



National Research and Development Centre  
for adult literacy and numeracy

# reflect

THE MAGAZINE OF NRDC | ISSUE 1 | OCTOBER 2004

## **SPECIAL REPORT:**

# ILPs - Guiding the learning journey

Practitioners and researchers  
share their views and experiences

### **Literacy frees the world**

Tom Sticht describes his  
'pearls of adult literacy'

### **Investigating dyslexia**

David Mallows talks with dyslexia  
professionals

### **Learning to write in 19th century England**

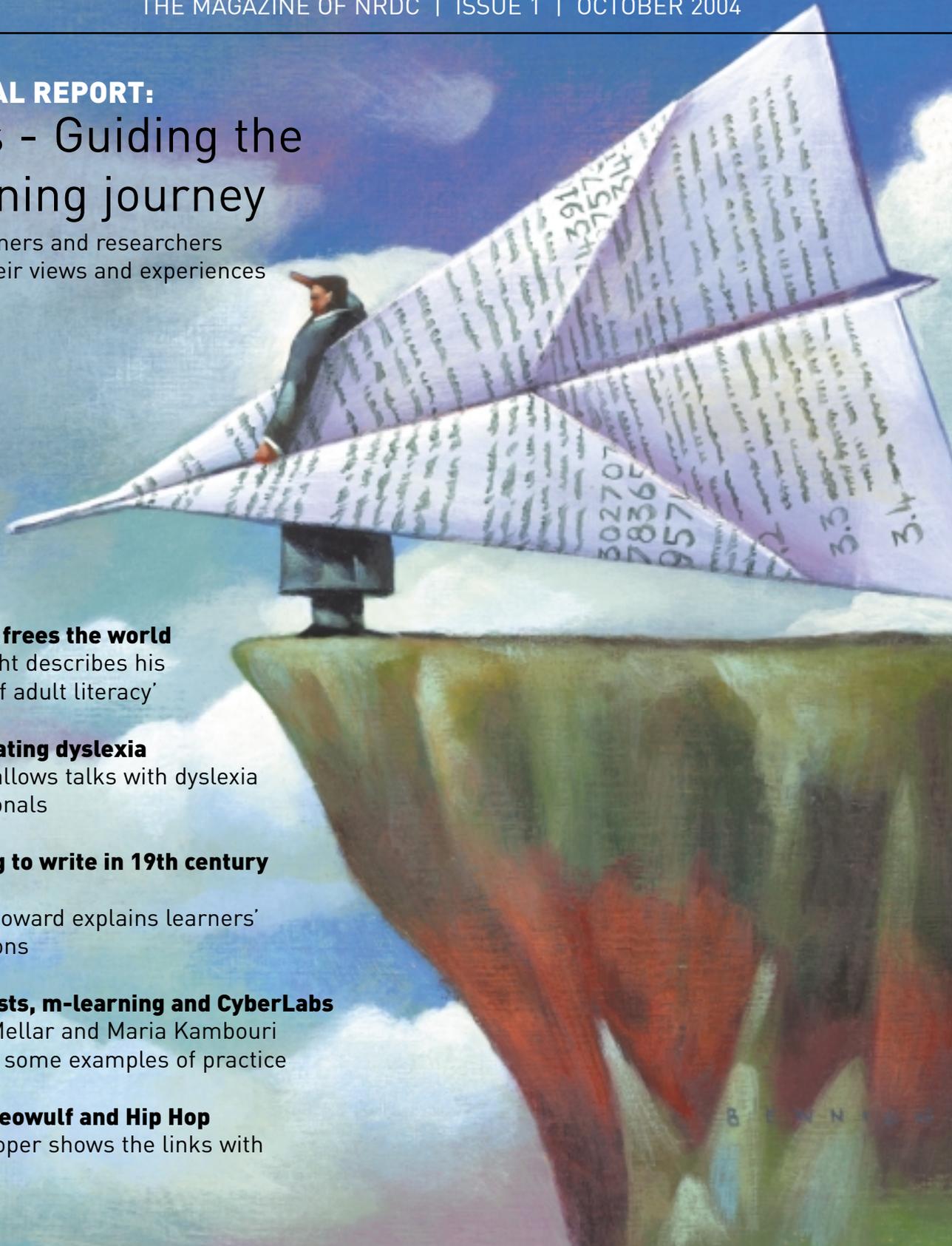
Ursula Howard explains learners'  
motivations

### **WebQuests, m-learning and CyberLabs**

Harvey Mellar and Maria Kambouri  
describe some examples of practice

### **Blake, Beowulf and Hip Hop**

Julie Hooper shows the links with  
literacy



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The board meets a few weeks after publication of each issue of the magazine, to comment on the latest issue and to advise on the next issue and on future editorial policy. We are very keen to recruit new members of the editorial advisory board, especially practitioners. If you think you could commit to three meetings per year and would like to contribute to the development of **reflect** please contact the editor, David Mallows, email: [d.mallows@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:d.mallows@ioe.ac.uk)

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**About NRDC**

The NRDC was established in 2002 as part of the **Skills for Life** strategy. We are a consortium of 12 partner organisations, led by the Institute of Education, University of London. The Basic Skills Agency is a key partner. The NRDC is dedicated to improving literacy, numeracy, language and related skills, and knowledge. One of our key goals is to refresh and help take forward the government's **Skills for Life** strategy. NRDC brings together research, development and action for positive change to improve the quality of learning and the achievements and progression of learners to further learning and employment.

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**NRDC consortium partners**

NRDC is a consortium of partners led by the Institute of Education, University of London with:

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## Editorial

Welcome to issue one of **reflect** – the magazine of the NRDC.



Cover illustration:  
Jason Bennion

We've chosen the title **reflect** to emphasise that reading the magazine should provide an opportunity to stand back from our own perspectives on teaching and learning literacy, language and numeracy and consider new ideas, challenges and issues in our work. We aim to provide a forum for dialogue between research, policy and practice, to give a voice to the research-informed practitioner and

to the practice-informed researcher. Practitioners, policy-makers and researchers often seem to inhabit separate worlds, yet we all share the same goal – to meet the needs of learners. By learning from and understanding each other, more can be achieved. That is what **reflect** stands for.

In issue one we have a special feature on the use of ILPs with ESOL and young **Skills for Life** learners. We hope you will respond with your ideas and widen the debate. Do you recognise/(dis)agree with the views expressed in the article? How are ILPs viewed by literacy and numeracy practitioners? What should the role of ILPs be in **Skills for Life** provision? Following the publication of NRDC's report on developmental dyslexia, we engage key professionals in further debate to help take critical issues forward in policy, research and practice. We hope you will contribute to this thinking.

The success of **reflect** will rest on whether it offers an interesting and useful forum in which practitioners, policy-makers and researchers can share, reflect on and learn from their experience of how practice, policy and research interact and are mutually supportive. To achieve this, your contribution is vital. What do you think about the issues raised? Are they the right issues? What do you think are the most important issues we should be discussing? Is your perspective represented here? Who else would you like to hear from? We will include a letters page in issue two, and we will listen to your views about subjects that should be covered in future issues of **reflect**. Help us to make it a success. ▣

**Ursula Howard**  
Director, NRDC

# Individual Learning Plans: fit for purpose?

**Philida Schellekens describes how her research on the 'Bridge to Work' programme in Croydon revealed the difficulties that learners had in reflecting on their own language skills, even when they had an advanced level of English and professional skills and experience. She considers the implications of this finding for Individual Learning Plans.**

Croydon Education and Training Service's 'Bridge to Work' programme is aimed at adult second language speakers who have an advanced level of English together with professional skills and experience acquired in their country of origin. Thanks to NRDC funding, we have been able to conduct research into aspects of the programme, including learners' ability to reflect on their language skills. I was interested in this because I thought it might inform the development of individual learning plans. We found that the learners were not able to review their language skills to a meaningful degree (1). For example, Larisa and Monique had this to say about their language skills:

Well, I've been here for nearly four years so I think it's, it's ... I can't say that it's high but people can understand me and I can understand them as well, so you see that it's quite ok.

**Larisa**

Yes, I think, ... I can make myself understood ... . People understand me.

**Monique**

The tutors reported that learners expressed their needs in a similar vein:

The [learners] tend to say something like: 'Speaking, or more grammar or er ... or more listening' so it's a very broad sort of answer.

What was interesting was that these were advanced language learners who were able to express themselves perfectly well in relation to the development of their job-seeking skills.



**It is very hard for language learners to analyse their own language performance**

## Implications of the research Our findings prompt three questions.

**1 How representative are these learners?** Only a small number participated in the research but their responses confirmed my own observations over time, not just with my own students but also in the context of my own experiences as a language learner: it is very hard, if not impossible, for language learners to analyse their own language performance. This is not to say that no language learners are able to engage in a language review, but what if a large majority of the learners cannot indicate what their needs are?

**2 What causes learners, who are able to review their job-related skills in detail, to have problems when reflecting on language learning?** It seems to me that learning a new language is a voyage of discovery during which the learner is essentially not in control. The learner is so busy processing language, taking in information and trying to create meaning that there is limited space for monitoring their performance. It is even harder to predict language needs; learners of another language cannot be aware of aspects that they have not yet uncovered.

**3 What do we do with these findings?** If they are right, they call for a review of the ILP process itself, focusing on what the learner is able to contribute. However, I do not believe that we should rip up the ILP forms just yet. They enabled these learners to indicate the purpose and context in which they wanted to use English. But this is not the same thing as creating a meaningful learning plan. This requires a language-analytical approach and measurable language targets. It is here we hit two problems.

First, we know from the Ofsted survey of literacy, numeracy and ESOL that the quality of the assessment of learners' progress and achievement is poor (2). This is underpinned by a structural weakness in the understanding of how people learn language. In my opinion the second problem lies in the adult literacy standards, which are defined in terms of communication skills and the settings in which communication takes place rather than in terms of language descriptors. My IATEFL paper (3) covers some of the aspects which make it hard to use these standards for ESOL. I worry that they encourage teachers to put down purely functional targets such as 'communicating with the doctor'.

## SPECIAL REPORT



### Creating meaningful ILPs

So what should teachers do to create meaningful ILPs for this group of learners? They should:

- elicit from the learner the contexts in which they would like to use English, e.g. for work, study, self-employment or to get access to public services
- assess the learner's English language skills
- create language goals and activities which will enable the learner to function in the contexts they have prioritised.

This process reinforces the role of the teacher as the person who assesses what the learner can already do, and checks with the learner that the learning plan is relevant.

These skills should be incorporated into the teacher training offered to new and existing teachers. This may seem a tall order but there is a carrot: if the teacher has the skills to assess the language needs of the learner, these skills can be applied throughout the programme of learning, from ILP through formative assessment to final achievement. ▣

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- (1) English for speakers of other languages (ESOL): case studies of provision, learners' needs and resources. NRDC August 2004.
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- (2) Literacy, numeracy and ESOL: a survey of current practice in post-16 and adult provision. OFSTED HMI report 1367. 2003.
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- (3) EFL and ES(O)L: common learning needs, common teaching goals? IATEFL Brighton Conference Selections Ed. Alan Pulverness. 2004.
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### Overview of NRDC's effective practice studies

NRDC has embarked on five major related projects, funded by the European Social Fund (ESF), designed to identify effective teaching and learning practices in the areas of ESOL, reading, writing, numeracy and ICT. The projects run from 2003 to 2006. They build on methodological insights from the influential American Institutes of Research report, 'What Works Study for Adult ESL Literacy Students' (Condelli 2002).

