



National Research and Development Centre
for adult literacy and numeracy

reflect

THE MAGAZINE OF NRDC | ISSUE 9 | NOVEMBER 2007

SPECIAL REPORT

Made to measure

**Why workplace learning needs
to be specially tailored**

Illuminating disadvantage

John Bynner on how poor
literacy and numeracy
affect adults' lives

World-class trainers wanted

David Hunter of LLUK grasps
the professionalisation nettle

One more push

How to encourage
learners' persistence



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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.

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The University of Sheffield

East London Pathfinder

Liverpool Lifelong Learning Partnership

Basic Skills Agency at NIACE

Learning and Skills Network

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National Institute of Adult Continuing Education

King's College London

University of Leeds

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Contents

Special Report: Workplace Learning	
Made-to-measure rather than one-size-fits-all	4
Sue Southwood	
Tube driver's learning journey	6
Sue Southwood	
McDonald's staff get a taste for learning	6
David Fairhurst	
Year of progress for TUC	8
Judith Swift	
Renovation required	9
Fiona Freel	
How learning boosts employee confidence	10
Alison Wolf and Ed Waite	
Upskilling Down Under	12
John Benseman	
Marginalised by lack of skills	13
John Bynner	
NRDC and NIACE unveil five practitioner guides	16
Sue Grief	
Interview with LLUK's David Hunter	18
JD Carpentieri	
Dogged determination not always enough	20
Jenny Litster and Desiree Lopez	
Pinning down embedding	22
Helen Casey	
Reviews	23
Prime Sites: Brian Creese checks out the talent website. Books: Sara Hattersley weighs the Basic Skills Agency's Starter Pack. A reading challenge for coffee drinkers	
Letters	26
NRDC in print	27

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Workplace learning gains momentum

Last December the Government's then Skills Envoy, Sir Digby Jones, warned employers that they were in the 'last chance saloon' as far as workplace learning was concerned. If there was no step-change in the amount of help they provided for employees with the lowest levels of literacy and numeracy within three years, an avalanche of regulation and red tape would descend on them.

Ten months on there are encouraging signs that not only employers but other key stakeholders recognise the vital importance of this learning drive. By last month more than 300 companies, with 2.4 million employees, had signed the Skills Pledge. They have committed themselves to doing all they can to raise their employees to at least Level 2. Employers such as McDonald's, the restaurant chain, have also introduced imaginative online learning programmes that remove the stigma from literacy and numeracy courses (page 6). The TUC and its 18,000 union learning representatives have lent their substantial support to the effort (page 8). Equally importantly, innovative further education colleges such as Solihull have extended the number of 'made to measure' learning packages they offer firms.

It would be naive to believe that all employers accept the logic of the Leitch Report's arguments for upskilling. The challenges facing Train to Gain must also be acknowledged (see Letters, page 26). However, this issue of *reflect* offers several reasons to be cheerful about workplace learning and further justification for believing in its therapeutic qualities. Research by Alison Wolf and Ed Waite, jointly sponsored by NRDC and the ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme, demonstrates how such courses can boost confidence levels inside and outside the workplace. They can also engage adults who have not benefited from other types of education and encourage employees to continue learning (page 10). Wolf and Waite offer touching case studies of learners who have flourished after being given a second chance. But perhaps the most memorable testimony is given by Natasha Robertson, a dyslexic London Underground train driver (page 6). Significantly, Natasha's account of her learning journey confirms that adults do not necessarily move to a better job immediately after they have improved their skills. Many employers cite this as a reason for not supporting workplace learning but research shows that this fear is misplaced.

However, as John Bynner's new study reminds us (page 13), workplace learning, on its own, will never be enough. Many of the most disadvantaged adults are unemployed or unwaged and therefore beyond its reach. One-off initiatives such as the Six Book Challenge (page 25) can help some of these adults. But only a sustained, national enterprise, such as Skills for Life, can offer the continuing support that may save them – and quite possibly their children – from long-term financial hardship and social exclusion. The road to community cohesion and sustainable well-being lies in addressing their needs. ▣

Ursula Howard, Director, NRDC

Made-to-measure rather than one-size-fits-all

Sue Southwood argues that learning providers must heed the wishes of employers and their workforce if the Leitch targets are to be met

It is now well known that the Leitch Review set ambitious targets for adult literacy and numeracy (see table below). What fewer people realise is that the onus to achieve these targets lies, broadly speaking, with employers.

As the Leitch Implementation Plan stated: 'We want to encourage all employers in England to take responsibility for the skills of their workforce, by making a Skills Pledge to support their employees to become more skilled and better qualified, with Government help'.⁽¹⁾

Some have questioned whether this employer-centred strategy is workable; employers tend to have other things on their minds – such as productivity, efficiency and competition – and may not agree that they should also have to close the nation's skills gaps. But there is no doubt that a major expansion of workplace learning is needed. A vast number of potential adult learners are in the workplace and it is unlikely that they will all find a suitable course at a local college that fits in with their working patterns, or that they will have the wherewithal and confidence to locate such a course even if it exists.

New demands at work

A recent report by SKOPE (2) found a sharp increase in the number of people strongly agreeing with the statements 'my job requires that I keep learning new things' and 'my job requires that I help my colleagues to

learn new things' (3). This evidence suggests that the workplace itself is becoming an ever more important driver for learning.

The same report also found that a startling 70% of people in work use email and those regarding use of the internet as 'essential' has doubled over the past ten years. The demand for IT skills is growing and with that comes the need for literacy and numeracy.

In addition, as life expectancy increases and the number of school-leavers falls, there are not enough young people to fill the new and replacement jobs that will need to be taken up over the next decade. Two-thirds of these jobs will need to be

filled by older people. And, if that is not enough, we all know that, if people don't have good skills, they are either excluded from the labour market or end up trapped in low-level or low-paid jobs.

Targeted support

The Leitch Review has been criticised for relying on qualification-based targets and ignoring the benefits of unaccredited learning – is a 'full fat' Level 2 qualification what employers and employees actually want? The answer is probably 'no'. It is more likely that each employee will have individual requirements. One will perhaps need support to use ratios to dilute chemicals, another to participate effectively in meetings, while a third might need help in recognising the difference between formal and informal writing when writing emails or reports. Targeted support will lead to improved confidence and performance at work and both employee and employer will see immediate benefits.

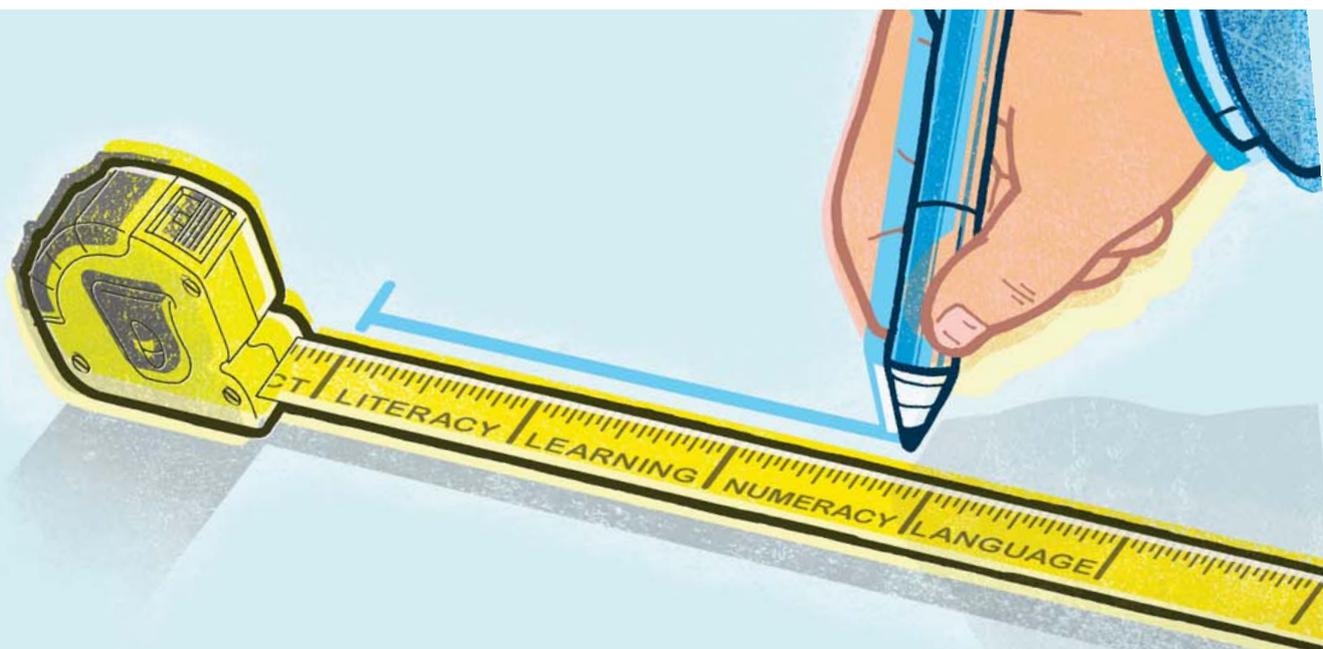
Qualifications play a useful role but they should not be the driver. Train to Gain (4) brings funding and puts an emphasis on workplace learning that is long overdue but a colleague who runs a successful Literacy, Language and Numeracy unit for a major employer told me:

'We've been contacted by six or seven Train to Gain brokers in the last few months. We listened to the first one in detail and decided it wasn't suitable for us; the company has agreed to continue funding our

The Leitch targets for England

	Adults qualified at minimum Level 1 literacy	Adults qualified at minimum Entry 3 numeracy
In 2005	85%	79%
By 2011	89%	81%
By 2020	95%	95%





bespoke provision. Subsequent brokers have been shown the door straight away.'

Giving customers what they want

Employers who decide that Train to Gain does not fit their needs will (if they are enlightened) either negotiate with providers for a better fit or set up in-house provision. There are some shining examples. Solihull College is working with a long list of employers to provide a range of solutions. They include Birmingham International Airport, John Lewis and the Royal Mail. Gill Hutchings, the college's Senior Director, suggests that some key factors for success are:

- secure a good relationship with the Learning and Skills Council
- be reliable
- look for opportunities
- provide robust quality systems
- be prepared to take a risk.

