Working with Others:
Case Studies of Approaches
in FE Colleges

March 2001
Publication code: A1128

Contents

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the following organisations and individuals for helping to produce this resource:

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- West Lothian College: Eugene Clarke

About these case studies

There are two major routes to Core Skills certification:

♦ automatic certification through Units or Courses in which the Core Skill is 'embedded'

♦ assessment using Core Skills Units

Working with Others is less widely embedded in Units and Courses than other Core Skills, and most colleges have found that opportunities for using the automatic certification route in their programmes are limited.

Because of this, colleges are concerned to find the best way both to use the Core Skill Unit as a 'discrete' Unit, with a separate timetable slot, and to use it as an integrated part of other programmes, using the Core Skill Unit assessments along with the assessments of the other Units in the programme.

The studies are interesting for the thoughtful approach taken to the Core Skill in each of the colleges involved, and for the different methods of delivery. For example, if an integrated approach to Core Skills Units is used, quality assurance issues such as standardised materials, staff development, tracking, and moderation are seen as critical in planning and setting up. Two of the featured colleges have used National Assessment Bank (NAB) materials, but have started to adapt these to suit their own circumstances — in the future they could use prior moderation to assure themselves that the adapted materials are assessing to the national standard.

The case studies are largely concerned with ways students can achieve *Working with Others* at Intermediate 2, but there is interest in progression — particularly for candidates who have previous achievement in *Working with Others*. The colleges featured are also interested in ways of delivering and assessing *Working with Others* to a group of candidates who are at different levels and differing abilities.

The colleges involved in the case studies pointed out that their approach to *Working with Others* was similar to that used for other Core Skills. Although it is early days, the colleges are aware that some elements of other Core Skills seem difficult to integrate. They are also aware that an integrated approach will often need some input to ensure the coverage needed. Making sure that the level of the assessment is correct, and that the detailed assessment requirements are fully met, needs robust auditing, with specialists overseeing any mapping exercises to ensure secure assessment practice, and appropriate coverage of all PCs and Evidence Requirements.

The first study describes how the *Working with Others* Unit was successfully used as a discrete part of the SGA in Information Technology. It was taught by a Communication lecturer who had previous experience of teaching team-working concepts and skills.

The second study describes how *Working with Others* was used in two different ways in Administration programmes. First, the Administration section delivered the Unit discretely, with a separate timetable slot, but neither staff nor students evaluated this arrangement very positively. In the following year, *Working with Others* was integrated into the Administration programme.

The third, smaller, study outlines some ways in which a college is thinking about the integration of the *Working with Others* Unit into vocational programmes that do not contain a Unit that gives automatic certification of the Core Skill. The study then outlines plans to combine *Working with Others* delivery with equal opportunities awareness raising.

Each case study concludes with a commentary that examines key factors in the success of each approach.

1 Discrete delivery of the *Working with Others* Unit at West Lothian College

Introduction

This case study describes the experiences and reflections of a Communication lecturer and a group of students from West Lothian College who did the *Working with Others* Intermediate 2 Unit as part of their Scottish Group Award (SGA) in Information Technology at Intermediate 2.

The time available for planning the delivery of the Unit was limited — the parent department made a late decision (well into the year) to use *Working with Others* and to ask the Communication Department to deliver the Unit. So, 'at five minutes notice' the lecturer met the 14 students. Their ages ranged from 17–30+, and they had different levels of communication skills.

Delivering the Unit

At the first meeting the lecturer got the class to talk about their previous experiences of group work. Most of this was with families, friends and other groups outside college. By the next time the class met, the lecturer had scanned the NAB pack and, mainly drawing on his own resources, he put together some handouts about how groups work. This got the class members discussing how the groups they knew had worked, and set the tone so that the Unit could get going.

Next, the lecturer introduced the working sheets for the Unit: plans, log sheets and review sheets, and made sure that the students understood that it was the process of working in groups that was important for this particular Unit. He also stressed the value of continual review of performance as tasks progressed. It was important to stress this because most of the students' work in college had focused on the importance of tasks and their Outcomes, rather than on the process of carrying out those tasks.

By this stage the class had a good idea of what was needed and how they should go about it. The class used pre-prepared planning sheets and began, in three groups, to firm up the nature of the tasks. The students used weekly log sheets to review their individual progress and the progress of the group as a whole.

