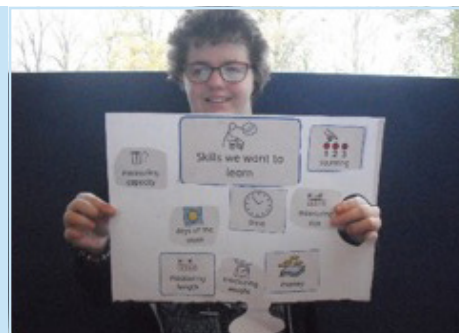
- Think of something you like to do.
- What maths skills do you need for this activity? Learners chose from symbols showing range of maths skills.
- They then created a display board that shows that they use maths in everything they do.

WHAT MATHS SKILLS DO YOU WANT TO LEARN THIS YEAR THAT WILL SET YOU UP FOR YOUR FUTURE LIVES?

To help learners identify maths skills relevant to them, she set up another learning activity, using information about their future aspirations that they had already recorded in their individual learning plans.

Learning Activity: Dream and Maths Skills

- Learners looked at the “dream” page of their plan. This is where they had recorded what they hope to do or be in the future. They were asked to identify which dream was the most important to them.
- They then considered the maths skills they needed to achieve this dream. Learners referred back to the maths skills already gathered on the display board. They made maths symbol cards and put these onto a ‘skills’ jigsaw piece.



WHAT SUPPORT DO THE LEARNERS NEED TO LEARN THESE SKILLS?

Returning again to existing documentation, learners looked at the one-page-profiles they had already created.

Learning Activity: One-Page Profile

- Learners were asked to find the section on their one-page profile that described how staff could help them.
- Working together with staff, they shared the information on the profiles and made a list of the support that they felt was most important for the group.
- They made symbol cards for different types of support and put these onto a ‘help’ jigsaw piece.



WHAT ARE THE LEARNERS' PREFERRED WAYS OF WORKING?

In order to help the learners identify activities that would best support their learning, Amanda then asked the group about their learning preferences, using another learning activity.

Learning Activity: Ways of working

- Learners took part in one activity inside and one outside and then shared which they preferred.
- They then tried activities in which they worked on their own, with friends, and in a given group, and shared which they preferred.
- They made symbol cards to represent ways of working and put these on a 'ways of working' jigsaw piece.

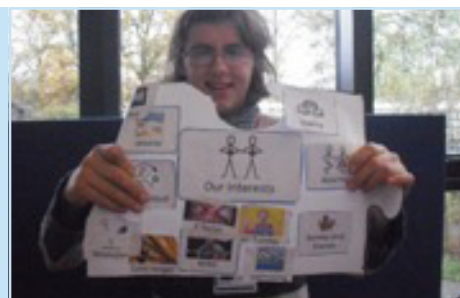


WHAT INTERESTS DO THE LEARNERS HAVE?

In order to help the learners come up with learning activities that would hold their interest and be enjoyable, Amanda set up a discussion activity around learner interests.

Learning Activity: Interests discussion

- Learners took turns to share their favourite activities.
- They made symbol cards for these activities and put their interests on an 'interests' jigsaw piece.



WHAT GROUP ACTIVITIES COULD HELP THEM LEARN THE SKILLS THEY HAVE IDENTIFIED?

At this point learners needed to bring all the information they had gathered together – and so they joined their four jigsaw pieces together: skills to learn, ways staff could help, interests, and ways they like to work. This was displayed in the classroom so that learners could draw on the information to come up with some suggestions for learning activities for their maths group.

Learning activity: matching interests and skills

- Which of the activities you like will help you and your friends to learn the skills on the jigsaw?
- Which of these activities are possible to do in our maths session?
- Once a list of activities was established, they voted for their favourite activities.



CREATING A SCHEDULE

Amanda set up a final activity to create a visual session plan.

Learning activity: creating a calendar

- The learners created a calendar using symbol months and numbers.
- They voted on the order of activities. They then placed their symbols on the board to match with the session dates. This calendar, in conjunction with the jigsaw pieces for skills, needs, ways of working and interests, has resulted in their scheme of work for maths this year.



The whole planning process took 6 weeks, but this was time well-spent as the learning for the learners was very rich. They improved their problem-solving, communication, and team-working skills and their understanding of the relevance of their maths to their everyday lives. As a result, they were better motivated to engage in their maths learning, showed more awareness of their own and others' needs and were more confident to try new activities.

