

## ABLE OPEN LEARNING CENTRE, OXFORD

An interview with Grace Stone, by David Mathew of the Workplace Basic Skills Network

In the Blackbird Leys area of Oxford, sharing space in and above the local library, is a Basic Skills project that is managed by Grace Stone and is administered and taught by her small but diligent team. The project is now eleven years old. It was started by Alison Noel, formerly of the Workplace Basic Skills Network (Alison helped to develop our Breaking Down Barriers course), who secured a £15,000 grant for Basic Skills in the workplace. Early work involved delivering ESOL courses to restaurant employees, and learning programmes in, *inter alia*, companies such as Rover. Before Alison left the Network, she had also moved towards delivering more classes in the service sector; towards marketing to companies, administering Training Needs Analyses, and evaluating patterns and processes of learning.

Grace Stone was a Project Manager for Cherwell. Since writing a successful bid to SEEDA in 2000 (at the time only twenty projects would be funded), Grace has developed an astonishing array and number of off-the-peg and bespoke learning programmes in a wide spray of work sectors. For example, along with Alex Braddell, Grace has worked on a large hospital project, saving from extinction a learning programme that was going to be closed. There has been a great deal of work done in the care sector. 'The care sector, of course,' says Grace, 'brings its own set of challenges. There's a high percentage of women learners and attendance can sometimes be erratic. Not only for reasons that are often blamed, either: not only for... childcare issues, for example. We've also encountered, in some places, a *reluctance*, from the managers, to release the learners from work. But we've had a lot of successes, too, of course.' Indeed: this year alone there either have been or will be ESOL classes, NVQ support programmes, Appraisal Training, Food Hygiene and Health and Safety classes.

'We've done work in the Education sector,' Grace continues. 'SEEDA used to fund us but after 2003 I wrote an ESF bid in order to claim funding for learners that have traditionally been non-eligible: learners from Brazil, for example. We now have ESF funding until 2006.' The pilot that Grace and her team offered to train Teaching Assistants proved popular. 'After we did a TNA in school settings, it was easy to see – at the very least – some refresher courses at Key Stage 1, Key Stage 2 and in IT were required.' Inevitably, the course brings some interesting dynamics. 'Absolutely,' Grace agrees. 'We have a mixture of graduates and school playground assistants!'

Having seen the excellent materials that the unit produces, it comes as no surprise to learn that a great deal of care and attention went into the production of the resources for the Teaching Assistants course. Grace tells me: 'All the materials are mapped to Key Stages *and* to the Adult Basic Skills Curriculum. For Literacy, we have a ten-hour course – Key Stages 1 and 2 combined, and then a further two hours for the confidence-building part of the course. Numeracy is split into two separate courses: ten hours of Key Stage 1, 10 of Key Stage 2. What we're saying, or offering, is basically: what do they need to know to support children in school? And in the case of IT: what do they need to know to support kids *and* tutors.'

Restaurants, the care sector, education: these are only three sectors in which Grace is able to offer Workplace Learning. Asked what else is happening, she replies: 'Well, there's construction, of course: CITB awareness-raising. We've done presentations to construction workers, and at one company, for example, we've got Russian workers in

a portable cabin, learning ESOL and IT... We've supported travellers, admin staff, worked on dyslexia issues... We're offering ESOL and NVQ to workers in care homes: Bulgarian workers, Slovakian workers... Sometimes – with some courses – we're working as much on what might be called 'Sympathetic Communication' as we are on standard English classes as such. There's IT for Union Leaders, IT for caretakers, courses for refuse collectors, and there'll be a new learning centre in Cowley very soon; we'll be doing some work there, I'm certain. We're also working on sector specific materials for NVQ and ESOL. Some projects take ages to get going, but at the moment we're working on about thirty different projects. The only area where we have disappointments is in the Retail sector: the staff change too often. There are plenty of Skills for Life issues there, and we might get as far as doing interviews... and then people leave. And to be frank, we have to be financially realistic. We always ask for a workplace to pay for their courses. Some do, some plead poverty!

Given the richness of the programme at the ABLE Centre, I wondered what the most important factor might be. 'A good team, of course,' Grace answers, 'is really important.' Grace is responsible for approximately thirty teachers. 'It might sound obvious, I suppose, but a good understanding of workplace issues is another important factor.'

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