But it can be a hard nut to crack. How do we encourage more adults in the workplace to learn and how do we provide opportunities for them that are relevant, meaningful and accessible? Well, the Skills Pledge is a step in the right direction. More than 300 companies have already signed up and have promised to look at the training needs of all their staff. Employers that make a commitment to the Skills Pledge can access free

literacy and numeracy and first-time full Level 2 qualification courses.

A skills broker can then help the employer to produce an action plan that, in theory, should look at a range of options. But brokers need to recognise that most employers are not looking for the quick fix and should encourage realistic expectations. Some learners will be content with a brush-up course, while others will need serious and sustained support over a long period.

The role of the unions

Unions also have a role to play and union learning is growing (see page 8). Increasingly, unions and employers are working together to broker learning agreements and provide learning opportunities for all staff, at all levels. By 2010 there will be 22,000 union learning representatives across the country promoting training and learning in the workplace on behalf of union members. Over a quarter of a million learners are expected to progress through the union route.

A pincer approach is often championed – engaging top directors and using Union Learning Reps to connect with people at an operational level. Success requires all levels of an organisation to be engaged. If they are not, supervisors and middle managers can be 'silent blockers',

particularly if support and training require people to be away from their jobs. In addition, once a strategy is in place and working well, providers need to be flexible and prepared to adapt constantly to new practices and shifting priorities.

So, the challenge is clear. Learning providers need to:

- get key messages across in ways that employers understand
- listen to what employers and employees want
- not offer a 'one size fits all' solution.

Providers need to work together and share what works well but, above all, sometimes we may just need to take a risk. ▣

Sue Southwood is Development Officer (Literacy, Numeracy and ESOL) for the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education

(1) World class skills: implementing the Leitch Review of skills in England (DIUS 2007)

(2) SKOPE is the Economic and Social Research Council's Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance.

(3) Felstead, A., Gallie, D., Green, F., Zhou, Y., Skills at Work, 1986 to 2006 (SKOPE 2007)

(4) The Learning and Skills Council's Train to Gain service provides independent advice on training to businesses across England.

'I don't think I'm stupid anymore'

Sue Southwood talks to **Natasha Robertson**, a train driver for Transport for London, about her learning journey

Please describe your learning journey.

I didn't have to do much reading and writing for my job but the writing I did have to do was often incomprehensible and people would have to come back to me for an explanation. This made me feel stupid. I had to write memos and incident reports and I didn't know how to structure sentences and I

made lots of spelling mistakes.

At school I always found essay writing difficult and thought I might be dyslexic but it was never diagnosed. At work, someone suggested I take an assessment for dyslexia. Being diagnosed has made me realise I have to try harder than someone without dyslexia. I have to check and double-check my writing and, if it's important, I get someone

else to check it. I've learnt how to structure my writing.

When I became pregnant, I couldn't drive a train so I came to the Learning Zone to improve my skills. I started doing a computer course. I didn't know anything about computers and could barely send an email. I then did English, Maths and computers but found this was too much and dropped the maths and

Take away the stigma

David Fairhurst describes how McDonald's staff are developing a taste for learning

We have a very simple business model at McDonald's: if we hire people with the right attitude towards customer service, and we give those people the competence and confidence to deliver great service, we believe that we will earn the loyalty of our customers which will, in turn, generate the sales and profits we need to flourish.

Reflecting this business model, we have recruitment processes in place to hire staff on the basis of attitude rather than experience or qualifications. It's this that gives us a diverse and vibrant workforce, but it also means that some of our employees join us with poorly developed basic skills – a fact that might prevent these otherwise extremely capable people from



concentrated on the English and computers.

The English classes made me confident in myself. They changed the whole way I think about myself. I stand up for myself now. For instance, I have felt pressure to give up breastfeeding but I've researched it and I don't take their word for it. Before I would never have stood up to health visitors or doctors but now I feel that I can. I am more confident that I can teach my son and have even considered home schooling, especially if he is dyslexic and doesn't get the support he needs. I would never have done this before.

What has helped?

The teacher. Positive criticism, pointing out what I was doing wrong in a helpful way. I was always told I was



Platform for change: a dyslexia assessment helped Natasha Robertson to tackle her learning difficulties

doing things wrong at school but nobody ever told me how I could change or what I could do to improve. Also, my manager supported me and could see that he would benefit if I did.

What did you find difficult about learning?

Facing up to my weaknesses. Sometimes I found it soul destroying. Things took a long time to make



PHIL MEECH

achieving their full potential. And, in a business where 80% of restaurant management joined us as crew and over half of the Executive team started in our restaurants, full potential is a sizeable opportunity.

Investing in people

This means that, for McDonald's, an investment in basic skills is not just an investment in our people, it also represents an investment in the future of our organisation. This meant that, when we were looking at providing basic skills programmes within McDonald's back in early 2006, it made sense to see how we could encourage as many of our people as possible to take advantage of these programmes.

First, we studied what had been learnt by other basic skills initiatives and were struck by the number of reports of individuals who reported feeling 'embarrassed' to acknowledge and address their lack of basic skills. As we reflected on this observation, we wondered why there was a 'stigma' associated with poor literacy and numeracy, yet there was no such stigma with other areas of personal development. We



concluded that, if we set our basic skills training in the context of our wider personal development initiatives, we might begin to 'de-stigmatise' the issue.

An online community

We took this idea a stage further by looking at how we might create a relaxed, supportive environment where people would be encouraged to 'stick with it' if they found the going a little tough. So, in partnership with an employee group of over 150 individuals, we set about creating 'Our Lounge' – an online community for McDonald's employees inspired

by the success of sites such as MySpace and FaceBook.

Visit Our Lounge today (www.ourlounge.co.uk) and you'll find reviews of books, CDs, and films alongside employee discounts, information about holiday destinations, and a fantasy football league. There's also guidance on a wide range of issues including learning to drive, childcare, buying a property, and being a carer, as well as online training programmes to gain literacy and numeracy qualifications where your progress will be supported both by online tutors and, of course, the Our Lounge community itself. In short, it's a space with something for everyone.

Our Lounge launched in September 2006. Our hope was to get 1,000 employees signed up for Maths and English courses by the end of the first year. Today, less than nine months after the launch, more than 1,500 individuals have enrolled. ▣

David Fairhurst is Senior Vice President, Chief People Officer, Northern Europe, for McDonald's Restaurants

sense or for information to sink in. It helped that I could go at my own pace.

What barriers did you face?

I can't think of any but I wish I'd had higher expectations and pushed myself to achieve more. I think my expectations were quite low.

Are you going to carry on?

Yes, I've enrolled at the Open University on a Nutrition course. I'd also like to do a creative writing

course. I've had two articles published, one in a National Childbirth Trust magazine and one in Prima magazine called 'Duncan's Birth', and I won the BBC Football Stories competition. I feel a lot more accomplished. I can say, 'Look, I've done this'. My manager put up my football story on the noticeboard at work.

Do you think your employer has benefited?

Yes, because I plan to stay here till I

retire. It's made me more confident to deal with problems and I think my prospects for promotion have improved. I don't think I'm stupid anymore. There are new trains and things have changed, so when I go back I will have to re-train as a driver but I feel more ready to face this. ❏

Sue Southwood is Development Officer (Literacy, Numeracy and ESOL) for the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education

Year of progress for TUC

Judith Swift summarises the initial achievements of unionlearn

It is now over a year since we at unionlearn celebrated our launch so it is a good time to take stock of our progress.

Unions have a vital role to play in workplace skills – not only to engage and support learners, but also to secure commitment from employers. The key people are our army of 18,000 trained union learning representatives (ULRs).

In the past year:

- We reported 100,000 union learners. Of these, nearly 18,000 were *Skills for Life* learners who achieved more than 12,000 recognised achievements in ESOL, literacy and/or numeracy between them.
- Work with the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) on learner progression has been important and will help unions to ensure that union learners are not only helped to make the most appropriate first steps into learning, but that they are then supported to progress and develop.
- We have been developing unionlearn's strategic initial assessment and guidance framework – 'Supporting Learners' – to provide a more structured and quality-assured approach to



engagement, support and progression for union learners.

- unionlearn has developed tools such as the Quality Award for Providers and the unionlearn Climbing Frame to help ULRs support their learners.
- unionlearn has produced 'Skills for Life – the Six Pack', a set of practical handbooks to help ULRs in *Skills for Life*. These include guides in the following areas:
 - General skills for life
 - Speaking and listening
 - Reading and writing
 - Numeracy
 - ESOL
 - Dyslexia.

To find out more about these tools and handbooks for ULRs, please visit the unionlearn website at www.unionlearn.org.uk

■ We have continued to support union colleagues on sector skills councils and to help them factor in the experiences of ULRs on the ground.

Leitch Report

The TUC welcomes the breadth and ambition of the Leitch Report and has been working closely with Lord Leitch's team and DIUS. A major issue was that 'demand-led learning' must reflect the needs and demands of learners and not just of employers. Our experience through our ULRs is that this voice needs initial support so that it can make itself heard with confidence. We welcomed the recognition of the importance of *Skills for Life* in realising the challenging vision of Leitch.

Employer engagement

We are supporting the Skills Pledge and unions are showing commitment and enthusiasm not only to get 'sign-ups' but also to work with employers to use the Pledge as a mechanism for continuing improvement. The Union Learning Fund has already supported unions to make hundreds of Learning Agreements. Last year alone unions and employers made more than 200 new Learning Agreements. ❏

Judith Swift is unionlearn's union development manager

Renovation required

Fiona Freel summarises what their Lordships have to say about the apprenticeship system

A recent report by the House of Lords Select Committee on Economic Affairs has claimed that apprenticeship schemes are failing to provide young people, employers and the UK economy with the skills they all so desperately need.

The report, published on 20 July 2007 and entitled *Apprenticeship: a key route to skill* (1), sees the apprenticeship system as crucial in the UK, which has an excellent higher education record but a poor one when it comes to providing skills for the rest of the population. The report uncovers a series of shortcomings in the current apprenticeship system, especially when seen in comparison with similar schemes abroad, but goes on to make recommendations as to how it could be renovated and expanded.

