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#### **About NRDC**

NRDC is the national independent research and development centre for adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL. Its aim is to improve professional practice and inform policy, from a robust evidence base. NRDC brings together research and development to improve the quality of teaching and learning, and extend adults' educational and employment opportunities. Widely recognised for its expertise within England, the centre has an international reputation and works across the UK and worldwide.

Initially established in 2002 by the UK government as part of its Skills for Life strategy to improve the literacy, numeracy and language skills of adults in England, NRDC benefits from long-standing partnerships with a wide range of research centres and national agencies. Based at the Institute of Education, University of London, NRDC was joined in 2008 by the London Strategic Unit for the Learning and Skills Workforce (LSU), further strengthening its development expertise.

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Cover illustration:  
Clive Goodyer

I've never been one for superstition. But even I'm reconsidering my stance after the extended delay that has befallen issue 13 of *reflect*. However, a year in gestation has resulted in a bumper output – our largest issue ever – and the important opportunity for you, the readers, to be involved in shaping the future of the magazine. Turn to the centre pages to fill in our survey, or complete it online at [www.nrdc.org.uk/reflectSurvey](http://www.nrdc.org.uk/reflectSurvey)

As we go to press, the new coalition government is announcing the first round of spending cuts. Whatever decisions are made, it's reasonable to assume that there will be reduced public spending which will inevitably impact on the adult learning sector. The ramifications of the recession will be felt for some time, but ultimately, as the need for ever-more skilled workers increases, we can see that the demand for LLN teaching will not go away. In this context, our Special Report theme of Employability feels very pertinent, with comment from Ireland and New Zealand, as well as views from employers, unions and providers here in the UK.

We've followed up on last issue's CPD focus with an example from Scotland of a potentially low-cost, far-reaching initiative (p18). We also responded to positive feedback on our Media feature with more information about NALA's use of TV to engage literacy learners in Ireland (p26).

Elsewhere in the issue we highlight the creative use of poetry (p15); showcase three different views on working with learners in the secure estate (pp29–35) – two from first-time contributors to *reflect*; and we share insights into differing views on the use of phonics with adult learners (p21). There should be something for everyone in this issue – please tell us what you think via the survey, or email us at [info@nrdc.org.uk](mailto:info@nrdc.org.uk)

**Helen Casey, Executive Director, NRDC**

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# It's all about the attitude

**Helen Casey and Moya Wilkie explore the myths and misunderstandings around teaching employability skills**

It's definitely the 21st century. Our working patterns have changed fundamentally since our parents' generation, and few people now expect a 'job for life'. But while the concept of 'lifetime employment' may have disappeared offstage, lifetime employability is waiting in the wings. The issue for adult LLN\* teachers is how to help develop learners' skills and potential so they can take centre stage – as lead actor and director combined.

## Definitions

Employability is an amorphous concept. And in the current climate one that many have been interested in pinning down. We're used to reading reports deploring the large numbers of school-leavers lacking the 'right skills'. So what are employers looking for? The UKCES\* report on employability<sup>1</sup> demonstrated the range of understandings imputed to the term by analysing 20 definitions. As might be expected, a wide variety of themes emerged, but some kept recurring – communication, literacy, numeracy and IT\*, initiative, problem-solving and teamworking – and from this, UKCES built their new definition, illustrated below:

By dividing the elements of employability into a foundational attitude, three functional skills, and four personal skills, UKCES highlighted a key question for adult LLN teachers: which of these can (and should) we teach – and if so, how?

## Covering the basics

We're all familiar with 'employability' classes which in reality teach job search skills: CV-writing, interview techniques etc. These are important, valid elements of supporting individuals to gain work, or move between jobs. Some classes include IT – also a useful area of skills development for most people in the UK today. But employability has at least two other dimensions: it needs to encompass the support people need to retain a job, maintaining and developing their skills once in employment, to fulfil their employers', and their own, needs; and it must address the skills less easily taught – those that have often been tagged as 'soft' skills. The UKCES model clearly emphasises the importance of a positive approach, which underpins all the required skills but is a somewhat nebulous foundation. The next 'layer' – of functional skills – is tangible and

measurable. On the top layer – the personal skills – we return to less quantifiable terrain.

## Teaching attitudes

So how can we teach these skills? There may be a definable core but the critical surround is less concrete, less straightforward to include in teaching. Discrete modules on employability aren't necessarily the way forward – the approach needs to permeate all teaching practice, so that an understanding of teamwork and self-management, as well as the benefits of a positive approach, are gained as part and parcel of other sessions.

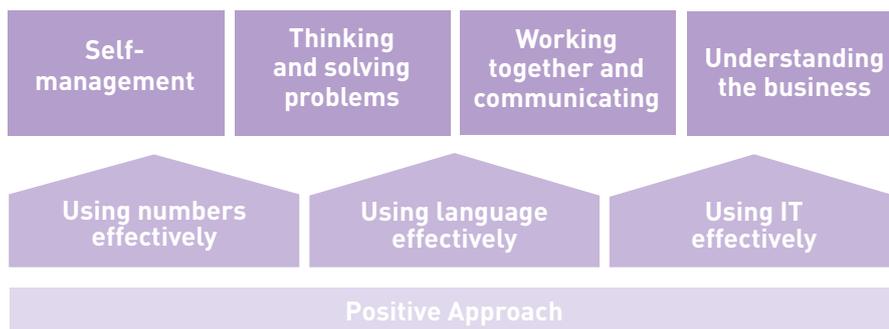
## Everything's relative

It doesn't help that in the employability market, there are no absolutes. Mastering skills is no guarantee of employment, as everyone is positioned in the market relative to others, who – especially in a recession – will also be retraining and upskilling themselves. But this is where attitude and self-awareness are crucial. Once the skills to learn are learnt, people wanting to find work or improve within existing employment will be able to adapt their knowledge to a changing context. We may not need to explicitly teach classes on employability, but if we can support learners to obtain the necessary skills through an embedded employability curriculum, then they will be better equipped to secure 'jobs throughout life'.

**Helen Casey is Executive Director at NRDC. Moya Wilkie is editor of *reflect*.**

(1) UKCES (2009) *The Employability Challenge*. London: UKCES

\* See Glossary p46



# In work and out: the importance of ESOL

**Anne McKeown describes how union-supported ESOL training can have impact beyond the workplace**

Recent policy on ESOL\* has focused on its importance in relation to community cohesion. But ESOL is also of huge importance in supporting the employability and skills agenda. That is the strong belief of an NRDC/ TUC unionlearn team, who have spent the last 12 months investigating ESOL training in the workplace.

## Project activity

The project aimed to:

- consider models of delivery;
- promote ESOL in the workplace;
- demonstrate benefits to employers and wider society;
- provide strategic recommendations for policy, employers, stakeholders eg providers, sector skills council, unions;
- examine the unionlearn role in ESOL learning.

The team gathered information about how provision has been developed, the size and shape of the ESOL courses, and the models of working between unions, employers and providers.

## Union messages

Trade unions have a long history of promoting learning at work and have actively promoted and supported the role of Union Learning Representatives (ULRs). Unions see ESOL as a means of promoting equality and inclusion in the workplace and of countering disadvantage and exploitation of vulnerable workers.

Trade unions have been involved in negotiating learning partnerships with employers, raising awareness of the need for ESOL and supporting

the establishment and maintenance of provision. Unions have consistently argued the case for ESOL in terms of improved productivity, lower absenteeism and improved operational efficiency. Unions provided examples of people going on from ESOL training at work to other types of training, as well as becoming ULRs themselves and promoting training opportunities with their colleagues.

## Employers' opinions

Employers cited various reasons for supporting the training – primarily better communication between employees and their colleagues and managers. They are aware of the value of good relations in contributing to a positive working environment for all, and the associated benefits of improved attendance and retention.

Other reasons given include compliance with legislation, such as health and safety or hygiene regulations, and working towards quality standards or charters such as customer service: all areas where a good working knowledge of English is important. They also report 'soft' outcomes of training such as employees being more likely to greet colleagues and join in work activities such as team meetings.

## Learners' views

Without exception, the learners value the training and want more of it. Some had attended college-based ESOL courses before they found work, which they had to leave because of time constraints and shift patterns. Making training more accessible by placing it in the workplace has been a successful move.

Learners want to develop their English, to help them in their lives outside work, but also to help them function better at work. The London bus drivers interviewed all identified writing reports and memos as an important goal for them, with one describing his wish to do this independently:

'if I knew how to write better then I can do myself ... I don't have to wait for others to come and check it ... people they don't have time to talk here ... everybody busy here.'

Learners described their learning at work as just one step on a journey: many of them intended to continue studying and had identified further learning they needed in order to help them improve their job prospects. One person described completing homework alongside their family – thus extending the reach of the learning opportunity outside the workplace.

Learners and teachers alike commented on the difficulty of gaining a qualification in such a short time, and their wish for longer courses. Current funding for workplace training through Train to Gain mediates towards shorter courses, often of no more than 30 hours.

## Sharing good practice

While acknowledging that there are extreme challenges in supporting ESOL in the workplace, due to issues of funding, qualification outcomes, size of cohorts, range of needs, and employee release time, the project has still been remarkably successful in finding many examples of interesting and valuable practices.

These practical approaches were shared with practitioners at an event in February and further dissemination is planned for later this year. The project report, including recommendations for the way forward for ESOL in the workplace, is with BIS\* for consideration.

**Anne McKeown is Development Manager at NRDC**

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\* See Glossary p46



# Employability across the organisation

**Grant Glendinning describes City and Islington College's employability initiatives in Skills for Life**

Two years ago, a report by the London Skills and Employability Board (LSEB), presented a mixed picture for adults with low skills or no qualifications.<sup>1</sup> Against a backdrop where worklessness<sup>2</sup> was higher in London than the rest of the UK, the LSEB forecast that by 2020, 50% of jobs would require Level 4 or higher qualifications, with a skills gap which would continue to attract well-qualified migrants to the capital, both from the UK and from abroad. However, the report also predicted a continued, stable demand for low-skilled, service-sector labour.

Fast forward to the post-Woolworths world and a more depressing scene emerges. With national unemployment running at its highest rate for 14 years (2.47 million people in the three months to August 2009),<sup>3</sup> the challenges of equipping Londoners to compete successfully for jobs are now being faced on much tougher terrain.

## Defining 'employability'

In recent years 'employability' programmes have become ubiquitous. Yet despite popularity with funders, there often appears to be confusion as to what employability is and who these programmes are designed for. Promotional materials describe activities such as writing CVs or job applications, and interview practice, all features we might associate more with a 'job search' programme. National initiatives such as Skills for Jobs advocate short interventions with assisted job search, but these programmes mainly offer lifelines to the recently redundant or the job-ready unemployed.

Tutors of quality vocational courses can describe at length how they have integrated employability and workplace arrangements, but these elements have been around far longer than the employability agenda. In fact, to gain a qualification in Childcare or Hair and Beauty, what learners must demonstrate is that they have acquired

those crucial 'soft skills' that employers from all sectors say they want, such as teamworking, problem-solving, communication and time-keeping. To facilitate employability in the modern workplace it should be these attributes that we foster. This holds especially true for learners on literacy, numeracy and ESOL\* courses who are often those furthest away from employment.

## Soft skills for life and work

Over the last two academic years, City and Islington College has used funding from the London Employability Demonstration Pilots (EDPs) and the ESOL Transition Fund (ETF) to integrate soft skills into Skills for Life provision.<sup>4</sup>

Tutors on ESOL programmes map their schemes of work to an Employability Skills Checklist. This allows tutors to identify and highlight more explicitly how existing teaching activities foster soft skills and simulate real-life work situations. The checklist also encourages tutors to reflect on

their practice, identifying gaps and opportunities. For example, it might expose a need for input on Time Management or Handling Money, or encourage tutors to invite external speakers or seek help for individuals with work placements. Employability materials which tutors have designed and used are now being shared across programmes.

Employability initiatives are supported by staff training focused not only on using tools like the checklist but also on the nature of soft skills themselves. At CPD\* inset days, staff trained as part of the Deloitte Employability Programme discuss how pedagogy can foster these skills in learners.

An employability plan acts as an interface between learners, their tutors and the college's careers service, which has responded positively to the fact that referrals come to them having begun an initial exploration of their background and motivation.

**Across the Skills for Life programme, learners who want to move towards employment are encouraged to initiate an Individual Employability Plan that articulates goals which are employment rather than specifically curriculum-related.**

For these initiatives to be effective, opportunities for contact with external organisations and employers must be maximised. Representatives from local volunteering and support agencies have been invited to coffee mornings and to lessons, signing up referrals on the spot; a local business has conducted mock interviews; and work placements have been arranged. Third sector, council, community and private organisations have all proved keen to help where possible. Learners report increased confidence, motivation and enthusiasm to find paid employment after completing placements.

Of course, being able to enhance Skills for Life programmes in these ways is dependent on adequate resourcing and funding, and the dedication and support of tutors is paramount.

**Grant Glendinning is Deputy Director (Employer Engagement and Teacher Training) at the Centre for Lifelong Learning in City and Islington College**

(1) The London Skills and Employment Board (2007) *Globalisation, Skills and Employment: The London Story*, [www.london.gov.uk/lseb/docs/thelondonstory.pdf](http://www.london.gov.uk/lseb/docs/thelondonstory.pdf)

(2) Worklessness is not the same as unemployment: it includes those defined as economically inactive (eg people who are sick or disabled, students, people looking after families or retired) and therefore equals the number of people not in employment.

(3) Office for National Statistics, 14 October 2009

(4) See LSC\* report: [http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/Lsc/London/Employability\\_Demonstration\\_pilots\(final\\_web\\_version\).pdf](http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/Lsc/London/Employability_Demonstration_pilots(final_web_version).pdf)

\* See Glossary p46

## Employability at City and Islington College: case study

I started teaching on the Start Your Own Business and ESOL Level 1 course in 2006. The course combines practical information about setting up and running a business with a chance for students to work on their written and spoken English while gaining a nationally recognised literacy qualification.

Learners receive input from an experienced accountant and use SAGE software, the industry standard computerised book-keeping tool. All aspects of preparing and producing a business plan are covered, including market research, customer service, budgeting, etc.

Input from people that have actually experienced setting up a business is really valued by the learners, so I invite former participants back to talk to the group. During the course I encourage learners to attend as many industry events as possible and to seek support from their local business venture, where they can access funding and attend free workshops, etc.



During the course the group have to produce a mini-business plan, as well as create a leaflet or poster to promote their product or service. These are then displayed in the classroom. Learners tend to come full of fantastic and often ambitious ideas but can sometimes struggle to present a convincing argument for funding in formal English. We therefore ask them to give a 15-minute presentation about their project before the class votes on whether they would invest in the business. Students consistently give positive feedback on this: they enjoy practicing their presentation skills and building confidence before actually applying for grants and loans.

A lot of learners have years of professional knowledge from their own countries but struggle to find work in their area of expertise in the UK. As part of the course learners are asked to focus on their skills and experience and why they are suitable for the type of business they want to set up. We do a lot of work on descriptive writing techniques, which helps them to improve their personal statements and CVs.

Past participants on the course have since set up their own businesses, including a coffee shop in Camden and an international website selling electronic products. Perhaps more importantly, most participants leave the course with increased confidence about their skills and abilities and many find work or go on to further training in their chosen area.

**Lucy Oakley is talent's Website Manager at NRDC**

# Doing it for themselves

## Sarah Hunt explains how HealthcareInitial's in-house training is just what the doctor ordered

Like many people, Alison left school with poor literacy and numeracy skills. After taking time out to care for her children, her first job on returning to the labour market was as a part-time cleaner. Little did she imagine that, further down the line, she'd be managing 200 staff.

Alison progressed in her job through a learning journey assisted by her employer, HealthcareInitial (HI). From a health and safety perspective alone, HI could see a pressing need to improve the skills level of their workforce. And with 4,000 employees based at 500 sites across the UK, 95% of whom work on cleaning and catering contracts for the NHS\*, HI saw a clear business case for investing in training.

### Starting at the beginning

At the outset, HI supported employees to improve their literacy and numeracy skills, and then began offering NVQs\* in Customer Service, Business Administration and Management. This range of courses will soon expand to include cookery and nutritional classes, touch rugby and general fitness training.

Learners first take a full initial assessment to place them at the right level on the appropriate programme, which might consist of either one-to-one or group sessions. Those who require additional help such as dyslexia or Entry level support are signposted to their nearest college or adult learning service.

### In-house trainers

Successful programme delivery was due to the creation of the InitialFirst Learning and Development Centre. After a partnership with an external training provider proved unsuccessful, the decision was made to bring control in-house. HI also had a clear idea of the flexibility they required from an awarding



### Achievements

Up to 300 Skills for Life qualifications have been delivered

Nearly 1000 staff have engaged in Level 2/3 NVQs

Successful pilot of ESOL\* for Work qualification with 100 employees had an 86% success rate and is now being rolled out across the company

Staff turnover has reduced

A 13% reduction in accident reporting in the first year alone

body, and negotiated with several until they found what they needed.

Measures have been taken to make learning both convenient and relevant for employees. For example, assessors are allocated to each of HI's sites, and all HI's contracts guarantee that a staff training room is provided on each site.

HI made the decision to subsidise training so that all potential learners are able to access learning opportunities.

They pay for employees who are not eligible for funding through Train to Gain to keep consistency and momentum throughout the business.

### Model for success

At the core of the scheme are ground rules to which HI hold fast. No compulsion – this is a self-referral programme, with initial information delivered discretely to employees via flyers in pay packs and posters in the canteen. Two hours per week – one from the employee's own time, matched by an hour from work-time. And an absolute focus on business relevance – classes concentrate on helping employees understand the terms and conditions of their contracts, or how to calculate ratios needed to mix cleaning fluids.

After the initial start, the programme has grown through word of mouth. Learners encourage and support each other, thereby reducing any perceived stigma around participation.

### Driving force

Much of this success can be credited to the direction of Mike Jepson, who joined Initial Hospital Services in 1993 and became Managing Director in 2000. The creation of InitialFirst Learning was part of the company's new vision and values strategy, and the name itself was part of the message. By placing the focus on the organisation and its business needs, rather than emphasising that employees needed to learn 'core' or 'life' skills, or come onto a 'programme', HI believed – and seem to have demonstrated – that they could break down potential barriers to learning.

**Sarah Hunt is Director of Synergy4Skills**  
[www.synergy4skills.com](http://www.synergy4skills.com)

\* See Glossary p46



# Transferring literacy skills in the workplace

**John Benseman describes a study from New Zealand that assesses whether lessons learnt in the classroom reach the workplace**

Implicit, if not explicit, in most workplace training programmes is the assumption that the knowledge and skills taught are not only internalised by the participants, but also transferred back into the workplace, with a resultant improvement in work performance by the workers and cumulatively for employers. There is, however, very little research evidence about how much this transfer of learning actually occurs and what factors might impede or facilitate this process. A recent study from New Zealand sought to provide some insights into this process.