The projects aim to identify 'what works'; that is, the teaching activities that help to develop and improve language, literacy and numeracy skills. Research will identify correlations between teaching interventions and learners' progress and attainments and, in particular, the classroom and teaching variables that can be correlated with improving learners' language, literacy and numeracy development and achievement. Synergy will be sought between all five studies, drawing out key messages across all the projects. This integrated approach will ensure that issues which are relevant to a particular group, e.g. ESOL learners, can be gathered from a range of settings and **Skills for Life** subjects.



## Diversity, ILPs, and the art of the possible

**In this article, John Callaghan reflects on the diversity of need in ESOL groups, how this relates to the current emphasis on ILPs and emphasises how diverse needs call for diverse responses.**

"The emphasis on ILPs is driven by a Basic Skills agenda that emphasises individual student learning at the expense of group processes". This was the view of an ESOL tutor in a recent study of diversity in ESOL and Numeracy classes (1). The view is shared by many. Seen as being imposed from above, pedagogically flawed and bureaucratically

unworkable, nothing, it seems, in the new world of ESOL is so controversial as the ILP. Nevertheless there is diversity among learners, and managing individual learner needs that are often varied and sometimes contradictory continues to be one of the biggest challenges facing the profession.

First, some extracts from interviews with E1 and E2 learners, carried out for the current NRDC Effective Practice Project, that suggest something of the size and nature of the challenge.

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I have been to many classes and I failed to continue. I don't have time to study at home so I cannot remember what they teach in class. And sometimes I feel embarrassed because they teach very simple things in class and still I cannot remember. So I just stop going to class. But this time is different. When I didn't come, the teacher called me and asked what happened. I really feel they are very kind so ... I generally come every class ...

**Yue Bing (Chinese learner interviewed in Chinese)**

I can't communicate well. I like to work in pairs with someone. It is only in pairs that I can work. I feel I have to ask or listen to someone asking me. But if we take a whole group, for example, we shall have quite a different situation. When somebody answers a teacher's question I miss the chance to say something. The answer has been already said.

**Natasha (Ukrainian learner interviewed in Russian)**

[In the IT class] the man asked me to write my details and my family details. I said, "I don't know. I can't write all this because I don't know the spelling." He said, "How am I going to teach computer to you?" So I said, "I give up."

How did you feel then?

Frankly, I won't lie to you, I felt I wanted [to bury my head and cry] and he was speaking in a loud voice, and all the students looking at me, and speaking to me in English ... I spoke with Mary and told her what had happened, and she said, "It's OK I'll teach you in class."

What is past, present, and something else past-present? Something you did

before ... in the past and present. And two together, present continue. It's very difficult. Can't understand. Very difficult. They should make it easier for people to understand.

**Yasmin (Yemeni learner interviewed in Arabic)**

When we are having a conversation ... you have a waiting-aggressive position. First, you attack me, and then you wait for me to answer you. ... When you trouble me all the time in the long run you will succeed. But if you see I am not in the right mood and leave me alone with all my troubles saying: "OK, I will leave him. It's better not to ask him and ask somebody else." ... This makes me feel even more discouraged. You see. It would be better if the teacher finished the matter with me.

**Andrei (Russian learner interviewed in Russian)**

It's hard to read these extracts without concluding that the more we know about our learners as individuals, the more we can help them. However, formal procedures for identifying individual learners' needs – including ILPs – are consuming amounts of time disproportionate to their value, as well as distorting the process of goal-setting and reducing possibilities for other kinds of activity. (Compare what teachers learn daily from interactions with learners in the classroom, from homework, in coffee breaks, at social events, on trips.)

**Individual needs and group settings**

In any case, identifying individual need is only half the battle; there remains the question of how to, and, indeed, how much it's possible to, address these needs in a group setting.

Diversity of need is best met by a rich and creative diversity of response. Starting at policy/funding and provider/programme level, diversity within classes needs to be made more manageable. Teachers must be given the opportunity and resources to reflect, research and debate, to share existing, and develop

new, skills and materials in order to shift the balance between what is desirable and what is possible. In particular, since 'talk is the work' in ESOL classrooms and management of spoken interaction is the distinctive means of addressing diversity, this task needs to be acknowledged by planners, managers and inspectors, and developed by teachers and trainers.

"I understand nobody will make the ideal learning context for us," says Andrei. "It is a very complicated task to combine many language aspects in one lesson, and a difficult job for a teacher. ... It is possible of course. But it is a great work." ✉

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- (1) Baynham M & Whitfield S (2004) 'Bilingual Students Learning in ESOL and Numeracy Classes: a contrastive study of classroom diversity' in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)—case studies of provision, learners' needs and resources, NRDC, pp. 70–91.

**Feedback**

Do you have your own ways of addressing individual learner's needs in a group setting? Please send them in to the editor, David Mallows (d.mallows@ioe.ac.uk), for publication in future editions of **reflect**.



**Tutors say:** In the old days the information was usually held in the tutor's head.

**Jo Tymoshyshyn**

We have tried a few different approaches with ILPs in Community Sfl/IT centres because we felt that formal ILPs may deter people from coming on courses.

**Jill Miller**

I have moved from a very busy college where ILPs were embedded in basic and key skills and encouraged for all curriculum areas. It is not hard to 'sell' something you know works for the student. I am now working for the MoD and have a very different clientele and paymasters, but the ILP still has a pivotal role in supporting the student, and I don't have to get LSC funding.

**Jo Tymoshyshyn**

The tutorial aspect is very useful but the target-setting is very difficult for bilingual learners; it is hard to come up with SMART targets without putting words in learners' mouths.

**Mary Simpson**



# ILPs in ESOL; theory, research and practice

**Helen Sunderland** and **Meryl Wilkins** challenge the proponents of ILPs to produce the evidence that ILPs and SMART targets are appropriate in language teaching. The authors work in LLU+, London South Bank University.

“Success in adult ...ESOL means that each teacher works with learners to ensure that the outcomes of initial and diagnostic assessment lead to the development of an individual learning plan with specific learning objectives and goals against which progress can be monitored and assessed.” [1]

“Many ILPs are poor. Targets are unclear and the review process is weak” [2]

Current orthodoxy in teaching in the post-16 sector takes as read that best practice involves developing individual learning plans (ILPs) with learners. ILPs should contain SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound) targets and these should be reviewed at regular intervals.

This raises several questions for the teaching of ESOL. Firstly, what is the research base for this view of

good practice? Where has it come from, and where is the evidence that this is the best way to facilitate language learning for adults? Secondly, how does this view of learning, in particular the use of SMART targets, fit with findings from research into second language acquisition? Finally, who can give realistic advice to hard-pressed teachers on how to actually prepare an ILP?

## How is language learnt ?

Current theories of how languages are learnt suggest that language learning is not made up of small measurable chunks and does not go in a straight line. As Lightbown and Spada (3) point out:

“Supporters of communicative language teaching have argued that language is not learned by the gradual accumulation of one item after another.”

In fact, there is a view that learners often begin to communicate using unanalysed chunks of language, which they later try to analyse. At this later stage, they may appear to become less accurate or fluent and thus seem to regress, whereas in fact they are in the process of developing a deeper understanding of the grammar of the language. This phenomenon, if observed in learners, is likely to cause immense difficulty for teachers obliged to record step-by-step progress.

It can also be extremely difficult to predict the progress expected within a given time frame, and then to measure it. For example, a learner needing work on pronunciation might benefit from work on a specific phoneme which is causing problems of comprehensibility. The learner cannot expect first to master this phoneme, and then move on to the next one. What the learner should be able to expect is a gradual qualitative improvement in comprehensibility, which is noticeable over time, in spite of the fact that accurate production will vary according to circumstances. This variability, if seen as a normal part of language acquisition, does not prevent the teacher and learner from noticing progress, but it does make measuring it extremely problematic. This problem is compounded for a learner whose priority is to improve her ability to listen to and understand the English spoken around her. Again, the learner can expect to make progress, but in this case it is progress which only the learner can notice and report on, and which can be noted, but certainly not measured, by the teacher.

### Setting targets or meeting needs ?

The current system encourages teachers to limit learners by setting targets that can be measured, such as using irregular past tense accurately, rather than concentrating on real communicative needs such as receptive skills and fluency issues which are essential to learners but more difficult to measure. However, even with supposedly measurable targets, language production is variable. Learners can produce accurate language in some situations but not others. For instance, in limited controlled conditions, focusing on form, a learner can produce accurate language forms, but in more authentic situations, focusing on meaning, there is likely to be less accuracy. The danger here is that teachers feel pressurised to focus on production under controlled conditions rather than on authentic use of language.

### What are the issues with ILPs ?

ESOL teachers have been struggling with the organisational issues of ILPs for at least the last four years. Concentrating on individual needs has brought undoubted benefits; many organisations now give much-needed tutorial time and teachers do now dis-

cuss learning needs and review progress on an individual basis with learners. However, as inspection reports and the OfSTED review (2) show, teachers still find it extremely difficult to operate the system.

These are the unresolved issues:

- the difficulty of fully involving beginner learners of ESOL in the negotiation of targets and ownership of their ILP
- the amount of time taken to draw up and review the ILP, particularly where classes only meet for two or four hours per week
- how to incorporate individual targets into a scheme of work and lesson plans for a group (we would welcome examples of good practice here)
- how to keep the paperwork manageable, particularly when teaching more than 20 hours per week.

ESOL teachers are trying to address these issues. They find them particularly difficult with extremes – learners with very little English, large and heterogeneous classes, courses that meet for a very few hours each week, teachers who teach several different classes for 23 hours per week and may have to draw up and review over 40 ILPs. Though different initiatives have tried to resolve these difficulties (for instance, the PLRA project <sup>(4)</sup>, and LLU+'s, South Bank University, ILP Working Party) no real solutions have been found. Pedagogic concerns are pushed to one side in the struggle to master the practicalities.

We welcome much of the underlying philosophy of ILPs – for instance the philosophy of concern for the individual learner, the idea of sitting down with learners and discussing their needs and progress, and the practice of differentiating teaching and learning to take account of individual needs. What we take issue with is the requirement to record, evidence and measure everything. ▀

We invite proponents of ILPs to do two things through this magazine. Firstly, to throw light on the evidence base for the use of ILPs and SMART targets in language teaching. Secondly, to give some realistic examples of how ESOL teachers can address the practical issues of developing and using them.

