



National Research and Development Centre
for adult literacy and numeracy

reflect

THE MAGAZINE OF NRDC | ISSUE 6 | OCTOBER 2006

SPECIAL REPORT

Effective practice

What is the key to successful
teaching and learning?

You wouldn't expect a maths teacher to teach plastering

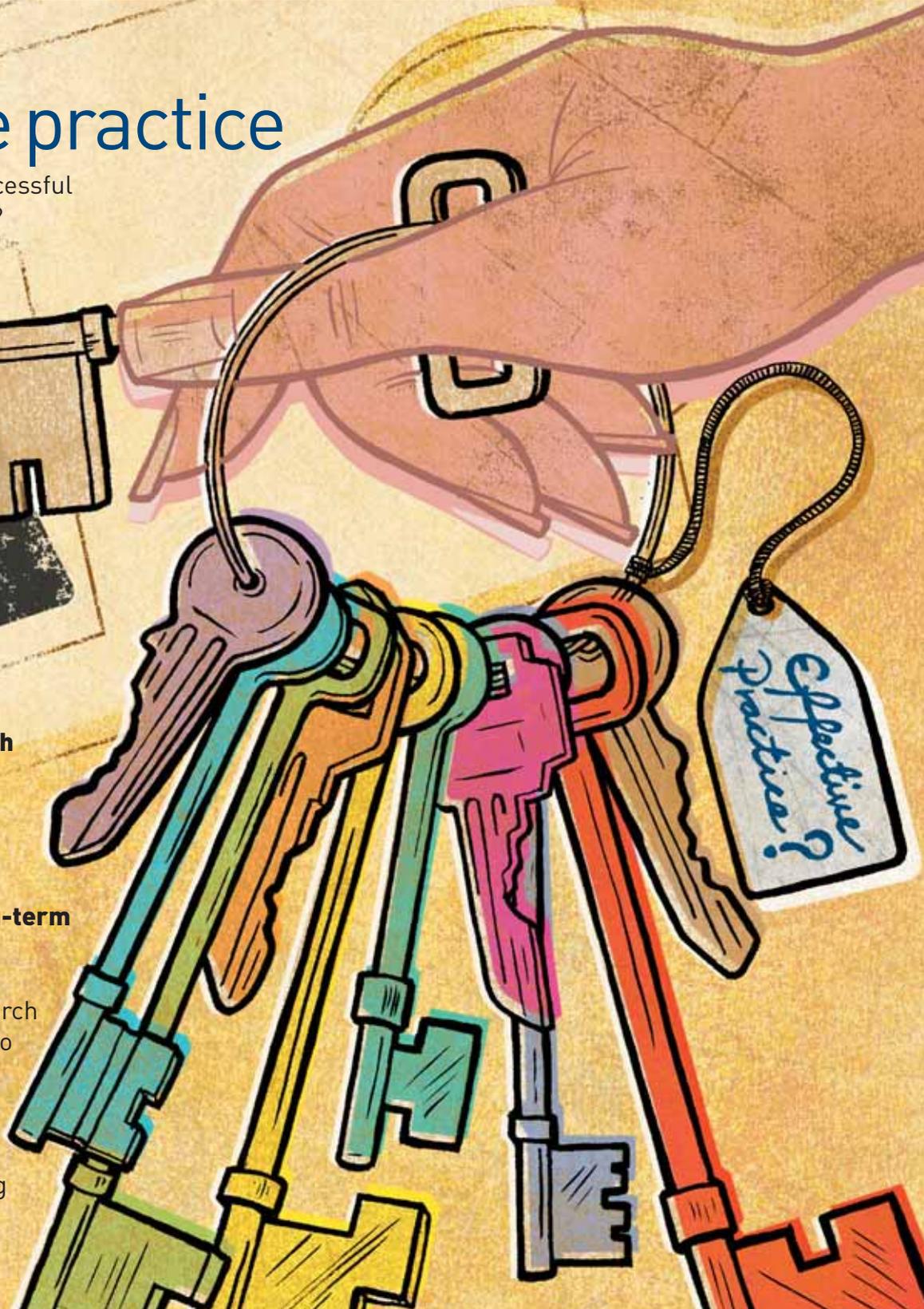
Tom Jupp on why an
embedded approach
works best

Just a fling...or a long-term relationship?

A look back at the
Practitioner-led Research
Initiative and forward to
where it might lead

Finding your voice

The NRDC launches
its own creative writing
competition for adult
learners



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About NRDC

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

NRDC consortium partners

The Institute of Education, University of London with:

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The University of Nottingham

The University of Sheffield

East London Pathfinder

Liverpool Lifelong Learning Partnership

Basic Skills Agency

Learning and Skills Network

LLU+, London South Bank University

National Institute of Adult Continuing Education

King's College London

University of Leeds

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Qualifications matter

I still hear it said, by pundits, professionals and employers, that qualifications are not important, or that confidence matters much more to literacy, numeracy and language learners. Peter Ustinov, story-teller, wit and university chancellor once said: 'people at the top of the tree are those without qualifications to detain them at the bottom'. There should be no conflict between confidence-building, practice, skills and qualifications. Of course qualifications must be up to date and fit for purpose. But a new NRDC review of research has again confirmed that qualifications and skills matter a great deal to people's chances in life and work (page 33).

Improved levels of literacy and numeracy are associated with higher income, better health and enhanced self-esteem. Unfortunately, it is equally true that very low skills are strongly associated with the opposite. Furthermore, as John Bynner and Samantha Parsons point out in a study published this month (page 22), the children of parents with reading skills at Entry Level 2 or below are also likely to encounter greater obstacles in gaining basic skills.

That is why the NRDC Effective Practice research is so vital. In our special report (pages 4 to 9) we begin the hugely important task of sharing this unparalleled source of evidence with the *Skills for Life* community. This research does not provide a neat list of 'tips for the teacher' but it will help us all to better understand what enables learners to progress and become more positive about learning. We are now working with practitioners to transform our findings into practical advice and support for even better teaching.

The NRDC's study of the startling impact of the 'embedded approach' has also yielded evidence that policy-makers, managers and practitioners will find fascinating (pages 10 to 12). But of course it isn't only teaching approaches that make the difference. Talented, committed teachers who 'know' their learners and the lives they lead are also crucially important. We believe that some of the best of them are also to be found in this issue of *reflect* in the shape of the practitioners who have found time to carry out their own research (pages 16 and 17).

They were good teachers before they dipped their toes in the research water but they are even better ones now, having analysed and reflected on what they and their colleagues do. As one of them, Bronwen Ray, says: 'Practitioners are in a prime situation to gather 'real' and 'live' evidence ...this project has inspired and challenged me and I want to do more.'

Bronwen, you may receive a call from the NRDC very soon! And please let us hear from many more teachers – we need and want to learn from your expertise.

Ursula Howard, Director, NRDC

What is good practice in *Skills for Life*?

John Vorhaus highlights some of the themes that have emerged from the findings of NRDC's Effective Practice projects

For the past three years, NRDC researchers have explored effective teaching practices in reading, writing, numeracy, ESOL and ICT, in order to understand what enables learners to make progress and become more positive about their learning. We were interested in adults seeking to improve their literacy, language or numeracy. We assessed attainment and attitudes, interviewed learners and teachers, observed the strategies used by teachers, and correlated those strategies with changes in learners' attainment and attitudes. By the time the 5 studies reported they had observed between them over 1000 learners and 1000's of hours of teaching.

Many of the findings are unique to each of the studies, but here we present common themes. They were selected because they reassuringly confirm what we already know, or because they were not what we expected, or because they illustrate one of the most important features of *Skills for Life* – its many contexts, and how much of what constitutes good practice depends on where it happens and with whom.

Integrating subject knowledge and pedagogy

The studies highlighted the importance of integrating knowledge of subject and pedagogy into teacher training and professional development. Indeed, the numeracy study concluded that teacher educators not only need a firm grasp

of the subjects they teach and of the best way to teach them, they also need to be on top of their subject-specific pedagogic knowledge. Similarly, teaching reading, for example, requires an understanding of both pedagogy and subject. However, this was not always in evidence. Several effective approaches to the teaching of reading were hardly seen, such as phonics and developing fluency.

Much of what constitutes good practice depends on where it happens and with whom

With knowledge comes the potential for flexibility. The writing study concluded that a flexible approach to teaching, a responsiveness to learners' concerns as they arise, and a willingness to 'go with the teachable moment' all have a positive impact on learners' progress. In ESOL, effective practice takes place with teachers who can balance the conflicting demands arising from policy and management requirements, on the one hand, and learners' lives and goals on the other. Managing the fragile 'classroom ecology', where so many vulnerable people are gathered together, requires flexible qualities in the teacher as well as sound teaching strategies.

Differentiation in ESOL

Diversity is increasing in *Skills for Life*. The classes observed in the ESOL project varied greatly both in terms of the length of time their learners had been in the UK, and their immigration status and backgrounds. And, while many ESOL learners have had no basic education in their home country and are often not literate in their mother tongue, others are professionals with successful careers. Most of the classes contained highly skilled, professional people.

We know that differentiation increases opportunities for teachers to get to know their learners. However, it may be that we ask too much of some teachers, and that differentiation in a general ESOL classroom is not enough to meet the needs of such a diverse group of learners. We found examples of non-literate learners being placed in classes without literacy support, or without a teacher trained in literacy instruction. In these circumstances, despite the best efforts of the teacher, the style of delivery, the material and the speed of the classes mean that the learners' needs are not met.

Professional vision

The difference between the novice and the experienced teacher is central to understanding effective teaching and learning. Less experienced teachers are over-reliant on the core curriculum, tending to teach scripted classes that are not well attuned to classroom diversity. The experienced,

expert practitioner, on the other hand, will exhibit a 'professional vision', aware of the wider context in which teaching and learning is embedded, drawing on their experience to take informed action in response to issues in the classroom. This is allied to an ability to plan a learning programme and select appropriate learning materials within it, becoming adept at both long-term planning and moment-by-moment decision-making.

Working in groups

Working in groups was good for some learners and not so good for others. In the reading study, learners who spent more time working in pairs made better progress, as did learners who spent less time working alone. Similarly, in numeracy the strongest negative correlations with attainment included a large proportion of individual work. On the other hand, ICT learners who spent more time on their own showed better gains in ICT than those spending more time in small groups. Working in groups sometimes undermined confidence in writing in a public place or at work.

Confidence and learning

The role of confidence in promoting adult learning is vital but not simple. In our reading study, a significant improvement in learners' self-confidence was not accompanied by improvements in reading. The writing study similarly found no relationship between progress or regress and changes in the degree of learners' self-confidence. The study found that making links between the classroom and life outside, including the use of real materials, can enable learners to become more confident about writing undertaken at home. In numeracy, once learners' initial anxiety subsides, and blocks and barriers are overcome, courses can have a significant and positive effect. They can improve levels of confidence and self-esteem and encourage learners to think of themselves as people who can do mathematics.

Learners' needs and aspirations

Learners' characteristics help to



determine the effectiveness of teaching practices and learning progress. These characteristics include motivation and purposes for attending a course, aspirations, abilities and dispositions towards learning, socio-cultural background and experiences outside the classroom. This underlines the importance of teachers having a good understanding of adult learners' needs and aspirations, and of positive teacher-learner relationships. We need to understand the characteristics of initial teacher training, learning environments and teaching practices that promote positive relationships and social interaction, and give due weight to developing both expertise and positive human qualities. Qualities matter vitally too.

Teachers and learners need time

We know that learners need plenty of time to make progress; the same applies to teachers. Our work with ICT tutors involved one-day-a-week release time for a year, monthly meetings between researchers and tutors, and regular meetings with development officers. Tutors met monthly for one-day workshops, and

completed online reflective diaries and intervention plans. We found significant learning gains in ICT and in literacy/ESOL, giving support for the Moser claim that 'learners who use ICT for basic skills double the value of their study time, acquiring two sets of skills at the same time'. The process took a lot of time and effort but, having developed robust models, the tutors were able to induct other tutors into these practices with much less effort on the part of inductees, and nevertheless achieve equivalent results.

What next?

Our Effective Practice studies represent an unparalleled source of evidence on *Skills for Life* teaching and learning, and our findings will be published in five research reports later this year. We are also preparing practitioner guides, one for each of the five studies. These will distil the research into messages and materials aimed at teachers and teacher educators, and will be disseminated in 2007.

John Vorhaus is Associate Director (Research Programmes) at NRDC. →

WHAT IS EFFECTIVE PRACTICE? IN WRITING

by Sue Grief

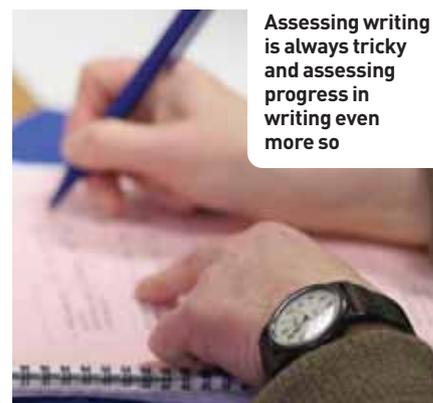
Very little previous research into adult literacy has addressed the teaching and learning of writing so this project provided an opportunity to focus on this important area of learning.

It can be hard to unpick reading and writing in a literacy course, for example, when a learner struggles to compose written answers to a comprehension question on a piece of given text. So, when our researchers observed literacy classes, their remit was to record and analyse activity which specifically enabled learners to

learn about or engage in writing.

Assessing writing, and progress in writing is always tricky. We used an assessment designed for NRDC studies which had many features that suited our study. It was relatively quick and easy to use and was based on a magazine which provided some context for the tasks. Importantly, it asked learners to compose meaningful text.

We predicted that, if learners were to register progress on a test of this type, for which they were given no preparation, we would need to find learners who had an opportunity to attend at least 50 hours' teaching between the first and the last assessment. However, many literacy courses are shorter than 50 hours and we struggled to recruit enough suitable courses. Also, for good



Assessing writing is always tricky and assessing progress in writing even more so

reasons, many learners in our sample were not able to attend the full 50 hours. Overall, our figures showed only a modest increase in scores between the two assessments. This serves to underline the time learners need to develop their competence in writing and has implications for planning and funding courses.

