

CITIZENS' CURRICULUM CASE STUDY

EFA LONDON

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CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Background.....	4
How it worked	4
Challenges encountered and how they were overcome.....	5
Impacts and outcomes	6
For learners	6
For staff.....	7
For EFA London	8
Critical success factors	8
Further information and contact.....	9

Introduction

Taking a Citizens' Curriculum approach ensures all individuals have the core set of skills they need for the 21st Century, including English, maths, ESOL, digital, civic, health and financial capabilities. NIACE is committed to widening access to these skills, particularly amongst under-represented groups in society, as well as improving the range and quality of provision available to all adults. These interrelated skills, which underpin lifelong learning, can be made more accessible by being contextualised and developed as an integrated curriculum offer or framework.

In 2015/16, the development of a Citizens' Curriculum was taken forward by thirteen pilots across a range of organisations including colleges, local authorities and charities. The pilots tapped into what motivates adults to learn, ensuring that more people are learning skills which are relevant to their lives, their needs and their work. Particular areas of focus included provision for homeless / vulnerably housed adults, offenders, ex-offenders, migrants, families and disadvantaged young adults. The pilots provided insight into methods of adopting a Citizens' Curriculum approach, how effective the approach is in engaging disadvantaged learners, the impact on learners and providers, and key success factors for both the learner and the provider. This case study tells the story of one of the pilots.

Background

English for Action (EFA) is a third sector charity which provides adult education opportunities for migrants in communities across London. The organisation was set up in 2009 to support London Citizens' campaigning work on the Living Wage and provided English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses to support migrant workers to develop the English skills needed to negotiate for fairer wages. EFA London is now a well-established charity with seven trustees, eight staff members and a host of volunteers supporting over 300 learners at any one time.

How it worked

Because the aim of their institution is to equip learners with the language skills needed to take action, EFA London necessarily embeds the language and civic capabilities of the Citizens' Curriculum approach into all of their courses. For their pilot, EFA London adapted their own "making meaning – going deeper – broadening out" pedagogical approach. This approach is very much learner-centred and as such there are no set learning outcomes and the course is not pre-written or structured by tutors. Instead, learners are encouraged to take ownership of their own learning through a three-stage delivery model. The overall programme is focussed on a generative theme chosen by learners.

EFA London recruited 14 of their existing learners onto their six-week Citizens' Curriculum pilot, which focussed on the theme of health. The pilot ran for six weeks and learners attended a two-hour session once a week at a primary school in their local community. This venue was chosen as many of the learners had children who attended the school and so it was already a familiar environment. The school also provides a free crèche which enabled parents with younger children to attend.

The first two or three lessons were very exploratory and learners were encouraged to exchange their experiences of using the NHS and health services in other countries they had previously lived in. The tutor used these "making meaning" sessions to explore where learners' interests lie, their current knowledge of the theme and their skills gaps. The middle two or three lessons then explored two specific topics within the theme in more depth: using emergency services, such as A and E and the 999 emergency telephone number, and GP waiting times. These "going deeper" sessions involved critical literacy activities and discussions which built learners' language skills and developed their critical awareness of issues. The final, "broadening out" sessions of the programme enabled learners to relate what they had learnt to their own context. This involved introducing learners to thematic texts and participating in specific language practice activities or role-plays, particularly around using the NHS 111 telephone service. Learners also took actions to address a specific issue they identified through the previous sessions. This included writing a letter of complaint, speaking to their local MP or writing a letter to their local newspaper.

Throughout the pilot, learners were encouraged to use their smartphones, tablets and the interactive whiteboard in the classroom to look up information and write about their experiences. The class also had a group blog which tracked their progress from week to week and enabled learners to practise their writing and digital skills in an applied context.

Challenges encountered and how they were overcome

Tutors only experienced a small number of challenges in delivering the pilot. The majority of these were related to focussing the programme on an extended topic. This meant that some time at the beginning of each session needed to be spent re-capping the learning of the previous week. Without this, learners struggled to recall the topics they had covered and the language they had practised previously. However, this approach proved very beneficial in enabling learners who missed sessions to keep up with the rest of the class.

'There was a big role for the teacher to lead a collective remembering of what we're doing, what we said last time, what language we learned last time... because sometimes they're just slightly slow to warm up and remember what was said last week.' (Pilot lead)

Another challenge which could have resulted from the in-depth focus on health was the potential for group discussions to move onto sensitive issues. To mitigate this

potential risk, tutors were very clear from the start of the programme that learners were not required to share any experiences they were not comfortable talking about. However, the close relationships between the learners in the group meant that sharing experiences about hospital stays and illnesses became a positive experience which learners gained a lot of value from.

The third challenge faced by tutors was the difference in skills levels across the learner group, which varied from Entry Level 1 to Level 1. Having a volunteer teaching assistant and two tutors involved in the delivery ensured that learners received appropriate support tailored to their level, but it was an ongoing challenge to engage all of the learners in the critical discussions about people's experiences.

Impacts and outcomes

For learners

One of the most important outcomes for learners was a huge increase in their confidence to speak and write in English. All of the learners felt more confident to describe their symptoms to their doctor and understand their diagnosis. Some of the learners said they no longer rely on translation services at their GP, while others felt more confident that they were writing correct information on medical forms for themselves and their children.