Lacking functional skills

Many young people are leaving school without the basic functional literacy and numeracy required for apprenticeships. The Association of Learning Providers told the Select Committee that 'many young people leaving school lack the basic skills necessary for employment – they are all too often simply not ready even for Entry to Employment (E2E), the recognised pre-apprenticeship programme'. The Committee recommends that these functional skills be given much higher priority by schools and that the Government needs to take this forward with great urgency.

Inadequate information

Furthermore, schools and careers services are providing pupils with inadequate information about the opportunities offered by



Improving the flow:
the Government is seeking 400,000 apprenticeships

apprenticeships and other work-based training such as E2E, if they are told about them at all. Evidence from other countries suggests that, if young people in school are well-informed about apprenticeships and the qualities required for entry, they are more motivated to achieve while at school. To rectify this situation, the Committee recommends that, by the age of 14, all school pupils should be informed about the opportunities offered by apprenticeships and the work needed to qualify for one.

A clearing house for applications?

More also needs to be done to ensure that prospective apprentices are successfully placed. Professor Lorna Unwin of the Institute of Education, University of London, cited the example of British Telecom receiving some 15,000 applications for 80 apprenticeship places. The Committee strongly recommends implementing a proposal that the Department for Education and Skills first announced in May 2004, which was to create a 'clearing house' for school-leavers. 'This will match

prospective trainees to employers, providing for aspiring apprentices what the UCAS clearing system provides for aspiring higher education students,' the DfES told the Committee. The report also recommends that employers play a central role in providing and managing apprenticeships. This would have the effect in the longer term of enabling employers to accumulate training expertise, which would benefit both them and the apprentices involved. Direct funding to employers would also act as a powerful incentive to provide more places, enabling them to subcontract off-the-job training, which employers and apprentices currently have to access via local training providers.

Incoherent policies

Finally, the report points out that there has been a lack of coherence in government policy (past and present) concerning apprenticeship schemes, with initiatives being announced but not implemented, and no single government agency having sole responsibility for apprenticeships.

■ Skills Minister David Lammy responded to the Lords' report last month by calling on major public-sector employers to offer more apprenticeships to young people and adults, and break down barriers preventing their take-up. The move is part of the Government's drive to see 400,000 apprenticeships in England by 2020. ✎

Fiona Freel is Publications and Communications Officer at NRDC

(1) The report can be downloaded from www.publications.parliament.uk

Reaching the learners that other provision does not reach

Bus driver, care-worker or baker? People of all trades or none can benefit from learning opportunities at work, as research by **Alison Wolf** and **Ed Waite** shows

The development of workplace learning has been a key component of the national *Skills for Life* strategy but very little is known about the impact such provision may have. The 'Adult Basic Skills and Workplace Learning' project aims to assess this impact.

A great deal of data still remains to be collected and analysed but we can already report on two key themes:

1. the potential for *Skills for Life* workplace learning to engage learners who are not reached by other forms of provision
2. the wide range of motives that lead individuals to get involved.

Our sample shows that workplace participants are not 'your typical learner'.

- Almost two-thirds of them were male, compared to 41% in further

education as a whole and just 23% in adult and community learning.

- 54% had left full-time education with no qualifications – far more than for the workforce in general.
- ESOL learners represented a sizeable 35% of the sample.

- Our sample were also older – 40, on average – at a time when two-thirds of the FE population is under 35.

These figures suggest that workplace learning is likely to engage many learners who have not benefited from other forms of post-compulsory education. Our in-depth interviews confirm this and illuminate individual attitudes. For many, workplace learning is 'compensatory'; they are seeking to overcome the legacy of negative educational experiences.

Benefits and outcomes

The official rationale for workplace provision is very much an economic one, resting on the assumed productivity gains from *Skills for Life*. However, our research shows that, in reality, many factors are at work. Few learners – less than one in five – took

About the study...

The 'Adult Basic Skills and Workplace Learning' project is a five-year longitudinal study (2003–2008) (1). It has involved more than 500 learners in 55 organisations from a variety of sectors.

The researchers have conducted structured interviews with the learners, their personnel managers and their tutors. Each learner has been assessed early on in the course and follow-up interviews and assessments have also been undertaken. In addition, a sub-sample of 66 learners from 10 sites has been interviewed in depth



Outcomes of course (item by item basis)

Increased confidence at work	66%
Developed new skills	61%
Increased confidence outside work	59%
Met new people	58%
Affected how current job is done*	45%
Helped with use of computers outside work	33%
Helped with use of computers at work	27%
Made work more interesting	25%
Increased chances of promotion	11%
Increased chances of a better job	10%
Helped earn more money	2%

*40% elaborated: all reported a positive impact

Whether or not a course increased confidence at work was highly (and positively) related to whether a learner also thought it had helped them to do their current job better or had affected how they did the job.

a course because they expected it to offer promotion or higher earnings and, as the table opposite shows, the actual benefits that they report afterwards are rarely job-specific. New attitudes and confidence, as well as new skills, are what matter.

For example, council employee Chris Murphy had experienced a surge in confidence. 'It makes me feel really good...Now I don't have to keep sneaking around to find someone else to keep spelling it for me. I can try and have a go at it myself.' Others, like Mike Phillips, who works in engineering, described a broadening of horizons. 'I feel a lot better in myself, yeah more confidence. Because it's, I feel...well now I've got the first exam out the way and I'd like to take more and whatever's on offer you know, I mean I'm really into history.'

Several learners were boosted by the knowledge that their skills were not as poor as they thought and that others were 'in the same boat'. For example, Harry Jackson, who suffers from dyslexia, told us: 'I mean, I really do have a problem, and not wanting to sound nasty but actually it makes you feel much better because yours isn't as bad as perhaps some other people's might be... well I've learnt to have more confidence in myself, I suppose, and realise that it's not such a big issue and not to beat myself up about it.' For him, and for many other learners in the sample, workplace learning has been not only a source of greater skills but of a real change in aspirations and self-image. ▀

(1) The research is funded largely by the Economic and Social Research Council, with substantial contributions from NRDC in the early stages.

Professor Alison Wolf is Sir Roy Griffiths Professor of Public Sector Management at King's College London

Dr Ed Waite is a Research Officer at the Institute of Education, University of London



Voice of the learners

Faiza Anwar, born in 1977, left school without any qualifications and had a variety of temporary jobs before joining a bakery company in 2000. Her early education was impeded by her father's approach to education. In her father's opinion, 'women shouldn't go to college and women shouldn't work – they should get married...he wouldn't have allowed us to go to college, so for that reason I think I sort of stepped back from learning...and, you know, concentrating at school, but I kind of regret that now because... I know I could have done better...' Faiza undertook a literacy course at the bakery company and went on to various learndirect ICT courses at the company's online learning centre.

Trevor Woodford, born in 1982, left school at 16 with no qualifications. He currently works as a mobile caretaker for a London borough. Trevor undertook a workplace 'communications course' (literacy and computers) for three hours a week over five weeks. The course has responded to Trevor's changing approach to learning in the few years since he left school. 'I suppose when I was a kid I was always the clown of the class...now I'm more grown up I can actually sit there and like learn something, whereas before I was too, I suppose, too active...'

Many learners refer to the relative convenience of workplace learning. For example, **Gerry Howard**, who works for an engineering company, told the researchers 'You're already here...which is the beauty of things. I used to go to the college, I'd be working...look at my watch, got to go in a minute, got to go in a minute.' **Richard Brooks**, a bus driver, mentioned that he preferred taking a course in the workplace 'because at least it's in familiar settings as opposed to I've got to "find room J49 and Fred Bloggs will be in there waiting for you".' Some mentioned that learning with people of the same age was an advantage and others that the workplace was less intimidating. For example, **Pat McAdams**, a local authority care-worker, said: 'You're more relaxed but I think if you're going to college, it's like back to school again.' **Jim Bedford**, a bus driver, said: 'It's not all taken as serious as it would be in college.' By contrast, very few said they preferred the college environment. ▀

All names are pseudonyms

Upskilling Down Under

John Benseman describes how New Zealand is tackling the need to raise skills levels in the workforce

Like many other Western countries, New Zealand is currently grappling with the challenges of improving its levels of productivity as part of its economic transformation agenda. With national overtime figures already among the highest in the developed world and unemployment rates at a 30-year low (between 3% and 4%), the focus has turned to improving the foundation skills (1) of the workforce.

New Zealand's International Adult Literacy Survey (1996) results were slightly better than those of Britain, but still well behind those of the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands. To improve these results, workplace programmes are seen as a useful platform for raising workers' foundation skills and facilitating the uptake of technology, ideas and knowledge necessary for innovative and productive workplaces. These programmes are also seen as contributing to greater social cohesion by increasing income, improving people's employment chances and resilience, and increasing participation in other aspects of life, such as children's education and community activities.

Working in partnership

In March 2006, the New Zealand Cabinet agreed to the development of a strategy to upskill the workforce by focusing on the foundation skills of the low-skilled. As a result, the Upskilling Partnership project has been set up. This project, which will run for three years, will involve collaboration between stakeholders including employers, industry training organisations, providers, unions, government agencies and community groups wherever

possible. The project aims to establish up to 15 workplace partnerships. These will involve working with providers and stakeholders to trial a range of foundation skills approaches and interventions.

One year into the project, four of the 15 programmes are under way, with a similar number on schedule to be signed up before the end of the year. The projects are expected to cover a diverse range of approaches, contexts and learners in order to maximise the research base.

Evaluating the project

Each of the 15 projects will have a full evaluation programme designed to fit its particular characteristics. In



Shear necessity: New Zealand promotes innovation and new skills as well as traditional ones

addition to assessing the impact on learners' foundation skills (using an assessment tool developed for the NRDC workplace research project), the evaluators will gather evidence on the wider impact of the programmes – the learners' workplace practices and skills, their work-groups' performance, their family life, and community involvement. Summative evaluation activities will monitor key performance indicators such as absenteeism, paperwork completion

New issue of Update

NRDC Director Ursula Howard reflects on the New Zealand approach to skills development in the autumn issue of Update (Issue 23), the Skills for Life magazine produced by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills. Free copies of the magazine are available from DIUS publications (tel: 0845 6022260 email: dfes@prolog.uk.com)

and staff retention. Where appropriate performance measures are available, a return-on-investment analysis will be carried out.