IN READING

by Greg Brooks and Maxine Burton

Our aim in this research was to investigate what is effective in teaching reading to adult learners. We took 'effectiveness' to mean improvement on a reading comprehension assessment and/or in learners' attitudes. We were trying to correlate learners' progress in reading and changes in their attitudes with their teachers' strategies, and thus to get some purchase on what enables learners to make progress and/or develop more positive attitudes. With the help of 12 practitioner-researchers, we assessed adult learners' attainment in and attitudes to reading and observed the strategies their teachers used.

There were two cohorts of learners, in academic years 2003/04 and 2004/05. We recruited 454 learners in 59 classes in different areas of England and gathered complete data on 298 (66 per cent). The majority of classes were provided by colleges of further education; other providers were local education authorities, charities, private training providers, and one prison. In each class, we carried out four observations, most



More progress was made when learners spent time working in pairs

lasting two hours. We then analysed the teaching strategies observed.

Findings

In the first year there was a statistically significant fall in the learners' marks on the reading assessment; this may have been due to problems with the pilot version of the assessment instrument. Probably more reliable was the statistically significant gain in reading made by learners in 2004/05.

Data from the attitudes questionnaire showed a small but significant increase in self-confidence, but not in the frequency of literacy-related habits or enjoyment of literacy.

The most frequent patterns of classroom activity were:

- (a) whole-class opening section followed by individual practice;
- (b) all individual work.

Both entailed learners working alone for substantial amounts of time – and indeed this was found to be the most frequent grouping strategy, corresponding with silent reading as the most frequent specific teaching strategy. Other common strategies were giving appraisal/feedback immediately, discussion of vocabulary during a reading, other kinds of word study (eg, word lists, puzzles, word searches), and using a dictionary to find word meanings.

The following factors were found to be significantly related to change in reading (but all the correlations were weak):

- gender (women made slightly better progress than men);
- occupational status (employed people made better progress than the unemployed);
- possession of formal qualifications (people with an FE/NVQ qualification made better progress than those with no qualifications);
- regular attendance.

We also found that more progress was made when learners spent more time working in pairs or less time working alone, or when they reported more self-study between classes. ▣

Our statistical analysis of the relationship between classroom practice and learners' progress did not produce any easy answers for practitioners. However, examination of the classes in which learners made most progress and those in which they made least provided some simple but valuable messages.

Findings

- Learners made most progress in classrooms in which they could engage in the process of composing meaningful text and were able to learn about writing and develop their own skills through the context of this activity.
- Talk about writing, including the purpose, the intended audience and the conventions of writing – as well as about the nuts and bolts of writing: the spelling, grammar and punctuation – appeared to support learning. Learners told us that talking with teachers and other learners was helpful.
- Conversely, a lot of time spent on individual tasks and tasks designed to practise particular aspects of writing such as punctuation, without a meaningful context, was a feature of many of the classes which registered little or no progress.

IN USING ICT

by Maria Kambouri and Harvey Mellor

Before the project started, we had spent a year closely observing the teaching of language, literacy and numeracy using ICT and had concluded that there was very little well-established practice. We therefore set out to obtain more detailed information on what might become effective practice techniques. Working with nine practitioner-researchers, we developed 14 teaching interventions based on seven schemes of work. Each intervention embedded ICT literacy within LLN classes and introduced pedagogical techniques such as small group work. A key aspect of the research design was to involve tutors, both in deciding on the ICT interventions and in the research →

IN NUMERACY

by Jon Swain

Adult numeracy teaching is enormously diverse in its range of provision, settings, teachers and types of learners. This makes it difficult to identify effective practices and factors that can be generalised with confidence across the whole sector. It may be that teaching approaches that work well with some learners in some settings may not work well in other contexts.

Our sample involved 412 learners and 34 teachers in 47 classes. Researchers used a mixture of quantitative and qualitative approaches, and in-depth interviews were carried out with 33 teachers and 112 learners. Although the majority of the research took place in further education colleges, settings throughout England also included work-based learning, Jobcentre Plus, adult and community education, an Army training course and prisons.

Findings

Two hundred and fifty learners were assessed at two time points to measure progress and, taking all classes together, there was an average gain of 9 per cent. However, there were very few significant correlations between progress made and different teaching approaches used. There was also very little association between size of gains and types of learner.

One of the most positive findings was that the overwhelming majority of learners really enjoyed learning numeracy. They recognised that the relationship between the teacher and effective learning was critical and the research found high levels of mutual respect.

A surprising result was that researchers found no correlation between learners' test scores and the number of hours they attended classes. Although this seems counter-intuitive, it may reflect the particular circumstances of each course and involve other factors such as learners'



purposes and motivations.

A wide range of teaching approaches was observed. Whole class and individual work predominated, with teachers demonstrating procedures and learners then turning to worksheets. The project concluded that a key feature of effective practice was 'flexibility', where the teacher builds on what the learners know, responds to their needs, and is able to change direction during the lesson.

So, the main message from the numeracy project is that there is no 'one size fits all' of effective practice that can be rolled out and used by every teacher in every classroom. Although there appear to be no clear implications for practice, the project recommends that, in teacher education and continuing professional development, teachers not only need to have a firm grasp of subject and pedagogical knowledge, but also of subject-specific pedagogical knowledge. This will enable teachers to be flexible in their approaches and to cater for the wide range of diversity of learners and provision in adult numeracy. ■

process itself, through reflection on their developing practice and that of their colleagues.

A total of 238 learners in 14 classes in Leeds, London and Hampshire participated in the study during 2004/5. Eleven of these classes took place in colleges of further education and the other three in adult/community college centres. Classes were held at different times of day and included learners of different ages, ethnicities and language backgrounds. Profiles for 175 individual participants were obtained and participants were assessed at the start and end of their course for attainment in reading and listening in English as well as background, attitude, and attainment in ICT. We also obtained information on attendance. Structured

observations of each class were carried out on three or four occasions, together with task-based observations of individuals. Research diaries and reports of tutor-peer observations (using a buddy system) have been combined with learner attitude and attainment data to form a coherent picture of what effective practice can be.

Findings

For at least five schemes of work, we found significant gains in ICT literacy and in learners' confidence with ICT. This included the use of internet searches (such as Web Quests), of mindmaps to plan writing, of tablets, and of m-learning (using technologies such as mobile phones and hand-held computers) to improve language skills

and extend the classroom. All groups showed improvement in English reading ability, although this was significant for only two of the schemes of work. Working in small groups correlated strongly with improvement in ESOL scores but negatively with improvement in ICT scores.

Our analysis pointed to four guiding principles for using ICT in a *Skills for Life* context:

1. Foster learner autonomy.
 2. Enhance peer collaboration.
 3. Plan the construction of artefacts.
 4. Aim for technological diversity.
- We also identified two strategies that do not appear to work:

1. Telling learners how to do the task rather than listen, discuss, prompt and extend.
2. Tutors using PowerPoint. ❑

IN ESOL

by Mike Baynham, Celia Roberts, Mel Cooke, and James Simpson

The ESOL Effective Practice project aimed to:

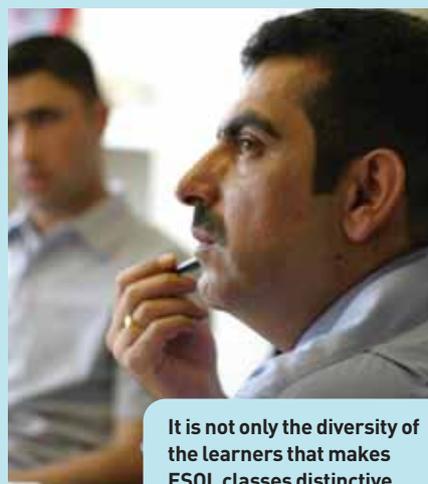
- establish correlations between pedagogical practices and learners' progress;
- examine what other factors impact on their achievement; and
- interpret and present these insights in ways that can genuinely make a difference in classrooms.

The study draws on observational data of 40 classes across sites that represent the demographic diversity of adult ESOL provision, both urban and rural, metropolitan and regional. These classes provided an initial cohort of just over 500 learners.

Half of these learners (257) were pre- and post-tested using a test of spoken proficiency. Observations of 40 classrooms were carried out (three for each class). We also interviewed 40 teachers and 78 learners.

Findings

Our research produced two key findings about learners. First, differentiation



It is not only the diversity of the learners that makes ESOL classes distinctive

designed to respond to the individual needs of classroom learners is not effective or even possible in ESOL classes where learners can range from highly qualified professionals to those who lack literacy in any language. Second, learners who had arrived recently (up to five years) made significantly more progress than the long-term-resident group.

Teaching strategies that promoted balance and variety correlated with gains on test scores. These strategies balanced fluency and accuracy with a variety of activities and materials that keep learners engaged. The importance of balance and variety is underlined by

the finding that learners performed best on the grammar and vocabulary sub-component of the test when they were taught neither too much nor too little grammar and vocabulary.

Our study has also shown that, although teachers with 'professional vision' manage the heterogeneous ESOL classroom as effectively as they can, too much heterogeneity does not serve learners well. There needs to be more differentiated provision rather than differentiated classes. The heterogeneity of ESOL classrooms means that the rigid distinctions between EFL and ESOL are largely outmoded.

However, it is not only the diversity of the learners that makes ESOL classes distinctive. It is the focus on talk and group processes taking proper account of the experiences of the learners, many living with trauma and great uncertainty about their life in the UK. All these have implications for the learning structure, the inspection framework and management of ESOL provision.

There is no magic bullet for effective ESOL practice. The major resource is the expertise and professionalism of teachers, which can make or mar the most promising methodology or initiative. It is this that should be invested in. ❑

Much more than just a teaching toolkit

Practitioner researcher Sue Nieduszynska on what she learnt from the numeracy project

Although numeracy teachers have for some time been urged to promote 'active learning' and more discussion, there has been little research evidence to back up this approach and little guidance for tutors on how to put it into practice. I therefore welcomed the opportunity to work as a researcher on the Effective Practice project and I came away from the initial training weekend inspired to change my own teaching. But, as the project proceeded, I found that my perceptions of numeracy learning were also being challenged.

I believe we now have approaches that work – for example, how to use question-and-answer effectively in a mixed-ability group. In one of my sessions I used the simple technique of asking a shy female learner 'is he right?' each time a more confident male answered a question. Both learners were highly amused by this and a questioning banter – 'are you right? are you sure? how do you know?' – developed between them. This triggered a change in the young woman from not trusting her own judgment, not committing to an answer, and contributing little in the group, to enjoying a challenge, being willing to have a go and finally to passing her numeracy test much sooner than I had expected, and with a comfortable margin. This was excellent for her growing confidence.

However, I soon realised that the project was about more than a toolkit of ideas. It also causes us to re-



Above: Freelance numeracy tutor, Sue Nieduszynska

assess how we think about numeracy teaching. While observing a group I saw how learners who had started with little motivation, poor self-image and a sense of failure in maths responded to challenge. Their self-confidence and enjoyment in the subject grew through working collaboratively and knowing that they had not been given easy material. Learning was taking place but not in a linear, structured way. This created its own challenge for the teacher.

The project has produced useful strategies and resources. It has also highlighted a need to train and support teachers in a more exploratory approach to numeracy learning.

Visitors to the NRDC website can read about the insights and experiences of other practitioner-researchers involved in the Effective Practice studies at www.nrdc.org.uk/

NRDC is to hold two conferences early next year to disseminate the findings from the Effective Practice studies. The conferences will be held in London on January 30 and Sheffield on February 1.

Further information from www.nrdc.org.uk

You wouldn't expect a maths teacher to teach plastering

Tom Jupp spells out the challenges presented by NRDC's recent research on embedding

Many *Skills for Life* practitioners have long argued that it makes sense to embed language, literacy and numeracy in vocational courses rather than teach them in isolation. They are convinced that learners are much more ready to improve their number skills, for example, if it is clear that this will help them succeed with their vocational studies or at work. A recent NRDC study has provided substantial research evidence to support this argument.

The study tracked almost 2,000 learners on Level 1 and 2 vocational courses in five of the nine English

regions. It found that learners on embedded courses had better staying-on rates than those on non-embedded courses. On embedded courses retention was 15 per cent higher.

Better results

It also discovered that achievement levels on fully-embedded courses were higher. On fully-embedded courses, 93 per cent of those with a *Skills for Life* need achieved a literacy/ESOL qualification, compared with only 50 per cent of those on non-embedded courses. Ninety-three per cent of

learners on fully-embedded courses who had an identified numeracy need also achieved a numeracy/maths qualification, compared with 70 per cent for those on non-embedded courses.

The embedded approach failed to work only when vocational teachers were also expected to teach literacy and numeracy. Learners were twice as likely not to achieve a literacy or numeracy qualification when a single teacher took responsibility for both areas.

The research showed that it is essential that numeracy, literacy and vocational teachers work together to

How the embedded teaching of literacy, language and numeracy on vocational courses raises achievement

The aim of the research was to find out: What is the relationship between embedded provision, in which literacy, numeracy and ESOL are embedded in a variety of ways, and learners' attitudes, retention on courses and achievement of qualifications?

The sample of 1,916 learners, drawn from 79 courses/programmes in 15 further education colleges and one private training organisation, was working towards national vocational qualifications at Levels 1 or 2 in five areas of learning:

- Health and social care
- Hair and beauty therapy
- Construction
- Business
- Engineering.

The gender balance of the learners was fairly even, 79 per cent were aged 16 to 19 and one in three was from a minority ethnic group.



The research took place between January and December 2005. Researchers carried out classroom observations, document analysis and in-depth interviews with nearly 200 staff. The programmes visited varied in many respects and ranged from ones in which literacy, language and numeracy were separate from the vocational work to those with a fully integrated approach. Each programme was rated on a four-point scale. Those at one end of the scale had no characteristics of embedding while those at the other end had many or all of the characteristics.

The research team did not use a fixed model of what embedding is; rather they judged courses on a range of

features of embedding, and the strengths of those features. For example, an embedded course may or may not include two teachers contributing to the same taught session. All embedded courses, however, included some aspect of teachers working together to focus on learners' progress.

