Creating a positive learning experience

This guide provides ideas to help you break down some barriers to learning, deliver engaging learning sessions and ensure that learners are getting the support they need.

Getting people in

Sometimes just getting people through the door can be a challenge. You can make your session more inviting by identifying and removing any potential barriers.

Here are a few questions to consider about your session. You may not be able to resolve all of these, but an awareness of them can help you anticipate reasons people may give for not visiting.

Parking

- Is your venue accessible by public transport?
- Is there affordable parking nearby?
- Does the area feel safe after dark if events will take place in the evenings?

Accessible venue

- Is your venue welcoming or potentially daunting to people going in for the first time?
- Is it accessible to people with accessibility challenges?

Marketing material

- If marketing materials show pictures of people or places, do they use diverse images which suggest everyone is welcome? Is it inclusive?
- Is the font size large enough for people to read?

- Are they easy to read and available in a language used by the local community?

You may want to think about these when promoting your session and on your marketing materials.

Learning activities

- Are the activities accessible to everyone?
- Are they varied?
- Is there a mix of group and individual activities?
- Are refreshments available and if so are they free?

Session times

- Are the session times appropriate for the audience?
- Do the sessions clash with other commitments (caring responsibilities, paid work, religious festivals, other key events in the local community)?

Engaging learning sessions

Some adults have negative past experiences of learning and may feel overwhelmed if they have to learn or speak in a group. Here are a few more suggestions when planning your sessions.

Setting up your session

- Adults may feel uncomfortable in a formal 'classroom' setting.
- Have materials and activities such as icebreakers that people can relate to and are interested in. For example, if you know that people in the group like sport, asking them to search for pictures of that, rather than cats, will engage them more.
- Having a combination of styles and techniques can help keep your sessions interesting. For example, a demonstration followed by small group activity and then full group discussion, ending with individual reflection on the learning gained in the session.

- A welcoming, relaxed atmosphere can help make learning less intimidating.
- Consider using customs that will be experienced as positive such as sharing a plate.

Set up a welcoming environment

- Providing tea and biscuits can give people a break from learning and a chance to talk to each other

No matter how well you plan, it is likely that you will need to adapt your sessions based on your learners. Unless you have a fixed schedule, it is important to be flexible and allow people to learn at their own pace.

Encourage peer to peer learning

- Encouraging your learners to help each other (peer to peer support) helps boost confidence. It also reassures people that it is OK to ask each other for help.

Set up breaks

- Learning new things can be challenging and take a lot of concentration. Regular breaks are especially important if there is a lot of time in front of a computer screen.

Prepare for different learning styles

- Give people time to try things out, make their own mistakes and work out how to fix them. Learning that it is okay to get it wrong, and pausing to reflect, is an important and valuable part of learning.
- Plan for people who learn at different rates and in different ways.
- Prepare extension activities for learners who finish the activity ahead of time to keep them engaged while others catch up.

Additional learning resources

- Handouts can be useful to help people remember what you have covered in your session

Keeping it going

Assessing learning

It is important to evaluate how effective your session is. For learners it can strengthen their learning and build confidence. For volunteers or digital mentors it can help identify people that may need additional support or areas of the session that could be improved.

Assessments such as quizzes or group questions are great for identifying points of learning. It does not need to be like an exam, making them light hearted or a game can take the pressure off individuals and make them more of an activity and less like a test.

Instead of quizzes you can also observe learners as they practise, and listen to what they say about what they have learnt. This can be a more reliable method of identifying if someone is finding an activity difficult.

Learner records

Assessing your learners progress will help you build up an awareness of their individual ability, confidence and needs. It can be useful to keep a few simple notes for future sessions; they can also be very valuable in case a different volunteer or digital mentor needs to support the group.

Your notes do not need to be detailed, and should not contain anything you would not feel happy to share with the learner. They can be just enough to remind you of each person's skill level, what they have done previously and any learning goals you discussed. You could also include any quiz sheets they have completed.

For example, "David: Confident with email and happy to support others. Diane: Likes cooking. Enjoys working in groups or pairs".

Feedback

Feedback is an important part of the learning process, both for you and your learners.

Be sure to offer praise where appropriate throughout the session. Even a simple, “That’s good, well done.” can go a long way to boosting a learner’s confidence, especially if they were worried about learning in the first place.

Encouraging learners to give you their feedback on the session, the activities, or any other part of their learning experience can reassure them that their opinion matters and help build their confidence. They may like to give feedback one to one, or feel better doing it as part of a group.

You might even have time at the end of each session to ask them for one thing they liked and one thing they thought could be better about the session.