

## Ep.5 Let's Go Further: Let's re-assess: work less and learn more.

Assessments, assessments, assessments. If you're a practitioner, you'll know that these can feel like a burden. But what if there was a way to reduce staff workload whilst improving learner grades?

Introducing the DIRT and TOES method – an assessment approach that involves both peer-to-peer feedback and independent reflection. As you'll hear in this episode, it has worked wonders for staff and learners at Derby College.

So, do join us as Linzi Smithies, Advanced Practitioner in Land-based Animal Science and Equine, tells us all about this method and the impact it has made at the college.

### Transcript

#### **Joe McLoughlin 0:01**

Welcome to Let's Go Further, a podcast that shines a light on the role of further education in transforming people's lives. In this first series, we are talking with learners, teachers, business people and professors about why further education matters to them. I'm your host Joe McLoughlin, Foundation Manager at the Skills and Education Group, an organisation that champions the further education and skills sector.

In this episode, we're joined by Linzi Smithies, Advanced Practitioner in Land-based Animal Science and Equine at Derby College. In the spring of this year, Linzi and her colleagues received a grant from the Skills and Education Group Foundation to support their work in improving their assessment and feedback processes, with Levels 1-3 learners using new methods to explore the effect that peer-to-peer and peer-led feedback had on learner outcomes and staff workload. Now, at the beginning of this academic year, I took the time to catch up with her and talk through where the ideas for this work came from, its development process, and how it might help learners progress in the future. Linzi, good morning, how are you?

#### **Linzi Smithies 1:03**

Good morning, how are you? Yes, I'm fine. Thank you.

#### **Joe McLoughlin 1:07**



Just to begin before we get into kind of your work with your project team and your learners, I just wondered if you could introduce yourself a little bit and talk about the roles you perform at college?

**Linzi Smithies 1:16**

I have what we call the best job in the world. So what I do is I support the teachers that are here onsite be it new, or be it ones that have been here for a while, and we coach new staff to develop themselves. We do PD sessions, we support staff to grow as teachers. I just love it. Because I get the opportunity to go into sessions and lessons and see all the fabulous work that's been happening with the teachers here at Land-based at Broomfield Hall. And I get to share all the resources, and amazing things that I see as well. So it is one of the best jobs in the world for me.

**Joe Mcloughlin 1:58**

So on a daily and weekly basis, then you're dipping in and out, you're helping people, you're sort of supporting everybody to grow and improve?

**Linzi Smithies 2:06**

Yes we do something called walkthroughs. So it's really calm, and I walk into sessions and I get to sit with different groups and all the different teachers, and I get to observe things that's happening in the lessons and the teachers showcase, then I get on a big scale, get to share that with the rest of the college and the rest of Land-based. And if there's any pointers, or if I've thought of any even better 'ifs' or 'what went wells', I would definitely share it with the staff members. And again, I'd also ask them to showcase their things that they do in their sessions in our PD sessions. So it's a lots of nice walkthroughs and seeing lots of lovely teaching.

**Joe Mcloughlin 2:50**

So we're here to talk about in a bit more detail, the research that you've been doing on feedback and assessment. I just wondered if you could begin by outlining some of the challenges or the problems you're facing with feedback both for learners and for staff.

**Linzi Smithies 3:05**

Yes, so assessments, assessments, assessments, it sometimes can be a burden. And we all know it, lots of us that have worked in this teachers industry for numerous years, we all know that sometimes we dread them assignments coming in, not only the number of assignments that we may have, so we may be over assessing our students, because we want the best for them. But also the quality of work that comes through. Often we may have to resub them or refer them. Some people may not get the grade that they want. And it's tiring, it's tiring for staff, it's tiring for students that they get that feedback. So what we wanted to kind of do is create a initiative where we can support students getting the grade that they want, straightaway. And also reducing the workload, reducing the referrals that we may give to students and support them and getting that improvement straightaway, getting them grades that they want straight off and not having to go through the referral and rehanding it in and then making the workload more for the student because they've got to redo that, but also making the workload for the staff members because they've not just got to mark that piece of work once they may mark it once, twice, or three times. So it was really, again, to help the students focus on the feedback that was being given to them so that they could actually understand where they had gone wrong. And put that into practice for their next assignment because we often find that students look at their assignments and go 'Oh, I got a Merit' or 'Oh, I got a C, I'm not looking at that. That's all I wanted.' They don't actually look at the feedback that you have beautifully put in there and painstakingly added to make sure that they can get a better grade next time. They just accept what they've got and move on and don't actually reflect on what feedback has been given to them.