Achievement and success rates

The research findings present a consistent range of evidence that Level 1 and 2 vocational programmes with embedded LLN produced significantly more positive outcomes for learners than non-embedded programmes:

- Achievement of literacy/language qualifications was higher.
- Achievement of numeracy qualifications was higher.
- Retention on the programmes with embedded LLN was higher.
- Success rates for the vocational courses with embedded LLN were higher.
- Learners believed they had been better prepared for their work in the future.

'Without [key skills teacher] I was ready for jacking...because of that pressure. You wouldn't expect a plasterer to go and teach English and maths, and you wouldn't expect a maths teacher to teach plastering.' Plastering teacher

ensure that they cater for learners' different needs. It means teachers planning 'behind the scenes' so that the numeracy or literacy skills and the vocational work are closely related.

Embedded provision is therefore likely to be professionally more demanding and more time-consuming for tutors than traditional models, but also more rewarding. In some colleges, there was

an institution-wide strategy that provided practical support for the work. In others, it was clear to the researchers that enthusiastic tutors on their own had created pockets of embedded provision that were unlikely to be sustainable, should staff changes occur.

A national strategy

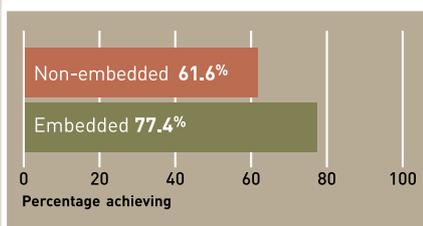
Despite such complications there is now enough evidence and experience around embedding LLN for a decisive national strategy to be put in place as part of both *Skills for Life* policy and the Skills Strategy.

There are three essential elements to such a strategy:

- Embedded LLN provision should be recognised and implemented as the norm, not the exception, for Level 1 and 2 vocational courses. This may sound simple, but actually poses very substantial professional and organisational challenges. →

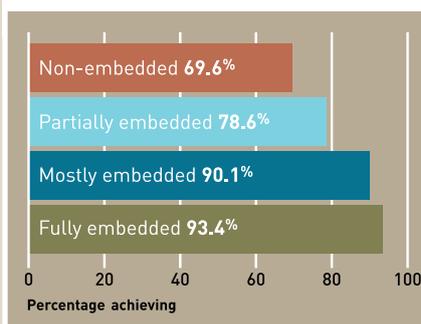
Learners completing vocational programmes

For all learners in the sample



Learners achieving numeracy qualifications

For learners below Level 2 in literacy/language and numeracy on initial assessment



Features of embeddedness

The research identified 30 aspects or features of embeddedness, which were grouped into four broad categories:

Aspects of teaching and learning, including how far the teaching of LLN is directly linked to the needs and contexts of the vocational work, the use of diagnostic and formative assessment for the integration of LLN and vocational teaching, and the presentation of LLN as integral to learners' vocational aspirations.

Teamwork between LLN and vocational tutors, including formal and informal shared planning and other aspects of working as a team.

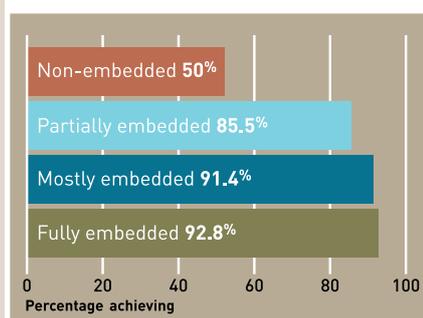
Staff understandings, values and commitments, including a shared commitment to learners' vocational success, respect for and understanding of each other's specialisms, and a commitment to learn from each other.

College and department policy and organisation, including resources, working locations, policies, champions, and training and development, all of which support embedding.

Elements from all four of these categories were present in the successful embedded programmes.

Learners achieving a literacy/ESOL qualification

For learners below Level 2 in literacy/language and numeracy on initial assessment



Learner attitudes to embeddedness

Correlating data from the learner questionnaire and the study's four-point scale of embeddedness showed that the more embedded the course the more likely learners were to say it had prepared them for work.

- A whole-organisation commitment is needed by a college or training provider for embedded LLN to be successful and sustainable. Many senior managers need support to gain confidence in taking decisions in this area.
- Further small-scale research and development work is needed on staff



selection and development, and on issues of organisation and resources. We also need to establish why embedding appears to have a greater effect in some subject areas and levels of learning than in others. Let's move embedded LLN provision decisively forward and in time for the challenge that the Leitch report on the



nation's future skills need will throw down when it is published in December.

Tom Jupp is a Senior Adviser to the NRDC. A report on the research will be published this month. Copies can be ordered from the publications page of the NRDC website www.nrdc.org.uk.

Don't say: 'It sounds good but...'

David Wylie believes NRDC's new findings should kill off any lingering resistance to embedding

'The latest research shows that your learner retention rate will be increased by 15 per cent', said the college's quality manager.

'It sounds good, but....', responded the vocational manager.

But why should a vocational manager resist the idea of improving retention rates?

It is nearly ten years since the inspectorate began telling us that key and basic skills achievement were improved by embedding them in the vocational programme. So, when I (coming from a vocational background) became a key skills co-ordinator, I tried to engage with vocational colleagues, but to little effect. Their reasons were clear: 'The key skills results are your problem. Mine is to get these lads through their vocational programme. I don't have time to deal with their literacy.'

Things have moved a long way in recent years but I still work with some managers in colleges with low vocational retention who will have nothing to do with it. Perhaps the latest NRDC evidence will win the argument.

Today, as an LSC *Skills for Life* development manager, I am less interested in a 43 per cent increase in literacy achievement than in the 15 per cent improvement in vocational Level 2 retention. Why? Because we know that

the motivator, both for learner and for staff, is not literacy but vocational achievement.

What does research tell us?

At a recent 'Embedded Solutions' event, Helen Casey, executive director of the NRDC, emphasised that the research does not suggest that vocational staff should teach literacy. 'This shouldn't surprise us,' Helen said. 'It's asking too much. Understandably, vocational teachers prefer to teach within their areas of expertise. Literacy and numeracy teachers would be equally out of their depth if they tried to teach an unfamiliar vocational skill.'

The research shows that what matters is that learners perceive the literacy as part of their vocational programme and see their key and basic skills tutors as part of the vocational programme team.

Indeed, some of the most successful embedding practice simply amounts to key or basic skills practitioners being part of a vocational programme team and working out of the same base rooms. This team approach enables coherent programme planning and informal, on-going, learner-focused, communication between vocational and *Skills for Life* practitioners.

Mentoring and teamwork

The embedded team approach also enables a most effective model of continuing professional development:

two-way mentoring. The vocational practitioners receive literacy, numeracy or ICT mentoring from key and basic skills colleagues and the *Skills for Life* staff are supported by vocational colleagues to enhance their vocational knowledge and experience. However, the NRDC research found that the method of working was less important. What mattered was that the staff had made, and were seen to have made, the commitment to work together. Where programmes did not appear to the learners to have integrated literacy development, 15 per cent more learners left without completing their vocational programme.

Funding

As the LSC is committed to 'only buy quality', our funding decisions are beginning to reflect this link between literacy development and main programme retention in a clearer understanding of what constitutes vocational quality.

The message to vocational staff is clear. 'Form a team with key and basic skills colleagues to embed the literacy development of your learners and 15 per cent fewer students will walk.' And, of course, the 43 per cent increase in literacy achievement is a bonus.

David Wylie is Skills Development Manager – *Skills for Life*, LSC South East Region.

Formative in name only

Kathryn Ecclestone argues that too many teachers are using assessment for learning for short-term goals

Recent research has confirmed that there is a clear link between higher levels of achievement, learner motivation and autonomy, and effective formative assessment (or 'assessment for learning' (AfL)). It has also shown that it is fairly easy to identify AfL techniques or approaches that help learners better understand what is required of them and that involve them more deeply in their learning. A research project at the University of Nottingham, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, the NRDC and the Quality Improvement Agency, is showing that teachers are keen to enhance both their understanding of AfL and the associated classroom and assessment practices.

Diagnostic assessment, questioning and feedback

Diagnostic assessment to identify formal learning goals is widely used in individual learning plans (ILP). It is also an aim of classroom questioning and feedback, where teachers use learners' responses to gain insights into problems with understanding and then adjust the teaching programme accordingly. Changing the quality and focus of questioning can have a powerful impact on engagement and understanding. Self- and peer-assessment and techniques of oral and written feedback also enable learners to assess their current performance and use appropriate criteria to judge how well they have done.

A cautionary note

But research in schools, vocational education and work-based learning shows that AfL can easily become mechanistic. In many programmes, it is little more than continuous summative assessment, rather than assessment designed to engage learners with a subject and encourage sustainable learning habits.

A study on 'learning how to learn' in the Teaching and Learning Research Programme, and another by the Learning and Skills Research Council of different post-16 assessment systems and their effects on learners' achievement, show that teachers like the rhetoric of assessment for learning but that many use it in a technical, superficial way just to meet targets. This is compounded by teachers' concerns about helping the most disadvantaged learners succeed in the system.

Divorcing techniques from the subject, whether it is literacy, numeracy or engineering, helps learners to gain the qualification but often without really understanding what they have learned. One effect is that growing numbers of learners in further and higher education expect teachers to offer simple feedback and advice to help them get good grades.

Comparing approaches

In our project at the University of Nottingham, adult education tutors introduced tutorials in numeracy classes. In one, the tutor did most of the talking, focusing on general progress towards targets and using the ILP. In another, the tutor asked questions designed to identify stumbling blocks to understanding of a topic the learner was struggling

with, and then set specific goals to work on. The learner asked questions, the tutor offered advice. In both settings, the goals for questions were perfectly legitimate but the first approach is about monitoring and recording progress rather than formative assessment.

Of course, targets and good outcomes are important and instrumental learning is an important first step in building confidence and progressing to deeper forms of engagement, but problems arise when formative assessment encourages only instrumental learning. Our project and other studies show that some teachers and learners use the same approaches in the same target-driven systems to generate sophisticated forms of coaching to the criteria and 'plugging the gaps', while others develop deeper learning and motivation in learners.

Understanding how this happens in different assessment cultures is important if we are to ensure that AfL does not become little more than monitoring and compliance with assessment criteria. The trade-off between instrumental learning and achievement becomes a problem for the very learners who need the best learning that we can offer.

Kathryn Ecclestone is Deputy Director of CDELL (Centre for Developing and Evaluating Lifelong Learning) at the University of Nottingham.

For details of the project on 'Improving formative assessment in vocational education and adult literacy, language and numeracy programmes', contact Tracy.Sisson@nottingham.ac.uk

Just a fling...or a long term relationship?

Mary Hamilton looks back at the Practitioner-led Research Initiative and forward to where it might lead

It is February and there is snow on the ground – but there is a warm atmosphere inside the Northern College. A group of practitioners and researchers from around the country are deep in animated discussion.

We are puzzling over how to work with older adults' oral history stories about their experiences of numeracy. We talk about the challenges of gathering the experiences of homeless adults, how to make sense of a pile of interview transcripts, and the ethics of assessment. We discover how easy it is to use blogs and do-it-yourself interactive video to collect reflections from both tutors and learners. We also learn how to record increases in confidence and other 'soft outcomes' from a programme of reading for pleasure in a way that reflects tutors' gut feelings about the value of a course but will also be convincing evidence for auditors and funders.

During the day and a half we spend together there is a lot of laughter, questioning and hard graft as well as some anxiety about whether it will all work out. Evening conversations in the bar are an essential ingredient.

The PLRI

This workshop was part of NRDC's Practitioner-led Research Initiative (PLRI) which has enabled small groups of practitioners to carry out nine-month research projects, co-ordinated by a team from Lancaster University. Groups were invited to pose researchable questions that would be useful to them, their employing institutions and their local communities. Each group was endorsed by a senior manager in their organisation; funding paid

for cover time and someone offering on-the-spot research support.

The idea was to draw in a new constituency of novice practitioner-researchers by offering a chance to step back and reflect on practice and to explore systematically day-to-day issues arising from the *Skills For Life* policy. Three broad themes were explored by the 18 projects that have been funded over the past three years:

- new ways of engaging new learners;
- understanding purpose and perseverance; and
- creativity in teaching and learning.

This initiative was designed to publicise and support one of the key underpinning strategies of the NRDC, that of engaging practitioners in the

work of the Centre. The hope was that projects would produce insights into adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL by providing accessible, grounded findings to complement large-scale surveys and other traditional research, as well as

knowledge about practitioners' and learners' perspectives and concerns. The projects were also designed to strengthen networks between practice, research and policy.

How did it work?

Project groups were offered a set of structured activities and milestones to help them negotiate the tight deadlines and unfamiliar demands of managing research. We learned what worked best as we went along. All groups attended an initial briefing day, the mid-project networking event and a dissemination event at the end as they were writing their report.

The co-ordinating team helped to solve issues

To find out more about the NRDC Practitioner-led Research Initiative, look on the website www.nrdc.org.uk/content.asp?CategoryID=512

like how to manage too much research data, or not enough of it. Each group worked differently. One project hoping to evaluate a *Skills for Life* course found that most people had dropped out, leaving them with very little data. After the initial panic, they re-focused the project to follow up those who had dropped out; this revealed the barriers to basic skills training, including practical issues and managers' attitudes, that existed within the organisation.

We found a particular need for help in corralling large amounts of data into a readable research report. We worked hard on new ways of presenting findings using visuals, music, and multimedia presentation. We developed innovative formats with posters, videos and interactive workshops. The 'Appetite for Learning' project organised a memorable workshop, lubricated by cups of cider, with contributions from employees, employers, practitioners and researchers involved with a workplace programme in rural Somerset.

New metaphors

Projects have generated powerful new metaphors, often based on learners' own words, to communicate key issues about literacy, numeracy and learning. For example, in the Broadway project in London one learner described her fear of joining in with group work as being like 'putting your hand into a pool of dark water and the thought that there might be a snake there'.

Practitioner research: can it last?

