

Taking a Fresh Look at Qualifications

Skills for Learning, Skills for Life, and Skills for Work

CASE STUDY: Rag Tag 'n' Textile: Social firm in conjunction with TAG Highland

Numeracy Skills via Textiles and Craft Studies

Rag Tag 'n' Textiles is an innovative social enterprise based in Wester Ross that offers employment opportunities to people recovering from mental health problems. This unique company takes discarded clothes and fabrics, and transforms them into desirable soft furnishings, bags and jewellery.

Rag Tag now employs seven staff and 40 volunteers, 10 of whom have come through the TAG (Training and Guidance) Skye and Lochalsh training programme.

What we planned to do

Rag Tag 'n' Textile sees training as core to everything we do and we have a keen interest in developing the skills of our staff, apprentices and the volunteer members of the organisation. We were already delivering courses such as the SQA certificated Craft and Textile Units in partnership with North Highland College — including the Intermediate 1 Units 'Practical Fabric Skills', 'Design and Make' and 'Developing Craft Skills in Textiles'.

We were keen to incorporate numeracy into all our sewing and craft skills learning programmes. We especially wanted to support more vulnerable learners such as a group of gypsy traveller women we were working with.

We wanted learners to overcome their reluctance to engage in the learning process and to address any numeracy issues by ensuring that the skills they needed to develop were naturally supported within the textile programme. We also appreciated that some learners would be keen to gain an accredited qualification for the numeracy skills they were developing, while others were happy just to develop the skills.

We wanted to:

- ◆ encourage the personal growth of our learners through building their confidence in their numeracy skills, allowing them to successfully consider progression to other learning or employment
- ◆ actively encourage family and peer group learning in numeracy, through a practical activity
- ◆ develop numeracy skills to help learners achieve success in their textile programme
- ◆ identify what numeracy activity was already naturally occurring in our programmes
- ◆ enhance the skills of those delivering programmes to enable them to embed numeracy activities within their delivery

- ◆ devise training materials which enhance opportunities for developing numeracy skills in order to achieve SQA accredited qualifications — both in textiles and Core Skills
- ◆ encourage learners to reflect on what they had achieved — including whether an accredited qualification in numeracy skills was important to them

How did we start?

We had already developed particular delivery methods suitable to our learners and had worked closely with TAG Skye and Lochalsh, the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), and North and West Highland Colleges, so a partnership approach seemed most sensible. There was a lack of suitable training materials and staff themselves did not necessarily have the confidence in teaching numeracy to take this forward. So we jumped at the chance of working with Highland Adult Literacies Partnership (HALP) to both help staff increase their own confidence in delivering numeracy skills, and to identify numeracy development opportunities within specific activities in programmes.

To achieve this, a tutor from WEA travelled to Skye for a series of sessions with staff and trainees. We engaged in many activities related to delivery of the textile training programmes and matched specific activities to numeracy skills. In particular, we looked at some of the confusion between metric and imperial measurements, encouraging 'guestimations' of sizes around the workshop.

'The most interesting and thought-provoking activity for us all was with a trainee who had been commissioned to make a Harris tweed bag to carry a laptop. This necessitated a whole lot of problem solving activity: measuring a laptop; discussion of different sizes of laptops; whether she should customise the size for each individual order or adopt a one-size-fits-all laptop bag; how this would impact on the final cost. This raised many questions including: levels of accuracy; rounding; how much padding or lining would be needed; 'ease' (a new word for me); how long the shoulder strap should be...?' (Tutor)

From this we moved on to financial issues — eg how to assess the cost of each of these items and the price it should be sold for.

With this new confidence in highlighting and embedding numeracy within delivery, Rag Tag 'n' Textile began to develop course material for the programmes that we are delivering, because we were unable to find relevant materials to support our learners at Access and Intermediate 1 level, especially when numeracy or literacy issues were present.

We worked in partnership with TAG Highland to develop a manual to support our textile programmes, and with North Highland College to help create a series of online learning 'bytes' (Arts and Crafts).

