

Aims of the project

Our aim was to explore collaborative working in relation to:

- producing and using active learning approaches and materials;
- the effectiveness of peer coaching on team development and CPD; and
- leadership behaviour and learning.

Dimensions of the study

Bridgwater College is an extremely successful tertiary college responsible for post-16 education and training in Bridgwater and the surrounding area. It provides a comprehensive range of academic and vocational programmes for full and part-time learners. The College has gained a reputation for high quality teaching and learning in well-maintained, modern facilities. The most recent inspection graded the college Outstanding.

The research took place in the Early Years section which is a Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) and integrates teaching and learning with a government-designated Children's Centre on the college site. The Early Years section has approximately 190 full-time (including HE) and 330 part-time learners each year on various courses related to Early Childhood. Twelve of the staff team took part in the study including full-time and part-time

Summary of main findings

- There was a marked increase in retention, achievement and progression across the learner groups involved in the study
- Learner engagement increased across all groups
- All teachers increased in confidence and enthusiasm
- Teachers enthused learners to create resources for other groups
- Peer observation and coaching were highly valued by teachers as a way of supporting and learning from each other

Background and context

We feel a strong responsibility to model good pedagogy to our learners who are training to work with young children in their formative years. We wanted to explore the impact of our developing enthusiasm, team work and creativity on teaching and learning.

Several years ago the Early Years section was involved in developing resources for the National Teaching and Learning Change Programme. We worked with the DfES Standards Unit who were producing boxes of teaching and learning materials to assist teachers in using active learning approaches. At the time we had felt a real team ethos that had inspired us to be more creative. We wanted to rekindle our enthusiasm and to draw on



Strong roots healthy branches – Inspiring creativity in teaching for Early Years practitioners through peer coaching

Karen Morgan
Bridgwater College
Bridgwater

teachers; the section leader and a member of the Resource Based Learning team. The approaches were used with a variety of Early Years learners who were training in child care and education at a range of levels from pre-GCSE (level 1) to A level equivalent (level 3) and HE (levels 4 and 5). The learners were mainly female and were taught in various ability groups.

our joint experience to support and improve teaching and learning and to integrate several new members of staff into the existing team.

Teaching processes and strategies

As the Section Leader, I began by meeting learners on a variety of courses and asked them questions about their learning such as: *What helps you to learn? What do you enjoy in your lessons? What do you remember about your lessons? What is less helpful?* Many of the points learners raised related to active learning as a preferred approach.

We then held a team day to discuss the findings. Two teachers demonstrated active learning approaches and ways of engaging learners actively in their own learning. Following this the teachers were divided into groups of three and we set about exploring the 'boxes'. These boxes have been produced by QIA (and previously by the Standards Unit) and contain a wealth of learning activities and ideas. There are card sorting exercises, dominoes, board games, online activities, as well as lesson plans and video clips of teachers and learners carrying out and reflecting on the activities. The idea was for teachers to discuss and reflect on the resources and then to develop their own activities based on these, to suit their own subject areas and learners' individual needs.

Peer coaching in these small groups gave teachers the opportunity to work through and refine their ideas with support from colleagues. We then set dates for when we would be able to use these with students and organised peer observations. The idea was that every teacher would both be observed and observe a colleague implementing the active approaches they had developed together.

Teachers then went back to the classroom, made their resource/game and used it with a group of learners. Peer observation was used for teachers to see how the resource worked and to gain ideas for their own teaching. It was an opportunity to see our teaching from a different perspective. The focus for peer observation was 'What can I gain from observing you?' The ground rules for peer observation were crucial. Teachers devised a *proforma* that asked about:

- 'Three things I would try in my teaching';
- 'One thing I might do differently'; and
- 'How did you find it being observed!'

This provided a template for the discussion/coaching following the observation as well as for the observation itself.

About six weeks into the study we held another team meeting to evaluate and reflect on the project so far. Some teachers had already completed their activities and observations and others had not yet started. I cannot exaggerate the impact of that day. It generated a huge wave of enthusiasm in the study. Already

we were finding positive results with learners. Several groups of learners had approached teachers to ask if they could help with making the resources in their spare time.