Based in Auckland, Fletcher Aluminium employs approximately 200 staff most of whom come from low-skill backgrounds. Eighty-five per cent of employees speak a language other than English (mostly Pacific languages) as their first language. The company began its workplace

## Four levels

The project used Kirkpatrick's evaluation model, in which transfer of new LLN\* skills back into the workplace equates with Level 3.

<b>Level 4: Results</b>	To what degree targeted outcomes occur, as a result of the learning event(s) and subsequent reinforcement.
<b>Level 3: Behaviour</b>	To what degree participants apply what they learned during training when they are back on the job.
<b>Level 2: Learning</b>	To what degree participants acquire the intended knowledge, skills, and attitudes based on their participation in the learning event.
<b>Level 1: Reaction</b>	To what degree participants react favourably to the learning event.

A recent review of this 50-year old model included the observation that 'relatively few [learning professionals] know how to effectively get beyond Level 2. When presenting these concepts to groups of professionals, we often refer to current evaluation practice as 'smile sheets (Level 1), pre and post-tests (Level 2), and hope for the best (Level 3 and Level 4)''.<sup>1</sup>

## Case study

### Coping with calculations

In D's work as a packer, he used to guess totals of products to go into a case or use a calculator (which he used to have to retrieve from another area). The result was an uneven end product because of his inconsistent counting. D has been working on his maths skills with his tutor, particularly multiplication and division. As a result of his improved maths skills, his packing work is now all calculated in multiple lots (bundles of 3, 4 and 5). 'It's made the job easier, I now do it straight from my head. I reckon I do two or three extra cases, not having to go and get a calculator.' He feels much more confident about his maths abilities and their application – 'I'm not scared of them (calculations) any more – I used to run away.' Despite this progress, he still feels he has some way to go – 'I'm nearly in the light, just about there.' He is particularly proud that his workmates now get him to check their figures.

## Case study

### Emailing with confidence

C has been working on his reading and spelling skills with the tutor. He has reached a point now where he feels confident enough to start using emails: 'I use them in the mornings now. When we are loading the trucks in the morning, customers send in emails to the dispatch area with last-minute changes and I have to confirm the loads to the customers. I'm still not very good at my typing, but I haven't had any complaints from customers so far.'

## Case study

### Communicating within the team

B says that his improved oral English means that he now gives instructions to temps. He shows and explains procedures by telling rather than just showing, which is what he used to do – 'they understand what I want now'. He also finds his improved English useful for communicating with leading hands and engineers when something goes wrong with machines and quality issues.

He says that only a few people speak up at team meetings about things like safety issues, or to suggest new ideas. As result of practising English on the course and an increase in his vocabulary, he has greater confidence and now speaks up at meetings – 'I'm not a confident person, I didn't talk at team meetings, but I've started to now.'

B is now doing online banking on his home computer as well, which means that he now only rarely has to visit his bank. He also says that his own progress has made him appreciate the importance of education for his children – 'one thing I've learned is how important school is for my kids. It might be a bit late for me, but not for them.'

LLN programme four and a half years ago, in response to concerns about understanding company procedures (including health and safety) and product specifications, wastage, interpreting graphs, tracking orders and ensuring on-time delivery.

Following a company-needs analysis, the provider designed a curriculum which was then further interpreted by the tutor in terms of the individual workers' specific job tasks and learning needs. Each participant works one-to-one with the tutor for an hour per week for 48 weeks.

Over a six-month period, the researcher tracked the progress of eight employees who had started a new LLN course in mid-2009. The group comprised one woman and seven men; all born outside New Zealand. Their average age was 43.3, they had been in New Zealand for an average of 20 years and with the company for an average of 7.1 years. Through a series of telephone and face-to-face interviews with the learners and the course tutor, the researchers explored the impact of their LLN learning on their working practices.

#### Transfer of learning to the workplace

All eight learners were able to identify how the teaching content was of direct relevance to their jobs. Even where the content was reasonably generic such as 'phonemic awareness', learners understood why these skills were important in the longer term for their jobs. All the learners reported throughout the study that they felt they were making 'good progress'. The tutor confirmed these observations, with only one person described as 'steady' and one as 'a long road'.

Feedback from the learners and the tutor showed that all the course participants were using at least some of their new skills in their jobs:

- **Use of technology** (computers, including email, health and safety software) which has been steadily increasing in the plant and

replacing paper-based systems.

- **Completion of paperwork** for those still using paper forms (eg daily reports, loading time-sheets, incident reports) has improved.
- **Improved accuracy and efficiency** with calculations and measuring.
- **Better oral communications** which are an important part of ESOL-related issues and the multicultural nature of the workforce.
- **Wider transfer** – a number of the learners also talked about how they were able to use their skills at home.

About half the group specifically mentioned growing independence in their literacy-related work tasks. For example, where previously these learners often asked workmates or supervisors to do (or help with) their paperwork, they were now doing it themselves because their LLN skills had improved. Although the level of progress they had made varied, several reported that they had now reached a point where they were using these skills independently as an integral part of their jobs.

#### Factors linked to transfer

This study identified a number of factors that could facilitate or impede the transfer of learning into people's jobs. While the small sample means that it is not possible to indicate their relative importance, they still provide a useful starting point for follow-on studies.

Teaching content that is based on both a company- and individual-needs analysis is clearly important. If the skills being learned are issues of importance to the learners, then there is a much higher likelihood that learners will be interested in what is being taught and motivated to improve the skills related to these issues.

Linked to this is the degree of contextualisation in the teaching content. Using 'realia' of everyday documents and processes as the medium for teaching LLN skills also increases learner motivation and



minimises the distance between the skill being taught and its application.

The skill level of the learner also influences the amount of time it takes before a skill can be transferred back to the job. If someone is just starting to use computers, it will take some time before they are able to integrate this into daily work routines. Others are closer to applying their skills because their skill levels are higher and therefore more readily transferred.

Along similar lines, the nature of the LLN skill being taught is also a factor. Some LLN skills (eg some aspects of maths) are probably more discrete and can be taught more readily than others (eg poor English pronunciation that is strongly established) and can be more readily transferred.

The worker's environment is clearly important. Supportive supervisors, who encourage workers to practise new skills on the job and provide affirmation for doing so, help transfer. Learners commented that supervisors often become much more supportive when they saw the impact of the course on the learners. It should also be recognised that the learners don't always 'hit the ground running' and may need some time to experiment and consolidate their skills.

A good example of positive environmental factors is incentives. At Fletcher Aluminium, a monthly grocery voucher draw is offered for people who have put in hazard reports. The course participants thought this was a great idea and provided a real incentive to

produce better reports and make these public among their workmates.

The tutor has a central role in the process. In this case, the tutor has worked on-site for four and a half years. Consequently, she knows staff and plant processes well and can ensure an ongoing fit between the teaching content, the learners' needs and the company's aims – 'the longer I'm here, the more relevant I can make it because I understand what they do in their jobs so much better'.

A second feature of the tutor in this programme is her close liaison with the participants' supervisors, providing feedback to them on the learners' progress on the one hand and gaining feedback on job demands/issues from the supervisors on the other. Being on-site for much of the working week, the tutor can clearly have a proactive influence on the transfer process.

Finally, the learners themselves influence the process. Transfer is built on an assumption not only of new skills being learned and a reasonably positive work environment, but also on the learners themselves being motivated to change their work practices as a result. While changing work practices using new skills is probably intrinsically positive in most cases, other factors (eg conditions of employment, personality clashes) can interfere with the process.

Each of these factors warrants further exploration across a range of different work contexts. What can be seen from the present study however, is that transfer of learning does occur, albeit at different speeds and in different ways.

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[1] Kirkpatrick, J. and Kayser Kirkpatrick, W. (2009) *The Kirkpatrick four levels: a fresh look after 50 years, 1959–2009*. [www.managesmarter.com/managesmarter/images/pdfs/trg\\_20090417\\_kirkpatrickwhitepaper.pdf](http://www.managesmarter.com/managesmarter/images/pdfs/trg_20090417_kirkpatrickwhitepaper.pdf)

\* See Glossary p46

# Employability, numeracy and maths: is it all just words?

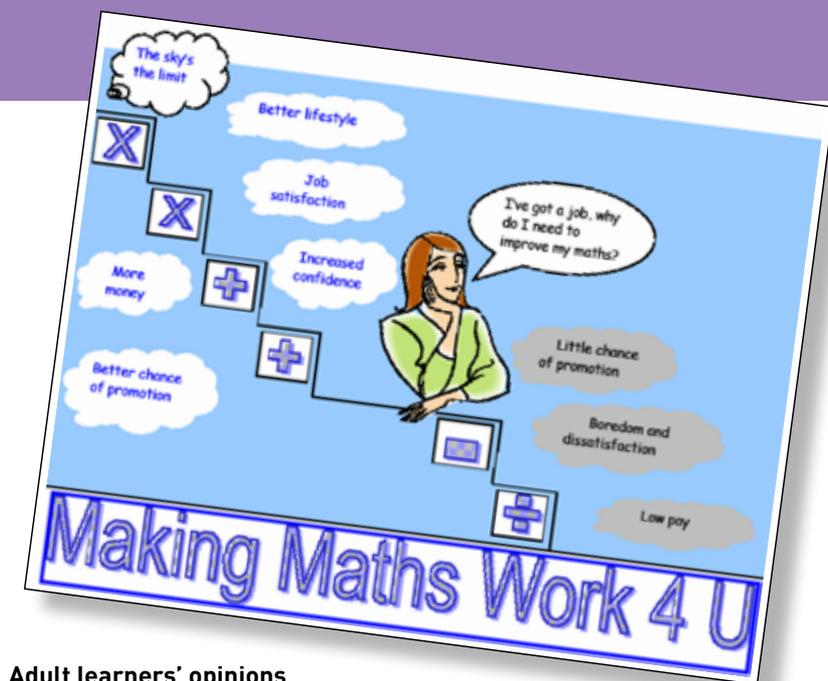
Noyona Chanda argues that instead of worrying about what mathematics and numeracy are, teachers should focus on how learners can gain practical numeracy skills through real-life examples

In the current economic climate, it is worth remembering that the recession was caused, at least in part, by the actions of the most numerate, mathematically-able and highly-employable members of the workforce. This said, the belief is widely-held that having numeracy and problem-solving skills improves individuals' efficiency in the workplace, and may help to improve job and promotion prospects. As part of the Maths4Life project, LLU+\* invited a group of (employed) adult learners to reflect on the subject of numeracy and employability. Their views were gathered onto a poster.

## Developing practical skills

From the learners' point of view, there may be little significant difference between the terms 'numeracy', 'application of number', 'functional maths' and 'functional numeracy'. Most adults would agree that being numerate helps people to function in work, daily life and society, but it is unlikely that they distinguish between being 'numerate' and being 'functionally mathematical', however much a mathematical qualification may be privileged over a numeracy qualification, either by the value system attached to academic qualifications or by employers.

We need to focus instead on ensuring that *whatever* provision an individual



Adult learners' opinions

engages with, whether employability or numeracy skills development, learners develop *practical* skills that can be used independently and effectively to function in work and life contexts. It is the quality of teaching and learning opportunity that will, in the end, determine the extent to which an individual is able to use the mathematical skills they acquire.

Enabling learners to gain practical skills should be the goal of all numeracy and maths teachers in the post-school sector. This goal encompasses the development of mathematical knowledge, skills and conceptual understanding at both a utilitarian as well as an abstract level,

allowing the individual to develop and use mathematical tools and problem-solving processes in real-life contexts, including the creative exploration of mathematical concepts.

## The role of teachers

Implementing this goal is not so difficult. The solution lies in ensuring that all teachers in the sector work towards:

- helping learners to acquire either the skills they need to gain entry into employment or to enhance their readiness for improved employment, and;
- engaging learners in active learning, through discovery, extension, and enrichment.

The techniques teachers use to achieve this should be informed by what is known about how learners learn and not by the kind of provision learners are in or the related funding stream or initiative.

All learners of numeracy, not just those in functional maths provision, are entitled to support that will enable them to function effectively in life and work. But numeracy learners are also entitled to engage with the beauty of maths and enjoy the exploration of mathematical ideas. No matter what level a group of learners is working at, there is scope for using what they already know and can do to enhance problem-solving and reasoning skills, and to apply these to creative and investigative tasks (work-related or otherwise) to develop confident, independent usage of mathematical skills and knowledge. The skills, knowledge and creativity of the teacher can make this happen.

Regarding employability, teachers and trainers need to focus as much on maths usage in work and life situations as on computation skills or abstract problem-solving. This awareness and understanding of maths in use is not something that can be picked up through formal CPD\* alone: it requires the teacher actively noticing the maths around them, and reflecting on the ways in which maths is used in everyday situations. This knowledge can then be used to:

- provide relevant situations for problem-solving practice
- motivate learners to engage with numeracy
- prepare learners for assessments relevant to gaining employment and promotion.

Although many teachers have had jobs other than teaching or training, they often do not draw upon these experiences when trying to establish for learners the relevance of maths to workplace contexts. At LLU+, we addressed this issue in a recent series of CPD events, under the auspices of the Skills for Life Improvement Programme, focusing on numeracy

and employability. Participants were asked to reflect on their non-teaching work experiences and to analyse the tasks and ways in which they used maths skills, knowledge and reasoning in their jobs. These scenarios were used to motivate learners and establish the relevance of particular skills. At each event participants were surprised and interested to learn how different maths skills and knowledge had been used in work contexts.

Groups came up with their top 10 numeracy skills for employability. These 'skills' were expressed as broad areas to avoid any association with assessment target areas and allow the inclusion of particular industry specialisms. All lists included areas like:

- Time and its management
- Finance and its management
- Interpretation of data (analysis and decision-making)
- Communicating numerically
- Computer use for numerical data handling
- Application of mathematics in specific occupational areas

Numeracy is an essential attribute for and in employment. No matter what other knowledge, skills and understanding an individual brings to the workplace, an 'at-homeness' with numbers will enhance not only the individual's life chances, but also contribute to the good of communities and the economy.

#### **Noyona Chanda is Director of LLU+ at London South Bank University**

LLU+ has recently developed a CPD module on numeracy for and in employment. For more information, contact Graham Griffiths [g.griffiths@lsbu.ac.uk](mailto:g.griffiths@lsbu.ac.uk)

(1) UKCES (2009) *The Employability Challenge*. London: UKCES.

(2) Cockcroft, W.H. (1982) *Mathematics Counts*. London: HMSO.

(3) DfEE (1999) *A fresh start: Improving literacy and numeracy. The report of the working group chaired by Sir Claus Moser*. London: Department for Education and Employment.

\* See Glossary p46

### **What is 'employability'?**

UKCES\* define employability skills to be the skills 'almost everyone needs to do almost any job'.<sup>1</sup> They are the skills that must be present to enable an individual to use the more specific knowledge and technical skills that their particular workplaces will require. Employability skills build up in three layers, starting with a foundation of Positive Approach, within which they include: being ready to participate; making suggestions; accepting new ideas and constructive criticism; and taking responsibility for outcomes. This crucial base supports the three Functional Skills of using numbers, language and IT\* effectively. In turn these Functional Skills are utilised in the context of four Personal Skills:

- self-management
- thinking and solving problems
- working together and communicating
- understanding the business

See the diagram on p4 for an illustration of the above relationship.

### **What is numeracy?**

According to the Cockcroft Report,<sup>2</sup> numeracy is the possession of two attributes:

- an 'at-homeness' with numbers and an ability to make use of mathematical skills which enables the individual to cope with the practical mathematical demands of everyday life; and
- an ability to have some appreciation and understanding of information which is presented in mathematical terms, for instance in graphs, charts or tables, or by reference to percentage increase or decrease.

The Moser Report<sup>3</sup> defines numeracy more simply as the ability 'to use mathematics at a level necessary to function at work and in society in general.'

# Back to the future

## Mary Kett explores how lessons from the past are informing current policies in Ireland

For policy-makers as well as practitioners in Ireland, the recession and rising unemployment rates (12.5% in October 2009)<sup>1</sup> have created considerable, yet familiar, challenges. As in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when unemployment peaked at almost 20%, education and training authorities want to provide people with opportunities to re-skill and upskill so that their employability is increased in a future recovery. Indeed, many current further and adult education programmes owe their origin to this earlier economic downturn, when adult education was seen as a way for people to use their enforced free time more fruitfully. Now, as then, it is individuals with low levels of education, training and skills who are most at risk of becoming long-term unemployed. Reintegration into the labour market is achieved more easily and quickly by people who receive appropriate training during a period of unemployment.<sup>2</sup>

### Skills for employability

The scale of the unemployment crisis and the scarcity of resources require strategic policies that put in place targeted, effective and value-for-money programmes aimed at the most disadvantaged unemployed people. The Irish response involves a joint approach to labour market activation from government departments for employment and adult education and training. A range of measures aimed at maintaining people in employment and re-skilling/upskilling those who had lost their jobs were announced in the April 2009 budget, including 7000 additional education places for newly unemployed people.

Research shows that the most effective programmes are those

that link closely to demand in the labour market.<sup>3</sup> But it is essential to underpin these with interventions that strengthen generic skills for adults with poor or no qualifications. Understanding of the adult skills deficit in Ireland has increased considerably since the 1990s, and policies are now implemented in the context of the European lifelong learning strategy and recent EC\* communications on adult learning calling on Member States to prioritise the needs of low-skilled workers.<sup>4</sup>

While there is still more to learn about the specific skills that make the key difference to employability,<sup>5</sup> evidence indicates that generic skills carry at least as much importance for employers as technical or job-specific skills in the modern workplace. The key competences<sup>6</sup> of literacy, numeracy and digital competence, as well as communication and team-working skills, learning to learn, creativity and entrepreneurship, apply across the full spectrum of jobs in the knowledge economy, from driving and hairdressing to software and financial services. New awards at Levels 1 and 2 on the National Framework of Qualifications offer adult returners additional opportunities to gain broad general education qualifications which can be built upon for progression to more focused vocational pathways.

### Re-emerging tensions between policy and practice

The current refocusing on unemployed adults gives rise to a number of key questions. Does this focus on 'employability' reverse the priority that has been given to social inclusion as a key goal of adult education provision? Or can provision focused

on employability outcomes also contribute strongly to social inclusion and social cohesion?

Meanwhile, on the ground, the demand from newly unemployed people for education and training places has risen dramatically. The challenge now is to maintain front-line provision and consolidate recent investments in order to ensure long-term sustainability. A priority for the Government is to support those who have lost their jobs, through retraining and further education. Both the Higher and Further Education sectors have a key role to play in providing the type of upskilling that will help unemployed people develop their workforce skills and avail themselves of more sustainable employment opportunities.

### Mary Kett is Further Education Development Coordinator for the Department of Education and Science in Dublin

(1) Central Statistics Office, Ireland, [www.cso.ie](http://www.cso.ie)

(2) Ahearne (Economic and Social Research Institute) on RTÉ News: Morning Ireland, 29 April 2009.

