

## Case study. Speak up for yourself and your future



### Summary

A group of six learners with severe learning disabilities took part in a programme entitled 'Speak up For Yourself and your Future', designed to support person-centred planning and inform a curriculum focussing on goals and choices for adult life. The group encompassed a range of abilities and cognitive levels, including students with significant speech, language and communication difficulties.

#### Key lessons learned

- Small group work around self-advocacy skills benefits young people with learning difficulties and disabilities by polarising their thoughts and feelings about the future
- A variety of accessible, innovative techniques encourages interaction and builds confidence such as the use of puppets, rapping, video reviews as learning tools and the use of a voice-recorder to gain instant feedback
- The use of a puppet as a medium to communicate social stories gives young people permission to articulate their feelings and creates empathy at a deeper level, enhancing listening skills and emotional literacy
- The technique of using key vocabulary from the previous session each week to create a group-rap reinforces learning and raises confidence in the act of articulating speech, as well as improving vocalisation, social skills and team-building
- The use of mind-maps to track personal goals and aspirations gives ownership to the participant and helps to feed into the Person Centred Learning and Education, Health and Care Plans
- 'Live learning' approach addresses problems which happen in the group as learning opportunities either in the moment or for future lessons, for example, introducing strategies for managing inappropriate behaviour towards others

### Introduction

#### About Hackney Community College

Hackney Community College is a medium sized College of Further Education, formed in 1993 by the merger of Hackney Adult Education, Hackney 6th Form College and Hackney Further Education College. They now have a single, purpose built site in Shoreditch. The college is strongly committed to serving the needs of the community, which is highly diverse and includes many families with significant social and economic needs. The college has always provided courses for learners with moderate learning difficulties and/or disabilities, but in 2009 it was asked to make provision for a small group of young people with a higher level of need.

The college responded to this with a rapid transformation of support facilities and a complete re-think of curriculum. They worked closely with the Health Authority to prepare to meet these young peoples' needs, and were required to have a different profile of staff to meet those needs, including staff to

provide a range of therapies. This year there are 48 learners with complex needs attending the college, which has won a Beacon Award for curriculum design and innovation.

## **What we wanted to explore**

Following one of the recommendations of the Green Paper, *Support and Aspiration*, (March 2011), the college began to build on their relationship with the Health Authority to develop an interactive person-centred learning plan that linked to the health plan. They began to review the entire curriculum to provide effective preparation for adulthood. They were aware that they were not addressing sufficiently well the development of learners' skills to express their likes, dislikes and opinions, and to make realistic choices.

The college wanted to develop a curriculum through which learners could develop the skills they need to be confident to express their own ideas, wishes and choices, and in particular to be able to take a more active role in person-centred planning for their own futures. College staff were unsure at the outset what approach to learning would be most effective to achieve the aim.

## **Aims**

To help the learner to learn, live and work in their adult life through improving their self-advocacy skills. The focus was planned to be:

- Student self-awareness to lead to increased positive self-esteem and confidence
- Communication skills
- Problem-solving and decision-making.
- Goal setting

## **Planning the approach**

The tutor designed a series of sessions for a pilot group of young adults with learning difficulties and disabilities.

She researched the area of self-advocacy and used as her principle source the *Speak Up for Yourself and Your Future!* Curriculum (found in the Self Determination Resource Handbook produced by the Oregon Department of Education). A copy is available with this output although it can also be found at <http://www.itschools.org/files/www/file/self-advocacy%20ResourceHandbook.pdf>

An afternoon session was identified for the programme, with a mixed ability group of students. The tutor is experienced in working with young people of different ages in a range of settings, with particular expertise in puppet work.

The programme was planned to concentrate on developing and improving individual skills, practising them, reflecting on them, and discussing progress, with an emphasis on self-awareness and on-going discussion about the impact of having the skills. It is intended that these skills are extended and applied across the rest of the learners' curriculum (although the mechanisms for monitoring this have yet been fully developed). The application to a variety of community or work contexts is to be addressed at a later stage.

