

# Taking a Fresh Look at Qualifications

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

CASE STUDY: Jewel and Esk College

### Employability, Enterprise and Citizenship Skills via Core Skill in Numeracy

#### What we planned to do

For many years it has been evident to staff in the Faculty of Integrated Curriculum Services at Jewel and Esk College that most learners view the acquisition of a numeracy qualification as a 'necessary evil' in their aim to complete their chosen course at college.

In order to address this we have chosen a portfolio approach to gathering numeracy assessment evidence, offering learners a more gradual accumulation of contextualised evidence, and in this way, ensuring that learners retain their acquired skills beyond the first assessment.

Following discussions, we felt that relating the learning of numeracy as much as possible to their everyday life experiences would hopefully engage learners more with their learning by taking away the fear factor often related to numeracy, and that it would also contribute to their wider life and work skills.

We were in the process of re-developing the teaching materials and assessments for the recently refreshed Numeracy Units, and so adapted our approach to meet this aim. We decided to offer learners a choice of materials which are directly related to their subject area, future employment or everyday lives.

As the Core Skills team delivers Numeracy to most programmes across the college, we decided we would initially concentrate on life skills concerning money, travel and food, and then gradually develop particular assessments related to themes such as recycling and carbon footprints. We are now producing assessments relevant to courses for Exercise Instructors, Sound Production, Nursing, Hairdressing, and Working with Communities. In many programmes, achievement of a Numeracy Unit is required for progression to the next year of the course.

We feel strongly that learners need to become confident with basic skills such as fractions and percentages before transferring these skills to situations they regularly meet within their everyday lives, or which can clearly be seen to link to their future employment.

*'I learned a lot of skills that I didn't learn first time around when I was younger.'* (Learner)

*'This is better than school as I can see how I am going to use my learning in future.'* (Learner)

## How have we developed?

We are continuing to develop worksheets and online materials, if appropriate, which link basic numeracy skills to everyday activities such as measuring and using money. Alongside this we are also looking at particular subject areas and developing resources relevant to the learners' current studies or which will assist them in future employment.

- ◆ We have devised worksheets and contextualised assessments for Nursing students which relate to actual drug dosages and also to the tables, charts and graphs used in hospitals. The use of drug calculations in number skills starts at level 4 with the pre-HNC Nursing class. In this way, the students can begin to understand what will be required of them in years to come when fully qualified as nurses.
- ◆ Numeracy materials have been developed for learners on the Sound Production course based on recent research on music royalties, thus enriching their understanding of what will happen in the music industry when they become employees.
- ◆ Car mechanics complete worksheets relating to percentages in a garage, and assessments based on the energy efficiency of various vehicles.
- ◆ Working in the Community learners have spent a long time considering different aspects of money management, that they can hopefully pass on to the people that they will be working with in the future. They have also chosen to explore green issues in future assessments.

*'We look at real-life statistics and issues in Scotland and Edinburgh so that learners say "Yes, this is useful to me."' (Tutor)*

At the start of the course, learners are given a brief outline of the skills to be covered within the Numeracy qualification. They are then given the opportunity throughout the semester to discuss the content and choose the direction and topics for assessment. Learners can choose which worksheets they use, depending on their particular interest. This has proved particularly engaging for them.

*'What I'm learning in the Numeracy class is really relevant to my life right now and in my hoped-for-future job as a youth worker.'* (Learner)

Since this approach is not as prescriptive as previously, we are able to allow much more discussion of topics and their relevance to learners' lives. This is in line with the four capacities of Curriculum for Excellence and Skills for Learning, Life and Work. All learners are encouraged to start and lead discussions about their learning and how it fits in with the rest of their life.

*'I can definitely plan my life much better now.'* (Learner)

## The way forward

We are always on the lookout for new Numeracy topics. The available assessment packs are continually being updated and expanded. Recent additions to the supply include topics such as recycling, conservation, profits from music, and mental health issues. In the future we intend to produce some with relevance to global issues and sport and exercise.

## On reflection

Since starting this approach to teaching numeracy, there have been many unexpected benefits for the learners in terms of evidencing prior experiences and preparing for future life.

*'I used to have a business but I was so blocked when it came to figures that keeping the books piled up on top of me. I wish I'd known then what I know now.'* (Learner)

*'Words like fractions and percentages used to make me shut down but the techniques I've learnt in class will definitely be useful for my future.'* (Learner)

Learners are more motivated to complete tasks if they can see the relevance to their everyday lives and future careers.

*'I'm happier understanding what's going on around me like what's happening with mortgages and interest rates.'* (Learner)

*'It makes me more aware of things on TV — I now understand statistics and stuff on the news.'* (Learner)

We have also noticed that while completing tasks that involve working with others, learners learn to develop a more positive attitude to the class and their fellow learners.

*'We've formed a little group of 40 somethings and we help each other along with our understanding.'* (Learner)

*'Now I can help other family members understand their wee bits and pieces like their mortgage and interest rate.'* (Learner)

An unexpected outcome was that learners who already had the required level of numeracy at enrolment or who had completed the Unit early, no longer opted out of the class. As there is a natural progression between each level of Numeracy, different levels are often taught within the same class at the same time, thereby allowing learners to find their own level of achievement.

The approach we have taken has been a huge success and is to be recommended to other providers.

*'When I heard there was numeracy in the course, I was dreading it following a terrible experience with maths at school. But I'm doing really well and enjoying it.'* (Learner)