Success is the Journey not the Destination

Introduction

Please note: this PDF version does not contain the many links to websites and documents that are available on the website version. This is available at: http://www.lancs.ac.uk/dialogue_nw/events/success/index.htm

This short booklet is an edited collection of the ideas and resources which were presented at the Dialogue NW event at Blackpool College in October 2009 called Success: Never Standing Still. We hope that those who attended will be able to use the resources and activities themselves and that it will be stimulating as well as useful for those who were unable to attend.

As with all of Dialogue NW activities this event was more than a training session telling people how to do it – instead we wanted to provide a space for critical discussion and reflection. Our focus was on the learners and what success meant to them, acknowledging that this may be very different to official concerns and discourses around recruitment, retention and achievement.

If we start from the learner, then success is more about the journey than crossing an imaginary finishing line: it is about the hurdles, the timing and in some cases the stamina to finish what might feel like a gruelling race. It also allows us to appreciate that the journey is not always straightforward and it is often easier when travelling with others. It is much more than the bullet point statements often used to describe or monitor success.

We started the day by thinking how learner and institutional perspectives on what counts as success may be different. Comments and discussion from participants suggested that although we know about these differences we often get drawn into organisational or official views of success, putting our own professional knowledge on the back boiler. People felt that professional development (CPD), which could ask these tricky and critical questions, is often patchy with little real time or support allocated to it. A critical approach would help us to think what the real issues are for learners, supporting collaboration and encouraging independent thought. For us, research is an important part of what helps reflection become critical – part of the learning cycle which includes learning about our learners. As one participant said:

"Learning isn’t learning until you think about it.”

This is supported by Barton and Tusting who, in summarising aspects of research in adult learning wrote:
“Adult learning has also been said to be distinctive in that experience, and reflection on this experience, has a central role to play in the process.”

Kolb is closely associated with ideas about reflective learning and sees learning through experience as a continual process rather than as a series of outcomes.

The day was planned and delivered collaboratively drawing upon our own experiences and those of others. We realised that learners themselves were able to explain and articulate clearly what success meant to them and what the factors were that supported or prevented this. We were able to draw upon a mixture of research and experience providing a wealth of insight and often generating more questions than answers. By questioning what success is we had to question our own assumptions and listen carefully to what learners described as important. For us, and we hope for those who attended, this listening and thinking space, where there are no ready answers, provides professional development that is critical and relevant to our practice as teachers, researchers and managers.

Before moving on to other aspects of the day it may be helpful to think about the spaces that we have available to us in our working lives to think, question and talk to others about our views, assumptions and practices.

**Activities**

1. **Thinking and asking questions for critical professional development**

Think about your own experience of CPD:
- To what extent does it give you the opportunity to communicate and think with other people leading to changes in practice?
- How could you make CPD more like that?
- How could you change team meetings to be so?

**Some ideas**
- Talk for ten minutes to one other person about a problem you have.
- Use the first ten minutes of a team meeting for someone to describe a teaching approach they use which works (not necessarily anything new). Discuss - Why do they use it? What makes it successful? How could it be improved?
- Go to [https://www.ncetm.org.uk/resources/](https://www.ncetm.org.uk/resources/) to find resources to incorporate into team meetings eg ‘Departmental Workshops’ with a series of 15 minute input sessions. Some may not be appropriate but the ideas and approaches are useful. Also look at the ‘What makes a good resource?’ microsite providing teaching and learning resources which

---

1 Barton, David, Tusting, Karin: ‘Models of Adult Learning: a literature review’ NRDC 2003
could be used as the basis for discussion about CPD, pedagogy and working on practice.
• Take a course
• Write for a practitioner publication

2. Linking learning and teaching

Think about what you need in your working life to succeed as a teacher. Now apply that to a learner.
• What ‘excess baggage’ do you think you bring into the classroom as a teacher - does this impact upon learners?
• Think about when in your organisation you talk about learners - what language do you use?
• Are their opportunities for working collaboratively with learners?
• Discuss ways to create opportunities to listen more closely to learners

In the next section you will read of participants’ ideas concerning what success is to them and their organisations. Following that you will hear the stories of some learners which we hope will provide insight to support your practice and research. We also provide some additional references at the end in case you would like to follow up anything mentioned in more detail.
What is Success?

