

FE.18 Engaging With Non-Traditional Learners - A Collaborative Approach

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Background

I am a lecturer of early year's child care and education within a college of Further Education (FE). As the college is a partner of the ICT Testbed programme I wondered whether the college could work collaboratively to raise the ICT skills of parents of children within a local primary school which was also involved in the ICT Testbed initiative, through the delivery of a non-accredited programme "Storysacks".

A Storysack is a large cloth bag containing a good quality young child's fiction book. To enhance the story, the main characters and artefacts associated to the story (e.g. a fact book relating to the fiction book) are also included. The Storysack may also contain a game based on the fiction book, a contents card and a card of ideas which may develop listening, reading and writing skills for children is presented within the Storysack. It was envisaged that parents could be encouraged to use ICT to design and make many of the artefacts, games, contents cards and card of ideas contained within the Storysack. The programme would be offered to parents and helpers at the local primary for 3 hours over four weeks.

Working with the experienced ICT Coordinator from the school, our ultimate intention was to extend parents' knowledge, skills and use of ICT to enable them to support their children effectively. We also hoped to inspire parents to progress from a non-accredited programme onto a further accredited programme primarily within child care and play work, ICT or an accredited course within the college of further education.

Aims of the project

- To encourage "hard to reach" learners to participate in their own, and their children's education
- To extend parents' knowledge skills and use of ICT, to enable them to support their children effectively
- To offer a community based programme through non accredited learning mechanisms
- To progress learners from a non accredited programme to an accredited programme within the college setting.
- To work collaboratively with an ICT Testbed partner school
- To make a valuable resource for the school though the use of ICT Testbed

Initial marketing/recruitment of programme.

A letter was sent home to all parents discussing the Storysack programme and how it can support children's literacy skills. However very few parents came forward and discussed attendance with the ICT Test bed co-ordinator within the school. As an alternative method of marketing and recruitment the ICT Test Bed co-ordinator then discussed with parents and school employers/helpers the importance of the programme and from this face to face discussion eight parents/grandparents/employers/helpers were recruited for the delivery of the programme.

Gaining evidence from the research sample

An initial questionnaire was offered to eight participants at the first session which established a "baseline" for the research "Making a Storysack through ICT". Of the eight respondents, five were parents of children in school, one a grandparent and one participant was attending in the capacity of helper within the school (Supervisory assistant). At the end of the four-week sessions a comparable questionnaire was offered to gain knowledge of "distance travelled".

Questionnaire one

The respondents were asked to rank or give a reason why they were attending the session "Making a Storysack through ICT". Five participants stated it was to help their child on the computer. One stated "the programmes are held within my local community" and one stated "I want to further my knowledge of the work you can do on the computer". Questionnaire One also asked "Have you used a computer before?" Six out of the eight participants stated yes. Question four posed the question "What can you do using the computer?" the responses ranged from "very little" to play cards, word process, and graphs. Question five asked "What you would like to do using the computer?". Each participant then stated how he or she wished to progress on the use of ICT. The responses ranged from "Finding the on/off button" to the use of "PowerPoint, tables and graphs". The final question asked have you ever thought about attending another course. Three participants stated "Yes" as long as they were held within the local community. This response related to short non-accredited programmes offered by the local Sure Start or residents association. Three stated "No" and one participant stated she was currently studying a CACHE level 2 Certificate for Teaching Assistants and intended to progress to a level 3 programme of study, within the local FE college.

Implementation of Storysack programme

It was agreed with the ICT Test Bed co-ordinator of the primary and infant school that the Storysack programme would be offered over four weeks for the duration of 3 hours. However the programme was flexible for those parents whose children attended the morning nursery session. These parents attended for 2.5 hours so they were available to take and collect children from the nursery session effectively. As discussed the programme was initially to be offered over four weeks; however, due to the General Election, the programme was offered for a total of three weeks. In this time the participants successfully made three Storysacks of traditional and non-traditional stories.