Has it been worth it? For those involved and their



The 'Appetite for Learning' project organised a memorable workshop, lubricated by cups of cider, with contributions from employees, employers, practitioners and researchers involved with a workplace programme in rural Somerset.

immediate organisations, the answer is emphatically 'yes'. For the wider field of practice, the jury is still out. It takes more than the enthusiasm of a handful of converts to change the culture so that evidence gathered by learners and teachers can inform policy-makers, as well as the other way round. Funding to extend the kinds of opportunities we have been able to offer through the PLRI is hard to find.

Is it possible to sustain the momentum, enthusiasm and links that have been made during this initiative? Doing research takes time and the funding is at an end. I have three observations. →

Sources of funding for practitioner-researchers

by Jenny Wedgbury

Are you a practitioner interested in conducting your own action research? What funding options are available to you? The NRDC-funded Practitioner-led Research Initiative has ended but there are other sources of financial support.

- Your local college or education provider may have an in-house research fund or a professional development budget.
- Many foundations and trusts are based locally. Some have very specific remits and interests – such as the legacy from an 18th century yeoman farmer that supports vocational and A-level

students in Evesham – but others are broad enough to encompass the deserving practitioner-researcher. Your local library or Council of Voluntary Service will usually have a list of these, with contact details.

- Your local area may be part of the Community Foundations Network. These are charitable trusts that support local causes. They often offer money to small-scale projects and are a good resource for those interested in social practices and community engagement.
- Several national organisations are also worth investigating. Both the Leverhulme Trust and the Nuffield Foundation offer funding for practitioner research. Nuffield offers grants for social science research projects, with awards of up to £7,500. The Leverhulme Trust is similar, but

concentrates on higher educational establishments. The Esmee Fairbairn Foundation and the Centre for British Teachers (CfBT), a not-for-profit education company, are other potential sources of funding.

- Those interested in ICT could contact the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (Becta). Its website carries advice for practitioners planning to conduct their own research.
- A useful summary of funding opportunities is available from the website of the now-defunct National Educational Research Forum.

Contacts

- National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (formerly The National Association of Councils for

Voluntary Service) – www.navca.org.uk

- Community Foundations Network – www.communityfoundations.org.uk
- Leverhulme Trust – www.leverhulme.org.uk
- Nuffield Foundation – www.nuffieldfoundation.org
- Esmee Fairbairn Foundation – www.esmeefairbairn.org.uk
- Centre for British Teachers – www.cfbt.co.uk
- British Educational Communications and Technology Agency – <http://partners.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=rh>
- The National Educational Research Forum – www.nerf-uk.org/links/funding/

Three observations

First, we must spread the word about the difference a relatively small amount of research funding can make to individual practitioners and their organisations, as a spark to further work. Participants have told us that practitioner research offers validation of their status and knowledge-base, visibility, levers for funding locally, and ideas to feed into training and management strategies. It shows other practitioners what can be accomplished through small-scale studies, and it encourages their interest in research. It validates the findings of more traditional research, and offers ideas for new research angles.

Second, embedding an enquiry-based approach into initial teacher training and continuing professional development courses, perhaps building on existing project-based work, is an obvious way to extend the reach of practitioner-led research. A number of participants in the PLRI have training responsibilities and they are taking their experiences to others.

Third, the developing networks created through this initiative should link up with existing ones such as Research and Practice in Adult Literacy (RaPAL). Networks are not just UK-wide. Practitioner research is part of an international movement and, although this initiative might be at an end, similar activities are continuing elsewhere.

Positive educational change is accomplished locally...we need all kinds of research and deliberation, scientific and non-scientific. And we need practitioner research...the knowledge of practitioners and of research specialists must grow together in new ways. (Erickson and Gutierrez, 2002)

A state of mind

Practitioner research is a state of mind as well as a set of activities. It is opportunistic and works creatively around traditional boundaries and obstacles. It carries the excitement of activism. It often challenges or ignores 'proper' research guidelines, presenting arguments about how and why it is necessary to do things differently, especially to achieve real collaboration with learners. Evidence from America suggests that practitioners engage best with research if they have first-hand involvement in the process, and that they are more likely to take notice of, and value, research that involves other practitioners.

I feel privileged to have worked with the PLRI groups. I am looking with interest to see where they lead next.

Mary Hamilton is Professor of Adult Learning and Literacy at Lancaster University.

Three projects...



Northern College

by Bronwen Ray

'We can now integrate research into our teaching and organisational activities'

Our research explored *Skills for Life* learners' perceptions of the impact of residential learning on their commitment and achievement.

This experience of action research has been very positive and successful in various ways. It has developed our research skills and given us the confidence to try techniques that were previously intimidating, such as running focus groups. It has also empowered us – having a collective responsibility for the research has developed us as practitioners. As a result, we can now integrate research into our teaching and organisational activities, confident that even the smallest piece of evidence can be used in a valid way. For me, the key to building this confidence has been that, as practitioners, we are in a prime situation to gather 'real' and 'live' evidence, through learners' work, discussions with them, and case studies.

The NRDC team were extremely supportive; with no previous action research experience, it was important to us that we

had clear guidance and support. They provided training days at key points during the project, as well as ongoing feedback on our progress. We felt that we could be honest with the team and knew that we could always ask for help.

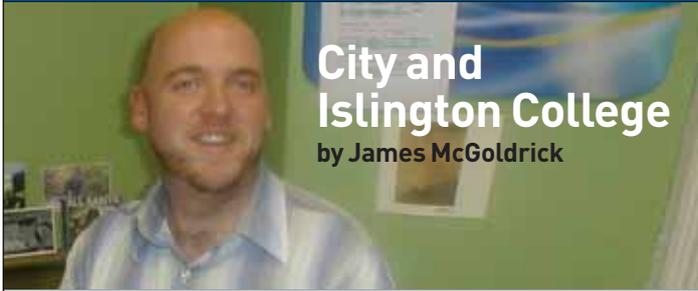
Catherine Menist wrote in Issue 4 of *reflect* that an introduction to action research should be part of *Skills for Life* teacher training. With that in mind, since completing the project I have delivered teacher training at the University of Huddersfield. I included a session on 'Experience of Action Research', with the aim of encouraging new teachers and building their confidence to get involved – in particular, exploring the benefits for them as practitioners.

This project has inspired and challenged me and I want to do more. The message that I gave the trainee teachers and one that I would give all practitioners is: 'If I can do it, so can you!'. Get involved!

Bronwen Ray manages and teaches on the *Skills for Life* programme at Northern College for Adult Residential Education in South Yorkshire.

City and Islington College

by James McGoldrick



'The biggest strength of the PLRI has been its demystification of the research process'

Research? Surely that's best left to university boffins who use words like 'triangulation' and 'hermeneutics'. Or so I thought...

The biggest strength of the Practitioner-led Research Initiative has been its demystification of the research process. It has done this by putting at its heart the link between the practitioners' world – their day-to-day work – and the world of research.

The supportive and nurturing environment of the PLRI has been crucial to the success of our project. Support also came from working on the research as a team – our team at City and Islington College was made up of people who knew each other and enjoyed working together.

Support also came from being one of a 'suite' of projects. The project teams had opportunities to come together and share anxieties and concerns, achievements and successes. These gatherings were opportunities for learning as well as occasions to feel comforted that others were also overwhelmed with data and wished they

hadn't asked so many people their opinions!

Nurturing came from the team at Lancaster who didn't overwhelm us with research jargon but rather, in a down-to-earth way, described research methods and techniques that would help us find answers to our research questions. They made research seem do-able and even 'fun'.

Of course, it wasn't all plain sailing. There were anxious times, caused by the deluge of data, report-writing and stress-inducing deadlines. However, these were made manageable by the support and nurturing I have described.

We have only scratched the surface of the world of research, and the methods we have at our disposal are limited to those that we learned while taking part in the PLRI. Nevertheless, it was a very positive experience and one that I would recommend to others.

James McGoldrick is ESOL Pathfinder Coordinator at City and Islington College.

Bishop Burton College

by Cheryl Dillon



'The project has helped to strengthen links and to foster a sense of fellowship'

In our project, we looked at an issue that we considered vital in the development of literacy and numeracy skills: how do classroom assistants in schools and the post-16 sector choose to improve their own literacy and numeracy skills?

We conducted the research through questionnaires and face-to-face interviews. At first, we thought that the assistants would jump at the chance to develop their numeracy and literacy skills using the most up-to-date technology, including on-line learning. We couldn't have been further off the mark. Most felt that they would need to develop their ICT skills before committing themselves to this type of training, and would prefer to develop their literacy and numeracy by traditional methods – preferably in their own workplace and alongside colleagues.

I 'volunteered' to be the practitioner-researcher. The other members of the group lent their expertise to keep me going. Our enthusiasm carried us through the nine months of the project, although from time to time we doubted

our sanity.

We soon realised that we had underestimated the amount of work required. I spent many long nights and weekends catching up with the transcription of interviews and the analysis of questionnaires, and even managed to rope the family in to organise the data.

Now that the PLRI has finished we can look back with a sense of achievement. The project has helped to strengthen links and to foster a sense of fellowship which has continued beyond the life of the initiative.

I have developed skills in the use of research techniques and academic writing that will prove useful throughout my career. The work has given me a greater sense of self-worth, as it was my original idea and I found it satisfying to see the project through to its conclusion. The icing on the cake was to be able to talk at a dissemination event in London without turning into jelly.

Would I do it all again? Absolutely!

Cheryl Dillon is a Skills for Life co-ordinator at Bishop Burton College, Beverley, East Yorkshire.



Voices on the page

Samantha Duncan explains why the NRDC is about to launch its own creative writing competition for adult learners

An adult literacy learner I interviewed recently about reading felt she could not possibly talk about reading without also talking about writing:

Writing is good; I mean it's good for me to write and good for me to read what I've written. And even better for me to read, say, your writing and you to read mine. We would all be better people if we read and wrote for each other more.

This calm statement set so many questions shooting off in my mind: what, then, is writing? Can, or should, it be defined in terms of why we do it, or how we do it? Can these two – the why and the how – be separated? And, if there is an impulse to write in so many of us, is it an impulse to put ourselves on the page – to solidify or inkify that nebulous 'me', or is writing rather an attempt to escape from this 'me' and be different? If reading allows us to live a thousand lives and only pay the price for one, as a sort of passenger in another person's mind, does writing allow us to create and drive those lives?

Personal or functional?

Besides the why and how of it, what of the what? What kind of writing have I been writing (and the learner quoted above talking) about? Does what she says apply only to what is often called 'personal writing', stories, poems, memories, or also to the 'impersonal' or 'functional', that of the tireless administration of our lives? But how can any writing be called impersonal? Can choosing and forming letters, words and sentences, conjuring sounds and worlds, ever be anything but personal? We've been told the political is personal and the personal political, but surely

never more so than with writing, any writing.

Five writers

American novelist John Irving wrote of how as a teenager he and his friends made constant and cruel fun of an unfortunate man in their town, Piggy Sneed, who, in the midst of their mockery, died in a barn fire. The children were left with no way to make it up to him, causing the adult Irving to realise that what a writer does is 'set fire to Piggy Sneed and try[ing] to save him – again and again – forever'. A writer both reproduces and redeems the cruelties of life. Alice Walker wrote of writing as a way to 'save the life that may be your own'.

About a hundred years ago in China, Lu Xun believed that only by writing

short stories could he free his nation from foreign occupation and destruction, and, centuries ago here in England, poet and adventurer Lord Byron felt 'words are things and a small drop of ink, falling like dew upon a thought, produces that which makes thousands, perhaps millions think'. These five writers (Irving, Walker, Lu Xun, Byron, and the learner quoted above) proclaim that writing can be integral to life. It is love and passion; it is blood and guts. Writing is something real, the recording and creation of dreams and truth, truth and dreams.

Basic skills: creative writing?

Imagine for a moment that there are many others who agree with these writers about the importance of written expression and communication. Imagine that some of these people have enrolled in adult literacy and ESOL classes and, finally, imagine that for some of these learners the desire to express themselves more freely in writing was their motivation for returning to study. I don't think this is such a feat of the imagination. I believe, from talking to learners and other teachers, that this is the case for many basic skills learners. How, then, are we helping them with this in basic skills classes?

Probably very well a lot of the time; every bit of work done on either writing or reading will help. Work on the use of capital letters, on reading recipes, on writing postcards or formal letters, or on homophones is all helpful. Every bit of reading or writing done will help as it is all important practice. And isn't there lots of work done directly on free, creative writing in thousands of basic skills classrooms? That adult literacy and ESOL classes are increasingly



'Words are things and a small drop of ink, falling like dew upon a thought, produces that which makes thousands, perhaps millions think'

Lord Byron



externally accredited and that the external accreditation rarely involves this kind of writing needn't, and doesn't, stop this kind of work from being done in the classroom.

However, we all – teachers and learners – notice what dominates these forms of national external accreditation and is therefore 'officially' valued or weighted. No matter what is done in the classroom, doesn't the emphasis of our formal external accreditation systems and curricula produce a loud and clear message that creative writing is less important than filling in forms or getting punctuation right in a test?

Voices on the Page

Voices on the Page is an attempt to counterbalance this by making an 'official', 'external' cry, shriek or whoop about the value of creative writing.

Alexander McCall Smith ends *Love Over Scotland*, his latest Scotland Street novel, with a poem about maps,

which starts by praising the usefulness of maps of countries or continents before moving on to celebrate 'the unpublished maps we make ourselves':

**Of our city, our place, our daily world,
our life;**

**Those maps of our private world
We use every day; here I was happy, in
that place**

**I left my coat behind after a party,
That is where I met my love; I cried
there once,**

**I was heartsore; but felt better round
the corner...**

This is what *Voices on the Page* is about. We want to remind everyone, not least ourselves, to celebrate and enjoy writing.

National writing event

Voices on the Page is a national writing event for adults in *Skills for Life* classes in England. We are looking for learner writing: true stories, fictional

Writing is something real, the recording and creation of dreams and truth, truth and dreams

stories or poems about life, love, home, family, dreams, happiness, sadness, hopes, experiences – anything that expresses what it is to be alive at the moment. *Voices on the Page* has three elements: a national online storybank of all submitted writing, awards for outstanding individual and collaborative writing, and a book to be published in the autumn of 2007. Our aim is to get everyone writing and sharing stories or poems, to inspire, collect and celebrate writing.

