



National Research and Development Centre
for adult literacy and numeracy

reflect

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SPECIAL REPORT

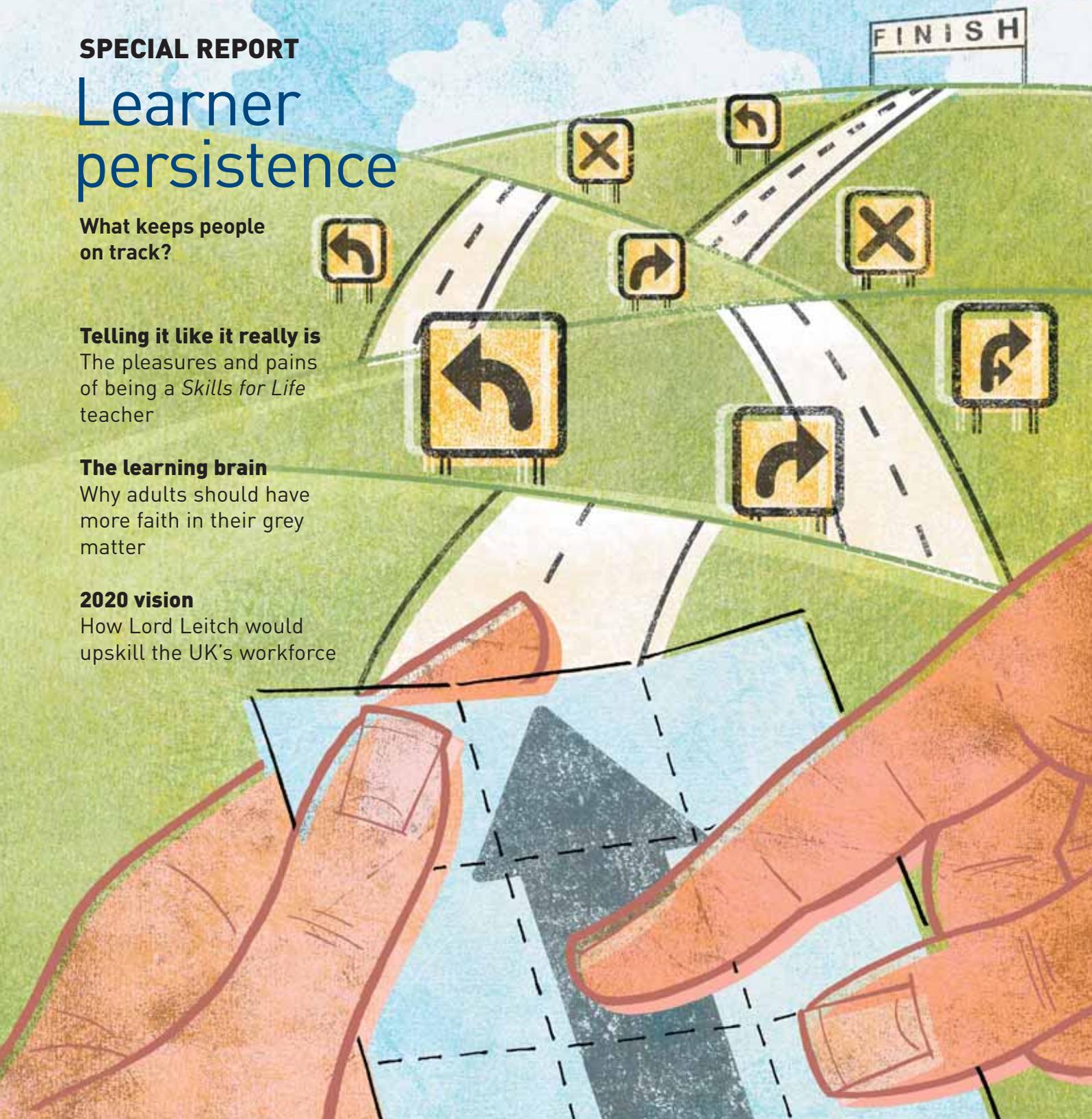
Learner persistence

What keeps people on track?

Telling it like it really is
The pleasures and pains of being a *Skills for Life* teacher

The learning brain
Why adults should have more faith in their grey matter

2020 vision
How Lord Leitch would upskill the UK's workforce



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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:

Lancaster University

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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www.nrdc.org.uk



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Sticking with it – the value of persistence

A marathon is something that the average runner completes in just under five hours so how should we describe the much greater challenge of moving up one level of the National Standards for Adult Literacy and Numeracy? That feat, research suggests, can take 150-200 hours.

The Quality Improvement Agency's research and development project led by the NRDC (pages 4-7) is exploring new ways of encouraging *Skills for Life* learners to keep their 'running shoes' on. Why use the term 'persistence?' First, persistence is essential to all learning that goes deep enough to build on. Secondly, persistence is about understanding learning from the learners' perspective. That means listening to their views about what helps them to keep at it, at a stretch or in bursts - but long enough to make progress and achieve goals. If 'retention' is a mark of successful provider organisations, 'persistence' is about successful learners.

Research has already identified some strategies which nurture persistence. But we have much more to discover about this critical issue and we have to learn it directly from learners. Finding out what helps them to persist and translating that into action will help us shape more flexible 'delivery models', create more personalised programmes, develop more learner-centred funding systems, and improve teaching strategies and resources to suit learners.

Lack of confidence in their abilities is a major stumbling block for many people. However, as brain researcher Sarah-Jayne Blakemore (pages 14-16) confirms, most adults should be more optimistic about their capabilities. Our brains do not necessarily ossify as we grow older. They can literally change shape, depending on how we use them (a musician's auditory cortex can be 25 per cent larger than average). Hearteningly, Sarah-Jayne Blakemore adds: "The brain is well set up for lifelong learning and adaptation...educational rehabilitation in adulthood is not only possible but well worth investing in."

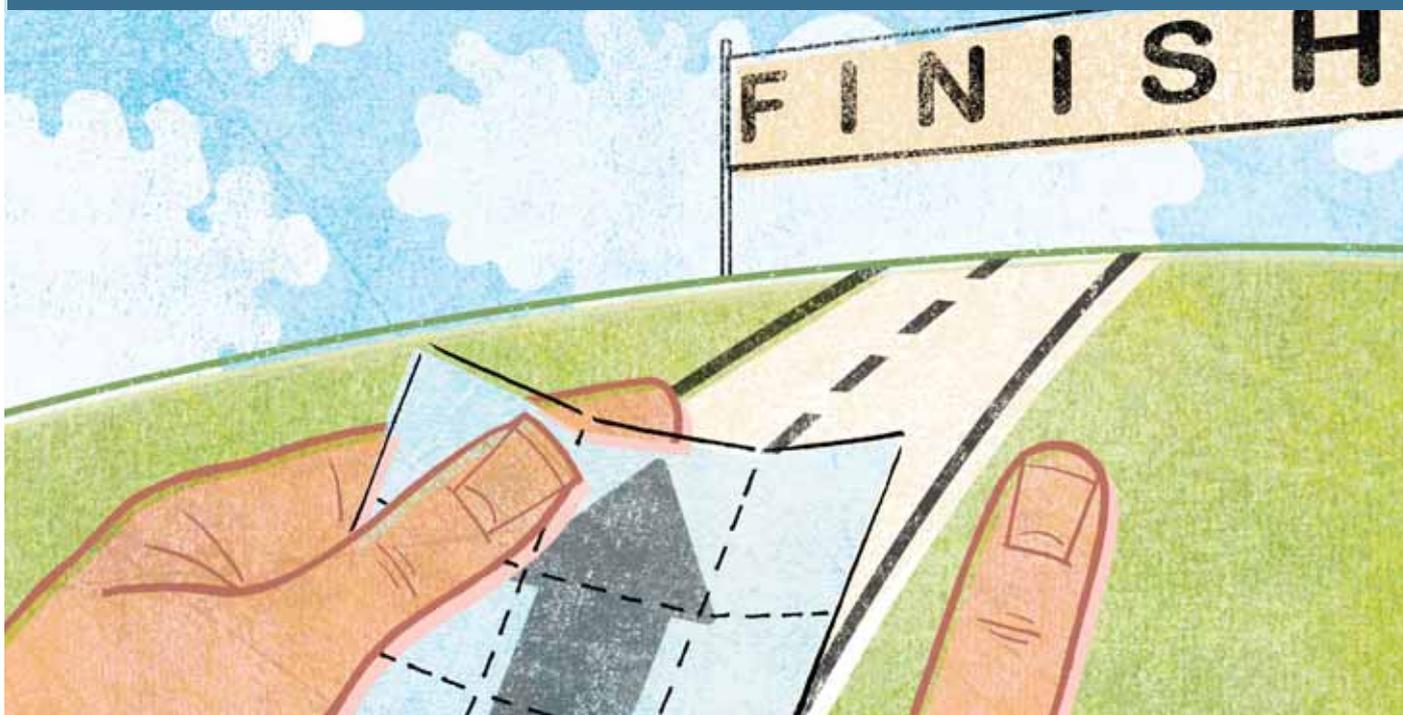
This, of course, is what Lord Leitch believes the Government should do – on a massive scale – to achieve the skills mix the country will need by 2020. But as many readers of *reflect* will know, the Leitch Review aimed to do more than ensure that UK plc remains globally competitive. It was also asked to generate proposals that would improve social justice (pages 18-19).

As Carol Taylor comments in her insightful reflection on a job-hungry Northern estate (pages 20-21), that aspect of Lord Leitch's remit may be harder to realise. On estates like the one she describes there are 'no local employers to lead on the development of skills, and no adequate transport to get to the jobs that do exist'. Even people who manage to improve their skills still struggle to get a job. But, as she says, in such situations educational programmes can still be invaluable because they help communities to cohere and thrive. Persistence can therefore pay dividends for society as well as individuals. Unlocking more of its secrets will be a fascinating and important task for our centre and its partners.

Ursula Howard, Director, NRDC

What keeps learners on track?

Jenny Litster describes an ambitious new research and development project that will seek answers to a question that has always bedevilled adult educators



Why do some adult learners persist with their studies for years while others drop out after a week and are never enticed back? There are no simple answers to that question, of course. But it is an issue that we cannot afford to ignore, especially as some *Skills for Life* programmes are prone to high levels of attrition.

Women returners with competing demands on their time can find it difficult to make a regular commitment to a course. Adults with negative experiences of formal education lack confidence in the learning process and their own ability to learn. Vulnerable learners such as young homeless people face complicated challenges in engaging with education. All these learners meet obstacles in staying the course and achieving their learning goals. Others are deterred because they cannot spot the learning pathway that will lead onto other courses or to work opportunities.

So adults who sign up to improve their literacy, language or numeracy skills require help to 'stick with it'. Organisations, teachers and trainers must build on the forces that 'pull' learners towards enrolment and be sensitive to the forces that can 'push' them, into withdrawal. In short, adults need help to support themselves, as they make the journey towards becoming independent learners.

But which support strategies are likely to be most successful, and with which learners? The Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) has commissioned the NRDC, in partnership with the National Institute for Continuing Education (NIACE) and Tribal-CTAD, to undertake an ambitious and exciting project to increase our understanding of these issues. The 'Motivating *Skills for Life* learners to persist, progress and achieve' project was launched in November 2006, running under the banner 'Stick With It'. The

The lead project team members are: John Vorhaus, NRDC; Desiree Lopez, NRDC; Jan Eldred, NIACE; Barry Brooks, Tribal-CTAD; and Jenny Litster, NRDC

project will develop ideas, models and tools to enable organisations and practitioners to support learners' persistence.

Three strands

Three strands of the project will throw a spotlight on persistence in literacy, numeracy and English for Speakers of Other Languages. The ESOL strand will ask how courses can be made more relevant to learners' goals. Research suggests that ESOL provision at Levels 1 and 2 takes insufficient account of the language demands of workplace and education selection processes. Some learners are consequently taking one course after another without a clear outcome or without being able to move into non-ESOL *SfL* classes.

The literacy strand will examine how 'learning to learn' can motivate learners, and how learners' understanding of literacy in the context of their lives can support persistence, progress and achievement.

The numeracy strand will concentrate on learning in the workplace, including the groundbreaking work that project partners Tribal-CTAD have done with McDonald's in creating an e-learning system for employees seeking Level 1 and 2 qualifications. Interestingly, it is the numeracy courses that have proved most popular with the restaurant chain's staff.

'At risk' learners

The project will also explore themes that are

central to good practice in all *Skills for Life* provision: pastoral care, assessment practice, information, advice and guidance services, and ICT support.