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- (1) Success in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL provision; a guide to support the Common Inspection Framework ABSSU, DfES (2002).
- (2) Literacy, numeracy and English for speakers of other languages: a survey of current practice in post-16 and adult provision Ofsted (2003).
- (3) Lightbown P & Spada N (1999) How languages are learned Oxford University Press.
- (4) Details of the PLRA project (Planning learning, recording progress and reporting achievement) can be found at [www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/LearninginfrastructurePlanningLearning](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/LearninginfrastructurePlanningLearning)

# Informal education, action planning and ILPs

How far can the informal methods of teaching and learning that are suitable for disengaged young adults be reconciled with the drive for formal planning and record-keeping? **Bethia McNeil** reports.

There are over 600,000 young adults in the UK who are not in formal education, employment or training. Many of them left school with no qualifications, and had 'disengaged' from education long before they left. In an attempt to engage and motivate this group, organisations such as the youth services, voluntary and community organisations and further education colleges are adopting informal teaching and learning approaches to help these young adults to develop their literacy, language and numeracy skills and foster their re-integration as young workers, parents and citizens.

The Young Adults Learning Partnership (a joint initiative between NIACE and The National Youth Agency) is currently undertaking a research programme that includes working with practitioners who are developing literacy, language and numeracy provision for this client group.

There is no agreed definition of informal education, but in this context, 'informal' denotes a style of relationships, a non-institutional setting, non-accredited programmes and flexible, responsive (or occasionally unplanned) activities. In contrast, formal education is governed by targets, has qualifications attached, and/or involves formal monitoring and record-keeping.

## Engagement, innovation and a flexible approach

The central themes of the research, arising from practitioners' experiences, are around engagement and innovative pedagogy – balancing 'hooks' and rewards with relevant, creative and non-threatening learning activities. Most practitioners working in this area have very little training relating specifically to literacy, language and numeracy delivery, or to the *Skills for Life* strategy. For those working outside the mainstream education system, access to such training and events is problematic. For those working on the 'front line', training is often not a priority. Very few practitioners have attended core curriculum or diagnostic training, and are unlikely to be using, or even to be aware of, the *Skills for Life* teaching and learning resources and diagnostic tools. Only two practitioners we have been in contact with as part of the research are using struc-

tured, paper-based individual learning plans with these young adult learners.

Practitioners spoke of the value of 'initial assessment' but, for them, this assessment was informal, and assessed 'need', rather than 'level'. They preferred to observe young adult learners and engage them in dialogue to gain a more anecdotal and holistic picture, moving beyond a skills-focused approach.



Overwhelmingly, practitioners spoke of the vital importance of flexibility and creativity – thinking on their feet to develop activities using, often literally, whatever came to hand. For these practitioners, the reality of working with a frequently challenging and demanding group means introducing or even, initially, disguising literacy, language and numeracy in the context of other activities, such as sports, cookery, film and music. Similarly, for practitioners who are not confident about mapping such activities to the core curriculum, the literacy, language and numeracy elements are more likely to be unplanned and unassessed. In projects where this approach is most effective, practitioners work with learners to draw out and develop the literacy, language and numeracy elements, highlighting progress as it is made. However, where these elements are not picked out, they are lost both to practitioners and to learners. Progress is often uncharted.

## Learner-centred action plans

However, practitioners with experience of working



**A style of relationships, a non-institutional setting, non-accredited programmes and flexible, responsive activities.**



with young adults are well aware of the value of planning and structuring learning, and are sensitive to the needs of this highly diverse client group; they try to retain a 1:1 approach, even in groups. They are not unfamiliar with action plans, targets and regular 1:1 reviews, but these action plans are learner-centred. They are individually negotiated, planned and evaluated by the learners, encouraging ownership and leadership by the young adults themselves.

Informal teaching and learning approaches are responsive and learner-focused and provision may appear chaotic and unstructured. In an environment where learners are not formally assessed, little is put down on paper, and future sessions are as yet unplanned, it is not easy to produce evidence that 'learning' is taking place. However, effective informal teaching and learning approaches can reach groups of young adults who are 'switched off' from education. By building on their interests and encouraging the learners to drive the process via a negotiated and holistic action plan, informal education has the power to motivate and engage young adults, bringing them back to learning. ▣

If you would like to know more about this research, contact Bethia McNeil at [Bethia.mcneil@niace.org.uk](mailto:Bethia.mcneil@niace.org.uk) or on 0116 204 7057



**Tutors say:** ILPs were high on the agenda at the NATECLA conference AGM. There were lots of negative views, but the general view was that, while the tutorial aspect is very useful, the target-setting is very difficult for bilingual learners. It is hard to come up with SMART targets without putting words in learners' mouths.

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**Mary Simpson**

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I am not anti-ILP. I work in two very different contexts. In one, the ILP is a vital piece of paper; in the other its purpose is obscure. The first context is a roll-on roll-off workshop; it can be chaotic but it is held together by the ILP. In the second context the students are streamed and each group heads for the same goal. The ILP is not completely irrelevant but it's not helping much either.

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**Mark Baxter**

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An interim report on this project will be available in November 2004. You can register on the NRDC website [www.nrdc.org.uk](http://www.nrdc.org.uk) to receive notification of all new NRDC publications.

# Literacy frees the world

**Tom Sticht**, International Consultant in Adult Education, identifies three key figures in the fight for adult literacy in the USA and its links with the Civil Rights Movement.



Above and below:  
Rowan county  
Moonlight Schools



On 6 January, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, speaking to the US Congress, identified four freedoms that he considered to be rights of people world wide: Freedom of Speech and Expression, Freedom to Worship, Freedom from Want, and Freedom from Fear. 65 years later, on 8 May, 2004, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan recalled FDR's Four Freedoms and observed that they are the very core of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Charter.

A year earlier, on 13 February, 2003, Annan launched the United Nation's Literacy Decade in New York with the theme Literacy as Freedom. To celebrate the United Nation's Literacy Decade, this year I have been conducting a speaking tour of 14 cities. In my tour I discuss each of FDR's Four Freedoms and how adult literacy educators around the world contribute to the achievement of these freedoms for millions of adults.

Here, I will discuss only one of the four freedoms, the Freedom of Speech and Expression.

## Teaching adult literacy for freedom of speech and expression

This year the United Nations Literacy Decade focuses upon issues of gender. In keeping with this focus, it is inspiring to learn how three adult literacy teachers, all women, used a simple technique for teaching illiterate adults to write their names and in so doing stimulated the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s in the United States. This is one of the greatest struggles for freedom of speech and expression of the 20th century – and to a large extent it was won by adult literacy educators using the same teaching technique.

I refer to these three women as Pearls of Adult Literacy because they were rare human beings, they were immeasurably valuable, and they were connected across time like fine pearls on a string.

Today, thousands of adult literacy educators all over the globe help millions of illiterate and poorly literate adults secure their Freedom of Speech and Expression. They join with Stewart, Gray, and Clark and form a string of pearls that stretches around the world. →

## PEARLS OF ADULT LITERACY

**First Pearl****Cora Wilson Stewart and the Moonlight Schools of Kentucky**

Cora Wilson Stewart started the Moonlight Schools for adult illiterates in 1911. They were called Moonlight Schools because there were no lights in the hills and hollows of the Kentucky mountains to show the way to school at night, which was the only time most adults

to take for education, so school was held only on moonlit nights. Writing about her work to teach illiterate adults to read and write, she recalled the words of one middle-aged man when asked about why he wanted to go to school. "Just to escape from the shame of making my mark" (Stewart, 1922).

Knowing full well the longing that illiterate adults had to write their own names, Stewart developed special Moonlight School tablets that were made up of blotting paper. This was soft, deep paper that was used to blot up the extra ink after writing

with a pen. But Stewart had teachers use a pointed tool to carve the student's name deep into the paper. Then students traced over the indented impressions of their names over and over until they could finally write their names without using the tracing paper.

According to Stewart, many adults learned to write their names the first evening of school. She recalled that, "One old man on the shady side of fifty shouted for joy when he learned to write his name. "Glory to God!" he shouted, "I'll never have to make my mark any more".

**Second Pearl****Wil Lou Gray and the Write-Your-Name Crusade of South Carolina**

The motivational power of being able to write one's own name was used later in 1922/23 by Dr. Wil Lou Gray, State Superintendent of Adult Education in South Carolina, as part of an anti-

illiteracy campaign across the state. Called the "Sign-Your-Own-Name" campaign in one county and "I'll Write My Own Name" campaign elsewhere in the state, the Write-Your-Name Crusade aimed to get adults into literacy programs to learn to sign their names when voting and in other important situations.

The method that Gray used to teach writing was similar to that used by Stewart, whose books called the Country Life Readers were also used by Gray in South Carolina literacy schools

in the 1920s. According to Ayres (1988), Gray recommended to teachers that they "...use a thorn or hairpin to trace letters on copy papers prepared so students could practice at home." Ayres suggests that this may have been an early use of what Ayres calls the "kinesthetic" method of teaching reading and writing and that Gray may have been the first proponent of this method for adults. But the fact that Gray was acquainted with Stewart, her methods and her books suggests that Gray learned the method from Stewart.

**Third Pearl****Septima Poinsette Clark and the Citizenship Schools**

The magic of a person's name in writing, and of Stewart's tracing method of learning to write one's name was passed on from Wil Lou Gray to Septima Poinsette Clark, the great civil rights teacher from the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. On 7 January, 1957, Clark and her teachers started the first Citizenship School serving adult African-Americans on Johns Island in South Carolina. Clark (1962) recalled that when the teachers asked the students what they wanted to learn, the answer was that, "First, they wanted to learn how to write their names. That

was a matter of pride as well as practical need."

In teaching students to write their names, Clark used what she said was the "kinesthetic" method which she had learned from Wil Lou Gray. Teachers were instructed to write students' names on cardboard. Then, according to Clark, "What the student does is trace with his pencil over and over his signature until he gets the feel of writing his name. I suppose his fingers memorize it by doing it over and over; he gets into the habit by repeating the tracing time after time."

She went on to say, "And perhaps the single greatest thing it accomplishes is the enabling of a man to raise his head a little higher; knowing how to sign their names, many of those men and women told me after they had learned, made them FEEL different. Suddenly they had become a part of the community; they

were on their way toward first-class citizenship."

Clark continued her work as a teacher and adult education program developer with Dr. Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The Citizenship schools eventually trained 10,000 teachers and brought the freedom of voice and expression to some 700,000 African Americans who used this new freedom to cast their votes; this hastened the coming of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.

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## Profiles of two dyslexic learners

### IAN



Ian is a young man with high self-esteem. He's popular with his boss – "If I had ten like Ian I could get rid of thirty of the others!" Ian sings in clubs at the weekends and he understands and is comfortable with the fact that he's dyslexic, but it wasn't always like that – "School days was bad, a lot of pressure ... the teachers didn't really understand me."

Ian was classed as a failure at school.

He wasn't diagnosed as dyslexic until he was an adult and, while his teachers later apologised to his parents, the experience was clearly painful – "School was horrible – I hated it." Ian faced similar problems with his job at the Job Centre when they decided that he needed to learn to use a new piece of software on the computer. The training failed miserably to meet his needs – "They just race through it, they give you a day's training then they say go away and do it." Fortunately Ian's line manager called in ADA to assess him and, through the strategies he and his tutor developed, Ian was able to master

the software and become a success in his job – "Just because I'm a bit different it doesn't mean I can't do the job. I got very angry and stressed out and wanted to leave. I didn't want to go in to work. I know why I was getting angry; I like to do things well and now I am."

