

Learning Journey: Leasowes Community College



A rich variety of learning experiences

An Innovative Approach to Timetabling

Leasowes Community College's 1,200 students are drawn from Birmingham, Sandwell and neighbouring boroughs. Around one-fifth of the students are from minority ethnic backgrounds, with about half of these speaking English as an additional language. One very successful part of the college's ongoing transformation is in the way it organises learning for its students, particularly the management of time. Head teacher John Howells explains, "We have a strong and nationally recognised track record on innovative approaches to the timetable. Students at Leasowes experience whole days of learning in single subjects on a weekly basis and, at three times in the year, longer blocks of up to six days."

The Impact of Managing Time

Leasowes has made reorganisation of the timetable the foundation of its efforts to transform learning. At the centre of its thinking is recognition that timetables have a profound impact on teaching and learning. For example a timetable comprised of short periods has the advantage that it can support learning that

requires regular practice and engagement; however longer periods of time are needed for sustained and deep learning, to make external visits, or to work with visitors. At Leasowes the focus for constructing a timetable is now firmly on how best to design learning and experiences; constructing a timetable is no longer an administrative function. By focusing on time and by managing it flexibly, Leasowes Community College is able to organise the learning it offers to students in a highly innovative way and to truly provide anytime/anywhere learning.

Each Friday, students and teachers work together on the Leasowes Flexible Day programme, in addition to a Monday-to-Thursday timetable of one-hour periods. The flexible day offers five-hour blocks of learning to every student. At three key times of the year all 1,200 students experience longer blocks of up to six days in a single subject. This combination ensures that students experience one-hour learning blocks, five-hour blocks and two, three, five and six-day learning blocks as an entitlement. In addition, students routinely

extend their day during the deep learning blocks and invest additional time. This is supported by holiday and Saturday School clinics. Learning is also available to students outside of school via the college's learning platform.

This radical approach to the management of time enables the school to provide a rich variety of learning experiences and opportunities. "Our experience has shown us that managing time can be a key driver of change," comments John.

One consequence can be seen in Year 10 where two GCSE options are 'fast tracked' for all students. Using deep-learning blocks of time allows subject departments to offer courses of different durations depending on the student's needs: one year, 18 months or two years. The majority of students complete the course in one year but examination entry occurs when the student is ready; at stage not age. Students who gain time as a result of fast-tracking GCSE subjects in Year 10 personalise their self-directed study in Year 11, mentored and supported by staff.

Providing a number of day-long blocks of time has led to a two-year Key Stage 3 and



subsequent further opportunities for students to follow their own interests and ideas, for example in the Year 9 humanities independent research project. There's more time too for the development of skills for independent study, problem-solving, decision-making and communication - allowing all Year 9 students in 2009 to complete the ASDAN Certificate of Personal Effectiveness (CoPE) at Level 2.

Another impact of managing time in this way has been felt in the use of space. Leasowes Community College is housed in 1970s buildings that have been specifically adapted to facilitate the demands of a flexible curriculum. All curriculum areas benefit from at least one large learning centre designed on principles from Eric Jenson's brain-friendly learning models and Howard Gardiner's work on multiple-intelligences. Attention has been given to colour choices, flexible furnishings, central access to ICT and resources to allow for a variety of learning outcomes/pathways. Learning spaces in the business and ICT block are environmentally lit and ergonomically designed to allow for team-teaching, movement, collaboration and activity during extended blocks of time. As John notes, "These spaces are intrinsic to learning when whole days or even an entire week can be based in a single area."

There has been a direct impact too on teaching and learning methods. Teachers involved in extended blocks of learning can no longer depend on short term didactic approaches. "When you teach a group for five hours, you have to employ a variety of teaching styles and approaches," comments John. "It brings a more active approach to teaching and learning that completely changes the relationship between staff, students and other adults." Through the longer blocks, teachers have time to offer high quality intervention and provide a greater depth to such strategies as Assessment for Learning. Students are required to be more deeply involved through collaboration, performance, presentations and so on. There's greater time too for students to visit museums, galleries, stadia, workplaces, leisure facilities and theatres; and time too for external



Longer blocks of time facilitate deeper learning

visitors to bring experience and expertise to students' learning.

Students are positive about the way they can work and positive too about the sense of achievement and raised ambition they gain when completing a GCSE early. Initial concerns about what would happen if they happened to be ill during an extended block of learning have not materialised. Teachers are able to provide greater support for students and the learning platform provides opportunities for students to fill the gap. Leasowes Community College provides a truly personalised curriculum.

Community Involvement

Although the management of time has led to significant changes, the school has also focused on other areas for development, not least in community involvement. Parents' views and comments are sought through an evaluation process, which also gives an opportunity for personal feedback. A Community Learning Partner scheme works closely with some families. The scheme brings families together in learning scenarios with family workers supporting students within the school as well as at home. The scheme provides activities during holidays and weekends for the student with the family, for example 'Dads and Lads' days. In partnership with parents, the school recently gained the Leading Parent

Partnership Award. The school has also created Junior PACT (Partners and Community Together) where local police, councillors, students and local residents meet to talk and work together. Links with industry are particularly strong and successful too. One local multimedia company works regularly with students, valuing and benefiting from the creative insight that students bring. So successful has this been that, from September 2008, the company will actually have a base within the school allowing a genuine blend of learning and work.

Next Steps

Leasowes is now looking to develop further the deep-learning block model. Firstly, to support the development of the 14-19 vocational diploma programme and, secondly, to provide more extended slots throughout the year. As John explains, "We no longer timetable for administrative reasons. Designing the timetable is now about how best to design learning and experiences for students and staff."

To find out more visit the Leasowes Community College website at www.leasowes.dudley.gov.uk