Two significant features influenced what happened next. First, it was the lecturer, who did not know the students very well at this stage, who decided on the composition of the groups. It turned out that the members of one of the groups happened to be already friendly with each other, and the others did not know each other well. One of the groups also happened to contain several students who were

poor attendees. Second, the lecturer decided to let the groups decide on the tasks they would carry out.

Group 1

Students in this group were already friendly, and so had already formed a coherent group. Earlier, this group had been complaining about the exams needed for National Courses in the SGA. The older students were especially concerned and worried. They had had some materials on preparing for exams, but had not found them useful enough. The lecturer asked them what they could do for themselves to help ease the exam problem? Could they use other people's experiences? Most of the group already knew that they wanted to go on to the Higher National (HN) Course in IT and that this would involve setting up a website. This became their task: to design and create a website to help students like themselves with exam preparation.

They made a group plan and schedule for monitoring their progress, allocated the tasks amongst themselves, and made individual plans. The main tasks were to find out about other websites that might help, to write materials, and to do the technical work associated with setting up a proper website. The group also negotiated commercial sponsorship in return for displaying a banner advert on the site.

After this had been decided, the class time was largely spent on the task. The group tended to meet at the start of classes, and would then work anywhere around the college they needed to.

All this was monitored lightly by the lecturer. His main input at this stage was to negotiate with other college staff so that suitable computers would be available at a time the group members could use them. He intervened only occasionally, for example, to suggest that they might work out a system for reporting progress to each other as they went along. He gave a little help, for example, to a student who, the group had agreed, would take on a writing task *because* he had problems with written communication. Needless to say, the Communication lecturer was very interested, but refrained from intervention except to point out a few spelling mistakes. The group had some IT technical difficulties and IT staff were enlisted to help with sorting these.

The lecturer, although tempted, did not attempt to modify or influence the content of the website. He needed to keep the emphasis on the process of working in a group, and was aware of the motivation given by ownership of the tasks by the group. He was more and more impressed with what the group was achieving as they went along.

The website is called Here 2 Learn and is at www.here2help.fsnet.co.uk — it is advertised on posters throughout the college and was still open at the time of this case study. Students who progressed to the HN Course maintained the site and it has been used in the HN Course. It has attracted press comment.

Groups 2 and 3

The other two groups also chose the aims for their tasks, using ideas that emerged during the introductory discussions at the start of the Unit.

One group successfully planned and organised a cheap first-time holiday abroad for a group member — a single mother — and her young child.

The other group, with difficulty, planned and produced a political leaflet.

Both these groups needed and received more guidance and help from the lecturer than the first did. Both groups used their information technology skills to complete their tasks.

Assessment

Evidence was assembled from:

♦ plans

♦ log books

♦ videos of group review discussions

♦ one-to-one interviews between student and lecturer

The log was devised by the lecturer, using questions based on each performance criterion of the Unit.

Evaluation and commentary

Because of the emphasis on process and on review, students gave the lecturer a fair amount of feedback as the Unit progressed.

At the end of the Unit, each student gave an individual evaluation in a one-to-one discussion with the lecturer.

Success factors identified by the students included:

♦ the ownership of the task by the group

♦ an appropriate level of support — it was there if needed, but was not intrusive

♦ the positive feedback — some students even said that it was the first time they had received such praise and admiration for work they had done in college

♦ for the first group especially, the success of the task — 'if you told me before-hand what I could do, I wouldn't have believed you'

♦ the students' feelings of achievement, improved confidence, and self-esteem — they were 'dead chuffed', they said

♦ improved motivation — for example, there was one student whose general behaviour around the college had caused the lecturer to ask him to consider whether it would be better for him to leave; but after informal review discussions, his attitude changed and he became a very good group member

Despite the success of this programme, it not certain that the IT department will use discrete delivery of the Unit again for the SGA in Information Technology — there is a trend to encourage integration of the *Working with Others* Unit, and other Core Skill Units, into parent programmes.

This case study has demonstrated how a Core Skills specialist can:

♦ provide expertly controlled learning of concepts and skills of group work

♦ facilitate, without being directive

♦ ensure that assessment of the Unit has the proper focus on Outcomes and Performance Criteria

♦ confidently judge the level of assessment because of experience of the standards

Things that might have been done differently include:

♦ The selection of the group members by the lecturer (at a point when he did not know the students well). The students thought that they could have selected their own groups, or at least the groups could have had a better mix of people.

♦ Making arrangements so that, if needed, weaker candidates could be assessed at Intermediate 1 and stronger candidates at Higher.

