

**OUTSTANDING TEACHING, LEARNING  
AND ASSESSMENT - PHASE 3  
(NORTH EAST AND CUMBRIA)**

**FINAL REPORT ON THE PROJECT 'TEACHERS  
AND STUDENT SUPPORT ASSISTANTS  
WORKING TOGETHER'**

(Redcar & Cleveland College)

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# **Synergy in learning: teachers and student support assistants (SSAs) working together to promote learner self-assessment.**

## **Project overview**

The project promoted more effective partnerships between teachers and student support assistants (SSAs) working in Redcar and Cleveland College through a process of experimentation with strategies to aid learners' self-assessment, thus stimulating more independent learning. Teachers and SSAs evaluated strategies designed to illuminate the learners' progress during teaching sessions so that appropriate responses could be discussed between SSAs and tutors as lessons progressed and challenges became apparent. Successful implementation of these approaches required effective organisational scheduling to ensure that SSAs were deployed most effectively across the project.

Key features of this project included:

- Teacher and SSA partnerships fully involved in regular “research and development” sessions;
- Careful tailoring of action research activities so that SSAs and teachers felt comfortable and confidently to experiment and share all findings;
- Use of practitioner-friendly evaluation methods (e.g. meetings and “Padlet”) so that developments could be charted and modified as appropriate

## **Rationale**

In-house observations and Redcar and Cleveland College's 2016 Ofsted report support published research (Sharples, Webster and Blatchford, 2015; Sanders, 2017) which indicated that learning support provision was often both neglected and ineffectively utilised in classrooms and workshops. This project was identified as an opportunity to give sustained attention to the valuable potential of SSAs that are too often taken-for-granted and not fully exploited within College teaching and learning relationships.

The project aimed to:

1. Enable teachers to implement strategies to help learners requiring support to take increased responsibility for their learning.
2. Provide a forum for teachers and student support assistants to develop collaborative strategies that would challenge learners.

## Project activities and outputs

### Approach and Methodology

The project lead used her role as a college-wide teaching and learning practitioner (TLP) to select a team of six tutors, six SSAs and three TLPs to promote more effective partnerships between tutors and SSAs in implementing strategies to aid learners' self-assessment.

The team engaged in a regular programme of professional development activities to ensure that the learning support experience was rigorously investigated. Both SSAs and teachers were supported to engage in action research. This support paid special attention to ensuring that all participants could attend. When possible, occasional events were held in local hotels with a meal provided to create protected time so that established working arrangements could be made more professionally focused. This approach helped create commitment to the project and to each other. It enabled a re-evaluation of existing relationships, and created a motivating ethos of respect and purpose between teachers and SSAs, who expressed pride in the newly-formed professional learning community.

The initial action research activities included comparing SSAs' and teachers' experiences of student support with findings and guidance from published literature. The team held fortnightly meetings and planned paired experimental approaches in classes, which increased team cohesion and professional learning about what SSAs, and teachers can achieve by working together. Information about the role and challenges for SSAs was collected from focus group discussion; questionnaires; observations of practice; artefacts produced by learners; and teachers' and SSAs' reflective diaries.

### What changes were made? What did the project produce?

The project team identified that much existing advice about successful teacher and assistant relationships focused on providing protected joint planning time. They realised while this might seem a good idea attempts at joint planning were often frustrated by practical realities, so they began to concentrate on producing resources that would stimulate attention to learners' needs **within** lessons, when teachers and SSAs could effectively intervene and respond to immediate needs. The SSAs began working with teachers and introduced a range of practical activities (e.g., review tickets) to help learners recognise and record their progress and "sticking points". These "Interim Review tickets" (see Appendix 1) were based upon "Exit tickets", but in this project, instead of waiting until the learning session had finished, they were introduced midway through the session, so meaningful discussions about the session, and any barriers could be addressed before the end. These classroom experiments by teacher and SSA pairings led to a variety of stimuli being used and evaluated. They included mind maps, learning mats and "question stem" cards (see Appendix 3). These practical resources prompted better in-class communication between learner, SSA and teacher when the teacher and SSA could take immediate action.

The results of these sessions were recorded by SSAs and teachers in their individual diaries (purchased through the project). Their reflections were shared later at a series of breakfast meetings and away days for the project team (see Appendix 4 for examples of the diaries).