Ian understands his dyslexia but he doesn't tell people he's dyslexic unless he has to – "I've got a motto – DTA – Don't Trust Anyone. I'm very aware of who I tell. People say 'he shouldn't be doing this job. How come he's on the same amount of money? But I've proved them wrong!'"

### JANE



Jane was in the back of her father's Volkswagen when she was told she was dyslexic; she was 11. "My main feeling was that it was just a middle-

class way of calling me thick." Her parents were both teachers and they had tried, unsuccessfully, to get her assessed at school before giving up and taking her to Bangor University. Little

changed for Jane after the assessment. She was still put in the lowest stream (from which she always worked her way up, only to be put back there in the following year) and received little support, but this just made her more determined – "What they did do, which they didn't mean to do, was give me determination. I've always had to prove myself."

Now, Jane is bringing up her daughter and studying for a degree with the Open University, with the support of her tutor Terry at ADA. "I'm developing strategies with Jane to help her construct essays,

help her with her spelling and give her the confidence to work on her own." With this support, Jane has come to terms with her dyslexia and has gained great understanding of herself – "It's partly who I am (or probably mostly actually) ... I have bad days when I really can't concentrate but now I just accept it, go and do something else and come back later."

ADA (Adult Dyslexic Access) is a charity based in North West England that offers advocacy for dyslexic adults.  
[www.dyslexia-help.org](http://www.dyslexia-help.org)

languages, Braille, etc., but they don't consider dyslexia."

ADA would like to see an awareness-raising campaign which looks at dyslexia positively. "We've got to target adults and be able to say to them: "We understand dyslexia, we understand why you might not have succeeded, and why employment has been an issue for you."

ADA is a non-profit organisation that is highlighting and addressing issues affecting adults with dyslexia. It offers advice, guidance, a national helpline, dyslexia screenings and assessments, one-to-one dyslexia teaching, and mentoring for dyslexic adults. It also runs accredited awareness-training courses, performs technical assessments, and is undertaking academic research in the field of learning disabilities.

### So what is dyslexia?

As Rice says (1): "There are many definitions of dyslexia but no consensus."

The new Framework for Understanding Dyslexia (2)

says: "We understand dyslexia to be a specific difficulty, typically characterised by an unusual balance of skills. Dyslexia affects information processing (receiving, holding, retrieving and structuring information) and the speed of processing information."

John Rack, in comparison, calls dyslexia a "language-based specific learning disability". This is a phonological deficit model which understands dyslexia to manifest itself through problems with phonics, short-term memory, sequencing and organisation.

However, while debate rages over definitions and research is ongoing, work has to continue to identify and support people with dyslexia.

As Alan Shoreman says: "The Rice report had thousands of different references and still no consensus. That's a problem for dyslexics because, while people are still arguing, they are getting pushed further and further back. They're not being identified. The social issues are not being addressed."



### A social issue?

For Alan Shoreman, dyslexia is a social issue. "If you come from an affluent background, it's likely to be picked up because of your parents' knowledge and ability to pay. In the poorer parts of the country, most people with dyslexia will go through life without being recognised."

In fact, 75 per cent of all dyslexic people are identified as dyslexic only after they have reached the age of 21. "Most dyslexic people are going through the school system without being picked up. That's why there's so much work to be done with adults."

Dyslexia, particularly undiagnosed dyslexia, has a significant impact on a child's experience of school and consequently on their attitude to learning as an adult. Where there isn't adequate support in place, the dyslexic child is likely to be put in a 'remedial' class. As John Rack explains: "Adult learners time and time again come back and tell us that they were put in the classes with kids who had more general learning difficulties or behavioural problems. Many dyslexic learners whose problems were specifically with literacy and who were capable of understanding the curriculum were effectively marginalised and excluded."

This marginalisation is likely to continue in the workplace. Elsewhere in this issue Hermine Scheeres discusses the increased textualisation of the workplace, a point that isn't lost on Alan Shoreman. "There's been a change from post-war Britain which was all manufacturing based, blue collar, construction, factories. That's changed and we've gone to clerical and service industries and a need for at least level one literacy. That pushes people with dyslexia further to the margins. Dyslexia isn't a problem, I don't see it as a problem. It's the way we function in society that is a problem; it is the way that society is constructed that creates the problem."

As Terry Rotheram of the ADA explains, if support is not in place, the social consequences for a dyslexic person trying to function in such a workplace are clear.

"Once someone has seen that they can't do the job the way they are being asked, anxiety levels rise and the next step is to go off on the sick with stress, then you're on the tablets."

### Good practice is always good practice

A positive message from the Rice report is that the teaching and learning practices that are good for dyslexic learners are good with anyone. John Rack outlines four key messages for any practitioner working with dyslexic learners:

- ask the learner what works for them
- use a multi-sensory approach
- avoid overload of information by using a 'small-steps' approach
- make learning cumulative – never begin a session where the last session ended; always go back a stage.

This seems to me to be a sensible approach to take with any learner, though in reality, as Ross Cooper of LLU+, London South Bank University, points out: "While every learner is likely to benefit from "dyslexia-friendly" teaching and learning, most dyslexic learners, particularly at basic skills level, require more than dyslexia-friendly group work."

What's more, many non-dyslexic learners would find the repetition and 'overlearning' that is so effective with dyslexic learners to be demotivating.

However, this could be taken to mean that the distinction between those with dyslexia and those without isn't always the most important. This could be misunderstood as saying that there's no need to screen for or diagnose dyslexia. John Rack again: "The point is well made in the Rice report that the causes of literacy difficulties are multiple and interactive and that they are both biological and environmental. However, in policy matters, people tend to want it simple. This means that one conclusion might be to forget about dyslexia – just talk about individuals with strengths and weaknesses and forget about categorising them."

What the Rice report is actually saying is that what is needed, is more distinguishing not less, with dyslexia being one of the variables we are interested in.

### Assessment

Diagnosis of dyslexia is the key. Until an individual is diagnosed the difficulties they face in functioning in our textualised world are ignored. As Terry Rotheram says: "There are so many people out and about in the real world who don't know they're dyslexic – they've just got this label 'thick'."

An effective assessment of dyslexia should reveal the pattern of strengths and weaknesses of a learner. It is often done by educational psychologists. However, Ross Cooper argues for the value of the teacher's involvement in the assessment process.

"... it is often important to reserve judgement until you have tried to teach the learner over time. This is not just to observe whether they respond to the teaching, but also to see how they respond to the teaching, what their pattern of strengths and weaknesses are and how these provide evidence of underlying processing difficulties. This is one reason why teachers' assessments have some advantages over peripatetic educational psychologists' assessments."

However, while an assessment should provide an accurate picture, independent of any affective factors, the affective factors are sometimes so strong that it isn't possible to get a clear picture. In this case the need to spend time talking to and getting to know the client is paramount and, for ADA, the best person to make that connection and get beyond the emotional baggage is someone who can truly understand the dyslexic experience, namely a person with dyslexia.

According to Alan Shoreman: "We've all felt the frus-



**Dyslexia isn't  
a problem.  
It's the way  
we function  
in society  
that is a  
problem.**



## Developmental dyslexia in adults: a research review

Dr Michael Rice with Professor Greg Brooks of NRDC. NRDC May 2004  
ISBN 095 464 9281

Developmental dyslexia in adults: a research review' aims to generate and share new knowledge, based on evidence from sound research. It adds to what is known about dyslexia from practice, informed advocacy, and research and development work by organisations which have been active in the field over several decades. Dyslexia is a critically important part of **Skills for Life**. This report, based on rigorous research, deepens and enriches our knowledge of dyslexia and the needs of learners and tackles some challenging issues.

In a short speech at its launch in July, Greg Brooks, project director of the report, made four points about the review.

"I shall be very brief, because I am just going to state four things that this report does not say and five that it does, interwoven.

Firstly, the report does not say that there is no such thing or condition or problem as dyslexia. It does say that no two researchers or experts agree on how to define it.

Secondly, the report does not say that there are no such people as people with dyslexia. It does say that no two researchers or experts agree on how to identify them.

Thirdly, the report does not say that nothing is known about how to help adult learners who have dyslexia or (as was the immediate reaction when Ursula Howard and I gave a presentation on it to the Advisory Group for the 'Understanding Dyslexia' project in January) that 'We might as well all go home then'. It does say (see pp.79-87) that there is very little even moderately reliable evidence from research on how to do this; and that in turn is not meant to downplay what practitioners know from decades of practical experience.

Fourthly, the report does not say that there is no point in teaching adults with dyslexia separately from other adults with literacy difficulties. It does say that there is at present no warrant in research for this. In particular –

and to me this is the most startling finding in the whole report – 'there appears to be no experimental evidence comparing group outcomes between adult dyslexics and "ordinary" adult literacy learners' (p.86). But again this is not to deny that practitioners may well have had success with teaching adult dyslexics separately.

Finally, the fact that so little can be deduced from existing research means that there is everything to play for."

The full report can be downloaded from the NRDC website [www.nrdc.org.uk](http://www.nrdc.org.uk)



tration, the humiliation, the anger at some stage in our life. I spent years and years in factories, never progressing because of my literacy. Once you disclose that to an individual they're able to bring out the stuff they've had problems with and barriers drop. There's nothing better than sitting down with someone who understands."

John Rack agrees. "What makes a difference for a learner who has failed in the past is when they meet someone who finally understands how they learn and why they find it hard. Once they believe that someone understands them, they'll accept that they can be helped and supported."

### Conclusion

There is undoubtedly a lot of good practice out there in dyslexia teaching and in the support given to dyslexic people by organisations such as the Dyslexia Institute and ADA. There is also increased activity with a major ABSSU project 'Supporting Dyslexic Learners in Different Contexts' getting under way in the wake of the LSDA/NIACE project which led to "A Framework for Understanding Dyslexia", Rice's research review for NRDC, and the excellent teacher training packages available from LLU+, London South Bank University.

NRDC is hosting a seminar in October that aims to arrive at an agreed agenda for future research and development. A full report on the seminar will appear in the next issue of **reflect**.

I've learnt a great deal through the conversations I have had with dyslexic people and those who support them. I hope that others will respond with their own experiences and fill in some of the gaps I have left. ▣

### Websites

Dyslexia Institute <http://www.dyslexia-inst.org.uk/>  
 British Dyslexia Association [www.bda-dyslexia.org.uk](http://www.bda-dyslexia.org.uk)  
 Adult Dyslexic Access [www.dyslexia-help.org](http://www.dyslexia-help.org)  
 (1) Developmental dyslexia in adults: a research review Dr Michael Rice with Professor Greg Brooks. NRDC May 2004 ISBN 095 464 9281.  
 (This report can be downloaded from the NRDC website [www.nrdc.org.uk](http://www.nrdc.org.uk) )  
 (2) Framework for understanding dyslexia DfES 2004 [www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/understanding-dyslexia/](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/understanding-dyslexia/)

# Learning to write in 19th century England

This is the first of a series of three articles by **Ursula Howard** in which she considers adult literacy practices and politics in England from the 19th century to the present day. In this article, she focuses on learners' motivations to write and on the role of church and state.



