

# OPEN LEARNING

*Staff Development in Learning Centres*

## A PROGRAMME FOR TRAINING TRAINERS



### **Background**

Across the country the need to improve the training of local business has led to a rapid increase in the number of learning centres. However, these centres have developed in ad hoc ways and have been very reliant on their own resources, sometimes operating under tight commercial pressures. Most can identify a range of staff skills they want to develop but lack resources for.

Other organisations, such as Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs), may have similar needs eg in helping small training organisations to be more effective and to help small businesses train staff cost-effectively. The project aimed to address these needs.

### **The Project**

From October 1989 to April 1990 the Employment Department funded a programme designed to increase the effectiveness of learning centres. In a preliminary study of twenty five centres commissioned from EDMC Consultants, staff training had been identified as one practicable way to increase the impact of learning centres on local business.

The programme had three phases:

- training needs analysis;
- training design;
- training delivery.

The programme was particularly concerned to emphasise strategies in open and flexible learning (OFL) and to demonstrate the usefulness and cost-effectiveness of a training needs analysis (TNA) approach to improving skills. The two main aims of the programme were therefore to:

- improve OFL provision through more effective learning centres;
- demonstrate a cost-effective, needs analysis approach to staff development.



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LEARNING METHODS CASE STUDY

Twenty centres participated in the programme, half of which were in colleges of further or higher education and the remainder supported in a variety of ways. The programme met the cost of needs analysis and training design for all twenty, and offered two-thirds of the cost of actual training. Twelve of the centres continued in the programme to the third phase, enabling 167 staff to receive training, including managers, trainers, tutors, lecturers, administrators, technicians and librarians.

### **Meeting the Training Needs**

Analysing staff needs in the learning centres showed predominant needs for:

- business skills, including marketing strategies, selling techniques and presentation;
- improved understanding of new technologies in training, especially interactive video (IV) and computer based training (CBT).

Training was designed for each participating centre by one of two training organisations, Flexitrain Ltd and Frontline Training Ltd. In each case courses or training activities were planned which met the specific identified needs.

For example, in one centre in a college of Higher Education eight staff from eight different departments were each trained towards one of the trainer certificates in open learning (now called ADDFOL), as the centre had identified the need to achieve a more flexible, learner-centred approach to training.

In another centre whose needs centred on the desire to become more competent in using technology based training, an interactive video system was purchased and initial training given.

In a third case the need to increase staff communication and co-operation was met by training in group problem-solving and assertiveness, whilst the need for improved customer contact was met by a course on professional selling skills.

### **THE VALUE OF THE PROGRAMME**

#### **Costs**

The alternative to a TNA approach is to use predesigned workshops. The advantage of TNA is that it tailors training to the particular needs of organisations (in this case learning centres) and the needs of specific staff within those organisations. Workshops can only provide generic information which may fail to meet needs for reasons such as:

- the organisation has specific constraints or circumstances that the workshop has not taken into account;
- the organisers of the workshop, deliverers of the workshop, managers of the organisation and staff actually trained may have differing perceptions of the aims of the workshop;
- workshop examples and cases may not be specific to the trainees' experience;
- little account can be taken of the specific knowledge, and lack of it, the individual staff have.

## O P E N L E A R N I N G

Good TNA can reduce, if not eliminate, all these problems. However, because it depends on detailed personal analysis, TNA is sometimes thought to be more expensive than pre-designed workshops.

In fact, in this programme, the TNA approach was shown to be highly cost-effective, with costs comparing very favourably with the workshop approach and benefits being perhaps greater. Average costs were:

- for TNA and training design in a learning centre: £1006
- for training to meet identified needs in a learning centre: £1854
- per member of staff: £206

Costs varied, however, from centre to centre, depending on economies of scale, travelling and subsistence costs and the precise nature of the training needed. Factors which can reduce costs include:

- delivering the necessary training on a local rather than national basis (reducing travel and subsistence);
- delivering training on site, rather than in the training organisation;
- using OL materials which can be reused on future occasions.

### **Outcomes of the Programme**

The Scottish Council for Research in Education evaluated the programme to identify areas of impact, appropriateness for providing local training and possible improvements. This evaluation concluded that the programme was a success and that most

of its components were sufficiently beneficial to be worth replicating, offering a cost-effective approach to staff development, though they were able to suggest a number of improvements that might be made. In particular they found:

- direct spin-off benefits in eleven centres, including enhanced professionalism and increased confidence;
- centres' shortcomings were identified with concrete suggestions for remedies;
- identified improvements in the centres' commercial and marketing skills.

Six centres also believed their efficiency had increased as a result of the programme and five believed they were doing more business.

One anticipated problem was the resistance of experts in TNA to the idea of having their own training needs analysed. Although some resistance was found, and probably contributed to the withdrawal of eight of the original twenty centres from the programme, the remaining centres did seem to feel the benefit of the objectivity of the analysis.

Of seventeen centres evaluated, nine found the TNA useful, with two more giving qualified approval. It was thought useful because:

- new development areas and skills were identified;
- weaknesses had been identified and suggestions made for tackling them;
- current ideas were focused and clarified;
- the centre's confidence in its operations was increased.

## O P E N L E A R N I N G

Similarly nine of the seventeen valued the training plan, especially because of its commercial focus, and eight of the ten who underwent training found it useful.

In taking an approach such as this, it was found to be important that:

- clear information is provided and centres given the time and opportunity to decide whether to participate;
- TNA is conducted thoroughly and objectively by someone who is trusted;
- the training plan takes full account of the circumstances of the centre, and what it can afford;
- training is delivered by those competent to do so, not necessarily the consultant who conducted the TNA and drew up the training plan.

### **The Benefits**

This study clearly shows the programme benefited learning centres. TNA offers a cost-effective approach to staff development which other organisations, such as TECs, can emulate if they wish to:

- help small training organisations deliver their services more effectively to businesses;

- help small businesses to train their staff in relevant skills in a cost-effective way.

It is worth pointing out that the Employment Department paid part of the training delivery costs because this was a demonstration project. Other funding agencies might consider supporting only the first two phases, TNA and the production of a training plan.

More details of the approach can be found in the full report, obtainable from the Employment Department.

### **Conclusion**

Although eight centres declined to participate in the complete programme, four of these withdrew for reasons outside the control of the Employment Department. Of the remainder, only a third in each case failed to value each of the three stages of the programme, and eleven of the seventeen evaluated saw substantial benefit. Clearly the two aims of the Employment Department were successfully achieved, for more centres were better able to offer effective OFL after the programme than before, and the TNA approach had been shown to be both effective and comparable in costs to conventional training approaches.