(3) O'Connell, P. and Jungblut, J.-M. (2008) 'What do we know about training at work' in K.U. Mayer and H. Solga (eds) *Skill Formation: Interdisciplinary and Cross-National Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

(4) European Commission (2006) *It is never too late to learn*; European Commission (2007) *It is always a good time to learn*.

(5) Keese, M. (2006) 'The Role of Education and Training in Building International Competitiveness', in EGFSN *National Skills Conference, The Skills Needs of the Irish Economy to 2020*. Dublin: EGFSN.

(6) Recommendation of European Council and Commission on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, [www.europa.eu/legislation\\_summaries/education\\_training\\_youth/lifelong\\_learning/c11090\\_en.htm](http://www.europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/lifelong_learning/c11090_en.htm)

\* See Glossary p46

# Teaching composition, using poetry

Jane Mace offers some notes on teaching writing, and on the place of poetry as a way of focusing energy in teaching and learning



**'I have published many books, but I have written none of them myself.'**

(Tony Benn, speaking at the celebration event for the Voices on the Page student writing competition May 2008)

What did Tony Benn mean when he said this, to a roomful of new writers? Essentially, as he went on to explain, with secretaries and other assistants to deal with the transcription side of things, he had been free to focus on composition – by dictating or recording what he wanted to say. He had written, but he had not physically held a pen or tapped a keyboard. As the American linguist Frank Smith pointed out, both composing and transcribing are necessary to the writing process.

The problem can be, as Smith went on to point out, that:

'for most of us, most of the time, there is no such division of labour; we have to play both roles concurrently.'<sup>1</sup>

Composition <i>(author)</i>	Transcription <i>(secretary)</i>
getting ideas	physical effort of writing
selecting words	spelling
grammar	capitalisation
	punctuation
	paragraphs
	legibility

In teaching and learning writing, learners (and often their teachers too) are so worried about making mistakes in transcription that they cannot focus on composition. According to Smith, the way to resolve this conflict is to 'get the words out as fast as possible and clean them up later'.

### Composing out loud

To achieve this, what is needed is a learning environment that banishes the fear of 'getting it wrong'. A good strategy is to encourage learners to work together. In the NRDC development project on collaborative writing, participant learners were unused to this way of working but found it a more creative experience than working on their own.<sup>2</sup> They reported gains in their skills and confidence, while their tutors noted how the approach gave them the chance to stand back and observe their learners, taking on the role

of facilitator rather than director of the class. It is an approach that can offer a means for learners to listen to the sound of words as well as study the look of them, allowing them to compose out loud with the same freedom that Tony Benn enjoyed in his writing process.

Literature has plenty of examples of such collaborative composition and – contrary to the romantic idea of solitary individuals writing in attics – poets are no exception. See the box on the next page for an example that could interest learners.

### Reading poetry

Giving time to play with words in this way and attend to the music of language enables learners to put transcription worries to one side and experiment. To encourage learners to try writing poetry themselves, an important step is to get them to read poetry. This is likely to be a new experience for many and one that needs preparation. The Poetry Society recommends that teachers introducing learners to poetry should:

'give time; read a poem at least twice; use open comments to "help unfold the poem" (such as "That reminds me of...", "I wonder if...", and "Tell me..."); and be honest – if you're not sure of what a line means, say so and ask students what they think. Model the whole exercise as a process of exploration.'<sup>3</sup>

Teachers may want to recruit a poet to help. In one project, members of a Family Learning Group, with their tutor

## Finding the rhythm

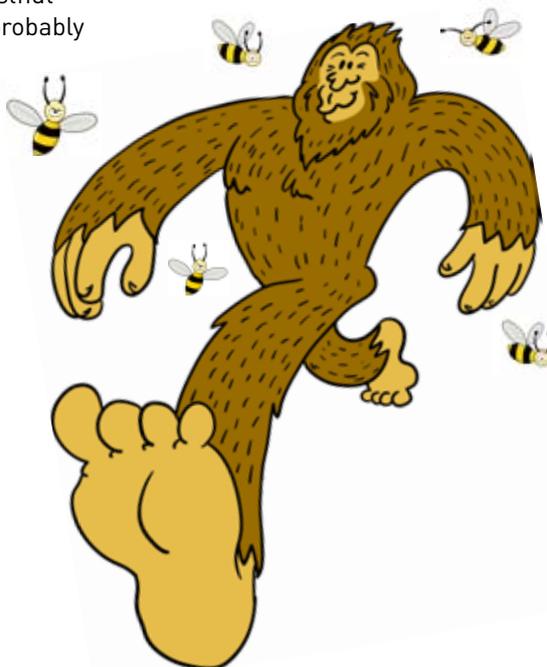
The poets Ian McMillan and Martyn Wiley used to work together, writing and performing poems in schools and arts centres. As Ian tells us, they regularly composed through collaboration:

'Always, when we had a few minutes spare in cafes or dressing rooms or hotels we'd sit down and write a few poems for children ... In this case, poems for young children about food.

Writing with somebody else is a lot of fun. Try it sometime. Me and Martyn would sit there trying to make each other laugh, trying to come up with rhymes and ideas that were unusual and a bit odd ... so one of us came up with the title 'What the giant had for dinner'. Then we'd just talk and joke about what the giant had.

I think poems should always start with talking, because that helps you with the rhythm and the feel, if that's the right word, of the language.

'A hive of bees' and 'chestnut trees' were phrases we probably wouldn't have come up with if we hadn't been saying the poem aloud and testing the rhythm. That's what poets should do, all the time: say words aloud. Test them out in your mouth and in your mate's ear. Hear what they sound like before you write them down.'



**And this was the resulting poem:**

### What the giant had for dinner

by Ian McMillan  
and Martyn Wiley

First  
he ate  
a hive of bees.

Then  
he ate  
some chestnut trees.

Then  
he ate  
a house near me.

Last  
of all  
he drank the sea.

From the Poetry Society website: [www.poetrysociety.org.uk](http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk) (visited 10 June 2006)

Basia Rostworowska and the help of poet Selima Hill, chose and read poems on the theme of family. As the introduction in the resulting collection tells us, the tutors had their own uncertainties about this:

'I and many of my colleagues have often felt insecure about using poetry in the classroom, especially if the last time we studied literature was for O-level! We worry about not having a grasp of the appropriate terminology, or that we ourselves might not understand what the poet is really trying to say.'<sup>4</sup>

As things turned out, with the help of the poet, the work of reading poems together felt like 'a breath of fresh air'. Learners' comments included:

'Doing this course has opened my eyes to a whole new world, the world of poetry. The closest I ever came to poetry ... was reading valentine cards.'

'I have never really been interested in reading poetry before. Whereas now having read and thought about poems, it has enabled me to see poetry in a different way.'

In another more recent approach, Sam Duncan taught a poetry option for learners on a return to study basic skills course at City and Islington College in London. The group was usually eight or nine learners, assessed at literacy Entry level 3 to Level 1. The course lasted for 10 weeks. The poetry session was one two-hour session a week out of eight hours' class contact time. Sam told me:

'We talked about the question: What are the two most popular topics for poems and songs? Students came up with 'love' and 'war'. This led to more ideas about why people write poems or songs and why people read them. Once, we tried students in pairs writing 'love questionnaires' and going round the college asking people questions about love – and then using the responses to make a poem. We found the topic of war could be more

## Food for thought

The tutor brought in 'The apple', a poem by Bruce Guernsey, and some apples, which she cut into quarters.

The tutor read the last section aloud:



**Quartered,  
a seed rocks  
in each tiny cradle.**

**Like blood,  
in the air an apple  
rusts.**

She then:

- read it aloud again
- asked the learners to read it aloud with her
- asked what they thought about the lines – giving time for responses.

She then gave each learner a piece of apple and asked them to discuss and describe what they saw, touched and tasted and any associations they found.

As the learners talked, she wrote up their words and comments on a flipchart and, from these, suggested making a group poem. Here is one that emerged:

**Red-faced and freckled,  
sweet, swollen  
with quadruplets,  
unsteady on her feet.**

In reflecting on the work, the writer stresses the fun to be had in this language work – and the value of the tutor reading aloud the learners' work, as well as the original poem. Other possible objects for this exercise are items that might have a history or association, eg a worn shoe, an ashtray, a pillowcase.

Adapted from Kazemek, F. and Rigg, P. (1995) *Enriching our lives: poetry lessons for adult literacy teachers and tutors*. Newark, Delaware USA: International Reading Association.

tricky, with memories for some ESOL\* students of first-hand experience. So then we tried using short newspaper articles and turning these into poems – taking the main ideas or emotions and finding ways to express them.'

### Writing poetry

Teaching learners to write poetry is about listening and talking, as well as about reading and writing. As Sam suggests, by reading poetry, learners can be encouraged to write. The Poetry Archive website ([www.poetryarchive.org](http://www.poetryarchive.org)) offers a useful resource for this. It has four indexes – poets, poem titles, poetic themes and poetic forms – and it includes a large number of poems being read aloud by their authors.

Here are two examples of activities using this resource that could act as pre-writing for learners' own journeys into poetic writing.

#### Activity 1

On the 'Name' index, find Valerie Bloom and listen to her reading her poem 'Time'. It is a short poem, with three metaphors, returning at the end to the first one.

After listening to it a couple of times:

- Take turns to read each line.
- Notice the rhymes she uses.
- Explore different kinds of rhyme.
- Check the rhyming dictionary at [www.rhymer.com](http://www.rhymer.com) for possibilities.
- Make word cards and invite learners to choose two or three they like the sound of.
- Read them aloud. Discuss what kind of rhymes they contain.
- Invite learners to use their chosen cards as the basis for a short poem.

#### Activity 2

Check for yourself in the 'Glossary of terms' the definitions and examples for sonnets, odes and ballads. With learners, look up one of these – say, ballads.

Find Brian Patten's 'The geography lesson' and listen to the reading. Invite the group to respond. Ask them what they think the feeling of the poem is. Re-read a line that particularly appealed. Read the whole poem again, listening for the rhythm.

Invite learners to choose a phrase and start a poem of their own.

In addition to reading poetry, the contemplation of an everyday object can also inspire ideas for learners to write poetically, as the example above suggests.

These ideas are a sample of what may be going on wherever tutors and learners are working to resolve the conflict between composition and transcription. I hope this piece may stimulate others to share their experience in *reflect*.

**Jane Mace writes and speaks about adult literacy teaching and research:**  
[www.janemace.co.uk](http://www.janemace.co.uk)

- (1) Smith, F. (1982) *Writing and the writer*. London: Heinemann.  
 (2) Grief, S. (2007) *Collaborative writing*. London: NRDC.  
 (3) Poetryclass – Poetry Society support project for teachers: [www.poetryclass.net](http://www.poetryclass.net)  
 (4) Rostworowska, B. (2000) in S. Hill (ed) *Jumping over trees: Poems from the Poetry Library*. London: The Poetry Library and Royal Festival Hall Education.

\* See Glossary p46

# Classroom-based research as Continuous Professional Development

**Jay Derrick explores the potential of a teacher-led model to meet professional development needs in Scotland**

Scottish literacies tutors<sup>1</sup> have often had less access to formal professional training and development than their English counterparts, and a recent CPD\* initiative, Teaching Reading to Adults, was set up with the aim of helping tutors keep up-to-date with the latest research. The programme was commissioned by Learning Connections, part of the Lifelong Learning Directorate of the Scottish Government, and designed and delivered by BlueSky Learning Ltd, who adopted an action-research training model which put the collaborative evaluation of classroom investigations carried out by the participants at the heart of the project.

Fifty adult literacies teachers from all over Scotland enrolled for the programme, following a three-week recruitment campaign spearheaded by flyers for the programme emailed to provider organisations and to regional adult literacies co-ordinators. The selection criteria were that tutors must have at least two years' experience, must be working with a group of literacies students, and

that they must commit to the whole programme. Sixty-four people applied, of which about half were working in and around Glasgow or Edinburgh. Applications for help with travel costs were supported for those from small organisations, but the time commitment for tutors from the Highlands and Islands was obviously a major barrier to their attendance. Learning Connections agreed in principle to consider repeating the programme in the north in the future.

## Learning together

The programme, which ran from October 2008 to July 2009, was built around three professional practice seminars, at the beginning, middle and end of the programme, between which the classroom investigations were carried out. In the first seminar participants carried out self-evaluation, identified their main areas for development, and began to plan their action research enquiries. It became clear during the first seminar that there were three broad areas for development across the group: working with mixed-level

groups; working with beginners and using phonics; and making teaching and learning more effective. Although it hadn't originally been intended to include formal content training as part of the programme, it was decided to provide specialist-led taught sessions on these three topics during the second and third seminars, as well as providing support for participants collectively to evaluate and adapt their classroom-based research. At the final seminar participants crystallised the findings from their investigations and discussed the online resources to be produced by the project team.

Ongoing support for participants between the seminars was provided through email contact with the project leader, and through a dedicated area of the Learning Connections moodle.\* This was populated with programme documents, presentations and readings, and was used by the project team to communicate with participants between the sessions, along with email communications. Realising that many participants were hardly using the moodle, consultation was held with them during the second seminar to investigate the reasons. Feedback was also sought on each seminar, and the programme as a whole, and these evaluations, along with the consultation on the moodle, were incorporated into the final project report. A Tutor Resource Pack on teaching adults to read, incorporating case studies from the programme, and providing discussions, resources on teaching and learning, tutor development, a

## Why action-research?

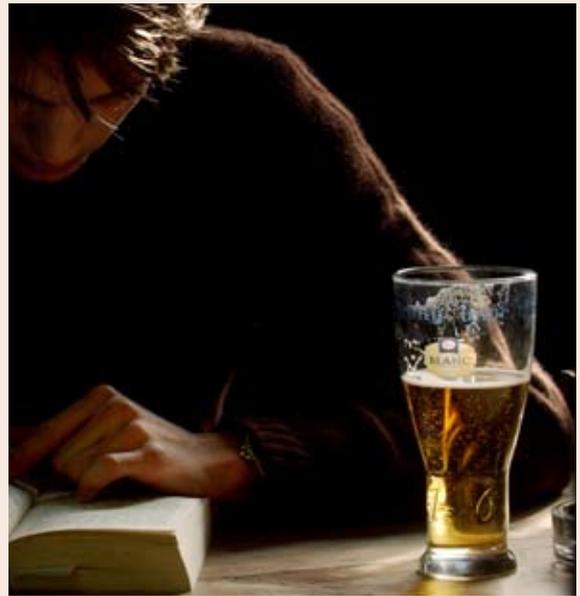
This model was chosen because it embodies a number of key research-based principles, that:

- the teaching of reading is a collaborative activity in which tutors and students work together in an equal partnership<sup>2</sup>
- teacher development is best organised formatively, rather than as the transmission of notions of 'best practice'<sup>3</sup>
- 'professional learning communities' are a useful and cost-effective model for the organisation of teacher development<sup>4</sup> and
- action-research is a powerful development activity for teachers.<sup>5</sup>

## Changing practice

An early impact survey carried out three months after the project finished suggested that it had led to specific changes in the practice of most participants. Tutors reported that since the project they had:

- made greater use of the language experience approach
- used more differentiation
- paid more attention to classroom feedback
- helped learners to set up a reading group
- supported learners to give feedback to each other
- used reciprocal reading approaches
- encouraged students to write soaps based on their own lives
- encouraged students to read more widely both in and outside the class.



glossary of key terms, materials and weblinks, a bibliography, and the final project report, was produced and is now available online.<sup>6</sup>

### Lessons learnt

The evaluation forms completed by the tutors were highly positive about the value of the programme for them. Tutors valued the opportunity to share ideas with other practitioners, were inspired by the idea of carrying out their own research, and valued the new knowledge they acquired about research into the effective teaching of reading. Many suggested that the programme would have been more effective if there had been an additional, preparatory seminar at which people were introduced to the ideas informing the programme, and to the moodle, so as to minimise any technical difficulties in getting started. Others suggested that there should be further programmes organised along similar lines, on numeracy, and on supporting writing development.

### Where now?

Four follow-up actions for Learning Connections are suggested by the programme report:

- to run a further programme on teaching reading to adults based in the north of Scotland to make it more accessible to tutors working in the Highlands and Islands region in particular;

- to make further programmes focusing on different topics such as numeracy and the development of writing;
- to commission research into the use of digital applications such as VLEs\* and moodles by adult literacies tutors, particularly focusing on overcoming tutor's initial barriers to use; and finally
- to pilot more CPD programmes incorporating the principle of professional development through collaborative action research.

The concept of group support and peer learning with varying degrees of external facilitation and input offers a low-cost and therefore more sustainable basis for groups of colleagues working in the same or neighbouring organisations. Research suggests that this type of learning has greater impact on teachers' classroom practice than traditional approaches such as attendance at conferences, because professional learning is ongoing rather than 'one-off' and much more closely based on the actual context of the classroom. The model has great potential for teachers in England and Wales as well as Scotland to contribute to their CPD needs and requirements. A scheme could be seeded by an individual college or adult education service – but could also be started by groups of teachers themselves, with no

necessary input from management: now there's an idea!

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Also involved in the project were Judith Gawn of NIACE, and Samantha Duncan and Irene Schwab of the Institute of Education, London.

(1) The word 'tutors' is used in Scotland for people teaching adults, rather than 'teachers' as in England.

(2) Papen, U. (2005) *Adult Literacy as Social Practice – more than skills*. London: Routledge.

(3) See for example Derrick, J., Gawn, J. and Ecclestone, K. (2009) *Formative assessment in adult literacy, language and numeracy*. Leicester: NIACE; and Pickering, J. (2007) 'Teachers' professional development – not whether or what, but how' in *New Designs for Teachers' Professional Learning* J. Pickering, C. Daly, and N. Pachler (eds) London: Institute of Education.

(4) Wiliam, D. (2007) 'Content then process: teacher learning communities in the service of formative assessment', in D. B. Reeves (ed) *Ahead of the curve: the power of assessment to transform teaching and learning*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

(5) Ackland, A. (2008) Professional development through professional enquiry, in *reflect*, issue 12.

(6) *The Tutor Resource Pack* (including the full project report) is available at Adult Literacies Online, the Scottish adult literacies resources website: <http://www.aloscotland.com/alo/downloadresource.htm?id=2336>.

\* See Glossary p46

# Reflecting with *reflect*

**Pip Kings looks back at her own professional development and considers ways to keep improving**

I remember seeing the first *reflect* magazine in October 2004, at a basic skills forum in London. Reading it on the tube, I was engrossed and I thought then as I do now that the approach to the content was refreshing and thought provoking – not just news and accounts of projects and pilots, but reflections on practice and outcomes of action research. The name was commanding and the ‘*reflect*’ approach was rigorous throughout, prompting you to consider the issues.

When the Institute for Learning (IfL) brought out its new software for recording CPD\* and called it ‘*reflect*’ I felt they had stolen the word. However it seems wholly appropriate that the system where people can record their thoughts about the value of professional development, shares its name with a magazine that provides insights into the reflections of others.

