Leicestershire Adult Learning Service
Improving students’ experience by increasing independent study (May 2016)

Summary

Leicestershire Adult Learning Service’s lead tutor Sarabjit Borrill has been using blended learning effectively in apprentice training for several years. Building on what she has learned in that time, she made 2015/16 the year to explore similar approaches with Skills for Life students studying GCSE English.

Students on the course are all 19 and over. Some are native English speakers who didn’t take to the subject at school but now need a qualification to get a job, while others have English as their second language. Some simply want to gain their qualification for personal reasons. For all of them, the course is demanding – there are just 30 weeks of teaching time. By introducing blended and flipped learning the service is building learners’ confidence in English, encouraging more independent study and extending the study time available for learners.

The challenge

Changing learners’ expectations of how the course would work took time. Many were not tech-savvy; some have a smart phone, others have a desktop computer at home and others don’t have any device of their own. The key was to work slowly, introducing blended and flipped elements into learning carefully and providing support to help them learn new skills. The aim was to encourage learners to try new ways of working, work more collaboratively and develop their own resources so that these have relevance to their own learning objectives.
The solution

A key part of the solution proved to be Moodle, the learning platform used within Leicestershire Adult Learning Service. Through careful use of Moodle tools like Wikis for collaborative writing and journals to support feedback and reflection, learners are being encouraged to work more closely with their peers. The first stage was to set up a Moodle glossary - which enables participants to collect and organise information about themselves - so that learners could introduce themselves to each other; where necessary, gentle pressure was applied to ensure that more reluctant learners began to take part. With encouragement, everyone took to it well and they largely taught themselves how to contribute, quickly starting to upload pictures and videos and to create engaging, relevant learning spaces for themselves.

Starting to use video feedback was an important moment in the success of the scheme. Using Screencast-O-Matic, Sarabjit gave impactful feedback on an important assignment and this was very well received. Students like the more detailed commentary that this makes possible and value being able to review the comments whenever they want to. It takes the course teacher a bit more time, but has proved to be worthwhile for key pieces of work.

“Technology is a tool to help me achieve what I want as a teacher. Video feedback is very powerful but it doesn’t need to be used every time. Through Moodle it is very easy to offer comments and ideas quickly so that learners can reflect and improve their work.”

Sarabjit Borrill, lead tutor (English) East locality, Leicester Adult Learning Service

A second important part of the solution is the library service. It has a strong collection of resources, supportive staff and a range of devices so that learners without their own kit can use these to participate fully in all aspects of the course. Promoting these facilities was therefore very important in making the new way of working a success among students.

The GCSE English course has been used within the service as an exemplar to show other teachers how to use Moodle and interactive learning technologies imaginatively. Results are mixed but, where people are reluctant, the concerns are almost always about whether students have the skills and confidence to embrace technology. The early success of the students on this course shows that they almost certainly do, or that they will find them easy to acquire.
Impact

It is still too soon to measure the impact of the new ways of working on attainment, but it is clear that students’ engagement and willingness to take charge of their learning has increased. Sarabjit ran an online Moodle Workshop during a holiday period for students to peer assess each other’s work. For some learners, it was necessary to apply some encouragement to take part – 11 out of 19 did so. This was the first time it had been tried and it took time to explain and run the activity, but all the participants played an active part; feedback comments from students are positive:

“Peer assessment...gives you a chance to practise writing and the fact that it is going to be assessed by peers, it gives me motivation to do the best to avoid embarrassment.”

“It’s nice to work in different ways as it keeps me engaged.”

Learners assigned marks carefully and made constructive comments. As Sarabjit put it: “they work better for each other”.

Another early indicator of successful engagement is the increase in the number of hits on the Moodle site – the 19 students on the GCSE English programme have recorded more than 6,000 page views in nine months; compared with just seven in the same period the previous year.

Key points

Sarabjit’s tips for supporting students and staff to embrace blended and flipped learning:

» Remember that technology is just one tool in a teacher’s toolbox, and it can help you to teach better

» Be curious and passionate – never lose these characteristics that made you want to learn and teach in the first place

» Don’t be afraid to try things, and to fail sometimes

» Technology offers opportunities, it is not a threat

» It doesn’t take long to learn the digital skills you need; it is all available online
More information

Sabjit Borrill, teacher
Email: sarabjit.borrill@leics.gov.uk

Visit the Moodle teaching page for tips and details on courses.