### **Joe Mcloughlin 5:14**

I'm just curious when you have all this extra work, both for the student and the staff how does that impact kind of learner experience in the classroom? Like, do you see changes in attendance rates or behavioural issues?

### **Linzi Smithies 5:27**

Often we can see attendance rates dip in, particularly when assignments need to be in. That's the first thing that students do to kind of safeguard themselves that 'Oh, I wasn't in on that day. So I can't hand in that piece of work.' This initiative that we came up with kind of didn't just set the date that the piece of work needed to be in, but it made it a two three week process, so that the students felt more comfortable with it, it was changing the culture within Derby College. To make this work, it wasn't just a one off thing that we did, often with the over assessing, what we wanted to really, really dive into is reducing the workload for the students, reducing the workload for the staff and making sure that we weren't doing that over assessment. Because then students weren't getting that

grade, first time. And they were getting assessed only once and getting the grade that they wanted to achieve.

### **Joe Mcloughlin 6:27**

So just to take a step back then the kind of traditional model of assessment and feedback. It's laborious for staff, it's extra work for students. And it contributes to negative effects outside the classroom, so drops in attendance that...I just wondered if you could introduce where your project idea...what you hoped to achieve with it?

### **Linzi Smithies 6:52**

So our ideas came from, it was a Derby College initiative to start off with that we were going to put through, and we started doing bits of it. And we actually thought, oh, there's something in this, this is, this is really going to work. And that's when we contacted you guys and went through the process of applying for funding to really dig deep into this and to see if it actually worked effectively. And what we ended up doing was creating a bigger DIRT and TOES. So TOES is taxonomy of errors. And basically, what that is, is a student is asked to bring in their assignment or whatever they would have been asked and was going to be assessed on on a day. And on that day, the teacher will hand out a TOES document. So this TOES document would be very similar to what we all at some...teachers may know as peer assessing. So they would have this really informed document, which clearly stated what was required of that piece of work that was in front of them. Now it's broken down, it's in clear English that the students are going to be able to understand it's not in the Pearson City and Guilds BTEch sort of language, it was in the language that they understood, and that they could really assess each other on. And then what happened is that piece of work with this really great TOES document got passed to another student. But the importance with this was making sure that the students felt comfortable, felt safe, and we had created like a collaboration session. And it wasn't judgmental, it's not about the students marking that piece of work. And that being the final grade, it's about them supporting each other to get the grade that they want. And what happens is the other peer then uses that TOES document to do a bit of an informal overview of that piece of work that's in front of them and give the students three 'what went wells', three 'even better ifs' and a tick and a comments box, so that if then things that were being asked to be in that assignment on that TOES document were there, the students were ticking it and then from there, the student received their work back with their TOES document. And what they did is they then had time in that session to address any of the issues or pointers that the other students had made. And they could then hand in their assignment later on that session. Or they could have an extra week or whenever that teacher had organised that piece of work to be in and

from that the students handed that piece of work in, and then the staff member then actually marked it from their subject specialism. But what we found was particularly with the TOES is the students were gaining higher grades than previous because the little things that the staff member would have had to have picked out, were already picked out due to peer assessment and this TOES document, so it worked really well. And then the DIRT, which is dedicated independent reflection time, students got to reflect on how they had been marked from their subject specialism what grade they had, and then they had a reflection form, in the form of this DIRT document where they actually were given time in lessons to reflect and understand where they were at, and how they could improve for their next assignment. And not just given the piece of work, let the students see the grade and then have to hand that piece of assignment back in or them shoving it in their bags, it was allocating 10-15 minutes of time where the students actually reflected on the piece of work. So all in all, Derby College came up with this initiative. You guys allowed us to explore it further. And we put it into place with our Level Three second-year Animal Management students, who we trialled this with and that was really quite successful.