The use of ICT through a non-traditional method of delivery

In session one each of the participants identified an area of ICT which they were hoping to improve or extend. This included finding the "on/off button" to the use of PowerPoint and Microsoft Word. Throughout the delivery of the session each member of the group had the opportunity to develop skills, knowledge and understanding of ICT according to their individual needs supported by the lecturer. However, it must be stressed that although ICT was seen as integral to the programme it not thrust upon the participants. Each member of the group used ICT to enhance the creation of the Storysack as the author had a clear knowledge and understanding of where the participants wished to progress with the use of ICT though the initial questionnaire one. One participant asked to develop skills of presentation to small groups. She then progressed to design a PowerPoint presentation on the "Benefits of Storysack for Children". The individual skills of each participant were developed and one lady did find the "on/off button", which was a major achievement for one who had never touched a laptop before in her life.

It must also be stressed that skills of knitting, crocheting, woodwork, sewing and drawing were seen as important as the use of ICT each individual was praised and encouraged for their individual effort. This raised individual's self-esteem and self-worth. It was inspiring to listen to the conversation of all involved and the discussion of how the three Storysack sessions had made them realise how much they already help and can further support their children with ICT, literacy and numeracy within the home setting.

Individual parenting skills were celebrated, discussed and enhanced though discussion with each other and the author. For example, discussion identified how to encourage recognition of numbers through the snakes and ladders game, and literacy skills and visual discrimination through the "Snap" game.

Questionnaire two

On completion of the Storysack programme, Questionnaire Two posed comparable questions to those posed in questionnaire one. Question two enquired "Now you have completed the course what has been of benefit/interest for you?" The respondents were initially requested to choose one of three answers. However, all eight respondents believed that there had been more than one area or interest or benefit. Eight stated that they "have enjoyed working with other people". Three stated they "Know more about reading to children" and five stated they "know more about computers". All eight respondents answered question three "Would you like to do another course?" All eight respondents stated "YES". One stated "If they are like the Storysack course". Three stated an interest in a computer course and a childcare course and three respondents stated they were interested in an accredited programme offered within Bishop Auckland College specifically the Specialist Teaching Assistant Level 2 programme of study. As identified in Questionnaire One, each of the participants were requested to identify what knowledge, skills and understanding would they like have gained on completion of the course. Each area identified was extended and each participant identified a new-found skill developed through the use of ICT.

Certificates

The certificates offered to the participants were significant to the success of the programme as it recognised the achievements in making and designing the Storysacks. I believe this status raised the self-esteem and self-reliance of the participants.

Discussion – Features of good practice

The Storysack programme delivered in collaboration through ICT Test Bed with a Local Education Authority Primary School and a College of Further Education has been a success and has clearly met the aims identified initially at the onset of the programme. The ICT co-ordinator of the primary school commented "At first I wondered what Storysacks had to do with ICT Test Bed but those ladies used computers for scanning, making lists and games and even to record their own CDs so it has had an impact on Test Bed. We have also encouraged their involvement in school and they have become part of a team"

The Storysack programme has exceeded the expectation of all involved. Although the programme was only offered over 3 sessions, parents and grandparents were more than willing to give up their precious time to design and make main characters and artefacts for the sacks.

It is evident from the completed questionnaire that the Storysack programme has been of benefit to all respondents. Parents and grandparents have had the opportunity to experience and extend their knowledge, skills and understanding of the use of ICT through a non-traditional method of delivering ICT. Each participant identified their personal area of development and throughout the sessions these have been addressed and built upon. This skills developed were varied; one grandmother expressed an interest in "finding the on/off button" and another participant wished to do a PowerPoint presentation to enhance her delivery of presentations for her Specialist Teaching Assistant programme. The PowerPoint presentation created identified the benefits of Storysack and how Storysack can enhance the holistic development and skills of young children. Staff at the school were so impressed at the presentation it is to be used on the Plasma Screen in the entrance of the school where the Storysacks are to be displayed to demonstrate the impact of the programme.