Thinking about an article on ‘reflection’, has reminded me of when I maintained a reflective log as part of my initial teacher training. Being asked to record my thoughts about teaching and learning – mine and others – was like opening a floodgate. I started to see so many things in terms of teaching (including Bruce Forsyth’s performance on *The Generation Game*, which prompted me to think about my teaching presentation!).

What was so important about this process of ‘reflection’ was the recording and subsequent discussions with colleagues. What previously would have been a pretty transient



**Reading the magazine should provide an opportunity to consider new ideas, challenges and issues**

thought was now being analysed, giving rise to serious consideration about the development of my practice.

Reflecting now is part and parcel of our professional roles: it isn’t just about formal professional development or getting an attendance certificate from a conference. We want to do our jobs well and we care about improving the quality of our work. So we mull over how we have performed and think about what we might have done better. But to really move forward, mulling over isn’t enough – we need input to stimulate our thoughts and how we might do things differently. This is where the real value of *reflect* lies; the contributions of experts in the field of teaching adults can challenge our beliefs and practice, or they can crystallise a thought that

has been growing without us even realising it.

To pick one example from the last edition of *reflect*, I’m aware of recent press coverage about the use of mobile phones and texting to support literacy and have tended to see this as a bit gimmicky. However when I read Aileen Ackland’s article<sup>1</sup> in issue 12, in which a group of women students were encouraged by their teacher to learn how to text, the huge benefits this brought them has caused me to rethink. (See Nora Hughes’ review on p43 for further discussion of this issue.)

I hope that both new and practising teachers will think of *reflect* as a CPD tool to support your own practice: magazine articles are acceptable sources for IfL’s *reflect* tool. As Ursula Howard summed up in the first edition, back in October 2004:

‘We’ve chosen the title *reflect* to emphasise that reading the magazine should provide an opportunity to stand back from your own perspectives on teaching and learning literacy, language and numeracy and consider new ideas, challenges and issues in our work’.

Over to you now – let us have your views.

**Pip Kings is Development Director at NRDC**

[1] Ackland, A. (2008) ‘Professional development through professional enquiry’, *reflect*, issue 12.

\* See Glossary p46

# The bother with Phonics

*reflect* asked two colleagues from either side of the phonics fence to debate the question: Why should adult literacy tutors bother with phonics? This is an edited transcript of their lively and revealing email exchange.



**From:** Greg Brooks  
**Sent:** 16 November 2009  
**Dear Ross**

Accurate word identification is an indispensable prerequisite for comprehension. The most efficient method for learners to identify and understand unfamiliar words and to spell words that they use in their spoken vocabulary is phonics, and specifically, synthetic phonics.

Research from the USA<sup>1</sup> and the UK<sup>2</sup> provides convincing evidence that systematic phonics instruction within a broad and rich literacy curriculum enables children to make a better start with reading. Through Maxine Burton's phonics research for NRDC<sup>3</sup> we now have the first piece of evidence that systematic synthetic phonics teaching can also help adult learners make significant progress in reading, comprehension and spelling.

I would argue that all adult literacy teachers need to look at the theory and the evidence from research and practice and come to their own decisions. I think they will conclude that they should add systematic phonics to their regular armoury.



**From:** Ross Cooper  
**Sent:** 16 November 2009  
**Dear Greg**

Yes, teachers should take account of phonics. Where I feel we differ is in how significant the role of phonics should or should not be at what stages of reading.

You seem to conflate accurate word identification with phonic attack. While we would probably agree that phonic attack is needed with unfamiliar words, the impression you give is that phonic decoding is a prerequisite for learning to read. If this were so, deaf readers would never learn to read. So while it can be a useful tool, particularly for beginner readers, it is not a prerequisite tool.

We need to be careful how we apply research findings to teaching practice. This is particularly true of adult education where learners have a wide range of skills, experiences, emotional baggage, difficulties and compensatory strategies. The so-called 'simple view' of reading which claims that comprehension must begin with phonic decoding of single words is based on limited evidence

about adults, and research repeatedly shows that adults provide a more complex context for the learning of reading than children.<sup>4</sup>

Although in principle phonics can be useful for most very early readers, the key issue for me is when should readers use a full range of reading strategies? At what point does an over-reliance on phonics impede comprehension, because readers become fixated on sounding out what is on the page rather than comprehending it? I often see this in my work with dyslexic readers, who frequently need weaning off that approach to one that more effectively supports their comprehension. This is not easy because the skills are quite different.

Similarly, I have worked with many adult learners who find it almost impossible to use sounds to arrive at possible spellings, yet persist in this approach. In practice, building strategies on learners' strengths is far more effective.



**From:** Greg Brooks  
**Sent:** 20 November 2009  
**Dear Ross**

I do not conflate word identification (accurate or otherwise) with phonic attack. I am well aware that there are other means of word identification, but these 'cues' are less efficient (and I did use that term, not 'effective') because they often fail to provide the exact word on the page. While it is true that a few profoundly, prelingually, deaf people learn to read well, most do not, and the average reading level among the deaf is very low.

Nor would I ever argue that phonic decoding is a prerequisite for learning to read. Years ago Margaret Clark found children in Dunbartonshire who had apparently learnt to read without being taught and/or ever reading aloud to adults, and many people (I am one) learnt by having the same texts read to us so often that we knew them off by heart and then realised that we could 'see what you say'. But the majority of children, who haven't made that start on entry to school, need the mirror-image technique of being taught to 'say what you see' and in that process phonics has an indispensable role.

I stand by my statement that the research implies that teachers of adults should take phonics seriously. They also need to take seriously research on boosting adult learners' comprehension (as Maxine's project did) – this must not be seen as an either/or choice. Research findings with children suggest that a rigorous study should be undertaken in order to test the hypothesis that phonics could work well with adults; and after that would come more specific questions about which learners phonics is best for, and at what stages.

I fully accept your statements about what you have experienced in your teaching of adults. However, I stand by my previous statements, and would only add that, in my opinion, those who decry phonics for adults may be doing their colleagues and students a disservice.



**From:** Ross Cooper  
**Sent:** 26 November 2009  
**Dear Greg**

I was particularly interested to read that you learned to read before going to school. In my own case, I failed to read through synthetic phonics. I learned to read aged around 9 by

getting engrossed in a book (about maths!). Once I could read, I started to understand what teachers meant by phonics. With sufficient time I can now do phonics as well as anyone, but not quickly. However, I cannot remember the last time I needed to, because I rarely come across a word I do not recognise visually.

Your assumption appears to be that as phonics can improve single word decoding leading to single word recognition, it must improve rather than undermine comprehension. I accept that with children, phonological difficulties are a good predictor of poor comprehension. But this is much less the case with adults. Given the paucity of the research, it becomes important to draw on professional experience and to compare the impact on readers of good quality interventions with their teachers.

One of the arguments used by proponents of phonics is that it doesn't work unless teachers are properly trained in using it, and that the target group are taught systematically over a period of time. But training the adult education sector about any intervention is a huge logistical task. Systematic phonics interventions need to be repetitive: in both the school and the prison sector, the intervention is daily. Very few adult education providers could afford such intensive interventions even if there were radical changes to teacher training. In the real world, adult education needs interventions that make a significant difference quickly.

The whole thrust of my argument is that reading is a different process to decoding and that an overemphasis on phonics may mislead learner readers and make it more difficult to make the jump to real reading.

I have no problem with your statement that teachers of adults need to take account of phonics; of course they do. But they also need to take account of the negative role that it can play in the learned strategies for reading.

### Comment Helen Sunderland

Reading this exchange reminds me how I felt as a teacher when faced with a lot of academic research. First of all admiration for the analytical skills of the contributors and the extent of their knowledge. Then confusion – as I read each one, I feel 'yes, they've got a really good point there'. And finally, exasperation: 'It's all very well for them, but we have to go into the classroom tomorrow morning and actually teach something.'

But I do feel it's important that teachers overcome their exasperation and engage critically with the research and debates; and, conversely, that researchers engage with teachers. Teachers have so much experiential knowledge that can be mined – to use 'researcher speak' – so much 'data'. Let's celebrate initiatives that encourage dialogue between researchers and teachers, academia and practice; we have much to learn from each other.



**From:** Greg Brooks  
**Sent:** 26 November 2009  
**Dear Ross**

I agree that we don't know what the best methods for teaching adults are, hence my desire to undertake research that will help with this. I do not agree that the greater life experience of adult learners necessarily changes the context of their learning so much that findings from the school sector are irrelevant, still less that the strategies needed are necessarily different – those findings at least provide ideas to explore with adults.

We seem as far apart as when this started. I know that there is very little research so far to support the use of phonics with adults, but am also certain you have none to back up your antipathy to it.



**From:** Ross Cooper  
**Sent:** 30 November 2009  
**Dear Greg**

While we are unlikely to arrive at agreement, we are not necessarily as far apart as you suggest. We both agree that more and better research is needed on reading with adults. We both agree that there is a 'take-off' point in reading, even if we may not agree about where this is or on all the pedagogical implications.

Essentially, we both want to change the teaching of reading with adults for the better and I feel that we are both doing our best to be evidence-led about strategies. I feel that teaching and support practice have informed my views more than research, and feel that practical experiences need to inform the nature of research foci and design.

It seems to me that the fundamental difference that remains is that I think you see only potential benefits from phonics teaching with no potential harm. I see both some potential benefits with considerable harm. Therefore, for me, getting the emphasis and timing right is critical.



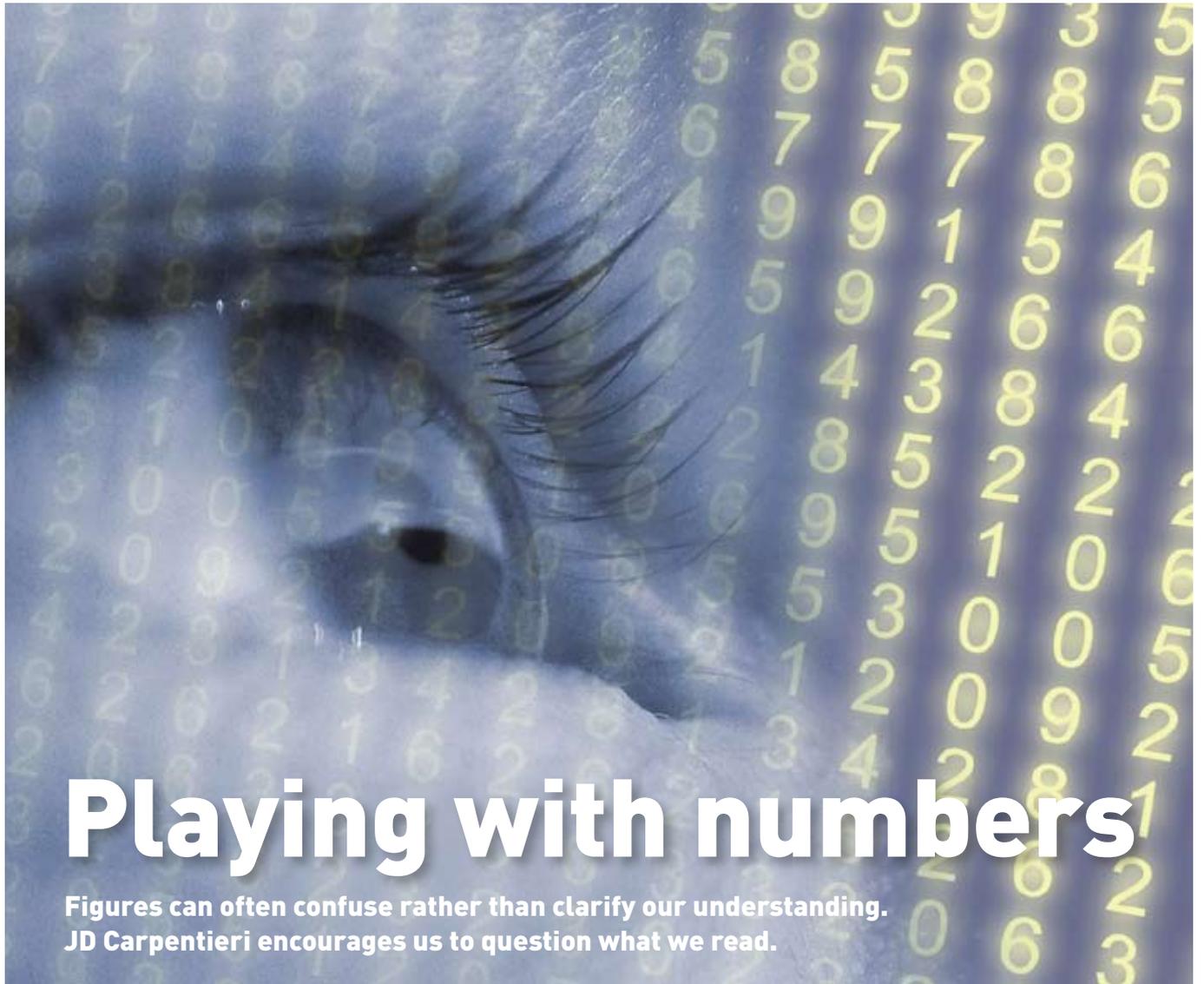
### Comment Maxine Burton

Above all this exchange illustrates the dangers of 'dichotomous' thinking, with viewpoints expressed as mutually exclusive. A belief that research on children has something to tell us about adults does not equate with an automatic rejection of the validity of findings from practice with adults, and vice versa. A belief in the potential of phonics for adults does not imply an approach that excludes all other teaching methods. Surely we can agree that an inclusive and open-minded approach is the way forward in helping adults to improve their literacy?

**Greg Brooks is Emeritus Professor of Education, University of Sheffield; Ross Cooper is Director of Dyslexia and Literacy Division, LLU+ at London South Bank University; Maxine Burton is Associate Research Officer, NRDC and Honorary Lecturer, University of Sheffield; Helen Sunderland is Head of ESOL and Assistant Director, LLU+ at London South Bank University**

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- [4] See Greenberg, D., Ehri, L.C. and Perin, D. (1997) 'Are word-reading processes the same or different in adult literacy students and third-fifth graders matched for reading level?', *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 89 (2); Bruck, M. (1992) 'Persistence of dyslexics phonological awareness deficits,' *Developmental Psychology*, 28 (5); Partridge, S. (forthcoming) Ph.D dissertation, The Open University.



# Playing with numbers

Figures can often confuse rather than clarify our understanding. JD Carpentieri encourages us to question what we read.

## What's the worst statistic ever?

Sociologist Joel Best claims it's one he saw in 1995 in a paper by a graduate student he was supervising. 'Every year since 1950,' the student wrote, 'the number of American children gunned down has doubled.'

Yes, America is a dangerous place. But has the number of children gunned down really doubled every year since 1950? Could it have? The answer is no, as a quick bit of back of the envelope arithmetic shows. Even if only one child had been shot in America in 1950, doubling that number would give you two in 1951, four in 1952, and so on up to 1024 in 1960. If you keep doubling the number every year, by 1970 you would hit one million and by 1980 one billion. In 1987 you would surpass the best estimates for the

total number of humans who have ever existed (110 billion), and by 1995 you would hit 35 trillion. Talk about a violent country.

What is interesting is that this wasn't a graduate student's error: he had quoted it from a professional journal. In other words a professional writer had produced this statistic, editors had signed off on it, proofreaders had approved it, and it now had an existence as journalistic fact, despite being clearly impossible. How does this happen? How do bad statistics – one of the most common forms of poor numeracy – get into our lives, and particularly into media and politics? In some cases, it's sheer accident coupled with poor numeracy. But in other cases, something more sinister is afoot: numbers are

manipulated for political means in the secure knowledge that they will be unquestioned.

Banner headlines are a good place to start. Take this example from the *Daily Mail*: 'Town hall bans staff from using Facebook after they each waste 572 hours in ONE month'. Again, a quick back of the envelope calculation shows this to be virtually impossible: each council worker would have had to spend an average of 19 hours per day (including weekends!) at the office, all of it on Facebook, to make this true. In fact, the total of 572 hours was for the entire council workforce: 4,500 employees (and the online version of the article has been amended to remove the word 'each').<sup>1</sup> And suddenly, council workers don't appear to be such skivers: that

makes the average use of Facebook around seven minutes per month, or 14 seconds a day. But even that was too much, said the *Daily Mail*, arguing that every one of those seconds was funded by the taxpayer. Here we see another way to lie with statistics: leave out contextualising details, such as the fact that workers may have been using Facebook on their lunch breaks rather than during working hours.

While I'm not keen to give additional coverage to the *Daily Mail*, it is a good source of bad examples. Earlier last year, the paper reported that state workers were now earning an average of £62 a week more than private-sector workers. Both the Conservative party and the Taxpayers' Alliance decried this gross overpayment of public sector workers, but as *The Guardian's* Polly Toynbee pointed out, this statistic was not comparing like with like.<sup>2</sup> The figures were arrived at by adding up total pay in the public and private sectors, then dividing those figures by the number of workers in each sector. Because the private sector now accounts for most of the low paid, 'unskilled' jobs such as cleaners, caterers, carers and dinner ladies, its average wage is relatively low. But when comparing similar jobs in the private and public sectors, workers in the former receive on average higher pay than those in the latter.

Contextless reporting of statistics abounds, such as breathless accounts of deaths caused by swine flu, which conveniently neglect to point out that every year, roughly the same number of people die of the flu, whatever its name. Or reports in America after the 2008 election decrying the fact that only 43% of white voters opted for Barack Obama – surely a sad indication of still lingering American racism, right? Perhaps not, if you consider that Obama actually got a higher percentage of the white vote than the two previous (white) Democratic presidential candidates.<sup>3</sup>

Another way of confusing the issue is to overwhelm your audience with



large numbers. For example, soon after coming to power in 1997, the Labour government announced that it would spend an extra £300m over five years to create one million new childcare places.<sup>4</sup> £300m sounds like a lot of money, and it is. But is it enough money to create one million childcare places over five years? The only way to answer that is to do the maths. £300m divided by one million places is £300 per place. Divide that by five years, and you have £60 per year, or £5 per month. Is that enough to fund childcare for one child? Suddenly, £300m doesn't sound like that much money at all.

Large numbers can inspire awe, but authoritative use of numbers of any size can also close down debate. Numbers don't even have to be large, just authoritative. You can argue against opinions, but who is going to argue against seemingly objective numbers? It feels like arguing against facts. But precisely because numbers seem so fact-like, it's all too easy to forget to check them. And then they take on a life of their own. Most adults in the UK know that we are supposed to drink eight glasses of water a day. But where does that number come from? Doctors? Scientists? No one

really knows, but those who have looked into it, such as the authors of *Don't Swallow Your Gum: and Other Medical Myths Debunked*, all agree that it is a myth, an urban legend given power by its numerical nature.<sup>5</sup> The truth is, we don't need to drink anywhere close to this amount.