The tutor reviewed her chosen basic curriculum (see link above), but after meeting the learners developed her own set of five overall aims and began to write the course, lesson by lesson, based on identifying individual goals. She wrote a monitoring check-list initially, but this didn't work for the group of learners because they were all working at such different levels and speeds, so she began working on a new approach to monitoring which was completed by the end of the first course (see below – Follow on activities).

## **What was done**

This was the framework which was used for each lesson

All whole group activities took place in a circle.

### *Beginning*

Each session began with learners, tutor and support staff sitting in a circle and taking turns to say how they felt and why. A wooden egg or other speaking object was passed around for each person to hold when it was their time to speak and for others to listen. The why or because was to give learners time to think about why they were feeling in a particular way. There was always an option to pass and have a

further turn at the end of the session if they wanted to say anything. Everyone was able to say how they felt and most were able to say why they felt like that. This activity focussed on bringing the group together, acknowledging the different feelings in the room, taking turns to speak and listen to each other without interrupting and raising awareness of how each person was feeling.

### *Game*

The group played at least one game each week to build confidence and focus on key skills such as concentration, memory, observation, speaking and listening. Learners were encouraged to use positive language with each other, such as *'well done'* or *'good try'* when they had correctly guessed something in the game. Students were very engaged in these games which helped raise the energy level. It also served to highlight the level of difficulties and understanding and the level and type of support needed to help individual learners. For example in one game one person is chosen to be the detective and has to leave the room and return after a short period of time. They were asked to count to 10 and then come back in. In practice however, most had no idea when it was time to come back and stayed outside until they were called. A simple mime game was introduced at the beginning of the programme which the group found very difficult because it involved standing up and miming something to the rest of the group and they were not very confident. However when they tried it 13 weeks later they were all very confident, participating to such a degree they didn't want to stop the game.

### *Main section*

The puppet 'Jazza' was used to introduce the aims of each session by sharing his own experiences, problems, hopes and dreams and also to interact with the students. They were able to empathise and were more willing to speak when the puppet asked them questions. They could also remember what he said. They were playful and showed empathy by saying *'ahh'* and *'don't worry'* if he was upset about something. On one occasion the tutor didn't bring him in and they were disappointed and wanted to know why. He was very much part of the group. 'Jazza,' himself had learning difficulties. He told the group he needed help and said he had difficulties reading and writing and managing money. The puppet was initially introduced to see how the learners would respond and this produced a visibly higher level of interaction. The learners were much more engaged and focussed when listening and interacting with the puppet than with the tutor or support staff. Watching back the video of the puppet in the earlier stages highlighted an issue which was subsequently addressed. Too much information was being given and the key message needed more clarity. This was addressed by mind mapping very clearly the key points of the session so it was clear and easy to refer to. Support staff commented on how well the group were able to respond to the puppet.

### **Follow on activities**

A variety of follow up activities were used to consolidate the learning. Tutor and support staff helped learners fill in questionnaires and mind maps which were used to gather information about their likes, dislikes, interests, challenges and goals. The learners worked in pairs or one to one

Support staff were used to model some of the activities -for example a scenario using small puppets to teach assertive language such as *'stop I don't like it!'* as well as actively taking part in group discussions and sharing their own experiences, interviewing learners and filming. One support member of staff said they themselves felt more confident when they saw video footage of themselves interacting with the learners. Another said that they had learnt to leave a pause and some space for the learner to answer a question rather than offer help too soon.

A video was used to record the students sharing something about the activity they had done. This was either one question linked to the lesson such as *'Tell us one thing you like to do at college and why.'* If there was more than one question they would be written down on a piece of card and to make it more interesting we used different ways of recording. At the beginning we used microphones as a prop to 'interview' each other for a 'television programme.' Sometimes the scenes were rehearsed beforehand, but it was more authentic when it was recorded without rehearsing. Occasionally each person would be recorded (keeping it short to 30-60 seconds) and then repeat it so they an opportunity to watch everyone and then have another go - they were often more confident the second time and they enjoyed doing it again.

### *Last part of the session*

This would either be watching back video from the previous week and or developing the song/rap for the project depending on time and energy levels of the group.

