Chesterfield College: the DofE Award for learners with learning difficulties

Summary

The introduction of the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme (DofE) for learners with learning difficulties posed some real challenges on how to build confidence and knowledge for the learners to be able to complete the expedition part of the scheme unsupervised. By adopting a stepped approach that utilises accessible technologies, learners are successfully completing the scheme.

About Chesterfield College

Chesterfield College is a highly successful and vibrant College based in North Derbyshire with excellent pass rates and high student success levels. Its location is key to its success in attracting students from north and south Derbyshire, Buxton, Derby and South Yorkshire and Sheffield. Chesterfield College is a highly accessible and affordable choice for over 8,000 full, part time or HE students every year.

The challenge

Four years ago, Darren Hirst, a lecturer in Foundation Studies, with a passion for outdoor pursuits, introduced the Duke of Edinburgh (DofE) scheme to the College for learners with learning difficulties (LLDD).

The initial intake was 18 learners doing the Foundation Studies programme, aged between sixteen to their early twenties who were timetabled for DoE every Friday for the full day, as well as dedicating a considerable amount of time outside of College.

The nationally recognisable DoE scheme comprises five parts:

- Volunteering
- Skill
- Physical
- Expedition
- Residential (Gold only)

The scheme is hard work but rewarding for all those who participate. Darren’s challenge was to deliver the scheme in such a way that worked for his learners.
His perception based on experience of seeing other providers working with LLDD learners was that they were often a little hand-held or sheltered through the scheme and didn’t necessarily do it as independently as Darren thought they could or should.

In particular the expedition element looked a distant prospect as learners are required to go on their own expedition without receiving any support and is the main focus of this case study.

**The activity**

To enable the learners to successfully complete the expedition part of DoE, Darren created a way of delivering it that utilises technology to break the learning into bite-size chunks.

One key activity to enable the learner to go out on expedition is map reading. This can be a complex task which requires the person to process and analyse lots of different information.

To help the LLDD learners get to grips with this, Darren broke the activity down into smaller parts and then layered them together as the confidence of the learners grew. A not unusual approach for any teacher perhaps to take, but the difference Darren made was to put technology at the heart of how this lesson was delivered.

With a background in Art & Design, Darren was able to use the Adobe suite of products, in particular Illustrator, to create a comprehensive set of visuals, which he could then utilise within new technologies to explain the concepts to his learners.

Darren and his Learning Support Worker, Nicola Lane, make good use of the Interactive Whiteboard in the classroom and encouraged learners to use it too.

Presentations are normally created used [Prezi](https://prezi.com), a dynamic presentation tool that engages the learners.
Darren and Nicola explaining grid references in a Prezi on the Interactive White Board

Learners then testing their knowledge with a grid reference activity

Darren has also created a lot of learning objects using the Xerte software tool. This is an open-source tool for e-learning developers and content authors to produce interactive learning materials with in-built accessibility options. Darren has created
various exercises for learners to practice different skills and also visual checklists such as “What kit to take on expedition”.

An example of a Xerte learning object

All of these resources are stored on Moodle, the College’s Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). The course uses lots of symbols for navigation, reading and explanation, as these are most effective for the LLDD learners, some of whom struggle with reading & writing or are print impaired. The VLE is not just used as a store of the resources, for example, learners have learnt how to upload and download documents including resources for a College Poster competition.

The outcomes

The learners undertake a minimum of eight practice journeys, before having a practice expedition, and then finally the real expedition where the learners are unsupervised.

Overall the learners are engaged and enjoy the DofE programme and it can sometimes be used as a “carrot” to encourage greater participation and application in their overall studies and general lives. The use of technology in their learning makes it easier for them to acquire the skills that they need for going out on their expedition.
The DoE scheme has three levels and four learners have now worked their way through Bronze, Silver, and achieved the top level of Gold - a fantastic achievement. In the springtime they are heading to St. James Palace to receive their awards.

“I wanted to encourage the students to be more independent so that they actually learnt skills rather than were led through the programme. By teaching in a more visual style and breaking it down into small steps, the students slowly build up their confidence. Not many people are able to map read to the level that these learners are able to do to.” (Darren)

The impact

The impact shouldn’t be underestimated for the learners participating in the DoE scheme. It has given them new-found confidence and enabled them to move on with their lives in many different ways; going on to further study in the College; continuing in their voluntary placements; finding new work opportunities; and leading more independent lives. The College is currently building up a bank of learner success stories.

This academic year the DoE scheme was expanded and twenty learners in the College on mainstream provision some with learning difficulties also joined.

The DoE Licensed Organisation has regularly sent other organisations from Derbyshire to visit Chesterfield to look at the approach they take to encourage others to replicate this good practice. Darren has shared his work at the regional Accessibility and Inclusion forum facilitated by the RSC.

At the end of 2013 their work in the DoE scheme was an integral part of a bid which was shortlisted for the “Inclusive Learning Award” at the AoC Beacon Awards.

In the future the College is considering becoming an Approved Activity Provider for DoE so that it can distribute its suite of resources to other providers that are teaching learners with learning difficulties (LLDD).

The lessons learned

Darren has relied heavily on his graphic design skills as he has not yet found suitable mapping symbols and objects online for free, so this may prove a barrier for others adopting this approach.

Not all the technology advancements have worked as well as originally thought. In the first year Darren spent time developing visual cards explaining expedition routes - imagine a series of pictures with sat nav like arrows showing the direction to take - but they didn’t prove that useful, perhaps because they merely showed information rather than helped explain the underlying reasoning behind it.

For the last three years Darren has been the accessible technology lead for the College which has given him three hours of remission per week. This has been
useful to develop expertise and resources, some of which was specific for the DoE scheme but he has also put a lot of additional time into developing it.

**Useful links**

- Chesterfield College website
- Prezi
- Xerte
- Moodle
- East Midlands Accessibility and Inclusion forum

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