Just as we don't need to swallow eight glasses of water a day, we don't need to swallow everything we are told about skills needs, no matter how authoritative the numbers sound. One of the most frequently cited 'facts' in policy discussions about future skills needs is the prediction that by 2020 the number of jobs in the UK requiring no qualifications will have plummeted from 3.6 million to just 600,000. As *The Guardian*<sup>6</sup> reported, both Alan Johnson and the then Shadow Education Secretary Michael Gove cited this figure, with both of them attributing it to the Leitch report.<sup>7</sup> But Leitch never said anything like this. In fact, the figure is the product of a woeful misreading of another report's prediction that by 2020 the number of people with no qualifications will be 600,000. This says nothing about the number of jobs that will require no qualifications: that number is predicted to be much higher.

**JD Carpentieri is Senior Research and Policy Officer at NRDC**

In the next issue of *reflect* he will be following up this article with further advice on how to identify bad statistics.

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 (2) Toynbee, P. (2009) 'These rottweilers do the work of the Tories for them' *The Guardian*, 10 February.  
 (3) [www.slate.com/id/2204251/](http://www.slate.com/id/2204251/)  
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## Still Written Off?

**Tom O'Mara reviews the use of television to reach adult learners in Ireland**

In 2008 the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) experimented with a new approach to highlighting and addressing literacy difficulties in Ireland. *Written Off?*, a fly-on-the-wall documentary series following the lives of 11 learners on an eight-week literacy course, was broadcast on prime time TV in spring 2008, attracting an average of 210,000 viewers (14% of the viewing public), and prompting 650 calls from learners interested in pursuing distance learning (for more details see *reflect* issue 12 or view the series at [www.writtenoff.ie](http://www.writtenoff.ie)). Spring 2009 saw the screening of a second series, and NALA have since devised

a different show (their tenth for TV), *Stuck for Words*, for 2010. So what have they – and the learners – learnt along the way?

### **Learners' progress**

The 11 learners who took part in the first series of *Written Off?* all recognised how important the decision to participate was on their learning journeys. By the end of the intensive 104-hour course, all learners showed significant improvement in terms of their reading, writing, numbers and technology skills, and also demonstrated progress in terms of setting goals, making decisions and

having the confidence to work towards and achieve these aims. Nine of the 11 students have continued their studies in local literacy services, with many focusing on computer skills courses. Two of the students set up their own businesses: a flower shop and a pizzeria. Another two became taxi drivers following successful completion of the appropriate written tests, something they would have been unable to do previously. One student has begun studying on a post-secondary school course, and many of the students have continued their writing and contributed to a new NALA publication titled *Written Off?*

### Next steps

The second series of *Written Off?* was filmed in January and February 2009, over six weekends rather than eight, but with classroom time maintained at 104 hours. As with the first series, funding was secured from the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland's Sound and Vision Scheme (BAI).<sup>1</sup> The number of learners was reduced to eight as this was to be a shorter series and, due to the more intensive nature of this course, NALA spent a greater amount of time interviewing and assessing potential learners to ensure suitability. The result was a diverse group of learners with clearly identified learning needs at NFQI\* Level 2 (see box for details).

### After the course

As with the first series, all eight demonstrated significant improvement in skill levels across reading, writing, speaking and listening, numeracy and technology. All eight learners completed the intensive course and received certification at Level 2. Arguably more importantly, all eight showed an increase in self-esteem and personal development skills, with many reporting that participation on the programme had provided them with an impetus to continue improving their new skills in further learning opportunities. Peter began working in a kitchen as a cook and has now moved to England for work. Ann is studying full time, participating in a Back to Education Initiative course in her local Vocational Educational Committee literacy service. Thomas enrolled in a computer course in his local learning centre although he has found it hard to keep this up with home commitments. Ifrah is now working with social services, translating documents for other Somalian immigrants, as well as taking a Level 3 communications course. Other participants have started businesses, undertaken training, or written letters and emails to relatives.



### The learners

Ann is a grandmother in her early 50s. She left school at 12 and asks for help from her daughter in reading or from Social Welfare workers to fill in forms. She is too embarrassed to help her grandchildren with their homework, and really misses being unable to read to them, so instead she sings. Ann does not read papers and has a mobile but does not feel able to text. She would like to work with the elderly but believes her literacy skills are so bad she would be unable to do so.

Peter is 19 and his mum is also a learner on the show. He left school early to join the army and was diagnosed as dyslexic while in training. This presented him with problems in completing the training and he left soon after. He is unemployed and growing frustrated at seeing his friends progressing onto work and other studies. His key motivator is to get into the workforce.

Thomas is in his early 40s and left school at 13. He set up his own cleaning business but this failed as he needed to care for his sick wife and three kids. Thomas is willing to ask for help – for example at the bookies the staff write out his booking slip – and went to a local literacy scheme for one-to-one tuition, but felt awkward as the only man in the group, so he left after three weeks. His aim is to be able to 'read a book or write a letter and not to have to be going to my Ma'. His were the weakest skills and he found the group tough.

Ifrah is 20 years old and came from Somalia in 2006. She had no experience of formal schooling and felt the six month course she had attended in Dublin was a waste of time because her English was non-existent then. Her spoken English is excellent now but she needs to work on reading, writing and numeracy skills. For example, she didn't understand the difference between upper and lower case letters, or understand +, - or % signs. Her key motivating factors were to be able to find work and also help fellow immigrants.

Find out about the other learners and follow all of the learners' progress on [www.writtenoff.ie](http://www.writtenoff.ie)

The learners' feedback acknowledged the benefit of the intensive tuition, in particular the one-to-one sessions they had with the tutors:

'I loved the one-to-ones more than the group work. With the group work there is constant movement in the room and I find that distracting because I lose concentration very fast. With the one-to-ones everyone is sitting in one place and listening.'

'I think when you are very bad at the reading and writing if they put you in a group it can be embarrassing ... unless you know they're the same. But you don't know that until you come in and get to know them.'

They also reflected on how their new skills were helping them outside the classroom:

'I have a son in America that I didn't see for ten years, but I'm going to save hard and go and see him. I was on the computer the other night looking up cheap flights ... I never thought I'd be doing that.'

'I used to dread going out for a meal. I'd order the same thing all the time, steak and chips or chicken and chips. That's why I used to love going away on holiday because in the cafes and restaurants they'd have pictures of the food on the menu. But now I can go out and order what I want. I don't know what all the things mean, but I'm not afraid to ask anymore.'

Perhaps most interesting in terms of the series' wider impact was the learner who said:

'When I told eight of my friends that I was doing the show ... eight friends that I thought could read and write, the eight of them told me that they couldn't and I was shocked. They said to me let me know how you get on with doing the course and if you get on well with it we might sign on and do a course.'



The show – which, like series one, was shown in the same time-slot as *Coronation Street* – was watched by an average of 186,300 viewers per week, 14.6% of the viewing public. Since its broadcast in April and May 2009, NALA has received over 4,000 calls from adults interested in returning to education as a direct result of seeing the show. This is a much higher response rate than the previous year, which they believe is due to changes in the economy (see 'Back to the Future', p14), the 'slow burn' effect of people watching last year's series, and increased promotional support. Most callers had detailed discussions with Freephone Operators before being referred to the most appropriate local services: 478 went on to work with NALA's Distance Learning Service for between one and 12 weeks, working on their skills over the phone, via the post and online.

NALA was very pleased with the response to the second series of *Written Off?* The series demonstrated that there are literacy services available in Ireland to suit people from all backgrounds and that

progress is possible once that first decision is made. People were motivated to take action: as well as the increased number of calls to the Freephone service there were anecdotal reports of increasing numbers of people dropping into local services. The series also showed that intensive learning can be very beneficial to lower level learners, which is something that needs to be investigated further.

### Stuck for Words

Despite the success of *Written Off?*, it became clear during consultation that the BAI were keen to support new types of programmes rather than just continuing to recommission the same series style. NALA discussed this with the broadcaster and production company, and felt that the only way to continue with this format and still attract viewers would be broaden the range of participants. NALA were concerned that this would lead to the inclusion of more sensationalist storylines, a risk they didn't want to take, as it would undermine the ethos behind the show. The new show, *Stuck for Words* uses a more traditional documentary style but will still focus on showing learning in a positive light and hopefully motivate people to take that first step on their learning journeys. With continued funding from the BAI, NALA hopes to reach even more learners this year – tune in and find out if they're successful.

### Tom O'Mara is Distance Education Co-ordinator at NALA.

For more information on all of NALA's TV and distance learning work, please visit [www.nala.ie](http://www.nala.ie) and [www.literacy.ie](http://www.literacy.ie).

*Stuck for Words* ran for six weeks on RTÉ One, in May and June

(1) Further details on the work of the BAI can be found at [www.bai.ie](http://www.bai.ie)

\* See Glossary p46

# Teaching in the forensic service

**Zoe Gerrard shares the results of her research into literacy and numeracy teaching in secure hospitals**



I teach in the forensic service, in a medium secure hospital caring for people whose severe mental illnesses have led to them committing serious crimes. Many people's first reaction is to ask: 'Isn't that dangerous? Don't you feel scared?'

Well, no. While there is always an element of risk on the wards, and tutors wear an alarm, patients are carefully monitored and are usually very rewarding to teach. They come to classes because they recognise that they need to improve their skills and it is gratifying to see people gain confidence as they realise that they are capable of learning and achieving.

Mentally disordered offenders are amongst the most socially excluded groups in the country, the stigma of mental illness compounded by several years of enforced hospitalisation and prejudice fuelled by the media. And most patients also have low level skills in English and maths: occupational therapists (OTs) in the North London Forensic Service (NLFS) where Barnet College runs 20 classes, estimate that more than 60% of their patients do not have functional literacy and numeracy skills.<sup>1</sup> Inevitably, self-esteem and confidence are low.

To gain a clearer picture of the learning needs and aspirations of patients, and how these can best be met, I carried out interviews with the

patients themselves and with their OTs and tutors.

## **Running classes in secure hospitals**

Patients lack confidence, have problems with social interactions and have higher than average anxiety levels. To provide the level of support necessary for them to succeed, and to provide a safe working environment, the NLFS recommends a ratio of one tutor to three or four learners. Patients on the acute wards may require one-to-one support to ensure the learner remains focused and is given sufficient reassurance. Being in even a small group is difficult for some. Tutors face the additional pressure of making sure that classes have sufficient numbers to make

them viable for funding, while giving learners the amount of individual attention they need.

People with a history of mental illness and educational failure need a warm and sensitive tutor. When asked what factors contributed to their enjoyment of classes, patients mentioned the tutor's ability to make learners feel comfortable, to give positive feedback and appreciation, to add an element of fun, and to judge what level of workload is appropriate in order not to cause stress.

Good relationships between tutors and the hospital staff are vital in ensuring that the importance of education for patients is recognised and valued. Tutors are able to give medical staff at the NLFS useful feedback not only on educational progress, but also on associated improvements such as ability to concentrate and remember.

Co-operation with nursing staff is needed to ensure that patients are on time and in the right place for their class, and not on ground or community leave or having a meeting with a psychologist or solicitor. Locked doors, the time taken to travel between wards and a shortage of staff to escort patients, can make it difficult to gather together people of the same ability, let alone the same subject, so tutors need to be resourceful and prepared to teach at different levels and, in some cases, different subjects, in a session.

Patients themselves were positive about the opportunity to attend classes on site rather than having to attend college, something many were not able or well enough to do.

'If you haven't got parole it's the only way to see someone if you want to learn.'

'You are doing something worthwhile while you are in hospital. You have to occupy your time and education is the best way – something to better yourself.'

A sizeable number felt that having a college tutor come into hospital made them feel more part of society.

'You don't feel inferior when you see the teacher. She's someone from the community.'

'You don't feel alienated, you feel normal again.'

### The value of learning Motivation

Mental illness and the effects of medication can cause difficulties with concentration and create a barrier to learning. In interviews, patients told me that the act of learning gave them great pleasure and improved their wellbeing. Providing opportunities to stimulate the mind and find achievement is an important factor in the road to recovery.

'I come because I see some success.'

'I can read a newspaper now, talk, express myself better despite medication. The class perks me up.'

Some people initially attended classes in order to fill the time and combat boredom, but others had a more specific motivation.

'I want to get a job. I've never worked.'

'I wanted to see how capable I was of achieving.'

'I used to struggle to read. I was angry with myself because I couldn't read my post.'

It isn't only the inability to read correspondence that causes problems for people in hospital with poor literacy skills. These patients find themselves at a serious disadvantage when faced with a wide range of documentation, from written statements of their rights, to care plans and daily timetables, to contact with agencies such as social services, in which they need to understand and fill in forms.

### Outcomes

Most patients wanted to gain employment and believed that certificates would help with this. Moreover, certificates were valued not only as evidence of achievement (especially to those who had previously seen themselves as educational failures) but also evidence of time used constructively.

'You need to have evidence of your achievement and show others you used your time to do good things.'

OTs said that presenting certificates of achievement at an event celebrating motivation and good attendance had a positive effect on patients. As noted by Taylor and Healy: 'The acquisition of certificates is a powerful tool in helping patients build self-esteem'.<sup>2</sup>

Most patients I interviewed saw attendance at the classes as helping with independent living. Some of their remarks give an insight into the frustrations and exclusion endured before coming into hospital.

'It will help with money. I can be in control. Before I could be tricked.'

'I've built up my skills to where I can do things for myself in future. I couldn't understand forms, had to ask for help. In future I will be able to do it alone.'

Most patients said that coming to a class had made them not only more confident about their ability to learn but also about themselves.

'The class has made me feel a bit special about myself.'

'I feel happy. In all my life I thought I was illiterate. I am surprised at my achievements.'

'Yes, I'm going to college and I think to myself, "Well done".'

### Facilitating progression

Patients whose appetite for learning has been whetted looked to further success at college. But how is this to

be ensured? Research by the Social Exclusion Unit found barriers to college education for all people with mental health needs, let alone those from the forensic service.<sup>3</sup> These obstacles included complicated enrolment procedures and inflexible courses that do not take account of fluctuating health. Other barriers for forensic patients stem from being restricted to secure settings for a number of years, having to cope with the side effects of medication and their awareness of the anxieties and fears of the wider community. As one patient who was attending college explained:

'It's difficult to tell people you have been in hospital, difficult to tell students. Some would feel awkward telling a teacher. Some are afraid to answer questions.'

When I asked how a college could help them have a positive experience, there was a mixed response, ranging from, 'They should be warm and friendly and considerate to people with illness', and 'Be supportive and acknowledge the person isn't used to the environment', to 'I don't think they should do anything special because we should be able to do what normal people can do. They shouldn't make an exception of us'.

OTs said that some patients feel they are failing if they apply for learning support. They want to feel they are managing on their own. Unfortunately some do not succeed without extra help.

Colleges therefore need to have carefully thought-out procedures in place to ensure a successful outcome. Patients from the forensic service have undergone a rigorous risk assessment before being allowed leave to access the community. Colleges do not need to know a person's 'index' offence, but they will need to ensure that all students and staff are safe. The learner, the college and the forensic service need to work together to identify particular support needs and adjustments, in order to comply with the Disability



### The rewards of teaching

What makes teaching in the forensic service so rewarding? Some of the tutors' thoughts were:

- The satisfaction of knowing that you are making a difference to the lives of people who are multiply excluded.
- Being able to work with patients for long periods of time, two or three years or longer, so you are able to see their progress.
- Knowing that the skills learnt give more freedom and choices to people whose freedom and choices are limited.
- Giving patients confidence, especially in terms of their learning.
- Teaching someone a skill they can use immediately on a daily basis, which will enhance their lives.
- Seeing patients progress to college courses, thus joining the wider community.

Discrimination Act Part 4 (SENDA), supported by a close working partnership between the referrer and the college. For OTs, this can be aided where they are able to work with one named person in the college, who holds all the patient information.

The message should be that students with mental health difficulties will be supported, not stigmatised. A mental health policy, made available to all students and staff, plus information about available support (counselling service, learning support, personal tutoring) should enable students to cope with any difficulties they experience during their course. This policy should outline how the student will be supported in the event of a relapse of symptoms. Staff training

on mental health issues and ways of relating to people with mental health needs should be mandatory.

**Zoe Gerrard is co-ordinator of Mental Health Outreach Provision at Barnet College, London**

[1] Questionnaires completed by 57 (out of 174) patients as part of this research project revealed that 47% of patients do not have any qualifications. Data from tutors (on 42 literacy and 25 numeracy learners) show that over 90% of learners were below Level 2 in literacy and numeracy: overall 20% were at Pre-entry level, with 36% assessed at Pre-entry for writing.

[2] Taylor, J. and Healy, P. (2001) 'Education in secure psychiatric units', *The British Journal of Forensic Practice*, 3 (4).

[3] Social Exclusion Unit (2004) *Mental Health and Social Exclusion*. London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

# The Sketch on the Wall

Graham Meadows examines the space available for prisoners to explore their creativity



Fiction can be an important trigger for literacy, particularly with beginner readers, and also with more isolated learner groups such as prisoners. However, while there is plenty of fiction dedicated to developing literacy from Entry 3 to Level 1 (eg Quick Reads), there is much less available at Entry 1 and Entry 2 that has similar merit, and there is scarcely any that reflects the needs of prisoners.

Prisoners as a group have lower than average literacy levels, and many have personal problems, often related to mental illness, that inhibit learning. The challenge is how to find strategies that address the needs of such prisoners while helping them to acquire essential literacy. The revised National Curriculum supplies part of an answer, by offering 'personal and social development learning' as part of the Foundation Learning 'progression pathway' structure,

alongside more functional and/or vocational elements.<sup>1</sup>

Linked with this opportunity, I have been using the 'third space' as a way of moving prisoners on through the informal options that exist in their own environment. The notion of the 'third space' comes from Anita Wilson's research into prisons,<sup>2</sup> in which she shows how prisoners make a psychological space for themselves within the boundaries of prison life. The third space, she says, is positioned 'between the practices of the prison and the world outside', thus sustaining an identity for the prisoner and some personalisation despite the tough realities of the institution. She cites graffiti as an example of the use of the third space.

Such 'informal' activities as Wilson describes often contain a strong element of resistance, as, in many

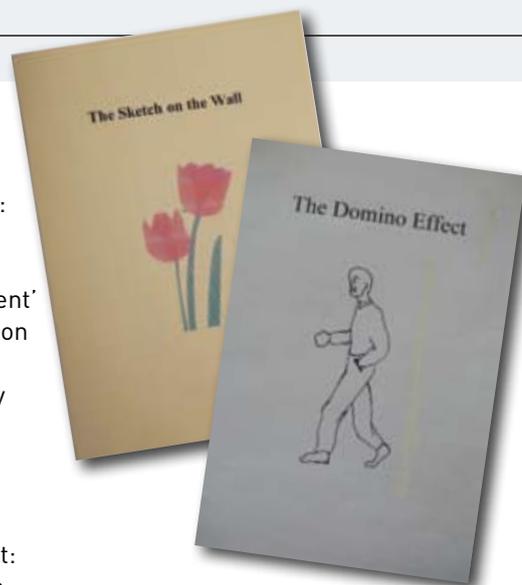
cases, does the prisoners' writing. The reason why prison journals like *Not Shut Up* work so well is that they provide a forum in which the voice of the individual in a heavily restricted environment is heard. Such journals contain not only anecdotes but poetry, stories, opinion, autobiography, and fiction as well – all the things that would normally foster 'social and emotional development' in the world at large. They are, in fact, the lifeblood of the learner's 'literacy environment' in prison. Fiction offers a way of using issues in this environment while simultaneously allowing the prisoner to detach, so that his own personal conflicts and difficulties can remain discrete.

