

How far can innovative methodologies support 16 - 19 learners and adult learners to achieve English and Maths GCSE?

What is practitioner-led research?

Practitioner-led research is focused on small scale action research projects which can improve practice in terms of understanding and impact on learning (Carr and Kemmis 1986).

Our project is a study of English and Maths GCSE provision within the college with a specific focus on the 16-19 cohort and the 19+ cohort.

A short description: in October 2014 Sarah Mandeno and Pippa Stone submitted this proposal for a project

We have been working with Chloe Clark, Harriet Rafferty and Andy Brewer to think about how best to help students with their Maths and English in new and creative ways to improve their grades. We chose innovative strategies which support active learning with a focus on motivation and dealing with stress and panic.

Why did we decide to do this?

We have a lot of GCSE students! A very diverse GCSE cohort across 16-19 provision and many 19+ learners. With the government focus on Maths/English we wanted to identify areas to develop to help learners succeed.

How did we do this?

We identified 4 groups (a total of 41 students). We established frames of reference in terms of confidentiality and anonymity. We discussed the ethics of research and agreed that all information would be treated as confidential. We asked the students about their attitudes to the subjects and exams. We gave out confidential questionnaires and collated anonymous results. The teachers have shared their own ideas strategies and we have included links to current research and literature to support these innovations.

Figure 1 <http://www.scotland.gov.uk> cited in EmCETT online 2015

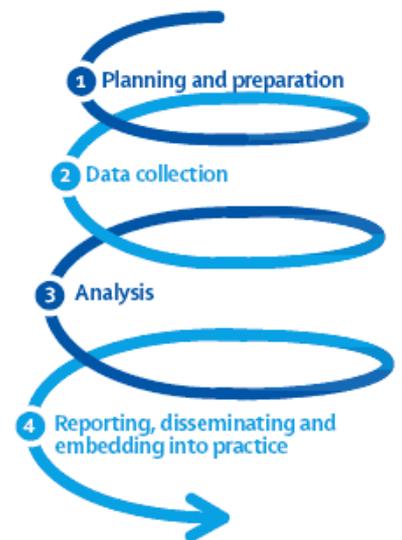


Figure 1 Action Research Cycles

What did the learners say and how did we respond?



- **motivation**

This was a particular concern for 16 – 19 year old learners. Some GCSE learners lacked motivation as they had taken the exam three or four (or more) times before. This can have a very demotivating effect on their attitude and confidence. Some thought ‘they just can’t do it’.

- **attendance**

For some learners the GCSE is not a priority and this impacts on their attendance as their ‘main’ subject is seen as the important area. Some learners don’t know the learners in their GCSE group and this can impact on their attendance. Sometimes the classroom for GCSE is on a different site or away from their own learning environment which can impact on attendance.

- **exam nerves and anxiety – ‘going to pieces’**

Some learners (particularly 19+ adult learners) find the experience of taking an exam very stressful.

Which theorists might be useful here?

Carol Dweck and her work on the ‘fixed mindset’ and the ‘growth mindset’ can be a powerful tool for motivating learners. It’s not about whether you have a certain IQ or talent – it’s about work and attitude (“passion, education and persistence”).

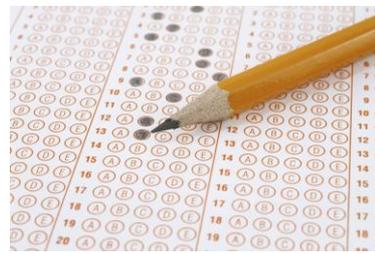
“In the **fixed mindset**, people believe that their talents and abilities are fixed traits. They have a certain amount and that’s that; nothing can be done to change it. Many years of research have now shown that when people adopt the fixed mindset, it can limit their success. They become over-concerned with proving their talents and abilities, hiding deficiencies, and reacting defensively to mistakes or setbacks-because deficiencies and mistakes imply a (permanent) lack of talent or ability. People in this mindset will actually pass up important opportunities to learn and grow if there is a risk of unmasking weaknesses.”

“In the **growth mindset**, people believe that their talents and abilities can be developed through passion, education, and persistence. For them, it’s not about looking smart or grooming their image. It’s about a commitment to learning–taking informed risks and learning from the results, surrounding yourself with people who will challenge you to grow, looking frankly at your deficiencies and seeking to remedy them. Most great business leaders have had this mindset, because building and maintaining excellent organizations in the face of constant change requires it.”

Carol Dweck (2015 online)

http://www.ted.com/talks/carol_dweck_the_power_of_believing_that_you_can_improve?language=en

Another useful approach is concerned with marking and grading:



There is a lot of discussion about the best way to give feedback to learners. Many of us give grades and are expected to grade work in order for learners to see their progress. An alternative approach is 'comment-based marking' which focuses not on the grade but on the work itself:

- You did this well
- You need to do more of this
- Even better if you did this

Why?

