Effective Personal and Social Development: a learner-led approach

Findings from the FETN project funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation

1   Introduction

The importance of ensuring learners develop essential personal, social and employability skills is not disputed, yet there remains a disparate quality of provision across the sector. It is often poorly regarded by learners, does not feel relevant to their lives, may repeat work carried out elsewhere and is frequently developed without engaging learners in the decision-making process. Developing effective strategies to engage learners in meaningful personal and social development (PSD) has always been essential to learners' achievement and progression. It is even more critical now with the sector's increased responsibility for ensuring that individuals develop essential skills for success in life and work. The increased expectations for effective PSD to positively impact on learners is clearly set out in the new Ofsted inspection framework where learners' personalised, holistic development is a central theme within the new judgement 'Personal development, behaviour and welfare'.

The purpose of this research was to explore strategies to improve the quality of provision, by creating a learner-led approach to delivering personal and social development. The central theme for the project was to provide Foundation Level learners, often the most disadvantaged and least confident young people, a key role in shaping the type of PSD programme that *they* feel is important and relevant to their needs and aspirations; this includes not only *what* is taught but also *how* it is best delivered for maximum effect.

This project was designed to enable students and staff to work together, as co-researchers, in order to create a shared understanding and model of effective PSD. By doing so it was intended that, in addition to the benefits for learners, staff working with and beyond the project, would gain a greater understanding of how PSD can be made more meaningful and engaging. Furthermore, it was envisaged that their new understanding would enable them to develop curriculum that would achieve more worthwhile, individualised skills development, relevant to the demands of society today.

The project was challenging to both learners and staff. Learners were provided with the opportunity to experience new and occasionally daunting environments. This enabled them to test their new found skills outside of their immediate Foundation Learning setting and thus outside of their comfort zone. They were encouraged to stretch their individual boundaries, take risks by engaging in new activities and broaden their interpersonal skills with previously inaccessible audiences. Teachers were encouraged to loosen their control on the learning experience. Over time they came to realise that learners possess their own insight into the skills they require and that they can devise innovative ways of developing those skills. In addition the project has enabled colleges to forge stronger employer links, providing Foundation Learners real opportunities to experience work.

2   Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to this project. Special thanks go to the students for participating so enthusiastically; to the practitioners for stepping outside their comfort zone to try new and innovative approaches to learning; to the project co-ordinators for their immense hard work and commitment to this endeavour and, of course, to the Paul Hamlyn Foundation for funding the project which allowed us to pursue this endeavour.

The colleges taking part in this project were:

Institution:	**Brooklands College**
Project Co-ordinator:	Lorraine Crossland
Position:	Head of Faculty, Learning & Development

Institution:	**Doncaster College**
Project Co-ordinator:	Sharon Moore
Position:	Transition and Inclusion Coordinator

Institution:	**Hackney Community College**
Project Co-ordinator:	Miranda Gay
Position:	Curriculum Manager - Individual Progress & Tutorial

Institution:	**Harrow College**
Project Co-ordinator:	Terry Knight
Position:	Curriculum Manager (ELD)

Institution:	**Heart of Worcestershire College**
Project Co-ordinator:	Ivan McDouall
Position:	Learning and Skills Development Officer - Foundation Learning STEP

Institution:	**Newcastle-under-Lyme College**
Project Co-ordinator:	Margaret Law
Position:	Curriculum Leader Level 1 Foundation Studies

Institution:	Riverside College
Project Co-ordinator:	Lorna McLean
Position:	Skills Academy Manager

3   Summary

During this project learners have been introduced to opportunities they would not otherwise have experienced. They have enhanced their personal and social skills to become well equipped with the tools to conduct themselves appropriately and interact positively, with a wider range of people than they had previously believed they could.

This has empowered them to feel more comfortable in unfamiliar settings and to be more confident about entering new situations in the future. As a result of this project parents have commented on the improvements they have seen in their child's level of confidence and communication skills.

In addition to achieving life-improving changes for individual learners, this project has given colleges the opportunity to explore what learners want from personal and social development and how it can be delivered in a meaningful and effective way. It has allowed teachers the freedom to test out new and innovative methods and work alongside learners to co-develop the curriculum and materials in a way that engages and values the learner.

Looking across the project it was found that learners want and value PSD that includes:
* group work and learning to work together
* goals to work towards that include rewards
* activities to develop confidence in a safe environment
* CV and interview workshops
* Visits from organisations such as local employers

They want and value the opportunity to develop and improve:
* employability skills
* organisational skills
* communication skills
* personal skills and qualities
* social skills
* numeracy and literacy
* confidence in public speaking

There are no surprises here, yet so often learners disengage from the personal and social development provided in group tutorial. So what needs to be different? In short, we need to *work with* our learners to hear what it is they want and need, *learn with* our learners by working in a more collaborative way and *create freedom* to learn through different strategies and interesting environments.

