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Skype's the limit: Council of the Isles of Scilly

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Brief description

The Lifelong Learning Service on the Isles of Scilly has worked with three other local authorities to establish a common approach to observing and improving teaching and learning. An unusual aspect is the use of Skype to carry out moderations of observations by partners, thus reducing time and expense while ensuring that a broad range of views are used to support improvement activities.

Overview – the provider's message

'We in the South West, and particularly the Isles of Scilly, can boast about our rural location; but what is a blessing for the tourist industry can present challenges for routine professional development in remote locations such as ours. We - the community learning provision (Lifelong Learning) - were keen to implement a more effective system of observations of teaching and learning to improve provision which had been judged satisfactory by Ofsted. Rather than our small team trying to create something ourselves we worked – mainly remotely – with other providers in the region to establish a common approach and standards. We felt this was effective use of time and sharing of good practice. When the system was up and running we established routine moderation of lesson observation reports by sharing records by email followed by discussions via Skype. That aspect of the observation scheme has ensured that we have an objective view of standards, routinely share good ideas, and maintain contact with colleagues spread over nearly 200 miles in the South West. All of this may have helped us when the most [recent inspection](#) graded our provision as good. This approach can be applied in remote areas, or with any providers who want to save time and money and work with others at a distance.'



Jo Evans, Lifelong Learning Manager

The good practice in detail

Background

In the 2008 inspection report for the Isles of Scilly Lifelong Learning (LLL) service, Ofsted said that quality monitoring arrangements were insufficiently established, although it was noted that a revised process of observations of teaching and learning was being introduced. Spurred on by a desire to ensure that standards matched those seen on the mainland, the LLL management team decided to look again at its system for observing teaching and learning.

LLL already had contacts with other adult education providers in the region - Plymouth ACL, Devon ACL, and Cornwall ACL - and they all agreed to carry out some joint work. Initially this involved a series of benchmarking exercises looking at achievement and retention. Support from [HOLEX](#) (the national network of local adult learning providers) followed and Plymouth ACL, acting on behalf of the others, submitted a successful application for challenge funds to develop a standard approach to observation of teaching and learning across the four services.

The process

A standard approach to observing teaching, learning and assessment was produced including an achievement rationale, a [common recording form](#) and clear [guidance and procedures](#). Four LLL trained observers carry out the majority of observations on the islands. And the standardised approach is now being used by LLL and others.

Moderating the outcomes

The providers were keen to moderate judgements, to ensure that the standards expected through grading were being maintained. But the 'normal' approach, with perhaps joint observations and meetings to discuss findings, was going to be a challenge. For instance, for those from the islands, a meeting could take up to two days and incur significant costs. So the group decided on a remote system of moderation:

- providers carry out observations using their own staff
- a programme of review meetings is established
- completed [observation records](#), with personal details and grades deleted, are sent by email to the specialists in the other providers.
- all four partners take part in a conference, using Skype, to discuss the records. The conference call uses a split screen, so all can feel involved, with the larger partners having up to four representatives
- the call is chaired and managed by each of the providers in turn.

At each meeting, one of the group is invited to present an observation from their service; the others having read the form in advance will suggest a grade. If there is consensus then the team moves on to the next observation for that provider without further discussion; if there is not an agreement then it is put to one side.



A Skype OTL Conference in action

Once the majority have been agreed, the group returns to those that require further debate when the participants may discuss the lesson; the activities and learning observed; the way the observation has been completed; and why some feel teaching and learning was better or worse than others. The grade may be altered, though the final decision lies with the presenting provider.

In 2012 there were three 'meetings', and four lesson observations from the islands were moderated. Each session covers between 10 and 15 observations.

The conferences take up to two hours, but this still represents a significant saving in time. The outlay on technology for this specific activity has been minimal. Large screen televisions, computers, webcams and good-quality microphones were already available. Video cameras were bought for lessons, and potentially observations; but this is not a necessary feature of this system. The use of Skype itself should be simple, though there can be the 'usual' problems with getting the system up and running each time. Some providers have an expert on hand at the start; others rely on [hints](#) about setting up the system that have been developed. Problems with the internet connection to the Isles of Scilly can cause difficulties with the picture, but in those cases the meeting proceeds using sound with limited vision.

The sharing of good practice and moderation of observations take place throughout the country. However, this approach is different in that common processes have established a clear focus on improving quality. The regular meetings, with very effective use of electronic communication, have created a close and supportive working environment in challenging geographical circumstances.

Provider background

Lifelong Learning (LLL) provides a range of community learning and accredited programmes for the local population of the Isles of Scilly, the majority of whom live on the main island of St Mary's. There are just five permanent part-time members of staff in LLL and a pool of around 20 tutors.

The Isles of Scilly, about 45 kilometres from Lands' End, have around 1,800 permanent residents aged over 16. There is no post-16 provision on the Island. Transport to the mainland during the winter is by small aircraft, with a boat also running in the summer.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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