What then are the advantages of using stories (as opposed to purely information-based material) to teach prisoners to read? Cunningham<sup>3</sup> suggests two major elements in

literature and fiction that serve the ends of personal development: (1) its ability to 'concentrate our attention', through the form of a fictional narrative, on what is 'salient' in human terms, and (2) its inclusion of an 'ethical filter' or 'diagnostic tool' through which we can identify to ourselves what is significant in our own lives and those of others, thus eliciting empathy. In the light of Wilson's notion of the 'third space', I would add a third element: (3) allowing the reader to think the unthinkable, and to cross boundaries of possibility and legitimacy through fiction.

An example of these features is contained in Guy de Maupassant's story 'A Vendetta'. The story concerns an old woman who plots to avenge her son's murder. The tale contains a vital proviso: the killer having escaped overseas, the woman has no resort to law to establish justice. Her only options, therefore, are either to leave the crime unavenged or to take the law into her own hands. The mother's choice, to take revenge, thus presents an ethical dilemma that it is the purpose of the story to develop. Fundamental questions about crime, punishment and natural justice are raised that demand discussion. The story can be rendered in a number of more or less complex ways but, to fully explore the ethical implications, the reader must empathise with the woman's plight and ask 'What would I have done?'. The story makes the reader 'think the unthinkable' – either that the murderer should get away with the crime or that the old woman in turn becomes a murderer.

Not all stories are so serious, or work at such a dynamic level of mental suspense, but this story shows well how literature can inform discussion of issues, and hence promote 'personal and emotional development', without the need for personal involvement. Prisons seethe with situations that can be discussed in a similar way once they are converted into a storyline. The tutor's



### Stories written with prison learners

role in the story-making process is to render a storyline with sensitivity and impartiality, and at the right level of difficulty for the reader or listener, through the medium of fiction.

My problem as a prison tutor was that, although such stories existed, they were few and far between, at the right textual level, to interest or satisfy my learner readers. Nor did any that I could find have much relevance to real life in prison. Therefore, with the help of the prisoners, I set about writing my own stories for Entry level learners. I needed stories with themes such as loneliness, bullying, anger, fear and despair, or themes that allowed prisoners bowed by these difficulties to face them more confidently. One of the key stories emerging from this activity was 'The Sketch on the Wall'. This was completed with the help of a talented illustrator from among the prisoners, who was also a model for the central character. He was someone with whom I felt empathy, which is perhaps why the story came to my mind.

Written for readers at Entry 2, the story showed an inmate's longing for privacy and solitude, both of which this prisoner had begun to find through sketching. At first, the character in the story sketched on paper. Then the momentum of the work led him to seek a more public place, in this case the 'forbidden' canvas of his prison wall (his 'third space'). He sketched

things he had seen in a city park before he was imprisoned, as well as scenes from prison life. The point of the story rested on the transforming joy of creativity, both for him and for the other prisoners. A tulip that he leaves half-sketched on the cell wall when he transfers to another prison becomes a symbol of this joy when it blooms in his absence.

Another story uses comedy, focusing on the prison dominoes contest. Entitled 'The Domino Effect' because the protagonist's victory over his cheating opponent leads to reprisals (one thing leads to another, like dominoes falling), the story ends on a humorous note. The bona fide victor's appearance on the wing, flourishing the trophy, upholds the interests of justice at the end.

Such tales as these engaged the prisoners' interest in writing their own stories, and endings to stories, as well as verbally exploring the moral issues and the language associated with the texts they read. As a pilot reading programme, it was evident with how much interest and enthusiasm the prisoners approached the production of texts. Their reportage of events and anecdotes from inside the prison walls, which contributed to these stories, was highly stimulating. Added to this was the voluntary contribution of literacy staff working in the prison, who made comments and suggestions of their own as well as encouraging prisoners at all levels to participate.

### Graham Meadows works as a part-time literacy tutor in HM prisons and as a consultant

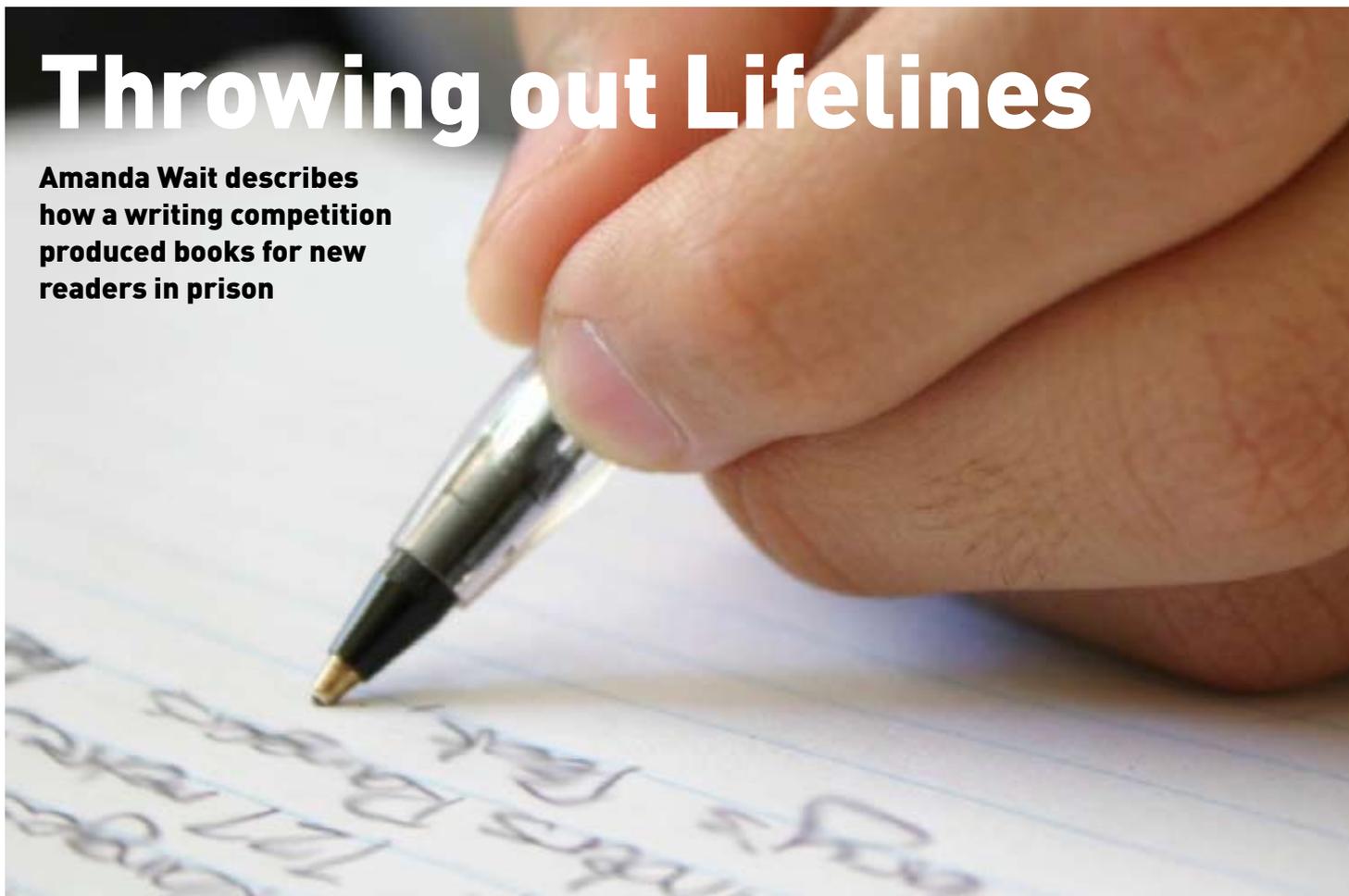
(1) *The Prospectus for Progression Pathways* (updated November 2008) Qualifications and Curriculum Framework.

(2) Wilson, A. (2003) 'Researching in the Third Space' in S. Goodman, T. Lillis, J. Maybin, J. and N. Mercer (eds) *Language, Literacy and Education: A Reader*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books Ltd.

(3) Cunningham, A. (2003) *The Heart of What Matters*. Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press.

# Throwing out Lifelines

**Amanda Wait describes how a writing competition produced books for new readers in prison**



Working as the Writer in Residence at HMP\* Manchester, I witness on a daily basis men emerging into a world of literacy; men who thought they would never read for pleasure, write a poem, ask for a dictionary, or hold a library card.

I'm based in the prison library, where tides of men arrive, sometimes eager and focused to use their 20 minutes amid the well stocked shelves, sometimes unsure of what a library is for but keen for a change of scene from the wings and a chance to get out of their cells. The librarians and orderlies answer a battery of requests: 'Love poetry? That shelf on the right.' 'True crime? Over there.' 'Starting a business? I'll have a look for you.' 'Archbold's Criminal Pleading – Evidence and Practice? It's reference only, but mark the pages and we'll photocopy them for you.' And then there are the less specific questions, by new readers, emerging readers, returning readers, unsure readers: 'I want something to read.'

'Something to read?' 'Yeah. Something to read.' But what?

## **Prisoners' writing**

When prisoners like Shaun (see box opposite) want 'something to read' what will they choose? It's heartening to see the growing range of books designed specifically for adult beginner and emergent readers, but adult readers are a diverse group of people with diverse experiences. What sort of books could a new reader in prison find that would reflect their experiences, or encourage them to write about their own lives? It was with this question in mind that I developed the LifeLines Prison Writing project for the Writers in Prison Network ([www.writersinprisonnetwork.org](http://www.writersinprisonnetwork.org)) and the Indigo Trust ([www.sfct.org.uk/indigo.html](http://www.sfct.org.uk/indigo.html)). The project aimed to extend opportunities for autobiographical writing by prisoners and to produce a series of accessible books that would encourage reading, writing and reflection by prisoners in a range

of settings, from cells to libraries to education departments.

Our first LifeLines Writing Competition was launched in 2006 and was publicised through Writers in Residence, prison education departments and libraries. The competition's remit was to write about 'A life-changing moment ... A choice you made ... Life as you know it ... Your own story' in a maximum of 300 words. It was designed to appeal both to new writers, who might struggle with a longer piece, as well as more experienced writers. Some writing was generated through creative writing sessions, some through one-to-one work, and some entries came in independently. Tutors, librarians and reader development workers encouraged prisoners to get involved. The £100 first prize, £50 second and £25 third were also an incentive for prisoners – particularly in Young Offenders Institutions – as was the chance to see their name in print.

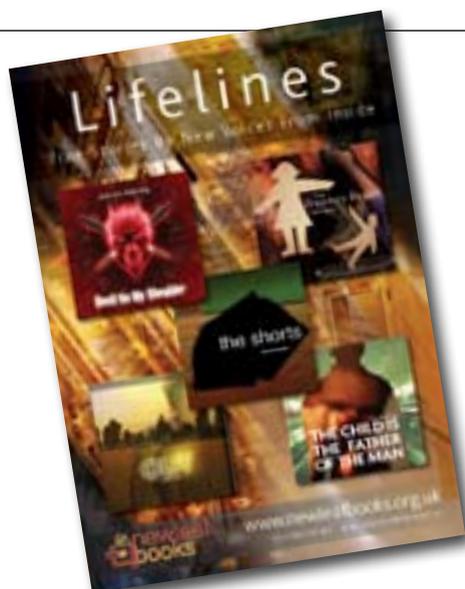
### Privileged insights

The writing started to come in – first a trickle and then a flood. There was writing by young offenders, women, remand prisoners and lifers from prisons all over England. All the writers had kept to the brief of 300 words; some work was typed, most was hand-written; some was hard to read, peppered with spelling mistakes and little punctuation. But there was an amazing array of poignant, hilarious, disturbing, thoughtful pieces. Reading them gave a privileged insight into the lives of prisoners: the dilemmas they had faced, the losses they had suffered, the hurt they had caused, the shortcomings of their family lives, the warmth of their relationships; it was all there. The criteria for shortlisting were: did the piece convey a sense of that person's particular life? would it strike a chord in a reader? would it provoke reflection after the book was closed?

The letters from the winning writers were lovely. All but one had never entered a writing competition before and they were amazed and pleased that their work had been selected. I worked with each of them to edit their writing so that it read more fluently. This also gave them the opportunity to get involved in the publication process, discussing suggestions for illustrations, and learning about copyright and ownership of their work.

### Publishing

The standard was so high that we were able to publish a further 30 pieces in the



**Entries were an amazing array of poignant, hilarious, disturbing, thoughtful pieces. Reading them gave a privileged insight into the lives of prisoners**

*Lifelines Anthology* from New Leaf, creating accessible high quality resources with a strong visual appeal for reluctant readers. New Leaf accompany all their Beginner Reader books with audio CDs with two tracks, one with the book read at normal speed, the second a slow read to support readers encountering new vocabulary. We used the CD format as a way of targeting new and reluctant readers in prisons who may feel stigmatised by picking up a 'basic skills' book, but are comfortable with listening to a CD.

Our second series – five more audio books and a new anthology – has been published. The anthology is a collection

of short, powerful pieces, and the audio books can be used in a variety of ways – in the privacy of prisoners' cells for enjoyment or self-study, to support one-to-one mentoring such as the 'Toe by Toe' programme, or in the library. We have commissioned a set of accompanying materials so that the books can be used as part of structured basic skills sessions, or to support listening, reading, discussion and writing activities. Some but not all of the themes are prison-specific. *My Choice* and *Devil on my Shoulder* have wider relevance for discussions around drug use. *Father First* has been used in parenting sessions and *The Child is the Father of the Man*, *The Freedom Project* and *The Shorts* are powerful starting points for discussions about family relationships.

### True stories, real people

Whatever their themes, these are true stories written by real people. As they reflect on and write about their lives, prisoners articulate their strong, diverse voices and, in their own way, throw out a lifeline to others who might just be ready to grab it.

### Amanda Wait is Writer in Residence HMP Manchester and Lifelines Co-ordinator

Lifelines are available from New Leaf Books, Tel: 0798 424 1863.

Free downloadable learning materials to support Lifelines are available from [www.newleafbooks.org.uk](http://www.newleafbooks.org.uk)

\* See Glossary p46

## Shaun

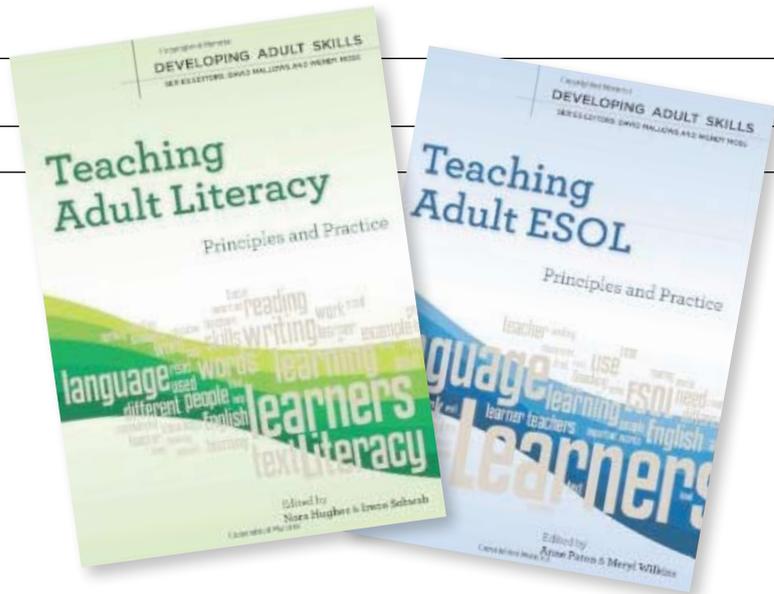
Shaun knows he's dyslexic but it wasn't until he showed up, aged 16, in a Young Offenders Institution that his learning needs were assessed and, although he received some support, the sentence was short, and he didn't manage to read his way to the end of it. Seven years on, Shaun's on remand in an adult jail. He's been working as a plasterer, supporting the two children he adores and is missing terribly. Now he's with a group of men sitting an assessment test to gauge their literacy and numeracy skills.

Shaun begins to fill in his name, then looks over at the AIG\* worker. He comes over with his paper, his first name written in a spidery hand. 'Miss, I know I'm dyslexic. They told me at school. I have tried to do something about it, but I've been working and I've got two little kids. My daughter's started school and she loves it, coming back with reading books. I want to be able to help her. I know I've got to do something about it and I might as well have a go while I'm in here.'

The AIG worker offers some choices: there's the Toe by Toe programme, where trained prisoners offer peer support on the wings; there's an intensive Skills for Life class with a great success rate and one-to-one help from volunteers; or there's structured support in the workshops from basic skills tutors. Shaun chooses the Skills for Life class; he wants to learn now and he wants to learn fast.

# Well worth the wait

**David Mallows previews new resources for adult literacy and ESOL teachers**



The creation of two books for adult teacher educators – one focusing on literacy, the other on ESOL\* – was initiated by NRDC back in 2005. It's been a long process, but the end products – published recently by the Open University Press and launched at the Institute of Education in April – clearly show the time and effort that have been taken to bring that idea to fruition.

The books were written to address the needs of trainees on literacy and ESOL teacher training courses. They will also be of use to practitioners who want to update themselves and develop their practice. Throughout the books readers are invited to develop and apply their knowledge and understanding through reflective tasks, which can be done individually or as a group, with appropriate commentary provided after the task.

A critical steer for the project was to reflect NRDC's core objective of drawing together research and practice, and to do so in a coherent and accessible way. Practitioners will be all too aware of the divide. Much experience and expertise that has been developed by adult literacy teachers has not been recorded. And conversely, while there is much published research on literacy, from many corners of the globe – both on how it is acquired and its role in society – this research can be hard to navigate, as it is scattered around different disciplines, such as anthropology, psychology or linguistics. The handbook on adult literacy teacher education is really a first of its kind.

Admittedly, there is more published material relevant to ESOL teacher training already in existence, much of it from the global world of ELT\*. However, there is very little that

addresses the particular situation of the ESOL classroom. The new book acknowledges a range of sources – adult literacy and the field of adult education in general; applied linguistics; ESOL experience in other English-speaking countries; and, in particular, general ELT – whilst maintaining its focus on the learners who concern us here. This alone makes it an invaluable resource.

Both adult literacy and ESOL have been important and developing areas of lifelong learning since the 1970s. The writing team which collaborated on this project have all worked in their fields for many years, as teachers, teacher educators, researchers, or combinations of these roles. The writers were keen to acknowledge the unsung contribution of hundreds of committed literacy and ESOL teachers whose work had helped thousands of learners and whose ideas had influenced the team but could not be directly credited.