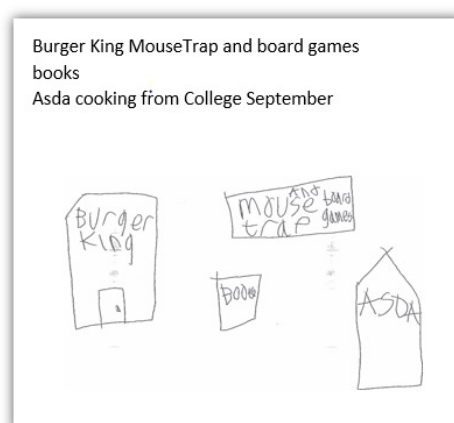
West Suffolk College evaluated the success of this co-creation project by speaking with learners and observing changes in the way that they participated in college life.

The Senior Management Team were so impressed with the positive impact that co-creation has had on this learner group that it has decided to expand the approach across the whole college. All West Suffolk College staff are now being encouraged to trial co-creation with learners, particularly those who experience difficulties in engaging in learning.

Spotlight on an individual student

Jason is one of the pre-Entry students who took part in the West Suffolk co-creation project. He has difficulties with learning and communication and at the start of the project was easily distracted. He found it difficult to maintain his focus on tasks and preferred to work alone.

Jason was actively involved in the planning process from the very beginning, using visual supports to aid his understanding. Once the scheme of work was in place, he took responsibility for checking the calendar, so he could tell the group what was happening at the beginning of each lesson. Jason participated with enthusiasm and began to work happily with other students. In fact, Jason enjoyed the co-creation process so much, that at the end of the year, without any prompting he put together a proposal for the curriculum for the following September. He asked to use a computer during break and presented his tutor with the document here on the right.



Jason's document sets out the activities he would like to his tutor to include in the maths curriculum for the autumn term. His suggestions shows that he is aware that activities such as cooking, visiting restaurants and playing board games all present opportunities for developing maths skills. His choices also demonstrate his awareness of other students' goals and interests as some of the ideas he presented match the preferences of his peers rather than his own.

On returning to college after the summer break, Jason's increased self-confidence led to him putting himself forward as a candidate to be class rep for his group.

The vote was unanimous, and Jason is now a Student Council member.

Case study 2

Heading towards Equal Power – co-creating the curriculum with Entry Level 2 and Entry Level 3 students at City College Norwich



Paula Ottaway, Head of Inclusive Learning at City College Norwich, and her staff team trialled co-creation with two groups of students working at Entry Level 2 and Entry Level 3.

In total, 16 students were involved in the project. One group of students designed a scheme of work as part of their sports programme that enabled them to lead and teach another group of students with autism. They started by undertaking some research into the rules of badminton, and then they considered the best way to teach their peers how to play. This involved talking to tutors who work with students with autism, asking their peers how they like to learn and doing some online research. A second group focussed on skills for employment. They explored how they could find out what employers want from their employees; their project was called 'From the Horse's Mouth'. These skills would form the basis of an employability curriculum.

Paula describes the approach to the projects as 'a leap of faith' for the staff. Whereas they would ordinarily have thoroughly planned a curriculum from the outset, they were now required to have nothing prepared beyond a strategy for supporting the students to develop their own curriculum. A strong commitment to listening to learner voice underpinned their approach.

STUDENT RESPONSE

The students engaged with the concept straight away. They valued the fact that they were respected and trusted to make decisions that would help them to practise and improve their skills in an educational setting over time

Through the co-curriculum process, the students developed skills in:

- articulating and demonstrating their existing strengths
- identifying and sharing evidence
- co-determining next steps
- identifying their support needs
- self-assessment and reflection
- negotiation
- research
- adapting approaches
- collating and presenting a portfolio

IMPACT

Paula is keen to stress the importance of evaluating the impact on students of co-creating the curriculum. She and her team considered not only progress in the specific curriculum area but also in relation to wider skill development. They also identified increases in levels of confidence and self-esteem, and improvements in attitude to learning and behaviour. The team was able to gather both quantitative and qualitative impact data from a number of different sources or perspectives. At City College Norwich, attendance in the co-creating groups increased, as the students knew that their peers were relying on them to attend and complete the work they had started. Behaviours used to express dissatisfaction also improved as students started to negotiate their learning with their peers and the staff team; they felt in control of how the learning took place.