Above: A Free evening class at Louth, taught by Mr Colam for working men, 1862.

This is the first of a series of three articles in **reflect** Volume 1. They draw on my doctoral research into literacy practices and politics in 19th century England, and on NRDC's study of Effective Practice in Teaching and Learning Writing and ask: what can we learn from the past to inform the future of writing as part of literacy learning?

There is ample evidence that writing, more than reading, motivates adults to learn literacy. This is true of the past, as well as the present. Yet, in educational policy, research and practice, reading has been and remains the key literacy. It is dominant in learning provision and central to concerns about literacy levels. Reading has been the main, often the sole focus of literacy research and surveys. It is more discussed, debated and assessed than writing. 'Writing', it has been argued, 'has been a virtually invisible topic in the material history of modern culture,' Brandt (1). Why is this? What are the roots of this imbalance?

## **Writing: a subversive or superfluous activity?**

What can the 19th century tell us about the learning, practice and meaning of writing in society? First let us hear directly from learners:

**My first attempt at rhyming was an epitaph on a dead toad which we found in the garden, and which we ... buried with great solemnity. I could not write the epitaph, for in the matter of writing I was quite behind the other children of the age. My ignorance in this respect was a sore burden to them with my continual cry, 'Teach me to write!'**

Marianne Farningham (2)

**I began to feel a desire to express myself about the things I read, and certain forms of expression lingered in my ear as well as entranced my eye. This, I imagine, was the first movement of a literary instinct. I remember my first efforts at composition were made on a slate ... I tried a pen and a copy-book now and then, but the exercise proved a weariness to the hand and an irritation to the mind.**

Charles Shaw (3)

Raymond Williams has argued that the first half of the 19th century was the moment of change following two thousand years when writing was known only to a minority. By the 1840s, a majority of people in England had achieved at least minimal access to writing – between 65 per cent and 70 per cent - before the introduction of elementary state education. Apart from church and charitable schools, which some children attended, but only for brief periods, adults and young people learned through a combination of self-help, ‘mutual improvement’, family learning, community organisation, the work of voluntary organisations and dissenting churches, e.g. attendance at Adult Sunday Schools, which offered a half-hour of writing before bible reading and learning as part of social and political movements. We would call it informal learning.

The measure of literacy was a measure of writing ability rather than reading: the ability, or willingness, to sign the marriage register rather than mark it with an ‘x’. However, the learning and use of writing for the working classes remained contested for several decades for various reasons. First, social class divisions were as rigid as cast iron. Writing was also viewed as encouraging people to harbour aspirations beyond their allotted station, whether as workers or as producers of cultural and political writing. A public voice for working class people was off the map. Cultural production was for others. The brief almost ‘freak’ celebrity treatment of the poet, John Clare in the 1820s is evidence of the novelty of the idea of a ‘peasant poet’.

Secondly, most people, children and adults, worked for six days a week. Apart from those who studied into the night after a long day’s work (a fairly common practice according to their own accounts), and a few evening classes, writing could only be learned on a Sunday at local often large-scale, Sunday Schools. Writing was viewed as an activity which was ‘temporal’, connected to the worldly

activities of getting and spending, rather than learning to read, with the bible as key text. Thirdly, writing was also viewed nervously as a potentially subversive skill which would enable people to create and circulate texts as part of radical social movements for change. If anything was more dreaded than either of these, it was the notion of offering potential criminals the tools of a heinous offence: forgery.

Initial opposition from the state and churches did not prevent people from learning to write. In any case, opposition gradually mellowed, swallowed up in grand ambitions for education, arguably one of the great obsessions of the Victorian age and driven in part by a wish for ‘social control’. One of the big stories of the 19th century, before the first major Education Act was passed in 1870, is the story of writing. Thousands and thousands of ‘learning stories’ survive, written by people who were motivated to acquire and use the skills of writing. Most people overcame determined opposition, material obstacles and disdain for their pursuit of skills, while others had genuine support. Family members, significant outsiders, friends, workmates and groups in the local community either helped or hindered. Many studied secretly. Writing was a powerful motivator. Informal learning mushroomed, and some individuals and groups were highly ambitious in their reading and writing activity, with little interest in starting with the basics, preferring the ‘lofty heights’ of eclectic learning in the arts and sciences and the crafting of pieces of writing.

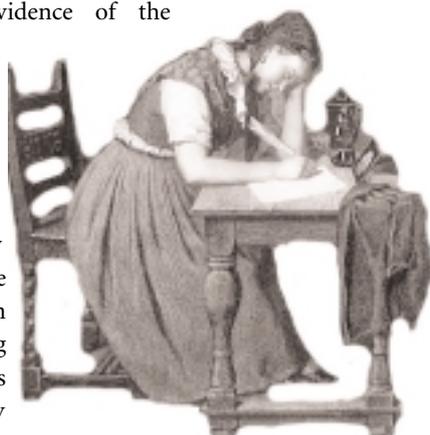
### The motivation to write

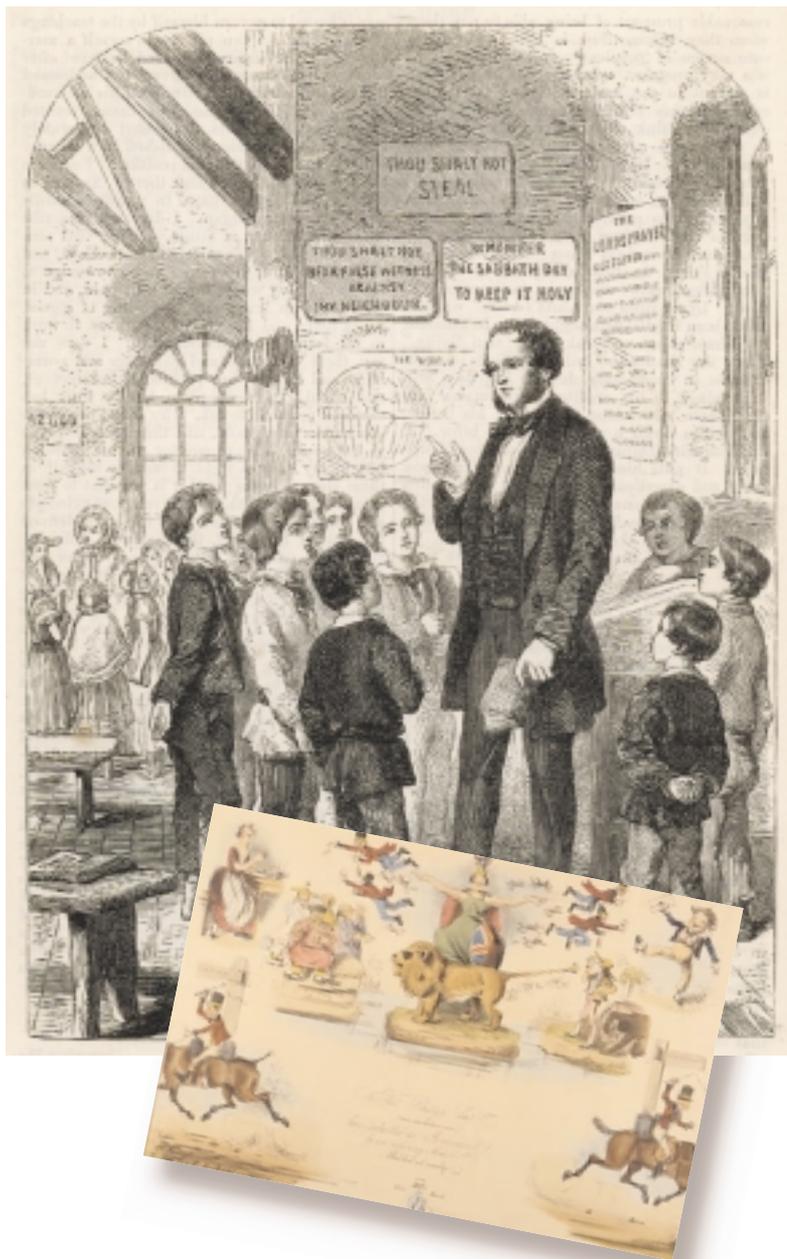
Why did so many people want to learn to write when it was not expected of them? The evidence is that there was a strong impulse, ‘a yearning’, to write between family, friends and lovers, separated for example by domestic service, imprisonment, or migration for work. Helping the next generation to better themselves was another aspiration. For some learners, writing was a tool to change the world for the better. Others sought better paid work. Yet others wanted to write poetry. A pervasive motive is the wish to take control of one’s life: writing appears to offer the possibility of human agency. Many surviving manuscripts and books describe learning to write in much more precise detail than reading: the initial motivation to learn, the catalyst, the sense of urgency, the physical effort involved, the artefacts and materials which were used – many of which have been kept throughout a lifetime. Memories of learning to write are often linked explicitly or implicitly to positive change.

**‘He had no pen, inks, or paper, nor even a slate. But with broken pieces of pots, pipes or chalk, he would be seen trying to write such letters as he had seen on doorsteps, door-stones and causeways’**

Joseph Lawson in 1887 (4)

Below: A peasant woman writing with a quill, 1865





Top: a Sunday School in 1858.  
Above: the first Penny Post envelope, 1840

They spent nearly three hours one evening preparing a letter to a far-away sister, the mother painfully composing the sentences, the lad painfully writing them down. The glorious epistle was at last complete, the first great triumph of a combined intellectual effort between mother and son. Proudly they held the letter to the candle-light to dry the ink, when the flame caught it and ...the work of three laborious hours destroyed in three seconds. It was more than they could bear. Mother and son sat down and cried together.

From a biography of Will Crooks (G. Haw, 1907)

### Church, state and literacy

By the second half of the century, rising literacy skills were met by the increasing availability of clerical jobs. A degree of upward mobility tapped away at the firm walls between social classes. The Penny Post was introduced in 1840. Her Majesty's Inspectorate was established in the 1830s to report on the many local, community-run schools, such as Dame Schools, which offered reading, writing, arithmetic, domestic and practical skills, often linked to local industries. The inspectors chronicled their shortcomings and gradually they disappeared as Church schools multiplied. By 1890, after successive Education Acts, universal free elementary education arrived. Writing was firmly on the curriculum, but in very contained forms.