'Now, I improve myself. Sometimes they ask me you want a translator, I say no I do - I speak myself... I'm confident actually speaking.' (Learner)

One learner in particular felt that they had made huge improvements in their written and spoken English.

'I want to say I am big example for learning English. When I came this class, no speaking, no saying, no listening, no understand the teacher. [Now] I can speak a little more. I can write, listening, understand the teacher.' (Learner)

Tutors also commented that learners' confidence to speak in front of the group and discuss a topic in depth increased dramatically from the beginning to the end of the six week programme. The pilot lead felt that having a theme running throughout the sessions helped learners to engage with the topic on a deeper level and encouraged them to develop their own opinions and express these to the group.

'So I think when you stick with a topic for longer the lexis becomes more familiar which then liberates people to talk a bit more and express their opinion. Whereas if the topic changes from week to week, I think people, they don't have as much to say.' (Pilot lead)

The pilot had supported learners to engage more confidently with their local services. The strong relationships within the group meant that learners were happy to share information and experiences about using emergency services and going to the GP, which enabled them to identify particular issues and challenges they faced in relation to accessing these services. This knowledge sharing has enabled learners

to use public services such as the 111 and 999 telephone services more appropriately.

'Before for me I don't know when to call to 999 and when you're going to call to 111. But now I know. Even if you call 999, I have confidence because I know what reason I am calling.' (Learner)

Another strong outcome for learners was developing the sense of belonging to a community. One of the tutors felt that learners treated the group as a community itself, giving them the confidence to make friends and attend a semi-public venue. This tutor was hopeful that the programme would encourage parents to engage more with their children's school.

'I think also having it in the school [is] like an intermediary step for a lot of the parents to getting more involved with the school, with life in the school. The secretary sometimes comes round and gives us information, like there's a PTA meeting and some parents might say I'm going to go to that. So that's, I think, embedding it in a community location, it's really effective for that.' (Tutor)

Learners all reported that they wanted to learn more English and practise their speaking and writing skills. In particular, learners were keen to learn the language needed to search for suitable and interesting jobs, develop a CV and complete application forms. Consequently, some of the learners had already signed up to additional language courses at the local FE college. Learners also wanted to develop their digital skills, as they recognised that the majority of jobs require applicants to have good IT skills and to apply online. Alongside this, learners wanted to gain a better understanding of e-safety so they can be sure their children are safe when using the internet.

For staff

Both the pilot lead and the tutor involved in delivering the pilot felt that the approach supported the development of their active listening skills. This was crucial in order for them to identify the important topics for learners and the feedback for learners on their use of language. By exploring the topics collaboratively with the class, tutors were able to establish the important topics for all of the learners, not just those with the "loudest voices". This enabled them to develop more relevant classes and activities.

A second outcome for tutors' practice was the lesson about the importance of recapping previous learning. Tutors also felt that they had improved the way in which they use technology to support learning in the classroom. In particular, tutors felt that the class blog was an effective way for learners to develop their digital skills and improve their written English.

By focussing on one topic for a longer period of time, tutors feel that learners have had a richer learning experience which has addressed some of their specific needs and issues around using the health service. This applied pedagogical approach

enabled learners to develop the language skills needed to improve their access to and experience of health services.

'I think being very explicit, that we're focusing on a theme for a sustained period of time, really focusing students' minds, I guess, has allowed us to go into more depth about their experiences and ways that we could find out information and develop the language to improve those experiences.' (Tutor)

The tutors also found that engaging learners in the evaluation of the pilot helped them to gather views on what learners enjoyed doing and what could be improved about the course. The class blog in particular has been effective in enabling learners to express the importance of learning to and their opinions of the programme. This has helped the tutors to reflect on their practice and make changes to the course as it progressed.

For EFA London

Staff involved in developing and delivering the pilot felt that it had had huge benefits for EFA London as an organisation. The Citizens' Curriculum approach enabled them to take a more systematic approach to the delivery of their "making meaning – going deeper – broadening out" delivery model and they are now hoping to train other organisations in this approach. The pilot has also been a good platform for them to promote this approach and their wider work to a broader community.

The pilot has also helped the organisation to recognise the value of embedding digital learning into their programmes. This has given staff a much better idea of their learners' digital literacy and how this can be developed through activities which also allow learners to practise and apply their language skills. The organisation is keen to build on this and embed digital capability into their future programmes.

The success of the pilot has encouraged the organisation to take the programme to the next stage and encourage learners to participate in more practical activities out in the community. EFA London is hoping that this would give learners the chance to practise their skills in a real life context and take action using the capabilities they have developed through the programme.

Critical success factors

- Embedding language, civic and digital capabilities in an overarching theme enabled learners to develop and apply these skills to their lived experience.
- Having an overarching theme for the programme also enabled learners to discuss issues in more depth and develop a more sophisticated understanding of the topics involved.
- The learner-led approach of the "making meaning – going deeper – broadening out" delivery model ensures that learners are motivated to learn and take ownership of sessions.
- The strong relationships between learners in the group meant they were comfortable to share their experiences of using health services.

- The active listening skills of tutors supports learners to recap previous learning and enables tutors to tailor the sessions to learners' needs.

Further information and contact

For more information about EFA London, visit their website at www.efalondon.org/

For more information about the NIACE Citizens' Curriculum, please contact Alex Stevenson at alex.stevenson@niace.org.uk