Other initiatives

In addition to the Upskilling Partnership project, New Zealand has a number of other government-funded initiatives designed to inform foundation skills policy. These include an international research literature review of workplace programmes, a synthesis of foundation skills research carried out in New Zealand over the past five years, an evaluation of the Workplace Literacy Fund (the main source of funding for workplace provision in New Zealand) recipients in 2006, and a review of current workplace policy and programmes in the UK, the US, Canada, Ireland and Australia. All these reports will be completed this year. ▀

John Benseman is manager of lifelong learning research at the Centre for Continuing Education, University of Auckland, New Zealand

(1) The term 'foundation skills' is used more commonly than (but also interchangeably with) 'literacy, language and numeracy'. The former includes a broader range of skills including speaking, listening, problem-solving and IT.

A trajectory of disadvantage

John Bynner's latest research illuminates the predicament of adults with the lowest literacy and numeracy skills

Every practitioner knows that adults on the threshold of literacy acquisition, at Entry level and below, will have had a history of disadvantage. They may also have had more difficulty than others in coping with many of the demands of adult life, though that, of course, depends on the support they are able to draw upon in the family and the community.

Illuminating Disadvantage (1) takes much further our understanding of the challenges that such adult learners face.

From the scores of the 10,000 cohort members who completed literacy and numeracy assessments, we were able to identify those at QCF (Qualifications and Credit Framework) Entry level for literacy – 4% at Entry 2 or below and 4% at Entry 3. The figures for numeracy were much higher – 40% at Entry 2 and Entry 3, with substantially more women at this level than men.

The stark difference in the life chances of this group, compared with others higher up the QCF scale, is striking. Adults at Entry 2 and below, particularly in literacy, had substantially more disadvantaged lives. They were less likely to be in employment and, if they had work, were unlikely to have had any training or promotion. Women's family life was marked by early pregnancy and parenthood. For both sexes, early parenthood was often followed by partnership breakdown.

The origins of these difficulties could be detected in early childhood, providing the foundations of a 'trajectory of disadvantage'. Poor economic circumstances, and parents who themselves had poor basic skills and little understanding of how to help their children succeed educationally, appeared to lie behind the poor acquisition of visual motor skills, slow reading development, and the subsequent poor educational progression of cohort members.

The role of teachers

Although many teachers recognised these children's difficulties, many did not and, in the

About the research



The *Illuminating Disadvantage* research draws on the findings of the survey of the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70) (2) that was carried out in 2004 when cohort members were aged 34. This was the first time that the literacy and numeracy skills of the entire BCS70 sample had been assessed.

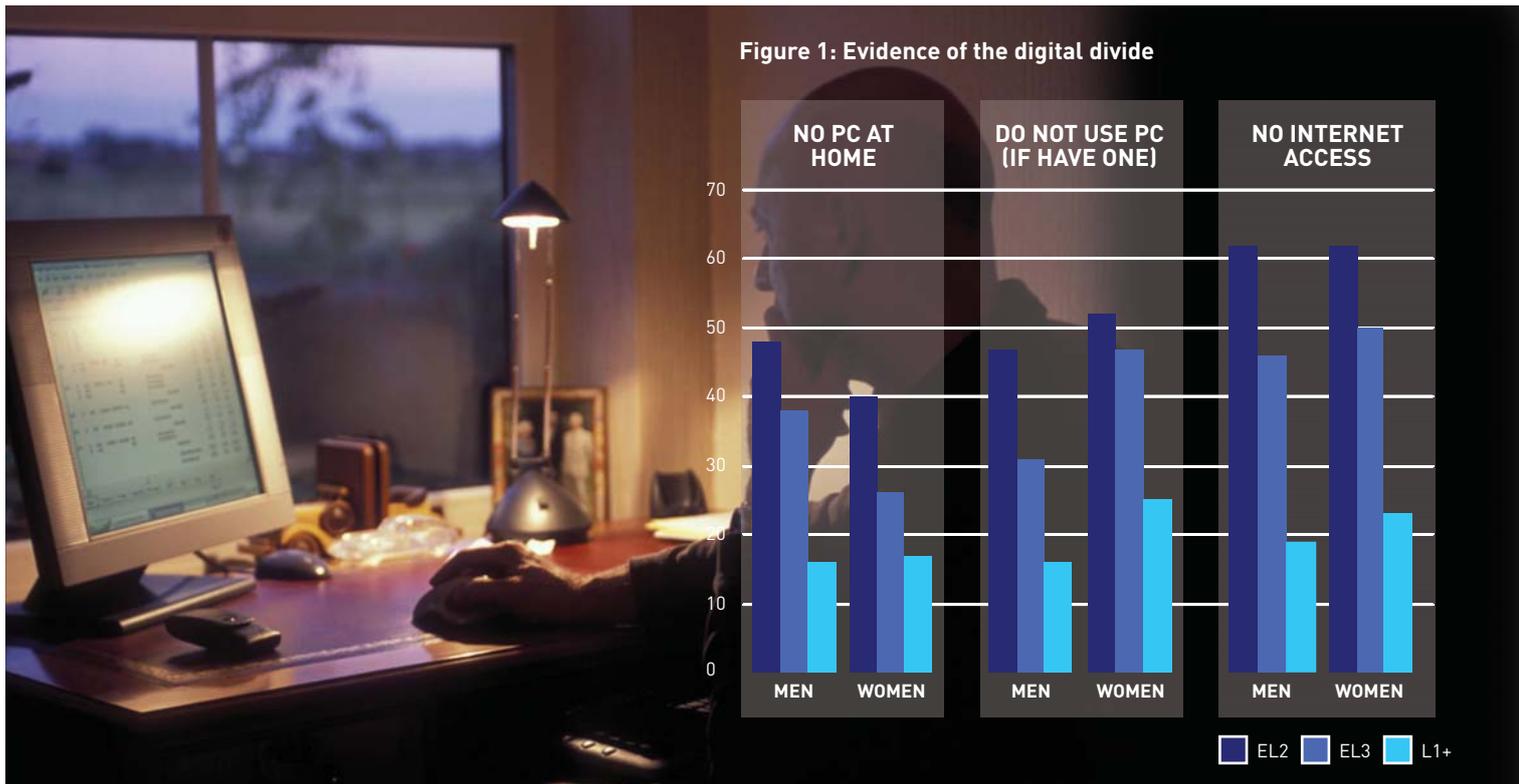
BCS70 contains a much wider range of data about this sample of British lives, charting development from birth through to adulthood. In *Illuminating Disadvantage* (1), which draws on the full range of data collected about the cohort's lives, we have been able to see

the staging posts in life chances where opportunities arise or obstacles get in the way. This is where support for literacy and numeracy in early life has typically been missing.

However, our findings need to be put in the context of another factor – geography. The varying distribution of adult literacy and numeracy performance from one region of the country to another raises a different set of questions about life chances and educational provision. National policy needs to address these questions.

case of mathematics, the majority of the children were left behind without any additional help.

The pattern was repeated from large primary school classrooms to secondary school where these children tended to leave at the earliest possible age, usually without qualifications and with low aspirations. Their disadvantages continued with entry into low-grade jobs with few prospects and excluded statuses in adulthood. →



These findings are, of course, statistical tendencies and we should avoid seeing them as implying causal inevitability. Many adults, through opportunities encountered in the workplace and the community, or through formal learning programmes, can gain the motivation to get back onto an educational track and, with sufficient support, are able to move their lives in more fulfilling directions. Personal resilience can overcome the adversity presented by poor basic skills.

Signals for policy-makers

Nevertheless, the findings show that strong tendencies towards social exclusion overall are present. This supplies a powerful signal to policy-makers that more needs to be done. From an early age, those with Entry level skills encounter obstacles to getting onto the achievement track. These obstacles continue to build up, making progression increasingly difficult. What may matter then is whether the relationships in which the individual is embedded (family, community and workplace) reinforce the problem or supply the support needed to transcend it.

As society’s expectations of what is needed in terms of literacy and numeracy skills rise, the pressure towards marginalisation of those without these skills grows. This means that *Skills for Life*, cast more perhaps in terms of lifelong and continuing education, should cease to be seen as a stopgap but rather as absolutely

The job market now has limited opportunities for people with poor literacy and numeracy.

essential to the wellbeing of every citizen in Britain and to society as a whole.

The digital divide?

The contemporary job market has limited opportunities for people with poor literacy and numeracy. One feature of this is the modern office, which relies on technology to undertake tasks that in the past were handled with typewriters, calculators, telephones and pencil and paper. Such ‘digitised’ work, of course, extends beyond office work. Every feature of a modern job is likely at some point or other to bring the worker into contact with computers.

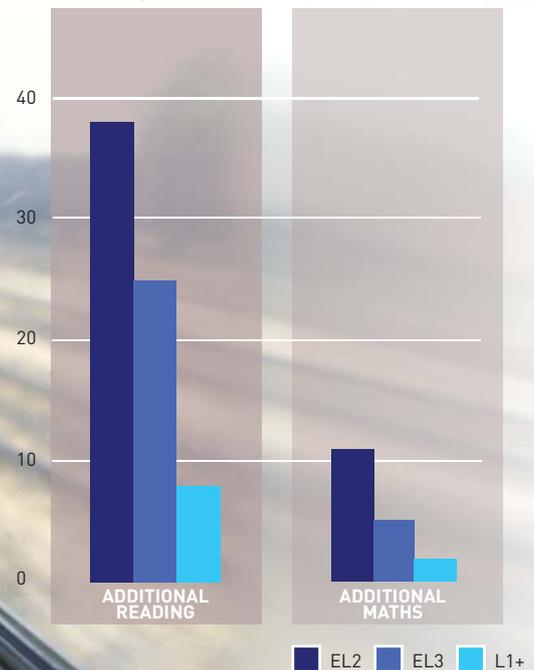
A notable feature of the occupational disadvantages faced by people with Entry level skills is that numeracy, which links to facility with computer competence, also comes at a premium. This helps to explain another of our findings – young women with poor numeracy, particularly, have difficulties in getting the office job that those who leave school early typically seek.