‘Success is sometimes best measured by spoonfuls. As we struggle with the changes in our lives, sometimes we are unaware of our accomplishments. Victories need to be celebrated, no matter how small the gain. It is critical that we look back from where we were days, weeks, months and years before so that we are aware of our achievements.’ (Rosemarie Rossetti²)

In the introduction, we noted that learner and institutional perspectives on what counts as success may be different. So it can be for practitioners who may have views about achieving success and measuring success which are different to their organisation’s. As a practitioner you may have intricate ways of measuring the success of your students, but yet may not feel continually successful as a teacher. Alternatively you may feel successful but your measure of success does not match with the success criteria that your organisation uses to value your contribution to standards in general. It all depends on what constitutes ‘success criteria’. Success criteria may of course be used in a motivational way to stimulate students as well as providing a benchmark for achievements:

“Success criteria provide a framework for a dialogue with [children]. Discussions focus on how well the success criteria have been met […] success criteria in short term planning is vital to ensure a focus on learning as opposed to activities.” (National Strategies³)

Participants considered the following two questions on the day:

- What does your organisation understand success to be?
- What do you understand success to be?

Their feedback summarised here shows that participants believed that in general their organisations certainly relate to the benchmark model.

- Benchmarks – reaching and surpassing
- Retention
- Budgets
- Growth
- Qualifications rather than personal goals
- Individual learner achievement (awards and life goals)
- Prestige
- Ofsted grade
- Progression

² Rosemarie Rossetti, PhD ‘Measuring Success’ (13.3.07 – accessed at ‘Inspirational Quotes’ blogspot.com 4.11.09)
³ The National Strategies – Success Criteria @ www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk 4.11.09
When considering what success meant to them, participants saw it through their learners, knowing the importance of success in soft outcomes to their learners. Indeed they were motivated by these measures of success as teachers too. So they identified ideas about success valued by learners:

- Positive experience
- Achieving personal goals
- Want to do more
- Enjoyment
- Self-confidence

And those related to practitioners:

- Good CPD
- Self-confidence

Not surprisingly both sets of personal understanding contained the phrase ‘self-confidence’:

“…the cycle is self-perpetuating. High self-esteem produces success and approval by others; these in turn enhance self-esteem.” (Meriel Downey⁴).

Educational bodies and organisations recognise that practitioners' views about the importance of softer outcomes for learners are at the core of good retention, enabling students to stay in learning long enough to achieve qualifications or individual goals⁵.

Barton and Tusting¹, having reviewed theories about adult learning conclude:

“… it would be partial and misleading to see adult learning only as an individual cognitive phenomenon, … Instead, learning is present in a dialectical interaction between individual, situational and social factors. The learner’s contexts, purposes and practices are the most important factors in the process.”

It is perhaps inevitable then, that success in learning will look different to any individual or organisation depending on the context in which they find themselves.

The conference allowed participants to build on their individual starting points about success. It offered some tools in the shape of ideas, activities and reflections on practice from a variety of speakers. Participants were encouraged to interact with each other in order to explore and develop their understanding.

---

about the issues related to the terminology of success. At the end of the day participants assessed its impact and some commented:

- “The importance of regular evaluation in contributing to success”
- “Thinking about success in different terms”
- “I was encouraged to carry out research to improve success”
- “Reminder of different journeys learners have made to get to learning”

And, as one participant commented:

“Success is a journey not a destination.”

How can you engage with these ideas?

Many participants found it valuable to refocus their attention on these fundamental concerns and this is reflected in their comments pasted on the evaluation boards at the end of the conference (Head, Hands, Heart). The ideas-storm – What does success mean to your organisation, and to you? - identified above, could be used as a basis for refocusing your colleagues in a similar way. It is always important at the beginning of any complex discussion to create and establish a shared understanding of the terminology. Below are suggestions you could use to consider not only ideas, but their impact on practice. Practice in this case applies to both teachers’ and managers’ practice.

Activities

In team meetings and/or wider organisational CPD events you could try one or more of the following:

1. Use 5 minutes to ideas-storm the same questions (above – What does success mean?) and follow this up with a discussion.

2. Consider the questions in pairs, feeding back to the whole group.

3. Consider the questions by dividing the group into smaller carousel groups.

4. Discuss factors that are held in common for organisations, practitioners and learners and the implications for how you work. For instance, gaining qualifications is important for learners and organisations.

5. Managers, discuss how you can incorporate into your work, practitioners’ extended views of success which includes a recognition of learners’ views.

6. Teachers, discuss how you can include learners’ values in how you work in the classroom.
7. Managers, how can you harness practitioners’ commitment to learners to achieve organisational goals?

8. Managers, consider how you can celebrate success within your organisation.
Learning from your learners

What you should know to promote their success

During the day, three learners talked about their experiences in informal discussion with a facilitator. Each focused on the following questions:

1. What learning have you done as an adult?
2. Did you have difficulties while you were studying?
3. What did your tutors need to know about you that was important to your learning … if only they’d asked!
4. What made your learning successful for you?

The three case studies below incorporate the main points that participants identified from the learner interviews which relate to the four questions above.