We also explored some of the barriers to implementing active teaching and learning approaches. For example: *Will I have time to make these resources/games? Will I be able to fit in my teaching content if I am doing games with learners? Are these activities challenging enough for higher level academic subjects? How will a game encourage reflection, analysis and evaluative skills?*

The teachers who had already developed active learning approaches were passionate about how they had worked. This passion was infectious. They suggested ways of saving time – the most important one being use your learners! Learners had researched questions to use with other groups: e.g. second years produced a blockbusters game for first years. One group copied the teacher's initial ideas to create a card sorting game for understanding how to assess children's attainment levels in Key Stage One. Not only did this help add to the teacher's stock of resources it also helped the learners find their way around the National Curriculum website (www.ncaction.org.uk).

The study continued for another six weeks. In the second phase we tried to develop more academic activities that could be used to encourage the students' reflection and analytical skills. Using learners to create new teaching materials added to the level of challenge as they had to review and evaluate what they were making. Card activities with case studies and more technical terminology were developed for subjects such as 'food and nutrition' and 'working with parents'.

The results of these approaches were brought to a final team meeting where two different teachers demonstrated their approaches and activities with the group and we discussed and reflected on the research project.

The findings

The research found that:

- Learners preferred lessons that included a variety of activities and used visual and practical as well as auditory methods
- All teachers increased in confidence and teachers worked well together in supportive relationships. One teacher reported,

"I thought that everyone knew what they were doing except me. Now I realise that we all had ideas and that I could contribute as much as the more experienced teachers."

- There has been a significant increase in the use of the Standards Unit/QIA materials. Experimenting with the materials helped teachers to know what was available and illustrated the value of looking for new ideas and resources to stimulate creativity

- There was an increase in learner engagement. One teacher said,

“I was surprised they enjoyed it so much. The learners really got involved.”

Learners found the activities fun and interesting and they helped them to remember the topic content. The quality of resources produced by learners was excellent as they took pride in what they had made and were very aware of the level of understanding their peers would need to complete the tasks set

- Peer observation helped to broaden teachers’ understanding of the Early Years curriculum and the links between subjects. A teacher reported,

“It has helped me to understand what you are doing in their other lessons. I always wondered what sort of things you taught them.”

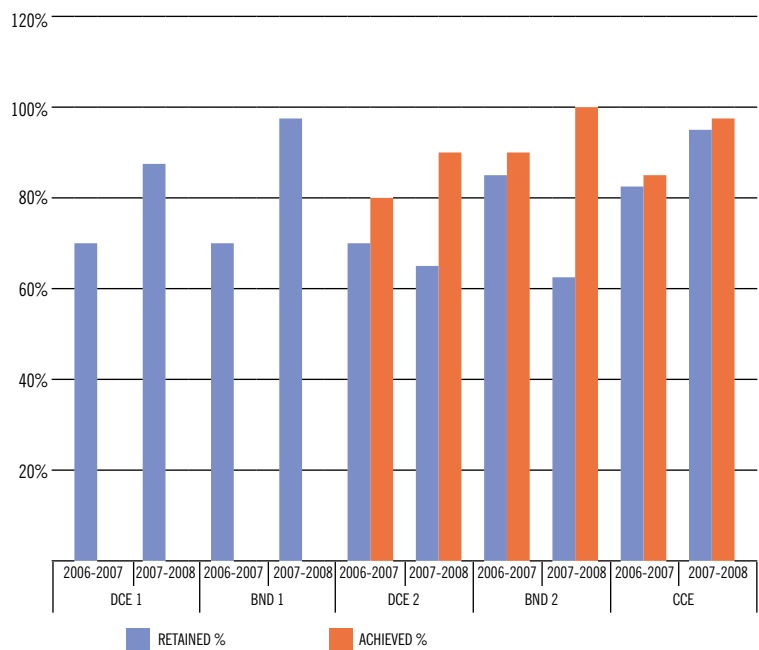
- The project has motivated staff to get more involved in understanding teaching and learning, and has encouraged an increase in reflection and evaluation. Comparison of the reflections from the first team meeting with the final reflections show teachers’ increased levels of engagement and interest in being creative in teaching and learning. Teachers were active in improving, adapting and developing their ideas
- Teachers appreciated the feedback from peer observations and felt that this had been a very supportive process as the observations were non-judgmental and focused on positive results. Several teachers used the feedback from the peer observation to inform their formal appraisal observations. One teacher stated

“I always try to play it safe in observations because I don’t know how it will go. The peer observation gave me the confidence to experiment with the learners and take risks. Then when I did my formal observation I wasn’t so nervous. The nerves spoil my teaching!”