The extent of the ‘digital divide’ is indicated by the gap in access to the ownership and use of computers (see Figure 1). Thus, nearly half of our 34-year-old men with literacy skills at Entry 2 or below, and just over half of the women, never used a computer, compared with only one-sixth of men and a quarter of women with skills at Level 1 and above.

With respect to access to the internet, the gap was even larger. Nearly two-thirds of men and



Figure 2: Cohort members receiving additional reading or mathematics help at school at age 10 by adult literacy/numeracy levels



women with literacy skills at Entry 2 or below, and around half with Entry 3 skills, had no access to the internet compared with about a fifth of those with skills at Level 1 and above. The gaps were smaller for numeracy but still showed the same massive gradients across the skills levels. Notably, women with Entry 2 numeracy skills were particularly unlikely to have any access to the internet.

Where were the teachers?

Education begins well before children enter school, in how their parents prepare them in relation to learning to read. Such preparation involves the provision of toys and constructive play that develop the visual motor skills that are vital in preparing to learn to read. Two-fifths of adults with skills at Level 1 and above had been read to every day at the age of five, compared with one-fifth of those at Entry 2 or below.

The low level of family encouragement was also reflected in the children's own reading. Three-fifths of adults with skills at Level 1 or above had read 'often' when they were aged 10, compared with two-fifths of those with Entry 3 skills and one-third of those at Entry 2 or below. Very similar gradients were apparent for the numeracy groups, suggesting that early reading practices are critical in this area of adult skill as well.

Finally, interest in their children's education, as expressed by the parents when the children were aged 10, similarly showed a sharp disparity

between the adult skills groups. More than half the parents at Level 1 or above were seen by teachers as 'very interested' in their children's education compared with only a quarter of those at Entry 2 and below. For fathers, the numbers were even smaller, dropping to one-sixth of cohort members at Entry 2 and below.

This evidence of disadvantage was further reflected in ignorance among the parents (and, more surprisingly, among the teachers) about the progress the children were making. Just over half of the cohort members at Entry 2 and below had parents who had recognised their children as having 'some or great' difficulties with reading when they were aged 10, meaning that nearly half had not recognised any difficulties. Two-fifths of cohort members at Entry 2 and below in literacy had received remedial reading help at age 10, meaning that three-fifths had not. With respect to numeracy, only 11% of those at Entry 2 and below had had remedial help with mathematics from the school at age 10 (see Figure 2).

Thus, although the ability of parents and teachers to identify problems was greater in the low skill groups than in the higher skill groups, the overall picture was one of a remarkable lack of awareness of the accumulating problems the children were having and therefore neglect of the need to help them. ❏

John Bynner is Emeritus Professor of Social Sciences in Education in the Institute of Education and an NRDC project leader

(1) Illuminating Disadvantage, co-authored by John Bynner with Sam Parsons, will be published by NRDC in 2007.

(2) The British Cohort Study has followed up all babies born in a single week in 1970 from birth to adulthood, with new data about many aspects of cohort members' lives being collected at regular intervals.

From research to practice

Sue Grief describes five new publications from NRDC, co-published by NIACE, that focus on teaching and learning in *Skills for Life* classrooms

This series of five 'Practitioner guides' has been developed from the five 'Effective teaching and learning' reports published by NRDC earlier in 2007. They start from the research findings and explore what they might mean in terms of classroom practice in reading, writing, numeracy, ESOL and using ICT. (1)

Practitioners played a key role in the development of the guides, working with the researchers to interpret, develop and illustrate messages from these and other research studies and projects.

The five guides share a number of themes. They all:

- emphasise the importance of teaching that is flexible and responsive to learners and that respects, values and

builds on the skills and experience learners bring to the classroom

- emphasise a holistic approach that avoids the fragmentation of learning and encourages the use of meaningful activities

- encourage teachers to reflect on their teaching, take risks, and try out new approaches with their learners

- develop themes that arose in the original research studies and focus on specific aspects of teaching practice

- encourage teachers to make time to listen to and observe their learners, and to stand back and allow learners time to talk, think and plan, draft, check and review

- argue that opportunities for learners to work together with their peers can

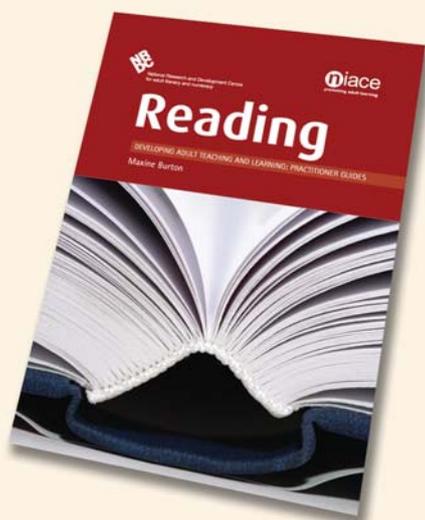
support learning in ways that individual worksheets cannot

- remind us all that 'a beginner reader is not a beginner thinker'. As part of a supportive group, and with the appropriate level of help, beginners in all subjects can engage in meaningful, challenging and relevant tasks.

Each guide:

- includes examples and case studies, some drawn from the original research, some from development projects and some from practitioners who worked on the guides

- provides signposts to further reading and resources, including useful websites.



Reading

Burton, M. (2007) Developing adult teaching and learning: Practitioner guides – Reading

One of the messages from the research project on reading was that *Skills for Life* teachers were not making use of approaches to reading that wider research has suggested can be effective. One of these methods, oral reading fluency, i.e. reading aloud to at least one other person, was the focus of the development project in reading and the guide shares its findings. Other approaches discussed include the use

of phonics, the language experience approach, and the explicit teaching of comprehension strategies.

A group of practitioners worked with the research team, reflecting on the findings of the research project. Their 'professional wisdom' is shared in a further fascinating chapter.

'Making good decisions about applying research findings also means understanding individual learners, groups and classroom settings.' McShane (2005)

Using ICT

Nance, B., Kambouri, M., and Mellar, H. (2007) Developing adult teaching and learning: Practitioner guides – Using ICT

This guide shows how digital technologies can be used to enhance teaching and learning in *Skills for Life* provision. It presents seven case studies, each of which reports on a trial of an ICT task that is targeted at specific literacy and ICT objectives. The case studies cover a wide range of

digital resources and include M-learning, tablet PCs, online games and voting technologies.

Four principles guided the designs of the tasks: collaboration between learners; encouraging learner autonomy; use of a variety of technologies; and the use of technology to construct artefacts that allow learners to experiment. These are explored in practice in the case studies.



ESOL

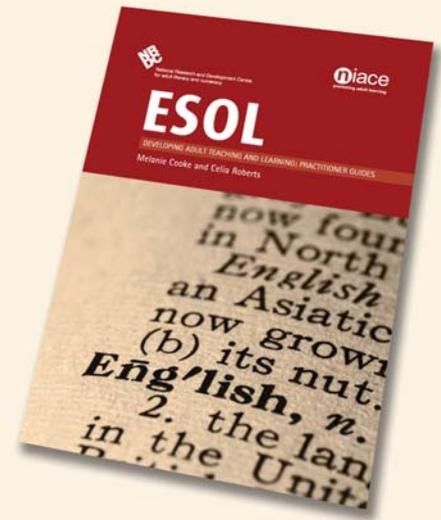
Cooke, M. and Roberts, C. (2007) Developing adult teaching and learning: Practitioner guides – ESOL

This guide focuses on the experiences of four teachers as they explored the kind of talk their learners produced in class and ways of building on that talk to help the learners become more effective speakers of English. Transcripts illustrate the learner talk; these not only bring the case studies to life but also give the reader a valuable opportunity to develop their own skills in the analysis of learner talk.

One teacher looked at how it is possible to open up space for talk and

make this talk the subject of the lesson. Another looked at ways of encouraging learners at Entry 1 to produce longer stretches of talk, moving away from controlled practice. Two further sections focus on helping learners to analyse and use western models of narrative and discussion. Readers are encouraged to undertake their own action research.

‘When learners speak “from within”, the language they produce is more complex and more memorable than that which results from controlled practice.’ (Cooke et al 2007)



Numeracy

Swain, J., Newmarch, B. and Gormley, O. (2007) Developing adult teaching and learning: Practitioner guides – Numeracy

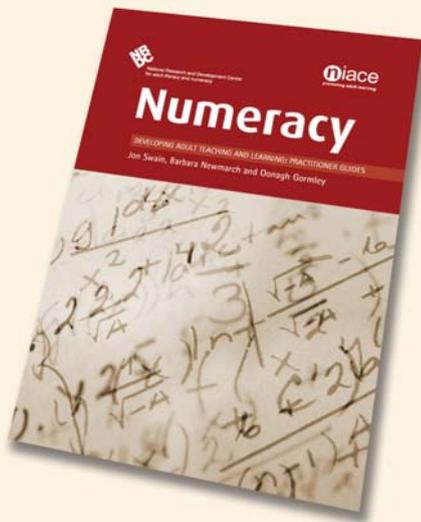
Drawing on the findings of the Effective Practice project on numeracy and the ‘Thinking Through Mathematics’ study (Swain and Swan, 2007), the numeracy guide takes the reader through the teaching process.

Teachers are encouraged to plan flexibly and to make connections between different elements of the curriculum. The use of formative assessment to ensure that you build on what the learner already knows is discussed and illustrated, as are the

nature and use of different types of questions and how to deal with mistakes and misconceptions.

This guide stresses the importance of using interactive approaches with learners and the value of collaborative activities.

