

Taking a Fresh Look at Qualifications

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

CASE STUDY: Skills for Health and Wellbeing

East Renfrewshire Council Adult Learning Group — Healthy Living Course

What we planned to do

We had been working with a group of primary school children's parents over a period of time. Some of the group said they would like to gain a qualification to help them in their long-term aim to return to work, and others said they were interested in fitness and healthy eating.

We were also keenly aware that we would have to work within the East Renfrewshire Community Learning and Development Strategy and link it to Curriculum for Excellence as well as provide accredited learning through an SQA qualification for those learners who wanted this.

East Renfrewshire CLD Strategy Outcome 2 — 'We will improve the health of local people'.

We wanted to create a programme where the learners could gain an SQA qualification in Communication — and at the same time develop skills for health and wellbeing.

How did we start?

It seemed sensible for us to combine the two aims of gaining an SQA accredited qualification and becoming fitter. So, working with the group along with our colleagues in the ERC Sports Development and ERC Employability teams, we planned to deliver two courses which we called 'Positive Learning' and 'Healthy Living'. As well as encouraging the group to become fitter, they would also gain an award in the 10 hour SQA Core Skills Units in Communication at SCQF level 3. Learners completed the Reading, Writing and Speaking Units one at a time. This allowed them to work on both their goals in an enjoyable way.

We decided that the weekly sessions of the Healthy Living programme should be split in two. In the first half of each session, an East Renfrewshire Council Sport Development worker introduced the learners to a range of physical activities. The group then returned to Carlibar Adult Learning Centre where we delivered the more theoretical work such as learning to understand labelling, calorie counting and healthy eating — including the importance of healthy portions. We planned to use activities from this session to produce evidence for assessment for those who wanted this, with the questions and responses being kept as evidence in the learners' folders for the Outcomes of both the Reading and Writing Units.

How have we developed?

The split-session approach worked well with the group being introduced to dodge ball, circuit training and running, followed by their class work. The learners were determined that we would join in the activities too.

'I've never been on a treadmill before. I'd like to do it again!' (Learner)

'If it hadn't been for the class this morning, I wouldn't have bothered getting up. I would have stayed in my bed, but this is worth getting up for.' (Learner)

The group were accustomed to maintaining portfolios of their work so we did this. However, we asked the group what the assessment approach should be and they decided that this would be based on reading pieces of text on healthy eating and nutrition, then producing written questions for the others to answer with the help of the original texts which were then exchanged with the rest of the group.

The learners appreciated being closely involved in setting the assessment methods. We could see that, for most of them, it allowed the topic of accredited learning to be more easily discussed. This can sometimes be quite a difficult topic for the learners.

We also saw that completing the Communication Units was very important to the group members as part of their personal learning and for their future plans.

'It's important to me that when I am ready to go for a job that the employer will know that I've not just been sitting drinking tea while I've been at home with my kids.' (Learner)

'It means that if I get accepted to the Business Admin course at college then I've already done a qualification and it won't be so scary.' (Learner)

'It fills a blank on my CV for the future.' (Learner)

We observed an increase in their confidence. When discussing issues, they had originally been reluctant to challenge other group members' opinions but most now felt they could do this in a measured way. They also felt they were much more supportive of one another and we often saw them encouraging each other, especially in learning situations where they had to speak formally. We saw this very clearly when the video clips for the case study were being filmed.

'By the end of the course the learners could more confidently express personal feelings, views and opinions — they were empathising with each other about difficulties each of them faced, evaluating personal feelings and showing respect for others.' (Tutor)

'They struggled with reading labels initially. That bit was difficult for them, but they persevered and got there in the end.' (Tutor)

Given that the programme was titled Healthy Living, we were not surprised to learn that there had been a major development in the learners' approach to their own physical wellbeing through discussing portion size, nutritional values on labels, and making the links between food, exercise and health.

'I had never understood how to count calories but now that I do, I have lost half a stone and am still exercising.' (Learner)

'The food I give my kids is different now. I know how important it is for them to eat properly.' (Learner)

The way forward

We have seen that completing the Communication Units through both the Positive Learning and Healthy Living courses has helped the group plan for the future and make choices and informed decisions. They have decided as a group that they would like go on to complete the Communication Unit and will do this through another health-related programme 'Health Issues in the Community'.

'I'd like to do the rest of the Communication Unit.' (Learner)

The group felt they had developed or improved skills not only in communication but in areas of health and wellbeing which impacted on their everyday lives and future job plans.

'They learned it's not about making drastic changes, just about choosing a healthier option.' (Tutor)

'I'm not at the stage of getting a job but when I do, I know I'm a lot more confident and will be able to persuade an employer just what I've achieved.' (Learner)

This is a very adaptable way to engage with learners. It allows the learners to be involved in their assessment and accreditation as well as the actual delivery.

On reflection

We first of all delivered a Positive Learning course which helped build the learners' confidence and allowed them to produce evidence for the Speaking part of the Core Skills Communication Unit, but we now realise that this could equally well have been met through the round-table discussions which took place in the second course: Healthy Living.

Although not originally planned as such, the assessment process (of questions and answers between the learners) offered further learning reinforcement as they challenged each other's responses and helped others in the group as required.

We originally planned to advertise the course throughout the authority as we felt the group would benefit from mixing with other people. However, the plan changed and the course was restricted to a closed group. On reflection, some of the learners said that although the prospect of a mixed group had been daunting, now that they felt more confident they wondered if they would have preferred a larger group. We will definitely consider this the next time we deliver these programmes.

The biggest challenge was maintaining the attendance of the group. Later sessions in the course were mainly held at the learning centre attached to the school which helped this aspect.