Anis’ story

Prior to coming to live in Britain, Anis had studied English in Tunisia. However, he struggled with his vocabulary and pronunciation and felt his language skills were not as good as he’d initially thought. Anis took on 3 jobs in cleaning and catering. It was while working at a local High School in Rochdale that he started ESOL classes along with basic ICT in a community outreach centre. He also started teaching Arabic which helped him with his English. Anis’ main difficulties while studying were tiredness and time management. He struggled to fit attending classes with his three jobs and he found the pace of learning quite difficult to keep up with when he was in class. This difference, not only in the culture generally, but also in the learning culture, he experienced as a real culture shock.

For the first time he had to learn through not only chalk and talk, but through group work and discussion. These different ways of organising learning made greater demands on him as a learner, compared to other learning he had experienced in Tunisia and he felt under pressure in class. He struggled to meet deadlines in terms of completing his work on time and in class it was difficult for him to maintain the pace expected by his tutors. He noticed that tasks which took other learners in class ten minutes to complete, would take him approximately thirty minutes. While working at a local High School, Anis applied to work there as a teaching assistant. He had always had ambitions to teach and while working in a school provided him with the
opportunity to apply, he was successful in getting his teaching assistant post on his own merit.

It would have helped Anis if his tutors knew and understood about his learning background and the differences in approaches to teaching and learning he had experienced. Knowing how he struggled with the greater emphasis on pace and speed in class would have lessened the pressure he felt while in lessons. Working at three jobs affected how Anis worked in his ESOL class and knowing this would have helped his teachers to understand why he was sometimes tired and unable to work as quickly as other students.

Anis finds it hard to identify barriers - he just sees issues as things he has to get round. This positive attitude and drive have helped him to be successful in his learning. He is also very open to learning and has taken every opportunity available to him to pursue learning. He received support from colleagues at work, including his employer and this faith in him helped him to remain positive and overcome any difficulties he experienced. Anis also has confidence in his ability to succeed and felt he had good self esteem. His tutors provided positive feedback and encouragement to Anis and this, along with being able to build good relationships with them made a real difference to Anis’ success. Anis has been well supported by the school SENCO, head teacher and ICT teacher. All have played a mentoring role to Anis. When the going has been tough they have encouraged him to look at how far he has come and helped him get over difficult times. The general staff at the school are all very supportive and are willing to talk things over with Anis. He was awarded an Adult Learner Week Learner of the Year award which has given him great encouragement to continue with his learning.
Marie

Marie is a single mum who had split up from her children's dad because of his addiction to drugs. She came to hate where she lived because she discovered that everyone, including her family, knew what he was getting up to – but no one told her. At that time, Marie felt sad rather than angry, and overwhelmed by her responsibility as a mother to her children. All of this sapped her energy.

Almost by chance she returned to education when the Lone Parent Advisor at the Jobcentre signed her up for a computer course. Before this, Marie had had negative experiences of education. At primary school she felt that she got little attention as she was labelled as coming from a poor family so that teachers had low expectations of her. They praised her little and this led to Marie feeling unmotivated. After all, if people feel you can't do something, then you don't!

So she returned to learning with this limited and dispiriting experience. Her confidence was low and she had her childcare and financial responsibilities to cope with. She had to walk four miles just to get to her college class and managing her time was always a challenge.

Marie was aware that she couldn’t read and write very well. Spelling was a real problem and could have got in the way right at the start of her IT class where she couldn’t even spell her computer password. But her tutor was always very patient, willing to read and explain to her what was on the screen. This led Marie to join an English class, another challenge, as she feared that she might be taught with kids and thought of as ‘thick’. In fact most of the other learners were adults and Marie found that she was respected by her teachers and developed good relationships with them.

It was important that the teachers’ knew about her personal circumstances as well as about her as a learner. They needed to know about her family circumstances and her need for financial support. They had to manage the fact that other learners did not know or perhaps understand Marie’s situation.

Teachers were interested in their subject and in Marie, took the time necessary to explain things clearly and were responsive to her as an individual. They also gave good, quick feedback to learners about their work and, in particular, her IT tutor gave her helpful coping strategies. Lessons were enjoyable.

Staff took flexible approaches, recognising that ‘one size doesn’t fit all’. As Marie progressed she learned most effectively when she collaborated with other learners, learning from them and teachers through talking and listening. She gradually developed her own approaches to studying and appreciated tutors being firm about deadlines and timekeeping.
Teachers inspired Marie to achieve further by recognising what she had achieved - both informally and through awards. This recognition as an individual and being treated with respect by teachers was important to Marie. She needed to develop confidence and a sense of empowerment, and did so.

Marie’s progress in learning was underpinned by her motivation that history should not repeat itself for her children in their education. She wanted to be independent and give her children a better chance than she had had. She had a strong determination and that, together with her good social skills and supportive friends led her to continue her success.

Marie went on to succeed in an Access to Health and Nursing course which led her to study at university to become a nurse. During that time she won a NIACE Adult Learner award and a Helena Kennedy Foundation award.