‘Further research, in the “Thinking Through Mathematics” project, strongly suggests that, broadly speaking, practice is most effective when it promotes active learning and when the teacher uses “connected” and “challenging” teaching methods.’ (Swain et al 2007)



Writing

Grief, S. and Chatterton, J. (2007) Developing adult teaching and learning: Practitioner guides – Writing

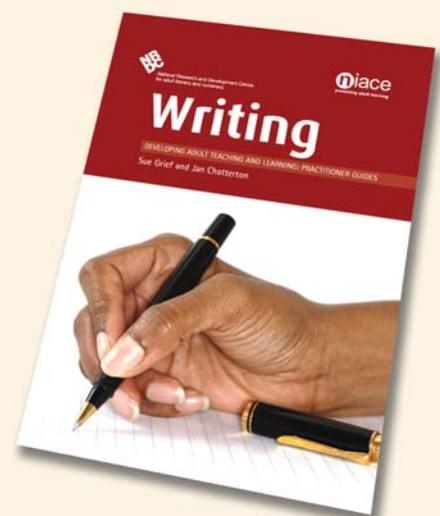
The key message in this guide is that, if learners are to develop as writers, they need to have opportunities to write – to put their own thoughts and ideas in writing. Meaningful writing activities can provide opportunities to develop both authoring skills, e.g. planning what to say and how to say it, and the technical skills of grammar, spelling and punctuation. The guide looks at ways in which teachers can encourage and support even beginner writers to express their own thoughts in writing and provides a range of ideas for

activities that teachers have found successful.

Other sections focus on making links with learners’ uses of writing beyond the classroom and helping learners to understand and experience writing as a process. The final section shares some of the findings of the development project on collaborative writing.

Two groups of practitioners worked with the researchers on the development of this guide and it includes many of their ideas and examples from their own teaching.

‘The only way to learn to write is to write.’ (Teeters 1998)



Sue Grief is an independent consultant with 30 years’ experience in adult basic skills

(1) There are also five Development Project Reports that complement the five guides. McShane, S. (2005) Applying Research in Reading Instruction for Adults. First Steps for Teachers. National Institute for Literacy. Teeters, P., (1998) You Can Get Published. Cincinnati: Writer’s Digest Books

Re-energising remedies

David Hunter, Chief Executive of Lifelong Learning UK, talks to **JD Carpentieri** about the role of LLUK in developing the skills of those who train the UK's workforce

JDC: I understand that LLUK (1) is one of the first of England's employers to sign a Skills Pledge.

DH: Yes. The Skills Pledge is a voluntary, public commitment by the leadership of a company or organisation to support all its employees to develop their basic skills, including literacy and numeracy, and work towards relevant, valuable qualifications to at least Level 2. In fact, we're exploring possible developments at Level 3 and beyond. We have a lot of people who have higher-level qualifications but we don't want to forget about the administrative and support staff. We must support them in gaining qualifications and having the opportunity to progress.

JDC: Can you identify some of the hurdles that sector skills councils are going to face in the next few years and ways in which they might overcome them?

DH: All the SSCs are about to go through a re-licensing process run by the Commission for Employment. It's going to be a real test, not just a rubber stamp, but it won't be only about meeting the needs of England. The situation is different in each country of the UK and each SSC will have to be much more focused on delivering what each country needs.

But the big issue will be that, as SSCs complete their sector qualifications strategies, what they will be requiring of further and higher education will be very different from what's being delivered now. We're doing an impact assessment of this at the moment. We're working through what it will mean in terms of what sort of skills the workforce will require in the future and what sort of training will be needed. We've already started a series of interventions in conjunction with the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS).

These include a 'lecturers into industry' scheme, professional updating, a graduate recruitment scheme, and a scheme to bring in leaders from business and industry. These interventions will re-energise the FE system.

JDC: I assume that LLUK will be taking a lead in pushing towards the skills landscape that Leitch envisages. What steps have you taken in this direction?

DH: We've set up the Institute for Learning, which is the professional body for the FE sector. We have developed the new standards for teaching and learning for England and Wales. We are

developing a qualification framework for teachers and trainers. We have developed the requirements for specialist teachers of literacy, numeracy and ESOL. All this will make a considerable difference to the

professionalisation of the sector. You need world-class trainers to develop a world-class workforce.

Also, the SSCs have a memorandum of agreement with the Association of Colleges that, as we develop qualifications, we will consult and take their views on board; they'll be closely involved in what we do. SSCs will be buddying with the sixty or so colleges that are leading in skills development. This is absolutely critical to making things work better because previously, as you may know, only somewhere between 6% and 11% of business and industry actually used the further education sector, with slightly higher figures for HE.

We're hoping that the new credit framework and associated funding will enable colleges to deliver what business and industry want. The problem in the past has been that colleges and other

You need world-class trainers to develop a world-class workforce

suppliers have been working to public service agreement targets that are whole qualifications rather than the bite-size chunks that business and industry wants. The credit framework gives colleges and other suppliers the opportunity to become much more flexible, because the funding will support this.

Also, as we all know, it's much easier for people who have been out of learning to take small steps at a time rather than make big jumps, and your success rate goes up.

JDC: I'd like to come back to the issue of the links between the SSCs, economic planning, and individual autonomy.

DH: You have to look at this regionally. For example, if your area is crying out for people to work in plastic injection moulding and to study science-based subjects, and the people in that area want to do media studies, you've got a real issue. Where does the workforce needed come from? These issues have to be dealt with regionally and by country and that's why a close working relationship between SSCs, the governments and the funding bodies for further and higher education are critical to getting the mix right for each country.

As to where the relationship between sectoral approach and regional approach meet, I don't think we're there yet. Regional skills partnerships (such as learning partnerships with universities) are obviously important. HEFCE and the universities are starting to pick this up whereas before they were saying 'it's not for us thanks' but the SSCs have a lot of learning to do about how to work with universities.

JDC: Leitch floats the possibility of making demands on industry if the skills pledges don't generate what we hope they will. What are your thoughts on that?

DH: Government is clearly saying to employers 'you've got to take upskilling seriously and if you're not prepared to do it we're going to take steps to make it happen'. But there are good examples in place already. Skillset (the SSC for media and communications) has a voluntary levy supported by their employers; that's just come in recently. ConstructionSkills are bringing in a similar scheme. We will also be seeing more emphasis on licences to practise. We're developing this for the FE sector in England and the Institute for Learning will be working that through.

JDC: Leitch says that some employers don't see the need for skills and also that training has traditionally been biased towards those who already have higher skills. How is this going to change?

DH: There will always be some jobs that will not require the higher skills yet can be done more efficiently and effectively if people are trained up to do them. The UK is leading on the development of standards. If you have a benchmark standard, you can say 'this is what a good person is like, this is what they do, this is what they need to know, this is how they perform'. Then you can look at yourself and say 'right I'm doing that, that and that but not that' and, if your employer's wise enough to help you with that benchmarking and say 'right we need you to be trained up for that skill', and rewards you for doing it, that leads to a much more positive working environment and an actual desire to upskill.



David Hunter: Employers who offer training are better at keeping their staff

At the moment some employers are afraid to upskill because they are afraid of losing people but, if they present a more holistic package of support and ensure that it's a place that people want to work, their fears will not be realised. People will say 'yeah I can go on in this company, I can move on'. Tesco, McDonald's, Marks and Spencer and others have developed this sort of package. People develop loyalty to their company; they stick with it. And, of course, the research findings in this area are clear: employers who train their staff have higher retention and lower staff turnover.

JDC: Finally, I'd like to ask about your thoughts on Skills for Life.

DH: *Skills for Life* are fundamental to employability. If you haven't got them you can't get on the first rung of the ladder or, if you are on the first rung, you can't progress. *Skills for Life* are critical to all the developments we've talked about. The Prime Minister will not realise his vision of a world-class workforce without *Skills for Life*. They are fundamental. ▣

(1) Lifelong Learning UK is the Sector Skills Council with responsibility for community-based learning and development, further education, higher education, libraries, archives and information services, and work-based learning.

Jenny Litster and Desiree Lopez explore some early messages emerging from the NRDC's 'Motivating Learners to Persist, Progress and Achieve' (PPA) project

Dogged determination not always enough

For adults improving their literacy, language and numeracy skills, persisting in learning can involve tenacity, perseverance, dexterity, and resourcefulness. 'At home,' one learner told us, 'I mainly do my homework when my husband's gone to bed. As you know, husbands can criticise you a little bit. I take as much opportunity as I can. I practise spellings while I'm washing up and I read out loud to my dog. He likes animal stories!'

Early analysis of the PPA data suggests that adults may not always be able to rely on the support of family, friends or employers, and have to grapple to balance their studies with the demands of daily life. Even so, our data reveal many inspiring examples of motivated, achieving adults.

- The numeracy learner determined to ensure that her children would not share her negative school experiences, when she was the butt of the teacher's jokes.

- The literacy learner 'dragged' to a three-day course at a residential course who loved it so much she returned home for only ten days in the next ten months.

- The ESOL learner doggedly searching out a language course, despite setbacks ranging from closed learning avenues to full waiting lists.

In all our work, learners amaze us with their capacity to persist.

However, initial analysis shows that personal qualities such as motivation, self-discipline, and the desire to achieve are not enough to ensure a meaningful learning journey. The concept of 'learner persistence' is rooted in the understanding that the barriers to persistence are multiple, and that all those delivering and supporting learning have a role to play in removing these barriers, helping directly where this is possible, and helping learners to develop their own support strategies where it is not.

'I practise spellings while I'm washing up and I read out loud to my dog. He likes animal stories!'

Barriers to persistence

Learning journeys can be long, complicated and precarious. It can take several years for a young person who is drink- or drug-dependent, for example, to shape small episodic steps of education into real and significant achievement. Some learners meet substantial barriers in their everyday lives. Issues with childcare emerge repeatedly in the data, as do conflicts with work and caring commitments, financial problems and ill-health.

Another group of barriers to persistence relate to the attitudes that learners bring to the course. These can range from resistance – the 'learning is not for me' feeling – and a lack of confidence, to a deep-seated dread of formal learning environments.

The initial analysis also suggests that aspects of the education system and organisational procedures can inhibit persistence at every stage. Enrolment can be bureaucratic and intrusive, demotivating people before they are through the door, and marginalising 'basic skills' learners. Targets for attendance and punctuality sometimes seem at odds with the realities of the lives of many adult

learners – those working shifts; asylum-seekers taking time out to attend Home Office interviews; parents who, at nine in the morning, are dropping children at school.

Organisations need also to liaise with other providers and with local employers to ensure that progression pathways are well signposted. Where there is no clear route to follow, or the path to achievement is foggy, learners stumble.

