

Practitioner-led action research: assessment for learning in practice

Sam Alvarez, an accounting and business studies tutor at Sussex Downs College in Eastbourne recognised that while her AS accounting learners were skilled in learning and applying theories, they were not so strong in their analytic and evaluation skills. She set out to improve her learners' grades by testing out assessment for learning techniques, investigating those that were effective in supporting and developing learning. She focused on four areas of practice that promote assessment for learning, including studying model answers and mark schemes; formulating assessment criteria collaboratively with learners; self- and peer-assessment and structured dialogue. By the end of the twelve-week period the impact was clear, both in terms of her learners' enthusiastic comments about using AfL techniques, and in improved grades in their assessed work, with one learner leaping from an E grade to grade A.



learners". She hopes this will encourage the learners to take more responsibility for their learning, which will in turn allow tutors to focus more on individual learners and their capabilities. Sam felt that giving learners the opportunity to voice their opinions about the way that they learn and giving them more responsibility was a large part of the study's success. She found that this approach also increased her learners' motivation, with some saying that hers was the *'only subject where I haven't missed a lesson'*. "The learners were pleased to be treated as individuals and involved in the way they were being taught – the classes who were not involved only seemed annoyed not to be!"

Sam found that conducting her own research was far more beneficial than she had originally thought it would be, "by doing the research yourself, the findings directly apply to your practice and setting". The improvements in her learners' work was evident by the fact that their grades were the best the college has ever had, and she hopes that her research will show how assessment can form a much more natural part of teachers' planning, and help to develop learners skills for life after education.

Having support was important

When Sam first started her research, she found the support that she received from both her colleagues and external specialists extremely valuable. She originally felt quite overwhelmed due to the amount of information that she was collecting, but with help was able to see how the data could be used effectively. She also found it a great help that Sussex Downs College was in the process of implementing a new CPD strategy at the time that used an action-research based approach. A result of this is that the college has an online professional development site which focuses entirely on practitioner research within the college, that all tutors can access (this includes further details of Sam's study, including video clips and the tools that she used). Sam's research has clearly given her and her colleagues the motivation and enthusiasm to continue connecting evidence with practice. This is evident in their future plans to roll out her findings across other subjects and sites by using a collaborative approach with five other teachers to discover the value of the research on a larger scale.

The benefits of doing research

Sam believes her research will benefit both practitioners and learners. "The learners will be better equipped to make the most of their learning and become more independent learners in the future; practitioners will be encouraged to work more with individual



Sam with Ria Henderson and Yi Ka Tang from Sussex Downs College.

Sam's inquiry work was supported by the laboratory sites project run by CUREE on behalf of LSIS. Laboratory sites activity helps practitioners develop approaches reported in *Inside Evidence* and try out evidence-based resources. Sam found reports of research findings from *Inside Evidence* helped inspire her work. Details about the laboratory sites and a fuller summary of Sam's work will be published shortly on LSIS's research website.