The video recording was something they enjoyed although some felt embarrassed watching themselves at the beginning, although at the same time they said they felt pleased and proud. They all wanted to continue to be filmed. Watching back gave the tutor an opportunity to give constructive feedback and also for them to self-evaluate: 'What *did you like? Is there anything you would do differently? What did you like someone else do?*' Many learners found it challenging to say themselves what they could do differently so the tutor would suggest something

Individual learning targets were identified that learners could work towards. One girl tended to laugh when she was talking and the tutor was able to say '*I noticed you were laughing when you said that, is it because you feel a bit embarrassed and would like to find a way to help you feel more relaxed and confident*'.

Key vocabulary was used from each session to build and create the rap and to reinforce learning, building confidence in the act of articulating speech with better timing, improving vocal skills, vocalisation and team building and giving opportunities for individual students to take a lead in this activity. It was done as a whole group as well as smaller groups with tutor and support staff. One member of staff with a music background helped the learners with the rhythm. A voice recorder was used to record small sections of the rap. Listening back meant they could hear themselves and if it was too loud we tried again but softer and so on. One of the learners who had a solo part looked so proud when he heard himself on the video. When they watched it back they all started singing it. The session ended with a round of something that the tutor liked at the beginning. She tried to vary it by adding what they didn't like but this seemed very hard for them answer.

## Evaluation

There were four questions. Students interviewed each other. This section was recorded.

1. How do you feel when you see yourself on the video?

I feel.....because.....

Alpha- *happy*

Peter -*happy*

Jessica - *I look beautiful*

Deborah-*happy Georgia and Emma is nice*

Mariah- *I felt embarrassed looking at myself in the video*

2. Tell us something you liked about speak up?

I liked.....because

Jessica-*'happy because Georgia is nice'*

Peter-*'happy to see my picture'*

Alpha- *'made new friends and it makes me happy'*

3. Did you like listening to Jazza the puppet? Yes/No

Can you tell us why?

Jessica- *'Yes 'Stop touching' (message)'*

Peter- *'I like it'*

Mariah - *'I like to see and listen to Jazza'*

Alpha- *'yes'*

4. Would you like to do the 'speak up' programme again?

Can you tell us why?

Jessica- *'yes I like it, I like Georgia'*

Peter- *'yes, I like it'*

Deborah - *'Emma, I love you'*

Mariah- *'yes, because it's good'*

Alpha- *'yes, because it's nice'*

## Outcomes and impacts

## What was achieved?

1. Outputs: a scheme of work (see below) and a model to be further developed.
2. Outcomes: expertise to disseminate among the teaching and support teams, with a view to the approach being embedded across the curriculum
3. Impact: the learners regularly discuss how they feel about the work they're involved with.

*'It makes me feel more confident' - Sukmit*

*'I can tell people what I want my life to be like when I leave college' - Peter*

*'I feel happy watching myself' – Deborah (she would not speak out in the group at the outset  
'I'm pleased because I was listening well' – Peter after watching himself interviewing a fellow student.*

*'It was good to hear me talking – it sounded better than I thought' – Sukmit*

Members of the teaching team report improvements in a range of communication skills for those learners who took part in the pilot.

Output: Speak Up for Yourself and Your Future!  
*Outline Scheme of Work*

*Aim:* To gather information about our interests and hobbies in college and in our social life

*Outcomes:*

- I know what I like to do in college
- I know what I like to do at home/in my social life
- I can tell someone what I like to do at college
- I can tell someone what I like to do at home

*Aim:* To introduce expectations we have about our future lives, home and work

*Outcomes:*

- I can think about where I would like to live in the future
- I can tell someone about the different types of accommodation people live in
- I can identify different types of work I might be able to do
- I can say what work I would like to try
- I can tell someone what I like to do in my social life
- I can find out about different activities I would like to do in my social life

*Aim:* To develop skills needed to create a song for the Speak up project

*Outcomes:*

- I can speak in a clear voice
- I can rap in a clear voice
- I can listen to others
- I can work with others
- I can practise rapping to a steady beat
- I can rap with other people
- I can identify words and phrases needed
- I can copy others with the words and rap
- I can take a lead with the words and the rap
- I can change the tone of my voice loud/ soft
- I can follow instructions