'Working in partnership allowed us to work in a way that would otherwise have been beyond the capacity of our organisation.' (Manager)

How have we developed?

Numeracy as well as literacy support is now integrated into all of our activities using a social practice approach and accredited courses where applicable.

'These skills are integral to all the work we do from measuring fabric, to choosing patterns and materials, following instructions for designs, and using sewing machines.' (Tutor)

Participants have contributed to conferences and training days showing off their new found confidence and producing a very attractive array of crafts and jewellery to sell to the public. Many have progressed on to further college courses, long-term volunteering and even employment, some within the project itself.

One participant who was helped with developing her numeracy skills explains how she feels after completing her 'Design and Make' SQA Unit.

'I find it unreal how positive I now feel. I can't believe it. I wouldn't have missed it for the world.' (Trainee)

Another former participant who worked on her numeracy skills took part in several conference workshops on the work of Rag Tag 'n' Textile — which has boosted her confidence greatly. Her next step has been to enrol in several UHI access courses and she is currently doing NC Art and Higher English. She is thoroughly enjoying her studies and says she owes a lot to Rag Tag 'n' Textile and keeps a link by continuing to work one day a week there.

'Throw yourself at it. Don't be afraid as everyone is in the same boat.' (Trainee)

The way forward

We would like to continue to work with WEA, TAG, West and North Highland Colleges, and possibly other agencies. We also hope that our trained tutors will go on to use our methods in delivery and embedding numeracy outwith the project. In fact, West Highland College is currently employing one of our trained tutors to teach on SQA's Intermediate 1 Fashion and Textiles Unit as part of the college's school link provision for Portree and Plockton High School. The same tutor delivered this accredited course with adults at our facility in Broadford, Skye.

We also have one learner who has developed her skills to such an extent that we are employing her one day a week to work within the project. We would like to support more of our learners into employment, focusing not just on textile and numeracy skills but entrepreneurial skills too.

'I owe a lot to Rag Tag 'n' Textile and want to help others achieve what I have done.' (Trainee)

With this aim in mind, we are continuing to develop a series of manuals to help other agencies deliver textile and enterprise courses. So far the series includes:

- ◆ Introduction to Stitch Textile
- ◆ Practical Craftmaking (which can be used to support Intermediate 1 and 2 Textile and Craft/Art Courses)
- ◆ a retail manual which can be used to support a number of SQA Retail Courses at Intermediate 1
- ◆ Sewing Machine Passport (a stand-alone manual)

All of our manuals embed numeracy (including counting, estimating, measuring, calculating, using graphs, charts and patterns) as well as minimum of technical

language. Future manuals may well include a manual looking at upcycling/recycling textiles and a simple introduction to enterprise skills.

As soon as capacity allows, we would like to seek to deliver accredited courses in-house thus enabling even more of our trainees to access this opportunity to gain certification in a familiar, supported environment.

On reflection

Because we work primarily with adults suffering from mental health issues there were a variety of challenges, including overcoming issues with low self esteem, poor health on the part of learners, issues with interrupted or arrested learning, reluctance to engage in the learning process, and literacy and numeracy issues.

We have included learners in most aspects of all the projects that we have undertaken and several of them have taken part in case studies or planning/evaluation meetings.

By involving learners in the development of the learning process, and by providing attractive and well planned learning materials, we have helped make learning fun — and we plan to continue this approach.

‘Using our own methods of training delivery, we have supported people who might otherwise have struggled to complete the various courses.’ (Manager)

We never expected that we would be delivering training/advice/support to organisations that are much larger than our own. Involvement in this work has allowed us to gather a substantial amount of knowledge and experience that we have used to support our core client group and share with others. It has allowed our staff to gain skills and knowledge that might otherwise not have been possible and it has provided learners and tutors with a much richer learning experience.

An important lesson we have learned is that if immediate interest and success is not grasped then individuals, especially within marginalised groups, can drift away. Our success with such learners indicates that with the right support and with careful choice of tutor and a clear link with practical activity, such challenges can be overcome.