So find out what your learners want to write and read, look at our website www.nrdc.org.uk/voices, join in the exchange of ideas, attend a seminar at one of the *Skills for Life* conferences, feed in learners' thoughts and your own. Send in your learners' writing so we can all read it. Email us at info@nrdc.org.uk, join in.

Samantha Duncan is a literacy tutor at City and Islington College.

How to get involved

Write something that you think other people may want to read; an entry is one piece of writing of 300-1,500 words. Your entry can be word-processed or handwritten and can be scribed by others, as long as it is in your words.

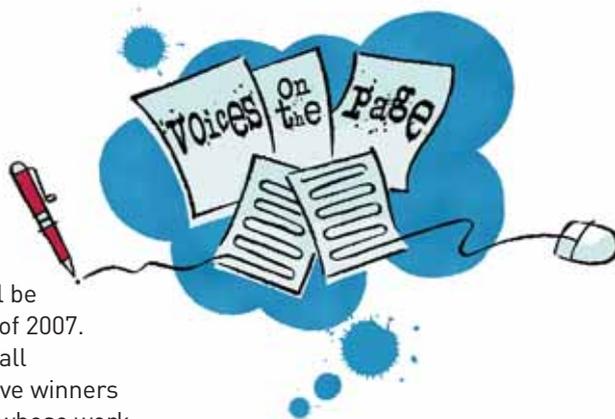
Entry forms are downloadable from www.nrdc.org.uk/voices

Fill in the entry form and send it off with your work to:

**Voices on the Page
NRDC
20 Bedford Way
London WC1H 0AL**

What will happen

A panel of judges appointed by the NRDC will select writing to be included in the *Voices on the Page* book, which will be published in the autumn of 2007. They will also select overall individual and collaborative winners from each region. Those whose work is selected will be invited to an awards ceremony during Adult Learners' Week in May. All writing entered will be included in the *Voices on the Page* online storybank on the NRDC website (unless you indicate on your form that you'd



rather your work wasn't posted online).

All entries must be received by 1st March 2007.

Changing lives through learning

Judith Swift introduces 'unionlearn', the latest development in helping unions to become learning organisations

History of union learning



1868
TUC formed

1899
Ruskin College established

1903
Workers' Educational Association runs its first courses

1957
TUC Training College opens, providing shop steward education

1970s
Employment and health and safety legislation triggers huge growth in demand for union rep training

1998
TUC Learning Service established

2000
First union learning reps trained and accredited

2002
Statutory recognition for union learning reps

2006
Unionlearn launched

The Victorian founders of the TUC believed that one of its key aims should be to improve the technical skills of Britain's workers. As the *New Statesman* noted earlier this year, the Flint Glass Makers union used to urge its members to 'get intelligence instead of alcohol – it is sweeter and more lasting'.

Today, the TUC still accords the highest importance to education and training. That is why *unionlearn* was launched earlier this year, supported by £4.5 million from the Department for Education and Skills.

The successor to the Union Academy, *unionlearn* is helping unions to become learning organisations with programmes for union representatives and regional officers. However, it is also enabling many more members to access a wider range of learning opportunities. For

example, it provides phone and online advice services, ensures that courses meet learners' needs, and helps to maintain the quality of provision through its kitemarking system.

Unionlearn has more than 120 staff, most of whom operate in the six TUC English regions. They support unions directly through a network of *unionlearn*-branded learning centres, based in colleges, union office and workplaces.

Unionlearn and Skills for Life

Skills for Life is a clearly defined priority for our new organisation. Unions have taken the strategy to their hearts because it so clearly meets their core principles of fairness and equity. *Skills for Life* can unlock the potential of individuals and groups of workers, enabling them to enrich themselves, both at work and in their wider lives.

Unionlearn will build on the successes of the Union Learning Fund (ULF) in *Skills for Life*. The number of ULF learners has risen year on year since the fund was established in 1998 (£81.5m has been disbursed since then). Today more than 25 per cent of learners are on *Skills for Life* courses.

Union learning reps

However, it is the union learning representatives (ULRs) who are the driving force behind union-led learning. This is still a relatively new role for union activists and is attracting a new layer of workers into union voluntary work. More than 13,000 have been trained to date. They are part of the union family but are specifically recruited and trained by the TUC or unions to engage colleagues in learning and then provide the support they need. ULRs are often themselves *Skills for Life* learners.

ULRs explain their members' learning needs and work patterns to training providers and help to shape the content and structure of courses. They and their unions are also increasingly making learning agreements with employers.

Pirelli has entered into an agreement with the Transport and General Workers Union (TG) and Amicus in Cumbria. As a result, initial assessments are now part of staff induction and *Skills for Life* needs are incorporated into personal training plans. Pirelli has also employed a *Skills for Life* specialist.

In Tottenham, the TG has formed a partnership with two bus companies, Arriva and Metroline. This agreement means that unsuccessful job applicants are now referred to the *unionlearn* learndirect centre. ULRs then help them to improve their skills to ensure that they are successful in subsequent interviews. Everyone gains from this arrangement. The companies have recruits who are more committed and confident, the new workers recognise that the employer is committed to them, and the union has members who value its support.

Merseytravel has also entered into an agreement with several unions to provide time off and support for *Skills for Life* learners.

Engaging employers

Encouraging greater employer engagement remains a priority. Under the 2002 Employment Relations Act, ULRs have rights to paid time off to train and carry out their functions in union-recognised workplaces. However, a recent TUC survey of ULRs indicates that many still struggle to secure time off for training and to carry out their role at work. ULRs in sectors such as care and construction also sometimes find it difficult to get *Skills for Life* embedded in NVQ courses.

A day in the life of a union learning rep

Elizabeth Bullen, union learning rep co-ordinator, Blackpool Council

Although I am a full-time Unison officer, I work with union learning reps from all the unions. We operate as a team to represent the needs of our members who work in many different parts of the council.

On a typical day I will:

- Come into the office at 7 am. It's quiet so I can answer emails and prioritise my workload. I give the ULRs a call if they are on duty for a supportive chat and update. I then check out the *unionlearn* website www.unionlearn.org.uk and other relevant sites.
- Call Unison for updates or to arrange ULR training.
- Meet service managers to discuss *Skills for Life* opportunities for employees and

resulting benefits for the council.

- Go out to depots, schools and other outreach areas to talk to employees and put information in restrooms or on noticeboards.
- Co-ordinate *Skills for Life* courses with providers, ULRs, and managers.
- Supervise press releases to raise our profile.

But I am by no means a one-woman band. I work with a fantastic team of people – parking attendants, welfare officers, street-cleansing staff – who all help to spread the learning message. We meet up monthly at the Town Hall to discuss the way forward, identify barriers and work out possible solutions. It's tremendously fulfilling.

These are issues that we need to address. We also intend to continue developing a whole organisation approach to *Skills for Life*. We will carry on the work of laying structured *Skills for Life* training pathways for ULRs, and we will strengthen our links with sector skills councils and their union members. Unions will be briefed and supported to work with *Train to Gain* brokers to engage learners and employers and ensure that *Skills for Life* is at the heart of workforce development – in every workplace.

Would the Victorian advocates of worker education in the Flint Glass Makers union approve of what we are doing? I think so.

Judith Swift is unionlearn's union development manager jswift@tuc.org.uk
www.unionlearn.org.uk

Unionlearn targets for 2006/7

3,500
new union learning
reps trained

600
ULRs progressing to
Skills for Life
module

18,000
Skills for Life
learners

4,000
NVQ 2 learners

100,000
learners going
through the union
route

From generation to generation

How much influence do parents' levels of literacy have on their children? **John Bynner** and **Samantha Parsons** report some findings from their recent research

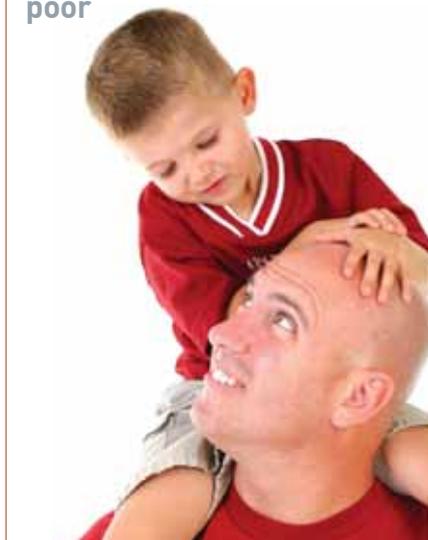
The term 'cycle of deprivation' is a convenient shorthand for the many ways in which various kinds of disadvantage are passed on from generation to generation, but it is often used very loosely. As part of our ongoing research with the men and women who are part of the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70), we wanted to investigate one aspect of the cycle more closely – the relationship between the literacy and numeracy skills of parents and the cognitive skills of their children.

BCS70 and Skills for Life

BCS70 is following a cohort of people born in the same week in 1970. The cohort has been surveyed regularly since birth to collect data about their health, educational, social and economic circumstances. In the most recent 2004 survey, when respondents were aged 34, 9,665 people were surveyed – 70 per cent of the original birth cohort.

The importance of the 2004 survey for *Skills for Life* is that the literacy and numeracy skills of every member of the cohort were assessed for the first time, together with those of the children of a representative sample of half the cohort. New assessment instruments were developed for the survey, which was conducted in the cohort members' own homes by specially trained interviewers

The relationship between performance of parent and child was much stronger in families where the parents' basic skills were poor



employed by the National Centre for Social Research. These assessments enabled us to investigate the relationship between parents and children's literacy and numeracy skills. We focus here mainly on literacy skills.

The adult assessment carried out in 2004 included some test items from the *Skills for Life* National Survey (2003), so that it was possible to compare our results with those from

the earlier survey. This comparison showed that, although more men and women in BCS70 at age 34 had Level 2 literacy skills than similarly-aged respondents (30-35 years) in the *Skills for Life* survey, the percentage at Entry Level 2 or below was very similar.

In total, 2,846 cohort members provided information on 5,207 of their children aged up to 16 years 11 months. Three-quarters of these children were aged three and above and were eligible for the assessments.

Assessing the children

To assess the children, we used a selection of tests from the British Ability Scales Second Edition (BAS II, published by NFER-Nelson). For children aged between 3 and 5 years 11 months the assessments were taken from the Early Years Battery; for children aged 6 to 16 years 11 months the assessments were from the School Years Battery.

Early Years

Naming Vocabulary For this exercise, the child was shown a series of pictures and asked to say what each one was, for example, a picture of a shoe, chair or pair of scissors.

Early Number Concepts In this exercise, the child was again shown a series of pictures and answered questions about number, size and other numerical concepts. The

youngest children also used ten green plastic tiles for counting.

School Age

Word Reading Here, the child read aloud a number of words from a card, ranging in difficulty from such words as 'up', 'he', and 'you', to 'mnemonic' and 'facetious'. The child had to pronounce words correctly according to locally accepted standards.

Spelling This was a modified version of the original BAS II assessment. The children were asked to spell a fixed number of words. The interviewer read the word, then a sentence with the word in it, and then the word alone for a second time, e.g. "Was...[pause]....It was my birthday on Saturday...[pause] ... Was".

Number Skills In this exercise, the child performed various number-based tasks, such as performing simple addition and subtraction sums and working out more complex equations and percentage calculations.

Parents and children

Initial analysis of parent and child performance in the assessments showed only a modest, though statistically significant, correlation or relationship, between scores. However, closer analysis showed that the relationship between performance of parent and child was much stronger in families where the parents' basic skills were poor.

Children of parents with Entry Level 2 (or lower) literacy or numeracy were relatively far more likely than were children of parents at higher levels to be in the bottom 20 per cent of children's scores even when the parents' highest qualification was taken into account.

Infants aged 3 to 5 years 11 months whose parents were at Entry Level 2 for literacy were three-and-a-half times more likely to perform poorly in the Naming Vocabulary assessment than children of parents with Level 2 literacy (Figure 1).

Children aged 6 to 11 whose parents were at Entry Level 2 for literacy were more than two-and-a-half times as

likely as the children of parents with Level 2 literacy to perform poorly in the Reading assessment and 1.7 times as likely in the Spelling assessments (Figure 2).

Implications for policy

Although these results are based on preliminary analysis, they begin to throw light on one possible feature of the cycle of deprivation. Children whose parents' reading is at Entry Level 2 and below are likely to face obstacles in acquiring basic skills themselves. In policy terms this means that *Skills for Life* faces the challenge of not only benefiting adults in their own lives, but also the lives of their children.

John Bynner is Professor of Social Sciences in Education at the Institute of Education, London University. Samantha Parsons is a research officer at the Institute. Their new report, *New Light on Literacy and Numeracy*, can be ordered from www.nrdc.org.uk. A summary version is also available.

FIGURE 1
Young children's relative chances of 'low' scores in the Naming Vocabulary assessment compared across parents' functional literacy levels*

● Children's age 3 to 5 years 11 months

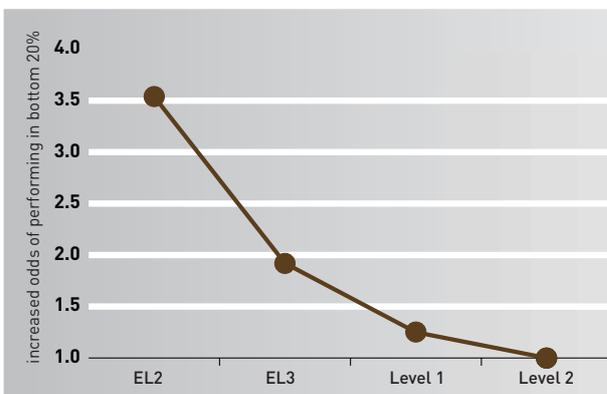
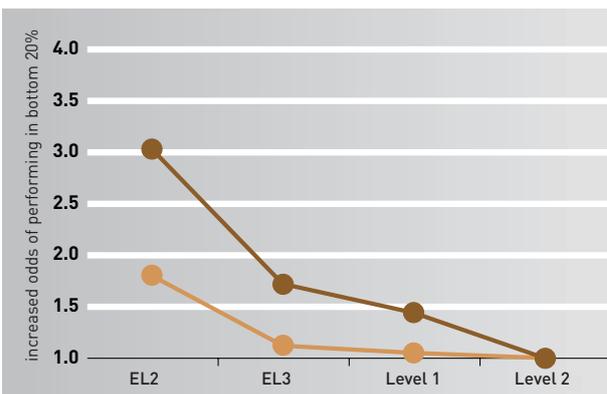


FIGURE 2
Primary school (6-11) children's relative chances of 'low' (bottom 20%) Spelling and Reading scores by parents' functional literacy*

● Reading
● Spelling



*taking account of parents' qualifications



QuickReads

Encouraging reluctant learners to read is a vital part of developing *Skills for Life*.