How far did formal education recognise and respond to the motivational drives of learners? The early years of a regulated school curriculum in England – the Revised Code of 1862 – was criticised by liberal minded commentators, notably the poet Matthew Arnold. The early decades of elementary education organised the teaching of skills into 'standards', comparable to 'years' or 'levels' now. Writing found its place, but only at the higher stages, with an almost exclusive focus on functional skills and the structure of language. Some adults used their hard-won skills to critique the new curriculum:

**'It was sterile of results...with detached observations about familiar things – 'the cat', 'the cow' and 'the parsnip' – what could a child get from it to kindle his enthusiasm for ... civilised learning?'**

**George Bourne, Change in the Village (1984) (5)**

Elementary education evolved. Early excesses such as 'payment by results' were abandoned. But the Standards system still withheld 'composition' as a reward for years of very mechanical learning. Writing came second to reading, where arguably it remains today. Paradoxically, the most visible literacy skill, the one which people most want to learn, despite the fear of exposure of spelling mistakes and poor handwriting, remains the most invisible one. 📖

### References

- (1) Michael Halloran, quoted in D. Brandt 'Literacy in American Lives'. Cambridge 2001 (p.13).  
(2-5) Quotes from 19th century autobiographies in U. Howard 'Writing in 19th century England: uses and meanings'. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Sussex, 1994.

The next article, in **reflect** Issue 2, will consider 21st century learners' motivations to write, compared with those of the 19th century.

# How can we get critical feedback from students?

**Alison Tomlin** wonders whether students give honest feedback and argues the case for involving them as researchers into teaching practices.

I've been working with four teacher-researchers in a two year project on the measures part of the numeracy curriculum. Students posed challenges to the curriculum: some already had skills way beyond their 'official' level (so a carpet-layer gave us an excellent way to estimate the area of a circle, without using pi); others said they didn't use or need what are called 'common' measures, other than to help their children with school work and to pass the test at the end of their course. They criticised past teachers: those who don't have time, who don't listen, or don't respect you. Many were critical of their present courses too, particularly about the feeling of rushing too fast (we agreed with them, and we developed different sorts of learning materials and a new scheme of work). We found too that some had not asked to study numeracy (much less measures) but were manoeuvred into it alongside literacy or ESOL.

But what the students didn't criticise was the teaching or their teachers – my colleagues in the project. Indeed, they were highly praised – and that's what I want to worry about here. Practitioner-researcher projects usually work with the students who have stayed the course: what about those who tried it but dropped out, or who decide against starting the course? And how honest are students with their teachers?

## Inviting criticism

I had an extremely uncomfortable experience in an earlier research project when Cathy and Pat, students in a numeracy class I taught,



**What do people say to each other about their teachers when we won't overhear them? How can we encourage real criticism?**

interviewed each other. I gave them some questions, with a catch-all at the end: 'Any advice for tutors or other students?' I meant the question to be about the research topic (keeping study diaries), but the students took the opportunity to make general comments on the course. Pat brought the tape to the next class and suggested we play it to the group. This is part of what we heard Cathy saying:

*I have enjoyed the course, but sometimes I think it is a bit wishy-washy. You get told that you have done very well because you're almost right, or on the right tracks. But in maths I think you're either right or you're wrong. I wish you were told you had got it right, or you had not got it right. It's kidding yourself. (Tomlin, 2001)*

Pat, on the other hand, praised the course and criticised fellow students for late attendance. I had no idea that Cathy felt like that, yet I was a tutor

who highly valued democratic practice, and I had thought I was reasonably good at listening to students, inviting criticism, and so on.

Pat and Cathy knew I would hear the tape. What do people say to each other about their teachers when we won't overhear them? How can we encourage real criticism? I'm a student myself in a course with a pretty poor teacher, but I like her personally, I would never criticise her to an outsider, and I find it hard to raise my complaints with her. That's because I know she cares (she just doesn't prepare ...).

## Students as researchers

It's possible that Pat and Cathy talked as they did because they were co-researchers, in a project in which students contributed to setting the research questions, gathering data, and debating conclusions. We need to make space for that kind of research in NRDC. Perhaps, if we don't, we are colluding in a view of students as not really that sharp or articulate, though we would never say that out loud. If we don't find better ways of hearing students' critiques then our own research is poorly based. I still think I was a good teacher, and I certainly think the teacher-researcher team are good teachers – but it's absurd to think we couldn't be better. Students are well placed to research our practices. ▀

**Tomlin, A.** (2001). 'We become experts': working with basic education students as researchers. In L. Richardson & M. Wolfe (Eds.), *Principles and practice of informal education: Learning through life* (pp. 222-235). London: Routledge.

# The textualised workplace

**Hermine Scheeres describes the growth of textualisation in the modern workplace and its effect on workers' identity.**

**What are the implications of this for language, literacy and numeracy in the workplace?**

In this article, I am not so much concerned with particular language, literacy and/or numeracy (LLN) demands in the workplace, or with the LLN/vocational education and training relationship; I am interested in the shift to a textualised and textualising workplace and the implications of this for what work is and what it is to be a worker. It means thinking about the positioning of workers in ways that move beyond work-based competencies or LLN skills.

## Texts and textualisation

Textualisation is part of what it is to be a new order workplace. It is not just that there are new LLN demands, but the workplace itself is increasingly a site of textual practices that affect everyone. Workplaces are becoming more and more textualised through the introduction of technological hardware and software, through increased in-house continuous (lifelong) education and training, through making explicit to workers at all levels how the organisation functions, through complex quality and accountability processes, through participatory practices such as having teams for everything, and through a myriad of other textual processes and products. Thus, for example, graphs, diagrams, spreadsheets of faults, production numbers, pictures of teams and team members are on the walls of the factory floor; these texts were non-existent five or ten years ago. Texts that would only have filled managers' in and out trays now form part of what it is to be a new order workplace. Knowledge in workplaces is expected to be

constructed in meeting rooms, around walls, on computer screens, in manuals, and so on.

The old idea of a limited number of manager-experts or knowledge-workers controlling working practices is giving way to the expectation that



ordinary workers become experts and knowledge workers, involved in textualising practices. The extent to which workers at all levels engage in these practices will vary. However, workplaces that may have been sites of physical or 'doing' work, with talk and texts supporting or even incidental to that work, are now becoming sites where textual practices constitute and represent work in a range of ways.

## Teams and team meetings

Teamwork and team meetings are a key part of the textualising workplace. Workers at all levels in organisations are expected to have command over a variety of texts and talk. They need to be able not only to describe, explain, report on, persuade, argue and generally discuss what is involved at their own work-station, but they are also expected to engage in talk about

work processes that may not be closely related to their own, and with people they do not normally work alongside. Team members are expected to offer ideas and solutions to problems, and to write about, record and collect data about what is going on. The positioning of workers as experts or knowledge-workers who have ideas and solutions to offer means that the social relationships they are expected to develop are in contrast to more traditional ones where they respond to directives. These social relationships are not static; they are always on the move and ways of 'being a worker' are therefore dynamic and contested positions or identities.

## Reconstructing identities

The textualisation of work and the workplace leads to the construction of different meanings for participants as they put at risk their 'old work' selves. Workers' traditional position of little status and limited expertise is being re-formed as they take up new positions (whether they are complying or resisting, or enacting both compliance and resistance). These experiences involve them becoming knowledge workers and articulating their expertise – it is identity-work.

Textualising work and the textualisation of the workplace are useful ways of understanding and deconstructing some new work order practices. This could be important for workplace research where the new work order has created a proliferation of demands that are too often seen as requiring sets of new skills only. Textualisation of work and the workplace are primarily about social relationships; the textualising of work involves, notably, identity-work. This leads to questions such as 'What could LLN curricula and pedagogies look like in and around the new order workplace?' and 'What are the implications for us as LLN practitioners?' ▣

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# WebQuests, m-learning and CyberLabs

**Harvey Mellar** and **Maria Kambouri** describe some examples of their research into integrating ICT in teaching literacy, numeracy and language

In an earlier NRDC 'Effective Practice' project on applying ICT in teaching literacy, numeracy and language (1), we recommended that:

- tutors should explicitly consider why they are using ICT and should match how they use the technology to their teaching aims
- teaching should address the changing nature of literacies in the digital age
- a wider range of technologies should be explored
- there should be more experimentation with a range of teaching styles, and in particular more use of collaborative work around ICT
- more attention should be given to the range of learning styles and how ICT might be used to address these
- the issue of how and when to teach ICT skills should be addressed more explicitly.

In the first year of our current project, we have been working with a team of nine practitioner-researchers to implement these recommendations. Over the next six months we will evaluate these examples in a series of trials. This article describes three examples of the work we have been doing, based on written accounts from the tutors whose work is described.

## WebQuests

Cathy Clarkson, a lecturer in ESOL at Dewsbury College, has been developing the use of WebQuests (2)

with ESOL learners. Bernie Dodge at San Diego State University, who invented the concept, defines a WebQuest as an inquiry-oriented activity in which some or all of the information that learners interact with comes from resources on the internet. Short term WebQuests (say one to three class periods) are about knowledge acquisition and integration, where a learner has to grapple with a significant amount of new information and then make sense of it. Longer term WebQuests (say between a week and a month in duration) are more about extending and refining knowledge; a learner has to analyse a body of knowledge, transform it in some way, and demonstrate an understanding of the material by creating something that others can respond to.

Cathy started by using an already existing single page WebQuest about Oxford, providing tasks and links to various sites related to Oxford. This basic WebQuest also provided a model for the learners to follow in order to build their own WebQuests later. This task helped learners to develop good scanning skills.

Next, a more advanced WebQuest was used in which the learners had to delve much more deeply into each site and began to develop their navigation and reading skills.

Finally, learners developed their own WebQuest about learning English. Students had to think about their own learning, providing links to sites and quizzes that they liked. This encouraged learners to search the



Teaching should address the changing nature of literacies in the digital age.

## Introducing WebQuests with ESOL learners

**Cathy Clarkson describes how she has used WebQuest at Entry Level 1 and Level 2.**

A WebQuest is "an inquiry-oriented activity in which some or all of the information that learners interact with comes from resources on the Internet" (1). It has revitalised how I use the internet in the classroom.

My second year of teaching a Level 2 CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) class gave me a first opportunity to run an intervention study using WebQuests. Before this I had used the internet with the students for obtaining information, but had had to spend time teaching learners how to use search engines efficiently. Even Level 2 students found this difficult, especially when the more obvious key words wouldn't reveal useful sites. A lot of time was spent 'surfing' rather than focusing on the task. Last year I used

WebQuests in two more successful intervention studies, one with a Level 2 ESOL group and one with an Entry 1 ESOL class,

A WebQuest reduces unproductive 'surfing' time in the classroom as the sites are provided by the tutor. As a result it becomes an excellent tool that utilises the positive aspects of the internet (a wealth of real-world material) whilst removing one of the more negative aspects (a seemingly endless amount of unstructured, uncatalogued material).

### International Food

I was very impressed by the success of the CALL intervention. It took the form of three different kinds of internet-based tasks, culminating in a WebQuest built using the aclearn toolkit (2) titled 'International Food' (3). The task was to research a topic on international food, prepare a PowerPoint presentation and present it to an invited audience. The students were introduced to the topic by their class tutor, using the WebQuest displayed on a SmartBoard. When I walked into the CALL classroom the next

day I found all nine students in various stages of logging on, viewing the WebQuest and organising their group tasks and roles. This was a far cry from the usual start to class, which saw student straggling in with tales of missed buses, sick children and dogs eating their homework. By break-time each group had produced a short account of their topic, initial research results and individual roles.