## **Professional learning:**

### **Evidence of changes in teaching, learning, and assessment practices.**

Towards the end of the project team members were asked to evaluate their participation and identify changes to their teaching, learning and assessment practices. The enclosed Padlets provide an overview of their findings and indicate that the whole process has been extremely beneficial to all participants as learners' progress was made more "visible", and staff were better placed to respond. This staff feedback also provided further evidence of improved collaboration between tutors and SSAs and clearly related to the Professional Standards. The organisation has supported the project and it is hoped the good work carried out to date will be further developed in the coming academic year.

### **Evidence of improved collaboration and changes in organisational practices**

The project lead organised dedicated in-house and external CPD opportunities for SSAs and teachers which provided an excellent basis for the development of practice, as responsive strategies were introduced by classroom partnerships who were enjoying a new research-informed professional relationship. Tutors and SSAs reported more effective working relationships. SSAs stated that during the project, their contributions, skills and knowledge were more widely acknowledged, and teachers acknowledge a new recognition of the potential of SSAs contributions. Teachers and SSAs were both using and contributing to educational theory. The practical resources and strategies from the project were rolled out to all 73 teaching staff in the Autumn term at an organisational CPD event.

Further in-house sessions were organised following an extension to the project, including a training session exploring more effective use of formative assessment and feedback. The project team focused on Hattie's feedback levels and how these could be applied in practice. They also considered the use of Directed Improvement and Reflection Time (DIRT) for learners. During this session the team agreed on new approaches to supporting learners that were subsequently implemented, reviewed at fortnightly team meetings and evaluated at the end of the project.

*"The changes when the SSA isn't in the classroom are significant"* (Teacher)

*"We have learned that it is possible to introduce change and that even small changes can make a huge difference to how people work together to promote learning."* (SSA)

## Evidence of improvement in learners' achievements, retention and progression.

Resources developed by the project (see Appendices 1-3) enabled tutors and SSAs to collaboratively use more effective formative assessment strategies. They help them identify and clarify difficulties experienced by learners. Learners with significant difficulties report that the new strategies help them to keep track of where they are in their learning; see what they need to do to improve; and recognise how to learn from and with peers. Learners find it easier to ask for specific help through the "exit ticket" process. SSAs report being better able to use deeper questioning when a learner is stuck, enabling the learner to be more independent in overcoming barriers. At first it was obvious that learners were trying to use the SSA to simply get the answers to classroom tasks; but the new approaches made lessons more interactive, leading to more effective cooperation between teacher, SSA and learners.

Learners have been very positive about the new approaches. A number stated that they felt more included in the process and enjoyed setting their own targets as these were more meaningful to them, enabling them to work on areas they considered important for their learning.

## Conclusion

### Learning from this project

- Teachers and SSAs worked together to varying degrees across this project. Commitment from both teacher and SSAs was very strong in some relationships; in other pairings, one of the participants was more noticeably active.
- Some teachers and SSAs used self-assessments during the session more than others. However, either the teacher or SSA engaging in "exit ticket" activities at the end of sessions still improved learners' capacity to self-assess, and the teacher's and SSA's appreciation of the learners' needs.
- Teachers and SSAs became aware that learners' previous school experiences of learning support had often unwittingly encouraged them to rely on SSAs simply to provide answers to classroom tasks. The new approaches used in this project prompted learners to be more active and responsible for their progress.
- SSAs reported being better able to use deeper questioning when a learner encountered difficulties, challenging the learner to work out new learning strategies. This represents significant progress compared with when learning support activity was limited to providing praise for (or criticism of) the learner.
- When SSAs and teachers use 'exit tickets' and 'mind maps' as interim assessment activities during the class (rather than at the end of the session), meaningful responses can rapidly be made to address learners' problems that might otherwise have impeded their progress for the whole session.
- Within the protected space created by this project, SSAs reported "being noticed", feeling valued and being listened to as equals. Teachers became more fully aware of SSAs' potential contribution.
- Because teachers and SSAs felt included as equal participants on this research project, this appears to have created the foundation for shared practice development. SSAs and

teachers reported engaging in more thoughtful discussion as they reflected on their experiences and planned further improvements for learners.

- Participants rated highly the opportunities for internal networking. Although the sharing of practice might have been expected already within this mature organisation, both new and experienced staff were inspired by the personal and professional relationships they developed through this project.
- Teachers' capacity to meet all learners' needs could be greatly enhanced by listening to the combination of the 'learner voice' and the voice of the SSA.
- The project was led by an experienced in-house teacher-educator who had some experience of teacher research; recognised individual practitioners' needs and contributed practical teaching strategies to meet organisational requirements.
- Managers now need to ensure that the benefits of the project are fully embedded into college practice and that all staff receive appropriate support and training to ensure learning support is used effectively in classrooms in the coming academic year.