Kay Jackaman describes a new initiative

About the Vital Link

The *QuickReads* series has done something that only master story-tellers ever achieve. It has encouraged reluctant readers to open a book – and keep going to the final page.

This ambitious literacy initiative, launched by the Prime Minister on World Book Day 2006 (March 2), has been supported by 24 best-selling writers. Authors such as Maeve Binchy, Joanna Trollope, Andy McNab and John Bird (founder of *The Big Issue*) have written short, fast-paced books that have proved extremely popular with adults who normally regard reading as difficult or boring.

The Vital Link has contributed to the success of the series by producing the learning resources that accompany the books.

Reading for pleasure

Before creating the resources, we thought very hard about why reading for pleasure was important, and what we would want it to do for literacy and language learners. It boiled down to moving learners from a mode of conscious incompetence in their reading skills to the state of unconscious competence. This would allow them to explore their reactions to content and construction, and to access wider reading opportunities through services such as libraries.

Reading for pleasure allows learners to go beyond comprehension to interpretation, and to avail themselves confidently of the learning and personal development opportunities that pleasure reading can provide. We wanted to offer support for

wider application of the functional skills that learners are taught in the classroom, and to provide opportunities for in-depth exploration of the texts and their literary contexts.

Reassurance for practitioners

At the same time, we acknowledged that practitioners needed reassurance that *QuickReads* and their resources would fit into their curriculum

delivery and satisfy quality monitoring and course-audit demands. It was not difficult to reference activity to the curriculum, but we feel it is vital for learners' wider understanding of what reading can do that the books should not become textbooks with practice curriculum exercises. We also wanted to ensure that our resources incorporated the multitude of purposes and genres which reading for pleasure embraces, even with functional material.

The resources are web-based, with content that offers practitioners a variety of suggested activities and approaches to help learners establish a confident reading habit and widen frames of reference. The materials can be used by a range of staff supporting *Skills for Life* prior to,

during and after reading of the *QuickReads* they accompany, and suggest use of a range of technologies for development activities.

Using the resources

There were nearly 35,000 downloads of the resources between March and July 2006. The

The Vital Link is an improvement programme, funded by the Department for Education and Skills, for building and promoting libraries' capacity to support and work in partnership with the Government's *Skills for Life* strategy. It focuses particularly on how creative reading activity through libraries can motivate and engage new learners.

The *QuickReads* initiative has cross-sector support and involves a collaboration between the publishing and bookselling industry, Arts Council England, the BBC, the Department for Education and Skills, NIACE, The Reading Agency, The Vital Link and the TUC.

For details, see www.vitalink.org.uk



Minette Walters' *QuickReads* title *Chickenfeed* was voted favourite *QuickRead* by adult learners. Here she receives her award during Adult Learners Week, May 2006.

challenge now is to learn how the resources are being used and to gauge practitioner opinion on the development of reading for pleasure. We obtained the views of a small sample (37 of our 300 volunteer 'reading for pleasure' champions). This revealed that:

- a growing number of practitioners have become involved in partnership activity with libraries, which have been keen to order multiple *QuickReads* texts and participate in the BBC's Read and Write Better campaign (RaW);
- 76% of practitioners are using *Quick Reads* in their work with learners;
- 66% of learners showed greater enjoyment and confidence in reading;
- 37% of practitioners felt averagely equipped to guide and support independent reading;
- 61% of practitioners would welcome further training in pedagogy for adult reading development.

Lessons learned

What other lessons can we draw from the last year of reading for pleasure activity?

- We need to take care to reflect the composition of adult groups in selecting and discussing books.
- Emergent readers are motivated by the opportunity to discuss content, debate their views on plot and character, explore author background and link books to other life and learning experiences.
- Some readers race through texts without worrying about omitting passages they find difficult; others prefer to ensure they fully comprehend the text first.
- Reading aloud, or hearing the text read, may be an under-rated strategy.

Training events have also shown us that practitioners and library staff need support in using the *QuickReads* learning resources and texts innovatively and flexibly with emergent readers, both for engagement and for reading development. We know there is a huge appetite among learners for short, attractively-presented fiction and non-fiction and that there are existing mainstream books that are accessible to Entry 3/Level 1 readers. And we realise that there is a dearth of 'pleasure' reading for learners below Entry 3 and for those on ESOL courses.

Demonstrating to learners and tutors that reading for pleasure is an entirely legitimate activity has got off to an excellent start. But it will need to be supported and encouraged if it is to become embedded in literacy and language programmes.

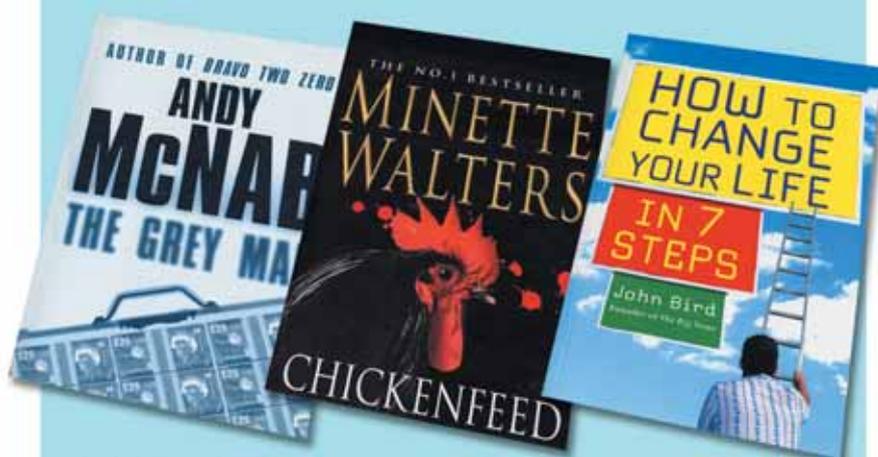
Kay Jackaman is campaign manager for The Vital Link.

A practitioner's view of *QuickReads*

The learners that I have worked with one-to-one have chosen the *QuickReads* title that attracted them. Together we discussed the cover and read through the blurb. Sometimes we read the introduction or first chapter to identify any tricky vocabulary that might discourage further reading. It may be deeply unfashionable, but I've found reading aloud to be very useful. The learner has then taken the book home to read and completed a review/questionnaire. If learners enjoyed the book, they were encouraged to do some follow-up reading and writing, eg, searching the internet for more information about the writer, their other works or the theme of the book. If learners had not enjoyed the book, they explained why, in some cases creating alternative endings or changing character traits. Several learners admitted that they would never read an ordinary book, because it was too long and too much work, but that these books are a good length for them.

I've also used *QuickReads* with family learning groups. Each parent has taken a book home and given a brief summary the following week. It's promoted some good discussion about language and has been a good introduction to tackling writing issues.

Marion Bissett is a *Skills for Life* tutor at Horncastle College, Lincolnshire.



Quick Reads titles

Patrick Augustus
Don't Make Me Laugh

Lynne Barrett Lee
Secrets

Maeve Binchy
Star Sullivan

John Bird
How to Change Your Life in 7 Steps

Richard Branson
Screw It! Let's Do It!

Rowan Coleman
Woman Walks into a Bar

Hunter Davies
I Love Football

Mick Dennis
The Team

John Francome
Winner Takes All

Tom Holland
The Poison in the Blood

Tom Holt
Someone Like Me

Conn Iggulden
Blackwater

Katherine John
The Corpse's Tale

Damien Lewis
Desert Claw

Val McDermid
Cleaskin

Andy McNab
The Grey Man

Courtia Newland
The Dying Wish

Mike Phillips
The Name You Once Gave Me

Matthew Reilly
Hell Island

Ruth Rendell
The Thief

Joanna Trollope
The Book Boy

Danny Wallace

Danny Wallace and the Centre of the Universe

Minette Walters
Chickenfeed

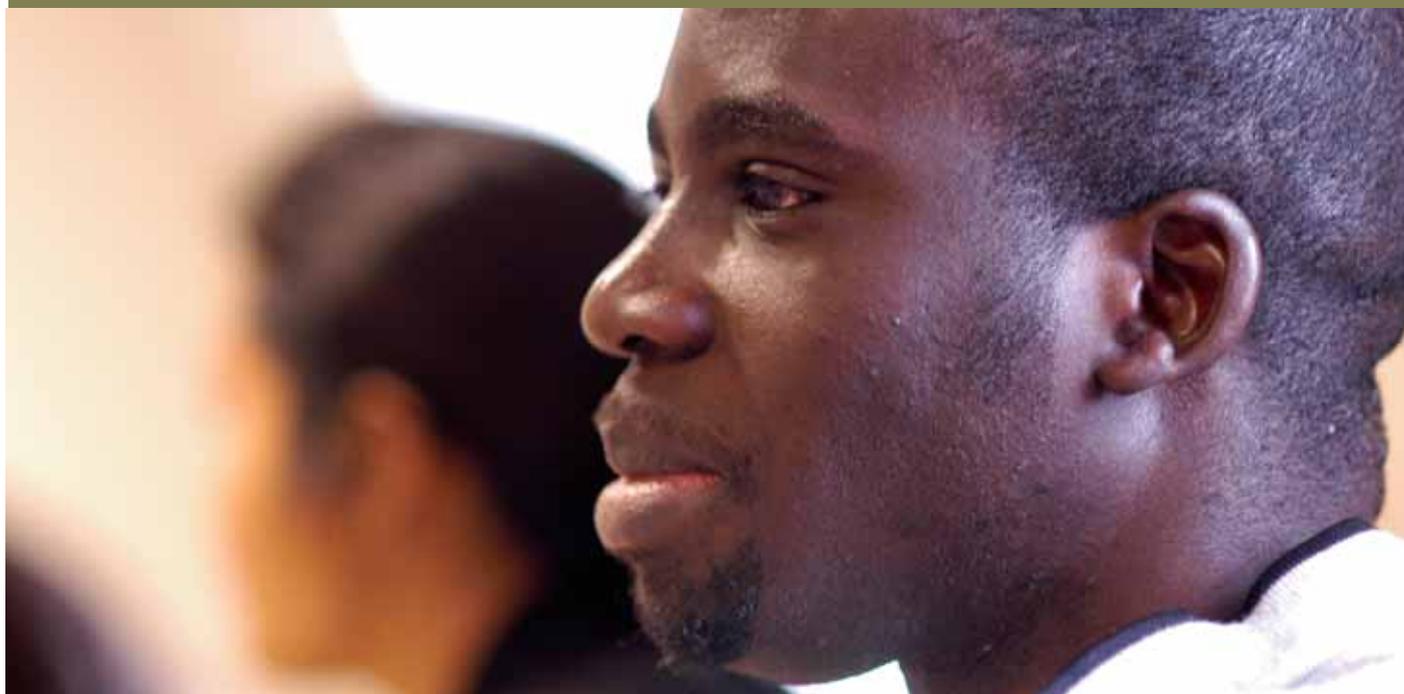
Doctor Who
I am a Dalek

The books are priced at **£2.99** but can be purchased at **£1.99** with a **£1-off token**, downloadable from www.quickreads.org.uk

The learning resources for the *QuickReads* series can be downloaded from www.vitalink.org.uk

Friendship, a refuge, socialisation and support

A review of NRDC research has underlined that ESOL provision is about much more than language learning, says **David Mallows**



'For many learners the classroom is their main reference group, sometimes the most motivating aspect of their lives – what helps them to get up in the morning.' ⁽¹⁾

As this comment suggests, ESOL learners gain significant psychological, social, and emotional benefits from the classroom. It can be a refuge in an unfamiliar environment and provide a structure that is often lacking, particularly for refugees and asylum-seekers. One ESOL learner told researchers:

'We wake up in the morning and we don't know where to go, sometimes we spend the whole day at home.' ⁽²⁾

For such learners, being a member of an ESOL group is highly motivational, providing access to informal social support and the chance to establish and maintain friendships:

'Our class is like a football playground. Yeah, because when you stay at home you say, oh today I missed the best game.' ⁽³⁾

Friendships

Friendships forged in the classroom are a significant emotional support for these learners, helping to combat the isolation that often results from their lack of English language skills and giving them confidence and a sense of identity that is often missing outside of

the college. The friendships also extend beyond the classroom and give them the chance to practise using English, which they have little chance to do elsewhere in their lives.

'When you're in college you speak English; when you're outside you speak your own language.' ⁽⁴⁾

The ESOL Effective Practice Project report (EEPP), which will be published by the NRDC in January 2007, points out that ESOL classes give learners an opportunity to meet people from nationalities they have never encountered before:

'It's particularly good to learn amongst

so many different cultures and nationalities. When I first arrived here, this was very interesting for me to see so many different cultures and people from different parts of the world in one place.' ⁽⁵⁾

The EEPP study also discusses the limited opportunities many learners have to practise English outside the classroom and lists some of the reasons:

'Working in ethnic work units or in jobs in which they only have to speak their dominant language...; working in a job where they don't have to speak much at all in any language...; being unemployed...; having no contact at all with speakers of English, because of isolation or because of living in a community big enough to get all their needs met...; because local people are unfriendly, unavailable or unapproachable; or just through shyness...' ⁽⁶⁾

Such findings emphasise that ESOL classes do much more than simply provide learners with language tuition. They point to the need to consider and value the social nature of language learning as well as cognitive elements.

A holistic response

ESOL learners' lives are often extremely complex. They face an array of challenges such as restarting their lives in a new country, dealing with unfamiliar bureaucracies, raising families and looking for work – all in a language they have not mastered and in an environment that is unfamiliar and, at times, hostile.