**Joe Mcloughlin 11:39**

Great and what did you find? So working with the Level Threes kind of what was some of the findings either anecdotally or sort of statistically?

**Linzi Smithies 11:47**

So with the TOES document, document where the students peer assessed each other with this TOES document, it was 94% of the students stated that they were able to effectively identify areas of the work for other students to improve on, which was great so that they felt comfortable with this TOES document that they were in a safe space to identify areas for improvement. And then add into this 94% of them did say that if they didn't have an effective TOES document that worked for them, then it wouldn't necessarily work as well. And they said that they wouldn't have been able to do this sort of task if they didn't have that document. But all in all, 90% of them a great 90% of them said that once they'd got their piece of work back, there was improvements on that piece of work that they hadn't seen that they were blind to because they had done that piece of work and looked over. So a massive 90% of them said without this peer feedback, they wouldn't have addressed some of these issues, because they didn't see them and they weren't there. So once the DIRT documents was done, and the feedback for the students and the peer feedback went back to them. They then address some of them issues and then handed it in at the end of the lesson or a different day that the teacher sorted. And then this DIRT was given to the students at least 15, 10-15-20 minutes, where they actually sat in silence,

which I asked my students to sit quietly read through the work that I have fed back on, and really take in what I've put. And with these documents put into place and this allocated time 93% of them said having that reflection time and really allocated to them was really helpful. And 96% of them said it helped them realise where they'd missed out on points that maybe they wouldn't have read previously. And it also helped them to understand how to achieve a higher grade for their next assessment. And again, with that 96% of students they also stated that these points that was being made by staff, they were definitely put into their assignments. So all in all the DIRT documents and the DIRT TOES documents did work really well. So we did do some comparison due to COVID, that we've all been through, we decided to use our data from 2018 because that was really the last year that 18-19 academic year that hadn't been hit by COVID. And what we found comparing our overall grades for that unit in 2018. We had a 30% decline in passes. But we had a 6% rise in Merits in 2022 but a massive 31% rise in Distinctions because them students really really work well with these DIRT and TOES documents. But I think the overall with this is you've got to have the buy in of the staff members and making sure that they're passionate about this. And also creating this non-judgemental creative culture within your school or college. For this to work effectively and the buy in of the students. So it's really, really great, and it works really great. But what we need to make sure is that these documents that are being used are well thought out by the staff members that are using them, and also that they are fit for purpose within that specialism and that they are altered accordingly. So if we are talking about an exam base that we wanted to do some DIRT and TOES on, it needs to be a specific exam-based DIRT and TOES document that's been created. And if it is a practical assignment or assessment that's happening, then it needs to be a DIRT and TOES, document that's been created for practicals. It is not one fits all, and the beauty of DIRT and TOES. It's about bouncing off each other and going 'Oh, how did you do yours? What form did you use?' And just taking some ideas from one session and somebody's DIRT document and somebody else's DIRT document to create your own and what would work for you and your students.

### **Joe Mcloughlin 16:24**

So in short you had great buy-in in the classroom, really positive reactions, presumably a reduction in workload for both learners and staff because grades naturally moved up. So the need for remarking was less....thinking longer term, kind of what were some of the outcomes for these learners on the project, kind of where are they now?

### **Linzi Smithies 16:45**

So these particular students were our Level Three second year, so they were in there last year. So they did a lot of progression in that particular group, we had a lot of students with support needs in that group that worked really well with, and we had a high percentage as well as EHCP students in there, and it worked really well with them, too. And we found that we had a really high percentage of students moving into higher education, be it with us as Derby College HE - because we provide that within our college setting - or going externally and going into different universities, we had a really high uptake on that. And I had to do a lot of references, which was great. And they all are really doing well in university and all jobs as well.