Adult learners have rich resources, knowledge and skills in many areas of their lives, despite being often viewed as a social 'problem'. Teachers also can be undervalued and misunderstood: many people believe 'basic' literacy must be 'basic' to teach. In fact it is one of the most complex areas of education, needing high levels of knowledge and skill to do well.

These books have been needed for a long time: now they are here we hope they will become essential reading for trainees and trainers in literacy and ESOL.

**David Mallows is Associate Director: Research and Development at NRDC**

	Topics covered	Contributors
<b>Literacy</b>	Literacy in its social context; Language awareness for literacy teachers; Teaching and learning literacy; Inclusive learning (including chapters on dyslexia; literacy learning for adults with global learning difficulties; and embedding literacy).	Mary Hamilton, Yvon Appleby, Nora Hughes, Irene Schwab, Jay Derrick, Judith Gawn, Margaret Herrington, Sam Duncan, Theresa Latham.
<b>ESOL</b>	ESOL and society; Teaching and Learning ESOL (including chapters on the spoken language; the written word; developing accuracy; developing and adapting resources; and planning and assessment); Inclusive learning.	Anne Paton, Meryl Wilkins, Helen Sunderland, John Sutter, Marina Spiegel, Clare Fletcher, Vivien Barr, Mary Weir, Efisía Tranza, Sue Colquhoun, Jo-Ann Delaney.

# From theory to practice: how the Reflect approach to learning came to ESOL

**Tish Taylor describes a pilot project to trial Reflect tools in a range of ESOL classes**



Pioneered by the international development agency ActionAid and its sister organisations, Reflect is an approach to adult learning and social change which is currently used by over 500 organisations in over 70 countries worldwide.<sup>1</sup> The Reflect approach has been praised for its creative approaches to literacy development, community empowerment and social justice. It has been adapted to a number of different situations and locations, won international literacy awards and is written about widely, including three articles in a previous issue of this publication.<sup>2</sup>

The Reflect ESOL\* project evolved as a result of enquiries from ESOL teachers who wanted to know more about this unique approach to teaching and how they could use it

in their ESOL classes. With a small budget and a small band of ESOL teachers from colleges in London and Bristol, the pilot project set out to experiment with and trial the Reflect tools, process and philosophy for one academic year in discrete, vocational and community classes from Entry level 1 to Level 1. From the outset we aimed to contextualise the approach into something that had a practical use in the classroom and that we could share with the ESOL community.

## **Adapting Reflect for ESOL**

### **The philosophy**

Reflect is based around the educational and philosophical ideas of Paulo Freire, in particular his criticism of a model of education he called 'education banking'. In this model the student is seen as an empty

[bank] account to be filled up by the teacher. As Freire comments, 'it is the teacher who chooses the words and proposes them to the learners'.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Freire proposed a problem-posing model of education. Here, teacher and learner discuss and analyse their experiences, feelings and knowledge of the world together. Instead of the belief that learners' and teachers' situations in the world are fixed, as the banking model suggests, the problem-posing model explores difficulties or situations people find themselves in, as something which can be transformed.

To turn this theory into practice in our ESOL classes meant exploring and re-evaluating our roles, aims and visions. For many of the teachers, it was a validation of their current

## Case studies

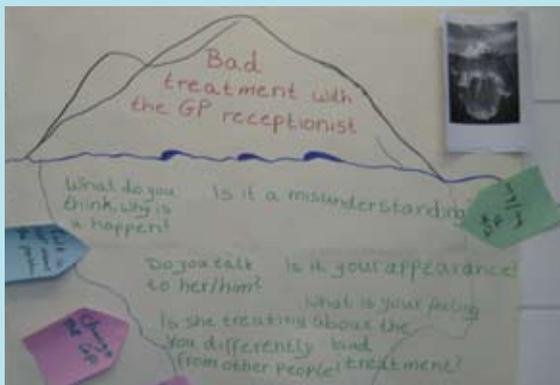
The case studies below give examples of Reflect ESOL work and how teachers and learners worked through aspects of practice. The tutors faced different issues throughout the pilot, such as how to move on from a discussion of students' experiences to analysing these experiences and taking action.

### Study 1: Bad treatment with the GP receptionist

An iceberg tool was used with a health and social care embedded

ESOL class. Working in small groups, learners selected a challenge that one of the group was experiencing in their life. This

challenge was represented visually as the visible top of an iceberg, with learners then discussing what was 'under' this top, by probing the challenge and posing questions. They also considered follow-up actions.



The class teacher noticed that the Reflect approach took a discussion which had previously stayed at the level of 'experience' to a more analytical level.<sup>4</sup>

### Study 2: Class dynamics and building a class community

Another teacher raised concerns about the dynamics in her class after noting that students contributed unequally to discussions. Together the class and the teacher agreed to explore what might be causing this. Using the 'wheel tool' or 'pie-chart', both learners and the teacher indicated how good they felt about their contribution in class and how much they had listened by 'filling in' the appropriate amount of their segment or slice of pie.

As the teacher noted in her reflective diary, 'I knew there was a need for sensitivity from me and the class ... repeating the exercise over a few sessions [weeks], I did see a change in class dynamics. The tool gave us an opportunity of seeing who felt good about their speaking and opened up a space for a real exchange of opinions, questions and concerns about speaking. After, I observed some more dominant class members include and "bring in" quieter learners – they were given space to communicate. I really feel we have a better feeling of a class community.'

### Study 3: Planning a class trip

Learners evaluated their discussion on planning for a class trip through a discourse framework.

After constructing the drawing, students presented their ideas on what you have to think about when planning a class trip. Students were then presented with a checklist of discourse areas for exploration. These offered a framework for a group discussion, including starting off, inviting to speak and taking a turn. Students evaluated what they normally do against the checklist. We then conducted the discussion again with students using the discourse framework. I fed back on individual strengths and gave tasks for the next discussion. We then discussed the quality of the discussion and the discourse skills used.<sup>5</sup>

practice. Ideas and techniques were shared or adopted through an ongoing teacher- and student-led action research project and regular meet-ups. From the beginning teachers were very explicit with the learners about Reflect and the pilot project. All learners were happy to take part.

### The process

Reflect proposes a critical approach to learning. Authentic spoken or written discourse can become both a medium to explore and analyse critical social issues and an impetus to take action. A very important element of Reflect is the examination of power relationships and how this affects participation and learning. This involves not only looking at relationships within the group (in our case the class) but gender, authority and social status. Because of this Reflect aims to explore and then analyse participants' stories, feelings and experiences in relation to wider social, political, economic and gender issues. If appropriate, courses of action will be discussed to address any concerns arising.

### The tools

To support this process, Reflect uses a huge (and ever growing) number of participatory learning tools and techniques. The ones used most frequently in the pilot were visualisation or graphic tools such as trees, rivers, icebergs, body maps and matrices. These tools aim to provide a means to record the points of a discussion and the language created (in whatever form) systematically for deeper analysis (see picture in box). We also discovered it provided the time for learners to think about their ideas and to describe them visually in cases where words were either unknown or inadequate.

Some tutors found particular tools facilitated particular types of spoken and written discourse. The river enabled narrative, while the tree prompted discussion, argument and sometimes anecdote. However, tutors and learners demonstrated time and again that tools can be adapted or



created to fit the theme or topic of discussion. In fact, the ability to adapt or even to create tools from scratch became essential to the successful facilitation of the type of 'talk' learners wanted to use.

#### Linking into current research

A milestone in the project was the publication of the external evaluation conducted by LLU+.\* Written by Pauline Moon and Helen Sunderland, this independent evaluation asked 'In what ways can Reflect support learner's English language development?' and linked its findings with other strategies outlined in recent research, such as 'speaking from within', 'interactional spaces' and 'turning talk into learning'.<sup>6</sup>

'The way Reflect ESOL can provide opportunities for authentic and extended talk is very significant because recent research has emphasized the importance of this type of talk for language learning'.<sup>6</sup>

While those involved may already have felt that their practice was intrinsically right and effective, acknowledgement that it was also supported by current ESOL research gave an enormous boost to the project. Some teachers incorporated suggested practice from the latest ESOL research into their Reflect classes to support learners' language work at discourse level. Research has also helped inform content of further Reflect training for new teachers experimenting with Reflect, building on previous good practice.

#### Reflecting on Reflect

Early reports showed different reactions from learners in the initial stages of the pilot. However, by the end, learners spoke about the benefits they experienced, not just in terms of language learning but also of the knowledge and confidence they gained through opportunities to speak freely about their thoughts and feelings. Feedback from learners included observations that they felt 'more confident now' and 'I think now it is easy how you going to find job because you can speak to the person I'm not scared anymore' (Learners at Entry level 1). Learners at higher levels commented that they 'got a lot of confidence ... our classmates help us ... give me a lot of ideas' and 'I think it is good to have a group discussion because you learning from other person and you learn it as well and it make you speak more English'.<sup>8</sup>

The tutors, regardless of previous experience or qualifications in ESOL reported fundamental positive changes in their classes and in themselves as teachers. In the words of one:

'I now feel that my classes are more holistic and free flowing and that they contain more possibilities for genuine human interactions of the sort that students will be more likely to come across outside the ESOL classroom, and therefore skills learned are more directly transferable. I do not feel that I have a Reflect way and non Reflect way of

teaching. I feel that using Reflect has fundamentally changed and added to my teaching style and ethos. It is not a technique or tool but a committed approach that I feel works for me. I feel that using Reflect has allowed me to be more in tune with my students' needs and has allowed me to widen the skills learned in my classes'.<sup>9</sup>

The LLU+ evaluation of the Reflect ESOL project recommended the approach to ESOL teachers suggesting that 'the messages ... for ESOL are important and should be disseminated widely'.<sup>10</sup>

#### What next?

Since the end of the pilot project, Reflect has been taken up and developed by teachers in many different locations in the UK. Actionaid Reflect ESOL are currently offering dissemination, training packages and regular hub meetings where teachers can share experiences and discuss new ideas.

In the long term I believe the Reflect approach will develop in ESOL through the imaginative and creative practice of teachers and learners.

#### Tish Taylor coordinates the Reflect ESOL project for ActionAid

The Reflect ESOL project was funded by the Esme Fairbairn Foundation. For further information, please contact the team on [reflectesol@actionaid.org](mailto:reflectesol@actionaid.org)

(1) For further details see [www.reflect-action.org](http://www.reflect-action.org)

(2) See Lopez, D. 'Introducing Reflect'; Newman, K. 'Using the Reflect approach in ESOL'; and Thompson, P. 'Reflect in a global society' in *reflect* issue 2, 2005.

(3) Freire, P. (1985). *The politics of education: Culture, power, and liberation*. Burnham: Greenwood.

(4) (5) (7) (8) (9) & (10) Moon, P. and Sunderland, H. (2008) *Reflect for ESOL Evaluation: Final report*. London: LLU+ at London South Bank University.

(6) Cooke, M. and Roberts, C. (2007). *Developing adult teaching and learning: practitioner guides – ESOL*. NRDC & NIACE.

\* See Glossary p46

# Supporting the supporters

**Mary Hastings shows how care support workers can play a key role in developing the literacy, language and numeracy skills of clients with learning difficulties and disabilities**

VOISE (Voluntary Organisation in Health & Social Care Education) is based in North West England and specialises in training in health and social care. We have also been delivering literacy and numeracy qualifications to the social care workforce for more than three years. Teaching takes place in the workplace or in the learner's local library (often for learners who do not wish their managers to know they are receiving support) on a one-to-one or small group basis.

Although these arrangements have enabled many staff to achieve LLN\* qualifications, we felt that even more could benefit but, to reach them, we needed a new approach.

First, we identified three current approaches to delivering Skills for Life:

- 1) We already had experience of the Whole Organisation Approach (WOA), having taken part in the QIA\* project in 2007. The WOA emphasises the importance of a top-down approach that encourages managers to support the LLN needs of their workforce.
- 2) Family Learning is where parents are given LLN tuition by a Skills for Life teacher in their child's school. They then join their child in class to support the child's learning, thus improving the skills and confidence of both parent and child.
- 3) Our Skills for Life team leader, who was also delivering Skills



**Although, on the face of it, this approach may seem costly and time-consuming, support workers spent the second hour of each session with clients, so the time could be budgeted as a support activity.**

for Life in FE\* colleges, saw that care support workers were often helping clients to attend college, but were not staying with them in the classroom. The workers often lacked the skills and confidence to support their client in the classroom, so clients were missing out on this potentially valuable support.

We decided to combine elements of these three approaches to develop a course that would give support workers the skills and confidence to support their client's LLN in education

and in everyday life. At the same time, the workers would become more aware of their own LLN needs. Our Sector Skills Council, Skills for Care, offered funding for innovative projects such as this, so we were able to pilot the course.

## **The pilot programme**

The pilot was delivered to two small groups of learners in eight classroom-based sessions. The first hour of the session was for the support workers; the second hour was for the clients, together with their support worker. The clients all had learning disabilities and had attended Skills for Life courses in colleges in the past.

In order for the support workers to receive certification, we based the course on the City & Guilds Level 2 Certificate in Learning Support (9297). By completing units 001 and 002, learners could achieve the Level 2 Award in Literacy, Language, Numeracy and ICT Awareness.

Initial assessment showed that the clients' abilities ranged from Milestone 5 (able to recognise some letters of the alphabet) to Entry level 2 (reading simple sentences). All the clients had spiky profiles, where their speaking and listening ability was significantly better than their reading and writing. The support workers ranged from Entry level 3 to Level 2.

In the first session, the support workers were given a general introduction to Skills for Life. In the second session, they looked at the learning process.

For the first few sessions, the tutor generated the learning materials that the support workers gave to the clients. However, the workers were encouraged to produce personalised resources for their clients. For example, one client was fascinated by makes of car so his support worker produced an alphabet sheet using makes of car to help him learn the letter sounds.

### Outcomes

All but one of the support workers achieved the Level 2 Award in Literacy, Language, Numeracy and ICT Awareness. One support worker has been guided towards further Skills for Life support and another plans to undertake the Level 3 course in supporting ESOL learners.

In initial assessment, many support workers found that some of their LLN skills had lapsed, such as the use of apostrophes and spelling patterns. They all expressed interest in accessing further courses to improve their own Skills for Life.

Learning targets for the clients were written into their individual learning plans and their personal plans. These targets were met. All the clients were disappointed when the course ended.

An unexpected outcome of the pilot was the value of involving support workers in the assessment of clients attending college courses. As they work with the client throughout their day – at home, out-and-about and at college – they know what their clients can and cannot do. This kind of knowledge cannot be picked up in a 90-minute initial assessment with a teacher. Support workers now attend initial assessments at college with their clients and with evidence of any work they have done at home.

### Lessons learned

We learned that clients need more advice and guidance at the start, telling them that this course is just a 'kick-start' and they will continue learning at home. However, we



Many clients were studying Skills for Life courses at college at a lower level than they were capable of. For example, one was taking a pre-entry course, whereas her reading abilities were around Entry 2. Involving the support worker in assessing

the client was valuable as she knew what the client could do at home. Using knowledge from the pilot course, the worker went to the college with evidence of their client's work, and the client is now studying a higher level course.

recognised that many clients attend college for social reasons and that home-based learning does not enable this.

The main weakness of the project was the pre-course guidance. Although we had prepared a concise introductory handbook, many of the support workers did not receive this until the first day of the course. Similarly, many of the training managers said they did not understand what the project was about until their support workers had started the course and given feedback. It was acknowledged that the model of the course is quite complicated so straightforward pre-course guidance is essential.

### Next steps

This approach shows the benefits to clients with learning disabilities of having one-to-one support from their care support worker in their Skills

for Life learning programmes. With training, the care support workers can assist the Skills for Life teacher in personalising the programme to best meet the client's needs.

For the support worker, the initial course and Award could be built on to lead to the City & Guilds Level 2 Certificate in Learning Support.

As a follow-up to this pilot, and as a result of evaluations from training managers, VOISE has run a 'Skills for Life Awareness for Managers' course. This used Unit 001 of the Level 2 Award in Learning Support to equip managers with the skills and knowledge to identify any Skills for Life needs of their staff and guide them towards appropriate provision.

**Mary Hastings is a Skills for Life Team Leader at VOISE [www.void.info](http://www.void.info)**

\* See Glossary p46

# Books

## The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education

Ecclestone, K. and Hayes, D. (2008)

Routledge: London

ISBN: 978-0-415-39700-1 (hardback)

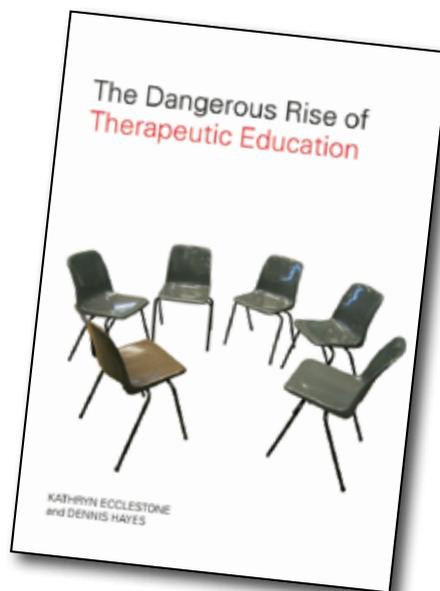
978-0-415-39701-8 (paperback)

Reviewed by Gill Moore

You can tell from the title that this is going to be a provocative book. The authors challenge one of the most cherished tenets of contemporary education – that the wellbeing of the learner should be the central concern of teachers because unhappy learners find it more difficult to learn. This idea may have become disproportionate – but is it really dangerous?

The authors suggest that, since the death of Princess Diana in 1997, concern with individual emotional responses to life's challenges has become a national obsession. The public expression of private anxieties is now encouraged in many fields, from reality shows on TV to performance management at work. A commercial empire is being built around a victim culture, from publishers of misery memoirs and self-help books to legions of counsellors and consultants.

Politicians have tuned into the zeitgeist, so that quasi-therapeutic approaches are now being funded by government and built into policies in schools such as the early years' curriculum and assessment, SEAL\* programmes and the ubiquitous 'circle time'. In FE\*, we are encouraged to see every learner as potentially vulnerable and entitled to support, and our assessment procedures reinforce this. The authors show how therapeutic practices have also gained currency in Higher Education and the workplace.



But don't we all believe that self-esteem affects learning and that we need to be sensitive to learners' emotional state and responsive to their problems? So what is wrong with a therapeutic approach? Ecclestone and Hayes claim that we are in danger of stereotyping all learners as needy and, in taking an individualised, emotionally responsive approach as central, we are at risk of losing, as our primary focus, the knowledge and skills that learners need to acquire.

Therapeutic education requires learners to disclose personal issues, and tutors to counsel them about how they might overcome these issues. It dictates a particular view of what it means to be happy and fulfilled. In examples such as nurture groups, practice becomes routine and ritualised, and is potentially intrusive and demeaning. Although we mean well, rather than encouraging more confident and emotionally capable individuals, we create introverts with a diminished sense of themselves and a dependency on support agencies. This is why the authors choose to use the word 'dangerous'.