*Aim:* To have an understanding of my own and other people's personal space

*Outcomes:*

- I know what personal space means
- I can stay in my own personal space
- I know how to behave appropriately with others
- I know what to do and say if someone touches me in a way that I don't like
- I know it is not okay to try and kiss someone or touch their private parts
- I can name comfortable feelings
- I can name uncomfortable feelings

*Aim:* Identifying strengths and challenges at home/ shopping/ college/social life

*Outcomes:*

- I can name personal qualities I have
- I can say what things I find difficult
- I can say what I would like to improve
- I can say what help I need

*Aim:* To understand how choices can help us to be more independent

*Outcomes:*

- I can say what choices I make at home/ shopping/ college/social life
- I can make choices with help
- I can say who helps me to make choices
- I can say how I feel when I make my own choices
- I can think about the steps I need to make my own choices

*Aim:* To recognise the people who help me

*Outcomes:*

- I can name family and friends who help me
- I can say what family and friends do to help me
- I can name people who are paid to help me
- I can say what others do to help me
- I know how to ask for help

*Aim:* To develop an understanding of goals

*Outcomes:*

- I can say what a goal is
- I can identify a goal
- I can gather information needed to help me choose a goal
- I know who can help me achieve my goal
- I can say what steps I need to achieve my goal
- I know when I have achieved my goal
- I can engage in problem-solving process to overcome any barriers in achieving my goal

*Aim:* Introduce skills needs for speaking with confidence

*Outcomes:*

- I can stand or sit up straight
- I can hold my head up
- I can walk or sit with my shoulders back
- I can look at the person or people I am talking to
- I can speak slowly and clearly
- I can take my time when I speak
- I can remember to breath and say words to help me calm down

*Aim:* To understand what comfortable feelings are

*Outcomes:*

- I can name some comfortable feelings
- I can say why I have comfortable feelings

*Aim:* To understand and manage uncomfortable feelings

*Outcomes:*

- I can name some uncomfortable feelings
- I can say why I feel uncomfortable
- I know some ways to help me relax and stay calm

*Aim:* To understand how uncomfortable feelings affect my body on the inside and on the outside

*Outcomes:*

- I can say what happens to my body on the outside
- I can say what happens to my body on the inside

## What we learned

Challenges encountered by the practitioner:

- Limited opportunities to meet with the support staff to discuss session aims and feedback at the end of each session
- Consideration needed to adapt tasks down to a level which met each student's individual needs
- The time taken to plan each lesson, evaluate and rewrite ready to try out for the next 'Speak up' project
- Developing every resource used and then having to further adapt to meet the learners' needs
- Making sure the commitment is there (two students timetabled to do work experience at the same time as the programme)
- Researching and developing own understanding and delivering of some of the aims
- Writing and asking the 'right' questions to help generate the information needed to meet the outcomes
- Length of time taken to watch back, edit and produce video clips
- Selection of the group: ensure involvement of speech and language staff support students with challenging communication needs

## What we are taking forward

All the aims have been addressed and built upon in every session, and reinforced in every session.

The tutor is reviewing the approach and aims, and keeping a clear record.

There will be specific training for learning assistants on how to support the work, and training for all the staff team to implement the emerging skills across the curriculum. There is evidence from feedback from the group tutors that the approach has improved all the learners' communication skills.

## How we are sharing it

Colleagues from other colleges have already visited, seen the work and shown an interest. They are being supported to develop and introduce similar programmes.

## What advice we would give to others

Initial lessons from the pilot work are:

- Match aims to learners, and continually review
- Take very small steps
- Continually re-cap and reinforce
- Use of video is effective to prompt memory, and build confidence
- Keep each activity short and use a variety of teaching and learning styles
- Keep the activities fun engaging and interactive, puppets, role play, games etc.
- Work as a team and draw on the strengths and skills of the support staff and model the behaviour you want your learners to use
- Have access to a range of visual resources
- Although the sessions are tutor lead, every decision on activities is discussed and every possible opportunity for making choices, listening to each other, and stating opinions is taken.

**The Case Study is on Hackney College's website, and included video clips:**

<http://www.hackney.ac.uk/courses/what-you-can-study/courses-for-people-with-learning-difficulties-and-or-disabilities/>