4   Key Findings

Whilst evaluating the outcomes of the project, staff were requested to identify key learning that would help others to design and implement effective personal and social development. As a result of this feedback, what follows is a series of useful observations to help promote, develop and embed meaningful learner-led PSD.

Considerations for the design and delivery of effective PSD

During the project tutors and students made the following observations:

- Learners are considerably more motivated to learn if they have a stake in what and how they are taught.
- Young people listen to each other and learn from each other in a different way to how they learn from adults.
- Project based learning has a strong impact on confidence and self esteem
- The specific activities and action plans chosen by learners revealed a more in depth picture of what skills they needed to develop and knowledge they wanted to acquire.
- Learners found the co-operative way of working particularly motivating. Learners commented *'I love this project'* and *'Now I can really see what I need to concentrate on'*.
- The learners responded very well to a co-operative model because they were allowed to be decision makers. They felt valued because their opinions were taken into account.
- A key message from the learners was to '*Get out of the classroom'*.
- One 14-16 group of learners responded particularly well to 'Drama Sessions' set up to explore social issues such as anti-social behaviour and family breakdown. Learners valued being able to explore emotions through characters and found it an empowering process, helping to significantly raise their confidence and self-esteem.
- Learners felt strongly about the importance of inspirational tutors who have a 'can do' attitude. One learner commented "*Why should we do work for tutors who talk down to us all the time*?"
- Learners reported that they prefer 'experiential learning' and that having a platform to voice their opinions raised their motivation and self-esteem.
- It was found that the learners were very creative and appeared more committed to activities that they had contributed to designing in some way.
- Learners become more active and self-directed in their learning when they value what they are doing and can see the benefits.
- Working as part of a team in a creative and exploratory way led to learners creating ideas for further development outside the classroom.
- Co-creating curriculum brings rewards. Learners want the curriculum to be relevant to their everyday life and careers, something they see as useful going forward. This approach enables their individual requirements to be included.
- Students are keen to have more input into their time at College and this has shown to be a way they can achieve this.
- The project has broadened learners' perception of potential progression routes and developed their confidence to pursue their goals.
- Learners became more independent, for example some of the learners required transport to and from college at the start of the year but are now confident enough to travel independently on public transport.
- Learners appreciated the opportunity to learn outside of the classroom. Personal and social skills were achieved well in a practical, outdoor context.

- Involvement in this project has provided learners with a wealth of positive experiences. The vast majority of participants feel empowered by having an input into the direction their life can take.
- By working collaboratively with their tutors, learners have developed greater confidence to make suggestions and take ownership of their own learning, something that many of them never had the opportunity to do at school.
- Learners have enjoyed the focus on teamwork and taking responsibility for the direction that their learning has taken.
- Partnerships formed throughout the project have been enormously successful and have continued. From these partnerships the learners have gained experience of being in a workplace, following a routine and have gained insight into how different working environments operate. They have also learned a great deal about what employers are looking for when they interview prospective employees.

The value of co-creating learner led curriculum
During the project tutors and managers made the following observations:
- Involvement in the project, particularly learners' enjoyment of it, has impacted on a year on year increase in retention. Retention this year is 97% compared to 83% in the previous year.
- Traditionally FL learners have been seen as naughty or less able, and, horrifyingly, 'outside of the mainstream'. This project has given them a visibility in the organisation with peers and staff alike that is reward for their hard work, but also sets an important precedent for the FL groups that follow them.
- Staff attitudes changed towards their approach to the design and delivery of PSD as they found it interesting working with the learners to develop the curriculum.
- Staff involved in the project formed very positive relationships with many of the learners resulting in a shared sense of pride when learners achieved.
- The learners' success in working with external partners and the feedback received from both has been incredibly rewarding.
- The project has given direction for embedding 'learner-led' learning and demonstrated the positive outcomes that can be achieved through this approach.
- Partnership work has been enhanced through the project. We have established links for community engagement for after-college activities and also work placements for our students. Our partners have been impressed with the level of commitment from the students and have engaged in supporting learners who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities.
- With strong links forged with external partners set to continue, more learning and development will be centred on learners being involved with the wider community, and staff facilitating recognition for the value of their input.
- Initially the idea of collaborative development was viewed with suspicion from students and staff alike, but the key lesson was perseverance. Both students and staff were removed from the comfort zone of their established roles. What is clear is that we would never go back.