Black and Wiliam (1998) first highlighted the importance of formative rather than summative assessment. Their experiment into grading and comment-based marking is still really interesting - It was based on a study of 132 mixed ability, Y7 students in 12 classes across 4 schools. The students were given three types of feedback:

- 1) *marks,*
- 2) *comments,*
- 3) *marks plus comments.*

The '*comments*' only group had a significant attainment gain but the '*marks*' only and '*marks plus comments*' groups had NO gain. Why so? The researchers concluded that giving marks indicated the end of learning



The Power of Formative

Type of Feedback to Students	Gain in Performance	Student's Interest in further learning
• Marks	none	Top Students + Bottom students -
• Comments	30%	All Students +
• Both	None	Top Students + Bottom students -

[Butler, R. (1988) *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 58 1-14]

Here's the questionnaire we used



Confidential questionnaire about your GCSE course

Your course

What is the easiest/most difficult thing about your course?

What would you like more help with?

Self study

Do you find it easy to study at home? If not why?

Do you use the internet at home to assist you in your studies?

Exams

Do you like exams?

Why/Why not?

How do you cope with the pressure of exams?

What did you get in your last English/maths exam?

Here's the feedback from the groups:

Harriet's feedback – GCSE 16-19 Maths (PLAR 15)



Key issues with the group:

- **motivation**

Some of the learners are lack motivation. Some have taken the exam three or four (or more) times before. This has a very demotivating effect on their attitude.

- **attendance**

For some learners the GCSE is not a priority and this impacts on their attendance as their 'main' subject is seen as the important area. Some learners don't know the learners in their GCSE group and this can impact on their attendance. Sometimes the classroom for GCSE is on a different site or away from their own learning environment which can impact on attendance.

Ideas and strategies

- *Develop a personal history questionnaire in the first two lessons – a diagnostic to find out who has taken the exam before, how many times etc.*
- *Use late cards*
- *Develop more strategies for dealing with non-attendance – how can this be followed up effectively?*
- *Have revision classes with a clear revision schedule for the last 7 weeks.*
- *Do more icebreakers and games to create a positive group dynamic at the start of the course so that all learners feel part of the group*
- *Use motivational strategies such as praise, encouragement and targeted feedback*

Sarah's feedback – GCSE 19+ Adult English (PLAR 2015)



Key issues with the group:

Anxiety/fear of failure

This is the key issue with both of my adult groups this year (and last year). Some learners failed their GCSEs at school and are anxious about failing again. Most learners hate exams and are worried that they will go into the exam and panic or forget everything. All learners are very motivated because they see gaining GCSEs as a gateway to higher education and or a chosen career. This motivation also comes with a sense of urgency to achieve so they can move on; as adults they feel that time is precious and would be devastated if they failed and had to retake.

Attendance

Adult learners have a range of commitments and personal issues, e.g. work, children, long-term illness etc. which can affect their attendance. However, they are, on the whole, excellent at communicating these issues (via email or phone) and catching up with work missed.

Strategies I have tried this year with your groups or would try next year (most of these strategies have been used to try and help learners cope with exam pressure):

- **Study Buddies** – Pairing learners up so that they are with another learner who can benefit from their strengths and vice versa.
- **Using ice breakers to create a positive atmosphere** – We did a lot of these in the first 3 weeks – including the 4 Gs. These icebreakers give learners the chance to talk about worries early on (Give: what are you going to give to course? Get: What are you going to get from the course? Great: What do you think will be great about the course? Ghastly: What do you think will be ghastly about the course?)
- **Revision workshops** – The GCSE teams (adult and 16-19) are offering a revision workshop before the exam and breakfast before the exam on the 2nd June.
- **Going to mindfulness sessions** – Learners have been using the Headspace app.
- **Handing out the 'Beat Stress' leaflet** (designed by Learning Support) - My learners found this really useful. From this I asked all learners to come up with a mantra to help them cope with stress/negative thoughts and focus if they start to panic.
- **Visualisation** – Another technique outlined in the 'Beat Stress' leaflet.
- **Glossaries, writing plans and mnemonics** are nothing new in GCSE teaching but learners do find them very useful in aiding their memories
- **Supporting bilingual learners** – GCSE English language can be a challenge as so many texts contain references to popular culture and language features (like puns) that are difficult to understand. However I have found that encouraging bilingual learners to focus on what they can interpret rather than fretting over an idiom they've never come across has improved their confidence in their exam technique.
- **Sending weekly emails** encouraging and praising learners (with session recap/relevant resources)

Andy's feedback – GCSE 19+ Adult Maths (PLAR 2015)



Key issues with the group:

Anxiety/fear of formal exams and failure

Last year, some learners were in a state of panic on the morning of the exam and needed reassurance before sitting a very formal exam. Despite performing well in practice exams many had not sat a formal exam for many years and had repeatedly failed previous exams. All learners are very motivated because they see gaining GCSEs as a gateway to higher education and or a chosen career. This motivation also comes with a sense of urgency to achieve so they can move on; as adults they feel that time is precious and would be devastated if they failed and had to retake.