The presentations the students gave were amazing. They gave three of the students the confidence to volunteer to talk at the Dewsbury College Staff Conference, where they talked in front of 250 teachers about how the use of ILT had improved their English.

### Online Shopping at Entry 1

I was so delighted with the success of the Level 2 intervention that I decided to investigate the potential with an Entry 1 group. As soon as I started researching sites I became concerned. Suitable sites for E1 learners are few and far between. Trying to think of a suitable task for them,

internet for useful sites. The class discussed the quizzes, their positive and negative points, which they preferred and why different students had different preferences. Cathy writes:

"In previous years with other students I had tried to develop activities that allowed the learners to evaluate sites developed for language learners but these were often confusing and the students didn't really understand the tasks. This was the most successful and structured task that I have run."

The learners found the building of a WebQuest a very motivating experience. Attendance improved, students were getting to class early to get started, and there was a great deal of interaction between learners.

### m-learning

Jo Dixon-Trifonov, a lecturer in ESOL at Southampton City College and a Learning Resource Developer at CTAD, has been working with camera phones and desktop computers in her teaching. The inspiration for this work comes from her involvement with the m-learning project (3). Mobile phones make it possible to gather and record information outside the classroom, whilst wireless internet and picture messaging allow pictures, audio and text to be sent directly to a website, so that the information can be edited and developed later on a desktop computer.

In one project the class looked at a map of the college campus on CTAD's mediaBoard website and iden-



**This was the most successful and structured task that I have run.**

tified the locations they knew. They then paired up, chose a location they wanted to explore, and went off to find out about it. They took photos at each location, read notices and asked people questions, and sent the information to the website. Later, in the classroom, they viewed their photos on the computer, attached them to the relevant places on the map, and discussed what they had found out. All came back having learnt new vocabulary and used it to write short texts to accompany and explain their pictures.

In another project, learners investigated migration in and out of Southampton. They roamed the town with camera phones, looking for information. The tutor kept the learners up to date with the group's progress by sending text messages to the whole class. They attached their photos to a physical timeline when next back in class, and repeated this with an activity on the mediaBoard website. They wrote short texts to accompany the pictures and turned the timeline into an informative poster about migration in and out of Southampton.

Learners had difficulty knowing what to write to accompany the photos and how to write in an appropriate style, so the tutor went on to focus on a study of photo stories in magazines and on websites such as the BBC's Newsround site, looking at the language and content of the captions that described the photos.

There were some teething problems with the technology, but learners found the use of state-of-the-art gadgets engaging and motivating. The activities gave



incorporating the four skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, also proved difficult. I had to think carefully about the ICT skills, English skills and the different nature and structure of the session. How would the students deal with sessions that were not led by the teacher?

During the first three weeks of internet-based classes the students navigated the given sites and interacted with the information. They presented information to the class, firstly from written notes (here they were nervous, spoke quietly into their paper, and one student just refused to come to the front.) and then from a PowerPoint presentation. They became more confident in working in pairs and groups and I was feeling more confident about standing back and not supporting immediately, giving them time to figure it out for themselves.

A WebQuest was built titled 'Online Shopping' (4). Each group was given a set of photos from which they were to make up the characters in a family. This family had inherited a house and an amount of



money. The task was to research the given sites on the WebQuest and present to the class how each family spent the money.

The results were remarkable. For two whole lessons I was able to make comprehensive observation notes and chat to the bi-lingual support worker as the students needed minimal support in their groups. When it came to giving the presentations, each student in each group spoke, clear,

audible, facing the front, and looking confident.

### Enjoyment

I would definitely recommend a WebQuest. The time spent in preparing your first WebQuest is rewarded by having an excellent resource which can be used again and again, providing an environment for students to take control of their own learning and work collaboratively and communicatively, even at Entry 1. Think carefully about the task and have three or four preparation classes so that lack of technical skills doesn't hinder the learning, then enjoy a motivated, enthused group of people learning from and with each other.

(1) Dodge, B. (1997) Some Thoughts About WebQuests San Diego State University [http://edweb.sdsu.edu/courses/edtec596/about\\_WebQuests.html](http://edweb.sdsu.edu/courses/edtec596/about_WebQuests.html) (accessed 16 Aug 2004)

(2) <http://aclresources.net/webquests/>

(3) [www.aclresources.net/pitman/index.html](http://www.aclresources.net/pitman/index.html)

(4) [www.aclresources.net/inroads/index.html](http://www.aclresources.net/inroads/index.html)

them opportunities for meaningful goal-oriented interaction in English, through which they encountered and learnt new vocabulary, gained confidence in asking questions in English and worked together to write for an audience on the website.

### CyberLab

Steve Harris and his colleagues at the Centre for Astronomy and Science Education at the University of Glamorgan have been developing an approach to integrating digital technologies into basic skills teaching. (4)

"CyberLab is an experimental ICT -based course in which learners work to improve their basic skills in reading, writing, numeracy and ICT while exploring a series of topics in science, technology and mathematics. These topics are made relevant to learners' lives through practical, technology-mediated engagement."

Classes are based around a central concept such as 'algorithm' or 'communication and control'. There is usually some direct skills instruction eg for new programming commands, a new software package, or specialised features of Word. This prepares the way for a practical activity which might involve the planning, research, and carrying out of an experiment or simulation, where learners (in pairs or small groups) observe, record and discuss results.

Learners use software tools such as Logo, Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Internet Explorer; Fractal Explorer and various online interactive applications. They also use pens,

paper, calculators and measuring equipment and produce models in paper and cardboard. In the latter part of the session, learners present their findings, with question-and-answer sessions and whole-group discussions.

We observed one class where the tutor discussed the Fibonacci sequence. Learners wrote the number pattern in a table in Word, explored the existence of the Fibonacci sequence in naturally occurring phenomena (such as petals) through digital photography, drew spirals based on the sequence with pen and paper, and programmed a Fibonacci sequence generator in Logo.(5)

CyberLab maintained a high level of involvement from its learners, with no-one dropping out. Learners showed evidence of gains in literacy, numeracy, and ICT as well as developing skills such as planning, stepwise problem-solving, and self-evaluation.

(1) See Mellar, H., Kambouri, M., Sanderson, M., and Pavlou, V. (2004) ICT and adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL. London: NRDC. Available at: [www.nrdc.org.uk/uploads/documents/doc\\_258.pdf](http://www.nrdc.org.uk/uploads/documents/doc_258.pdf)

(2) For more information on WebQuests see: [www.aclearn.net/content/toolkits/webquests/](http://www.aclearn.net/content/toolkits/webquests/),

(3) For more on the m-learning project see [www.m-learning.org/](http://www.m-learning.org/)

(4) For more about this work see [case.glam.ac.uk/CASE/StaffPages/SteveHarris/SRH.html](http://case.glam.ac.uk/CASE/StaffPages/SteveHarris/SRH.html)

(5) For a straightforward account of the Fibonacci sequence, see [www.schoolnet.ca/vp-pv/amof/e\\_fibol.htm](http://www.schoolnet.ca/vp-pv/amof/e_fibol.htm)



**Learners  
found the  
use of state-  
of-the-art  
gadgets  
engaging and  
motivating.**

# Hip Hop megastars blend with Blake and Beowulf in FE classrooms in Sheffield

Engaging young people in *Skills for Life* courses is a challenge faced by organisations across the country. To address this problem, tutors at Sheffield College have developed an innovative course based on popular culture. Here **Julie Hooper** describes the impact of the Rap/Poetry unit of the course.

Young People Speak Out is a *Skills for Life* curriculum developed by the tutors at Sheffield College with the support of the School of Education at Sheffield University via the NRDC's Practitioner-Led Research Initiative. The curriculum is built around issues of youth and popular culture and is designed to encourage 16-19 year olds with below grade D in GCSE English to continue with literacy and language skills using ILT. The themes are all mapped to both the Core Curriculum standards and the GCSE English descriptors; students work towards the national tests but grade C at GCSE English remains a longer-term goal for some.

Students are particularly motivated by the theme in our Rap/ Poetry unit that teaches language and basic literacy by exploring Hip Hop lyrics and culture.

## Hip Hop in Sheffield

Hip Hop has a prestigious place in the hearts of educators in Sheffield. Last March, The College, Sheffield LEA and Sheffield University joined forces to put teenage Hip Hop rappers from the USA onstage in Sheffield with local rappers in Sheffield's theatres. Their performance was a celebration of the creative talents of young people with a passion for creating Hip Hop rhymes and rhythms. It was also a recognition that Hip Hop is more than a multi million dollar industry that glamorises violence and materialism; it is a form of lyrical composition that requires verbal dexterity and mastery of language. Competitiveness with words feature in rap music and the skills of 'freewheeling' where young people verbally spar to see who is the



Doing my own Rap really helped to improve my English.



## PLRI – Practitioner-Led Research Initiative

NRDC, supported by ESF "Skills for Work and Life" funding, has been able to establish a nationally coordinated series of small-scale practitioner-led research projects over the next three years.

The aims of the programme are to:

- build research capacity in the field
- embed the activities of the NRDC in practice
- undertake important small-scale research projects which contribute to NRDC's overall programmes

- strengthen research networks linking practitioners, researchers and policy agencies.

The programme is aimed at groups of between three and six people who are directly involved in the delivery and development of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL in any institutional setting anywhere across England. Collaborations between institutions are welcome, including links with HE Institutions

Six small-scale projects are funded in each of three bidding rounds, with up to £10,000 available for each nine-month

project. Each year will address a different priority topic. The first bidding round was completed in February 2004; the projects address social exclusion and how we can stimulate demand for learning, under the heading "New ways of reaching new groups of learners". Round two projects are currently being selected on the subject of "Understanding Purpose and Perseverance – Learners' Aspirations and Commitment to Learning".

For details, see [www.nrdc.org.uk/content.asp?CategoryID=426](http://www.nrdc.org.uk/content.asp?CategoryID=426)

quickest, the slickest, the most entertaining user of words is part of the cultural capital of many young students in our colleges.

### The Rap/Poetry unit

We wrote the Rap/ Poetry unit of the ‘Young People Speak Out’ curriculum to take advantage of the high status rap music has with young people. Hip Hop lyrics are used to teach stylistic features; imagery, assonance, alliteration, rhythmic structure and rhyme are taught while basic literacy (vowels, consonants, blends, syllables and spelling) is embedded. Students also apply the language techniques to their own writing. The curriculum is available both online and on paper in the form of student workbooks which capture the design elements of teenage magazines.

The lyrics of global giants such as Eminem and African American rapper, Nas, are juxtaposed with poetry from the literary canon such as William Blake’s ‘Infant Sorrow’. Ideas in Eminem are traced back to the classical tradition, for example the story of Atlas. Features of rap are compared with features found in Beowulf.

### Seamus Heaney on Eminem

The unit begins with the study of a newspaper interview with poet Seamus Heaney who extols the verbal skills of rap artiste, Eminem. When asked if there was an artiste today who informed young people’s thinking about lyrics in the way that Bob Dylan and John Lennon did in the sixties and seventies Heaney answered:

"There is this guy Eminem. He has created a sense of what is possible. He has sent a voltage around a generation. He has done this not just through his subversive attitude but also his verbal energy".