♦ Despite the fact that the open choice of task allowed to the groups encouraged them to feel ownership of their tasks, there were dangers — one of the tasks was difficult to manage, and more boundaries around the choice of task might have been useful (as recommended in the NAB for *Working with Others* at Intermediate 2).

♦ The end-of-Unit evaluation of what the real learning gains might be could have been better. Although the students said they had improved their planning, process monitoring and review skills, the lecturer suspected he might be hearing what the students thought he wanted to hear. Some longer term evaluation of learning gain would be useful to verify this.

Internal moderation arrangements at this college are largely geared to moderation of subject Units. Some modifications will be needed to provide robust quality assurance for Core Skills that are integrated into Units and Courses. At the moment it is difficult for college quality assurance staff to track how the Core Skills are being delivered and where there might be problems that need revision of systems or some staff development.

2 Two approaches

Introduction

This case study focuses on the efforts over a period of 18 months by the Business Administration section of the Faculty of Business, Management and Computing at Perth College to find an effective way to include *Working with Others* in their programmes. In session 1999–2000 they used discrete delivery of the *Working with Others* Unit. In session 2000–01, they developed ways of integrating the Core Skill in some programmes. There are plans to extend this method throughout the faculty for session 2001–02.

College policy and section arrangements

College policy for session 2000–01 is that all non-advanced Courses should contain the five Core Skills. Policy for session 2001–02 is that non-advanced provision throughout the college should follow SGA lines, except where this would be inappropriate.

Ahead of this, the Faculty of Business, Management and Computing had wanted to use the SGA in Business at Intermediate 2 in its year of introduction, 1999–2000. This was introduced to Administration classes. Although the college's Business Studies programme did not convert to the SGA, several new National Units were included in the programme, including *Working with Others*.

The plan for session 2000–01 was to extend National Qualifications provision in the faculty by introducing an SGA in Computing and a new National Course in Business Studies.

Discrete delivery of the *Working with Others* Unit

Before planning Core Skills delivery in the faculty for 1999–2000, a member of the team produced a list of all the Units that were already in use and that carried automatic certification of Core Skills. She also identified Units with automatic certification that could readily be slotted into existing programmes.

It proved difficult to find a carrier of *Working with Others* that fitted naturally into the Administration programme — which was being converted to an SGA, and therefore needed to cover all five Core Skills. (The National Certificate Module *Work Experience* had been used in such programmes in the past, but had not been successfully integrated.)

The team decided to use discrete delivery of the *Working with Others* Unit at Intermediate 2. The Unit was scheduled for the second semester of the session.

Delivery was not a success. Student and staff feedback was candid about reasons for this:

♦ The Unit was taught through class activities, but the students did not enjoy learning — good students thought it was 'below them', and not challenging enough; weaker students had poor attendance, but when they did come they regarded it as 'playtime'.

♦ It was delivered too late in the session, when the students had settled into ways of working.

♦ The staff team was severely distracted at the time of delivery by other priorities — the on-going development of a new degree and a college restructuring, which affected staffing levels.

♦ The staff team already delivered the HN double Unit, *Working with People in Teams*, and saw overlap between this Unit and *Working with Others*. They knew that many students would progress to the HN Course and, consequently, in their own words, they 'dumbed down' their approach for *Working with Others*.

Fortunately, although delivery was problematic, the assessment procedures used were successful and redeemed the situation to a great extent. Lecturers relied heavily on the published NAB materials to plan assessments, and these proved successful and popular with students and staff.

The lecturers grouped the students into teams. The teams had to carry out one of three tasks, each involving the rest of the class. The tasks were:

♦ to provide a games hour

♦ to run a quiz

♦ to run a treasure hunt (around the college)

This allowed for the completion of the log for evidence, and the students successfully completed the Unit.

Assessment of *Working with Others* was done using the log from the NAB. Students filled this in over the course of doing the Unit, as and when relevant activities arose. The logs could, and did, include reflections on an 'away-day' which was part of the induction for the Administration Programme. Staff also kept a performance checklist and, at the end, there was cross marking of the logs. The students achieved the Unit at Intermediate 2. There was a contingency plan to mark against the Intermediate 1 Unit, but this was not really used — only students whose attendance had been poor experienced problems achieving Intermediate 2.