The students at City College Norwich reported that they felt more respected as a result of co-creation, that they had 'equal power' and that they understood more of what it was like to be a teacher. Overall the whole project was given the thumbs-up.

The tutors were impressed by the positive impact of co-creation. They reported that the students were very focused in the sessions and had made great progress in a short space of time.

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Case study 3

Developing a social skills curriculum with learners at Palmer's College (now merged with Seevic College to form USP College)



At Palmer's College, a sixth form college in Thurrock, Essex, Ian Gilling, Additional Learning Support Manager, and Kate Palmer, Learning Consultant, realised that although their learners with SEND were achieving well academically, the curriculum was not addressing all their learning needs. If these learners were going to progress successfully into further or higher education or employment, they needed not only academic achievement but independence skills as well. Uncertain as to exactly which skills would be most beneficial for the young people in question, they decided to ask the learners themselves.

Kate and Ian invited 17 learners with social anxieties, the majority of whom were on the autism spectrum, to take part in a project to co-create a social skills course. The learners were all working at level 2 or 3, mostly taking A-levels and BTECs. Attendance at the sessions was voluntary.

WHAT SKILLS MATTERED TO THE LEARNERS?

The fact that this was an unregulated course, with no qualification attached, meant that tutors were able to give the learners complete control over the things they wanted to work on.

Kate and Ian started out by asking the learners what they felt they needed to learn and what had been missing from their school curriculum. The learners came up with a range of skills, many of which were practical in nature: getting the bus, talking to people, making sandwiches, first aid, looking after themselves, renting houses, using money, and opening up bank accounts.

The learners self-assessed themselves against a set of social skills at the start of the course and at half termly intervals. This helped them to develop an understanding of self and was a useful aid in setting targets and monitoring their own progress. Outcomes in Education Health and Care Plans were also taken into consideration, where relevant.

HOW TO DELIVER IT?

Finding space on the learners' timetables to allow them to meet in small groups was the first challenge, as this course had not been planned into their formal curriculum programme. Having identified the skills that the learners wanted to develop, the next challenge for Kate was working out how to teach them.

Her solution was not to do it all herself, but to involve the college community. Canteen staff, the sexual health nurse, work experience tutors, SEN support staff, the drug awareness team and first aiders were all involved. For example, a member of staff from the canteen worked with the learners on sandwich-making while the sexual health nurse led a session on sex and relationships.

Learning in different environments and with a group who all had additional needs brought its own benefits. The sandwich-making sessions took place in the canteen, an area many of the learners had previously avoided because it was too loud and busy. Not only did they learn some basic catering skills, they also learned to cope with the canteen environment. One learner who was already very competent in sandwich-making was given the opportunity to become the teacher, which boosted his self-confidence. Having their own session with the sexual health nurse allowed the learners to participate in a way they hadn't felt able to in tutorial sessions on the same subject, because they did not have the levels of trust that they had built up with their peers on this programme.

Key success factors

1. Tutors and learners 'learning together'

College staff said to learners from the start: 'This is something new for us, can you help us?' It involved a trial and error process, with learning for both staff and learners.

2. Involving the college community

Having a range of staff contribute to the course didn't just broaden and strengthen the curriculum offer, it also enriched the social learning, as the learners interacted with a broad range of adults on a peer-to-peer basis. Doing so made the learners feel for the first time that they really were part of the college.

3. Working in partnership with the learners

Co-creation changed the dynamics. The learners didn't feel they were being lectured at. They were part of a group, and it was their group; they chose to attend and identified the topics they wanted to discuss, based on issues affecting their lives.

Over the year, the relationship between the group developed, so that increasingly learners did not just participate in whatever had been prepared for them, they also contributed their own issues for discussion and reflected on what had worked well in the sessions.

IMPACT

The learners were very positive about the experience. They acquired many new practical skills, but even more importantly they grew in confidence, increased self-awareness and felt good about what they were doing.

They also developed social skills and built relationships. Kate observed,

It was a shared experience. They all came wanting to do things on their own, but the thing they ultimately loved the most was doing it with other people. They started to say things like 'when we did this' or 'remember when we all...' Now they are ready to spread their wings and their families appreciate that they can achieve things on their own.