We focus on the language Heaney uses to describe Eminem then introduce the work of black American rapper, Nas. Following a series of international chart hits, Nas is also part of mainstream popular culture. We study the lyrics of a less well-known piece called ‘Fetus’ (sic). Nas imagines himself in the womb, waiting, preparing for birth, commenting upon his family and society .

### Nas and William Blake

We then make thematic connections between ‘Fetus’ and William Blake’s ‘Infant Sorrow’. Students recognise that both poets explore the imaginary idea of a baby having a privileged insight into its own birth and the society it’s born into ; both place the birth in an impoverished urban setting, albeit two hundred years apart. Similarities and differences between the babies’ birth experiences, the parents’ reactions to the births and the socio-historical context are discussed.

Stylistic comparisons between the lyrics and the poem lead into discussion about why one gets called a



Above: Young Delaware rappers in Sheffield’s Crucible Theatre

Opposite page: Students opt into literacy at the Sheffield College

Right: Classroom wall display



poem and the other a rap. An interesting dimension is that Hip Hop itself claims the words ‘rhymes’ and ‘poems’ in its discourse so ‘poems’ in this context have high status with many young people.

### Styles and genres

We then introduce an informative text about the history and styles of rap music. Our main purpose is to teach the concept of genre through discussion of the different genres found in rap, particularly Party rap, Message rap, News rap, Boast rap and Gangsta rap. Students get to identify the genre in lyrics by American rapper E Attack called ‘Partytime’. Interesting discussions can happen about the music industry’s exploitation of gangsta imagery ; students acknowledge thinking that ‘gangsta and ‘bling’ was all that Hip Hop was about.

Next the Rap/Poetry unit explores the ‘boast’ genre through ‘Partytime’, where E Attack ‘boasts’ about his verbal skills. ‘Boasting’ and exaggerating are presented as a stylistic convention in literature and oracy that has ancient and cross-cultural roots ; translated extracts of Beowulf are used for comparison. Beowulf boasts that he can kill the monster Grendel single- handed, where whole armies have failed. →



I enjoyed the topic. It’s a good way to teach because it relates to your people’s culture. I’ve always listened to Rap outside the classroom.



Left: Sheffield rappers stress the importance of education

The unit then moves on to Message Rap. In Nas's international chart hit, 'I Can' he has the following message for young men about literacy:

**Young boys, you can use a lot of help,  
you know  
You thinkin' life's all about smokin'  
weed and ice  
You don't wanna be my age and can't  
read and write  
Begging different women for a place to  
sleep at night**

#### **The lyrics of Eminem**

The Rap/Poetry unit now builds upon the language features it introduced earlier, through a study of Eminem lyrics. In 'Sing for the Moment' from the 'Eminem Show', Eminem describes the reaction that some American parents have when they discover their sons listening to his music.

**These ideas are nightmares for white  
parents  
Whose worst fear is a child with dyed  
hair and who likes earrings  
Like whatever they say has no bearing  
It's so scary in a house that allows no  
swearing  
To see him walking around with his  
headphones blaring  
Alone in his own zone, cold and he don't  
care**

We use the text to stimulate discussion about adult perceptions of youth culture. The extract is excellent for demonstrating sound effects in language, especially assonance. We also used this text to introduce a substantial section on the different spellings of vowel

sounds. Imagery is later introduced through Eminem's words:

**And I just know that I grow colder the  
older I grow.  
This boulder on my shoulder gets heavy  
and harder to hold,  
and this load is like the weight of the world,  
and I think my neck is breaking**

For centuries, western poets have found inspiration in the classical tradition; our students are given the story of Atlas and contemplate whether or not Eminem is consciously drawing inspiration from the myth.

Although teachers encourage students to write creatively in rap form whenever the opportunity arises, the Rap/ Poetry unit concludes with an exercise that gets the students writing rap in a genre of their choice and including stylistic techniques they have learned – imagery assonance, etc.

#### **Conclusion**

Did the unit engage young people and help them develop language and skills? This is partly what the NRDC Practitioner Research will help us find out and we will be able to share our results at the PLRI event in London on 7 December, 2004. 📌

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The Sheffield team would love to hear from fellow practitioners who try out some of these ideas or who would be interested in either a fuller description of the language and literacy activities used or the way that ILT is used to engage young students in literacy.



**I was  
interested in  
learning  
about  
Eminem and  
Rap. It's our  
sort of stuff.  
Not boring  
like  
Shakespeare.**

# What is ethnography?

Social and educational researchers use a wide variety of methods. This article is the first in a series which will give a short introduction to some of the more widely-used of these methods. Here, **David Barton** of Lancaster University introduces ethnography.

Ethnographers take a detailed look at what is going on in a social setting. This is essential in educational research when studying complicated places like classrooms or trying to understand situations with many influences, such as the effects of learning on people's lives.

Researchers tend to talk of 'ethnographic approaches', as there isn't a single method. An ethnographer in the classroom, for example, is likely to combine detailed observation over time with in-depth interviews; teachers and learners may also be involved in photography or by keeping diaries of their learning as part of the research. A central aspect of ethnography is that it is interested in participants' perspectives – What do learners think is going on? How do they make sense of an activity such as filling in a learning plan? – and it is not setting out to be evaluative. When looking at test results, for example, the ethnographer is interested in all the answers; if there are errors of spelling or punctuation, there is usually a reason and it makes sense in some way. The ethnographer is also interested in the big picture of how activities fit into people's whole lives and will try to look, for example, at the reasons behind why people choose to participate or not participate in formal learning activities, and whether or not they make an effort to do so. Such issues may only become evident over time.

## Collaborative ethnography

Ethnographic research has to be tailored to specific situations; the approaches used in a classroom with beginning students may be very different from those used with people



**Ethnography is interested in participants' perspectives – What do learners think is going on? How do they make sense of an activity such as filling in a learning plan?**

attending a drugs rehabilitation centre. In the work we have done at Lancaster we have developed methods of collaborative ethnography where we work with teachers and learners. They are involved in developing the research questions, in carrying out the research and in the analysis and impact activities. This is demanding and time-consuming work; it involves establishing good relations with people and being respectful of them. In the end it can be highly effective if the participants in some sense own the research and it can then have a great impact at all levels, from the individual learners through to the college and to policy-makers. An example of this work is the case study we carried out of people seeking asylum and refugee status in an ESOL classroom, which is being published by NRDC. Teachers and learners were involved in this research; they found it of value and it led to practical changes

in classroom management, in college support and in inter-agency relations in the town. It also had implications for national policy.

In the Adult Learners' Lives project we have been working longitudinally with learners in different situations for the past two years. Teachers who have worked as teacher-researchers have found the detailed examination of their practice invaluable. Even whilst we are still in the middle of the research, the approach, the methods and the data we have on learners' lives have all been of value to teachers and managers in other contexts.

Ethnography provides a detailed understanding of specific situations which make sense to people and which can have an immediate effect on practice. It provides research methods which practitioners and learners can use to research their own activities.

## Broader implications

A study in a specific situation also has broader implications. These have to be worked out from situation to situation; ethnographic research avoids making sweeping generalisations. More than this, it can provide a space to examine constructs such as 'motivation' and 'engagement'; crucially, it can change the way we talk about a problem. It can also provide understanding of complex situations and it locates explanations in their cultural context; in this way it complements other broader research, such as research done through surveys. Ethnography is an important approach in the array of methods available to educational researchers and one which is growing in importance. ▣

## NRDC publications

All publications are available for download from the "Publications" page on the website [www.nrdc.org.uk](http://www.nrdc.org.uk) and by post. To be sent copies and/ or added to our mailing list, email us at [publications@nrdc.org.uk](mailto:publications@nrdc.org.uk)

### Recent

Teaching and learning writing: a review of research and practice.

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) – case studies of provision, learners' needs and resources.

ICT and adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL.

Developmental dyslexia in adults; a research review.

Adult literacy learners' difficulties in reading: an exploratory study.

NRDC newsletter September 2004.

### Forthcoming

Success factors in informal learning – Young adults' experiences of literacy, language and numeracy. Interim findings from the YALP research project. *Six page leaflet.*

**October 04**

'Beyond The Daily Application': Making numeracy teaching meaningful to adult learners.

**January 05**

Supporting successful outcomes with literacy, numeracy and other key skills in Foundation and Advanced Modern Apprenticeships. *Evaluation report.*

**November 04**

Improving the literacy and numeracy of young offenders and disaffected young people: the first 18 months of the study.

**January 05**

Success factors in informal education: young adults' experience of literacy, language and numeracy. *Full interim report.*

**November 04**

Study of the Impact of the **Skills for Life** Learning Infrastructure on Learners.

**January 05**

Empowering Mentors - Building opportunities for bilingual adults to work in the wider community.

**December 04**

Assessing adult literacy and numeracy: a review of assessment instruments.

**February 05**

'Measurement wasn't taught when they built the pyramids'. The report of the NRDC teacher research project into the teaching and learning common measures, especially at Entry Level.

**January 05**

Provision of, and learner engagement with, adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL support in rural England; a comparative case study.

**February 05**

# Glossary

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**C&G 9281** An introductory certificate in teaching communication skills to adults that predates the current qualification framework; roughly equivalent to current level 2

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**CTAD** Cambridge Training and Development

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**E1** Entry Level 1 on the Adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL core curricula

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**E2** Entry Level 2 on the Adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL core curricula

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**ESOL** English for speakers of other languages

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**GCSE** General Certificate of Secondary Education

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**IATEFL** International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language

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**ILP** Individual Learning Plan; document used to plan and record a student's learning

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**LEA** Local Education Authority

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**LLU+** a national consultancy and professional development centre for staff working in the areas of literacy, numeracy, dyslexia, family learning and English for Speakers of Other Languages. See <http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/lluplus/>

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**LSC** Learning and Skills Council; responsible for funding and planning education and training for learners over 16 years old in England

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**MoD** Ministry of Defence (UK)

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**NATECLA** National Association for Teaching English and other Community Languages to Adults; the national (UK) forum and professional organisation for ESOL practitioners

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**NIACE** The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education – England and Wales; a non-governmental organisation working for more and different adult learners. See <http://www.niace.org.uk/>

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**OFSTED** a non-ministerial government department with responsibility for the inspection of all schools and all 16-19 education

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**PGCE / Cert Ed** Non-subject-specific qualifications that give qualified teacher status

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**PLRA** Planning Learning and Recording Achievement in Adult Literacy, Numeracy and ESOL; DfES project led by LSDA. See <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/LearningInfrastructurePlanningLearning>

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**Skills for Life** The national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills in England

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## Get in touch

In issue 2 of **reflect** we would like to include a letters page so please write to us with your views on the articles in issue 1 or anything else you would like to explore. We also plan to have a reviews section - would you like to write a review for us? What would you like to read a review about? Please email **[publications@nrdc.org.uk](mailto:publications@nrdc.org.uk)**

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