This work will include a large cross-project study of learners identified as being 'at risk' and will involve a range of educational and social providers, including charities and government agencies. Building on the NRDC's Adult Learners' Lives project, we will investigate how 'at risk' learners define progress and achievement in learning and in life. Learning and support workers will participate in the action research and record primary and secondary materials using photography, creative art, free writing and reflective diaries.

Feeding back messages

This study is matched to a project on 'at risk' learners funded by Communities Scotland, allowing us to compare and contrast across different education systems. The persistence project makes the most of connections like these. Every site where primary research and development activities are taking place is connected to secondary sites in a local network.

Via these local networks, project partners NIACE will feed emerging messages about learner progress and persistence back into the field. Findings will also be shared through short practitioner guides, workshops, and online resources made available on the project website. ➔

The literacy strand of the project will examine how 'learning to learn' can motivate learners

Strategies to improve persistence

Research by NRDC and NCSALL, its sister organisation in the United States, suggests that the following strategies can improve learner persistence. This list is not prescriptive, but have you tried ...?

Making a safe learning environment

- a good teacher-learner bond establishes a sense that you are all in this together – find common interests
- know your learners' names – and use them
- learn a few words or key phrases in the language of students
- acknowledge that learners' lives are complicated, and that their reasons for dipping out are valid
- make time for chats and to give informal advice
- have informal contact with other staff who teach the same learners.

Creating a community in the classroom

- let learners know that you



- notice if they do not come to class; find out what the problem is; telephone the learner if it happens again
- increase interaction by working in groups or pairs
- set up a voluntary buddy system – having a fellow student who can call and tell you what you missed can be very useful
- have a 'catch up' plan for

learners who miss a class

- ask a former student to come back and talk about motivation
- have learners talk about their goals, motivations, hopes and fears at an early stage; learners see that other students have similar goals and perhaps similar worries.

Personalising learning

- establish clear learning routes and communicate these to students
- make learning relevant to learners' lives
- plan activities that make learners feel they have a personal investment in their learning – keeping journals, writing personal histories.

Setting and revisiting goals

- teach a lesson on goal-setting, and find out what learners' goals are
- ask learners to identify positive and negative forces that might affect their work towards their goal; draw up individual

action steps; revisit these goals and action steps regularly

- use formative assessment to demonstrate progress and show learners how they are 'learning to learn'.

Supporting self-directed learning

- encourage learners to take responsibility for their own learning by working independently
- mark homework promptly, and give verbal comments as well as written; give comments not just ticks and crosses
- work on improving learners' study skills.

Have your Say

We are eager to hear about how you motivate your learners to persist, progress and achieve.

Visit www.nrdc.org.uk/ persistence and complete the short online survey to tell us about the strategies that work for you.

Jenny Litster explains why traditional notions of retention are ripe for revision

A journey that can have many stops along the way

It is little wonder that learning and skills sector providers can become fixated on learner retention. Holding on to learners has to be a high priority when so many financial and staffing decisions are based on enrolment numbers, and targets have to be met.

But how useful is this equation of learning with attendance? When it comes to considering the challenges involved in improving the language, literacy and numeracy skills of adults it may be more helpful to focus on a learner-centred concept such as 'persistence'.

Simplistic definitions of persistence should, however, be avoided. Learners often 'dip in' and 'dip out' of study. Breaks in attendance do not necessarily equate to 'dropping out' from learning altogether.

As part of its Learner Persistence Study, the National Center for the Study of Adult Literacy and Learning (NCSALL) in the United States defined persistence as: *adults staying in programmes for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study when they must drop out of their programmes, and returning to programmes as soon as the demands of their lives allow.*

The value of this perspective is twofold. First, it is realistic. It acknowledges that adult learners' lives are complex, and that remaining on a course can prove difficult. Secondly, this broad definition allows



Learners who have a specific aim, such as helping their children, are more likely to persist

us to understand engagement with learning in a more creative way. Time spent outside of the classroom or a formal course can be regarded as a bridging period during which other options can be offered to support the learning journey.

NCSALL's vision of cumulative learning embraces both self-study and distance learning, and highlights the importance of ICT, including e- and m- learning. Such a learning journey can be supported not only by practitioners and their organisations

but also by external agencies such as the health and social services that are involved with the learners.

Practitioner research into persistence

The second round of the NRDC's Practitioner-Led Research Initiative (PLRI) projects addressed motivation and persistence (see www.nrdc.org.uk for details). A City and Islington College team worked with ESOL learners to identify the qualities they valued in teachers – especially those that seemed to improve persistence. Next to their personal motivation, learners said that the most motivating factor was the teacher who:

- gives clear explanations
- is professional, by, for example, marking homework promptly
- respects learners as equals, and is friendly
- gives individual attention and allows learners to talk about their personal lives.

Interviews with teachers also revealed that goal-setting and formative assessment are crucial motivators:

Even things like half-term tests, they actually look forward to that, if they've got a goal then they know they have to work hard. (City and Islington College teacher)

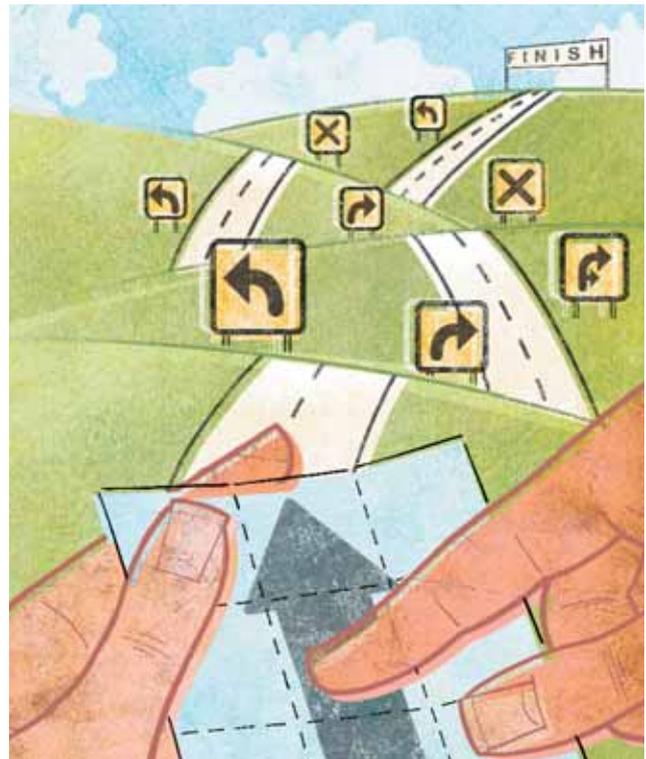
NCSALL's Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning also discovered that

learners who had a specific aim, such as getting a better job or helping their children, were more likely to persist. Learners who are more aware of the learning process may also be more motivated, judging by another of the second-round PLRI studies. As part of a strategy to combat potential resistance to a mandatory programme, armed-forces learners at York College were asked to write down any positive or negative thoughts they had towards learning. The teacher took these thoughts into account and was able to help the learners recognise how they were overcoming obstacles as the course progressed.

This illustrates the key role that teachers and trainers can play in motivating learners to persist. The York College researchers concluded that it was not particular activities that guaranteed success. Instead, it was the fact that activities were matched to learners' interests, goals and motivational needs, and that learners' feedback and reactions to tasks were taken into consideration throughout the programme.

Again, there is much here that resonates with previous research. From American studies we estimate that learners need 150 to 200 hours to progress by one level of the National Standards for Adult Literacy and Numeracy. We also know that a substantial number of adults engage in self-directed learning, and that those who have been involved in basic skills and vocational courses, or self-study, are more likely to persist.

However, a concluding comment by the City and Islington College practitioner-researchers should be borne in mind: 'Even the best teachers with good track records find that their students sometimes leave the course.' There are two lessons here. First, not all students drop out of a course for negative reasons. They may find a job or move on. Secondly, it is unavoidable that some adult learners will 'dip out'. One of the challenges of the persistence study will be to devise more ways to help keep these learners 'warm' until they are ready to dip in again. ▣



Help your learners to stay the course

There are two ways in which practitioners and organisations can get involved in the persistence project.

1. Sign up as a self-report site

These sites will produce data on their experiences regarding learner persistence, as specified by the research team. Self-report sites will be able to participate in dissemination events, national and regional workshops, and other developmental opportunities.

2. Sign up as a cascade site

These are sites which indicate an interest in the outcomes of our research and development work. We will build up local networks to encourage information-sharing throughout the life of the project and beyond. Cascade sites can also be organisations that are engaged in related work and want to share this with other practitioners.

If you would like to get involved, please contact Emma Salter on e.salter@ioe.ac.uk using 'PPA potential site' as the subject, and specify which type of site you are interested in. We will then contact you directly with more details.

A new study reveals that many adults with only basic literacy and numeracy skills are surprisingly good at keeping track of their finances. But as **Anat Arkin** explains, they are still prone to making mistakes that they live to regret

When it is especially hard to check the



small print

Many of us have trouble managing our money and making the right financial decisions. But how much harder is it for people with literacy and numeracy needs who struggle to read the small print on financial products or make sense of their bank statements?

A new study shows that adults with literacy and numeracy needs are more likely than most to have low levels of financial capability. This puts them at risk of making expensive mistakes and in need of protection when dealing with financial services providers. While education alone cannot provide this protection, the research suggests that there is real potential to improve levels of financial capability alongside literacy and numeracy.

'Teaching numeracy and literacy in the context of finance can be an effective way of addressing financial capability,' says Claire Robinson, head of financial literacy at the Basic Skills Agency, which commissioned the research. 'It's never going to be the only way but it's a useful tool that can be employed in order to address both issues.'

The study, which was conducted by the University of Bristol's Personal Finance Research Centre, drew on data from an earlier survey for the Financial Services Authority. It paints a detailed picture of the financial capability of adults with literacy and numeracy needs.

Researchers divided the respondents into three groups:

- those with few formal qualifications (group A)
- those without any qualifications (group B)
- those who had difficulty reading English (group C).

The researchers gave the people in these three groups scores in five aspects of financial capability: keeping track of finances, making ends meet, planning ahead, choosing financial products, and staying informed

Keeping track

It may be surprising to learn that people in all three groups were better than average at keeping track of their finances – for example, by checking receipts against bank statements. In fact, some achieved scores that put them in the top 20 per cent of the working-age population.

Making ends meet

However, when it came to looking at how well different sections of the adult population managed to make ends meet, researchers found that people in groups A and B were concentrated in the bottom 20 per cent. Those in group C were six times more likely to be failing to make ends meet if they were also unemployed.

Planning ahead

Scores for planning ahead produced a similar pattern, with over 30 per cent of adults in the three groups ending up in the bottom 20 per cent. They tended to be more focused on immediate gratification than on long-term security and to admit that they would not be able to cope with a sudden drop in income. They were also less likely to have made their own pension provision.

Younger people in groups B and C were especially bad at planning ahead. On the other hand, home-owners in all three groups did better on this measure of financial capability than those in rented accommodation.

Choosing financial products

Among people who had recently bought financial products, those without any qualifications tended to have lower scores for choosing these products than their better-qualified peers. People in group B were the most likely to be poor at choosing products, especially if they were young, living in rented accommodation and less well off. Renters in group A also tended to have lower 'choosing product' scores than those with mortgages.

People in groups B and C were more likely than average to say they had not used any information to make product choices, with just over 20 per cent of both groups admitting that they had bought a product without considering their options. In addition, just six per cent of people in group C had taken advice from an independent financial adviser before choosing a product, compared to 14 per cent of adults generally. As researcher Adele Atkinson remarks in her report of the study: 'This is of particular concern given the increased likelihood that they would find other sources of information difficult to negotiate because of their limited reading and comprehension skills.'

Staying informed

Of equal concern is the finding that people with literacy and numeracy needs do far less to keep informed about personal finance than other adults. While just over one in five (22 per cent) of working age adults admitted to never looking at economic indicators, the figure for people in group B was 42 per cent. However, people in this group who were in full-time education had higher scores, prompting researchers to conclude that education is likely to improve individuals' willingness or ability to stay informed.

A 'money quiz' used to measure financial literacy and knowledge confirmed that people in the three groups generally had lower than average levels of knowledge. For example, while under half of all working-age adults knew that endowment policies were linked to the stock market, this dropped to just 24 per cent for those in group B.

Key findings



Keeping track

Adults with numeracy and literacy needs tended to be better than average at keeping track of their finances. Women, single parents, the unemployed and people without current accounts did especially well.

Making ends meet

People with few or no qualifications were concentrated in the bottom 20 per cent for making ends meet, although 16–17 per cent had scores in the top 20 per cent.

Planning ahead

Few of the adults in the study were

planning ahead effectively, with over 30 per cent gaining scores in the bottom 20 per cent for this aspect of financial capability.

Choosing financial products

People without qualifications and those who had difficulty reading were especially poor at choosing products – and therefore likely to overspend or make unsuitable purchases.

Staying informed

People in the study were concentrated in the bottom 20 per cent of the adult population for keeping up-to-date with financial matters.



Targeting the training

However, with the money quiz, like other aspects of the study, revealing wide variations in the financial capability scores of adults in the three groups, the report concludes that it would be wrong to view low levels of financial capability as an inevitable result of low levels of literacy or numeracy. This has important implications for education providers. In particular, the finding that

most adults in the three groups are good at keeping track of their finances leads the report's author to warn that training in budgeting could amount to a misuse of resources unless it is carefully targeted at those who really need it. But, given the weaknesses in other aspects of financial capability revealed by the study, she stresses the need to make guidance and training aimed at improving financial capability accessible to all learners.

One in five people with no qualifications chooses a financial product without considering other options

Financial capability among adults with literacy and numeracy needs by Adele Atkinson can be downloaded from www.pfrc.bris.ac.uk/publications/financial_capability/basic_skills.html



Telling it like it really is

The Teachers Study is providing a uniquely detailed picture of the *Skills for Life* teaching force. Here, **Jon Swain** reveals what staff have told NRDC researchers about their career hopes – and the pleasures and pains that the job brings

Trying to make a career in the *Skills for Life* sector can be a complex and challenging business. The Government has always placed a strong emphasis on development of the sector's teaching force. However, structural factors, such as the scarcity of full-time work and permanent contracts, and lack of promotion or managerial opportunities, can limit teachers' options.

Of course, not every teacher wants a career, whether in *SfL* or another educational sector. Research has shown that *SfL* teachers are on average older than compulsory education teachers. A substantial minority of the teachers in the NRDC's Teachers Study are in their mid- to

late-50s. Many of them have already finished what they see as their 'main' career, and so regard their current post as either an end-of-career move, or part of the transition from semi- to full-retirement.

Indeed, for some, the opportunity to work part-time is one of the sector's main attractions. Those who do not need to work full time, or who have family or care commitments, value the flexible work patterns a part-time contract can offer. This helps to explain why the *SfL* workforce is predominantly female.

The majority of the 63 teachers we interviewed (see How the teachers

study was conducted, opposite page) told us they thought that the *SfL* sector did offer a career pathway. While most pointed out several obstacles, some saw it as being a relatively straightforward route:

Teacher: Course team leader, and then there is curriculum manager and head of school. So it is very clear, the progression path, if that is what you want.

For others, there were the additional options of becoming either a manager within their organisation, or an *SfL* teacher-trainer:

Teacher: You can go two ways. You can carry on as management within the college, or there is the training that is needed for teachers who are doing basic skills. So you could cross paths and be a teacher of teachers.

Only about half of the teachers we interviewed said they had a clear career plan for the next few years. The rest said they would wait to see what turned up.

Interviewer: Have you got some sort of clear plans and goals in your career?

Teacher: Not really, no. It is just plodding on really. I have never really thought about the future. I am quite enjoying what I am doing now.

Many teachers told us that the most enjoyable part of their day was their contact time with learners. However, a teacher who wants to stay in the classroom faces a very limited range of promotional prospects:

Teacher: I am not ambitious but I enjoy being in the classroom and ... I wouldn't want to move into anything else. I think it is very hard to move out of teaching, in terms of moving up into some promotion. I think the next thing is co-ordinating and then line-managing.

Interviewer: And you don't really want to do that?

Photo: Grant Lynch

continued on page 12 →

How the data is being collected

The findings in this article are based on telephone interviews with 63 of more than 1,000 *Skills for Life* teachers who form part of the NRDC's Teachers Study, a three-year research project that tracks the changing impact of the *SfL* Strategy on teachers and trainers.

More than 1,000 *SfL* teachers completed the first Teachers Study questionnaire in 2004-5. This panel of respondents was asked to participate in a second survey on the web in 2006

(there was a 75 per cent response rate) and a third and final survey will be launched in April. This questionnaire collects information on all aspects of a teacher's job, from salary and contract details to teaching practice and organisational support. In telephone interviews the researchers found out more about the professional identity and career pathways of *SfL* teachers. The Teachers Study panel comes from a wide range of learning programmes across England. However, the teachers

taking part are volunteers and therefore do not represent a random sample.

Further work is currently underway with LLUK which will enable us to report on the full *SfL* workforce in the near future. To find out more about this study, contact John Vorhaus: j.vorhaus@ioe.ac.uk

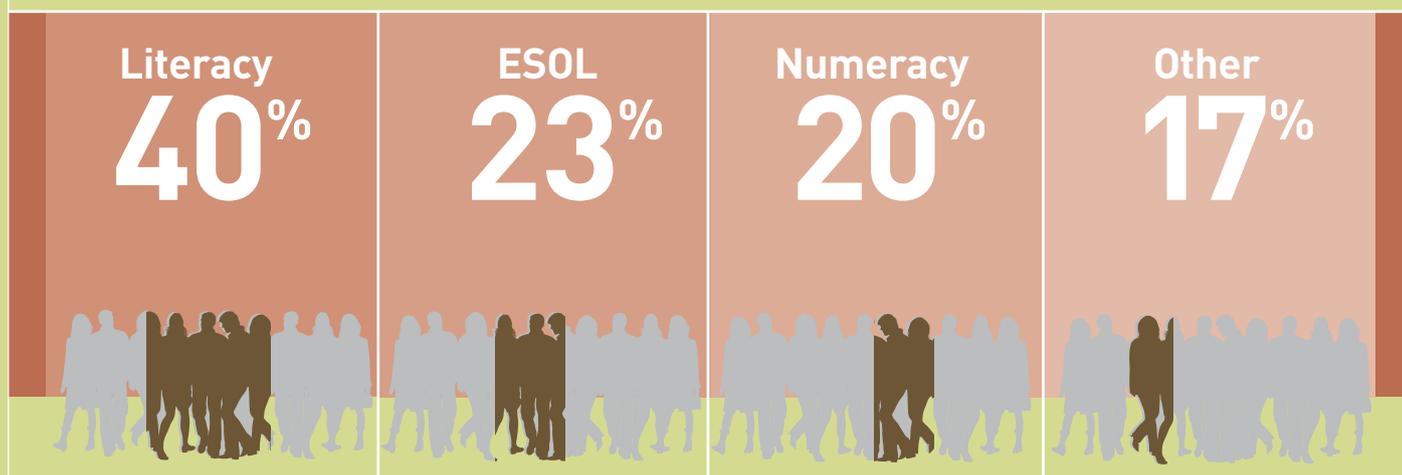
The NRDC project team is: John Vorhaus, Jon Swain, Olga Cara and Jenny Litster

Profile of the 1,000-plus teachers surveyed

- Overall, 1,027 teachers are participating in the survey.
- The teachers in our sample are employed mainly by further education colleges (73.8 per cent), by local education authorities (9.5 per cent) and by private training providers (8.8 per cent).
- Forty per cent of our respondents identify literacy as their main teaching subject, for 23 per cent it is ESOL, and for 20 per cent it is numeracy. The remaining 17 per cent teach another subject.
- Half of the respondents are aged 45 or older.
- The large majority of the respondents is female (78 per cent).
- An even larger proportion is White (87 per cent). Three per cent are Asian or Asian British, and 2 per cent are Black or Black British.
- The majority of teachers (58 per cent) are employed full-time while 42 per cent are part-timers. Of those on part-time contracts, 67 per cent have 'fractional' employment status and the rest are hourly-paid.
- More than three-quarters of the teachers surveyed (77 per cent) have permanent contracts with their main employer.
- The average length of experience in post-16 education is around eight years, excluding a small proportion (3 per cent) of new entrants (those with less than a year of experience).
- Thirteen per cent of teachers in the sample are employed by other post-16 education and training providers and 11 per cent have some other employment outside this sector.

Data analysed by Olga Cara, NRDC

Who teaches what*



* main teaching subject

Teacher: Those jobs are very few and far between. Most of us, if we are lecturers, that is where we stay, with some co-ordinating responsibilities at times. But that is it, nothing else, no career progression.

The teachers we spoke to felt that the most effective way to build a career is to move into management at some stage. Yet, as we have said, not every teacher wants to follow this route, nor is every teacher suited to a post that involves increased responsibilities and administrative burdens. Nevertheless, some teachers follow this pathway because it offers greater security.

Teacher: I suppose I wanted a secure position, and yes, I wanted more responsibility. And I enjoy quite a few aspects of that job. But I suppose, more than anything, it is the salary and job security, rather than the job itself, because it is quite administrative.

How complex it is to make a career in *SfL* largely depends on where a teacher works. In some colleges, particularly larger further education institutions, a teacher may have a wide range of opportunities:

Teacher: I was amazed, all the training [the college] got me, and put me on a

PGCE as well, while I was on basic skills, it was excellent for me, felt like it was fast-track. And all the training support within the department, because the department was quite close. It was great and you could see ways of moving up within the college anyway.

However, we found that some institutions could not offer teachers the chance to build a career:

Teacher: It depends on what college you are in. We are a very small college and there is nowhere for me to go here. So if I want to get a promotion I will have to leave this college, which is unfortunate.

Working long hours but not feeling valued enough

Skills for Life teachers working on part-time and/or temporary contracts often feel poorly treated in comparison with colleagues who have full-time permanent jobs.

Many of those interviewed for the Teachers Study also believed they had a lot less security.

A lot of people feel quite badly treated. It is not necessarily the college's fault, but the people who are 'core hours' lecturers, who get a contract for a year and then don't know what is going to happen the following year, that is a standard sort of thing. If you are not a programme co-ordinator that is what you will be on. They wait until the end of August to find out if they are going to have a job in September.

Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of *SfL* teachers we interviewed reported that they work more hours than they are contracted to.

I don't know whether it is expected or not. I don't actually know whether anybody notices, but I can't just walk out and not be prepared for the students. So if I haven't done my prep for my classes, that is my job, that is what I have to do, regardless of all the other paperwork and all the other bits and pieces I have to do, I feel I have let the students down if it is not all done. So that keeps you here.



'I can't just walk out and not be prepared for the students'

Rightly or wrongly. And I know I am not the only one that does it.

Although these teachers are incredibly committed to their learners and often accept that longer hours are part and parcel of their teaching role, most did not feel sufficiently appreciated by their employing organisation.

Interviewer: How valued do you feel, compared with a secondary maths teacher?

Teacher: Chronically bad. That is proper maths, this is what I get told all the time. This is proper maths, you are just numeracy.

Interviewer: Who says that?

Teacher: Our GCSE staff in college. Other teachers, quite a few of my friends teach in various parts of the country, and college teachers, in their opinion, aren't teachers.

As this suggests, many *SfL* teachers also felt undervalued in comparison with schoolteachers, particularly in terms of pay and conditions. Our survey found that full-time *SfL* teachers were earning £25,350 on average, compared with part-timers' £15,000. The average rate for hourly paid staff was £19.63. *SfL* teachers who had experience of working in school, either personally or through friends or parents, recognised that schoolteachers have to cope with as many, if not more, pressures. But *SfL* teachers have more difficulty than schoolteachers in describing what they do to the general public. The majority of our interviewees identify themselves as 'teachers' but acknowledge that when they say they are neither a school nor a university teacher the conversation usually goes quiet. ▣

Historically there have been fewer full-time employment opportunities for teachers of adult literacy and numeracy than for teachers in other FE programmes or compulsory education. Data from the Teachers Study support previous research which shows that a high proportion of *SfL* teachers work on part-time contracts (either fractional or hourly-paid contracts). Many teachers work part-time but want a full-time post. Others have a short- or fixed-term contract but would like a permanent contract. This often affects the decision on whether to make a career in *SfL* or move elsewhere.

'The part-time hours and the bits and pieces here and there are brilliant'

This issue is particularly pertinent to younger teachers. For many aspiring teachers coming out of university or college, one attraction of the compulsory schooling sector is that it is generally more likely to offer greater long-term job security.

Interviewer: And so if you come out of university saying you want to go into a career and you took a PGCE, you would think if I want to go full-time I have to go into the schools sector, because otherwise I will end up having to work part-time and I want decent money.

Teacher: Yeah, well that is why I ended up working in the factory, because I needed a full-time permanent contract. You can't get a mortgage without one. And I think ... the part-time hours and the bits and pieces here and there are brilliant. And they attract a lot of people who maybe have retired from the school sector, and still want to do a little bit of work. And that is fantastic, but what it doesn't attract is people straight out of uni, who want full-time hours to run a house, support the family. I think we lose a lot of people who would be really good at it but can't take a temporary contract for eight hours a week. You need full-time permanent jobs. ▣

Contract types and job satisfaction

- 72.6 per cent of female *SfL* teachers work part-time, compared to 53.1 per cent of male teachers.
- The 40-49 age band has the lowest proportion of full-timers.
- 34.8 per cent of teachers on part-time contracts would like full-time positions.
- 31.6 per cent of female *SfL* teachers on part-time contracts would like to convert to full-time positions compared to 48.1 per cent of their male colleagues.
- The most common reasons for not wanting to convert to full-time employment were freedom to do other things and other jobs (40 per cent) and family commitments (26.1 per cent).
- A higher proportion of teachers who work part-time are dissatisfied with their job security (27 per cent) than their full-time counterparts (12.3 per cent).
- Almost twice the proportion of part-time teachers aged under 30 are not satisfied with their job security.



One of the most common reasons for not wanting to convert to full-time employment was 'family commitments'

Career pathways

- 35.4 per cent of teachers said that they would like to be promoted to a managerial, or a higher managerial, post.
- The main reasons given for wanting promotion were having the necessary skills (21.9 per cent), the desire to influence decisions and policy (12.3 per cent), career progression (11.4 per cent) and to make a difference (10.3 per cent).
- Many of those who did not want a managerial post would miss their time spent teaching (24.2 per cent), or are satisfied with their current job (18.2 per cent).
- Female *SfL* teachers are less willing to take on a higher managerial post (33.2 per cent) than their male colleagues (41.9 per cent).
- A higher proportion of the youngest teachers would like a higher managerial post (51.4 per cent of those aged under-30, compared with 43.4 per cent of those aged 30-39, 42.2 per cent of the 40-49s, and 19.9 per cent of the 50-59s).
- A higher proportion of *SfL* teachers aged under 30 are not satisfied with their career prospects (50.5 per cent) compared to all other age groups (24 per cent on average).
- Part-time *SfL* teachers aged under 30 are particularly dissatisfied with their career prospects (70.8 per cent) compared to all other age groups.

The learning brain

Adults are often too ready to believe that their brains, like their bodies, are not what they were. **Sarah-Jayne Blakemore** points to the evidence that our mental faculties do not deteriorate as quickly as we might think



Until relatively recently, it was widely believed that the adult brain is incapable of change. The general assumption was that after the first few years of life the brain is equipped with all the cells it will ever have, and that adulthood represents a downward spiral of brain-cell loss and deterioration in learning, memory and performance.

In some cultures these beliefs are strongly held, and they can discourage older community members from attending adult classes. But research is beginning to show that such views are too pessimistic. Recent research has revealed that some brain areas, in particular the frontal cortex, continue to develop well beyond childhood. The frontal cortex is the brain area responsible for cognitive abilities such as the ability to make plans, remember to do things in the future, and multi-task.

The frontal cortex also plays an important role in self-awareness and understanding other people. Many studies have now confirmed that this brain region goes on developing during adolescence and even into the twenties and thirties (see Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006 for a review of this research).

Other research also indicates that the adult brain is flexible: it can grow new cells and make new connections, at least in some regions. Although laying down new information becomes

less efficient with age, there seems to be no age limit for learning.

The brain's plasticity – its capacity to adapt continually to changing circumstances – depends critically on how much it is used. 'Use it – or lose it' is therefore good advice.

The changing adult brain

The brain adapts whenever we learn anything new: a new language, a new skill, a new route home – even when we see a new face. The brain's plasticity also enables us to find new ways of learning after an injury has occurred, such as a stroke.

One part of the adult brain that is particularly capable of change is the hippocampus, a sea-horse-shaped structure deep inside the brain that is essential for spatial memory. The hippocampus helps you remember where things are and how to find your way home. A series of studies carried out by Eleanor Maguire and her colleagues at University College London has shown that part of the hippocampus is enlarged and more active in London taxi-drivers than in the rest of the population (Maguire et al., 2000). Maguire found that hippocampus size was related to the time a person had been driving taxis, suggesting that its size was determined by how long the drivers had used their spatial memory.

On the other hand, a different part of the

Sarah-Jayne Blakemore is Royal Society Dorothy Hodgkin Fellow at the Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience, University College London. This article is adapted from *The Learning Brain: Lessons for Education* by Sarah-Jayne Blakemore and Uta Frith (Blackwell, April 2005). The *Learning Brain* received the Education Book of the Year award from the Society for Educational Studies in November 2006.



The human brain – facts and fictions

The adult brain weighs about 1.4 kg (3 lbs) and contains about 100 billion brain cells (or neurons – see Figure 1). Neurons have both short and long fibres (axons) that contact the bodies of other neurons and there are about one million billion connections (synapses) between cells in the brain. Neurons communicate with each other by passing chemicals across synapses, and this is the basis of cognition and learning. All our experiences -- recognising your mother, hearing music, falling in love,

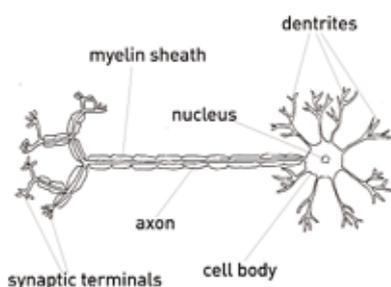


Figure 1: neuron

running for the bus – are due to communication between neurons.

Misconceptions about the brain and how far neuroscience research can extend in terms of its application to education are only too easy to foster. Take, for instance, the popular idea about how few brain cells (is it 5 per cent? 10 per cent?) we actually use. There is no evidence for this whatsoever! Let's consider the percentage of the brain used just to tap one finger. Neuro-imaging has shown that a large proportion of the brain is activated when a finger is tapped. Tap your finger at the same time as reading this, as well as maintaining your balance, breathing and body temperature, and almost all of your brain will be active.

How does the brain develop?

Human babies are born with just as

many neurons as adults. However, as babies develop, many changes take place in the brain. Neurons grow, which accounts for some of the change, but the 'wiring', the intricate network of connections between neurons (synapses, see Figure 2) →

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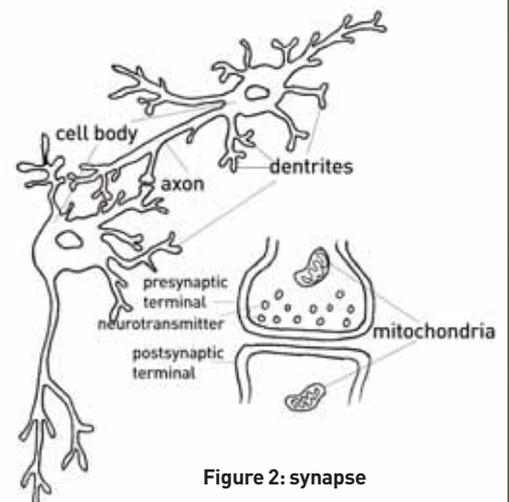


Figure 2: synapse

The human brain – facts and fictions *continued*

undergoes the most significant change. Synapses start to multiply early in foetal development and go on multiplying for many months. A one-year-old baby's brain consequently contains many more connections than does an adult brain.

The increase in the number of synapses is followed by a period of pruning in which excess connections wither away. This process is largely pre-programmed – it will happen no matter what environment the baby is in. However, the environment can also influence synaptic pruning, in that frequently-used connections are strengthened and infrequently used connections are eliminated. This experience-dependent process, which occurs over several years, reduces the overall synaptic density to adult levels, usually by the time of sexual maturity.

It is believed that synaptic pruning effectively fine-tunes networks of brain tissue and perceptual processes. An example of this is sound categorisation. Learning one's own language initially requires categorising the sounds that make up language. New-born babies are able to distinguish between all speech sounds. Patricia Kuhl at the University of Washington measured babies' perception of two different sounds from the Hindi language, between which American (and British) adults are simply unable to distinguish. In an ingenious series of experiments, Kuhl showed that American babies under 10 months could detect the difference between these sounds. After this age, babies gradually lose this ability (Kuhl

2004) because their own language does not contain those particular sounds.

Such experiments suggest that development of certain areas of animal brains is especially sensitive to environmental influence at particular times very early in life. Indeed, 0-3 years is often said to represent a 'critical period' of learning in human infants. And yet this argument may be ill-founded. First, humans undergo a much more prolonged period of development than any other species. Second, the research on animals was mostly carried out on the parts of the brain that process vision and hearing. Nothing was known until very recently about how other parts of the brain develop.

In fact, it now appears that there is no biological necessity to rush and start formal teaching earlier and earlier. Rather, late starts might be reconsidered as perfectly in time with natural brain and cognitive development. ▀



hippocampus was smaller in taxi-drivers, and was again related to how long the person had been in the job. The longer a person had been driving taxis, the smaller was this part. This suggests that, when one part of the brain grows through experience, there might be costs to other parts of the brain. This makes sense: the brain could not just grow and grow – it has a limited capacity.

Similarly, the part of the brain that processes sound (the auditory cortex) is enlarged in highly skilled musicians by about 25 per cent compared with people who have never played an instrument (Pantev et al., 1998). Enlargement is correlated with the age at which musicians began to practise, suggesting that the reorganisation of the auditory cortex is again use-dependent.

Brain changes can, however, be rapid. Studies have shown that in just five days the sensory and motor areas of the adult brain can adapt according to how they are used. Non-piano-playing adults learned a five-finger piano exercise for two hours a day over the course of five days (Pascual-Leone et al., 1995). The area of the brain responsible for finger movements became

enlarged and more active in these participants compared with a control group who had not learned the exercise.

A more recent study, carried out by Arne May and colleagues at the University of Regensburg, Germany, scanned people's brains before and after they had practised juggling three balls each day for three months. At the end of this time two regions of the jugglers' brains that process visual motion information had increased in size. But three months later, during which time people stopped juggling, these regions had returned to their normal size (Draganski et al., 2004).

Conclusion

Research suggests that the brain is well set up for lifelong learning and adaptation to the environment, and that educational rehabilitation in adulthood is not only possible but well worth investing in. The recent findings discussed in this article could potentially play an important role in reassuring reluctant adult learners that they are not too old and that it really is worth the effort to return to learning. ▀

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Bilingual learners – literacy or ESOL?

James Simpson considers the course placement conundrum that puzzles many ESOL teachers and learners

Why do some bilingual learners end up on an English for Speakers of Other Languages course while others are placed in a literacy class? At a time of mass movements of people and huge diversity across the *Skills for Life* sector, bilingual learners can find themselves following either route.

An NRDC project is investigating the placement of ESOL and literacy learners who are at Entry 3 /Level 1. Since last September the project team have been building up a picture of learners' experiences at two very different colleges, one in London and one in Yorkshire.

So what decision-making processes are at play in placement, and what factors influence these decisions? Here is Shajma's story, as it emerged through observation of an enrolment session.

Shajma, from Bangladesh, is very fluent in English and speaks with few errors. Her test shows her reading and writing to be at ESOL Entry 3. She needs help with her writing for her job, she says; she works as a nursery assistant in a private nursery, and is often asked to write reports for work. She feels unable to do this and has to ask others to do it for her. Next year she wants to do a childcare qualification. The tutor considers enrolling her on a course in the literacy section, but she finds a timetable which suits her work hours and is enrolled onto ESOL Entry 3.

Our interviews with learners reveal that institutions' placement decisions sometimes run counter to the way the learners identify themselves. Sarah was born in the UK but grew up in Iraq, returning to the UK as an adult three years ago. She talked about her time at her previous college last year.



Bilingual learners can find themselves either on ESOL or literacy courses

S: I ask them for English class and they did test for me and they decided I'm in Level 1 literacy class. I don't know why they put me in literacy not ESOL.

I: And it wasn't the right thing for you?

S: I think no. Because it's mainly individual works not as a group. And just a lot of writings. Mainly writings. Reading and writings. So it's writing, it's important but I need speaking and listening more than writing in this stage.

Sarah passed her Level 1 literacy exam, but left the college. She is now enrolled on a Level 1 ESOL course at her new college, having asked explicitly for an ESOL class.

Researchers on the Placement Practices Project are finding that the

distinction between ESOL and literacy is not always clear to teachers either. Sue teaches both ESOL and literacy. Here she describes her experience:

One of the classes that I had in the community was called a literacy class, but it was full of Asian women. So, I found it really hard to take on board that this was a literacy class. Why wasn't it entitled ESOL? Because there was a mixture of women there. They weren't all British-born. Most of them were from Pakistan with maybe one or two who were British-born, and had had some kind of education here, but it hadn't been continuous because they'd been taken out of school or they'd spent quite long spells in Pakistan.

What class would the same learners find themselves in if they attended another college? And, as ESOL courses will no longer attract automatic fee remission from August of this year, where will the same learners be placed in the future?

It is unlikely that we will come up with definitive answers to the complex questions of placement. We hope, however, to shed some light on the issues, which may help *Skills for Life* practitioners to understand their own individual contexts better and to ensure the best placements for their learners. We will also address the underlying question of how conceptions of ESOL and literacy are changing in the 21st century.

The project team are: James Simpson, Mike Baynham (both Leeds University) and Melanie Cooke (King's College London).

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2020 Vision

Lord Leitch has mapped out the path that the Government should follow if the UK is to have the skills set it will need in future. **Graham Peeke** picks out the key recommendations

In three years' time, the UK will have a million jobs for unskilled people. In 10 years, it will have about 400,000, and by 2020 there will be just 100,000.

The recently-published Leitch Review on the country's long-term skills needs contains a number of stark messages of this kind. But it also offers a long list of recommendations designed to ensure that the UK is not left behind in the international race to improve workforce skills.

Lord Leitch, a former chief executive of Zurich Financial Services, was asked to produce an independent review for the Treasury on what the UK's long-term ambition should be for developing skills – not only to maximise economic prosperity and productivity but to improve social justice. His report stresses the absolute necessity of raising national ambitions in order to become a world-class skills economy.

The Review points out that at present:

- 35 per cent of UK adults have either no qualifications or nothing above Level 1 (more than double the proportion in the best-performing nations, such as the US, Canada, Germany and Sweden)
- only 39 per cent have intermediate qualifications (Levels 2 and 3), compared to more than 50 per cent in Germany and New Zealand
- 27 per cent have high qualifications (Level 4 and above). This compares well internationally but is still significantly behind the US, Japan and Canada where the proportion stands at about 40 per cent.

Consequently, Leitch recommends that the UK should move into the top eight in the world at each skills level by 2020. This translates into the following basic skills targets:

- 95 per cent of adults with functional literacy and numeracy
- more than 90 per cent of adults qualified to at least Level 2.

Leitch believes that achieving these targets will deliver massive benefits to the UK economy,



Flying the flag for the future

significantly reducing income inequality and child poverty, increasing productivity growth and employment. The biggest skills improvement challenge will be to slash the number of adults with the lowest levels of literacy and numeracy.

Current efforts must be more than trebled, Leitch has concluded. Improvements should be delivered both through specific literacy and numeracy qualifications and by 'embedding' functional literacy and numeracy within other qualifications. Leitch proposes a four-part strategy to deliver his vision:

- creation of a demand-led skills system
- development of a shared national ambition for world-class skills
- embedding a culture of learning
- integration of employment and skills services.

Demand-led system

Leitch considers that the introduction of a fully

The biggest skills improvement challenge will be to slash the number of adults with the lowest levels of literacy and numeracy

demand-led system is the only way to ensure that the UK achieves world-class skills that are economically valuable. The Review recommends that all publicly-funded adult vocational skills, apart from community learning and programmes for those with learning difficulties and disabilities, should be routed through Train to Gain and Learner Accounts by 2010.

Creating a demand-led system also means ensuring that qualifications are valued in the labour market. At present too many qualifications, particularly at Level 2, have low or no wage returns, suggesting that they lack economic value. In addition, the Review agrees with the Foster Report on further education that the English qualifications system is too confusing and that its complexity has constrained investment in skills by employers and individuals.

Shared national ambition

Employers have a key role in ensuring world-class skills by 2020, Leitch believes. Improvements in qualifications and changes in Government targets need to be matched by increased investment in – and demand for – skills by employers. Skills also need to be deployed effectively in the workplace. Employers must subscribe to a shared national mission to develop world-class skills. In order to increase employer training for low-skilled workers the Review recommends a 'skills pledge'. This is a specific promise to the workforce that every eligible employee would be helped to gain a Level 2 qualification.

Embedding a culture of learning

Individuals also have to be part of the shared national mission, engaging in learning and investing where it will improve pay and prospects. But Leitch says that, in order to raise aspiration and awareness of the benefits of learning, people need good information and advice on learning

opportunities and their relevance to the labour market. The current lack of information – and failure to integrate advice on learning and careers – is seen as a clear example of market failure. The Review consequently proposes the establishment of a universal careers service.

Employment and skills services

Integrating employment and skills services is also considered essential to help people find jobs and get on in their career. Leitch recommends screening all benefit claimants for adult literacy and numeracy needs and helping people improve these skills without delaying their return to work by having part-time training included in their

action plans. The Review also calls for improvements in the quality of training available to claimants through Learner Accounts used with a range of accredited training providers.

Voluntary action by individuals and employers may not be sufficient, however, to meet the new targets. Leitch recommends that the Government review progress in 2010 and, if it is

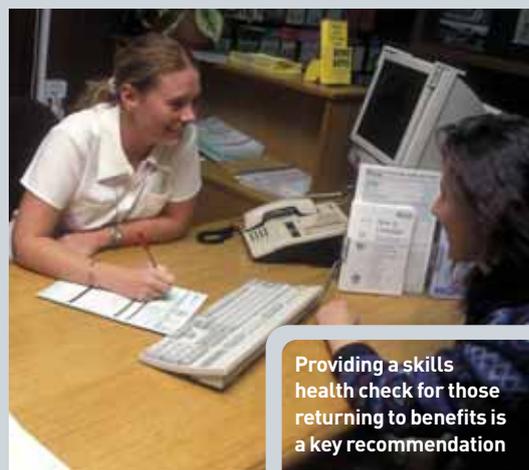
insufficient, it should introduce a legal entitlement to workplace training for employees lacking a Level 2 qualification or equivalent.

By recommending that the UK should be in the top eight industrial nations at each skill level by 2020, the Review puts adult literacy and numeracy centre stage in government skills policy. In addition, it places the responsibility for the funding of skills development firmly with government and recommends a number of measures to drive up demand for literacy and numeracy qualifications. Such a strong endorsement of the importance of literacy and numeracy provision augurs well for *Skills for Life*. ▀

The English qualifications system is too confusing and its complexity has constrained investment in skills by employers and individuals

Key recommendations from the Review

- 95 per cent of adults to be functionally literate and numerate by 2020
- More than 90 per cent of adults qualified to at least Level 2 by 2020
- All publicly-funded adult vocational skills, apart from community learning and programmes for those with learning difficulties and disabilities, to be routed through Train to Gain and Learner Accounts by 2010
- Introduction of a skills pledge, a specific promise that every eligible employee would be helped to gain a Level 2 qualification
- Establishment of a universal careers service
- Screening all benefit claimants for literacy and numeracy needs, providing a skills health check for those returning to benefits
- Government to review progress in 2010 and, if it is insufficient, introduce a legal entitlement to workplace training for employees lacking a Level 2 qualification or equivalent.



Providing a skills health check for those returning to benefits is a key recommendation

The cement that keeps an estate together

The Leitch proposals will not guarantee jobs in some communities but there will be other important spin-offs, says **Carol Taylor**

I was sitting in a community café on the outskirts of a small, northern town just before Christmas. The estate was celebrating its 25th birthday – 25 years since it was built to house what was called the ‘Manchester overspill’. I had been invited to the café, the hub of the estate, by Helen, the community education worker, to see the effects of eight years of intense educational activity and to hear first hand about people’s experiences.

What was going on was impressive. The primary school was at the heart of much of the activity; the busy library was right in the middle of the estate; there was a state-of-the-art nursery/children’s centre, and the ‘parish rooms’ had been wrested from the exclusive use of the over-60s to become a vibrant adult education centre. The people I met obviously enjoyed living there. They liked the sense of belonging and being part of an active community.

Three generations joined us at the table – Mary, daughter Marie and granddaughter Kylie. Marie was persuaded to try a family literacy class – *‘she told me it would help Kylie, I wouldn’t have to do no writing, it would be easy. She bullied me into it’*. She listed the classes she had attended since then, the achievements – *‘well, then I did literacy Level 1, and then IT. Then I persuaded my mum to come to another thing about looking after the kids* (this turned out to be the Basic Skills Agency’s programme, ‘Keeping up with the Children’), *and then we both did a numeracy course* (both getting Level 1, I discover). *Then I think it was GCSE English, both of us, and a course on CV writing and getting a job, then...’* Next I met Tony who talked about his first course, five years ago – on *‘maths and computers’*.



Carol Taylor is Joint Director of the Basic Skills Agency. She is writing here in a personal capacity.

This started him off on his journey. He picked up numeracy Level 1, did a further IT course and, amongst other things, set up a children’s football team. He had just come back from taking them to a weekend tournament in Torquay.

Helen told me that these stories could be repeated hundreds of times; she pointed out people through the window – *‘she did literacy and numeracy, and creative writing and is a volunteer’*; *‘he has just agreed to come to a literacy class’*; *‘I’ve been trying to get him for years!’* Since the explosion of funding for basic skills a range of opportunities has been developed: embedded and discrete literacy and numeracy courses, family learning and parenting. The *Skills for Life* teachers have involved Jobcentre Plus, the church and the mental health team. Helen is clear how much better things are since *Skills for Life* was launched – there is a more professional workforce, standards, curricula and tests.

However, while she is sure that the increased funding has had a profound impact on the skills levels on the estate, what she cannot do is get people jobs. Despite his educational success in recent years Tony does not have a job. Does he want one? Of course he does, but there are few local jobs to apply for. Those that do come up attract hundreds of applicants and anyway, as Tony said, if employers know you *‘come off the estate they won’t look at you’*. There are jobs further afield but he has no *‘transport’* and cannot afford any.

One in four of the estate’s 16 to 24-year-olds is unemployed, a statistic Helen puts to good effect to apply for yet more money. This time she is applying for Lottery money, but before that she sought funding from the Single Regeneration

The increased funding has had a profound impact on skills levels on the estate but people cannot get jobs



Budget, European Social Fund, Learning and Skills Council – she can reel them off.

However, as I sat in that café listening to Helen I began to wonder how the Leitch Review recommendations will help the people I met. The Review is to be welcomed, with its emphasis on developing the skills of not only those who are out of work but those in low-paid and low-skilled jobs. Of course we need to upskill the current and future workforce and we need employers to become engaged in that process. But what about Helen's estate? There are no local employers to lead on the development of skills, and no adequate transport to get to the jobs that do exist – 10 miles away in the city. People with five or six qualifications, who have moved, over years, from having very poor basic skills to GCSE and beyond still struggle to get a job.

Nevertheless, Helen and her neighbours did have reason to celebrate their 25th anniversary, as their local MP acknowledged in a recent speech: 'It [the estate] was given half a dozen shops, a primary school, a church hall, two pubs, a narrow

choice of bus routes, very few play facilities and no employment opportunities to speak of. It was not designed to liberate people or to engage or involve its residents. In a phrase, that estate was not designed to succeed as a community. It is now the hub of a network of activities, including ...a huge variety of adult education classes, with an exceptionally high participation rate, a comprehensive adult literacy programme, including popular parenting.'

One in four of the estate's 16 to 24-year-olds is unemployed, a statistic Helen puts to good effect to apply for yet more money

People like Tony and Marie may not be able to get jobs, but they can inspire their families and their communities to value education as a way to take control of their lives. They can also help their neighbours to recognise that

education has the power to bring together communities, enrich lives and help different generations to live together and learn from each other.

Perhaps this is the way we should be looking at the Leitch Review – it is about upskilling the current and future workforce for the impact it has on their lives, for intrinsic as well as extrinsic reasons, as well as to improve the economy of the country in the global world. ▀

The design of many housing estates makes it hard for them to succeed as communities – but education can help to compensate for the planners' oversights

World class but not perfect

The Government is proud of its *Skills for Life* Strategy, but how does it compare with adult literacy and numeracy programmes in other countries? And how could it be improved? Barry Brooks discusses the findings of a study that sought answers to these questions



No other country places such a strong emphasis on adult literacy and numeracy qualifications

The UK is not the only developed nation that appreciates both the size of its adult skills deficit and the importance of addressing the problem. Other countries have also initiated educational policies and practices designed to improve adult skill levels. The international benchmarking study undertaken by Tribal Education Ltd over the past year has, however, confirmed that the *Skills for Life* Strategy is distinctive in the scope of its target audience and its high levels of public funding.

The sustained determination of the UK government to secure irreversible change in the culture, performance and quality of adult literacy and numeracy provision also appears to be unique.

Skills for Life – in terms of investment and vision, as well as impact – is increasingly recognised as a world-class strategy by international commentators and researchers. What makes this approach unique is that it has been from the outset a central government-led strategy designed to address every aspect of the learning journey including delivery, achievement and progression.

A vision for the UK

Our research, which covered all the UK countries,

Europe and a range of leading industrial nations, showed that no other system in the world is directly comparable or has many, let alone all, of the following features of *Skills for Life*:

- explicit national standards of satisfactory performance
- specialist teaching requirements and qualifications
- national assessment of performance that is large-scale, robust and reliable
- harmonised national mechanisms for policy, implementation, research and evaluation
- high-quality measurements and data resulting from the above processes.

Our study, which was commissioned by the *Skills for Life* Strategy Unit in January 2006, also revealed that the countries of the UK recognise that there is now more that binds policy and practice in this sector than separates it. Key officials we interviewed in each home nation appeared willing to work together to meet the needs of all UK citizens in respect of social justice and employability, irrespective of where they learn, live or work. In particular, lead policy organisations were keen to share good practice and develop closer links and collaborative

approaches that will ensure portability of qualifications for adults within the UK and lead to improved ways to monitor the engagement of those in greatest need of help.

Recognising achievement

The European arm of our study showed that the *Skills for Life* system of standards, core curricula, courses, teaching requirements, research, learning support, assessment and qualifications overarches and includes most of the individual benchmarks and indicators used in other countries. However, what sets some countries apart is their high rate of successful completion of upper secondary education. The Scandinavian countries and some of the recent entrants to the EU fall into this category. One of the greatest challenges for the *Skills for Life* Strategy is the continuing flow of low-skilled school-leavers into the labour market. This flow dilutes the gains made in the 'stock' of the adult population who have improved their literacy, language and numeracy skills as a result of the Strategy.

It is also clear that no other country – in Europe and beyond – places such a strong emphasis on adult literacy and numeracy qualifications. Officials in all the countries researched recognised that the resulting qualifications data are invaluable for policy-makers in this country. However, we need to look at how our economic competitors measure, record and report achievement and progress, especially for those at the lowest levels of literacy and numeracy. These alternative forms of recognising achievement should not replace our national qualifications – they are a cornerstone of the Strategy – but could help to engage and stimulate those who have no experience of 'academic' success. For example, the social practice model in Scotland provides an interesting and innovative approach to negotiating and providing learning for those with the lowest levels of skills. It merits further study.

Responding to change

We found that the *Skills for Life* Strategy is not only uniquely ambitious – in economic and social terms – but is unusually responsive to changing trends. Those in charge of implementing the Strategy constantly review, revise and update their understanding of its efficiency and effectiveness.

Nevertheless, we have recommended that the time is right to re-affirm the basic goal of the Strategy: a highly skilled teaching workforce, supported by a flexible teaching and learning framework. We also believe that the Government should look more closely at the impact on, and continued relevance of, the original priority groups. Having considered the new challenges identified by the Leitch Report, we have

recommended that the teaching and learning infrastructure should be adapted and enriched to accommodate the new adult learners, increased expectations and wider range of skills.

Our recommendations are designed to ensure that all future developments focus on providing learning at points, places and times that are meaningful and motivational to individuals. Equally, for illiteracy and innumeracy to be eradicated, individual progression must become one of the Strategy's key success criteria alongside the achievement of qualifications.

Individual progression must become one of the Strategy's key success criteria alongside the achievement of qualifications

Barry Brooks is Director for Lifelong Learning, Tribal Education Ltd. He is a former head of the Skills for Life Strategy Unit at the DfES. Tribal's benchmarking study was presented to the Department for Education and Skills in November 2006.

What the study concluded

- The future role of the public purse – *Skills for Life* is unique in that all learners, irrespective of their personal circumstances, specific needs or skill levels, receive free tuition. The *Skills for Life* Strategy Unit must decide whether this is sustainable in the long term, given the scale of the challenge and the ambition of the Leitch targets.
- The relationship between school and progression – Greater effort and investment are needed to improve the development of young people's skills in school. Improvement in upper secondary performance will enable the Strategy to focus more on those with greatest need.
- Reaching the hardest to reach – The time is right to explore more flexible assessment routes, especially at the entry points, as a means of widening participation and engaging reluctant learners.
- Mobilising ICT – New technologies are not being fully exploited. To reach new audiences the Strategy must recognise the crucial role of new technologies in all aspects of adult literacy and numeracy policy, including assessment.
- Embedding and developing employability skills – It is now recognised that literacy, language and numeracy should be developed and assessed in work-related contexts that are meaningful and motivational to non-traditional or reluctant learners.
- UK-wide development – the potential for a UK intra-national basic skills passport for specific priority groups such as employees of trans-national companies, migrant or mobile workers and offenders should be considered.



Greater effort and investment are needed to improve the development of young people's skills in school

A job for the professionals



Alison Wedgbury , NRDC Development Officer, reviews the impact of the 'Creative Routes' scheme and considers the prospects for the professionalisation of the teacher workforce

'I want to become a more professional teacher'

That's the view of an applicant for support from 'Creative Routes', an initiative administered by NRDC on behalf of Lifelong Learning UK and as part of the QIA *SfL* Improvement Programme. In the current frantic atmosphere of teacher education reform, it is easy to be cynical or at least bewildered in the face of continuing change and uncertainty, but teaching literacy, language or numeracy skills is definitely a job for the professionals.

The challenge

In a special report on teacher training in *reflect 4* (October 2005), Helen Casey commented on some themes from the Ofsted/ALI 2003 inspection report: the frequent lack of pedagogy in *Skills for Life* teacher education programmes, and the need for more pre-service courses that integrate theory and practice and lead to fully qualified teacher status. She highlighted the 'confusing array of different shapes and sizes [of programmes], some in universities, others in colleges', the 'lottery' of fees and bursaries, and a 'complex nightmare of referrals and re-directions...for newcomers'. She

suspected that 'only the determined and the committed are likely to make it through into the *Skills for Life* teaching workforce'.

Inspectors have also revisited teacher-education provision. They concluded:

'There is still a striking contrast between the quality of the taught element of ITT [Initial Teacher Training] courses, which is generally good, and the quality of the practice elements, which is inadequate' (Ofsted 2006)¹

Some new entrants have achieved full teaching qualifications via one of the integrated courses

The response

Development activity in the past two years has been

making a real difference in strengthening provision and professional networks. National and regional courses to 'train the teacher-educator' have boosted the knowledge and confidence of *Skills for Life* specialist programme leaders.

While there has been anecdotal evidence of candidates dropping out or not completing programmes, determined new entrants have made it through, achieving full teaching qualifications via one of the subject-specific, integrated courses that have emerged in many



¹ Ofsted (2006) The initial training of further education teachers (ref: HMI 2485)

Short-term funding with long-term benefits

A new teacher training grants scheme is meeting three pressing needs

Creative Routes

The Creative Routes to Qualified Status programme offers access, through NRDC, to development funds from the QIA *Skills for Life* Improvement Programme and Lifelong Learning UK. The funding aims to help universities and colleges develop local responses to three pressing needs:

- provision that integrates subject knowledge and pedagogy, attracts new entrants and prepares them to teach in a range of contexts
- in-service provision, delivered flexibly and fast to get existing teachers fully qualified in their subject specialism before September 2007
- 'top-up' provision for ESOL Diploma holders.

All regions of England are involved. More than 80 programmes are receiving grants to develop key aspects of quality and get ready for the post-reform era.

The Qualification Support Fund

The 'Creative Routes' programme includes the Qualification Support Fund – money to help trainee, newly employed and existing teachers not only to attend training courses but also to complete qualifications to teach *Skills for Life*. Some 500 to 600 candidates will receive Qualification Support funding to enable them to complete their teaching qualification. The kinds of needs that are being met include:

- travel costs – particularly important in rural areas
- cover while training – most organisations find this valuable
- fees – many providers have very small training budgets



- mentor charges
- personal costs – extra course materials, childcare.

Sally Bird, manager of the Workforce Development Strand of the QIA *Skills for Life* Improvement Programme, says: 'Already the QSF has helped two literacy teachers from a work-based training provider, Philips Hair Academy, in Wakefield. Two teachers are attending literacy teacher training courses at Barnsley College and Wakefield College and the funding has contributed towards their fees and the cost of covering their work'. Mandi Hartney, academy principal, says: 'As a small organisation, the cost of covering teachers would be prohibitive without the support the fund is giving us.'

Owten Rossmore Resource Centre, a voluntary organisation in Hartlepool works with hard-to-reach unemployed adults in one of the poorest wards in England and 'struggles to make ends meet'. The fund will support its numeracy

teacher through her specialist training qualification, thus helping to meet the organisation's objective to continuously improve and develop its staff. 'It's made a fantastic difference,' says Glenys Thompson, centre manager. And she has nothing but praise for the numeracy teacher training course at Sunderland University and its 'excellent team of teacher trainers'.

Yes, it is short-term funding again, for now anyway. But it is also a positive way to help imaginative teacher-educators surf the big waves of *Skills for Life* reform. It is also certain, following the Leitch Review (see pages 18-19), that even more professionals in the workforce will be needed to support learners who need and deserve the best.

The Qualification Support Fund is available to support attendance on stand-alone Level 4 subject-specialist programmes for adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL teachers and also on integrated subject-specific initial teacher education programmes in these areas.

Applications should be made by an organisation, eg, the teacher's employer, or the teacher education programme provider. Late applications to NRDC during March 2007 will be considered subject to remaining funds.

Find out more about eligibility and how to apply from the NRDC web site at www.nrdc.org.uk/funding or www.sflip.org.uk (Home page, click on 'News').

regions of England. Some of these courses are now well established but they are still rare outside the big metropolitan areas. It is uncommon to find all three subject areas, ie, literacy, numeracy and ESOL teacher-education programmes, within reasonable travelling distance.

Many existing and highly committed *Skills for Life* teachers have also made it through. They have achieved their in-service, subject specialist, certificates for teachers of adult literacy, numeracy or ESOL. They value their increased knowledge of theory and practice. They have shared experiences and ideas about teaching with colleagues from different contexts.

Some centres have built up considerable expertise in delivering in-service programmes in a variety of models. As with the integrated programmes though, the availability in all three subject areas has been variable across the regions. Marketing is often tentative because providers are not sure that they will be able to afford to run courses.

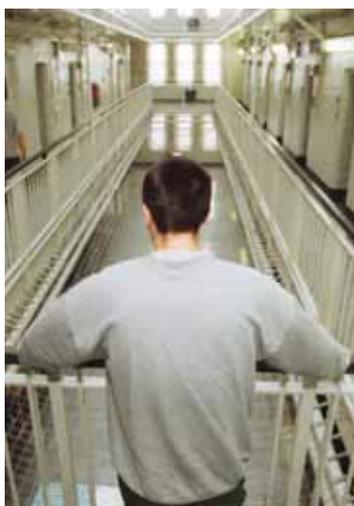
Continuing problems

Some of the differences between university- and college-based programmes remain puzzling to candidates. They meet at national or regional conferences and networks and compare notes. They continue to find it odd that there can be such variation in weight of assignments, support from mentors, expertise of teacher-educators, or exposure to different approaches to teaching.

And of course the pressures are many, including availability of teaching practice, an uncertain job market, confusion of specialist and support roles, restructuring of provision and workloads, and limits on space and time to think and complete assignments.

What happens next? The agenda from 2007

All eyes are now on what happens from September 2007. Lots of features of *Skills for Life* teacher education are new this year: professional standards, subject specialist routes for new teachers and continuing professional development options for existing staff, professional recognition of learning and skills, further clarity about roles in the workforce, proposals for a national *Skills for Life* Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training etc. Watch this space! ▀



Colchester Institute staff are developing a joint approach to meeting professional needs in the workplace, FE, prisons and other settings

Creative provision

Here are some examples of how the Creative Routes funding has been used:

Residential – speed and comfort

In the Yorkshire and Humberside region, Selby College is offering a 'fast-track' numeracy subject specialist qualification between February and July 2007. It is organising intensive residential sessions for teachers in the beautiful setting of Wentworth Castle where very successful work already happens with *Skills for Life* learners.

This programme focuses on both the 'how' and the 'who' of teacher education: on a particular delivery model, and on a group that includes a number of prison teachers. The 'what' is also involved: numeracy is a priority, and shortage, subject area.

What does 'integration' really mean?

Colchester Institute started preparing in 2006 for the new framework of teacher education. This will continue during 2007. Generic teacher education and adult literacy teacher education colleagues are developing a joint approach to meet professional needs in many different settings: voluntary and community learning, work-based and workplace, further education, prison education and Jobcentre Plus training.

They are using a QIA-funded programme development grant to work with new teachers who started in January 2007 on two qualifications: the Certificate/Postgraduate Certificate in post-compulsory Education (University of Essex) and the Certificate for Adult Literacy Specialists (City & Guilds). They will explore what it means in practice to integrate the two qualifications. Their candidates include some who are progressing from being vocational assessors to the full *Skills for Life* teaching role.

Keeping ahead of the game with ESOL teachers

Newcastle College decided to apply for the programme development grant to meet a strategic need in the city. ESOL funding is changing dramatically here, just as in the rest of the country. The college wants to hold on to the valuable expertise of ESOL teachers and prepare them to work more flexibly over a wider range of provision. So these teachers are participating in a fast-track, Certificate for Adult Literacy Specialists from February to June 2007.

The programme will be run on ten full days including Saturdays and five weekdays, varying the actual days of the week to accommodate different working patterns. It will be supported by

Information and advice about the new teaching qualifications

Who should you contact when you have a specific question about the new teaching qualifications framework that will take effect in the *Skills for Life* sector in September 2007? And who can provide information about the finer points of the Professional Recognition Learning and Skills scheme?

Until now, many *SfL* staff have not always been sure how to access specialist advice on continuing professional development and accreditation. But now

that gap should be filled by a newly-launched information and advice service funded by the Department for Education and Skills.

The specialist National Reference Point for *Skills for Life* Professional Development (NRP) will be provided by Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK), which has run a generic information and advice service for several years.

Carolyn Dowding is one of the NRP advisers dealing with email and telephone enquiries. (A website is also available at the address given below.) She said: 'Our day-to-day tasks can be very challenging. Because of the specialist

nature of the sector the answer to each enquiry – especially about qualifications already held by teachers – is quite particular and can often involve research.'

Carolyn started working in the sector in 2002, shortly after the launch of the *SfL* strategy. She helped to set up and run *Skills for Life* Herts, a professional development centre. More recently she was LLUK's *SfL* project officer, a role that prepared her well for her new job.

The NRP telephone number is 020 7936 5798 and the website is at www.lluk.org/nrp. For email enquiries or to subscribe to the eBulletin service, contact nrp@lluk.org



distance learning and online mentoring/tutorials. Candidates will have access to a range of placements across different settings: college, prison and community.

Even more ideas...

Other plans from providers around the country include:

- pooling the training of teacher-education mentors across a rural county to support geographically separated providers
- employing experienced mentors who will travel to support candidates who work in contexts where they may be the only *Skills for Life* teacher
- picking up 'non-completers' from recent years to finish elusive units of subject-specialist certificates
- adapting delivery and content to meet the needs of prison teachers
- developing a regional Moodle (online learning platform) to help candidates from different programmes to network, seek mentor advice and review content
- extending the use of a college virtual learning environment to external candidates who work at a distance
- supporting a joint literacy/ESOL programme to prepare for the application of the new qualifications
- developing and expanding an Accreditation of Prior Experience and Learning service

- recruiting candidates who are under-represented in the profession.

Questions and research

Creative Routes programmes will participate in action research and evaluation to help answer some key questions:

What are effective ways to:

- market programmes to teachers from diverse backgrounds?
- recruit and select candidates, using different models of initial assessment?
- cater for pre-service trainees on a part-time basis?
- integrate theory and practice throughout the programme, creating strong links between the taught programme and teaching practice?
- integrate delivery of the subject-specific qualification in a generic teacher education programme?
- use innovative approaches to teaching practice placements, including 'training classes' or 'scaffolding' models?
- establish agreements with teaching placement providers?
- train and support mentors?
- monitor and evaluate programmes?

Alison Wedgury is Development Officer, NRDC

One idea is to employ experienced mentors to support candidates who have no *SfL* teacher colleagues

One story that will sum up something real

The NRDC's writing initiative, *Voices on the Page*, was meant to inspire learners. But as **Samantha Duncan** explains, teachers have also been hugely stimulated by the challenges we have set

The NRDC launched *Voices on the Page* in October, to gather the voices of those in adult literacy, language and numeracy classes all over England. Every piece of writing submitted will be put into an online story bank and we will publish a book of this writing, a book that anyone – learners, teachers, and, importantly, those who have nothing at all to do with teaching or learning but just happen to have a love of stories and storytelling – will be able to hold, to feel, and to read – again and again.

Since October we have all been busy. Learners have been busy writing (and we will all get to read this writing soon) and teachers have been working with their classes and sending us case studies for generating and developing writing (available on our webpage www.nrdc.org.uk/voices).

Here are two examples of teacher case studies, one from an Entry Level 1/2 class and one from a Level 2 class.

Winifred Miller has taught literacy and numeracy at the College of North West London for six years. Before that she taught carpentry and joinery.

'Two years ago my Entry 1/2 adult literacy group completed a writing project over a four-week period. The group was multi-cultural and consisted of two men and three women aged 17 to 31. The group had completed a number of functional writing tasks prior to this project and knew how to construct simple and complex sentences. However, I could not see any evidence of them monitoring their own writing. I therefore carried out this project in the belief that creative writing might enable them to develop their personal writing skills and make them become their own monitors.

We decided to base the theme on the Boxing Day tsunami disaster, as we had just lost a member of the group who had gone back to Sri Lanka to see if his family were all right.

The plot and characters of the story were planned collaboratively using a bubble graph. The students then ordered paragraphs and outlined what each paragraph should be about. This enabled them to have a basic structure to work from, and allowed each one to develop a style and sub-plot within their own text.

When the students completed their handwritten text, they typed up their work using computers. I then used



their text for them to proofread and correct their work in pairs.

The next step was to get them to understand that good writing means re-reading and reviewing their work. They often think that good writers only need to write once and felt somewhat inadequate if they could not write in this manner. Creative writing takes practice to do well and with confidence, and reviewing one's work is a necessary part of that skill.

We had to decide to have a cut-off point, where they would stop correcting their work. This was done after students had read their work out aloud to the group. If the text was coherent and cohesive they would stop correcting.

We then compiled their work and made it into small booklets, which they could take away. Many of them had never seen their written work in print before, and like myself were very proud of the final product.'

We decided to base the theme on the Boxing Day tsunami disaster, as we had just lost a member of the group who had gone back to Sri Lanka to see if his family were all right

Adrian Whittaker is a literacy/GCSE English tutor at City and Islington College.

Lead-in work

'We started by looking at some contrasting examples of autobiographical and fictional writing (as part of a previous assignment). During this we focused on style – sentence length and effect, register and type of English used, narrative/descriptive balance, descriptive techniques including use of senses and imagery. We also looked at a contrastive model (a vague description versus a detailed one of the same person – could also be a writing task).

The brief

Students were asked to write a short story about an encounter between two people who do not know each other, focusing on descriptive elements – character, mood, setting, physical description etc., with a minimum of dialogue. The structure was: 1. Place 2. First character 3. Second character 4. Moment of meeting ending with one line(-ish) of dialogue.

Process

We looked at a few models – stories written by other students using this brief. To give a focus to this, students 'graded' them using GCSE criteria – not as bad as it sounds, e.g. 'awareness of audience, sustained and effective use of language – could be watered down according to group.

Students discussed ideas in small groups using a 'bubbles' planning sheet (the bubbles, or a spidergram, help learners to focus on ideas/elements rather than writing whole paragraphs immediately). The aim was to create two characters where, by developing their thoughts and feelings, the reader could start to predict what might happen when they met; the restriction on dialogue meant students had to focus on these aspects.

After brief feedback to the whole group (and constructive suggestions from other students) they firmed up their plan and then wrote the first sentence of each of the four sections – during all this I was going round the tables helping them with questions or suggestions. They then wrote a first draft for homework. Students brought this draft to the next class, swapped stories, read each other's, and fed back comments using a 'feedback sandwich' approach (one positive comment, one constructive criticism, another positive comment).'

These two case studies, by different teachers, working with different levels, and on quite different types of courses, share the overwhelming sense that writing is about meetings, both as the subject of what is written (as Adrian's approach tackles head-on) and writing itself as a form of meeting. Writing is a meeting between reader and writer, between different readers, between different subjectivities (usually boxed up in our little individual skulls), meeting across continents, cultures and lifetimes.

Words as meetings

The film *Walk the Line* shows us a young Johnny Cash (played by Joaquin Phoenix below) first meeting and then auditioning for Sam Phillips at Sun Records.

Stopping Cash half-way through a dull number, Phillips tells him that he needs to perform something different, something he believes in:

'one song that would let God know what you felt about your time here on Earth, one song that would sum you up [...] something real, something you felt, 'cause I'm telling you right now that's the kind of song people want to hear, that's the kind of song that truly saves people.'

This was a meeting – whether real or fictional – about voices, words, stories and songs as meetings that help everyone involved, meetings like those described by Winifred and Adrian.

Voices on the Page is celebrating writing as meetings – on paper or on a computer screen – of truths or hopes or realisations, some quiet and some screamingly loud. Please join us. Send in your case studies (info@nrdc.org.uk), look out for the online story bank in the spring and get a copy of the book when it is published in the autumn. As Winifred concludes: 'I must stress that seeing their [her literacy learners] work in print has raised their confidence and inspired them to continue writing.'

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

See Letters page 34



PRIME SITES

Oonagh Gormley visits the rapidly expanding website set up by the National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics

The NCETM is a major initiative funded by the Department for Education and Skills to enhance professional development for mathematics teachers. It was launched last June in response to the recommendations of the Advisory Committee on Mathematics Education and those made in Professor Adrian Smith's 2004 report, 'Making Mathematics Count'.

Charles Clarke, the former Education Secretary who brought it about, said: 'We had to find a way of making the very best continuing professional development available through distance learning; hopefully the NCETM will do this.'

NCETM staff work directly with colleges, organisations, networks, the Government and everyone involved in mathematics education and professional development. Each of England's nine regions has one or more co-ordinators, some specifically for post-16 education. However, the quickest way to get to know what NCETM has to offer, and to get in touch with your regional co-ordinator, is to visit the centre's website www.ncetm.org.uk

So what will you find if you visit the

site, which is, in effect, the new virtual forum for all mathematics teachers? Although less than a year old, it is already overflowing with ideas, news, discussions, resource recommendations and links to professional development courses. As you might expect, given the numbers involved, items of interest to schoolteachers dominate. You will, however, find quite a lot of material specifically aimed at teachers in the post-16 and *Skills for Life* sectors, and you can help to expand this presence.

Online networks

You can drop into the online community any time you want, and spend as much or as little time as you have available. You can catch up on the news in mathematics education – at present you can find out how mathematics helps robots to smell, or hear how some college teachers have used computer games to improve their learners' literacy and numeracy.

You can also join in public discussions on issues such as assessment for learning, recommend resources to others, or have your say on what you think should be on Teachers' TV.

If you want to join more specialised private discussion groups you can – currently there are regional communities, and several on issues relating to mathematics and numeracy in colleges. And if none of these sounds interesting, why not start your own thread on your pet topic?

No self-respecting website is without its bloggers, and one of the NCETM blogs is about using the Maths4Life

Fractions booklet. Again, if you don't find anything to your taste, why not write your own blog?

Resources

While most people agree that resources are not everything, having a range of websites and other sources of ideas can be really useful. The NCETM website offers numerous suggestions, from the further education-focused 'Teachers' Toolbox' to 'Classic mistakes' and a range of interactive resources, some of which, although created for schools, could potentially be adapted for use with adults. The seven web pages of suggestions contain many interesting nuggets.

CPD directory

The NCETM portal provides an online directory of national and regional professional activities for mathematics teachers. The CPD directory enables teachers of mathematics to find suitable courses to meet their professional development needs.