5   Overview of the Project Activities

At the beginning of the project each college submitted individual plans outlining the activities they would undertake and the partners they would be working with. Colleges were encouraged to provide learners with opportunities to work in new environments to extend their understanding of community and employment. Early project leader activities included:

- Presentations by project co-ordinators to relevant staff, providing details of the project and their role in contributing to the outcomes.
- Presentations to participating learners on what PSD is and what the project was about.
- Discussions between project teams and external partners to plan activities (based on the learners research into key PSD themes)
- Completing learner baseline data to support the evaluation of personal skills development.

Examples of learner activities in Year 1:
- One group of L1 Beauty learners worked with a care home which contributed to the wellbeing of the care home residents and increased the learners' confidence.
- PSD activities to provide opportunities for the learners to develop speaking and listening skills through presentations and discussions, for example a presentation on individuals' role models and a discussion around moral dilemmas.
- Learners participated in the College's Learner Conference where they contributed their views on tutorial and pastoral provision and work experience.
- Motivation and peer support days were conducted with the project learners in collaboration with the College's NUS.
- Some learners were involved in a research activity exploring local and national issues in collaboration with external partners.
- One group of learners carried out research to explore what personal and social development was delivered in schools for previous generations and discussed how it has changed for today's learners.
- All learners recorded their experience of the project in learning diaries.

To help learners to engage fully in the project additional training and support was provided by each college which included support for learners to:
- Facilitate focus group discussions
- Plan and facilitate events within the community
- Present their findings to college managers at relevant internal meetings and events

Lessons on a range of research and interviewing techniques included:
- An Introduction to peer research
- Interviewing skills
- Public speaking skills including facilitation and presentation skills
- Types of interviews
- Developing an interview schedule including the wording of questions
- Communication and interpersonal skills including active listening
- Practicalities of arranging and conducting interviews

- Methods of data analysis and report writing

Year 2 Activities:

During Year 2 each college undertook a range of activities focussed on co-developing schemes of work and lesson resources with their learners and gathered feedback from learners following delivery. Each College agreed to develop sessions for the following broad themes:

- Personal awareness and development
- Academic development and progress
- Problem solving and self management
- Preparing and planning for work & progression
- Being heard and being valued
- Group working and socialising
- Exploring culture and community

Once the sessions were developed in collaboration with the learners, staff and students carried out a joint review of the sessions. Learners were asked to consider the proposed content, materials, activities and methods of delivery. The learners' feedback was recorded and appropriate amendments made to the sessions prior to piloting. Following this the sessions were delivered to learners who had not been involved in the review so that they would experience it as 'real'.

The students evaluated the outcome of the pilot which fed into the findings on what works what doesn't work, what they most liked and least liked. The student evaluation process enabled the learners to develop their research skills. They were also provided with opportunities to practice their speaking and listening as they presented their evaluation and recommendations to key college staff and partner groups.

6 Impact and Outcomes

A wide range of learners at Entry Level and Level 1 were encouraged to participate in the project as a means to building confidence and self-esteem. It was also intended that the activities would provide additional support for the development of speaking and listening skills and enhance personal and social development. Part of this process was to help the learners recognise how these skills can equip them to be more effective learners, and prepare for the world of work and wider society. One of the benefits of this project was that it allowed learners to develop these skills in a 'real life' investigative and problem solving context. As the project progressed we became aware of how the peer research activity was an empowering process for those involved, and it was found that it led to a significant increase in self-confidence and belief in the value of team work.

The project planned participation and outcomes were:
- At least 90% of 180 Foundation Level learners demonstrate an increase in their personal confidence and/or self-esteem in each year.

- At least 90% of 180 Foundation Level learners demonstrated increased skills in speaking, listening and research skills (active listening, clear questioning and seeking clarification, presenting and persuading) in each year.
- Impact on professional practice for 30 staff as individuals and 8 providers as whole organisations
- Produce and pilot a draft framework for personal and social development, drawn from learners' phase 1 research findings.
- Disseminate findings from the project to benefit the sector through web presence and appropriate forums.

A variety of methods were employed to evaluate the project outcomes. Baseline data was collated for each individual learner to capture their starting points in relation to speaking and listening skills, levels of confidence and self esteem. Level 1 learners were encouraged to use the Navigate software, an online tool designed to analyse a host of personal and social skills and identify areas for individual development. Those working with Entry Level learners chose to use hard copy resources, for example questionnaires with scales 1-10 for learners to identify their level of skills, or pictorial resources to help identify their starting points. The same resources were used at various points during the project to provide an accurate measurement of distance travelled.

Learners were encouraged to keep learning diaries during the project so that they could reflect on their progress and celebrate achievements as they progressed. In addition to this staff working with the learners observed and noted individuals' skills development and key achievements throughout the project, for example speaking to groups of people for the first time.

A draft PSD framework was produced and a range of lessons was developed and piloted. Findings from the project were presented at the FETN Annual Conference in November 2014.