Internal moderation involved checking arrangements before delivery, and keeping records of what was happening where, and where resources were to be found. The

college keeps a 'control folder' for every Unit in all programmes. At the end of the Unit students' evidence for *Working with Others* was moderated along with their subject evidence.

Integrating the *Working with Others* Unit

In the following session, 2000–01, the new *Work Experience* Unit, which was seen as an improvement on the NC Module, was included in the Administration programme. This Unit carries automatic certification of *Problem Solving* and *Working with Others*. Even so, the team wanted to make sure that the programme provided students with opportunities for explicit development of the concepts and skills involved in working with other people, and decided to integrate assessment of the *Working with Others* Unit with Work Experience.

Induction was another element of the programme that the Administration team wanted to improve — they wanted to make induction an experience that would make the new students feel part of their class group and the college as soon as possible. Induction for the Administration programme was extended from two days to four to include an 'away-day' at the Ardeonaig Centre on Loch Tay. This is one of several outdoor centres owned by the Christian Abernethy Trust, and offers day and residential courses on team building, problem solving, and management-related activities, to various groups, including schools, colleges and private parties. The centre designed problem solving/team building activities in line with the objectives and criteria supplied by the college.

At the end of session 1999–2000, staff visited the Ardeonaig Centre and worked through the activities students would experience to ensure that the objectives for the away-day would be met. These objectives were:

♦ to enhance induction by getting students to see themselves as group members as well as individuals

♦ to provide experiences of *Problem Solving* and *Working with Others* that could be built on later in the college programme

At the start of the 2000–01 session, Ardeonaig Centre staff ran the activities over three days for five class groups of Computing, Business and Administration students and their staff. The morning was spent in class groups, the afternoon as a big group with lots of sub-group activity.

The event was excellent, and successfully fulfilled the objectives — students gained valuable insight into the nature and dynamics of team-work and undertook real problem solving activities.

Evaluations took place throughout the day and at the end of the day to help students reflect on their experiences. These were later built on in the more formal class approach to problem solving and working with others.

In the college programme itself, an extra hour per week was built into the timetable for the *Work Experience* Unit to give time for teaching of group work concepts, practice of activities, and assessment of the *Working with Others* Unit. The staff who had been on the away-day were happy with this arrangement: it allowed consolidation of the Unit Outcomes, as well as providing for *Working with Others* in a natural way, not through artificial experiences.

The staff are confident that the students have benefited from using the *Working with Others* Unit — the students are more reflective learners and have enjoyed their Core Skill work; they are aware and appreciative of help from others and better able to ask for help. All of this appears to have had led to a significant improvement in the retention rate for the Unit — low retention rates in some full-time courses were commented on in the recent HMI review of the college — so to confirm that this is cause and effect, next time round evaluation questions for the students will include questions about they feel they have benefited from having *Working with Others* in the programme.

Are the experiences transferable across the college?

Other non-advanced Courses run by the faculty have adopted, or are planning to adopt, similar approaches to those used in Administration:

♦ Stage 1: check to see if any Unit that gives automatic certification of *Working with Others* could be included in the programme (for example, *Local Investigation* is used in a Business programme).

♦ Stage 2: if not, integrate *Working with Others* with one or more subject Units and carry out *Working with Others* assessment in addition to Unit assessment.

Rather than using the *Working with Others* Unit discretely, it seems likely that many non-advanced college programmes will develop integrated approaches for this Core Skill. (The college has developed a Core Skills section that can provide 'roll-on/roll-off' facilities for Communication, Numeracy, and Information Technology.)

College policy is now that induction for all non-advanced students will include a problem solving/working with others activity day. (There are resourcing issues to be resolved.)

Assessment using NAB materials

Assessment of *Working with Others* involved the log from the NAB. This was very useful and worked well. However, there were some issues:

♦ The language of the NAB is quite complex. For a group of students in Administration at Intermediate 2, staff had to go over the log quite carefully and explain terms such as 'component'.

♦ The NAB is very open in its guidance on what evidence must be produced. Staff assessing the Unit have to develop the detail for the questions and probes in the NAB.