**Joe Mcloughlin 17:37**

So there's a kind of positive...is the kind of through working with this material working through this approach. The learners have got to where they're going wherever that may be.

**Linzi Smithies 17:48**

Yes, yeah, absolutely. It really, really did help. Obviously, with their grades slightly going up in this, well, more than slightly going up in that unit, help them gain higher grades in their City and Guilds potentially, and allowed them and supported them with progressing on to HE, jobs and apprenticeships.

**Joe Mcloughlin 18:12**

And why in a wider sense, why do you think that is? Because I'm, I'm curious to, I think responding to feedback and improving the work that's in front of you is great. And it you know, it helps you achieve better grades and all those things. But I also think there's something about this project in the way you work with your learners that changes their approach or encourages them to think differently about problem solving or learning.

**Linzi Smithies 18:35**

Well, I think, again, it's about the culture. It's about the culture you create within your classroom, and allowing them students to step out of that box in a safe environment, and allowing them to not criticise, but support others by giving them even better if it's setting them life skills up it's giving them the ability to be able to look at something and go, oh, that might not be quite right. How can I get that across to others in a positive manner, or that was amazing. I feel confident about giving them positive feedback. It's creating that culture

where being kind to each other and supporting each other to get to each other's goals is a great thing. And it's worth doing. And I just think it's worked so well. And the students that I did it with, we didn't particularly choose anybody in particular, it was just ones that I was teaching, because I teach three sessions in my part time role. And it just worked superbly well because it not only was it supporting me with reducing my actual marking, it was them supporting each other and creating this culture of supporting each other to get to one goal, and giving them life skills, that they were able to effectively go, oh, that's, that's what should have been there that's not there now, how can I get that across and it just worked, it worked really well for the Land-based.

**Joe Mcloughlin 20:16**

So yeah, so the approach to kind of any issues you might have in future rather than, rather than thinking I've done that job well enough, or I failed to do that job, they're like, they can take that approach forward with them. And so it can benefit them in life.

**Linzi Smithies 20:29**

Yeah, definitely. So they don't just have to accept what they've been given. They can question and learn from what they have done to improve in the future. I think it's great skills to be developing through education. Definitely.

**Joe Mcloughlin 20:46**

And so what's next for you, Linzie? How are you hoping to develop the project in the future?

**Linzi Smithies 20:52**

So we're hoping to develop our project further with yourselves. And we want to extend our project into the health and social care team that we have here at Derby College Group. So in our first project, we did develop a SWAY, which is a learning platform that you can access. And on that it has theories behind where we came to this conclusion, the data analysis, it has different copies of different DIRT and TOES documents, both Level Three, Level Two and Level One, so you can have a look. And please feel free to use. Also, we are going to be hopefully updating that with this extended project. So within the health and social care team, what we're going to be doing is really looking at the DIRT and TOES documents that we have maybe doing a bit of co-constructing with students of their ideas, and if things have worked or how they feel it would work better if we





did things in a different way, we are going to be looking further into Level Ones and Level Twos, because the first initial project was Level Three second years. So we wanted to delve deeper into the Level Ones and Two sectors. So with that in mind, the learning platform SWAY, we are going to be updating that with further examples of DIRT and TOES it can be used, we are going to be updating the video. That is a recorded video with me talking about what DIRT and TOES is and how you can implement it in your lessons and the benefits of it. So hopefully, we're going to be updating that with additional data that we have and giving a real overview of how it worked in Land-based and how it's worked in health and social care. And we are really hoping to just further explore it as a whole and see if the students' progression rates goes up, and also their grades. Overall, in particular units that this is worked in. In Land-based we had a particular high level of EHCP students, students with learning plans. So it's similar in health and social care, so we're hoping some of these things will bridge the gap and support the students with achieving their goals.

### **Joe Mcloughlin 23:22**

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