There was significant development of resources, materials and artefacts through the use of ICT was vast. One member of the group scanned in pictures from two of the three books used and made two matching/snap games. Another member of the group made a game on the principle of Snakes and Ladders which was a numbered table (this candidate identified initially that she would like to be able to implement a table through the use of ICT). Contents cards were made using Microsoft Word and three CDroms were burnt with the stories read

by two participants and placed in the Storysacks as a resource to support children within the classroom setting and a resource for parents reading to children at home. Whereas the use of ICT was significant, the personal contributions of the participants was fundamental to the success. One participant knitted all the main characters for all the three stories, and other members made soft furnishing and background scenery, developing creative skills. Two participants encouraged family members and friends to make beds, chairs and a table using wood.

The comments of the Testbed co-ordinator Primary school capture the enthusiasm and enjoyment of all involved in the Storysack programme she comments:

"Haven't we got a keen set of Mums? They're coming in on Monday morning to introduce their sacks to all the children. We'll start in Nursery at 9.00 then move into all of the infant classes at half hour intervals."

"You missed a treat on Monday morning; all the group turned up and went from strength to strength. They were unsure in nursery but gained confidence and read the stories and played the games etc. in the other classes, they are continuing to work together on Friday afternoons to produce numeracy sacks for the reception teacher."

"The Storysack group have been in every Friday afternoon making Storysacks. They have started one for me today and are really keen. It's the Pied Piper, which I like to do a project on".

As a direct result of the Storysack programme all eight participants expressed an interest in a course offered by the local college of Further Education. Three stated an interest in a computer course and a childcare course and three respondents stated they were interested in an accredited programme offered within Bishop Auckland College, specifically the CACHE Specialist Teaching Assistant Level 2 programme of study. As many of the participants have no means of travel to the college I am working in collaboration with Community Learning within the college in the hope of offering a level 2 accredited programme within the local community. One participant will be continuing her studies to access the CACHE Specialist Teaching Assistant Level 3 programme and no doubt PowerPoint will feature in her presentation of course materials.

This study of embedding ICT into a non traditional programme has proved to be extremely rewarding for many children and teachers when using the Storysacks, the participants when creating the Storysacks and seeing the enjoyment of the children and teaching staff and for myself in the successful delivery of the programme. It was enlightening to see all involved – participants and children – gain in confidence and self-belief in their own ability to achieve. It has given parents/grandparents and helpers within the school the opportunity to understand the importance of reading to children with the home and school environment and how to make stories enlightening and above all FUN, whilst encouraging young children to learn and become interested in books and stories. It has provided the school setting with many valuable resources which continue to be made and developed weekly, these will be used repeatedly in the future with many young children. It has achieved its aims of engaging parents/grandparents and helpers to use ICT through collaboration within ICT Testbed.

Emerging Principles

There are a number of principles which can be drawn from this study that may have relevance to other colleagues seeking to engage hard to reach learners in ICT-related education:

1. To encourage participation on the course, it was very important to use face-to-face communication from individuals that the participants liked and respected.
2. ICT would only be embraced by participants when they were confident that their other skills and contributions were valued by the facilitators.

3. For these hard to reach learners, it was extremely important for their continuing involvement, that their practical contributions were valued by the schools, and offered opportunities to gain high self-esteem. To this end, the responses from children validated the teachers' encouraging feedback on their progress.
4. ICT may well be a secondary focus when encouraging participation from non-traditional learners; learners who are encouraged back into supporting learning in schools or enrolling on other vocational programmes will inevitably begin to use ICT when these courses are offered in ICT-rich environments.
5. It may be unlikely that hard to reach learners would have been persuaded to join a course in which ICT was the main focus of the course
6. The safe, local setting was very important to several of the most disadvantaged participants

Finally to analyse the personal benefit of this study I feel it is germane to highlight the most memorable parts of this study to be the raised self-esteem, enthusiasm and eagerness demonstrated by non-traditional learners in each of the sessions delivered through a non-traditional programme of study and the children's smiles, gasps and anticipation the first time they see a Storysack.