Early indications are also that the funding system and the increased focus on targets will emerge as a major barrier to persistence. Any squeeze on Entry-level and non-counting provision, for example, reduces the provider's ability to be flexible and responsive to all learners.

The persistent learner: choices and challenges

Early PPA analysis suggests that organisations, educators and policy-makers face two particular teacher-related challenges. First, teachers must have appropriate support, particularly in their roles of giving pastoral support and information, advice and guidance. Secondly, they must receive sufficient training in the activities that support persistence, most obviously in ICT training – PPA data suggest that, although many providers are not lacking in resources for e-learning, these resources are underused.

A clear message to emerge from the data is that, although an array of 'persistence' strategies can be identified, these strategies do not work for all learners. In fact, the approach that enables one group of *Skills for Life* learners to persist can actually inhibit others.

Flexible learning approaches such as drop-in centres and online tutoring can be a vital step on the road to learning autonomy to those for whom regular attendance is problematic. But, for learners working at lower levels, or who are 'at risk', routine and structure are the enablers. In addition, strategies seem to be sensitive to age and the life course. Some younger learners face different barriers from older learners. Learners with pre-school and school-age children require additional – and different – supports.

Supports for persistence

How are the organisations taking part in the PPA project responding to these challenges? Some examples:

- To set the tone for attendance from the start, one FE college operates a text messaging service, where tutors send reminders to learners an hour before lessons.
- To break down the resistance that keeps learners from progressing into college, one probation service participates in Adult Learners' Week activities and hosts its own biannual awards ceremonies to recognise the achievements of its *Skills for Life* learners.
- Some organisations run taster courses to help potential learners identify what they want to learn: the right 'fit' between learner and course is a vital support to persistence.
- One FE college makes its courses more accessible to busy adults by delivering all numeracy provision at

Levels 1 and 2 at a drop-in centre where learners always have access to specialist staff, a library, and ICT facilities.

Learners consistently told us that teachers play a key role in supporting persistence. This role – or roles, rather, for *Skills for Life* teachers wear different hats – makes its impact throughout the learning journey. One college cited teacher involvement in initial interviews and assessment as an aid to avoiding misplacement. The 'unofficial' flexibility that some teachers showed within the 'official' attendance policy was mentioned as a way of re-engaging learners who might otherwise drop out.

In the classroom, as well as effective pedagogic practice, learners particularly appreciated the teachers who created a relaxed, friendly, adult, learning environment where smaller achievements were recognised. The self-belief that comes from being able to do something you previously couldn't is a vital support in itself. As one learner told us, 'You need confidence to learn. If you start getting things right your confidence builds. Then you try something harder.'

At one FE college, tutors send text reminders to learners an hour before lessons



On the journey towards more learner-led provision, then, a holistic view of the learner is essential. For some learners, such as migrants whose future career prospects hinge

on their language acquisition, this may involve a system that acknowledges the high priority of learning, allowing for fast-tracking where it is beneficial. For others, those with complicated lives, or those just re-embarking on learning, we should acknowledge that learning is not the only priority, and often not the top priority. A persistence-friendly system is one where adults are supported while in provision, and enabled back into learning after any breaks. ■

More information...

The 'Motivating Learners to Persist, Progress and Achieve' project was commissioned by the Quality Improvement Agency. For more information about the research and development activities being carried out by NRDC and project partners, NIACE and Tribal Education Limited, visit the project website: www.stickwithit.org.uk

Jenny Litster is Project Officer at NRDC. Desiree Lopez is Research and Evaluation Officer at NRDC

Pinning down embedding

Helen Casey clears away some of the mythology about the embedded approach to Skills for Life learning

One of the interesting things about embedding is the way it continues to mean different things to different people. A college manager I met recently told me that her college 'doesn't do embedding, but prefers contextualised'. It took only a few questions to identify that what was being described as 'contextualised' would have been called 'embedded' if it had been part of the recent NRDC research. The teachers worked in teams, met to discuss learner progress, shared schemes of work and materials, but they did not team-teach.

In the early stages of the research it very quickly became clear that a wide variety of provision in different contexts was carrying the 'embedded' descriptor. Some of what was described to us as embedded provision really was not embedded at all, no connections were being made between the vocational and the literacy and numeracy learning.

The story of how the research team set about pinning down the characteristics of embedding is well documented in its report '“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’.

Earlier work on embedding (Eldred 2005) had described different models of delivery ranging from discrete *Skills for Life*, through contextualised to embedded. In this earlier conception, embedded was perceived as either team-teaching or as one dual/multi-skilled teacher 'doing it all' single-handed. The larger-scale NRDC research found a more



Joint effort: on the successful programmes, teachers worked in partnership

complex reality. We came across many instances of learners experiencing inter-connected teaching of vocational skills and literacy, language and numeracy, which was being achieved through all kinds of different combinations of modes of delivery. This sometimes involved separate but connected teaching of LLN, within a coherent whole which was understood by the learners. And in which the teachers worked together to support the learners.

On other programmes, despite the same elements appearing on learner timetables, the connections were not being made. Attendance at key skills or literacy and numeracy sessions was poor and learners struggled to see the relevance of these areas of learning to their vocational goals.

The research revealed impressive benefits from embedding, but it also showed that where learners were being taught by one teacher with responsibility for both vocational and LLN teaching, they were twice as

likely to fail in their literacy and numeracy assessments. So it seems that embedding works, but not if it is done as a one-teacher exercise. This is not to deny the brilliant dual-skilled and dual-qualified teachers that do exist. We found some in the research, but they were small in number, too small to have a positive effect on the 'twice as likely to fail' statistic quoted above, which reflects the many who were teaching beyond their area of expertise.

The creation of teams of dual-skilled and dual-qualified teachers is an option, but a resource-hungry one. The successful programmes we found were taking a more pragmatic approach, finding ways for teachers to work together, using their established subject expertise.

Embedding needs a team approach. Learners need teachers that know their subjects well, and who collaborate to support the integrated development of learners' skills.

Listen to the second half of the quote in the title of the research: 'You wouldn't expect a maths teacher to teach plastering... so why on earth do you expect a plasterer to teach maths?' Spoken by a vocational teacher who was concerned and worried at being asked to teach an area he knew he was not strong in, and in which he knew his learners deserved better (or more than he felt confident to offer). ▣

Helen Casey is Executive Director of NRDC

Eldred, J. (2005), Developing embedded literacy, language and numeracy: Supporting achievement. Leicester: NIACE

PRIME SITES

www.talent.ac.uk

A talent for survival

Brian Creese checks out one of the sector's longest-running websites

One of the biggest frustrations for those involved with *Skills for Life* teacher training is the lack of a fixed focal point. No sooner do you find a decent website that is up to date and authoritative than it disappears or becomes moribund. That is why the *Talent* (Training Adult Literacy, ESOL and Numeracy Teachers) website is such a beacon. In its seventh year, and expanding rather than contracting, *Talent* is a rare constant source of information for everyone working in the *Skills for Life* sector.

Launched in 2000 to support an East London project to increase the supply of LLN teachers in the region, it was initially funded by the London Development Agency, and has also received support from the Central London Learning Partnership, the Learning and Skills Council, the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit and, for a time, NRDC. It is currently funded by the London Strategic Unit (LSU) for the Learning and Skills Workforce – completing an impressive list of supporters.

Talent aims to offer London a high quality and impartial advice and information service for initial teacher training and continuing professional development for *Skills for Life* practitioners. Although intended to act as a regional reference point for London, it increasingly acts as a focus for the entire country, with courses and jobs advertised across the UK. One reason for this popularity is that it boasts a full-time editor, Lucy Oakley. Lucy works hard to keep the

courses, events and news up to date, moderates the discussions forum, manages the online community, runs an email and telephone information and advice service and generally gives the 22,000 registered users a central and human point of contact.

Shared resources

Lucy is particularly pleased with the growth of the shared resources section of the site. Registered members can upload resources for the use of others, while the community as a whole has a role in reviewing and commenting on them. The forum also acts as a central meeting point for *Skills for Life* teachers, debating national or local topics.

Useful and popular websites are often not the 'prettiest'. This is certainly the case with *Talent*. On first opening the site it seems, to my eye at least, to be crowded. Too many words, too many headings, too many options. It is clearly a site that has grown with need, but LSU is in the process of redesigning the site to make it a little easier to navigate. I hope they don't go too far, though; I prefer a certain amount of clutter to the pristine sites we often see.

Registering is advisable, as you need to be registered to share resources or participate in discussions, and the process is admirably straightforward. If you have jobs, events or courses to advertise, the process of uploading the information to the site is also very simple.

Talent is successful simply because it is very useful. A first point of call, *Talent* is usually the last as well. Not that all in the garden is rosy. Funding remains uncertain and, while the LSU is investigating trying to raise money in some limited ways from the site, the essence of its success is being comprehensive and free, so there is no question of a paying subscription. The best chance for *Talent* to retain its funding is for it to continue being one of the most used sites in the sector. Quite simply, if *Talent* were to close, someone would need to reinvent it. ❏

Brian Creese is Development and Quality Improvement Officer at NRDC

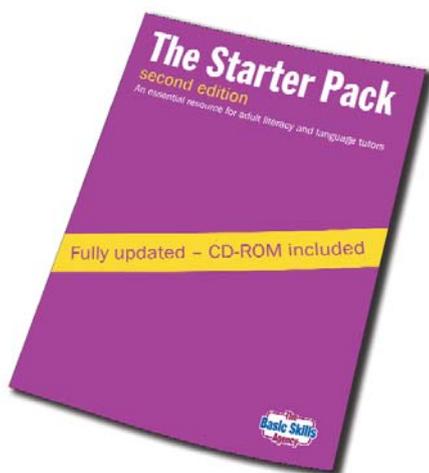


BOOKS

The Starter Pack**The Basic Skills Agency (March 2007)****1 85990 439 4****£75.00**

Reviewed by Sara Hattersley

It provides tutors with a firm basis for the learner-centred approach



Resources for teaching adult literacy have increased substantially in recent years and practitioners can now choose from a range of books, software and web-based resources to support their learners. This is good news, of course, but the volume of resources can be daunting for a new adult literacy tutor and there are very few resources that describe basic teaching methodology. *The Starter Pack*, in its new edition, does just that, providing an invaluable initiation into the teaching of reading, writing, spelling and speaking and listening skills to adults.