This is compounded for those seeking asylum by the uncertainty of waiting for a decision on their claims while dealing with the aftermath of the situations that forced them to leave their countries in the first place. Haxhi, an asylum-seeker from Kosovo who was interviewed as part of the EEPP, commented:

'I don't know what is going to happen. I have a family here and I want a better life for them but it does not depend on me. Today I am here in college and at midnight the police might knock on my

door and tell me to leave this country and go back to Kosovo.' ⁽⁷⁾

The stress such uncertainty generates is likely to have a detrimental effect on learning, the EEPP team conclude. ESOL teachers must therefore respond holistically to these social and learning needs. However, the teachers' efforts may be hampered by the lack of a co-ordinated approach to providing support services to ESOL students. One of the main conclusions of the NRDC case studies on ESOL (8) was that there is a need for more pro-active cross-agency support for refugees and asylum-seekers as teachers in most classes were juggling a number of roles and lacked institutional support and specialist knowledge to do so.



Friendships forged in the classroom are a significant emotional support for these learners

Socialisation through language

The NRDC research also makes it clear that, for ESOL learners, their talk within the classroom has significance beyond the acquisition of fluency and linguistic accuracy. They are also engaged in a process of socialisation through language. They are learning to interact with others in this new language and becoming familiar with some of the rules that govern such interactions. This is made particularly clear in the NRDC Embedded case studies in which ESOL learners on vocational courses are defined in the context of learning to become members of another social group (eg, potential childcare workers). The promise this membership offers is an important motivation for improving their language learning. Equally, in the ESOL classroom, learners require

social and pragmatic knowledge of how the language is used in real communication. Only with this will they be able to communicate properly with the teacher and their fellow learners, as well as those they must negotiate with in unfamiliar institutional and bureaucratic settings.

Pedagogy and training

The NRDC review of ESOL has covered current issues of pedagogy and the challenge of training teachers to work in such a complex and demanding field. The review also addresses the central question of the positioning of ESOL alongside literacy and numeracy. Command of language is a prerequisite for acquiring other skills. Individually-tailored language learning that enables them to make the transition from language student to learner of other skills – either in a classroom or workplace – should therefore be the primary concern of ESOL teachers.

While the social nature of learning in the ESOL classroom, so richly demonstrated in the NRDC research, is of great importance, language learning processes are different from those needed to acquire other skills. It may be that the traditional alignment of ESOL with adult literacy and numeracy has encouraged a lack of focus on language. It is important to ask whether ESOL provision has had to adapt too much to fit and whether this has always been in the interests of the learners.

David Mallows is Head of Young Learners and Teacher Training at Bell School, Geneva.

His review of the 18 ESOL projects that the NRDC has undertaken since 2002 was carried out for the NIACE Committee of Inquiry into ESOL. Its final report was published on October 3. See www.nrdc.org.uk for a full list of the NRDC's published ESOL reports.

1 Roberts, C et al (2004) ESOL case studies of provision, learners' needs and resources

2 Roberts C et al (2004)

3, 4 Practitioner-led Research Initiative, Round 2 report from City and Islington College (CANDI) www.nrdc.org.uk

5, 6, and 7 ESOL Effective Practice Project, forthcoming report by Baynham, M; Roberts, C; Cooke, C; and Simpson, J.

8 Roberts, C et al (2004)

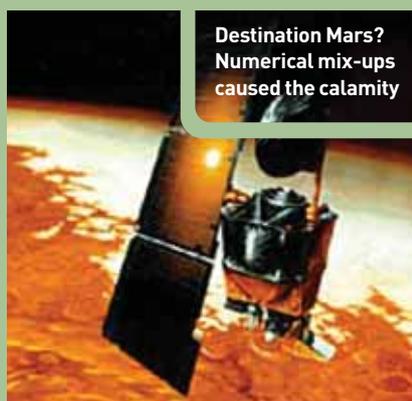
Numeracy is not just an aspect of literacy

It is only recently that adult numeracy has been acknowledged as an independent area of inquiry in the US, say Anestine Hector-Mason, Katherine Safford-Ramus and Diana Coben

It was the loss of the Mars mission spacecraft in September 1999 that caused many Americans to question whether their country had a numeracy problem. The investigation into the loss of the \$125 million craft, which was designed to study the Red Planet's climate, revealed that it had been caused by a mix-up between imperial and metric measurements. One of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) teams had been working in centimetres, metres and kilograms, while another was using inches, feet and pounds. The error meant that the craft flew too close to the planet's surface and probably burned up. But it is global competition rather than NASA accidents that has recently persuaded American politicians, business leaders and educators to turn their attention to adult numeracy.

Competing in a global economy

Numeracy skills are essential for the United States to be competitive in a global economy and for adults to function successfully in the workforce, in training programmes, and in the home and community. As adult learners in the US are encouraged to move on into post-secondary education, the development of numeracy skills will become even more critical. However, 35 per cent of all school-age American students are scoring 'below basic' on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP 2002 Math Assessment). The proportions of Hispanic, African-American, and low-income students in that category are even higher. This is of significant concern to adult educators, as an increasing number of 18 to 25-year-



olds are enrolling in adult education programmes – the very same students who lack numeracy skills. To make matters worse, adult education programmes are inadequately prepared to provide numeracy education to a diverse student population that brings unique and different needs, interests, skills, behaviour, and attitudes toward numeracy.

'Quantitative literacy'

Since its appearance in the 1959 Crowther Report in England, numeracy as a concept has remained highly contested internationally, and as an area of inquiry and practice has remained significantly uncultivated in adult basic education (ABE) in the US. For years, ABE mathematics has been little more than a subtext of adult basic literacy education. Attempts to address the critical educational and workforce issues facing the US have therefore tended to focus on the 'eradication of illiteracy'.

The 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS), which was prompted by a call for such a study from the US Congress, defined literacy as 'using printed and written information to

function in society to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential'. Numeracy was again buried under literacy, and literacy was measured along three critical dimensions: prose literacy, document literacy, and quantitative literacy. NALS defined the last of these as: *the knowledge and skills required to apply arithmetic operations, either alone or sequentially, to numbers embedded in printed materials, such as figuring out a tip, completing an order form, or determining the amount of interest on a loan from an advertisement.*

Adult Numeracy Initiative

But numeracy was finally acknowledged as an independent inquiry area in September 2005 when the US Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education awarded the American Institutes for Research, in partnership with the NRDC and Berkeley Policy Associates, the Adult Numeracy Initiative project. It is the first systematic effort to investigate adult numeracy education in the US.

There is only limited research on effective strategies for teaching adult numeracy. This makes this initiative timely, but underlines the need for sustained concentration on adult numeracy through research at the federal, state and local levels.

Anestine Hector-Mason is a research scientist at the American Institutes for Research; Katherine Safford-Ramus is an associate professor at St Peter's College, New Jersey; Diana Coben is professor in the Department of Education and Professional Studies at King's College London.

The Adult Numeracy Initiative project

The Adult Numeracy Initiative project in the US is designed to:

- (a) gain a more thorough understanding of the current state of the field of adult numeracy;
- (b) identify critical issues in instruction, assessment, and professional development; and
- (c) help the Office of Vocational and Adult Education to develop a research agenda in adult numeracy.

Phase one of the project is under way, comprising a literature review, a technical working group an environmental scan, and commissioned papers.

The literature review was designed to capture national and international research and literature in adult numeracy and inform subsequent project activities.

Key findings

The review confirmed longstanding issues in adult numeracy.

- There are competing definitions of numeracy and no one clear definition suits current numeracy practice in the US.
- So far, research that has advanced numeracy theoretically has not widely transferred to practice in the US, nor has it guided empirical work examining numeracy teachers' practice.
- Adult basic education numeracy practice seems to be dependent on school-based research.
- There is little rigorous research studying the effects of numeracy teaching on adults.
- There is a need to design reliable assessments that are aligned with curriculum goals and objectives.
- There are scant examples of effective professional development in adult numeracy grounded in rigorous research.

Themes and objectives

Following the literature review, the technical working group was convened, bringing together a broad range of expertise from the US and abroad. The objective of the group was to discuss the current state of the field

of adult numeracy, including the key points from the literature review, and:

- (a) identify gaps in the knowledge base about successful teaching materials and methods for teaching adult numeracy;
- (b) determine assessment methods and instruments that accurately portray student knowledge and skills and programme merit; and
- (c) define strategies to enhance the conceptual and procedural knowledge of numeracy instructors and sketch professional development vehicles for their promulgation.

Several themes emerged from the group's discussions:

- teacher capacity and knowledge;
- professional development for numeracy teaching;
- research on cognitive and affective factors in learning and teaching;
- teaching approach and curriculum content; and
- quality of assessment.

Key questions

This prompted some key questions for the commissioned papers on critical issues in adult numeracy, namely:

- How much mathematics do teachers need to know in order to be able to transfer concepts from

one arena to the next?

- What should numeracy professional development entail?
- What are the best ways in which adult numeracy research can build upon school-based research related to mathematics and cognition?
- What should an adult numeracy curriculum contain? What should teachers learn from their students' thinking processes?
- What is the basis for the vast disconnection between adult numeracy teaching and assessment, and the lack of teacher basic knowledge of assessment?

Professional development

Preliminary findings from the environmental scan suggest that numeracy teaching in the US is not well-developed owing to:

- a lack of agreement on what constitutes numeracy;
- poor professional development;
- limited understanding of how adults with diverse characteristics, needs, and backgrounds obtain numeracy skills; and
- the lack of alignment among content standards, curricula and teaching, and assessments. ■

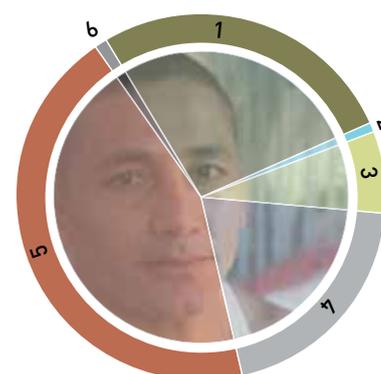
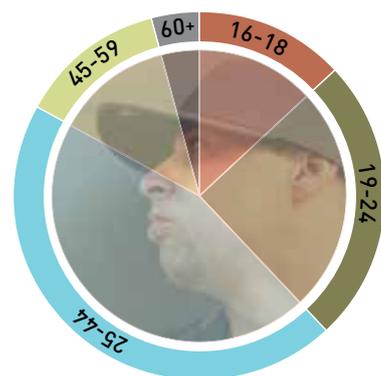
Students by age and ethnicity

Number and percentage of adult education participants by Age 2004

■ Age 16-18	348,088	13%
■ Age 19-24	656,205	25%
■ Age 25-44	1,159,483	45%
■ Age 45-59	326,859	13%
■ Age 60+	90,646	4%

Number and percentage of adult education participants by race/ethnicity 2004

① White	703,132	27%
② American Indian or Alaska Native	37,408	1%
③ Asian	188,663	7%
④ Black	511,852	20%
⑤ Hispanic	1,118,504	44%
⑥ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	21,722	1%



PRIME SITES

Introducing Wikipedia

Wikipedia is a free online encyclopedia. Karen Sheard shows how it can be useful to *Skills for Life* practitioners.



Adult educators bandy about terms such as 'ILPs', 'CoVEs', 'embedding' and 'Entry Level 2' that are baffling to 'outsiders', but web language can be at least as impenetrable as Skills-for-Life-speak.

'Web 2.0' is one of those insider's terms that means nothing to the lay person. But, ironically, it describes a new era in internet applications designed to make the web more accessible to even the least techie web-user.

The term refers to the emergence of more interactive, sharing, community-focused applications. An example of one of these applications are blogs – easy to set up and easy to view diary entries that are replacing the need for individuals to create their own web pages.

Another Web 2.0 innovation is a 'wiki' – a website that anyone can add to and edit. The best-known wiki is the Wikipedia, a free online-encyclopedia.

'Wikipedia is an encyclopedia written collaboratively by many of its readers. It uses a special type of website, called a wiki, that makes collaboration easy. Lots of people are constantly improving Wikipedia, making thousands of changes an hour, all of which are recorded on article histories and recent changes. Inappropriate changes are usually removed quickly, and repeat offenders can be blocked.'
Source: Wikipedia

The links to other pages that are contained in each entry allow you to research a topic in as much detail as you require.

Wikis have their detractors (some of the main objections can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:Replies_to_common_objections&oldid=56954947). But, like any encyclopedia, Wikipedia is a good source of reference for a cursory enquiry into a topic. Although entries are not moderated, the content of the Wikipedia is quite accurate. As each article is viewed and edited by many people, Wikipedia entries generally provide a good indication of the commonly held view on a subject.

At present you need to get familiar with the user interface before you can effectively edit the site. This is changing though, with more and more wikis adopting a 'What you see is what you get' interface (commonly referred to as WYSIWYG – pronounced wizziwig). This resembles the Microsoft Word interface, with icons for options such as 'bold'.

Getting started

Have a look at the following (and, if you don't like what you read, feel free to edit the page):

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Help:Contents> a good page to start if you're new to Wikipedia.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literacy> for items such as world literacy rates, literacy and the Industrial Revolution, and Teaching literacy.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ESOL> for information on difficulties for learners, teaching qualifications and professional associations.

“'Web 2.0' is one of those insider's terms that means nothing to the lay person. But, ironically, it describes a new era in internet applications designed to make the web more accessible to even the least techie web-user.”

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E-learning> for items such as supporting learning online, blended learning and the pedagogy of e-learning.

Also try:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject> to set up, or join in with a project. A WikiProject, incidentally, is a collection of pages devoted to a specific family of information in Wikipedia. It is not a place to write encyclopedia articles, but a resource to help coordinate and organise article writing.

http://en.wiki.org/w/Wikipedia:School_and_university_projects_-_instructions_for_teachers_and_lecturers for information on school and university projects that are possible using Wikipedia.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Reference_desk if you can't find what you're looking for. You can always ask a question that volunteers may answer.