## Dissemination

- Information on the project was disseminated locally through the media.
- May 2018: Catherine McPartland (project lead) and Di Pearson (team member) attended the Teacher Education Advancement Network Meeting at Aston University, Birmingham. An article about the project is planned.
- July 2018: Catherine McPartland (project lead) and Di Pearson (team member) presented project findings at the Newcastle SET meeting.
- September 2018: Catherine McPartland (Project Lead) presented project findings at the British Educational Research association Conference SET meeting Group.
- October 2018: Gillian Greenwood (SSA); Irene Walker (teacher) and Catherine McPartland (project lead) presented project findings at the International Collaborative Action Research Network Conference, Manchester.
- November 2018: An article about the project is due to be published in the journal **Teaching in Lifelong Learning**.

## References

Sanders, A. (2017) **Strand 2: Develop and deliver CPD for support staff to improve progress in maths and English Annex A: Desk Research** London: The Education and Training Foundation.

Sharples, J., Webster, R. and Blatchford, P. (2015) **Making best use of teaching assistants. Guidance report – March 2015**. London: Education Endowment Fund. Available online: <http://maximisingtas.co.uk/eef-guidance.php>

## Appendix 1 - “Interim” and “Exit” Stimulus Materials

The project team identified that most existing advice about successful teacher and assistant relationships was aspirational and vague and referred to protected joint planning time as being all-important.

However, the practitioners realised that while this might seem a theoretically sound arrangement, but it was often frustrated by practical realities, so they began to concentrate on producing resources that would stimulate attention to learners’ needs **within** the lesson, when teachers and SSAs could effectively intervene and respond to immediate needs.

SSAs collaborated with teachers and introduced a range of practical activities (e.g. review tickets) to help learners recognise and record their progress and “sticking points”. These interim review tickets were based upon “Exit tickets”, but instead of waiting until the learning session finished, they introduced them midway through the session, so that they could have meaningful discussions about the learning topic, and any barriers could be addressed.

Examples of the resources include:

### 1 An interim Self-Assessment “ticket”

**Self-Assessment ticket**

**What I learnt from this activity**  
.....

**What I did not understand:**  
.....

**What I need to know:**  
.....



2 A target setting and assessment ticket

	<b>In today's work I will...</b> ..... ..... .....
<b>Review - At the end of the lesson:</b>	
	.....
	.....
	.....

3 Another exit ticket

321 Exit Ticket Template	
<b>3</b>	Things I Learned Today ...
<b>2</b>	Things I Found Interesting ...
<b>1</b>	Question I Still Have ...

## Appendix 2 - Padlets

### Evaluative Padlets

Group sessions were important in developing the commitment to the project that became evident in refreshed relationships between teachers and SSAs. The process of contributing to an evaluative Padlet within a group session appeared to encourage colleagues to explore their personal and shared responses to the process.

OTLA and Me. Participants identified personal growth and development as a result of the project: <https://padlet.com/cpmcpartlanduk/otlappd>

OTLA Evaluations, June 2018 <https://padlet.com/cpmcpartlanduk/otlaevaluation>

## Appendix 3 - Question Stems

**Why do you think it happened like that?**

**What are the differences between?**

**Can you give me an example of what you mean?**

**Describe what happened at ... stage of the process**

**Can anybody see this in another way?**

**Why did the changes occur?**

**Can you explain why ...?**

**Why do you think this is the case?**

**Why is this activity harder than the last**

**Why is this necessary?**

**What does this information tell you about**

**Can you give me an example of that?**

**How many ways can  
you ...?**

**What is it?**

**Do you agree that ... is the  
most important factor?**

**Make a list of...**

**What are the top  
three ...?**

**What bit are you  
missing? It begins with**

**What is happening?**

**Is it true that ...?**

## Appendix 4 - Examples of diaries

The accompanying diary excerpts show how SSAs and teachers can keep diaries to help focus on developing issues and how professionals respond.

It is very important to note that the project lead created the conditions for diaries to be successfully sustained at a level of meaningful examination of practice. These conditions included:

- Providing quality hard copy diaries, respecting individuals and indicating high expectations of their commitment
- Organising regular meetings where diary entries are discussed
- Creating opportunities in the discussion so that participants realise it is as useful to share unwelcome findings as it is successes. This helps people relax and gradually become more comfortable with disclosing the realities of classroom life in supported sessions.