

FE.13 Widening participation by overcoming barriers to ICT: a case study of FE and nursery collaboration

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Aims

- To establish how to introduce ICT to the "terrified"
- To develop an award to match the cohort learning/development needs
- To encourage parent/carers to use PC's and to help their own children with the use of ICT.
- To help build up the confidence of the parent/carers

Background –FE College

I am a full time FE College Lecturer in Child Care Training in Bishop Auckland and ICT Test Bed Coordinator within this section. As good links are formed with other ICT Test Bed areas in the community I was approached about teaching basic IT skills to parents/carers from a nearby nursery school. The particular parent/carers in question had not accessed IT previously and were even unaware of how to switch on a PC. It was decided that this group needed significant encouragement to gain the confidence required to use ICT equipment and in order for them to learn the basics of using a pc/laptop and thus work with their own children/grandchildren in their own home or familiar learning environment. All parent/carers, whose children attended both the morning and afternoon sessions, were offered the opportunity to attend the ICT sessions and a cohort of learners was formed. After discussions with the cohort had taken place, it was evident that the learners in question had previously had poor educational experiences and consequently preferred to conduct their learning in familiar surroundings. This fitted in well Carol Ward's (Nursery Head Teacher) plans as a purpose built ICT Test Bed project facility (a new UK Online centre/parents room) is attached to the local state sector nursery school and containing an interactive whiteboard and laptops and pcs. It all seemed a good opportunity to try to match the group with the setting that was familiar to most of the parent/carers.

Before the course began it was important to organise childcare arrangements first for the parent/carers as some of the learners had younger siblings that needed to be cared for. As a two way process, it was appropriate to take a small cohort of childcare students to the facility who would help care for the children in question enabling the childcare students to gain some experience of working with young children, which in turn assisted with the course of study that they were undertaking.

Deciding what was needed

During first discussions, statements such as, "I want to know how to switch it on", "What if I break it!", "How can I write a letter?", "My five year old can use it and I can't", suggested that this was indeed a group that were terrified of ICT but were willing to face their fears. These comments made it clear that a modest but functional set of outcomes would be agreed, which were:

- Technical terms for components and basic actions
- How to switch on the PC
- How to log in

- How to open a Microsoft Word document
- How to input text
- How to change font size, style, embolden and italicise text

Working with the parents/grandparents

Initially I spoke with the group of learners on a one-to-one basis and establish what, if they had any knowledge/experience at all of working on a PC and thus determine a baseline. Once this was established we negotiated a specific 'plan of action' for each person that they needed to undertake. Each morning and afternoon session, was split between two groups and each learner then worked at their own pace/level. Initially the learners worked on their own PC and were given an awareness of how to switch the machines on and how to open up a Microsoft Word document. Once this was achieved, the learners took part in the workshop, which included getting used to the keyboard and writing their names/addresses onto the blank document. The groups' cohesiveness in this potentially stressful episode was assisted by all of them truly being at a basic level and thus feeling comfortable achieving and making mistakes together. As the workshop progressed, they began learning how to change font size, font style and how to italic, underline and bold text as well as how to type to either the left, right or middle of the page.

On starting out some grandmothers commented "I don't even know how to switch it on", "I'll never be able to use this", but fears were soon overcome as we reflected back at the end of the first session. All learners had successfully managed to log onto their machines and type their personal details into a blank word document. All learners had also changed the font size of their work and highlighted it before embolden and italicising it. Already, after only the first session the learners had achieved so much and were very proud of themselves, rightly so!

Throughout each session each student was well supported and guided as they took their knowledge a step further. Smiles on individual faces, told a story. If a particular student made a mistake their peers stepped in and offered moral support and many laughs were shared. As time passed learners encouraged each other and interacted well. The comments of "Will I be able to do that?" began to fade and were replaced by "I can do that now!"

As the weeks passed by the learners became more and more confident after each session. Most advanced onto internet explorer and learned about different search engines and how to look for pieces of information that they required. By this time it was evident that confidence was rapidly growing and the learners were no longer as dependent on advice from the tutor, but were more geared towards independent learning.

It had now become evident that the students initially needed a lot of support to take their first step but once this was overcome they had more confidence to work independently.

Progression

The short course 'ICT for the Terrified' concluded after seven weeks and learners were each presented with a Bishop Auckland College certificate at a special awards ceremony that was held in the nursery for all staff, learners and children.

In September 2004 the majority of the group progressed onto a basic computing accredited course through Bishop Auckland College. This was very positive and demonstrated that the parents now visualised themselves as 'students' and were not dependent on the project tutor.

At the conclusion of this short, pilot course, it was felt that all the students' self-esteems had been boosted significantly and they were a lot more confident with the pc/laptop and software. There was little evidence of nervousness once the group had formed and perhaps this was due to taking time at the beginning for the group to see themselves as a group. The Head Teacher within the organisation commented that, "There was raised self esteem, the students had loved the course and they would constantly talk about it in the lead up to the next session". She went on to state that,

"The grandparents were 'over-the-moon' at their achievements and each of the individual students would go home after the sessions had concluded and show the work that they had typed, to their husbands/partners and practice."

It was important that the outcomes were negotiated with the cohort. This seemed to lend itself to a situation where changes were minimised – had we gone in without the potential for a 'customised' programme and tried to fit the cohort's particular needs, then a lot of time might have been wasted 'changing' outcomes. (In the event, no programme appeared to be available to meet their needs.) Similar programmes are due to be enacted using this pilot as a template.

We are now looking to collect further evidence to see if this programme has had a real effect for the children.