Simon

Before Simon entered custody he had a history of alcohol and drug use. He also had a background of domestic violence and was living apart from his partner and his four children. His hearing impairment had gone untreated until he was in custody. Simon’s educational experiences prior to arriving at Thorn Cross were not positive. His mother was unable to read. Consequently, when he first arrived there he had few traditional literacy skills and was unable to recite the alphabet. However, he did recognise letters. Simon lacked the motivation and the skills to change his offending behaviour.

Given all of this, Simon needed a highly individualised approach to engage him and begin to give him success. Staff needed to understand his background; his previous educational history and give him time to talk about his experiences in a stable and non judgemental environment. They needed to know about his physical disability and the implications of this for his learning. Simon needed a diagnostic approach to what he knew already and his learning styles. He needed a multidisciplinary team of tutors and other staff to support his range of physical, emotional and learning needs. He needed support to understand his own aspirations and how to share these.

Simon’s learning was successful because all his needs were addressed. In terms of his learning, he initially followed the ‘Toe by Toe’ reading scheme which worked for him and provided quick, small step successes. By the end of the first learning session Simon was much more confident with phoneme/grapheme
Recognising.

Having a full sentence plan while in prison supported Simon’s success. Having incentives to change helped his motivation to succeed. Simon was supported to identify his own issues and learned to ask for help. He measured his success in small steps and much of his learning was contextualised to his own interests. He received 1:1 support for his literacy and this support was provided daily. He also received support from his peers and had high quality specialist support for learning.

Simon didn’t believe that he could learn to read but began the Toe by Toe reading programme, which he initially found quite difficult. He was delighted when he was able to read a whole sentence two weeks after starting the programme. He is now able to read fluently, at his level, while continuing to develop his skills.

Simon has recently left custody and is also helping his mother to learn to read, using the same programme.

He also gained an Industrial Cleaning qualification whilst at the prison and is presently awaiting the result of an interview as a cleaner at a local hotel.

Simon has four children and when his licence expires he will be going to live with them and his partner for the first time.

Simon feels that a whole new world has been opened for him because he welcomed the opportunities offered to him at the prison.

How can you engage with these case studies?

Part of sustaining success for practitioners is to continue thinking and working with the ideas that were generated during the learner interviews. Here are some suggestions for you as teachers or managers to try in your classroom, at team meetings &/or wider organisational CPD events.

1. Using the case studies, identify what each learner considered success to be at the start of their journey, and now.

2. To what extent are the critical success factors for each learner specific to each, or common to all the learners? Discuss the relative importance of each.

3. Devise your own questions concerning ‘success’ and systematically collect learners’ responses.

4. Use a learner case study to identify how your organisation would respond to that learner. Identify what you could plan into your teaching and class management to support the learner.
5. Use a case study or current or past learner from your own organisation to do the same. You could use an example of a learner who feels they have not succeeded.

6. Review current ways of finding out your students’ views about success - within the class, the programme and/or the organisation. Explore and experiment with what you ask and how you ask it.

7. Use the learner case studies to consider the dispositions, knowledge and practical approaches these successful learners valued in their teachers. Consider whether these qualities are included in your organisation’s person specification for teachers and support workers.

In the next and final section of the booklet we refer you to some additional resources so you may follow up ideas raised not only in this booklet, but also others raised during the October event. For instance, Brian Creese, in a wide-ranging presentation about current national projects, offered an audit checklist for organisations to assess, ‘How flexible can you be?’ This recognised that for learners to succeed, organisations need to be flexible. You could use this with colleagues in a variety of ways, such as appraising the checklist’s usefulness in the light of the three case studies; to consider which aspects of the checklist would matter most to students; or whether there are other aspects which should be included in the checklist. Some listed resources are academic publications while others, like Brian’s, are more practically based.

**Conclusion**

The focus of the day and this booklet has been on what success means to learners, acknowledging that this may be very different to official concerns. We used interview questions to tease out from the three people who consider that they are successful learners what had characterised their learning experiences. Listening to them led us to question our own understanding and assumptions. We hope that the ideas and activities suggested here will support you to engage with colleagues in further critical discussion to develop your thinking, and make an impact on your practice.
References


Useful Links
Please note, some useful links appear on the website version of this resource. These are available at: http://www.lancs.ac.uk/dialogue_nw/events/success/resources.htm

Other resources to help you move forward

In addition to the sources and useful links referenced within the resource itself, below is a list of additional publications which you may find of interest:


Davies, P., Hamilton, M. and James,K. 'Maximising the Impact of Practitioner Research'. NRDC. Available at: http://www.nrdc.org.uk/publications


**Websites**


The Stick with it Project 2006-8. For research documents and reports go to: http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/page.aspx?o=165167