Attendance

Adult learners have a range of commitments and personal issues, e.g. work, children, long-term illness etc. which can affect their attendance. However, they are, on the whole, excellent at communicating these issues (via email or phone) and catching up with work missed. A few students have left due to struggling with the workload and expectations (particular Access students) and gaining new employment.

Strategies and ideas:

- **Encouraging students to work together** – Many students pair up or form new friendship groups and can learn effectively from each other inside and outside the classroom.
- **Emails** – Students constantly communicate by email so they feel supported at all times. If they miss a lesson all work is sent so it can be completed.
- **Encourage students to self-learn** – There are many resources available to students to encourage self-learning outside of lessons. These have included using Maths watch (paid for by the college) which can be accessed by computer or Smartphone app, “my maths” where work on every topic is set with questions, CGP text books and work books which students are encouraged to buy and popular revision web sites such as “Khan Academy” and GCSE Bitesize. Homework is set every week which is self-marked and / or discussed at the next session.
- **Revision workshops** – A time table of GCSE Maths revisions classes at Foundation and Higher tier have been set up from mid-April through to the final exams. These normally take place on a Saturday morning and run as an open workshop so students can drop in at any time within the three hours. There is also a bi-lingual workshop so ESOL students can learn key Exam words that often cause confusion – A text book is also given out.
- **Handing out the ‘Beat Stress’ leaflet** (designed by Learning Support) We discussed the contents of the book as a whole group, asking learners to talk about their experiences and ideas to pass..
- **Simulated Exams** – In order to prepare students for the exam. Both Paper 1 and 2 from previous June is given to them under exam conditions. ie chairs in rows and columns, no talking, act as an invigilator, exact timing used. I then mark it and feedback just like a real examiner to improve their exam answer technique. If possible students can sit in the sports hall to experience the feeling on exam day. On Exam Day a room is reserved so students can come early for last minute revision and to be given a last minute confidence boost. Students are at their most nervous and may need to be calmed down to perform to their best.

Chloe's feedback – GCSE 16-19 English (PLAR 2015)



Key issues within the group:

The main issues with my group is disengagement and anxiety/fear of failure. All of the learners concerned failed their GCSE English at school and feel that they are 'destined' to do so again. A number of students feel they are going to fail because they find exams really stressful and that this will work against them. Others feel tired of being stuck in the GCSE cycle and so attendance can be an issue.

Attendance:

Attendance with some of the group is excellent. These students are also proactive and if they have to miss a lesson they will email me and ask for work to catch up on. The others will dip in and out of lessons depending on their feelings toward the course at that time and how they feel they are doing. I notice that if they are unsure or feel they have 'covered it before' then they stay away.

Strategies I have tried this year:

- 'Captain English vs. Evil English' – On the very first lesson I encouraged my groups to get any negative thoughts they had about English and having to retake onto paper. I then asked them write down why they think it would be useful to have their GCSE English qualification. Compared the two and gave students the opportunity to vent any negative feelings with the idea that it will put 'Evil English' to one side.
- Mixed pair work: I have purposely paired students that are weaker with students that are good attenders/hard workers/higher ability
- Exam map: I created an exam map so they could plan out how much they needed to write and how long they needed to spend on each question. I've then asked them to use this every time we have completed a practice question so they can find a routine for the exam.
- Handing out the 'Beat Stress' leaflet: All students found this really useful.
- Drop in sessions: I have been running drop in sessions for students since the beginning of this summer term. I have offered it to students that either need to catch up or are anxious about the exam and want to practice with me. This has been hit and miss! For the first few weeks hardly anybody took me up on this offer but as I get closer to the exam more and more students want to have extra support.

Some feedback from GCSE (19+) English students

'I feel that I wouldn't have got this far if it wasn't for the support of the teaching staff.'

'I feel very prepared for the exam and know what to expect.'

'I have really enjoyed GCSE English and before I started I believed it would be a struggle but it has proved not to be with the help of a wonderful teacher.'

'I have enjoyed the classes and have been inspired to further my education as a result.'

'Massive thank you to my teacher for changing the way I see life and how it will make an improvement to me always.'

'I feel more confident about the exam.'

'I have enjoyed the GCSE course which has improved my memory and myself!'

'I notice things differently, take more notice and form an opinion.'

'I can use more words, I can analyse texts and write different things.'

I have enjoyed this course immensely. It has opened my eyes to things I never understood before. I have rediscovered my love of reading.'

Conclusion

We are publicising the strategies used in our college newsletter and in our Staff Development. Next year in English/Maths GCSE Induction Week teachers will be encouraged to address different levels of motivation and/or issues around exams by questionnaires in week one, icebreakers which address motivation, a simplified version of Dweck, mindfulness apps and group building exercises.