

Learning to learn in Further Education

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CETT for Inclusive Learning

Background to the project

The Campaign for Learning (*CfL*) is an independent charity that aims to stimulate an appetite for learning that will sustain people for life. They define Learning to Learn as *'a process of discovery about learning. It involves a set of principles and skills, which, if understood and used, help learners to learn more effectively and so become learners for life. At its heart is the belief that learning is learnable'*. *CfL* has run a national Learning to Learn research project with schools (including schools with sixth forms) for over eight years developing strategies to improve the learners experience, skills and achievements throughout their learning journey. The *CfL* were contacted to initiate the inclusion of the Further Education (FE) sector into their research projects. Important developments with younger learners and teaching staff were being established, developments which would definitely be beneficial for FE staff and learners.

Structure of the project

The college in collaboration with the *CfL* prepared a study proposal which was presented to the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) to gain funding for a research project which was the first of its kind. It is a two-year project which has utilised the successful model already in use in the schools project with local In-Service Education and Training (INSET) for the staff involved, residential, regional and national conferences which circulate and authenticate the research as it progresses. The project involves teacher-led professional enquiries (action research) as already previously used by the schools. These are conducted within an overarching framework established with the *CfL* and supported by the Higher Education Institution (HEI) research team.

Partners

The two-year project commenced in September 2008 and was funded through the *CfL*; the Universities of Newcastle and Durham support the research through face-to-face and electronic networking. An Advisory Group (joined with the schools project) with representatives from a range of national policy organisations, professional bodies and educational institutions also support the project. It is hoped that a wider research community will be established involving other FE colleges interested in the project to share good practice.

Aims of the project

- To gain and develop an understanding of Learning to Learn for both learners and college staff to encourage growth in learners' autonomy
- to explore the issues of incorporating and maintaining Learning to Learn as a developmental approach within FE colleges
- to study the various approaches and potential of Learning to Learn and how they relate to raising standards and achievements across ability ranges within the college, especially in inclusion and learner support
- to fully appreciate the role of enquiry in both teacher and student learning
- to develop stronger links with the HEI and schools to improve networks
- to investigate the possible effect of the family and community on the progression of students as lifelong learners
- to identify and understand any differential impact on the learning of distinct groups of learners.

Desired outcomes

- Those involved in the project gain an understanding of learning to inform and improve practice
- learners taking more responsibility for their learning (learner autonomy) and gaining transferable knowledge and skills (creating lifelong learners)
- improving the skills of all supporting and teaching through cascading of ideas and results
- produce evidence for a research publication aimed at parliamentarians, civil servants and the FE sector
- hold conferences and events to disseminate research findings and reports
- develop an FE website which would link to the L2L school website.

Personal involvement

The first cycle of the professional enquiry began in January 2009 and consisted of two hourly sessions on a weekly basis over an eight week period. The reason behind the duration and timing of the research was to encourage staff to commit themselves to a short, you could say 'taster' of Learning to Learn. The college is very busy and staff have huge workloads so it was vital to offer a study programme which would be fun and interesting a *'journey of self discovery'*. The research was aimed towards gaining a greater self-awareness of how the participants learn best

themselves and also to investigate the theories of how others learn. The two staff involved in the research were from the Additional Learning Support Department, they were additional learning support (ALS) staff.

During the eight week programme the ALS staff reflected on their previous learning experiences which led to in-depth discussions regarding what they identified as their personal successes and failures. As a result of the reflection, learning styles, emotions, feelings and environments were examined in the hope of building awareness of personal learning. Each session engaged the participants in various activities and discussions. In the first session a reflective activity involving taking the participants on a journey back to their experiences in school life was absorbing and was followed by lengthy conversations regarding the attributes of effective learning. The participants wrote autobiographies of their learning which encouraged in-depth discussions that led on to investigating emotions and feelings in the learning process. The participants also kept reflective learning journals throughout the research project. In each session time was allocated to share an entry they had submitted into their diaries this was to encourage learning conversations. Learning spaces, domains, taxonomies, multiple intelligences, personality types, learning theories and theorists were all touched upon within the sessions.

Summary of findings

- Almost immediate impact on role supporting learners, engaging in conversations about learning
- raised awareness and importance of understanding how individuals learn
- reflection aided with self-discovery of how and when personal learning is most effective
- learning journal identified how learning is continuous in formal and non-formal contexts
- increased the confidence of the participants for future learning and supporting role.

The Head of Additional Learning Support Department has requested the Learning to Learn programme be offered to the ALS staff in the new academic year and she has also introduced it to 12 new members of her team. The second cycle will involve a larger number of participants increasing the credibility of any research findings. The case study will be submitted to the March edition for approval.

Developments to date

- The first Learning to Learn in FE conference was held at the Chambers of Industry and Commerce in March 2009
- all of the staff involved in the first cycle of the Learning to Learn project are writing up their case studies with a deadline of September 24 2009
- the case studies will be available on the CfL and CfLaT websites in November 2009
- the 'Learning to Learn in FE' findings will be analysed by the HEI research team and a full report will be available in November 2009
- Learning to Learn 'The voice of the learner' Conference in place for 10 December 2009 at the CfLaT Newcastle University.

Next steps

- Learning to Learn Research and Development meetings will commence in October 2009 and all college staff will be invited to take an active role in the project
- the existing staff involved in the Learning to Learn project will identify, plan and organise the second cycle of their research
- a timeline of progression check points and events will be established.