Commentary

Distinctive features of *Working with Others* activities in the Administration section at Perth College include:

♦ the section team includes staff with experience of teaching and assessing group-work skills as well as their subject skills

♦ the staff team has exemplified good practice in *Working with Others* by planning, doing, and reviewing as a team

♦ care that was taken to make sure that *Working with Others* was fully assessed and moderated, even though it was integrated

♦ the planning team acknowledges that staff's and students' enjoyment of the learning experience is a significant consideration for programme design

♦ the planning team is open to bringing in others to help (for example, Ardeonaig Centre staff and college senior management)

♦ the team was able to respond quickly to address a weakness in their provision

♦ signs that integrating *Working with Others* was adding value to the delivery of the subject

Next time, there are plans to provide opportunities for assessment at the level below and the level above the target level of Intermediate 2, where needed. This is important because it is college policy that students should be able to achieve the highest level of Core Skills of which they are capable.

3 Planning to integrate *Working with Others* with job-related topics

Introduction

At the time of this case study, plans for delivery of *Working with Others* were at an early stage in Fife College, with various approaches being considered or tried out. There are various cross-college groups, including a Core Skills group and an Equal Opportunities group. These two groups have some members in common.

Developments so far

Integrating Core Skills into the curriculum was seen as matter of formalising existing practice, since many programmes involve large amounts of project work. This meant that *Working with Others* and Problem Solving skills were already widely used.

Across the college, *Working with Others* is delivered for a variety of purposes, using a variety of approaches. For example:

♦ *Working with Others* is automatically certificated in the many programmes that include the *Work Experience* Unit (eg Administration, Care, Hairdressing, Retail, and Travel and Tourism).

♦ The *Working with Others* Unit has a separate timetable slot in Electronics and Information Technology programmes, both of which will be converted to SGAs shortly.

♦ Scottish Enterprise Fife needs a statement on Core Skill approaches in the SkillSeeker and New Deal 16–18 programmes in which the college is involved. For the rest of New Deal, the Employment Service asks for Core Skills in Training Plans.

♦ Student Services is beginning to carry out diagnostic testing for Core Skills when students enter the college. This will help with selection and making sure that students embark on the right level of programme (although many programmes already have a built in fall-back arrangement for changing level). At present, any necessary top-up of Core Skills is most easily arranged through the two-week Summer School and the two weeks between the three blocks of the session, but arrangements for year-round access to top-up assessment are gradually building up. These include flexible learning facilities for Communication, Numeracy, and Information Technology.

Over the college as a whole, the main aim for Core Skills is to find ways to integrate them into programmes without the need for separate timetabling.

Assessment evidence for the Core Skill Units will be gathered along with the Unit/Course evidence.

For students, the benefit of this integrated approach is that they are better able to see the relevance of Core Skills. For the college, an integrated approach to Core Skills helps implement college policy that all programmes should develop characteristics and skills that will make students more employable in their chosen vocations.

Digital stories

Due to the initiative of one lecturer, the college already has a facility for students to create a 'digital story' about themselves using IT facilities. This is like an informal CV, but it could also be used to help students to develop material for a Progress File. Creating these 'digital stories' has provided useful evidence for Communication and Information Technology, but it could also be used to assemble evidence for *Working with Others*. The college is considering using SkillSeeker funding to develop all the Core Skills using this approach.

Equal opportunities

Since some staff are on both the Core Skills group and the Equal Opportunities group, there are plans to explore the potential of adding an equal opportunities layer to delivery of *Working with Others* (whether discretely timetabled or integrated with vocational Units.)

This idea originated through successful staff development sessions in equal opportunities — these aimed to find ways of promoting equal opportunities awareness in all programmes. The sessions involved mixed groups of support staff, lecturers and managers — their task was to develop approaches to address equal opportunities issues raised in specific scenarios. These sessions proved to be a useful way of addressing equal opportunities issues with staff. They also proved to be such a good exercise in group working (analyse, plan, do and review) that the Core Skills group and Equal Opportunities group have begun to plan how such approaches might be used with student groups.

There are clear opportunities to use the method in programmes that already feature equal opportunities issues (such as Modern Studies and Care programmes) and with other programmes where learning is already activity-based:

♦ in induction

♦ in school-link taster programmes

♦ in Princes' Trust programmes

The Equal Opportunities and Core Skill groups think it might be possible to develop several ways of integrating equal opportunities and *Working with Others*

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that could generate evidence for *Working with Others* assessment and certification.

(There is more information on *Working with Others* and Equal Opportunities in *Core Skills: Information for Implementation*, HSDU, June 2000.)

Commentary

This case study illustrates the early stages of planning for delivery of *Working with Others*. A key theme for the college is how to make sure that delivery of *Working with Others* (and other Core Skills) is relevant to the jobs that the students may soon find themselves in.