Some pages that are ripe for improvement

If you fancy adding your expertise to Wikipedia, pages that need expanding upon include:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adult_education

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adult_learner

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Education_stubs

You will also struggle to find anything on the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills. In fact, if you type 'Skills for Life' into the Search window you will find that 'Bushcraft' is one of the subject headings that pops up. So, if you want to enlighten the world, now is your opportunity to do so. 🐾

NRDC in print

All of the documents described below are available for download from the Publications page on the website www.nrdc.org.uk and by post. To be sent free copies and/or be added to our mailing list, email us at publications@nrdc.org.uk

Does numeracy matter more?

Samantha Parsons and John Bynner
February 2006

Relating adults' lives and learning: issues of participation and engagement in different settings.

David Barton, Yvon Appleby, Karin Tusting and Roz Ivanic
April 2006

Linking learning and everyday life: a social perspective on adult language, literacy and numeracy classes.

Roz Ivanic, David Barton, Yvon Appleby and Karin Tusting
April 2006

Measurement wasn't taught when they built the pyramids – was it?

Alison Tomlin, Diana Coben, Mark Baxter, Topo Wresniwiro, Eamonn Leddy, Liz Richards
April 2006

Maths4Life Fractions Booklet

Barbara Newmarch
June 2006

New Light on Literacy and Numeracy (summary version)

John Bynner and Samantha Parsons
October 2006

You wouldn't expect a maths teacher to teach plastering...

The impact of embedding on literacy, language and numeracy in vocational programmes

Helen Casey, Olga Cara, Jan Eldred, Sue Grief, Rachel Hodge, Roz Ivanic, Tom Jupp, Desiree Lopez and Bethia McNeil
October 2006

Four Years On: NRDC Research and Development 2006-07

October 2006



BOOKS

Changing Faces of Adult Literacy, Language and Numeracy: a critical history

Mary Hamilton and
Yvonne Hillier (2006)

Trentham Books. £18.99 208 pp.



This book reflects three years of research and analysis involving a wide range of players, and a much longer period during which the authors lived the history they document. The book introduces new ways of doing policy analysis to the still-emerging field of Adult Literacy, Language and Numeracy (ALLN). There is much here to deepen our understanding of the context, the complex forces shaping the field, and what can be learned from the past to inform the present and future.

Major new archive

The research covers the 30 years in England from 1970 to 2000 during which ALLN moved from almost nothing to a major government priority. Sources include some 200 interviews and a major new archive of written documents including teaching and training materials, local policy documents, student writing, newsletters, project reports, local newspapers, assignments and dissertations. These archives are as important a legacy of the Changing Faces project as the book itself, and are searchable via the website (www.literacy.lancaster.ac.uk/links/changingfaces.htm).

The book's aim is to help the reader gain an understanding of why current policy and practice is what it is and a sense of the 'enduring tensions' that have to be managed. It uses five 'lenses' to examine different aspects of ALLN's history, analysing:

- timelines
- discourses
- agency (policy actors not just policy makers)
- tensions
- deliberative spaces.

Policy-making does not occur in a vacuum and the authors offer clear evidence of connections between the developments in ALLN and broader policy and cultural changes at national and international levels. One example is the importance of the first Race Relations Act for ESOL provision in the workforce.

Recurring themes

There are some recurring themes that stand out for me:

- The narrowing of space for alternative visions and the poor record of formal agencies in creating deliberative space within ALLN (the key committees that shaped the field were led by people with limited direct knowledge of the field, and had little contact with practitioners or learners).
- The growing emphasis on vocational purposes for literacy (there from the beginning for ESOL but less clearly so for literacy): as the field became more mainstream it was sucked into the dominant competence-based approach to education in England.
- The backdrop of social justice activism that energised the 1970s and made alternative realities seem possible, diminishing as the field became part of mainstream education but living on in some of its ethos and organisations.
- The effects of funding decisions and accountability mechanisms interweaving every aspect of the field and all the players.
- The role of practitioners as agents – less active in national advocacy than in other countries like Canada but adept at subversion.
- The role of the mass media in constructing images of learners and articulating the purposes of ALLN.

'Changing faces'

The 'changing faces' of the title has different meanings, including the literal one. The authors trace the changing images of learners in policy documents from On the Move's white, male, unskilled or skilled manual workers (shown in line drawings) through unemployed men and women of the 1980s to *Skills for Life's* full-colour photos of confident learners, diverse in terms of age, gender and ethnicity, all shown as progressing rapidly in their lives.



The book's sources include a major new archive of written documents including teaching and training materials, local policy documents, student writing, newsletters, project reports, local newspapers, assignments and dissertations.



There are remarkably few niggles. The copy editors missed far too many punctuation errors, even spelling their own home town on the title page as Stoke on trent (sic). The shortness of the book combined with the broad sweep of the review and the long time period means that any one individual agency or activity is given fairly minimal attention (eg, the impact of the Manpower Services Commission never really emerges). Another 30,000 words would have been great. But if the main criticism of a book is that it should have been longer, the authors should feel pleased.

**Reviewed by Juliet Merrifield,
Director of the Friends' Centre,
Brighton.**

The economic and social returns from literacy and numeracy

The economic and social returns from literacy and numeracy learning sometimes seem frustratingly difficult to pin down. But a new review of the evidence by the NRDC has reaffirmed that improving levels of literacy and numeracy are associated with higher income, better health and enhanced self-esteem.

As ever, some research findings seem contradictory, but the overall message is that enhanced literacy and numeracy can have a powerful impact on people's lives. The review concluded that:

- 1 There are substantial returns from learning literacy and numeracy. Evidence is stronger for earnings than for employment (at least as far as numeracy is concerned), and for numeracy than literacy.
- 2 Women's low numeracy level is a significant predictor of negative outcomes even if their literacy level is relatively good.
- 3 There are substantial differences in life chances, quality of life and social inclusion between individuals at or below Entry Level 2 compared with others at higher levels of literacy and numeracy.
- 4 The relatively strong relationship between the skills of parents and those of their children, even when parents' highest qualification is taken into account, suggests that the children of these parents are particularly disadvantaged with respect to literacy and numeracy development (see article by John Bynner and Sam Parsons on page 22).
- 5 Improvement of poor skills between 21 and 34 may have a more substantial influence on quality of life at age 34 than deterioration of good skills across the same period.
- 6 Literacy and earnings: adults with Level 1 skills earn up to 12 per cent more than those at Entry Level 3. Men who improve their literacy skills between 16 and 37 earn more than those whose skills don't improve.
- 7 Literacy and employment: women at Level 1 are up to 7 per cent more likely to be in the workforce than women at Entry Level 3; men at Entry Level 1 or 2 are up to 12 per cent more likely to be outside the labour market than men at Entry Level 3.
- 8 Numeracy and earnings: workers at Level 1 earn at least 6 per cent more per hour than those who are less numerate.
- 9 Numeracy and employment: men aged 16-37 who improve their numeracy are more likely to be employed. Those at Entry Level 3 are up to 8 per cent more likely to be economically active than lower-skilled men.
- 10 Earnings returns for adults taking English or basic mathematics courses are greatest three or more years later. Non-graduates who attended a basic mathematics course more than three years ago earn around 13 per cent more than matched individuals who have not attended a course.
- 11 A study of FE adult literacy and numeracy learners shows their average take-home pay was £558 a year higher in their third year of study compared with their first, whilst non-learners earned £713 a year less.

The evidence to support these conclusions is taken from five data sets: the 1958 National Child Development Survey, the British Cohort Study 1970, the 2003 *Skills for Life* survey, an ongoing longitudinal study of a representative sample of adult literacy and numeracy learners, and the 1996 International Adult Literacy Survey.

Further information about the review can be obtained at www.nrdc.org.uk

Letters

Send your letters to: *reflect*, NRDC, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL
or email: info@nrdc.org.uk

An alternative offer

I have read several issues of *reflect* but nowhere can I see any plans for researching alternative forms of provision, and different methods of instruction, for adult beginner and struggling readers in entry classes. Instead of the traditional course of a minimum of two classes (five hours) a week, I suggest an alternative offer of one hour of intensive synthetic/linguistic phonics instruction per day, delivered one-to-one. This need not be too expensive as trained volunteers can be deployed under the instruction of a trained teacher. Computer software could also be developed with adult material for daily practice.

In *reflect 5* it is noted that trainee adult literacy teachers are asking for training in teaching reading. Such courses need to provide trainees with an understanding of the nuts and bolts of the correspondences of the alphabetic code and ways of developing the skills needed to

process it. For 20 of my years in adult literacy I could teach spelling – but I had never been trained to teach reading. It was only when I did a course in synthetic/linguistic phonics that I fully realised the logic of the alphabetic code correspondences and was able to teach them effectively. Do not let the current crop of trainees wait 20 years. Too many students – and learners – will continue to be short-changed.

Joan Greyer
North London

Controlling the curriculum

I read John Sutter's article with great interest ('Return to Sender', *reflect 5*) having just completed some work using Bernstein's theory of the Pedagogic Device. What he outlines is precisely what Bernstein would argue occurs as the result of educational (instructional) discourse being placed within the realms of regulative discourse, ie. government policy.

The effect of the Pedagogic Device agenda has meant that government priorities, based on economic rationales, are acting to control the production and distribution of curricula and resources, such that tutors feel they have little direct control over their teaching. The skills and competence-based economy assumes that, as long as a person is sufficiently well-trained, s/he can turn his/her hand to anything.

A similar attitude can be found vis-à-vis *Skills for Life* teaching in that it is believed that the curricula will provide the skills and knowledge that tutors need to 'deliver' the required outcomes. What tutors have found, however, is that they have lost the creativity they had when literacy teaching was truly individualised and aimed towards wider, more socially-directed outcomes.

Nina Taylor
Trainer, Hants and IOW

Poetry and rap

I have just stumbled upon the article about poetry and rap that appeared in Issue 1 of *reflect* ('Hip Hop megastars blend with Blake and Beowulf'). I would like to say how life-affirming it is to hear about someone doing this because this is very important to our young people. MC Vapour is an amazing rapper and a lot of his material is usable in the classroom. I have worked with him in different schools and the results of this collaboration are always positive.

I have also worked with the Asian Dub Foundation. We remixed Romany music as garage and drum and bass in an attempt to challenge



racist stereotypes about gypsies and travellers. We distributed the CD free of charge to 1,000 schools in London and Kent and it was used in a workshop to break down barriers and hostilities between Roma teenagers and non-Roma teenagers in West London.

Richard Robinson
Canterbury High school

Clarification

Ross Cooper's review '*Dyslexia and the bilingual learner*' in *reflect 5* referred to Helen Sunderland's 'seminal paper' '*Dyslexia – What does it mean for ESOL learners?*' as having appeared in Sunderland H, Klein C, Savinson R, Partridge T (1997) *Dyslexia and the bilingual learner: assessing and teaching adults and young people who speak English as an additional language*, London Language & Literacy Unit.

We wish to make clear that the paper was first published as '*Dyselxia* (sic) – *What does it mean for ESOL teachers?*' in the NATECLA Journal, Language Issues, Volume 9/1 in 1997. ❑

Glossary

ALI	Adult Learning Inspectorate. See www.ali.gov.uk	Ofsted	Non-ministerial government department with responsibility for the inspection of all schools and all 16-19 education. See www.ofsted.gov.uk/
BSA	Basic Skills Agency. Independent charitable agency funded by DfES and the Welsh Assembly Government. See www.basic-skills.co.uk	PGCE/Cert Ed	Non-subject-specific qualifications that give qualified teacher status.
CPD	Continuing professional development.	PLRI	Practitioner-Led Research Initiative at NRDC. See www.nrdc.org.uk
DfES	Department for Education and Skills. See www.dfes.gov.uk	QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. Non-departmental public body, sponsored by the DfES. See www.qca.org.uk
E1, E2, E3	Entry Levels in the adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL core curricula.	QIA	Quality Improvement Agency. Non-departmental public body; successor to the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) (qv). See www.qia.org.uk
EFL	English as a Foreign Language.	RaPAL	Research and Practice in Adult Literacy. Independent network of learners, teachers, managers and researchers in adult basic education. See www.literacy.lancaster.ac.uk/rapal/
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages.	RSA	Royal Society of Arts. Awarding body now merged into OCR (qv).
IATEFL	International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language. See www.iatefl.org	SpLD	Specific Learning Difficulties, eg, dyslexia, dyspraxia, attention deficit disorder, dyscalculia.
ILP	Individual Learning Plan. Document used to plan and record a student's learning.	SSC	Sector Skills Council. SSCs are independent, employer-led UK-wide organisations licensed by the Secretary of State for Education and Skills to tackle the skills and productivity needs of their sector throughout the UK. See www.ssda.org.uk
JobCentre Plus	Government agency supporting people of working age from welfare into work, and helping employers to fill vacancies. Part of the Department of Work and Pensions.	Skills for Life	National strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills in England. See www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus
LEA	Local Education Authority.	TUC	Trades Union Congress. See www.tuc.org.uk
LLN	Language, Literacy, Numeracy.		
LLUK	Lifelong Learning UK. Responsible for the professional development of all those working in libraries, archives and information services, work-based learning, higher education, further education and community learning and development. See www.lluk.org.uk		
LLU+	National consultancy and professional development centre for staff working in the areas of literacy, numeracy, dyslexia, family learning and ESOL. See www.lsbu.ac.uk/lluplus		
LSC	Learning and Skills Council. Responsible for funding and planning education and training for learners over 16 years old in England. See www.lsc.gov.uk		
LSDA	Learning and Skills Development Agency. See LSN.		
LSN	Learning and Skills Network. Independent not-for-profit organisation launched in April 2006; took over some of the role of LSDA (qv). See www.lsneducation.org.uk		
NATECLA	National Association for Teaching English and other Community Languages to Adults. National (UK) forum and professional organisation for ESOL practitioners. See www.natecla.org.uk		
NCsALL	National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (in US). Federally funded research and development center focused solely on adult learning. See www.ncsall.net		
NFER	National Foundation for Educational Research. See www.nfer.co.uk		
NIACE	National Institute of Adult Continuing Education – England and Wales. Non-governmental organisation working for more and different adult learners. See www.niace.org.uk/		
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification. NVQs are work-related, competence-based qualifications, accredited by QCA and included in the National Qualifications Framework. See www.qca.org.uk/14-19/qualifications/index_nvqs.htm		
OCR	Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations. One of three unitary awarding bodies in England.		

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

reflect

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