- Working together on the study helped define team roles and as Section Leader I gained an increased awareness of individual teachers’ strengths and concerns. I have felt empowered to promote team work and to form a more cohesive team
- The team has produced high quality resources that they can use and adapt for other lessons as well as sharing with colleagues. An example of this is the Resource Based Learning co-ordinator. She is usually based in the Learning Resource Centre and her contribution to teaching and learning within the section is not as clearly defined as a teacher’s role. During this study she was actively involved in helping teachers to find materials to use in their activities including online resources. This reinforced the potential of her role not only for herself but also for new staff who had

not used her in this capacity before

- Comparison of retention and achievement data for this year and the previous year showed a marked increase in retention for first year groups and achievement for second year groups. Progression to Level 3 from Level 2 has also increased dramatically



DCE – Diploma in Child Care and Education (level 3)

BND – BTech National Diploma (Child Care Learning and Development) (level 3)

CCE – Certificate in Child Care and Education (level 2)

Research methods

Data were collected from several sources, including:

- learner group interviews and evaluations;
- staff reflections before, during and after the study;
- minutes and video recordings of staff team meetings and discussions;
- college statistics on retention and achievement; and
- peer observation records.

The team meetings were important because they gave time to reflect and discuss with each other. We investigated how it had changed the way we teach, the impact on the learners and what facilitated the process.

Conclusion

Teachers have developed a supportive community of practice. We talk about teaching and learning. Creativity and innovation are valued as a tool for increasing learner engagement and enjoyment. We have developed an environment of sharing resources, ideas and practice.

As a result of this research I have developed as a leader. I have seen the value of pursuing a common goal and the impact of working together in developing the team ethos. The time spent reflecting and sharing our work with others has enabled me to identify and more effectively utilise the strengths of individual teachers in the team.

Some of the most interesting lessons were the ones where learners 'took over' and built on what the teacher had started. This has reminded us that the learner can be the best teacher and their creativity outstrips ours on numerous occasions. The challenge for us now is to continue to be supportive and creative and to look to the learner to provide inspiration for continuing professional development in teaching Early Years.

Suggestions for further reading

Gallwey, W.T. (2003) *The Inner Game of Work*, Thompson TEXERE, New York

Joyce, B. and Showers, B. (1996). *The Evolution of Peer Coaching*. Educational Leadership. 53 (6), 12-16 (*Interesting research on Peer Observation*)

Kolb, D.A. (1984). *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. New jersey, Prentice Hall.

Swafford, J. (1998) *Teachers Supporting Teachers through Peer Coaching*. Support for Learning. 13 (2), 107-115

Wenger, E.C and W.M. Snyder (2002). *Communities of Practice: The Organisational Frontier*. Harvard Business Review. Jan-Feb (2), 139-145

Whitmore, J. (2002) *Coaching for Performance GROWing people, Performance and Purpose*. Finland, WS Bookwell
Subject Learning Coaching programme site has a variety of case studies on quality improvement; enthusing staff and learners and coaching, supporting and developing staff:
www.subjectlearningcoach.net

The Excellence Gateway aims to help transform delivery across the learning and skills sector by becoming *the* recognised web channel where practitioners *at all levels* can access high quality resources and information, inspire innovation and share best practice. Among other things it contains the original material we used when first developing our activities:
<http://excellence.qia.org.uk/>

Author's contact details

Mrs Karen Morgan

Section Leader for Early Years

Bridgwater College

Bath Road

Bridgwater

TA6 4PZ

01278441379

e-mail: morgank@bridgwater.ac.uk



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All conference materials are available at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp

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To find out more please email: research.summaries@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk