

# reflect

THE MAGAZINE OF NRDC | ISSUE 8 | JUNE 2007

## SPECIAL REPORT

# Learners with learning difficulties

How to help people find their wings

### Priorities for the future

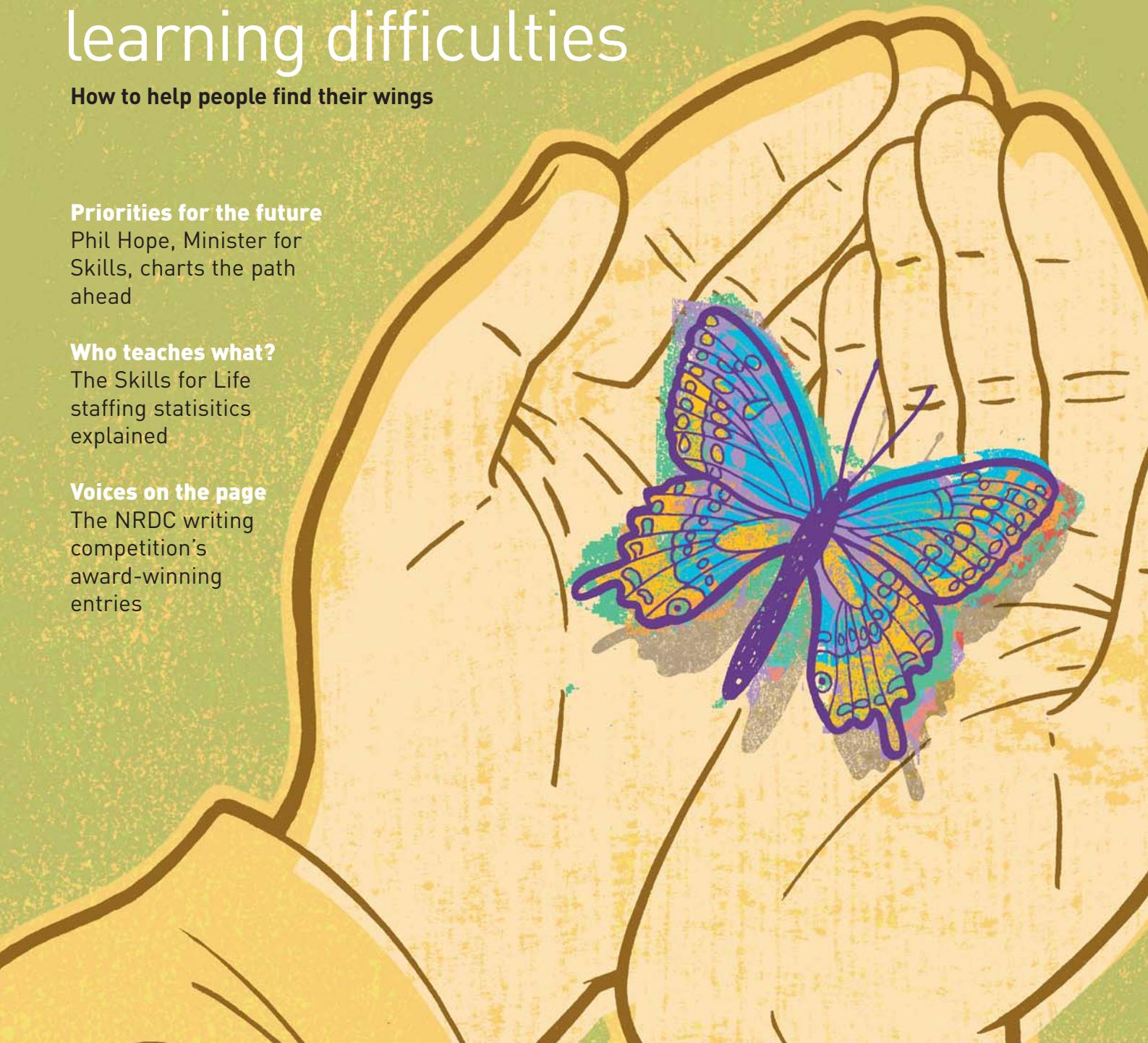
Phil Hope, Minister for Skills, charts the path ahead

### Who teaches what?

The Skills for Life staffing statistics explained

### Voices on the page

The NRDC writing competition's award-winning entries



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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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Cover illustration:  
Jason Bennion

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## Listen to the learners

Participation, persistence, achievement and progression for all. These are the continuing preoccupations of the *Skills for Life* community, both worldwide and in the UK, where we hear the same messages from individual learners via college leaders such as Jane Burnett (pages 6-7), right through to ministers (see the interview with Phil Hope MP, Minister for Skills).

Our special report focuses on learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LLDD). Mary-Lynne Jones is sure that, for provision for this group to be properly inclusive, it has to be specialised, with a specialised curriculum, specialised qualifications and specialised training for teachers. 'Above all', she says, 'we have to have clear leadership. There is an acute risk of drift as the strategic harness for this kind of provision remains incomplete and unconnected.' The NRDC interview with Phil Hope shows how far this 'strategic harness' is in place, and how far the Government's future plans demonstrate the leadership that is needed. It is time, he says, to review the *Skills for Life* priority groups, including learners with learning or physical disabilities, but he also reminds us of how wide-ranging are these groups and how varied are their needs. There is a need for an increase in the kind of specialised training and qualification described by Ross Cooper (page 7), and specialised provision such as that offered at Lewisham College, both of which are inspired by the vision of John Tomlinson's report on inclusive further education, now more than 10 years old.

The ideas and the innovations come thick and fast. Perhaps the most exciting aspect of the 2007 NRDC international conference, many of whose sessions are summarised on pages 22-27, was how it showed that, while the challenges faced by literacy and numeracy teachers worldwide are very much the same, the solutions are varied, visionary and imaginative. And variety is what characterises the writings of the eleven award-winners of NRDC's recent 'Voices on the Page' competition, published as a special insert in this edition of *reflect*. Each one of these pieces of writing tells a story in an interesting and imaginative way which captures the reader's attention. Some are poems and some are prose. All are moving, not least those that draw on the real-life experience of these writers, where they tell us something about their lives, and about the things that matter to them, reflecting the passion about writing that is celebrated by Sam Duncan (page 10).

Proper research into the facts and figures about the workforce, about progression, about Train to Gain, and about national qualifications achieved are all essential, and feature in this edition, but the core message from, for example, Rachel Davies' work with learners with dyslexia (page 8) and the early findings of the Persistence, Progression and Achievement research reported on by John Vorhaus and Desiree Lopez (page 29) remains the same: listen to the learners. □

**Ursula Howard, Director, NRDC**

# Handle with care

**Mary-Lynne Jones** argues the case for specialised inclusive provision

When I read application forms from 15 and 16-year-olds who, in painstakingly formed script, proudly write their predicted GCSE grades as Fs and Gs I want to weep. These applications come from special secondary schools and make me wonder what we are doing to meet the needs of learners with learning difficulties.

Of course, this cohort of learners should have access to the fullest range of qualifications, but only if they are going to be successful – they deserve more than a watered-down version of what is on offer to everyone else, be they young people or adults. I recognise there is a debate to be had on this; should learners with learning difficulties have access to the same accreditation as other learners or should they be offered a curriculum designed for them? I subscribe to the latter view and I want to argue that designing and delivering high quality provision for this cohort of learners is very skilled work. Practitioners in this area need recognition, resources and support for what they do.

The Learning and Skills Act 2000 defines a learner with learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LLD) as follows:

*'a) he has a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of persons of his age; or  
b) he has a disability which either prevents or hinders him from making use of facilities of a kind generally provided by institutions providing post-16 education or training.'*

What can colleges do to meet the

needs of the learners described in the first of these definitions?

## Services and information

Applicants must have access to information in appropriate formats and to support services. At Lewisham College we have guidance officers and also an access co-ordinator and a mental health co-ordinator who organise support for interviews and assessments as well as on-course support. We offer language and maths support, courses with small group sizes, and specialist equipment and staff. We deliver specific training on, for example, meeting the needs of a learner with autism, as well as more general training. All our teacher training courses include sessions on learners with LDD delivered by a specialist practitioner.

Many colleges will offer such services, so why did the Office for Standards in

Education, in a recent survey of provision for 16 to 18-year-old learners with LDD, report that:

*'Eighteen of the 22 colleges lacked understanding about, and expertise in, initial, baseline and diagnostic assessment of learners' needs, how to assess their progress on programmes which were not accredited and how to evaluate their progress against their targets'*

(Ofsted 2007)

This goes to the heart of the problem. If you present a teacher with a group of learners with learning difficulties and expect them to design and deliver a curriculum which meets their needs, there has to be proper training. Most teachers in further education are teaching towards a qualification and follow a clear syllabus. This is not always true for teachers of learners with learning difficulties, however, and it can be a very scary place to be.

## What is good provision?

We need to step back and look at what is meant by good or outstanding provision. What is a good curriculum offer for pre-Entry and Entry Level learners?

Many mixed messages are coming from a variety of sources. In recent years there has been huge emphasis on improving levels of literacy and numeracy. We have the Pre-Entry Basic Skills Framework and the Adult Core Curricula. These were never intended to be used as a syllabus but we have drifted into this partly because of the incremental way in which they are written and partly because some institutions unnecessarily interpreted

## Classroom challenge

**The scale of the teaching challenge that learners with LDD pose for the Skills for Life teaching force has been underlined by the NRDc's ongoing Teachers Study. A survey carried out for the study last year revealed that in the previous three months:**

- 82 per cent of teachers had taught learners with specific learning difficulties (such as dyslexia);
- 57 per cent had taught students with mental health problems; and
- 37 per cent had worked with autistic learners.

funding methodology as enforcing them.

On the other hand, we have the two reports arising from the Learning and Skills Council review (chaired by Peter Little) of provision for learners with LDD, *Through Inclusion to Excellence* (LSC 2005) and *Learning for Living and Work* (LSC 2006). We also have '*Greater Expectations – provision for learners with disabilities*' (Ofsted 2007) where classroom-based basic skills sessions are condemned for this cohort of learners. The report emphasises the need for learning to take place in real-life situations (page 21).

These messages are not necessarily in opposition but teachers deserve some support in unpicking it all and clear guidance as to role, purpose and pedagogy.

### Meeting the needs of the learners

A good curriculum offer starts with the learners' needs and should never be driven by external curriculum frameworks or the demands of accreditation. It needs to be challenging, fully involving the learner and preparing them for their next step in life. The teacher must be able to assess her learners and then use that assessment to inform both the individual learning plan and curriculum planning.

For some learners there are few, if any, assessment tools and the teacher has to rely on keen observation skills, but is there sufficient training to develop and sharpen those skills? Some teachers 'deliver' a variety of accreditation and a variety of levels in the same class; this requires high-level skills. The teacher needs to be able to draw on a wide range of teaching and learning strategies, evaluate what works, and change what doesn't.

We have seen grade 1 classes where learners have been doing spelling in exciting and innovative ways and grade 1 classes where basic skills are totally embedded. Teachers often have to devise their own learning materials to ensure that they are age-appropriate and accessible using pictorial and/or symbolic representations. The worksheet is only a record of what has gone on in the class, not a teaching tool.

Good provision records progress rigorously. At Lewisham, we have designed our own internal scheme which includes staff verifying each other as well as an appeals process. It also includes setting skills targets and social and emotional goals and evidences the learners' journey in a range of appropriate formats.

### Putting the picture together

We have all the pieces of the jigsaw but it is not yet properly assembled and we need to make sure it is. I see lots of opportunities with the Foundation Learning Tier (for learners at Entry Level and Level 1), continuing professional development entitlements, the personalisation agenda, new teacher training standards, the new diplomas and the emphasis on progression into employment or supported employment. But we have to articulate a firm sense of purpose. Practitioners need to know where they are taking their learners, what the progression routes are, what is the most appropriate form of accreditation, and how the curriculum should be adapted.

Above all, we have to have clear leadership. There is an acute risk of drift as the strategic harness for this kind of provision remains incomplete and unconnected. A bold, innovative and well-resourced approach is undoubtedly needed. □

**Mary-Lynne Jones is head of the school of supported learning at Lewisham College**

**Ofsted (2007) Current provision and outcomes for 16 to 18-year-old learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in colleges**

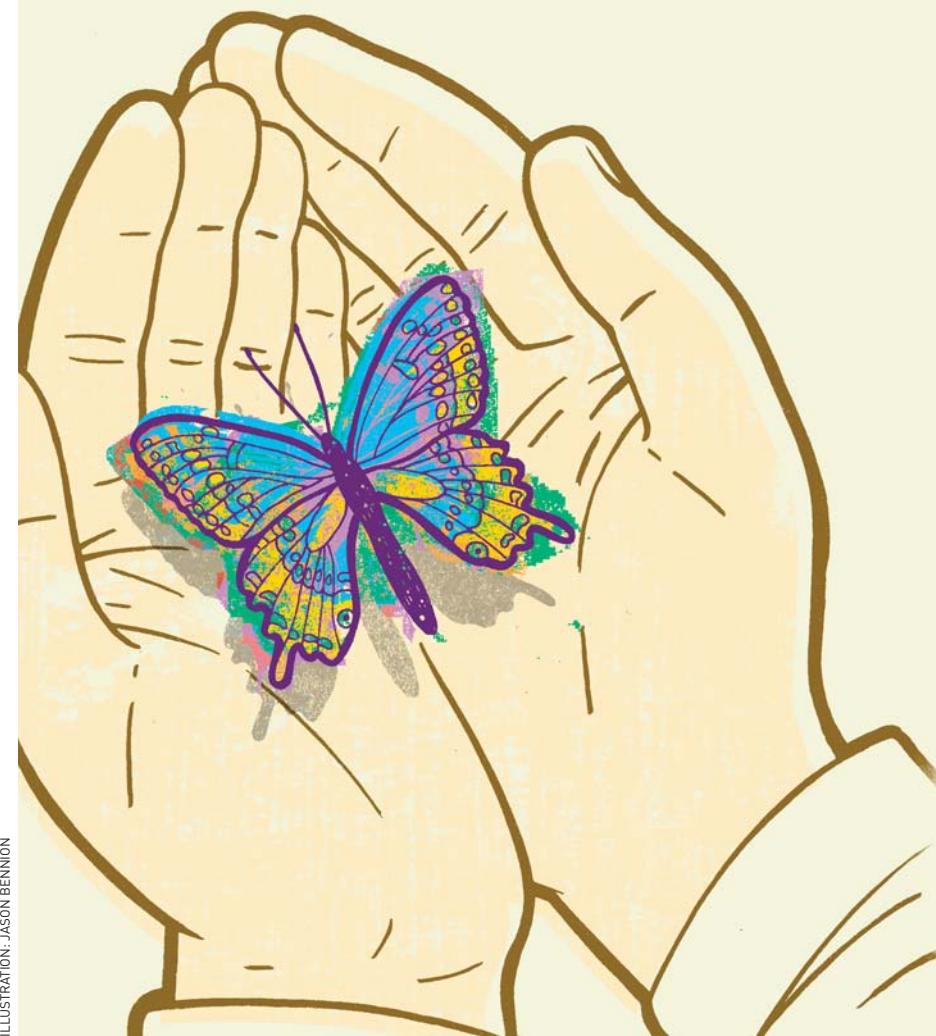


ILLUSTRATION: JASON BENNION

# The barriers are coming down

**Jane Burnett** describes how one FE college is meeting the needs of students with mental health problems

**'It wasn't the mental health problem, the schizophrenia, that made me want to kill myself; it was the discrimination, the embarrassment, the fear and prejudice of those around me that really hurt. That was what stopped me from getting a job, going to college or even to the local swimming pool, and generally ruining my life.'**

Mental health problems in Lambeth are a major issue; it has been estimated that our borough has an incidence of psychosis six times greater than the national average.

In September 2000, four classes for people with mental health difficulties were transferred from the local authority to the college. We saw this as an opportunity to expand and develop what we could offer this group of learners.

In meetings with the local NHS Trust, representatives from specialist mental health centres and service-users, it was agreed that the college would provide:

- small classes at the college that

would be a stepping-stone to mainstream classes

- small classes at outreach mental health centres for those not ready to attend a large college site
- a support system for learners wishing to access mainstream classes
- staff development for those working in this new area.

It was also agreed that we needed to be flexible about attendance and the timing of classes (built-in breaks and no early starts) and that progression would be measured in different ways, such as increased self-esteem and improved social skills. The recent introduction of RARPA (Recognising And Recording Progress and Achievement in non-accredited learning) has made this easier [1].

Within 18 months we were offering 24 classes across two college sites, plus a range of classes at mental health centres. After three years, we were offering 32 classes, including an accredited Bridging Course designed to give learners the skills and confidence to move on to mainstream provision and/or employment.

Currently, 168 learners are enrolled on the specialist programme, with others

attending mainstream courses in the college.

## Developing and supporting staff

We recognised from the start that we would need to train staff to support this work. Representatives of the South London and Maudsley NHS Trust and service-users formed a working party to develop a programme of mental health awareness training for the whole college. Research by the Institute of Psychiatry found that staff at Lambeth College already had a positive approach to working with learners with mental health issues. The training did, however, increase staff knowledge and confidence and reduce anxiety.

Working with people with mental health difficulties is demanding. All staff on the programme can attend a support group and those working on a one-to-one basis with learners are themselves offered one-to-one sessions with experienced external supervisors.

Staff find the individual supervision invaluable but the support group has been less successful. The staff who use it gain great benefit but many choose not to do so, possibly because such groups are unfamiliar in educational settings.

## Working in partnership

Delivering the programme involves working with several agencies in a range of settings. We have:

### What the learners say about their college classes

**'The classes have built up my confidence to levels I never knew, not even at school. They have built a structure for each day, even at home, eg going to bed on time, eating on time because when you are sick and unemployed there is usually nothing for you to do to better yourself.'**

**'I have been suffering with depression for 12 years. I had tried psychotherapy and counselling but they made me feel worse by bringing out lots of things that I didn't know how to deal with. Through painting I could express myself in a safe way and it promoted healing within me.'**

- agreements with outreach centres about recruitment and support for off-site classes
- annual reviews at the outreach centres to plan for the future
- a termly newsletter
- termly meetings with elected learner representatives to ascertain their views.

All of this has involved a huge amount of work but the effort is paying dividends, as this comment from a vocational rehabilitation manager with the local NHS trust shows: 'The health and social gains that I have observed in our clients using the college include increased self-esteem and confidence, an enhanced ability to mix and communicate in

groups and a greater sense of personal achievement and occupational direction. The college has engaged successfully with some of our most excluded and disabled client groups.' □

**Jane Burnett is Head of Learner Support at Lambeth College**

(1) See [www.niace.org.uk/Projects/RARPA](http://www.niace.org.uk/Projects/RARPA)

## Workforce development

**Ross Cooper describes the first postgraduate qualification developed specifically for teachers who work with adults with learning difficulties**

Following John Tomlinson's visionary 1996 report, *Inclusive Learning*, and the Inclusive Learning Quality Initiative in the late 1990s, a series of consultation events were held at Lewisham College with the aim of establishing the first postgraduate certificate for teachers of adults with learning difficulties.

The resulting course is run at Lewisham and is explicitly underpinned by the fundamental principles of inclusive learning. It promotes the values of adult status, self-advocacy, authentic learning and meeting individuals' needs and goals.

The course is the equivalent of half a Masters degree and includes a taught element of ten half-days, plus classroom work and log-writing. At its heart is the development of a self-reflective approach that emphasises the capacity to learn from mistakes, take calculated risks, draw on relevant theory and improve one's professional practice. Our first cohort of 11 teachers began in 2005; the second course attracted 15.

We welcome the news that new professional standards for teachers, trainers and tutors are being developed and we expect to map our outcomes to them. We are, however, disappointed that the associated qualifications are only being recommended at degree level. We feel



**Something to celebrate:  
200 specialist teachers  
could be trained each year**

that accrediting self-reflective practice needs to be at Masters level to support effective praxis. Good teachers are self-reflective practitioners and need to conceptualise and address problematic situations involving many interacting factors.

What we have found is that some course participants have good practical skills, but little theoretical knowledge. Others have good academic and theoretical knowledge, but little integration of this in practice. The course helps to integrate the two through detailed formative feedback.

No fees have been charged so far: this is a significant investment in quality and the development of inclusive learning by LLU+ and Lewisham College in particular.

As part of the Skills for Life Improvement Programme run by CfBT Education Trust and partners, we are developing a national network of trainers who can teach our postgraduate certificate or equivalent course. This could lead to around 200 teachers working with adults with learning difficulties being trained every year. This would be a fitting legacy from the vision of John Tomlinson. □

**Ross Cooper is Assistant Director of LLU+, based at London South Bank University, and course director**

**Further information:**  
**Postgraduate certificate course:**  
**Kathleen Mahoney 0208 694 4794**  
**Training the trainers course:**  
**Jenny Beard 0118 902 1540**

# The experience of dyslexia: some personal accounts

**Rachel Davies** emphasises the importance of listening to learners

What do literacy and numeracy learners with dyslexia say about their experiences? And what does this tell us about what helps them to learn successfully?

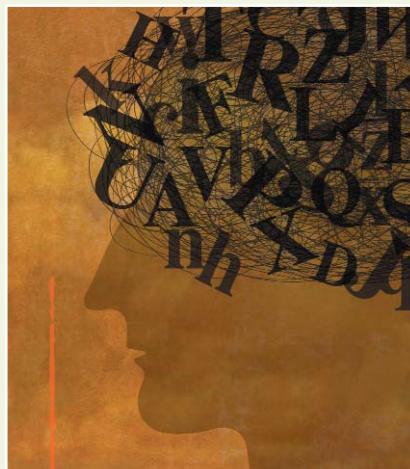
## 'Dyslexia isn't just about maths and English'

Much of the research and the controversy about dyslexia and basic skills focuses on approaches to teaching or assessment but interviews with learners with dyslexia highlight some different concerns. Learners talk, for example, about being misunderstood: 'The assumption with dyslexia is that you have a problem with reading'<sup>[1]</sup>. They feel that the wider impact of dyslexia on their lives is missed.

## '(It) makes me feel really uncomfortable, makes me feel like I'm stupid'

Learners are keen to talk about the emotional aspects of dyslexia diagnosis and support, and the links to their previous experiences of education. For example, Colin explains that at school 'you had a chalkboard rubber chucked at you for not getting things correct...The first time I went back into the classroom I saw a board rubber...jumped over the table and ran out of the classroom.'

The importance of emotional support being linked to a 'diagnosis' of dyslexia is also key. Steve comments: 'The learning champions pushed me, well encouraged me, into taking a dyslexia test...I just felt so



downgraded, all my self-confidence went...I spoke to learning support here and they really encouraged me to come in here and give it a go...If it weren't for them I wouldn't be here.'

## 'Make sure you find someone more bothered about you than they are about funding'

Learners comment on their experience of teachers, both good and bad. Teachers who belittle or underestimate learners, or 'show you up', come in for criticism. Learners value a teacher who sees them as an individual and who is motivated to help them learn, above and beyond what their 'job' might compel them to do. Colin praises his tutors: 'If they can see that you've learned one thing then that's enough...that's more than the wage packet.' And Laura comments on her tutor: 'She's so passionate about learning that it makes you think "I should be bothered 'cos she's bothered".' We are used to learners who lack confidence, have poor past

experiences of education and need help to overcome these barriers. However, learners with dyslexia may surprise us with the degree to which these experiences impact on new learning. Dealing with the effects of inadequate support, and trying to redress the balance, is a key issue for practitioners working with young adults with dyslexia, as the research that I undertook with Bethia McNeil confirmed<sup>[2]</sup>.

## 'It takes me longer, but I get there. You've just got to be determined to do it'

Learners also talk about the importance of becoming aware of their own strengths, learning style and ability to persist. Laura says: 'I've just got the confidence that I am going to do it, and the willpower.' These 'soft' skills are tricky to pin down and to measure but they are integral to understanding what makes some learners with dyslexia successful and others less so.

It is only through learners' own words and experiences that we can begin to understand the complexity of the personal stories that lie behind the statistics and identify how best to respond to them. □

## Rachel Davies is Development Officer (Dyslexia) at NIACE

(1) The quotations in this article are taken from interviews carried out as part of the 'Say What You Like' campaign (NIACE, 2006)

(2) Davies, R. and McNeil, B. *Dyslexia isn't just about maths and English Adults Learning November 2005*

# Left on the shelf?

**Richard Finnigan uncovers the reasons why a potentially stimulating and useful set of teaching and learning materials is not being used**

Most tutors are familiar with those resources at the dusty end of the resources cupboard – the ones that look impressive but somehow you don't get round to looking at...

*Learning for Living* (published by the DfES in March 2006) is a set of materials for use with adults with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who are improving their literacy, language and numeracy skills. The materials, developed by a consortium led by NIACE, consist of eight A4 booklets – nearly 1,300 pages in total. They help practitioners to implement person-centred approaches, promote family learning, and support bilingual learners or those in employment. The materials also include continuing professional development modules on CD-ROM.

#### How are the materials being used?

Researchers at the University of Nottingham have carried out research with providers known to have the materials to find out:

- how extensively they were used
- if providers were encountering problems using them.

Providers who were using the materials said:

- they aid teaching and learning by more closely matching practice with learners' needs. This increased learner enjoyment, commitment and motivation, and encouraged progression
- teaching had broadened to include 'soft' social skills and confidence
- learners were more involved in the planning and reviewing of targets and teaching processes.

However, early in the evaluation, it became apparent that the question was not so much 'How extensively are the materials being used?' but 'Are they being used at all?' Mostly, they seemed to be at the dusty end of the cupboard. From our sample of 62, just 26 per cent were using the materials to some extent, 43 per cent were not using them at all, and 31 per cent professed to have no knowledge of them.

#### Why are the materials not being used?

- Time: lack of time to read and study the materials, to work with individual learners, and to liaise with other agencies to implement the approaches
- Training: a need for training in the use of the materials
- ICT: lack of access to computers and the internet

- ICT knowledge: some staff lacked the skills, for example, to produce PowerPoint person-centred plans
- Divided attention: more pressing concerns – inspections, internal restructuring
- Leadership: no one to take a lead in using the materials
- Inertia: a reluctance to change existing ways
- Changes in provision: changes in courses or learners made the materials less relevant.

#### What have we learned?

We believe it is essential to promote new materials and to stage easily accessible staff development events that encourage practitioners to use them. Ordering the materials should be straightforward and training in their use should be embedded in teacher training programmes. □

**Richard Finnigan is Research Associate in the School of Education at the University of Nottingham**

**The materials can be downloaded free from the QIA website [www.qia.org.uk](http://www.qia.org.uk) Select 'Excellence Gateway' and 'Areas of Work'. To order hard copies, contact QIA 0870 1620 632.**

#### A tempting suite

The *Learning for Living* suite of guidance documents was developed over 30 months and tested in consultation with more than 300 practitioners and more than 2,000 learners in 86 pathfinder sites. The documents were launched at a series of events across England.

The end-of-project report produced for the funder, the DfES, recommended, that a well-publicised programme of staff training and development activities should be offered to all sectors - local authorities, FE colleges, specialist colleges, offender educators, work-based learning and voluntary and community providers.

Many features of the Skills for Life Improvement Programme (SfLIP) are drawing on the *Learning for Living* documents. However, the SfLIP is a huge programme, offering a wide range of training and development, and it may be that busy specialist teachers

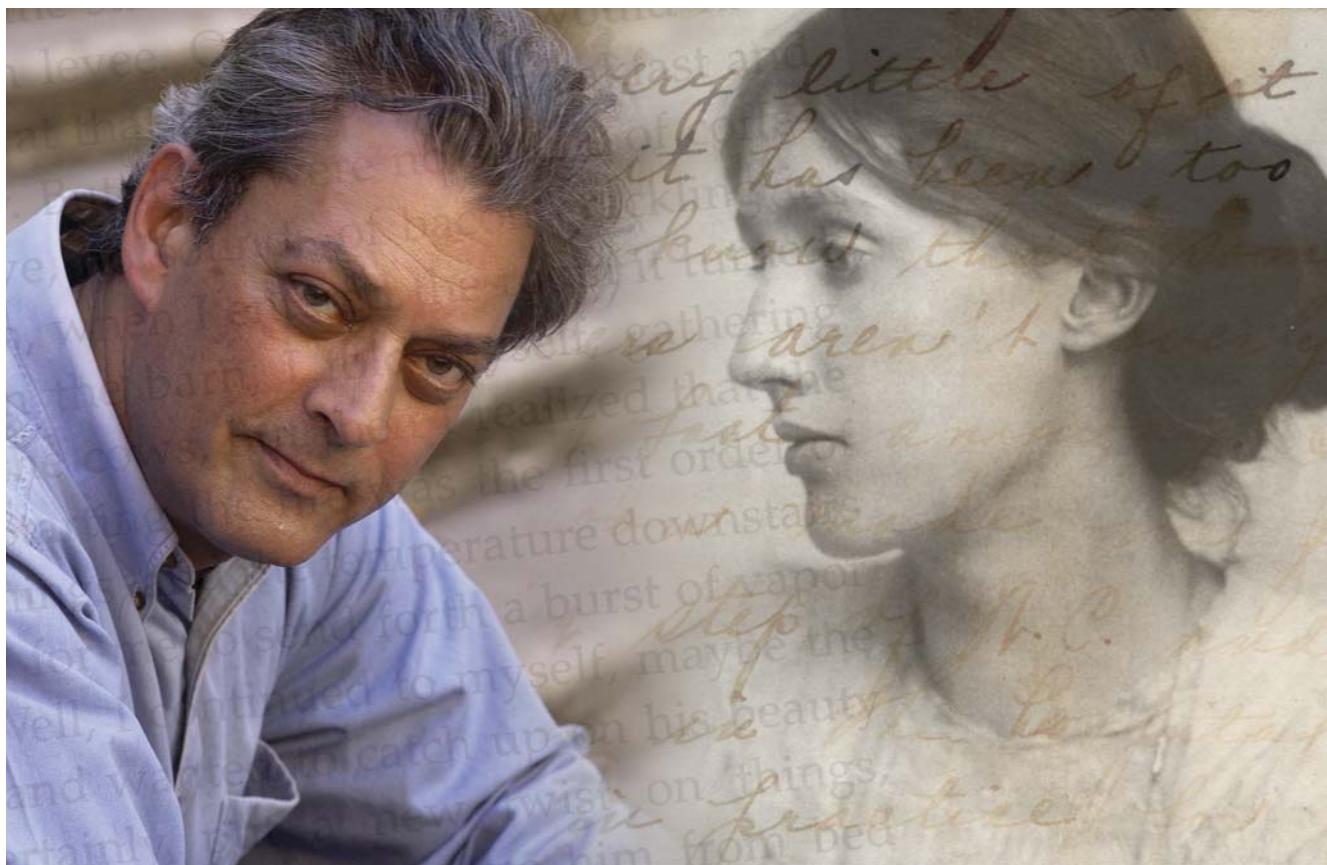


are not sufficiently aware of these opportunities. This would help to explain why the valuable insights and ideas that these guidance documents contain have not been more widely shared.

*Jan Eldred is NIACE's Associate Director for LLN*

# A passion to write

**Sam Duncan** reminds us that effective teachers help learners to express the views and feelings that are meaningful to them



At the recent NRDC International Conference in Nottingham, Sue Grief and I ran a workshop for adult literacy teachers and policy-makers where we explored links between the *Effective Teaching and Learning: Writing* study that the NRDC published in February (Grief et al. (2007) and the Voices on the Page student writing project.

These two NRDC projects were conceived and carried out independently but, as they grew and as we talked about them, we came to realise that they had much in common, and much to offer each other.

Key links we identified included the importance of critical thinking, the

value of using speaking and listening, and of authentic and meaningful texts to develop writing skills, and the integral role of motivation and of linking work inside the classroom with lives outside the classroom. Not only are these all central to both the *Effective Teaching and Learning: Writing* research and *Voices on the Page*, but each of these issues links to the next, all bound up in a nest of *why* questions. Critical thinking (which is still an odd term to me, as if there could be non-critical thinking) is about asking *why* you are doing something, *why* certain meanings emerge, *why* someone would read this text, or *why* someone would write it... *why, why, why...* asking, discussing, speaking those questions and listening to a range of responses.

**Paul Auster and Virginia Woolf:**  
'reports from the front lines of personal experience'

The use of authentic texts is also a case of *whys: why* this text is used in a certain way by certain people and *why* this means it has been written or could be written in this certain way rather than any other. To go further, what does 'authentic' mean? It seems to be generally agreed that using meaningful texts is a better way of developing reading and writing skills, and the more 'meaningful' the better, but what makes a text meaningful, and to whom?

Motivation and links between classroom work and outside-the-

classroom lives also hover around the *why* question. Why are we writing? What are we writing for? Why (or why not) are we propelled or compelled to write something, to read something, to write something in response, burning to write, trying to tell someone something?

Asking *why* to a class of students – or asking *what* they want to write – and *what* it should be like in order to figure out *how* to write it – seems a possible way to approach that uncomfortable literacy teaching tightrope between teaching literacy for ‘social adaptation’ (teaching students to adapt unquestioningly to the literacy required by a dominant cultural norm) and teaching literacy for ‘social transformation’ (using literacy classes to question and challenge those norms, Beder, 1990). Our professionalism as teachers lies in how we can help students to write what they – not we – want to write.

We used this method to ask two adult literacy classes to come up with the criteria for selecting the individual award-winners in *Voices on the Page*. Their criteria ranged from ‘has something in common with me’ to ‘shows different ways of life’ and from ‘relates to or challenges your opinion’ to ‘connects to what’s in your mind’.

In his introduction to *True Tales of American Life*, a collection of true stories ‘written by people of all ages and from all walks of life’, and one of the inspirations behind *Voices on the Page*, Paul Auster writes:

*If I had to define what these stories were, I would call them dispatches, reports from the front lines of personal experience. They are about the private worlds of individual Americans, yet again and again one sees the inescapable marks of history on them, the intricate ways in which individual destinies are shaped by [and, I would add, shape] society at large. (Auster, 2001)*

This interplay between the individual and society, between one voice and a multiplicity of voices, are core to

*Voices on the Page*, core to developing writing skills, and core to adult literacy, language and numeracy teaching and learning.

Encouraging young female undergraduates in the Cambridge of 1928 to write (despite, she felt, a lack of role models), Virginia Woolf urged:

*So long as you write what you wish to write that is all that matters; and whether it matters for ages or only for hours, nobody can say. But to sacrifice a hair on the head of your vision, a shade of its colour in deference to some Headmaster with a silver pot in his hand or to some professor with a measuring-rod [or National Test] up his sleeve, is the most abject treachery... (Woolf, 1929)*

So, to the criteria-producing adult literacy students, to Auster, to Woolf, and maybe to most of us, effective practice in writing hinges on writing what we are burning to write, writing what is meaningful to us, writing what we consider to be good writing, for this second or this hour or this decade. We all have to write our tales of burning life, the words that connect our lives to the lives of others. We can write as individual, singular voices or as part of a multiplicity of voices; we can write in order to see ourselves through someone else’s eyes, stepping in and out of every box we have ever been in, ever wanted to escape from, ever longed to be inside. ▀

**Sam Duncan is an adult literacy co-ordinator at the Institute of Education, University of London, and a literacy tutor at City and Islington College. She is also co-manager of Voices on the Page.**

**Auster, P. (2001) *True Tales of American Life*. Faber and Faber**

**Beder, H. (1990). *Adult literacy and the political economy: some critical issues*. Paper presented at the SCUTREA.**

**Grief, S. et al. (2007) *Effective teaching and learning: Writing*: Summary report. NRDC**

**Woolf, V. (1929). *A Room of One's Own*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.**

## Celebrating writing

Nearly 700 pieces of writing were sent in to *Voices on the Page* between December and March. The online storybank will be ready to display this dazzling multiplicity of voices in the summer and a book will be published in the autumn of 2007. In Adult Learners’ Week at the end of May, we celebrated all this writing, along with 11 individual award winners, who were chosen using the student-created criteria. These award winners were not selected in the spirit of Woolf’s ‘professor with a measuring rod up his sleeve’. They are not necessarily ‘better’ than the rest, but they demonstrate beautifully what is so powerful about all the writing sent in. They show us an aunt painted from memory, the poetry of talking trousers, a world of rats, kittens and kitchens, war and sex in montage, family houses built of equal amounts of love and pain, childhood Saturdays at the cinema, wanted and unwanted children, a village united by a bull in a well, the love for a sister and how it feels to lose a parent. These writers have written what they were burning to write, and it is the pleasure and good luck of all of us to be able to read them, again and again.



**The award-winning entries can be read in the insert in the centre of this edition of reflect**

# Priorities for the future

**Phil Hope**, Minister for Skills, outlines Government strategy for the next stage of *Skills for Life* in his first *reflect* interview

**First, can we ask you about your views on education and what you feel it can accomplish? *Skills for Life* is predicated on the notion that ‘nothing is written in stone’ – that is, no matter what someone’s age, background or prior experiences, education can help to improve their lives. What are your thoughts on this?**

The effect that education has on an individual’s life is enormous: whether you’re a child or an adult, embracing education has the potential to transform your life, both socially and economically. People are able to develop and progress in their careers, which has a positive impact on our economy. Just as important, education also provides the stepping stones for individuals to progress in life, enabling them to better contribute to their families and communities. *Skills for Life* has been that stepping stone for millions of individuals in the UK. Since 2001, over 4.7 million learners have improved their skills through *Skills for Life* learning opportunities. These achievements have transformed these individuals’ lives and will continue to do so.

***Skills for Life* has successfully reached many of the Government’s priority groups: what more would you like to see happen to motivate those with the greatest social and economic disadvantage and the lowest literacy and numeracy levels – including learners with learning difficulties and disabilities – to persist and achieve?**

I think it is now time to review the *Skills for Life* priority groups and to look at how we can further break down barriers to participation and achievement and improve the likelihood of

individuals ‘staying the course’. I agree that we need to ensure our campaigns at all levels are communicating the benefits of *Skills for Life* to the widest possible audience. If we are to achieve the ambitions set out by Leitch (1), we need to reach all sections of society. We need to foster a culture of learning that encourages people to see learning and skills as integral to the fulfilment of their lives and ambitions. We also need to ensure we work with and support the voluntary and community sector, who are the experts in reaching people and groups locally. We need to embed the opportunity to improve these skills into areas of people’s lives that matter, such as supporting their children in the way we have through the national family literacy, language programme or through supporting individuals to manage their personal finances, such as financial literacy courses, and of course in the workplace, ensuring there is a clear offer for all as set out in Lord Leitch’s report.

For job-seekers, we will be ensuring that there is a clear assessment of their skills levels and that provision is available for those who need to improve their skills no matter how long they have been without work, similarly for offenders and those leaving the justice system. For learners with learning or physical disabilities it is of crucial importance that provision is available and accessible and is of a quality that supports the individual to succeed in life, work and within their families and communities. I am always amazed that, despite having jobs, families and incredibly challenging schedules, *Skills for Life* learners still somehow manage to find the time and energy to pursue learning – we must support them in doing this all the way.

**These achievements have transformed these individuals’ lives and will continue to do so**



**Metric or imperial?**  
Phil Hope gets to grips with everyday maths

**One of the most gratifying aspects of *Skills for Life* has been the increasing recognition of the importance of numeracy. Why do you think numeracy matters, particularly in a modern economy?**

In modern society numeracy is an essential skill in both work and life more generally. Recent research by the NRDC shows that earning power is significantly improved when people have good basic numeracy skills. It is also important to remember that we live in an increasingly credit-based society where the ability to make simple calculations and, perhaps even more importantly, understand basic mathematical language is becoming more and more crucial. Understanding terms and concepts like 'APR' and 'percentages', often linked to 'special offers' and finance arrangements of one kind or another, is increasingly necessary in everyday life. Without these skills people are significantly disadvantaged and of less value to employers. It is good to see that Lord Leitch acknowledged this in his recent review of skills.

**ESOL is one of the most complicated areas of *Skills for Life* policy-making, with a high level of demand and very challenging funding issues.**

**We need to ensure our campaigns at all levels are communicating the benefits of *Skills for Life* to the widest possible audience**

**Can you offer a prediction of how ESOL provision will evolve over the next decade or so?**

For those who speak other languages, learning English is, and probably always will be, an essential skill for life and work. I expect the current high levels of demand to continue in the short term, especially given the needs that a successful economy has for migrant workers.

The funding changes following the recent Race Equality Impact Assessment are:

1. reinstating eligibility for asylum-seekers who have not received a decision on their application after six months. We will also reinstate eligibility for asylum-seekers who are unable to leave the country for reasons beyond their control;
2. supporting vulnerable learners, including spouses and low-paid workers, through the addition in 2007/08 of £4.6m to our Learner Support Hardship Fund;
3. asking the Learning and Skills Council to develop guidance to encourage providers to work locally with Government agencies and to support learners in evidencing entitlement to

fee remission. In some cases, providers may seek evidence of learners' financial circumstances (such as payslips, P60s and other tax forms) to assist learners to get the evidence needed of means-tested state support;

4. working with the LSC to ensure that young asylum-seekers aged 16–18, who may turn 19 and become ineligible while waiting to enrol on a course, are a priority. Colleges and providers will work together to ensure that learners in this situation are signposted to alternative local provision in order to ensure they start a programme before they are 19.

5. We are also committed to taking forward the dialogue with social partners about securing employer contributions to the cost of learning. New ESOL for Work qualifications will be introduced from September 2007 and will have a stronger focus on the language skills needed for the work environment through shorter, more work-focused qualifications.

For the medium term, I expect the levels of demand to lessen. For example, we are already seeing the lowest levels of asylum-seekers since 1991. The aim of the Home Office's New Asylum Model is, by December 2011, to conclude 90 per cent of all new asylum applications within six months. In addition, a new Points Based System will start early next year and will ensure that we only admit to work and study those migrants with a contribution to make to Britain. This does not apply to EU countries.

Our longer-term plans for ESOL will be announced as part of the Department's response to the Leitch report in June.

**You know of the large number of outstanding practitioners dedicated to their learners: what has been the single most inspiring example of Skills for Life teaching and learning that you have seen? What was it about that example that you would want to celebrate?**

I think Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) are inspirational as they encourage and inspire their colleagues in the workplace. I met a particular ULR at a visit to a learning centre last year and he said that he hadn't initially anticipated the impact he could have to help make a difference to colleagues' training and education levels. Improving your basic skills can be a life-changing experience for some and it takes a lot of courage to ask for help on tasks that most of us take for granted. ULRs are unique as they work with colleagues to consider and access appropriate learning opportunities. ULRs'

**This will mean looking at innovative models of provision and training for a more diversified workforce, especially to meet the needs of work-based learning and disadvantaged groups**

contribution to workplace learning and development is huge and their success with the individuals they have helped to progress cannot be overstated.

**Following the Leitch Review, an even greater responsibility now rests on the shoulders of the Skills for Life workforce which will increasingly support learners and learning in the workplace and other settings. If you had one message about how you see the Skills for Life workforce, what would it be?**

In 2002, the Department set a target of a fully qualified workforce by 2010. Skills for Life teachers were also asked to gain a subject specialist qualification in adult literacy, adult ESOL or adult numeracy. The specialist teacher status is currently unique to Skills for Life in the sector, and this reflects the important and special work that these teachers deliver. The Skills for Life workforce is a dedicated workforce, with strong values and a commitment to the goals of the strategy. However, in order to deliver the Leitch vision, we will need to step up the already high standards of provision. This will mean looking at innovative models of provision and training for a more diversified workforce, especially to meet the needs of work-based learning and disadvantaged groups. We will need to ensure that learner progression is central to course planning. And we need to ensure that teaching support staff have access to appropriate qualifications and are used effectively to support the achievement of learners.

**I think Union Learning Representatives are inspirational as they encourage and inspire their colleagues in the workplace**

**One of Leitch's central themes is the development of a 'culture of learning' in the UK. What do you see as potential barriers to achieving this tremendous ambition, and what are some of the factors that make you believe we will achieve it?**

Clearly, this is a challenging ambition. We won't create a culture of learning overnight, but it will be essential if we are to radically improve the skills levels of the nation. The potential barrier is that it is such a long-term aim. Changing the way people think and what they believe is difficult, but it can be done – just look at how the drink/driving campaigns of the 1970s and '80s have made it unacceptable to drink and drive. I believe that all people truly want to learn; certainly, the desire to learn is embedded within us from birth. I think it's a question of encouraging people to see the personal benefits of learning, to understand that improving your skills puts you in charge of your own destiny, and enabling people to take up opportunities that are relevant to them.

**In July 2005 you were reported to have told the Guardian: 'Part of my job is to make sure that ... we have parity of esteem, so that in August we celebrate skills qualifications as well as academic qualifications. My job is to find a way to capture the public's imagination about the importance of skills to individuals and to the economy as a whole.' Two years on, do you feel that we are nearer to that goal?**

Yes, I think we are nearer to that goal. The Leitch Report has put skills on the agenda and there's definitely more of a public debate about the role of vocational education and qualifications. Reforming education and training for 14 to 19-year-olds is fundamental to achieving the flow of skills into the labour market that the country needs. We have already set stretching targets for at least 85 per cent of 19-year-olds to achieve Level 2 skills by 2013 (up from around 70 per cent now), and for at least 90 per cent participation at 17 by 2015 (up from around 75 per cent). With the new Diploma and Apprenticeship provision in place there will be, for the first time, suitable routes through the education and training system in place for every young person – either through full- or part-time education or through training while at work.

What does please me is when I hear stories of young people aspiring towards more skilled trades, as opposed to, say, traditional academic degrees. I think that's a change from a few years ago. However, we need to keep pushing on this point and we need to enable people to see that skills aren't just about qualifications, but are about their own wellbeing and personal fulfilment and that of their families.

I am also pleased that the UK will host the WorldSkills championship in 2011. This will have enormous benefits to the UK. These include enhancing the value which, as a nation, we place on skills; changing our attitudes towards vocational and academic qualifications; raising the aspirations of individuals, providers and employers; and permanently improving the supply of and demand for world class skills in the UK.

**The Government consistently emphasises the need for policy that is evidence-based. What do you see as the key research priorities we need to focus on in order to take *Skills for Life* forward?**

In order to meet the demands on the system expressed by Leitch and increase the achievement rates of learners, we need to increase our understanding in various areas.

- Learner progression will be important, and research needs to be done into effective methodology and practice in this area.
- Including and engaging the hard-to-reach person, those whom we have been unable to engage in learning to date, is essential: what are the routes to reaching these priority groups?
- Evidence around good work-based learning practice and the skills that employers need will help us move towards the first class economy we envisage.

- We need more research into the benefits of embedding *Skills for Life* across subject areas and organisations, so that it can be further mainstreamed and become part of the collective consciousness of the sector.
- And, to support this, better and clearer data collection and analysis will enable us to understand the make-up of the sector and how the strategy is having an impact.



**Finally, one of the key themes that emerges from research into adult learners' lives is the fact that, despite having jobs, families and incredibly challenging schedules, they still somehow manage to find the time and energy to pursue learning. Let's turn the lens on you: what sorts of learning do you enjoy, and how much success do you have fitting it into your schedule?**

I am continually learning on the job as a Minister as we develop our skills policies. I learn best when I am out meeting people and organisations who are learners themselves or people who are helping others to learn and improve their skills. It is their experiences that help me to understand better how Government can support people on the front line. I also learn through debate and discussion with DfES officials and parliamentary colleagues as we solve problems, respond to events and develop new ways of working.

Being an MP and working as a Government Minister is a tremendous opportunity for personal development as you have to learn new skills and gain knowledge on a huge range of issues. At a personal level, I am still trying to improve my topspin second serve and to successfully juggle fire clubs – but I have a long way to go! □

(1) Leitch, S. (2006) *Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills. Final report*. London: The Stationery Office

# Double-check these figures

**JD Carpentieri** on why the *Skills for Life* teacher statistics are more complex than they first appear

The professionalisation of the workforce is a key objective of *Skills for Life*. Qualifications are central to this, and have risen sharply of late. For example, recent NRDC research for Lifelong Learning UK (1) has found that, while only 13 per cent of the *Skills for Life* workforce was fully qualified in 2004/05 (ie with both a generic PGCE or Certificate of Education and a Level 4 subject specialist qualification), this had risen to 35 per cent by the following year.

That's quite a significant increase. However, in *Skills for Life*, the situation isn't necessarily as straightforward as that 35 per cent figure would indicate. For example, even though 35 per cent of the workforce is classified as fully qualified, these are the percentages of fully qualified staff teaching in each subject:

- Literacy: 21 per cent
- Numeracy: 29 per cent
- ESOL: 28 per cent.

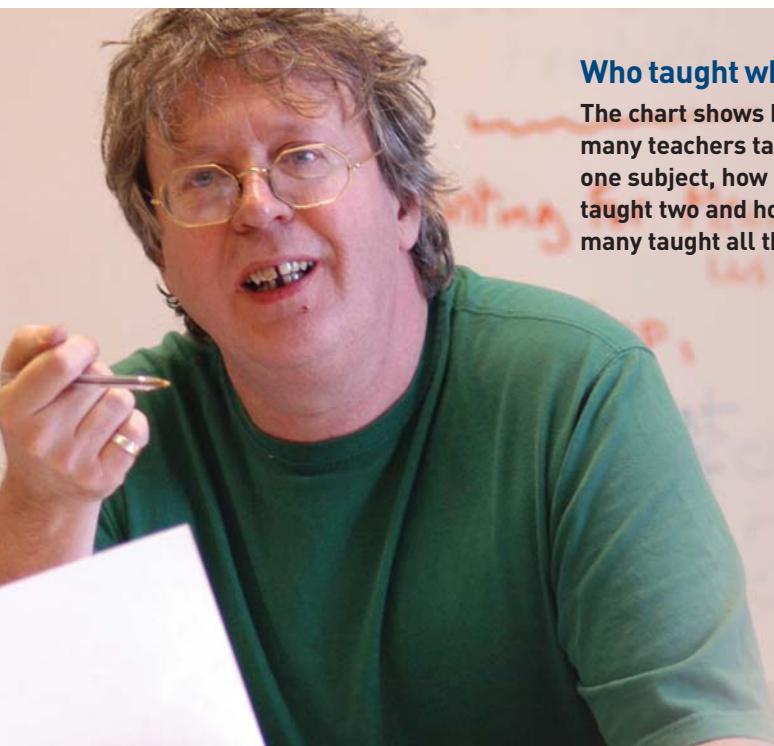
Notice anything strange about those figures? I do: they are all under 35 per cent. So how is it that 35 per cent of the workforce is fully qualified? The answer is that 35 per cent of the *Skills for Life* workforce is fully qualified in at least one subject but, since so many *Skills for Life* staff teach more than one subject, the qualification levels of those teaching the individual subjects are somewhat lower.

We all know that many teachers teach two (and sometimes three) subjects, and that they tend to be more fully qualified in one than the other. Until now, though, we haven't known exactly how many teach two or more subjects, or how well qualified they are. Thanks to the NRDC research (which was carried out with SQW), we now have answers to those questions.

**Until now, we haven't known exactly how many teachers teach two or more subjects, or how well qualified they are**

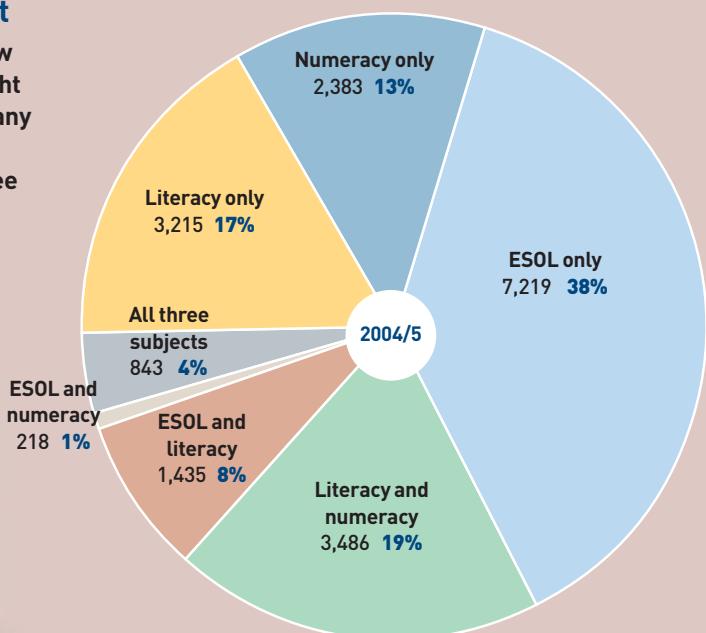
## How many teachers?

First, though, how many *Skills for Life* teachers



### Who taught what

The chart shows how many teachers taught one subject, how many taught two and how many taught all three



are there? Based on the latest available data, we can estimate that, in 2005/06, there were 18,800 individuals teaching *Skills for Life* in England, accounting for a full-time equivalent (FTE) of 9,489 posts. Of those 18,800 teachers, nearly one-third (32 per cent) taught more than one subject. The chart below shows the complete breakdown of who taught what in 2004/05, the most recent year for which full data are available.

You may notice that, while only 32 per cent of teachers taught more than one subject, this hides a more complex picture. 74 per cent of ESOL teachers taught ESOL only. In literacy and numeracy, however, the situation is quite the opposite. Non-exclusivity was the norm, with 64 per cent of literacy teachers and 66 per cent of numeracy teachers also teaching another subject. In fact, while one can safely refer to most teachers of ESOL as simply 'ESOL teachers', it would be more accurate to refer to teachers of literacy as 'literacy-numeracy' teachers, since more of them do this double duty than teach literacy alone. The same is true for numeracy teachers. In both of these subjects, 'doing the double' is the norm rather than the exception. So, if you're introduced to someone and told they are a literacy teacher, ask them how their numeracy class is going. More often than not, they'll be able to tell you.

### How many are qualified?

But how does this serial multi-tasking correlate with qualification levels in each subject? The first

thing to note is that teachers who teach only one subject tend to be markedly more qualified in that subject than colleagues who are teaching two or more. The most extreme example of this phenomenon is in numeracy. Looking at the majority of numeracy teachers – that is, the ones who teach both numeracy and literacy – only 14 per cent were fully qualified in numeracy in 2005/06. Among those who teach only numeracy, qualification rates were four times better, with 57 per cent of this group being fully qualified. It would seem that, where teachers are primarily numeracy teachers, they are mostly qualified but, where literacy teachers also teach numeracy, numeracy learners are, on the whole, being taught by less qualified teachers.

At the other end of the scale, whereas 25 per cent of all numeracy teachers were unqualified in 2005/06, only 5 per cent of numeracy-only teachers fell into that category. However, of the nearly 3,500 staff who teach both literacy and numeracy, 25 per cent lack qualifications in either subject. There are almost as many literacy-numeracy teachers who fall into this unqualified category as there are teachers who are fully qualified in either of these two subjects. As the workforce strives to become more fully qualified, the issue of whether teachers are qualified to teach different subjects will need to be continually addressed. □

**JD Carpentieri is Research and Development Policy Liaison Officer at NRDC**

(1) **The Skills for Life Workforce in England: the full picture. Briefing paper, May 2007.** Available from [www.lifelonglearninguk.org](http://www.lifelonglearninguk.org).

### Qualification status of the entire *Skills for Life* workforce in England, 2006: percentages of teachers who teach one, two and all three *Skills for Life* subjects in various combinations.

Teachers' subject specialisms	Subject qualifications held	Fully qualified	Part qualified – generic teaching qualification only	Part qualified – subject teaching qualification only	With legacy teaching qualifications only	No teaching qualifications u
Adult Literacy only	Literacy	22.2	29.3	28.8	8.1	11.6
ESOL only	ESOL	32.5	29.2	8.6	26.6*	3.2
Adult Numeracy only	Numeracy	57.3	27.1	9.1	1.9	4.6
Adult Literacy and Numeracy	In both subjects	9.4		0.5	24.5	
	In Adult Literacy	14.1	30.2	12.5	7.5	22.3
	In Adult Numeracy	4.2		4.7	4.6	33.2
Adult Literacy and ESOL	In both subjects	2.6	43.6	•		11.5
	In Adult Literacy	9.0		•	1.2	15.5
	In ESOL	29.5		3.8	8.5*	4.2
Adult Numeracy and ESOL	In both subjects	•	33.3	•		25.0
	In ESOL	16.7		•	16.7*	8.3
	In Adult Numeracy	25.0		•	•	25.0
All three	•	•	23.8	•		33.3

Subject and subject combination categories are mutually exclusive – ie individual teachers are represented in the table only once.

• represents too few cases for a robust estimation to be made

\* including ESOL teaching Diplomas (eg DELTA) at NQF level 7 and Certificates (eg CELTA) at level 4.

uTeachers with only introductory or no teaching qualifications at all

Source: Teachers study of the *Skills for Life* workforce in England, NRDC

# Zig-zagging up the skills road

**JD Carpentieri** considers what two major surveys, plus new NRDC research, tell us about the fascinatingly complex issue of progression



Progression is central to *Skills for Life*. Unfortunately, understanding of the key issues related to progression – who progresses, what are the barriers to progression, and what role *Skills for Life* plays in furthering progression – has until now been somewhat limited because of the relatively small amount of research on the topic.

In this article, we will look at what is known about progression, particularly up to Level 2, and then turn our eyes to new NRDC research, which sheds additional light on some of our questions.

## What is progression?

First, we need to define what progression is and distinguish it from 'progress'. In adult education, 'progress' is generally synonymous with doing

better, and is usually used to describe how a learner is doing within a particular class or course. Progression, on the other hand, signifies the move from one course to another; for example from a course at one level to a course at a higher one – from a course at numeracy Level 1, say, to one at Level 2. But there are many forms of progression for adult learners: from education to employment; from a course at one level to a course at the same level; and other trajectories besides. Progression requires progress but is not the same thing.

**There are many forms of progression for adult learners: from education to employment; from a course at one level to a course at the same level; and other trajectories besides**

## How much progression is there?

To ascertain how much progression there is currently, we can turn to two sources: the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), which annually interviews a representative sample of the adult population, and the National Child Development Study (NCDS), which, since 1958, has been following the lives of all children born in the last week of March of that year. The two studies are in many ways complementary: while the BHPS provides us with an overview of the entire adult population in Britain, the NCDS allows us to take periodic snapshots of people born in a particular year, following their experiences as they age, thus helping to give us an aggregate picture of lives unfolding over time.

## What do these sources tell us about progression?

Looking at the BHPS, we find that, in 1991, 28 per cent of the adult population lacked any qualifications, and 17 per cent were qualified only up to Level 1. Twelve years later, in 2003, 11 per cent of the first group – those lacking any qualifications – had achieved Level 2 qualifications or higher. Of the second group – those with Level 1 qualifications in 1991 – 22 per cent had achieved Level 2 or higher by 2003.

This information is very useful but remember that the BHPS is a sample of the entire adult population. While it can tell us what percentage of that population progressed to Level 2 or higher, it cannot tell us how likely progression is for particular age groups. For example, what if we want to know how likely progression to Level 2 is for someone who reaches her early 20s without any qualifications at all?

For this sort of insight, we can turn to the NCDS which, as noted above, is following individuals born in 1958. Let's look at this cohort of individuals when they were 23 – that is, in 1981. In that year, nearly half (47 per cent) of this cohort lacked Level 2 qualifications. How much progression can we observe over the next two decades? Looking at the year 2000, we find that more than half (53 per cent) of those without Level 2 qualifications at age 23 had progressed to Level 2 by age 42.

The fact that the progression rate is higher for this cohort than for the adult population as a whole should not be surprising. It fits in with human capital theory, which indicates that the older an individual grows, the less likely she is to invest time and energy in achieving higher qualifications, largely because an older individual has less time to reap the rewards of having those qualifications.

## Does Skills for Life affect progression?

While evidence up to 2000 can tell us how much progression there was before *Skills for Life*, it

## Pathways, barriers and surprises

Not surprisingly, one of the key barriers to progression is time. American research suggests that, in the English context, learners are likely to need on average 150–200 hours of time on task to improve their literacy by one level within the *Skills for Life* qualifications framework. Perhaps more unexpected are the findings of some recent research conducted by the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, one of NRDC's sister organisations, which indicates that attitudinal barriers may play a bigger role in non-progression than socio-economic constraints (Sabates et al. 2006).

While there may be typical barriers to progression, there appear to be no typical routes of progression to Level 2, and analysis of the routes that adults take highlights some surprising complexities. A large number of adults, it turns out, go straight from no qualifications to Level 2, without getting a qualification at Level 1 along the way. In fact, looking at working-age adults who had no qualifications in 1991

and who attained Level 2 or higher by 2003, recent NRDC research has found that a significant majority (58 per cent) achieved Level 2 or higher without taking a Level 1 qualification (Sabates et al. 2006).

Perhaps even more surprisingly, the same research found that those achieving Level 2 or higher from a base of no qualifications in 1991 were less likely to take sub-Level 2 qualifications than those who started from a base of Level 1. That is, learners who already had Level 1 were more likely to take additional Level 1 qualifications on their way to Level 2 than were learners who started with no qualifications and attained Level 2. This non-linear progression highlights the fact that learners' definitions of progression do not necessarily match those of policy-makers or providers. Learners seek progression in their lives but do not necessarily seek progression up a ladder of qualifications. Learners sometimes zig when policy-makers expect them to zag.



cannot tell us whether or not *Skills for Life* has increased progression. To investigate this question, we need to turn to a forthcoming NRDC study conducted by Augustin De Coulon and Anna Vignoles, which looked at the progression rates of a group of adults born in 1970, paying particular attention to those who had not attained Level 2 qualifications by 1996, when they were 26 years old.

The study initially looked at this group's rate of progression from 1996–2000 – that is, before the launch of *Skills for Life*. The researchers then compared progression rates from this four-year period to progression rates for the same group between 2000 and 2004, during most of which time *Skills for Life* was in existence. Among this cohort, 6,457 individuals were interviewed in all three sweeps (1996, 2000, 2004). Of these, 3,573 were qualified below Level 4 in 1996: 211 of these had no qualifications, 2,312 were qualified at Level 1, 1,050 at Level 2, and 826 at Level 3. A further 1,641 were qualified at Level 4 and 417 at Level 5.

### Ten per cent – and more

Looking at the first four-year period (1996–2000), the study found what could be called a 'rule of 10 per cent': among adults with no qualifications, or qualifications at Levels 1, 2 or 3, approximately 10 per cent of each group achieved a higher qualification in this period. Looking at the next four years of this same cohort's lives, the study found that, for adults with qualifications at Level 1 or below, progression to a higher level went up to 13 per cent. This three-percentage-point gain, compared with 1996–2000, represents an increase of approximately 30 per cent in the likelihood of progressing.

The sum total of qualifications achieved (including those not leading to a progression) also shot up. Among members of this cohort with qualifications below Level 3 in 1996, a total of 592 qualifications were achieved by 2000 – that is, between the ages of 26 and 30. However, between the ages of 30 and 34, individuals in this cohort with below Level 3 qualifications achieved 810 qualifications – an increase of 34 per cent.

### More research needed

These very significant increases may be even more impressive than they first appear. Remember, as adults in their early 30s age, their likelihood of progressing to higher qualifications should theoretically fall, not rise. For adults at higher qualification levels, this proved to be true over this time period. For example, the same study found that the rate of progression for those at Level 4 or above fell by 28 per cent in the second four-year period. This is in stark contrast

to the 34 per cent rise for those at lower levels.

Does this all mean that *Skills for Life* has increased progression? At this stage, it's too early to say. The introduction of *Skills for Life* does coincide with an increase in progression for adults with low qualification levels, and research by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research also offers some positive evidence regarding *Skills for Life* and progression. At the same time, other factors may have played a role in explaining the apparent rise in

progression. As noted earlier, progression is an under-researched field, and cries out for further investigation. As Liz Lawson of the Department for Education and Skills argues, there is a strong need to increase our understanding of progression, and to develop 'a new, coherent approach to progression, particularly if we are to achieve Lord Leitch's ambitions for world-class skills levels by 2020'.

To that end, she adds: 'The DfES Skills for Employability Division is developing a national adult progression strategy for England covering progression along several stages: from adult learners' varied starting points into qualification-bearing courses, through the *Skills for Life* levels, and into Levels 2 and 3 vocational training and employment.' Further to this, a progression strategy will be debated at a series of NIACE Regional Achievement Dialogues in June and July 2007, and at a national conference in the autumn (see below). ▀

### JD Carpentieri is Research and Development Policy Liaison Officer at NRDC

Sabates, R., Feinstein, L. and Skaliotis, E. (2006) Determination and pathways of progression to level 2 qualifications: Evidence from the NCDS and BHPS Wider Benefits of Learning Research Report No.21

## Contact

### NIACE Regional Achievement Dialogues, June /July, and national conference in the autumn

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# Employers need to be convinced

**Judith Hinman outlines the difficulties of offering *Skills for Life* via Train to Gain and suggests how they might be addressed**

Delivering *Skills for Life* in the context of Train to Gain has proved very challenging in recent months. Across the country, targets have not been met. This suggests that there are difficulties to be addressed if Train to Gain is going to be a vehicle for realising the ambitions of the Leitch Review (1).

Unlike its precursor, the Employer Training Pilots, Train to Gain funding can only be used to support employees who have been assessed as *Skills for Life* Entry 3 or Level 1 to achieve an NVQ Level 2. Resources for employees with literacy or numeracy at Entry levels 1 and 2 must come from core funding. Half the Train to Gain funding is conditional on employees passing the national tests in literacy or numeracy. These employees are expected to progress by one literacy or numeracy level in an average of 15 hours' teaching. The average time for the NVQ Level 2 is probably now around 25–30 hours.

The challenge facing providers is that passing many of the NVQs that are in demand from employers does not require much literacy or numeracy, if workplace assessment methods are used. This is the case despite recent warnings from the Adult Learning Inspectorate and others (2) that have focused on the need to secure additional learning from this type of programme, rather than just assessing existing skills to achieve a qualification.

## Releasing staff

Employers are often unwilling to release staff for programmes that seem to them to devote a disproportionate amount of time to largely irrelevant skills. As one

owner of a small construction firm put it :

*'I need my bricklayers to get an NVQ so we can bid for contracts that require a qualified workforce. They are experienced men and don't need to waste time being tested to see if they can do sums.'*



**Necessary scaffolding? Some building firms don't see the point of Level 2 skills.**

So the challenge is to embed skills that employers frequently do not think are needed and that employees do not particularly want. 'I failed at school but I've coped in my life so far; I don't want to drag all that up again,' said one care worker when interviewed about her experience of initial assessment. This reluctance is frequently echoed by the brokers and business managers whose job it is to sell training to employers.

It is hoped that these challenges will be alleviated over time by the introduction of the new design principles for vocational

qualifications that will include personal and functional skills as well as vocational ones. But, until more employers are convinced of the benefits to all of a workforce with literacy, numeracy and ICT skills at Level 2, they will continue to be unwilling to release employees to study them.

## Making a positive case

So how can they and their employees be persuaded? They can be convinced by good advocacy and above all by good delivery of *Skills for Life*, delivered either in a contextualised pre-NVQ course or in a more fully embedded model where the NVQ delivery allows for that.

As one care manager said:

*'I just had no idea until I saw some of their reports how weak my staff's writing skills were. They have to write handover notes, and I can't see some of them being able to do it without serious help. I'm now really keen on the course they are being offered.'*

Despite its many difficulties, a positive case can and must be made for using the funding to best effect. □

**We would be very interested to hear about your trials and successes in embedding *Skills for Life* in Train to Gain. Please contact us with your views at [jhinman@oie.ac.uk](mailto:jhinman@oie.ac.uk) or [info@nrdc.org.uk](mailto:info@nrdc.org.uk)**

**Judith Hinman is Development Consultant at NRDC**

(1) Leitch, S. (2006) *Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills. Final report* London: The Stationery Office

(2) See *Implementing Train to Gain A Good Practice Guide 2006 Appendix 1, Quality Improvement Agency*

# A global village meeting

Literacy and numeracy specialists from 16 countries gathered for the NRDC Nottingham conference this year. **Fiona Freel, Moya Wilkie** and **David Budge** report on the insights they shared

It was, as Jan Eldred of NIACE noted, 'the most international of the NRDC's international conferences'. Leonne Beebe, a practitioner-researcher from Vancouver, said simply: 'It feels as if we have the world in a room.'

This year's conference in Eastwood, the former mining village outside Nottingham where DH Lawrence spent his boyhood, attracted adult literacy and numeracy specialists from Australia, New Zealand, Germany, Switzerland, the United States, Canada, Norway, Iceland, the Netherlands, Brazil, Malawi and Ireland, as well as the UK countries.

Each nation has very different policies and qualifications for this sector but, as this conference showed, there are common

challenges that make the distances between countries seem minuscule.

How do you rebuild the shattered confidence of learners who failed at school (or were failed by the system)? What is the best way of catering for immigrants and refugees? How do you ensure that the least skilled will not be left behind by global competition and the never-ending ICT revolution?

As Ralf Kellersohn of the Swiss e-learning company Avallain pointed out, even relatively low-level jobs demand more skills than in the past. 'Fork-lift drivers, for example, may have to be ICT literate because they may find they are controlling trucks run by computers.'

Encouragingly, Professor Steve Reder, of

## The A to Z of independence

### MALAWI

Adult literacy programmes in Malawi face a multitude of challenges. Even ascertaining literacy levels in the country is fraught with difficulty, as much of the testing is subjective. Inadequate training for tutors, high turnover of participants, and a lack of continuing education for those who become literate are other major problems.

Malawi is also blighted by HIV-Aids and more than half the population lives below the poverty line. It is therefore not easy to convince people that literacy should be a major concern. However, as Chris Dzimadzi told the NRDC International Conference, one programme, Sustainable Socio Economic Empowerment for Poverty Reduction (SSEEP), is addressing the country's literacy problems. SSEEP uses Paulo Freire's Reflect methodology, which places the learner



at the centre of their own learning process.

Adults in the SSEEP literacy classes discuss the major issues affecting their lives, prioritise the challenges and develop action points. This process not only helps people to read and write, but encourages them to find solutions to problems rather than waiting for donors or government help. 'People need to be empowered socio-

economically before acquiring literacy skills,' said Dzimadzi.

Since 2004, 370 Reflect circles have been established in 12 districts. By collaborating with donors, farming methods have been improved and income-earning activities ranging from beekeeping to soap-making have been started. A literacy policy has been finalised, training manuals have been written and post-literacy materials have been developed. The identification by a community of its problems is 'the beginning of a long journey' towards literacy, said Dzimadzi. It is hoped that the programme will be extended beyond its planned end date in 2007, so that many more can embark on this journey.

**Chris Dzimadzi's conference presentation can be found at [www.nrdc.org.uk](http://www.nrdc.org.uk)**

NCSALL, the sister organisation of the NRDC in the US, reported that the ICT gap between American high school drop-outs and their more educated peers appears to have closed in some respects (in 2000, less-educated adults were not using computers but by 2003 many of them were).

The Americans, like the rest of the world, are still looking for the magic formula that will encourage adult learners to persist with their studies. However, John Comings, director of NCSALL, said that some factors that promoted persistence were already known. 'Students say that the most important thing is a supportive person who encourages them,' he said.

Comings also emphasised that the traditional concept of persistence needed to change. It should be accepted that adult learners might drop out and then resume their studies later.

#### **soundbite**

#### **'It's true that employees with low skills don't trust 'suits' – no matter how nice they are'**

**Clare Hannah, Learning and Development Director, First UK Bus, responding to a suggestion that shopfloor workers should champion learning opportunities**

That was a key message that practitioners took away from the conference, as Joseph Kingsley-Nyinah, a London ESOL teacher, confirmed. 'Some college managers are loath to re-admit students who drop out but the NCSALL research shows this is a pattern that should be expected.'

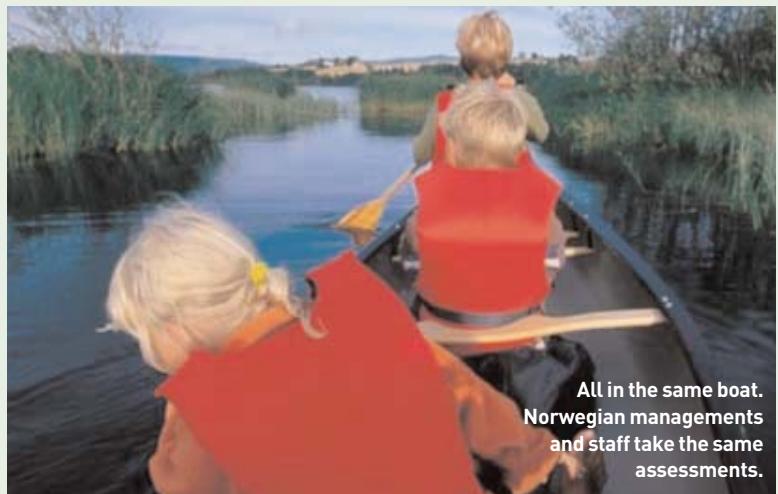
The importance of embedding not only literacy and numeracy but communication skills in vocational training was also emphasised. Neil Robertson, head of the Skills for Life Strategy Unit, acknowledged that some occupational sectors already recognised this need. 'I went to Liverpool recently to speak to hairdressers. As I left I picked up a flyer that described the 'recipe' for a successful stylist – it suggested that it was 45 per cent communication skills, 25 per cent vocational skills and the rest was literacy and numeracy.' That point has evidently not percolated down to some hairdressers. Half a mile from the Eastwood conference centre one of the village hairdressers had placed an advert for 'apointments' with the 'beautian' in their shop window.

Much remains to be done therefore. But practitioners who attended the NRDC conference seemed 'up for the challenge' by the final session. 'I have taken part in some very interesting workshops and feel really invigorated now,' said one. 'I am ready to do battle again.'

**Letters page 34**

#### **Tests are the great leveller**

#### **NORWAY**



**All in the same boat.**  
**Norwegian managements and staff take the same assessments.**

Senior company managers in Norway are being asked to take literacy tests alongside their shop-floor employees to demonstrate that it is not only blue-collar workers who can improve their reading and writing skills.

Managers and staff sit the same four-minute test that enables literacy specialists to 'map' their skills. It includes a short dictation exercise. They and their employees then receive 'feedback' letters at home from the assessors. The company also receives a report explaining how much remedial work needs to be done – but the anonymity of staff with literacy problems is protected.

'Our approach to adult learning is based on Denmark's but because we are about five years behind we have learnt from some of the mistakes of the past,' said Kirsten Waarli, a special adviser to Vox, the Norwegian Institute for Adult Learning. 'If you aim publicity material at only the shop floor the employees say: "Do you think we are stupid – what about the people in the office?"'

The programme organisers have also heeded the trade unions'

advice and selected learning champions with no management role. 'The employee who promotes learning opportunities may be the person who runs the wine lottery on a Friday, in other words someone the staff trust,' the Norwegian researcher told a conference workshop.

The £3.3 million programme currently involves just 26 companies, whose employees receive three or four hours of tuition a week. Teachers spend two days in the company, assessing the texts that employees encounter, before holding their first class.

Nevertheless, Kirsten Waarli acknowledged that some employer resistance would have to be overcome in order to reach the 15 per cent of adults with literacy needs. 'Sometimes employees are told it would be "bad for production" if they attended classes,' she said. 'One employer even wanted his employees to sneak out and do the courses at night. He didn't want to draw attention to the firm's literacy problems.'

**Kirsten Waarli's presentation can be found at [www.nrdc.org.uk](http://www.nrdc.org.uk)**

**Over the border and into the classroom****United States**

Many of the latest arrivals, such as these women from Somalia, have low literacy levels in their own languages.

Larry Condelli is concerned about what he sees as the 'almost xenophobic' reaction of many Americans to the latest waves of immigrants to land on the country's shores, but he has retained his sense of humour. 'We have a vigilante movement in states such as Arizona and a ridiculous 700-mile fence on the Mexican border is proposed. We also have the Department of Homeland Security. Fortunately, as it's a government agency it's not horribly efficient,' he told the NRDC conference.

Condelli, a senior official in the American Institutes for Research, accepts that the US's population is probably growing too fast – it recently passed the 300 million mark – and he is concerned that ESOL providers face barriers to teaching English to new immigrants. For example, many Hispanics in cities such as Los Angeles often do not see any reason to learn English. They live in Spanish-speaking neighbourhoods, read Spanish newspapers and

**Nothing sinister about the writing on the wall****INDIA**

'Build on what learners' know...'. It's a great aspiration, but how does it translate into practice? Delegates attending the workshop entitled 'Learning for Empowerment through Training in Ethnographic Style Research' were told about a teacher training project in India and encouraged to reflect on the wider implications of the findings.

Brian Street trained as an anthropologist and is now the chair of Language in Education at King's College London; Dave Baker has a background in numeracy and has been involved with NRDC for several years. Along with Alan Rogers, whose expertise is in adult education, they have been working with a group of rural women in India since 2002. They were approached by Nirantar, an Indian educational non-governmental organisation which felt that the model of literacy favoured by UNESCO and other funders was not promoting culturally sensitive teaching.

The research team wanted to challenge the premise that 'literacy' is one 'thing', believing that it exists in many forms and contexts. They refer to these as 'plural literacies', citing as an example the different types of language and writing used by market traders and schoolteachers in the same village.

They claim that there are no cross-cultural literacy 'norms': accepted practices in India, such as students practising their writing on the walls, jar with the dominant Western view that this is not the 'right' place to write. Multiple numeracy practices were also shown to co-exist. Women in Mehrona, a village in Uttar Pradesh, have traditionally measured ghee and wheat by volume, using a standard-sized container, and are having to learn to translate the traders' standard system, which uses weight.

Having looked at examples of different

literacies in Mehrona, workshop participants were invited to reflect on their own numeracy and literacy practices – considering especially those areas where different systems collide – and the implications for pedagogy and curriculum. The mismatch within the UK between metric measurements, which have been taught in schools for more than 30 years, and the imperial system used in many everyday situations (eg road distances and height and weight of people) is one example. Teachers need to acknowledge the presence of the latter, even if the curriculum focuses on the former.

Workshop participants said it was imperative to recognise the real life experiences of adult learners. Although this could prove challenging, it would ultimately improve the quality of provision, both at home and abroad.

**Street and Baker's presentation can be found at [www.nrdc.org.uk](http://www.nrdc.org.uk)**

watch Spanish TV.

In many other parts of the US, however, the influx of legal and illegal immigrants has fuelled a huge demand for ESOL teaching and imposed serious strains on the country's adult education services. Many of the latest arrivals are from less developed countries such as Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia and Myanmar (Burma) and have low literacy levels in their own languages, let alone English. Immigrants are also moving to districts that have never had to offer ESOL classes before.

The changed circumstances have not led to increased funding but Condelli, one of life's optimists, says that the new challenges have at least triggered some innovative teaching programmes. ESOL teachers in the US are trying to make classroom work more relevant to learners' lives, are



**Teachers have encouraged learners to create 'fotonovelas' that blend photographs and narrative**

becoming more involved in family literacy work, and are more ready to use learners' native languages, he said. Other teachers have encouraged learners to create 'fotonovelas' that blend photographs and narrative (see left).

Project-based learning is also growing in popularity. This approach requires learners to create their own group project and then present their results. One group of Spanish-speakers decided that they would like to put something back into the society they had left, so they improved a school in Mexico. It was, in part, a language-learning exercise as they had to have enough English to order all the materials they needed for the school from the hardware depot.

Although such innovative projects are proving successful, Condelli would welcome information on any other recent ESOL strategies and techniques that have been found to work in Britain. Two nations divided by a common language we may be but, in this respect and many others, the US and the UK have much to learn from one another. □

**Larry Condelli's presentation can be found at [www.nrdc.org.uk](http://www.nrdc.org.uk) email [lcondelli@air.org](mailto:lcondelli@air.org)**

## Definitely divided by age and gender

### ICELAND

It reads like the title of a bestseller of the early 1990s: 'Women go to the library and write diaries, men surf the internet and never read manuals'. However, this is not a book about how to understand the opposite sex, but one of the findings from a recent research study of adult literacy in Iceland.

The study surveyed 321 men and women aged 17 to 70. The participants, who were visited and tested in the workplace, answered a questionnaire about reading and writing and also did a timed silent reading test. The study revealed significant differences in reading and writing habits according to age, sex and education.

The researchers, Elísabet Arnardóttir and Guðmundur Kristmundsson, told the NRDC conference that men were more likely to have negative memories of learning to read as a child, were less likely to read books in their spare time, and rarely went to the library. Women



were more likely to keep a diary and help the children with homework, while men spent a lot of time reading material for their own enjoyment on the internet.

Older people were more likely to read every day 'for leisure' but were the poorest readers, at least in terms of speed, while younger people were more likely than older people to read magazines regularly. Although younger people appeared to read less for leisure, they did not necessarily include emails,

text messages and other electronic reading in this category. Those who had experienced further education were more likely to read for enjoyment than less educated adults, but were less likely to keep a diary.

The participants were asked to assess how they thought they had performed in the timed reading test. Interestingly, this caused some people to become very bashful – 'lorry drivers became like children', said Kristmundsson. Men generally rated themselves at a lower level than women. Lack of confidence was also evident among some older participants, who had learnt to read at an early age but had subsequently lost faith in their reading and writing abilities.

The researchers added that their findings should be taken into account when planning adult literacy classes. Organising courses according to age and combining learning to write with using ICT could both prove fruitful.

**The presentation by Arnardóttir and Kristmundsson can be found at [www.nrdc.org.uk](http://www.nrdc.org.uk)**

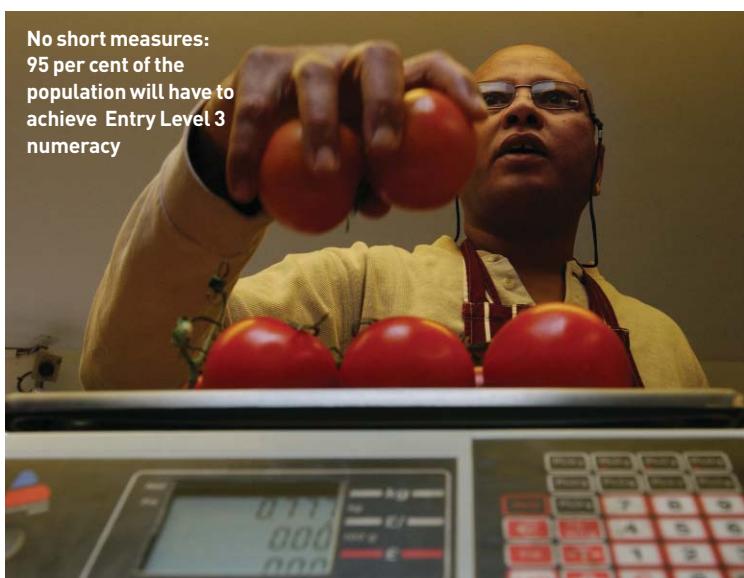
**Leitch charts the path ahead****ENGLAND**

The Government may not yet have given its formal response to the Leitch Review but the direction of change and the implications for the *Skills for Life* strategy are now clear.

Neil Robertson, head of the Government's *Skills for Life* Strategy Unit, spelled out the ramifications in a keynote address to the NRDC International Conference. He reminded his audience that Lord Leitch had suggested that 95 per cent of the population should achieve 'functional' literacy and numeracy skills (Level 1 literacy and Entry Level 3 numeracy) by 2020. Leitch had also said that at least 90 per cent of adults should achieve a first full Level 2 qualification by the same date.

'This will require a major change in the pace of our activities,' Robertson said. A better-qualified teacher workforce is a priority. 'By

**No short measures:**  
95 per cent of the  
population will have to  
achieve Entry Level 3  
numeracy

**Formative assessment still evolving****OECD**

The use and understanding of formative assessment in adult literacy, numeracy and language classes is variable and unsystematic in many developed countries. Attempts are being made to improve practice, but they are sometimes hampered because formative assessment is not well-defined.

These are the emerging findings from an ongoing study on formative assessment commissioned by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). More optimistically, the study suggests that effective practice can be found in most of the countries surveyed.

A conference workshop led by education consultants Jay Derrick (UK) and Alison Sutton (New Zealand) was told that the OECD had commissioned case studies based on observations in six European countries and the US. It had also commissioned reviews of research papers in English, French, Spanish

and German. The English language literature review has been jointly funded by the OECD and a Nuffield and NRDC-funded research project called Improving Formative Assessment, due to report in 2008. It is finding that a range of formative assessment approaches can be effective, particularly for less confident learners.

These include activities which involve self- and peer-assessment, collaborative learning, learning from mistakes, and group discussions on the quality of students' work. The English/language studies also suggest that the value of these approaches is undermined wherever success is measured wholly in terms of formal qualifications gained.

The workshop presentation was followed by a discussion of questions raised by the research, such as:

■ How can more teachers be supported to use formative assessment?

■ How much is knowledge about formative assessment in schools transferable to adult learning?

Alison Sutton then described a proposed initiative in New Zealand to develop an online formative assessment tool. This would enable learners and teachers to select assessment tasks and questions and receive detailed qualitative feedback on the answers, which would help to plan future learning.

Participants discussed the possibility of such tools being used bureaucratically and losing their formative potential. It was agreed that most materials, activities and tests can be used both formatively and summatively. This implies that future work should focus on teacher development and support.

**The OECD study's draft reports can be found at [www.oecd.org/edu/whatworks](http://www.oecd.org/edu/whatworks). Its findings are expected to be published this autumn.**

2010, every FE teacher working in the sector will be required to have an appropriate teaching qualification or be enrolled on a course to achieve one.

The Government and teachers could not, however, tackle the nation's skills shortfall on their own, he said. More employers would also need to invest in their employees' skills development. The Government would therefore support the Skills Pledge for employers in England proposed by Lord Leitch. The pledge is a corporate commitment to help employees to achieve not only basic qualifications in literacy, numeracy and ICT but broader qualifications that develop work-related skills at Level 2.

'It's voluntary, no employer is required to take it, but the Government hopes the full range of employers will want to give this commitment,' Robertson explained. This applies to the Government too: an estimated 10 per cent of Civil Service employees have poor literacy and numeracy.

Sector skills councils would be crucial partners in the coming effort as they would articulate employers' skills needs, Robertson said. The SSCs were also helping with the development of new design principles for full Level 2 qualifications. New qualifications that get the full public subsidy under the Level 2 entitlement would have to contain not just vocational elements but literacy, numeracy and ICT – as well as personal skills. In other words, there would be less discrete learning above Level 1 and more focus on Level 2 vocational learning.

'We're not going to get a blank cheque, so there has to be much greater emphasis on progression,' Robertson added. 'Employability will be a much more important part of the discussion.' ▀

#### soundbites

**"A colleague went into a shop and bought two shirts that were being sold at '20 per cent off'. The woman at the counter said 20 per cent and 20 per cent ... that's 40 per cent off. He said: 'In that case, I'll take five'."**

Malcolm Swan, of the University of Nottingham, discussing common mathematical misconceptions

**"I read 16 dissertations while we were working on the literature review. No, I don't have a life outside school."**

Kathy Stafford of the St Peter's College, New Jersey, describing her contribution to the US Adult Numeracy Initiative

## A beach story for all seasons

### CANADA

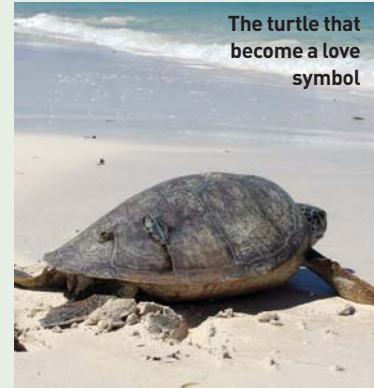
When Paula Davies asked her class of adult literacy students to bring something special from home one man turned up with a wooden turtle he had carved. He then told a story.

The turtle was precious, he said, because it reminded him of a memorable holiday with his wife. He had been undergoing chemotherapy and had decided that they both needed a break by the sea. One night he could not sleep, so he walked down to the beach to be alone with his thoughts. As he sat there, something almost magical happened: turtles began to emerge from the water, haul themselves on to the beach and bury their eggs in the sand.

Davies, an adult literacy teacher and researcher from British Columbia, recounted the story as she addressed a conference workshop on personal narrative and reflective writing. She said that the man's experience had triggered a remarkable class discussion on symbolism.

'One class member said she thought of love when she saw the turtle. Another said she thought of survival. A third said that the turtle made her think of rebirth, both that of the turtles who were laying eggs, and of our student who had successfully battled cancer,' she said. 'I had never had such a response from a class in 25 years of teaching. Personal narrative can be so powerful.'

Davies's co-presenter, Leonne Beebe, emphasised that some forms of personal narrative worked better than others. 'A daily journal that did not involve reflective writing wasn't



The turtle that became a love symbol

encouraging students to really tell me about their lives – there was a lot of "I went shopping ... she went shopping with me".'

Tired of 'getting the same stuff' after more than 20 years, Beebe developed the Guided Reflective Writing Technique. This encourages students to become aware of what they are learning by answering questions about their learning process after each class activity, and at the end of each month and term. The activities are based on Rita Smilkstein's classroom teaching model of 'brain-based' teaching/learning. Smilkstein argues that a student's learning experience should be based on 'metacognition, motivation, self-evaluation, and achievement'.

Beebe joked that the probation service had 'sentenced' students to take her classes in the past. But she said she now has a better relationship with her students. 'Class lessons have become much more student-centred and less teacher-centred. It has been a revelation.' **Letters page 34**

Additional information about the Canadian practitioner-researchers' teaching strategies can be found at <http://ripal.literacy.bc.ca/completed.html>

# Forward to excellence

**Ursula Howard explains how the success of the Maths4Life programme will be carried on under new management**

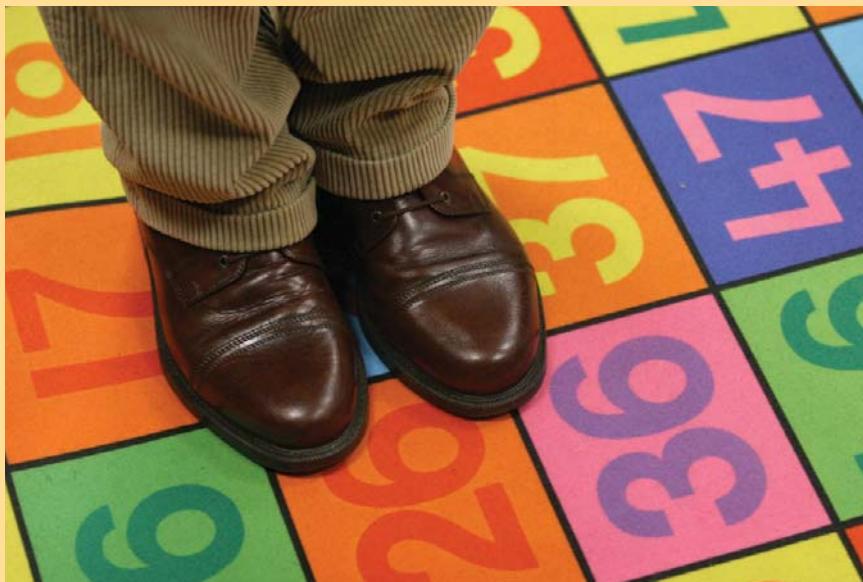
The Maths4Life programme at NRDC has, since it was launched in August 2004, produced high quality, well-researched resources which we know teachers and learners in the *Skills for Life* sector find stimulating. The DfES-funded programme has launched a number of professional development events and has undertaken small pieces of research. It has had a major impact on mathematics in *Skills for Life*.

March 2007 marked the end of the first phase of the programme and, in recognition of the quality and value of its work, the DfES has asked the National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics (NCETM) to take the work forward until March 2008.

NCETM was set up in 2006 to enhance professional development for all mathematics teachers. Maths4Life has already forged strong links with NCETM, especially with its regional coordinators. NCETM personnel and associates have been involved in the production of the *Thinking Through Mathematics* pack, as well as presenting at dissemination events.

NRDC remains a key partner in NCETM's further development of the Maths4Life programme, and will focus its efforts in five main areas. It will:

- explore the best ways to disseminate the *Thinking Through Mathematics* ring-binder by building on what was learned during its development. NRDC will work with NCETM to encourage collaborative professional development
- examine best practice in work-



## About Maths4Life

Maths4Life was set up in 2004 in response to the Smith Report *Making Mathematics Count*. In its response to the report, the government said:

*'the long term future of mathematics in the UK will depend on aligning action on the three critical issues... teacher supply; teacher support; and curriculum development...'*

These are the tasks the project was set. NRDC, based at the Institute of Education, with LLU+ at London South Bank University

as main partner, began work in 2004. The programme reached the end of its first phase on 31st March 2007.

Since 2004, Maths4Life has developed strong 'brand recognition' and the programme has helped to bring about a culture shift in approaches to teaching and learning mathematics – in particular, the narrowing of the gap between 'mathematics' and 'adult numeracy', with the two communities beginning to see each other as colleagues and uniting within the same field of expertise and endeavour.

based situations, and explore the sorts of CPD that maximise successful teaching and learning of mathematics in this area

- produce summaries of the latest research for practitioners, and explore 'hot issues' with them
- run a seminar to explore the implications of the Leitch report (1)
- help to transfer the Maths4Life website to NCETM. The Maths4Life website will remain live and will be maintained until the

end of March 2008 when it will transfer to [www.ncetm.org.uk](http://www.ncetm.org.uk)

Oonagh Gormley, formerly the NRDC Programme Manager of Maths4Life, will assist other NRDC colleagues with much of the work commissioned by NCETM. She will also work for the London Mathematics Centre, based at the Institute of Education. NCETM will now formally manage Maths4Life. □

**For further details see  
[www.ncetm.org.uk](http://www.ncetm.org.uk) and  
[www.maths4life.org](http://www.maths4life.org)**

# In search of the secret of stickability

**John Vorhaus and Desiree Lopez on what an NRDC project is discovering about learner 'staying power'**

What helps *Skills for Life* learners to persist for long enough to make real and lasting progress? And what are the barriers that lie in their way? The Quality Improvement Agency has commissioned NRDC, together with our partners NIACE and Tribal-CTAD, to find answers to these questions and to offer practical support for learners, teachers and providers that encourages and enables learners to persist.

The Persistence, Progression and Achievement (PPA) project got under way at the end of last year and is now helping learners to 'stick with it' at sites up and down the country. The PPA literature review, the results from the project's web survey, and other research and development work will be shared on a new website [www.stickwithit.org.uk](http://www.stickwithit.org.uk)

Some messages are already coming across loud and clear. UK research suggests that learners who withdraw from courses do not have a markedly different demographic profile from those who complete their studies. Researchers in the US reached a similar conclusion. They did, however, find that immigrants, those over the age of 30, and parents of older children, were more likely to persist.

## Barriers to persistence

What about the barriers to persistence? We know of at least three kinds: situational (the pressures of day-to-day life), institutional (providers' rules and procedures) and dispositional (the attitudes that learners bring to their learning). It is

## What do you do to help learners persist?

To share your experiences, to find out more about the PPA project, or to get involved, go to [www.stickwithit.org.uk](http://www.stickwithit.org.uk)



the dispositional barriers that may prove to be the biggest, but they are the ones that are often least understood by practitioners. Respondents to our web survey shared similar perceptions about the barriers and what could help to break them down:

- time for adult learners to develop a real love of learning
- practitioners having time to understand what motivates their learners as people
- more diverse progression routes
- more flexible provision
- more personal tutor follow-up with

learners when they are absent or have to drop out for periods of time.

There is also evidence that providers and teachers who identify early on the learners at risk of dropping out are likely to witness higher levels of persistence. The first three weeks are critical.

## Episodes of learning

Adults involved in previous literacy, language or numeracy learning, or vocational skills training, are also more likely to persist. And that underlines the importance of recognising *episodes* of learning and self-study; learning does not stop just because formal learning has ended. Adults engage in self-study, often at home. We need to recognise learning pathways that include much more than what goes on in a formal learning environment.

The web survey respondents agree. They mentioned working with learners to support learning outside the classroom. Resources such as *Skillswise* ([www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise](http://www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise)) and other forms of e-learning have proved helpful in this respect.

## The importance of goals

We also believe that goals matter. Adults who mention a specific goal when they are enrolling on a course or training programme are often more likely to persist. The time spent in finding and identifying a learner's motivation and goals is therefore time well spent – learners can then make informed choices about their education and training. Our web survey respondents endorse that view. They have also found that effective initial assessment, which includes finding out what motivates learners as adults, and how they see learning in relation to their personal lives, is critical to supporting learners to stick with it. □

**John Vorhaus is an associate director of NRDC and director of the PPA project. Desiree Lopez is an NRDC research and evaluation officer and project manager of the PPA project**

# Goblins help to defeat the gremlins

**Bex Ferriday shows how video games can provide a stimulating way for learners to develop communication and number skills**

Three years ago my husband was submerged in yet another marathon Xbox session when he put down his controller and said: 'Do you know what? These sorts of games would be a great way of teaching literacy skills!'

The game in question was a Role Playing Game (RPG) and I was immediately intrigued. How slashing goblins in half and ransacking barrels for gold coins could possibly teach literacy was beyond me, so I asked him to elaborate.

There may have been some sense to his rambling but, having toyed with the idea for a few minutes I let the subject drop, unable to make any explicit links between video gaming and literacy.

### Altered learning

Fast-forward to last year and I was enjoying a bit of mindless web-surfing when I stumbled across a website called Altered Learning, a site that claimed to provide: 'effective alternative learning and teaching tools with the characteristics of a game, yet with the content of the traditional curriculum'. My interest was aroused.

Altered Learning claimed to be able to achieve this by modifying a popular role-playing adventure entitled Neverwinter Nights. They realised how hard it was to engage some learners, especially when teaching key skills in Communication and Application of Number, as they much prefer sitting in front of a computer to sitting in front of a worksheet.

A form of almost subliminal learning



takes place as students play the game, locating answers to questions, carefully selecting appropriate conversational responses and methods for solving puzzles and calculations, which are automatically logged using a piece of specially designed software. Altered Learning claims that 'this isn't a process that does away with the teacher'. In order to solve the problems learners have to know about such linguistic skills as spelling and punctuation, and the only way to find out about these is to ask to be taught them which, when the answer is a matter of on-screen life or death, they do!

### Improved skills and better results

West Nottinghamshire College was the first establishment to use this technology, and it helped to send the key skills results soaring, from a national benchmark of 22 per cent to 94 per cent. In this academic year Cornwall College has also purchased both the game and the tracking software, installed it on the college network at one of its sites and invited students to play...and, as a result, key skills pass rates have increased considerably.

It isn't just the games that encourage literacy learning. Gamers often build

up a vast collection of notebooks stuffed full of handwritten annotations informing them of the various quests and sub-quests their in-game characters (or 'avatars' to use the correct vernacular) must complete to proceed. Once one of these quests has been completed, they will happily rattle off an email or write a critique or comment in an online chat room about their experiences and about the game as a whole to help fellow-gamers.

Research will be carried out over the internet to look for a solution to the age-old question: 'Just how DO I kill that end-of-level monster if I have no weaponry?' and, even before the power button is pressed, the game's instruction manual will be leafed through and skimmed for relevant information.

Isn't it about time we stopped blaming video games for all social ills and started to concentrate on the good they can do? Forget the outmoded notion that the only good thing to come from gaming is improved hand-to-eye coordination. What about social skills, visual literacy, the art of active listening, student-led learning and learners' empowerment?

Now where did I put that copy of Tomb Raider...? □

**Bex Ferriday is Lead Practitioner (Teaching and Learning) at Cornwall College**

Altered Learning can be found at [www.alteredlearning.com](http://www.alteredlearning.com). Key skills and *Skills for Life* tutors may also like to look at [www.keyskills4u.com](http://www.keyskills4u.com), which contains two games specifically designed to develop students' Communication, Application of Number and ICT skills.

## PRIME SITES

# www.skillsforlifenetwork.com

**John Barton reviews a website that is poised for further development**

Do you want to keep up with the latest information about *Skills for Life*? Do you need to know what jobs are on offer in your area? Or are you, like me, just nosy and wanting to check how your salary compares with those of a similar grade in your region? Whatever the reason, [www.skillsforlifenetwork.com](http://www.skillsforlifenetwork.com) may be the site for you.

This website was started in 2003 by Barbara Zealley and Caryn Loftus (the only ones with those names on Google) as a source of information for *Skills for Life* practitioners in the North of England. As a free service supported by the Learning and Skills Council it was brilliant but then, as with many of these initiatives, the money dried up. Many similar ideas have fallen by the wayside but, through enterprising schemes such as charging for job adverts, the site has blossomed and gone national with more than 8,000 registered members.

The best way to make effective use of all the facilities is to register and provide all your details, choosing your own username and password. As well as giving your name and job role, you are asked to name your region and to indicate whether you would like email alerts. I would recommend that you do.

### Email alert system

The alert system, both national and regional, is what makes the site so special. Once a fortnight you find out what is happening, what courses are being offered and what funding is available. Not only is this helpful to me as a practitioner/manager but it also enables me to tell others in my region about courses I am offering. We've recently offered some intensive Level 4 Numeracy courses; more



Recruiting new staff: this website offers an e-alternative

than half of those who signed up heard about the training through the alert.

There is also an alert for job vacancies. As a manager, I find it helpful for recruiting new staff – much better than the local and national press – and useful for keeping tabs on the 'going rate'. The cost is very reasonable at £295 for one job, with discounts for more adverts during the year.

### Links and downloads

What about the rest of the site? Initially the idea was that tutors would provide resources that could be used by colleagues free of charge. The original materials are still there under Resources Downloads, but there are only 23 items and nothing has been added this year. The current emphasis seems to be on promoting specialist publishing houses, whose sponsorship helps to support the site. Could the two not be run side-by-side? I understand that more downloads are due to be added in the autumn, so I wait in anticipation.

I find the Resource Links helpful. Although most of these sites are

known to me they are not always easy to find and I can't always remember the name.

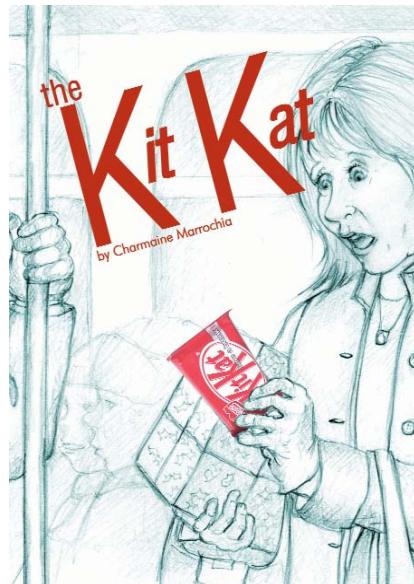
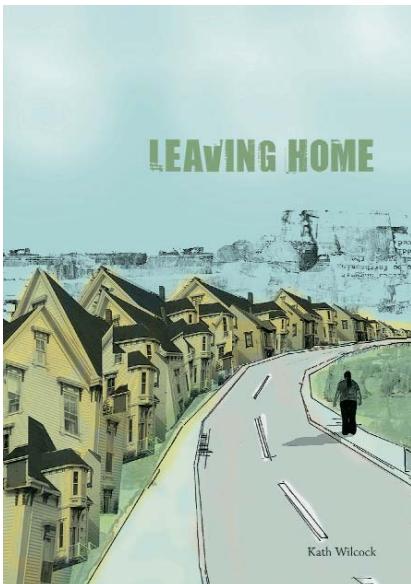
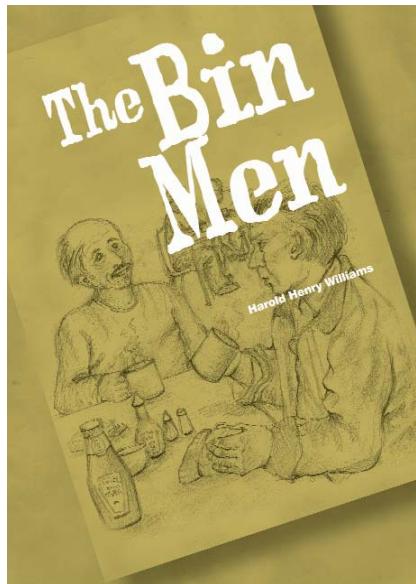
The Training & Development section has always been a helpful part of the site. However, this section contains more information from the North East and Yorkshire & Humberside than from the rest of the country, as historically these regional site sections have been LSC-supported.

### Give feedback

The site is well worth adding to your favourites and visiting regularly. However, as they have not got everything right yet I feel they would benefit from receiving more feedback from their users. As the site is being redeveloped between now and the autumn, this is a good time to have your say.

If the number of people using the site continues to grow, and the sponsorship revenue continues to increase, this could become the most important central place for all involved in *Skills for Life*. ▀

**John Barton is Subject Area Manager Skills at Selby College**



## BOOKS

### Beginner readers

[New Leaf Publishing \(2006\)](#)

**Story books, £4; Accompanying CDs, £4; Set of 12 books and CDs, £81.60**

**Orders: 07984 241 863 or  
amchester@btinternet.com**

**Website [www.newleafbooks.org.uk](http://www.newleafbooks.org.uk)**

**Reviewed by Jan Eldred**

I am delighted to review some refreshing new publications for adults who are beginning to take pleasure in reading but who find longer books rather daunting. They are produced by New Leaf Publishing and follow a noble tradition in adult literacy and language (notably that of Gatehouse Publishing) of learners' publishing their own writing. New Leaf describes itself as '...the only British publisher dedicated to publishing books written by and for adult learners.' It aims 'to make reading and writing accessible to adults who lack confidence and who do not necessarily see themselves as readers and writers.' Some of the most vibrant publications of the past 30 years have come from similar sources but have been notable by their absence in recent years. New Leaf begins to fill that gap and to provide learners and their tutors with new resources.

The books are small (A5), feel good to handle, and are crisply and clearly presented with plenty of 'air' and space on the page. Black and white illustrations are of different styles, some reflecting pencil drawings and others being bold and impressionistic. Sentences and page lengths are short, encouraging the reader to move through the book to completion; the language is neither over-simplified nor patronising. The stories are based on the real life

experiences of the authors, embracing the funny, the sad and the sentimental events of ordinary lives. This reality makes the stories powerful and authentic. Stories about the prankish antics of bin men, disastrous high-heeled shoes, or of biting other people's buns, engage the reader with their emotional involvement.

There is an audio CD to accompany each book; samples of these readings are available on the website [www.newleafbooks.org.uk](http://www.newleafbooks.org.uk). At the back of each book is an autobiographical note about the author, which adds to the sense of authenticity and reality. The authors' testimonies to the effectiveness of their learning have the potential to inspire other learners to become writers and publishers.

These books not only provide welcome reading material but can be used in reading groups or as stimulus for speaking and listening or writing, using learners' memories and experiences.

Let's have more of this kind of publishing! □

**Dr Jan Eldred is Associate Director for Literacy, Language and Numeracy, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education**

**Brickwork NVQ and Technical Certificate Level 2 Student Book****9780435430863****£19.99****Carpentry and Joinery NVQ and Technical Certificate Level 2 Student Book****9780435325701****£19.99****Painting and Decorating NVQ and Technical Certificate Level 2 Student Book****9780435463595****£19.99****all from Heinemann (2006)****Reviewed by Steven Cowan**

These three books have been published in a joint project between Heinemann and the national construction company, Carillion. The books are designed specifically for use in the apprenticeship training framework that lies at the heart of the programme undertaken by Carillion Training, an organisation that now operates from 15 centres nationwide. The introductory chapter about 'The Construction Industry' and the second chapter dealing with 'Health and Safety' issues are the same in all three books.

The content of the books has come from the personal teaching and training materials developed by Carillion's own instructors, work-based assessors and verifiers, each of whom comes from a professional craft background and has had recent and

current experience of working with apprentices. The books are packed with examples of on-the-job scenarios that reflect the on-site experiences of trainees. Many existing books come from college-based practice and, although they may have strengths, they lack the recognition factor of workbooks produced by a real construction company. Despite the explicit Carillion imprimatur, the books are likely to appeal to a wider market in both work and college-based courses.

The content and layout of all three books are influenced by the fact that Carillion does not screen for ability on interview, often accepting into training apprentices who have few formal qualifications. There is an emphasis throughout each book on simple page layouts and large font sizes, supported by generous use of white space and limited blocks of text. This allows the colour diagrams to be the central focus of a page, making the content appear less challenging to less confident readers. New technical terms are highlighted in the text and reinforced with 'Definition' tags set in the margins. All photographs used are from recent Carillion training bases or from sites that are currently in partnership with them.

There are concise 'Did-You-Know?' insets on many pages that highlight interesting facts about each topic, and end-of-chapter checks.

**Embedded key skills**

Another prominent feature of the three books is the way in which they systematically embed the key skills elements of the courses. For example, integrated information about scales, symbols and abbreviations combine elements of numeracy and literacy in a chapter on 'Drawings'. The key skills are never mentioned as such but underpin the construction content in virtually every double-page spread.

**An apprentice's delight**

The first batches of the books were delivered while I was interviewing three Carillion brickwork apprentices in Southampton. The apprentices responded with unabashed glee as they were told that they would own a copy. One, a female apprentice who had left school with no formal English qualifications, was particularly enthusiastic. Within seconds of flicking through the Brickwork volume she had identified familiar faces and wanted to begin reading. ▀

**Heinemann also publish a CD-ROM of Tutor Materials to accompany each book. The series includes titles for Brickwork and for Carpentry & Joinery at Level 3, and for Plastering at Level 2.**

**Steven Cowan has worked on three reports relating to key skills and apprenticeship training for the NRDC. He is based at the Institute of Education, University of London, where he is researching the history of popular literacy in 18th-century England**

**Within seconds of flicking through the Brickwork volume one female apprentice wanted to begin reading**

# Letters

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

## The future for skills

The NRDC International Conference offered practitioners and researchers insights into how the problem of a lack of essential skills in the adult population is tackled throughout different parts of the world. However, it was also interesting to hear from Neil Robertson, Head of the Skills for Life Strategy Unit, on the Government's thinking re. the way forward in the field of key skills. While I liked the targets for 2020 – 95 per cent of the population should have Level 1 literacy and Entry Level 3 numeracy and 90 per cent should have a Level 2 qualification – there was no clear information as to how this was to be funded and achieved. The embedding of basic skills in ICT and the need for vocational skills at Level 2 were important steps for the future but the emphasis on 'Growth in Confidence' was especially dear to my heart.



I was also very interested to hear about the latest research project being undertaken by NRDC to evaluate the importance of persistence. I work with offenders in the National Probation Service and see this as the most important goal.

Dealing with those who have been unable to sustain any formal consistent educational engagement I personally have seen many times the difference that motivation and perseverance can make in a person's learning journey. I await any forthcoming report with interest.

**Rita Keily  
Dorset**

## Conference camaraderie

Congratulations on this year's international conference. It was packed with crucially relevant information and buzzed with an atmosphere of professional camaraderie. I especially enjoyed learning about the research carried out in the US and Brazil, and will keep tabs on this in future.

**Ibrar Butt  
West Yorkshire**

3 developing a raft of funded, accredited modular research opportunities in a wide range of universities

4 developing democratic research cultures in colleges of further education.

Clearly a long-term, systemic response is needed.

**Margaret Herrington  
Visiting Professor of Education  
University of Wolverhampton**

**1** Herrington, M. (2006) *A Practitioner Researcher Project. Working with the Adult Literacy Curriculum: A Case Study from the Black Country Colleges*. LSC Report. Walsall: University of Wolverhampton

**Embedding research in the long term**  
In answer to Mary Hamilton's question regarding practitioner research, 'Just a fling...or a long-term relationship?' (*reflect*, October 2006), the answer must be a long-term relationship. Two decades of research in practice by members of RAPAL, as well as by overseas colleagues, especially the outstanding Canadian network, RIPAL, have demonstrated its impact on professional formation, on the democratic inclusion of adult literacy learners in research processes and on the generation of new, hard-to-reach knowledge. It is difficult to imagine how this could conceivably be described as a short fling.

Given such powerful outcomes, the important question is how such

research can be embedded in adult literacy practice across the board. Hamilton rightly points out the weakness of relying at any one time on small numbers of keen converts. Hence the recent practitioner-research project at the University of Wolverhampton<sup>1</sup> has underlined the importance of:

1 reconceptualising the basic skills teacher role to include a strong investigative and theorising stance. Research questions abound at the heart of most adult literacy practice; and there is always an interpretive challenge

2 including research in practice activity at some stage in all teacher training programmes

# NRDC in print



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

## **Learning for and in the workplace** (leaflet)

### **Getting the practical teaching element right: A guide for literacy, numeracy and ESOL teacher educators**

Helen Casey, Jay Derrick, Samantha Duncan and David Mallows

### **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

### **"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 (summary report)**

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

### **Practitioners leading research: A report of action research projects from the NRDC Practitioner-Led Research Initiative (PLRI)**

Compiled and edited by Mary Hamilton, Paul Davies and Kathryn James

### **Putting good practice into practice: literacy, numeracy and key skills in apprenticeships. Part two: revisiting and re-evaluating (May 2005) (summary leaflet available in print; full report available as download via NRDC website only)**

Olivia Sagan, Edmund Waite and Steve Cowan, with Helen Casey and Karen Evans

### **Effective teaching and learning: Using ICT**

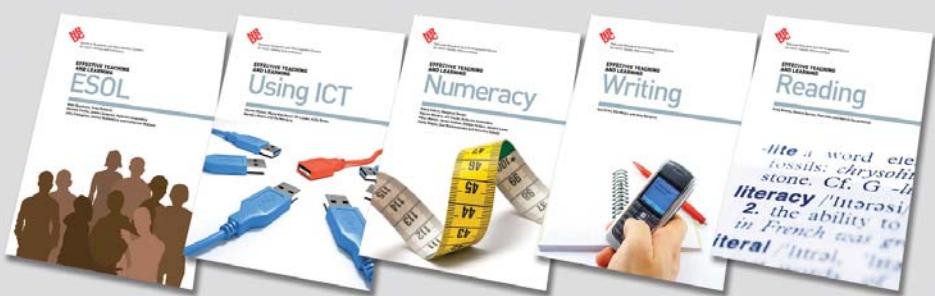
(full report and summary version)

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

### **Effective teaching and learning: ESOL**

(full report and summary version)

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



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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