Good practice

Developed with advice from practitioners in the field, *The Starter Pack* contains all the basics that a new adult literacy tutor might need – and some helpful reminders of good practice for those with more experience. Clearly divided into coloured, subject-based sections (e.g. 'Speaking and listening'), each section of *The Starter Pack* follows a clear format that includes practical strategies and activities, advice boxes containing hints, tips and 'warnings' for tutors, links to effective ways to incorporate ICT, and a professional development record that prompts tutors to think about the themes explored in relation to their learners.

Section 1 deals with 'Developing learner autonomy' and is a general introduction that offers advice about how to encourage learners to plan and evaluate their own learning. This provides tutors with a firm basis for the learner-centred approach, on which they can build their planning for literacy learning.

Subsequent sections deal with literacy skills that, although not specifically referenced, reflect the key competencies outlined in the adult literacy core curriculum. Crucially, the themes of reading and writing are each divided into two sections, indicating the difference between the teaching of emerging and higher level skills. For example, Section 5, 'Developing writing skills', contains

strategies for helping learners write notes and messages, fill in simple forms and plan their writing, covering skills that are predominantly at Entry level. Section 6, 'Be a better writer', offers advice and activities for teaching drafting, paragraphing, extending sentences and using more complex punctuation, moving through from Entry level to Level 2 skills.

Suggestions and a rationale

The Starter Pack not only offers practical advice on strategies and classroom activities but gives a rationale for the suggestions it contains and ideas for furthering learners' work in each area. For example, Section 3, 'Developing reading skills', details the language experience approach, not only giving tutors ideas for carrying it out but also the reasons why, in terms of personal ownership, it is a valuable approach for learners. It concludes with a list of other language experience activities that tutors might try with learners (including the use of blogs) so, in a sense, *The Starter Pack* not only 'starts tutors off' but offers suggestions for development beyond the confines of its pages. This is also what makes it a suitable resource for more experienced practitioners.

Section 8, 'Using ICT in literacy teaching and learning', acknowledges the rise in importance of technology for learning. This section contains easy-to-follow advice about ways of using familiar packages (e.g. Microsoft Word) to create interactive resources for learners, including the use of photographs, sound files and drop-down boxes. Screen grabs show tutors what to do. Importantly, this section also refers to accessibility issues, showing tutors how to make paper-based and screen-based materials easy to read.

Layout and presentation

Overall, the layout of *The Starter Pack* is clear and accessible with good use of colour, illustrations and images of real life materials. It contains up-to-date references (e.g. Lynne Truss's *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*) and a helpful

'References and links' section, including websites. The sturdy ring-bound format makes this resource easy to skim through and photocopy. However, the key advantage of this new edition of *The Starter Pack* is the inclusion of a CD-ROM containing the full pack, allowing tutors to print, download or adapt relevant pages, select particular images, or follow the suggested web links directly. Using the same colour-coding as the pack, this makes *The Starter Pack* CD-ROM as accessible and user-friendly as possible.

There are few disadvantages to this resource. However, some themes could have been explored further. For example, although the section 'Developing writing skills' quite rightly includes an activity about text messaging, it would have been good to include a discussion, for tutors, about the issues that arise when using this activity with learners.

Finally, at £75 per copy, *The Starter Pack* is excellent value for money. The price may deter some individual tutors from purchasing it but, as a resource for literacy tutors to share in a department or organisation, it is invaluable. The addition of the CD-ROM makes it even more accessible for groups of tutors to use.

The Starter Pack, then, is an important tool for both beginner and more experienced adult literacy tutors, with good coverage of the themes, up-to-date sources and ICT references and, above all, a wealth of practical activities and ideas for modern adult literacy teaching. ▣

Sara Hattersley is Assistant Manager at the Essential Skills Centre, University of Warwick

Reading challenge will stir coffee-drinkers' interest

Tutors keen to get their learners reading this winter should check out their local library. Over 60% of library services in England will be launching a scheme designed to encourage new readers to give reading for pleasure a try, and pick up a free cup of coffee in the process.

The Six Book Challenge, in association with Costa Book Awards, invites learners to read six books and record their reading in a diary. Libraries will provide specially selected books and a range of incentives, including a £2 Costa coffee card, to keep readers going. They can also support creative reading activity around the Challenge, such as reading groups and book swaps.

The Challenge starts in January 2008. Those who complete it by the end of May will receive a certificate and can enter a national prize draw to win an all-expenses paid trip to London for two. But tutors can use the scheme at any time in 2008. There is also a separate draw for those in offender institutions who complete the Challenge, with a prize of free books for the prison library.

Pioneered by Hull Libraries last year, the Six Book Challenge has been trialled successfully by all 15 library authorities across Yorkshire and the Humber. The national version is being run by The Reading Agency as part of its Vital Link libraries and literacy programme. It will be delivered through libraries working in partnership with colleges, community adult education, trade unions, prisons and other organisations which work closely with emergent readers – adults who can read but who have yet to build

reading stamina and experience. It links with national initiatives such as Quick Reads and the BBC RaW campaign and coincides with the start of the National Year of Reading in 2008.



Shelf life: the challenge runs from January to May 2008

Recent research funded by the NRDC reinforces the role of the library in promoting reading for pleasure to learners. *Practitioners leading research: Weaving reading for pleasure into the Skills for Life Adult Literacy Curriculum* by Sue Oakey is based on action research carried out by Essex Adult and Community Learning working with Essex Libraries. The findings demonstrate that reading for pleasure supports the development of self-confidence, motivation and the acquisition of functional literacy skills. The research also confirms that the support and resources of the library service make it very easy to include reading for pleasure in curriculum delivery. ▣

See www.sixbookchallenge.org.uk or contact genevieve.clarke@readingagency.org.uk for more information.

Letters

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

Train to Gain

We were interested to read Judith Hinman's article in *reflect* 8 about the difficulties in offering *Skills for Life* through Train to Gain. We have been working at both national and regional level supporting *Skills for Life* engagement and achievement since the first round of the Employer Training Pilots in 2002.

We identify the following challenges.

- Learning and Skills Council restructuring and reliance on short-term contracts, together with the timing of the tendering processes for Train to Gain in 2006.
- The setting of low *Skills for Life* targets in the first phase of Train to Gain.
- Lack of clear understanding of, or commitment to, *Skills for Life* by skills advisers.
- Lack of understanding and confidence to 'sell' *Skills for Life* as relevant to the skills offer.
- Strict constraints on funding and



provision that can prevent the delivery of some employer-led models.

- Constraints in meeting employer and employee requirements for employees not eligible for Train to Gain due to low initial skills levels.
- The targeting of funding on full qualification-bearing courses; this may not allow employer/employee initial needs and requests to be met.

- Constraints when an employer's preferred provider does not hold an LSC contract.
- Providers not offering *Skills for Life* skills checks and initial assessment appropriately (or not offering them at all).
- Providers not offering sufficient flexibility or sufficiently targeted training, due to funding or other constraints.

The situation has been frustrating, especially in the light of so much identified good practice. We understand that there are to be some changes in the Train to Gain offer relating to *Skills for Life*; this will be very welcome. We shall continue to support work to ensure that appropriate and skilled marketing leads to truly employer-led quality provision.

**Lynn Mulford
Dawn Walker
Walker Mulford Associates**

Not the full Level 2s

Thank you for your article in *reflect* 8 ('Employers need to be convinced') about the difficulties of offering *Skills for Life* via Train to Gain. I agree that there are difficulties to be addressed in this provision, that the funding for *Skills for Life* provision allows for only very short courses that are unable to make any significant difference to deep-seated literacy/numeracy difficulties, and that employers are often not willing for learners to receive literacy/numeracy provision in work time.

But I feel also that there are more fundamental difficulties with Train to Gain. In my experience in the co-ordination of *Skills for Life* provision

within Train to Gain for a London college, I have sometimes been dismayed to hear employers explain that NVQ Level 2 courses were started, delivered and completed within a matter of weeks. It is hard to understand how such a qualification represents the equivalent of five good GCSEs. What disturbs me though is not just this mismatch between qualification weight and course content, but that it sends a very misleading message to employers. If employers see their staff gaining a full Level 2 qualification in a matter of weeks, they are understandably less open to the prospect of employees engaged in basic skills learning over what is likely to be months (if they want to see significant change).

Furthermore, it is hard to understand how the snappy provision I have seen under Train to Gain, both on the vocational and the *Skills for Life* side, can in any real sense be contributing to the upskilling of the nation's workforce. This is not upskilling but handing out qualifications for skills that learners already have.

I feel that, in these early stages of Train to Gain, it is really important to take an honest look at what is happening on the ground and at the impact it is having.

**Skills for Life manager
North London college of FE
Name and address supplied**

NRDC in print



Teaching and learning in practice: project reports

Using voting technology for assessment
Sally Betts and Maria Kambouri

'Bestimation': Using basic calculators in the classroom
Barbara Newmarch, Valerie Rhodes and Diana Coben

Collaborative writing
Sue Grief

Reflection and action in ESOL classrooms
Melanie Cooke and Celia Roberts

Oral fluency for adults
Maxine Burton



Developing adult teaching and learning: Practitioner guides (co-published with NIACE)

ESOL
Melanie Cooke and Celia Roberts

Numeracy
Jon Swain, Barbara Newmarch and Oonagh Gormley

Reading
Maxine Burton

Using ICT
Barbara Nance, Maria Kambouri and Harvey Mellar

Writing
Sue Grief and Jan Chatterton

The following four new practitioner guides will be available shortly:

Working with young adults
Bethia McNeil

Responding to people's lives
Yvon Appleby and David Barton

Reaching out: relating lives and learning in adult literacy, language and numeracy teaching in the community
Yvon Appleby

Embedding
Helen Casey, Mary Conway, Sue Grief and Desiree Lopez

The publications listed here can be ordered from the publications page of the NRDC website www.nrdc.org.uk.

To be sent free copies and/or to be added to our mailing list, email us at publications@nrdc.org.uk

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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