Learner Engagement and Outcomes: Year1
In year 1 the project initially recruited 236 learners and retained 198. The reduction in participation was due to individual learners across the project leaving their course for a variety of reasons, including finding work and progressing to other learning programmes.

Year 1 Learner Engagement					Total
Level	Male		Female		
	14-16	16-19	14-16	16-19	
E1	1	2	1	1	5
E2	7	21	2	26	56
E3	2	8	2	11	23
L1	5	45	2	62	114
Total	15	76	7	100	198

The project aims were to improve the speaking and listening skills and the confidence and self esteem for at least 162 learners in Year 1. This target was exceeded as 183 learners improved their speaking skills, 181 learners improved their listening skills and 187 learners improved their level of confidence and self-esteem. In addition 150 learners improved their

research skills. Although this was slightly below target, not all learners had the opportunity to practice these skills in year 1. Low level data shows that all learners benefited individually from the project in relation to developing one or more elements, i.e. speaking and listening skills, research skills and developing confidence and self esteem.

Year 1 Project Outcomes					Total Learners	% Against Project Target
Areas of Development	Male		Female			
	14-16	16-19	14-16	16-19		
Speaking skills	15	70	6	92	183	+13%
Listening Skills	15	72	6	88	181	+11%
Research Skills	13	65	5	67	150	-7.5%
Confidence & Self Esteem	15	73	7	92	187	+15%

Learner Engagement and Outcomes: Year 2
In year 2 a total of 215 learners were recruited and retained on the project

Year 2 Learner Engagement					Total
Level	Male		Female		
	14-16	16-19	14-16	16-19	
E1		5		4	9
E2		8		8	16
E3	2	26	1	20	49
L1	2	61	2	76	141
Total	4	100	3	108	215

All project outcomes were met in relation to learners developing speaking and listening skills, research skills and improving confidence and self esteem.

Year 2 Project Outcomes					Total Learners	% Against Project Target
Areas of Development	Male		Female			
	14-16	16-19	14-16	16-19		
Speaking	2	70	3	95	170	+4.9%
Listening	2	70	3	95	170	+4.9%
Research Skills	4	93	2	90	189	+16%
Confidence & Self Esteem	4	94	3	102	203	+25%

Impact on Learners
In addition to the agreed project outcomes, the colleges reported that the project provided the following benefits:

- Learners enjoyed taking ownership of the task, particularly in relation to the inter-generational event.
- Learners developed the ability to link theory to practice which led to a higher than expected level of success in their vocational qualification.
- Learners enhanced their ability to reflect on their own personal and social skills, and the practical benefits of developing these skills.
- Learners engaged in a broader range of activities than would otherwise have been possible. For example, some explored intergenerational stereotypes and how these can be challenged and broken down through positive interaction.

- Some Entry Level learners demonstrating a severe lack of confidence and self-esteem at the start of the project developed enough confidence to apply for and secure a work placement within the college.
- A number of learners regularly attended the local gym after exploring the benefits of exercise and healthy lifestyles

Organisational Impact
- In a number of colleges the project has generated interest across other departments, which are now looking to include learners more in the design and delivery of their PSD curriculum.
- Participating staff continue to develop an increased level of understanding in relation to how embedded PSD can enhance the tutorial process.
- Some teachers developed their questioning skills to support learners' self-reflection
- Some teachers adopted new, innovative teaching techniques for example using rap songs to encourage self expression
- Stronger links with the community have been forged and continue to provide opportunities for work placement and volunteering opportunities.

7 Moving Forward

The findings from this project are being used to share good practice as FETN continues to raise awareness of the value of learner-led personal and social development across the sector. The findings are also being used as a framework to enable organisations to develop ways in which they can embed a learner-led approach, and encourage teachers to collaborate with students in order to create meaningful PSD.

It was found that, in addition to learners' increased skills development, this approach offers wider benefits for the organisation. For example, many of the external partnerships developed during the project between the colleges and local organisations have been formalised, and are set to continue long into the future. Colleges report that this will make a vast difference to the learning experience and work opportunities for cohorts.

This collaborative approach to developing PSD curriculum did test the 'normal' power balance of the teacher/student relationship. It also highlighted the benefits of co-designing content and strategies for teaching and learning. It was found that, whilst adopting this new way of working, the benefits far outweigh any challenges and anxieties it creates. The project co-ordinators involved continue to actively promote and embed learner-centred PSD across their own organisation and encourage others to test out the PSD framework and approach for themselves.

If you would like to discuss the details of this project, or explore how you can introduce a learner-led approach to personal and social development in your own organisation, please feel free to contact Sally Wootton by email info@fetn.org.uk or telephone 07800 585595