Teething issue

The only problem with the site at present is that the post-16 sector is not as well represented as you might hope for. The solutions are two-fold: first, practitioners need to go onto the site and make their voices heard in discussion groups and via blogs. Secondly, the Maths4Life project (a DfES-funded project run by NRDC) is currently working with NCETM to build a new section of the website that will provide a virtual home for those working with mathematics for adults. Keep your eyes open for its launch in the next couple of months. ▀



'You can find out how mathematics helps robots to smell'

NRDC in print

All the documents listed 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

Effective teaching and learning: Reading

(full report and summary version)

Greg Brooks, Maxine Burton, Pam Cole and Marcin Szczerbiński

Effective teaching and learning: Writing

(full report and summary version)

Sue Grief, Bill Meyer and Amy Burgess

Effective teaching and learning: Numeracy

(full report and summary version)

Diana Coben, Margaret Brown, Valerie Rhodes, Jon Swain, Katerina Ananiadou, Peter Brown, Jackie Ashton, Debbie Holder, Sandra Lowe, Cathy Magee, Sue Nieduszynska and Veronica Storey

Effective teaching and learning: Using ICT

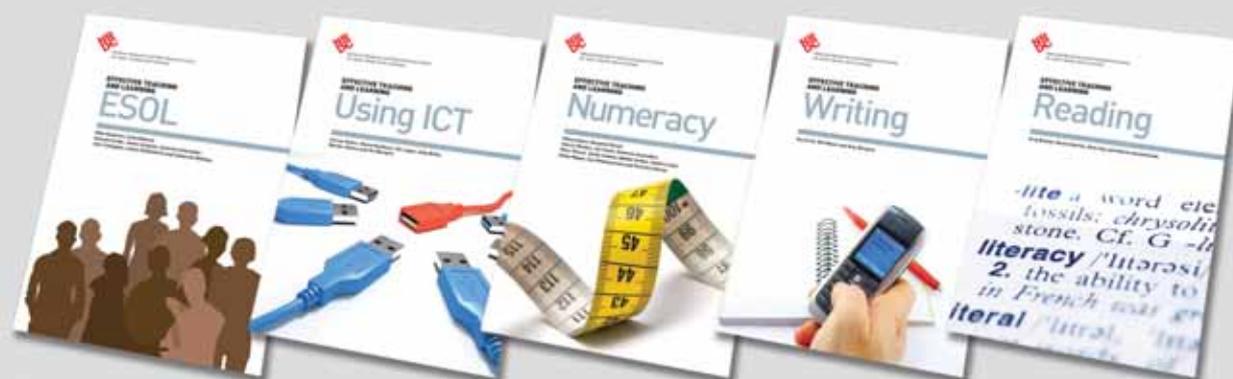
(full report and summary version)

Harvey Mellar, Maria Kambouri, Kit Logan, Sally Betts, Barbara Nance and Viv Moriarty

Effective teaching and learning: ESOL

(full report and summary version)

Mike Baynham, Celia Roberts, Melanie Cooke, James Simpson, Katerina Ananiadou, John Callaghan, James McGoldrick and Catherine Wallace



A literature review of research on teacher education in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL

Tom Morton, Terry Maguire and Mike Baynham
December 2006

New light on literacy and numeracy

(full report and summary version)

John Bynner and Samantha Parsons
November 2006

Four years on: NRDC annual report 2005-06

John Vorhaus
November 2006

'You wouldn't expect a maths teacher to teach plastering...' Embedding literacy, language and numeracy in post-16 vocational programmes – the impact on learning and achievement

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



BOOKS

Collaborative learning in mathematics: a challenge to our beliefs and practices

Malcolm Swan

NRDC / NIACE London (2006)

£24.95 366pp

Available from orders@niace.org.uk

This book tells the story of one researcher's three-year journey. The journey is so interesting and informative that I read the book, like a novel, during one long train ride between Lisbon and Porto – and felt disappointed when the train arrived perfectly on time.

Malcolm Swan's research started with a question of how to strengthen the learning of (low-achieving) students studying mathematics in further education colleges, particularly those re-sitting GCSE examinations. These learners were making little progress and faced

many frustrations. Their teachers, on the whole, followed a transmission model of teaching. Even those who wanted to respond to individual learners' needs and who believed in students developing their own understanding felt hamstrung by full syllabuses, tight deadlines and the demand to ensure that a 'C' grade was achieved.

Swan set out to work with a group of these teachers to break the cycle. He created and piloted a new set of lesson designs that would change the way of learning. These lesson designs

'incorporated novel features which contrasted with teachers' existing practices: cognitive conflict, the negotiation and emergence of concepts through group discussion, the interpretation of multiple representations using sorting and classification activities, and creative activities in which students were invited to design their own examples within given constraints' (p.25).

The book that emerged from this work provides us with a rich set of data on learner and teacher beliefs and documents the change process that the learners and teachers experienced. It also demonstrates how research can learn from mathematics teachers and learners and how it impacts on professional development. Swan's work has already inspired the teaching resource materials known as the Standards Unit Box (Improving Learning in Mathematics, DfES, 2005, available through www.ncetm.org.uk/).

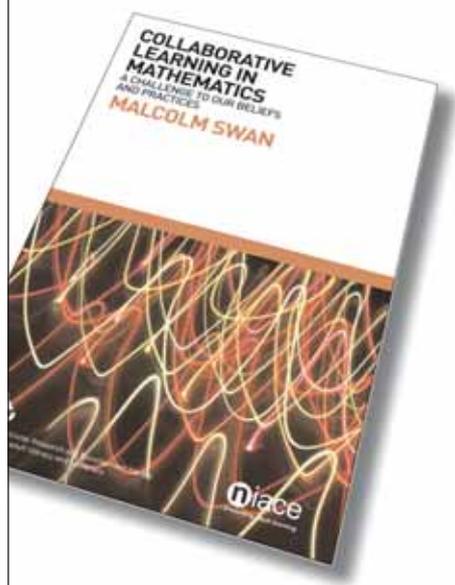
The three-year research programme described by Swan starts with an initial two-year study of four FE classrooms. The preliminary study provides evidence that changing learning of mathematics in the college environment is a difficult process and requires new teaching and learning strategies and a well-formed professional development programme. Out of the initial study

came an 'evolving' set of teaching resources and the design of a professional development programme.

During the main one-year study Swan worked with a sample of teachers from 44 colleges in England. These teachers were involved in a professional development programme that was designed to create a more discussion-based approach to teaching and learning in algebra. At the end of the study the author notes the real difficulty in effecting change in learning where teachers and learners are bound by the demands of public examinations. He modestly claims: 'I believe that I have succeeded in indicating one possible way in which FE teachers may be enabled to reconsider their practices and engage in new ones.' The book is accompanied by a CD containing the professional development resource and the research data.

Since the research was completed, the algebra materials and professional development programme have been extended to cover all curriculum areas. They have also been developed as a resource to help all teachers (not just those taking examination classes) to improve the quality of teaching and learning in mathematics. Teachers embrace the materials with excitement and they are being adapted and integrated into schemes of work. However, the materials and curriculum resources alone do not change teaching. This book is the scaffolding to help teachers make use of the material and it provides the research evidence to help educators and policy-makers plan how to make effective use of the professional development resources. It should be well thumbed by every person involved at any level in mathematics teaching and learning.

Reviewed by Teresa Smart, Director, London Mathematics Centre, Institute of Education, University of London



Adult literacy, numeracy and language

Edited by Lynn Tett, Mary Hamilton and Yvonne Hillier

Open University Press (2006)
£19.99 188pp

Social practice theory challenges our understanding of literacy, language and numeracy, rejecting the concept of these as a set of cognitive skills that people need, acquire and then possess. Rather, it recognises the significance of what people actually do with LLN, with whom, where, and how – that is, the highly varied contexts in which LLN activities take place – but also the purposes behind them. *Adult literacy, numeracy and language* aims to explore this theoretical framework and consider how such an exercise might serve to inform and shape the strategies used in policy and practice.

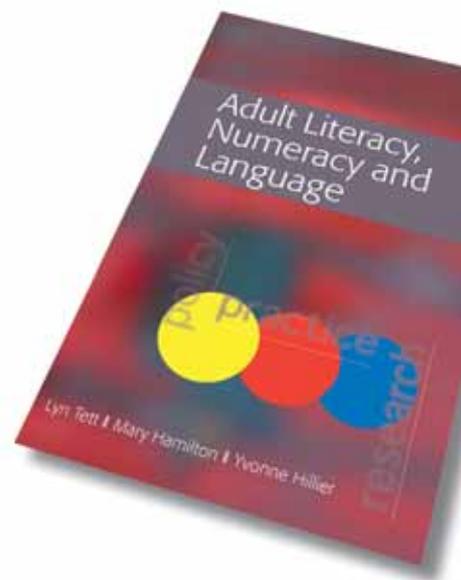
In his foreword, Steve Reder of Portland State University envisages a step-change in applying the social practices theoretical framework to practical problems of policy and programme design. That would be welcomed because a concerted effort on the part of theorists to engage with policy-makers as a community with a rightful interest in this debate is long overdue. Some of the contributors to this book struggle to preserve its initially constructive tone, dismissing policy as inadequately informed and isolated from practice. Nevertheless, this represents an important first step, and Ursula Howard's chapter assembles a persuasive argument for why informing policy of the value of the social practices approach should be a priority.

Skills for Life is essentially operated through command and control mechanisms such as inspections, standards and targets. As this volume makes clear, such a system inevitably places less weight on the professional judgement of the

practitioner to plan, guide and assess learning. A devolution of power to a professionalised workforce seems to open up not only the possibility of more fruitful dialogue between practitioners and policy-makers but also of a better, more balanced assessment regime. While a final test may well be here to stay it should be one of many tools. A balance between quantitative data and qualitative professional judgements would better capture and account for learner progress.

The authors of this book reject notions of 'delivery', of one-way transmissions of knowledge, instead emphasising the importance of dialogue and negotiation between teachers and learners as equal parties. The language is very different, however, when it comes to encapsulating the relationship with policy-makers; here it is about 'convincing' or 'having an impact'. This culture in itself must hinder the kind of conversations that can bring about change. It is refreshing, however, to hear this rather adversarial approach challenged by Juliet Merrifield. She wants to mix things up, bringing 'research and policy into practice and vice versa'. Merrifield also suggests a social practices study of policy-making, looking at what policy-makers read, how they select texts and are influenced by them. Her chapter has many such insightful comments.

The success of the interaction Merrifield envisages will depend largely on securing evidence. The combination of 'stories and numbers', of rich ethnographic detail and the robust economy of quantitative data, is a powerful one. Many aspects of learning are undoubtedly difficult to measure, and what we cannot measure tends to be under-valued. This has not made it easy for the social practices approach to gain currency with policy but this volume should help to change that. In a useful final chapter, Yvonne Hillier draws together the claims made for social practices in this book and calls



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for these to be subjected to testing. Her challenge to social practices to be self-critical, and prove its efficacy, is bold but vital if it is serious about influencing policy.

Social practices could have an important role to play in 'opening up more democratic visions for the future', as Lynn Tett strikingly puts it. But, as I have indicated, it must first acknowledge policy-makers as partners in driving change for learners. The publication of *Adult literacy, numeracy and language* is the start of an important conversation; long may it continue.

Reviewed by Alix Green, Research Manager, New Local Government Network

Letters

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

Given a voice at last

My Adult Literacy Workshop learners have really enjoyed the NRDC's Voices on the Page writing project. They have been motivated and well-focused on their writing. It has given two of my learners the opportunity to express their feelings and to put them 'down on paper'. It has also meant that someone will actually listen to them and value their life experiences.

The project has given my learners the chance to express opinions, share life experiences (both negative and positive) and respect other people's points of view. It has also prompted much discussion amongst

the group and the results have been rewarding. The students proof-read and corrected their work and realised that a good essay does not happen 'just my magic'. They also enjoyed using their computer skills to cut and paste, add images and correct spellings. The learners are proud of their essays, and look forward to hearing from the organisers of this initiative in the near future (all the learners are adults with various learning difficulties/ disabilities).

From a teaching point of view – this has definitely been worthwhile and has given good structure and aims to the workshop. I have submitted six

essays of the learners' work.

Susan Bramley
Literacy tutor, Lancaster & Morecambe College

Clarification

Issue 6 of *reflect* was excellent. However, I did notice one small omission that I would like to rectify. Rachel Hodge's name was missing from the list of authors that appeared alongside two papers in the 'NRDC in print' list on page 31 – the Barton et al paper and the Ivanič et al paper. The same omission occurred in *reflect* 5.

David Barton
Director, Lancaster Literacy Research Centre, University of Lancaster

Embedded Down Under

I am writing to congratulate the NRDC on a very well-written and useful research report - *You wouldn't expect a maths teacher to teach plastering...* (*reflect* 6).

I work with the State Training Agency in Western Australia. In 1994, a national policy decision was made to embed literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) in our new training packages. Being convinced of the value for learners of a teaching environment where the LLN demands of vocational training could be explicitly addressed, we developed a curriculum product that would enable LLN support to be funded and audited as an explicit, but embedded, component of vocational training at all levels. We called this product the Course in Applied Vocational Study Skills (CAVSS), avoiding terms such as literacy and numeracy. The course prescribes a team-teaching methodology, so for a few hours a week, apprentices, trainees and other vocational students have the benefit of



two specialists (LLN and vocational) explicitly modelling teamwork, halving the student/teacher ratio and making sure that nobody is falling behind because of a gap between the LLN demands of the course and learners' skills.

CAVSS does not confer an LLN qualification (and therefore requires no separate assessment of learners). It is therefore impossible for us to measure the impact on learners' LLN skills acquisition. This is one reason why I am so interested in the research you have conducted, since you seem to have evidence that there is a robust

correlation between the embedded features of provision and higher course retention and success outcomes for LLN.

We are, of course, able to measure the success of our embedded provision in the improved outcomes for the vocational course. Like you, we have found a trend towards better retention and completions and very high levels of satisfaction from both students and staff. We are beginning to be convinced that the model provided by team-teaching brings its own particular results because it can transform the essentially 'competitive' nature of most learning environments and replace this with collaborative practices. Both teachers and students have spontaneously and independently identified these effects. I offer you this insight in case it might be useful in the context of any further research you decide to undertake.

Margaret McHugh
President, Australian Council for Adult Literacy

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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