

OPEN LEARNING

An Open Learning Initiative in the Midlands

FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN THE HEART OF ENGLAND



Over seven million tourists visited the Midlands in the course of 1990, attracted by its unique combination of picturesque countryside, city-centre facilities and historic sites, such as Warwick Castle. Fifty per cent of these visitors were from Europe, accounting for nearly £300 million spent in the area.

The Heart of England Tourist Board recognised that if numbers of overseas visitors were to increase,

customer service would be a crucial factor. Welcoming visitors in their own language was seen as a key step in this continuous improvement process.

The objectives of any such initiative would be three-fold:

- to provide visitors with a welcome in their own language
- to improve levels of repeat business
- to generate other 'bottom line' benefits.

Any training initiative would have to be flexible and able to adapt to the needs of a broad spectrum of tourism employers operating in very different sectors. It was also felt that 'frontline' staff in responsible jobs would not respond well to a traditional approach. More than this, the wide range of abilities involved and the initial differences in skill levels could prove an obstacle to progress. Most employers felt that there was insufficient time available for off-site tuition and that day release was not a viable option.

Open Learning was clearly an ideal solution.



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Tel: (0709) 888688

CS32

Printed in England MM/3/93

LEARNING METHODS CASE STUDY

Participating Companies

It was against this background that Angela Boden Associates launched a language training initiative, designed to bring together five local tourism employers and the Heart of England Tourist Board. Participants in the scheme covered a wide range of tourism and leisure facilities.

Participants in the project were:

- *The Tourist Board's sixty six Tourist Information Centres.* Often the first point of contact, these staff are required to give advice and assistance to overseas visitors and promote and advertise local events and attractions. Foreign language proficiency was thus a crucial skill.
- *Warwick Castle.* The castle is visited by over 700,000 people each year and its director believed that better communications between staff and visitors would improve customer satisfaction and ultimately lead to more repeat business.
- *The Ironbridge Gorge Museum.* Situated on the River Severn, Ironbridge is a World Heritage Site, incorporating six museums and occupying a six mile stretch of land. The Museum attracts 330,000 visitors each year, of which ten per cent are from overseas. By 1993, numbers of non-English speaking visitors are expected to double. Management believed that language skills would be invaluable in enabling staff to deal more effectively with foreign customers and to give more complex technical information about the Museum and the area's industrial heritage.

- *Shugborough Hall.* As a museum, mill, rare breeds centre and working farm, the Hall attracts a quarter of a million visitors each year. The Hall's director was strongly committed to the initiative, believing that it represented a unique business investment.
- *Brummagen Boats.* The company offers trips and self-steer canal holidays throughout the year and 30 per cent of its clients are from overseas. Managers were strongly committed to a language learning initiative, both to enhance customer care and to ensure that vital safety and technical information was communicated effectively.

The Training Solution

The central objective of the programme was to develop and test a flexible Open Learning package which would reflect the specific needs of each of the participating companies, while also providing a general grounding in basic foreign language skills.

To ensure that individual needs were catered for, participating companies were asked to identify specific language and vocabulary requirements.

The next stage of the project identified a primary target group. These were managers and staff directly involved in day-to-day contact with foreign visitors.

An external consultant was appointed to help in the creation of a pilot programme which would concentrate on small groups of trainees at each site. Each group would then be supported by a mentor who would have a

good understanding of at least one of the languages being learned.

Five languages were chosen for the initiative: Italian, French, German, Spanish and Japanese. The Employment Department's Business Growth Training programme contributed 50 per cent of the funding for the £34,000 scheme.

The Training Materials

The materials provided training to five different skill levels and were built around a central 'Message Bank', incorporating vocabulary and phrases specifically requested by the participating companies.

The emphasis of the programme was on self-study and students were encouraged to work at their own pace at appropriate moments during the day, using the workbooks and audio tapes provided. Regular tutorial

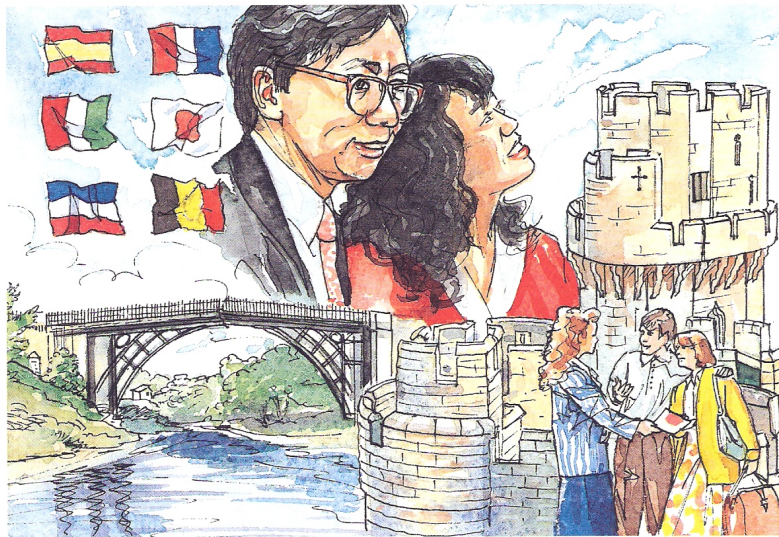
sessions and frequent informal contacts with the local on-site mentor ensured that queries could be resolved.

Additional activities were organised to support the learning initiative. Cultural Days were held by the participating companies, each focusing on the background and culture of one of the five countries concerned. These informal, face-to-face sessions were invaluable in enabling staff to learn about other tourist attractions in the region, something that encouraged them to 'cross-sell'.

The full involvement of employers was an important aspect of the scheme and many became closely involved with areas such as research, development, tutoring and mentoring.

Project Feedback

Both staff and employers were enthusiastic about the Open Learning initiative. Each of



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

the five participating companies reported significant improvements in staff/visitor communication and in staff confidence. Indeed, a significant reduction in staff turnover at all the participating companies suggested that motivation and job satisfaction were positively affected by the scheme. Staff became more confident, to the extent that some of the first trainees went on to act as mentors to their colleagues.

In the words of the director of Shugborough Hall:

"The training programme has been a great morale booster to staff, while foreign visitors have clearly been impressed at the professional way in which they have been welcomed and treated."

The Ironbridge Gorge Museum was equally positive about the business benefits of the initiative. Already, some 40 members of staff have completed the training. The Museum's head of public relations explains:

"Response times for handling overseas enquiries have dropped dramatically and as a business we are now far better equipped to go out and market ourselves internationally."

While each company participating in the initiative has gained from the experience, the area's tourist industry as a whole has also benefited. The fact that staff at each venue have learned about other local attractions has led to frequent recommendations and referrals.

Visitors' enjoyment has increased and all participants feel confident that repeat business will grow.

Future Developments

Following the project, a conference was held to which participating employers were invited. All were enthusiastically committed to maintaining the momentum of the programme and to extending its scope and availability.

Other companies are also seeing more extensive use of the materials than was originally intended, evidence of the commitment and enthusiasm of employees. At Ironbridge, for example, tapes and workbooks are being used by many members of staff who did not participate in the original programme. Ironbridge's public relations manager concludes:

"This indicates how user-friendly and non-threatening the programme was. We have had only positive feedback from both employees and visitors."

The Open Learning initiative has proved an unqualified success, enabling tourism employers across the Midlands to achieve real training and business benefits, easily enjoyably, and at a fraction of the cost of a conventional training programme.

This Case Study is one of a series of eight covering Open Learning and foreign languages in the hospitality and leisure sector.