If you don't go along with the orthodoxies, you are liable to be called reactionary, or in denial of your own emotional inadequacies. Furthermore, the woolly language and ill-defined concepts of therapeutic education, coupled with the undisputed public acceptance of such ideas, make them particularly hard to challenge – but not if Ecclestone and Hayes can help it.

They fear that surveys showing our children to be the most unhappy in Europe are only going to get worse. Our interventions are creating a vicious circle that diminishes self-confidence, makes people conform to imposed behavioural patterns, and saps their courage to take risks and rise to challenges. We are losing sight of the true goals of education, which are to develop a base of knowledge and skills as tools to raise ourselves up. We are replacing it with a Curriculum of the Self.

As a Skills for Life lecturer, I recognise emotional literacy as an important tool in the teachers' professional kit. But I am also aware of the gap between the overview of researchers and managers, and the realities of those who teach on a daily basis. Although these authors are careful to include anecdotal evidence from practitioners to support their arguments, I don't think things have gone as far as they suggest – at least not yet. But this challenging book should make everyone stop and ask themselves if this is indeed where we are heading.

**Gill Moore is a lecturer at South Staffordshire College but writes in a personal capacity**

\* See Glossary p46

## Books

### Txtng: The gr8 db8

David Crystal (2008)

Oxford University Press

ISBN: 978-0199544905 (hardback)

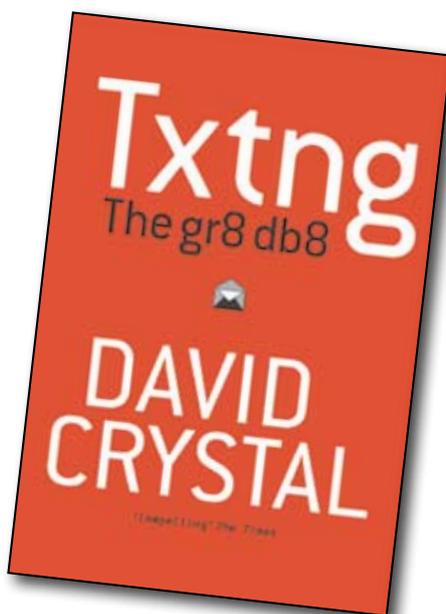
978-0199571338 (paperback)

Reviewed by Nora Hughes

So what is the 'great debate' about texting? In this book, linguist David Crystal discusses some of the claims and counter claims: who texts and why; new social norms brought about by texting; its linguistic properties; the impact it is having on 'standards' and on language itself.

In the popular media, he argues, much of this debate is mere hype: apocalyptic warnings of impending social and linguistic disaster vie with claims that texting is a whole new language, a 'high-tech lingo' known only to the initiated. Research is patchy and contradictory: on the one hand texting 'fogs your brain'; on the other hand it 'is linked positively with literacy development'.

Very few studies focus on what happens linguistically when people text and this is an area that Crystal explores. Using samples from an international corpus of text messages, he identifies well known features, such as logograms (b4), initialisms (lol) and non-standard spellings (wassup). Some of these devices have been around for longer than we might think (for example IOU was used in 1610 and luv dates back to the 19th century) but there are real innovations too, like running words together, mixing different kinds of symbols (cu2nite☺) and 'upping the ante' in terms of 'language play' (IMHO – *in my humble opinion*, IMHBCO – *in my humble but correct opinion*, IMNSHO – *in my not-so-humble opinion*). One perhaps surprising finding is that



only a small minority of people text in this way: most texters use standard language and orthography.

Crystal looks at texting in an historical context, pointing out that language change and new technology have always aroused 'moral panic' (the invention of printing was thought to be the work of the devil). He also examines text language through a multilingual lens: vowel-less words, for example, are often assumed to be difficult to read but in some languages they are part of standard writing and according to information theory they are perfectly intelligible (f u cn rd ths thn wats th prblm?). Meanwhile, the global power of English is such that common English textisms, such as lol and gr8, are now universal.

The book examines texting as a worldwide social practice: people use it to gossip, exchange greetings and organise their lives; governments send out health alerts; citizens mobilise quickly in large numbers and sometimes even overthrow the government (as in Madrid in 2004).

Teenagers are still the largest group of texters, though older people are narrowing the gap. In teenage social networks the communicative potential

of the medium has come into its own: texting is a badge of identity and there is widespread creativity and innovation. Texting can be inclusive: it is affordable for those on low incomes, and it has 'reduc[ed] the gap between [deaf people] and hearing people'. Other social consequences are less positive, for example the 'need to be continuously available to friends and lovers' referred to in a Japanese study.

On the benefits of including texting as part of the school curriculum alongside other forms of writing, Crystal is very clear: 'The aim of language education is to put all these literacies under the confident control of the student, so that when they leave school they are able to cope with the linguistic demands made on them'.

There is much in this book that is relevant and useful to the field of LLN\*. Many practitioners share the author's view of texting as a social practice that learners engage in or aspire to, and therefore a legitimate focus of study. More research into adult learners' uses of texting and how they can develop it alongside other literacies would be welcomed.

*Txtng: The gr8 db8* focuses on countries where private ownership of mobile phones is taken for granted. A useful addition to this book would be a study of the role of texting in the South. There is evidence that communities and NGOs are using it to combat inequality and improve people's lives – a model of 'literacy in action' that we in the richer countries of the North can surely learn from.

**Nora Hughes lectures in Adult Basic Skills Education at the Institute of Education, London**

\* See Glossary p46

## Books

### ESOL: A Critical Guide

Cooke, M. and Simpson, J. (2008)

Oxford University Press

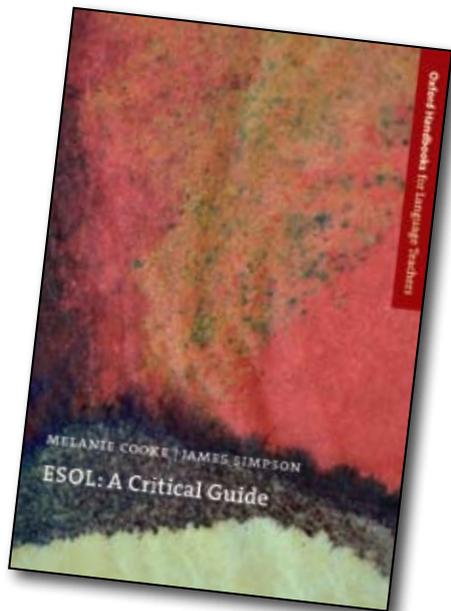
ISBN: 978-0-194-42267-3

Reviewed by Jane Allemano

It is gratifying to see another book join the few publications that are devoted specifically to ESOL\* – an area that has been sadly neglected in most of the books published for language teachers. It is also pleasing that, in this book, ESOL in the UK is seen as part of a worldwide agenda in addressing English language learning for increasingly migrant populations.

*ESOL: A Critical Guide* gives an excellent, up-to-date overview of the key issues that face teachers and managers on ESOL programmes today. It covers the effects of recent and current political policy, and ongoing research into pedagogy. It deftly relates the classroom to learners' lives outside the classroom and to the wider political agenda. Particular attention is paid to the social practice element of language teaching and learning, and there is a whole chapter on electronic literacy which gives an enlightening overview of current research into this relatively new area for teachers. Although there is a considerable and informative amount of background and theory, the book remains accessible and by no means loses sight of the grassroots.

The 'Critical' in the title is sustained throughout the book, particularly with regard to government policy and the attendant bureaucracy. This is described and critiqued logically and rationally and there is nothing here that does not need to be said; in fact it should be required reading for decision-makers. There is also an



**Particular attention is paid to the social practice element of language teaching and learning, and there is a whole chapter on electronic literacy which gives an enlightening overview**

interesting section on current research into the assessment of spoken English, indicating the flaws in existing systems and stressing the need for further work to be done in this area. It would have been interesting to see a response to the testing practices in the other skills as well but there is probably scope for another book on this increasingly important area.

The book is well organised in a series of self-contained chapters, each with its own very manageable bibliography. It begins with the position and challenges of ESOL in the world and then, more specifically, in the UK. This leads on to a consideration of pedagogy and the specific issues facing ESOL teachers, and finally comes to observation and training for teachers and to the benefits of ESOL teachers taking part in action research, an area which should be significantly encouraged and

expanded. The appendix comprises a very interesting series of studies of ESOL in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the USA, the Republic of Ireland and Scotland. A welcome feature is that the text is peppered with activities for teachers – very useful for teacher education courses but also to help the reader to process the arguments put forward and relate them to his or her own teaching situation while reflecting critically on the wider agenda.

In a book of this length (198 pages), there are inevitably areas that have been missed out or mentioned only in passing. The choice of content reflects very well the concerns of the average professional in ESOL today. Therefore, as well as being an excellent resource for ITT\*, this book will be welcome to practising teachers and managers who will see that their concerns about the demands being made on the profession are being aired in an academic forum and who may also be encouraged to make time to reflect on their work in the classroom and how they can contribute to future developments. The book is an excellent introduction to the world of ESOL for teachers coming into the profession from a traditional EFL\* background, highlighting for them the key features of the principles of ESOL and the varied characteristics of ESOL learners. It makes essential reading for all.

**Jane Allemano is an Adult ESOL Teacher Educator at the Institute of Education, London**

Sample pages from this book can be viewed at [www.oup.com](http://www.oup.com)

Cooke and Simpson worked on the ESF\*-funded NRDC project 'Effective practice in ESOL'

\* See Glossary p46

# Letters

## Targets: problem or solution?

### Dear *reflect*

I found the articles in *reflect* 12 – the special issue on CPD\* – an interesting read. While some articles were depressingly suffused with the bureaucracy-ridden rhetoric of managerialism and the Skills agenda, others were refreshing illustrations of how routes to professionalism can indeed be learning- and teaching-focused. John Sutter's piece 'Speaking from Within: Archaeological Perspectives' was the best example of this.

I was troubled, though, by JD Carpentieri's defence of targets in Skills for Life ('Teachers and Targets: A Tale of Knights and Knaves?'). Carpentieri maintains that, while some practitioners might find them distasteful, policy-makers and technocrats regard targets of all sorts as 'a necessary enabler, much like petrol in a car engine'. Targets are, in Carpentieri's view, 'part of the bargain struck by government on the one hand and public sector professionals such as Skills for Life practitioners on the other ... a realistic arrangement'.



However, targets can do immense damage to education. An example drawn from current ESOL\* practice will illustrate how target-setting can actually militate against learning. There is a conflict between, on the one hand, the need to provide appropriate courses for beginner ESOL learners and, on the other, managerial demands that government targets are met for the numbers of learners achieving qualifications. Practitioners are increasingly compelled to focus on higher level qualification-bearing courses, and learners are under great pressure to demonstrate regular 'upward' progress through the qualifications framework. This has contributed to institutional cuts

in vital, intensive, but unaccredited beginner ESOL and ESOL literacy classes, which in turn leaves huge numbers of adult migrants who are potential beginner ESOL learners unable to gain access to provision.

A target-driven culture can work against effective practice. The learning needs of Skills for Life learners are complex, multifaceted and often urgent, and simply do not lend themselves to the crude reductionism of 'targets'. Targets are the problem, not the solution.

**Dr James Simpson**  
University of Leeds

\* See Glossary p46

## Response

James Simpson makes one valid criticism of my article but also seems to miss its point somewhat. While I did highlight some of the downsides of targets, I could possibly have devoted more space to this side of the argument. However, the article can only be read as a defence of targets if the reader is intent on seeing it that way. (It is instructive that Simpson attributes to me a pro-targets

viewpoint that I explicitly attribute to Neil Robertson, former Head of the Skills for Life Strategy Unit, and that where I write that targets 'may be a more realistic arrangement', Simpson replaces the words 'may be' with an ellipsis.) The purpose of my article was not to judge whether targets are good or bad. Instead, the article strived to provide a historically-informed overview of why targets and other public sector management techniques currently play such a central role in Skills

for Life. My contention is not that targets are the problem or the solution, but that they are part of a much broader long-term shift in the relationship between government and practitioners in all policy areas. Any attempt to get rid of or modify Skills for Life targets needs to take this into account, or it is doomed to fail.

**JD Carpentieri**  
NRDC

# Have your say!

After six years and 13 issues, we want to hear your views of *reflect*. Take this chance to shape the future. Either fill out the survey in the middle pages of the magazine and return it to us via Freepost, or go online to:

[www.nrdc.org.uk/reflectSurvey](http://www.nrdc.org.uk/reflectSurvey)

The deadline for receipt of responses is 30th September. Responses can be anonymous, or, if you give us your name, you will be entered in a prize draw.

## A-Z

### AIG

Advice Information and Guidance.

### BIS

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. [www.bis.org.uk](http://www.bis.org.uk)

### CPD

Continuous Professional Development.

### EC

European Community.

### EFL

English as a Foreign Language.

### ELT

English Language Teaching.

### ESF

European Social Fund. [www.esf.gov.uk](http://www.esf.gov.uk)

### ESOL

English for Speakers of Other Languages.

### FE

Further Education.

### HMP

Her Majesty's Prison.

### IT

Information technology.

### ITT

Initial Teacher Training.

### LLN

Literacy, Language and Numeracy.

### LLU+

National consultancy and professional development centre for staff working in literacy, numeracy, dyslexia, family learning and ESOL. Based at London South

Bank University. [www.lsbu.ac.uk/lluplus](http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/lluplus)

### LSC

Learning and Skills Council. [www.lsc.gov.uk](http://www.lsc.gov.uk)

### LSIS

The Learning and Skills Improvement Service is the sector-owned body created in 2008 from the merging of QIA and CEL (the Centre for Excellence in Leadership). [www.lsis.org.uk](http://www.lsis.org.uk)

### Moodle

An example of a VLE. A free package which aims to help practitioners create effective online learning sites. [www.moodle.org](http://www.moodle.org)

### NFQI

National Framework of Qualifications of Ireland.

### NHS

National Health Service.

### NVQ

National Vocational Qualification. Work based awards in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

### HMP

Her Majesty's Prison.

### QIA

The Quality Improvement Agency was established in 2006 to guide improvement in FE. See LSIS.

### SEAL

Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning.

### TUC

Trade Union Congress, an umbrella organisation for trade unions in Britain.

### UKCES

UK Commission for Employment and Skills. [www.ukces.org.uk](http://www.ukces.org.uk)

### VLEs

Virtual Learning Environments are software systems designed to support teaching and learning in an educational setting, facilitating online contact between teachers and students.

## Got an opinion?

If you want to contribute an article or opinion piece to the next issue of *reflect*, we'd love to hear from you. We're interested in your ideas and comments on practice, research and policy. Please contact us at [info@nrdc.org.uk](mailto:info@nrdc.org.uk)

# New publications

You will have noticed fewer paper-printed publications from NRDC, as we adopt a greener publishing approach. Most of the documents described below are available solely in electronic formats: these can be downloaded from the NRDC website. Not all bear our logo: we've been working closely with many different organisations and some of the documents listed below are published by funders and partners.

## RESEARCH REPORTS

### The three divides: The digital divide and its relation to basic skills and employment in Portland, USA and London, England

By John Bynner, Steve Reder, Samantha Parsons and Claire Strawn

### Economic Impact of Training and Education in Basic Skills

### Education, basic skills and health related outcomes

By Augustin de Coulon, Elena Meschi and Marisa Yates

### Progress for adult literacy learners

By Maxine Burton, Judy Davey, Margaret Lewis, Louise Ritchie and Greg Brooks

### Progression: Moving on in life and learning

By Rachel Hodge, David Barton and Lynda Pearce

### Feedback, talk and engaging with learners: Formative assessment in adult numeracy

By Jeremy Hodgen, Diana Coben and Valerie Rhodes

### Quantitative research into entry-point levels of Skills for Life learners

By Pip Kings, Jenny Litster and Brian Creese

### Minimum Wage and Staying-on Rates in Education for Teenagers

By Augustin de Coulon, Elena Meschi, Joanna Swaffield, Anna Vignoles and Jonathan Wadsworth

### Adult numeracy: A review of research

By JD Carpentieri, Jenny Litster and Lara Frumkin

## RESEARCH SUMMARY

### Learning literacy together: The impact and effectiveness of family literacy on parents, children, families and schools

## PRACTICAL GUIDES

### Why leadership matters: Putting basic skills at the heart of adult learning

By Ursula Howard and Pip Kings (eds)

### Curriculum Development in Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education (ITABE)

By Juliet McCaffery, Jane Mace and Joan O'Hagan

### Making it work: A practical guide to effective delivery of Skills for Life in workplace learning

### Teachers of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL: Progress towards a qualified workforce

## TEACHER EDUCATOR HANDBOOKS

### Teaching Adult Literacy: Principles and Practice

By Nora Hughes and Irene Schwab (eds)

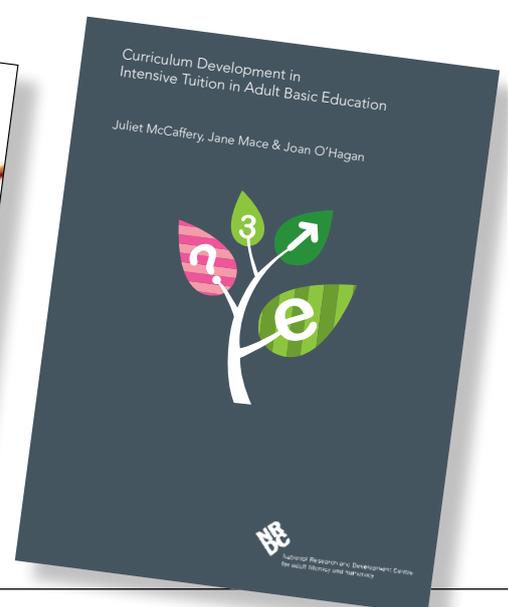
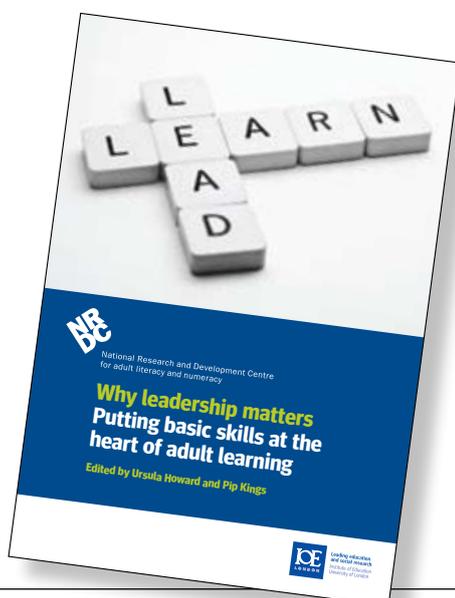
### Teaching Adult ESOL: Principles and Practice

By Anne Paton and Meryl Wilkins (eds)

Available to purchase from OUP: [www.mcgraw-hill.co.uk/openup](http://www.mcgraw-hill.co.uk/openup)

### Want a closer look?

If you're interested in reviewing either of the two handbooks for the next issue of *reflect*, please contact [m.wilkie@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:m.wilkie@ioe.ac.uk)



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