Of the 17 learners who started on the course, 14 continued right to the end, all of whom either returned to college, went on to university or moved into employment, including two who were close to being excluded at the start of the project.

The college had a record number of learners with SEND going on to university in 2018, including some from the co-creation group. Attending the group gave them the confidence to start thinking about university as an option and parents began to explore how to make that happen, when previously they had thought their son or daughter wasn't ready to go.

The success of the project has also been recognised more widely. Other parents and learners have heard about it, which has boosted recruitment. This year Kate and Ian are working with 30 learners, and local schools and colleges have asked to find out more.

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Case study 4

Co-creating the curriculum with adults with learning difficulties at City Lit



City Lit's Change the World course is a year-long self-advocacy course for adults with learning difficulties, delivered in weekly two-hour sessions.

It is advertised in the college prospectus as a class where you can learn the skills to:

- get involved in your community
- campaign on issues
- know your rights and responsibilities
- speak up for yourself.

The learners

The current group of learners range in age from 23 to 72. All attend without support, although some learners joining the course for the first time, access support for the first few sessions. Just over a third of the learners of the group have autism. One learner is blind; a couple of learners have hearing impairments and two learners have restricted mobility. Some are very confident in speaking up while others need to be given time and space to do this. Their literacy skills range from fluent to very basic.

PLANNING THE CURRICULUM

Course tutor, Yola Jacobsen, spends the first couple of weeks helping the group get to know each other, setting ground rules and finding out what the learners are interested in - through discussion, small group activities and questions and answers. By the end of the second week, she displays a list of topics on a flipchart based on issues and ideas that have come up in the class activities so far. The group dot-votes on the topics they are most interested in, with each person given three dots to allocate. In this way, the group negotiates the curriculum and the order of activities, based on which topic gets the most votes.

Yola revisits the list on a termly basis to check they are on track and to reinforce the idea that the group has the steer of the course content and direction. If the group decides they want to add a new topic, they can do so; they can also decide to drop a topic. Revisiting the topic list also allows those who were less confident at the start of the course to add ideas once they start to find their voice.

Change the world	
How to organise a debate	●
Politics here and in Iran	● ● ●
Learn about the world	● ●
Discrimination and rights as citizens	● ● ●
Campaigns	● ● ●
Democracy	● ●
London Assembly - visit Mayor?	●
Economy	● ● ●
Voting and Brexit	● ●
US Elections	
Autumn Statement Budget	
Hate Crime	● ●
Making complaints	● ●
Magazine	● ● ● ●

DEVELOPING A SCHEME OF WORK

Yola designs a scheme of work based on the topic list created by the learners. She begins with the topics that were most popular and also allocates more time to these, where appropriate. Some topics develop as the group engages with them, and, if necessary, they spend more time on these and less on others. Yola's flexible approach means that it is relatively straightforward to accommodate these adjustments. Depending on the nature of the topics chosen, learning activities might include discussion, small group activities, inviting speakers to talk to the group, interviewing each other and invited guests, and visits out which the group plan and help organise. The group decides together how they want to spend their learning time; one year they chose to produce a magazine.

Each week Yola invites the learners to do some research for the following week's topic. For example, before coming to class, learners might ask people they know about their views on certain issues or they might find relevant information or objects to bring into the class, for example campaign badges they have collected.

The benefits and challenges of co-creation

Yola observes that by enabling the learners to negotiate their curriculum:

"You can guarantee that you end up with something that is relevant to their interests. The negotiation that goes on in the group around topics and activities is an excellent way to develop the self-advocacy skills of choice and decision-making and speaking up about what is important to you – which is what this course is all about."

It is not easy to ensure that all learners participate in their own way. Differentiation is very important particularly when there is a wide range of skills and abilities in the group. It is quite possible, though, to play to the strengths of individuals. For instance, the blind learner on the Change the World course has very good literacy and touch-typing skills which the group use for the class tweets and to write invitation letters to speakers.

Asked about the attraction of co-creation, Yola replies, "It can take you places that you never expected to go, and this is stimulating for the tutor as well as the learners."

"The negotiation that goes on in the group around topics and activities is an excellent way to develop the self-advocacy skills of choice and decision-making"

Delivered in partnership with:

