Derby Adult Learning Service

Peer support tutor service leads to embedded use of technology in curriculum activities (October 2016)

Summary

After changing their approach to the way continuous professional development (CPD) is delivered, Derby Adult Learning Service have noticed a significant improvement in the use of technology to support learning and in tutor confidence in embedding digital interactions within curriculum activities.

A small team of six peer support tutors, co-ordinated by the professional development adviser, provide a centrally managed but devolved service that provides cost-effective on-demand support for tutors.

“Flexibility is key. Tutors receive support wherever, whenever and for whatever they want to do – it is important that tutors feel in control of own learning.”

Ruth Mable, senior manager of Derby Adult Learning Service

The challenge

Derby Adult Learning Service are striving to move from an Ofsted grading of ‘good’ to that of ‘outstanding’. Ruth Mable, senior manager of Derby Adult Learning Service sees effective use of technology within the curriculum as a contributory factor to achieving this and in “anchoring everything together”.

The service employs approximately 120 tutors and thirty support workers across a number of sites in and around Derby. Most staff are part time. In the past, the service has tried various forms of
continuous professional development to support tutors to develop and embed their use of technology in the curricula and in their practice. CPD sessions included making effective use of available technologies such as interactive whiteboards, tablet devices and apps like Xerte, Triptico and Padlet. The CPD sessions were generally popular and well-attended. They covered a range of topics and often used the services of external speakers and specialists.

Despite the popularity and good attendance at CPD events the training was not having the impact the service expected or hoped to see. Observations and feedback showed that comparatively little of the training was actually being put into practice – a reflection that echoes the findings made by Bruce Joyce and Beverley Showers in their research published in 1980 and their subsequent further studies.

The solution

After analysing the problem, Derby Adult Learning Service drew on their knowledge and experiences from former government-funded initiatives such as the E-Guides and the Subject Learning Coaches programmes to design their own flexible, in-house approach to CPD based on the concept of peer support and mentoring techniques.

A team of six peer support tutors were appointed in 2012 with the specific remit to increase the effective use of technology to support learning within curriculum activities and to increase interactive engagement with learners. Team members include those with subject knowledge as well as those with expertise in use of specific technologies/apps. The digital focus of the support offered by the team is important – assistance with lesson planning and course file building are not part of the peer support team remit and are addressed by other quality improvement initiatives. Investment in Smart Boards™ in most of the classrooms also helped to promote the drive to use technology.

The team of peer support tutors are co-ordinated by the professional development advisor (PDA). Setting up the team of peer support tutors was a strategic decision that was costed prior to implementation and that is supported by an appropriate structure. Key features of the service include:

» Central co-ordination, training and support of the peer support tutor team by Derby Adult Learning Service professional development advisor (PDA). The PDA is supported by senior managers and receives external training to ensure the service keeps abreast of new developments.

» The peer support service is flexible and there are no restrictions placed on the team in terms of the hours they do or on tutor requests for support – tutors can ask for help with any aspect of using digital technologies to support curriculum delivery from any member of the team.
The peer support service is linked to other quality and improvement initiatives such as the observations of teaching and learning (non-graded) and quality advisers, feedback from staff and learners. Staff are able to self-refer but may also access support through their curriculum managers and one-to-one appraisals.

Regular termly meetings are co-ordinated and chaired by the PDA and attended by the peer support team as well as senior managers who support the team and ensure that any other strategic priorities are built in to service activities. The activities of the team are reviewed during these meetings and the peer support tutors submit termly reports, outlining what they have done and the hours they have worked (on average each peer support tutor gives approximately 30 hrs of support per year). Peer support tutors are thoroughly involved in the meeting process and have played an active role in shaping the ongoing development of the service.

The regular team meetings also facilitate the sharing of skills and expertise across the team and flag up opportunities for transferring and adapting successful use of any given technology, app or strategy to other curriculum areas. For example, the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) team have had support from the peer tutors to use Triptico to create and share interactive learning resources and the team are now rolling this out to other curriculum areas.

The peer support model means that lots of short, focused interventions can be delivered directly to individual tutors or to small groups of no more than four. Derby Adult Learning Service have found that so much can be achieved in short periods of time, especially when the team are working on a one-to-one basis – fifteen minutes is sometimes all it takes as generally only have to show someone something once! This approach also makes most efficient use of time and addresses fears from tutors about pressure on their time and concerns that not all previous staff training appeared directly relevant to them. Any support given is followed up to ensure that it has been effective.

**Impact**

The peer support model developed by Derby Adult Learning Services has proved to be effective and sustainable as well as comparatively cheap when compared to the cost of hiring external speakers to run CPD sessions. Teaching and learning observations, feedback from learners and tutors and curriculum managers as well as evidence from individual learning plans show a significant growth in use of technology within curriculum activities and an important increase in tutor confidence. The peer support approach has also helped to create a culture where developmental conversations can more naturally occur. Both tutors and learners from different centres are talking to each other via online forums to share their experiences and apply successful approaches to different curriculum areas.
Evidence of impact on learners is also emerging with a noticeable rise in the use of digital terminology used by learners – perhaps reflecting a soft approach to the development of digital capabilities and a growing confidence. Examples of use of technology in the curriculum include:

» Use of quick response (QR) code mapping on field trips

» Learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who run a café using presentation software and interactive whiteboards to present the menu to customers

» Shift workers using material posted on the virtual learning environment to catch up on sessions they haven’t been able to attend

» Leaners studying for the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) accessing videos and other material for revision purposes

This successful model is now being rolled out to administrative staff.

“Switching to a peer support CPD service is the best thing we have ever done, it is the best form of CPD. It is having an impact and yielding results – more so than previous approaches.”

Ruth Mable, senior manager of Derby Adult Learning Service

Key points

» Flexibility is key – other than the specific focus on use of technology to enhance learning there are no restrictions on the type, amount or frequency of support. Tutors can do what they want, where they want and whenever they want.

» Tutors really value contextualised peer support from someone with expertise in their own curriculum area. They see the resulting CPD as directly relevant to their practice.

» Combining curriculum and specific technological expertise within the team has created a flexible support matrix that expands the range of technologies the team can support and helps to share effective practice across different curricula.

» The strategic design aspects of the peer support service are important. The visible senior management support, central co-ordination and management of the team and alignment to other quality improvement initiatives all highlight the importance the organisation places on effective use of technology within the curriculum as well as facilitating operational effectiveness and efficiency.
More information

Derby Adult Learning Service http://www.adult-learning-derby.org.uk

Contact name and email: Ruth Mable senior manager of Derby Adult Learning Service
ruth.mable@derbyals.org