



National Research and Development Centre
for adult literacy and numeracy

Practitioners leading research

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

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

Attracting new learners

Understanding purpose and perseverance in learners

How practitioners can engage in research

Creativity in the Skills for Life classroom

Resources to support practitioner research



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Round One Report



The first report from the
Practitioner-Led Research
Initiative is entitled: *New ways of
engaging new learners: lessons
from round one of the practitioner-
led research initiative.*

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A report of action research projects from the NRDC Practitioner-Led Research Initiative (PLRI)

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Preface

Engaging practitioners in research and encouraging reflective practice is central to NRDC's remit. The Practitioner-Led Research Initiative (PLRI), which ran from 2004 to 2006, supported 17 groups of literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) practitioners in designing, developing and completing hands-on research and development projects. These projects addressed policy priorities in Skills for Life and important messages have emerged which will help in the future development of the strategy. This report summarises key findings and explores the lessons learnt from the process.

NRDC is committed to bringing together the in-depth knowledge that practitioners have from their experience and reflection on practice with rigorous research and development methods. Well-supported and resourced practitioner research is best placed to develop practice because it encourages critical and reflective inquiry. It throws light on, explores and challenges accepted practices and received wisdom from the inside as well as the outside. It provides the opportunity to recognise and use practitioners' knowledge, and to identify and promote innovative practices, which mushroom constantly in so many places. Practitioner research also develops the transferable skills needed to underpin good practice and quality improvement.

NRDC has engaged practitioners in research in many ways, involving teachers and others at all stages of the research process, from design to data gathering to analysis of findings on many large empirical studies. We gain knowledge from many kinds of research, including small-scale action research and development projects of the type represented by the PLRI, and by engaging practitioners in developing better practice guidance based on the evidence produced.

The PLRI has been central to building capacity in literacy, numeracy and ESOL research and practice. As part of this project and others, NRDC has been able to bring together policy-makers, practitioners and researchers in seminars, conferences, and also through our research and practice-focused magazine *reflect*, to share knowledge, strengthen networks and inform policy.

NRDC's work is part of a wider movement towards developing practitioners as researchers/developers and practitioner-led research. This movement is alive and well, but needs energy, commitment and persistence to keep it going. The Learning and Skills Network (then LSDA) founded the Learning and Skills Research Network back in the 1990s, to engage practitioners across post-16 learning. Thanks to practitioners and researchers working together it has now been revived. Those interested in finding out more should contact Andrew Morris or Yvonne Hillier, whose details are provided in the resources section of this report.¹

In the literacy, language and numeracy field, RaPAL (Research and Practice in Adult Literacy) was established in 1985 and is still going strong, with conferences, seminars and its own journal. In ESOL, NATECLA (National Association for Teaching English and other Community Languages to Adults) plays a similar role, and the international numeracy group, ALM (Adults Learning Mathematics) offers a worldwide network, bringing post-16 maths and numeracy researchers and practitioners together, with an annual conference providing the cornerstone of its activities.

We hope you find the reports in this publication informative and thought-provoking. The findings from the research offer clear messages that chime with those from larger empirical data. They are particularly relevant in terms of reaching people who have been turned off by formal learning; in showing how to make numeracy an attractive option for learners; in demonstrating the positive possibilities of creativity in the classroom alongside formal curricula; in identifying approaches which support progress and persistence ... and much more.

NRDC will continue to work proactively to find new ways to encourage practitioners to engage with research and development. Please contact us if you are interested and can find time in your busy lives for this exciting, innovative and important work. ■

Ursula Howard
Director, NRDC

¹ See page 102



Part 1





The PLRI Reports

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Introduction

This report provides a detailed summary of the Practitioner-Led Research Initiative (PLRI) which ran for three years between 2004 and 2006. Each round funded up to six nine-month projects selected through an open competition (see Appendix 4). The initiative offered an opportunity for groups of practitioners to engage in hands-on research. Groups were invited to identify research questions, design and carry out projects with structured support from the research community. The initiative was funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) as part of the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) and by the European Social Fund (ESF). It was coordinated by a team at Lancaster University with the support of a national advisory group comprised of representatives from the field. This report outlines the reasons for the PLRI, the main findings that emerged from the research projects and the experiences of those who took part in it.

One of the underpinning strategies of NRDC is to 'build research capacity, reflective practice and career development through the systematic engagement of teachers and other practitioners in the centre' (NRDC, 2003: 13). The overall intention of the PLRI is to publicise and support this strategy by drawing in a new constituency of beginning practitioner researchers. The aims were explained to applicants as being to:

- build research capacity in the field;
- produce findings which will give new insights into adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL;
- embed the activities of NRDC in practice;
- strengthen networks linking practice, research and policy.

Drawing on a model of partnership working, the initiative was intended to be of benefit to practitioners and their organisations in a number of

ways, providing an opportunity to put original research ideas into practice, offering the chance to step back and reflect on practice, and systematically to explore day-to-day issues arising from the Skills For Life policy.

Within the scope of a broad theme, practitioners were invited to pose researchable questions that would be useful to them, their employing institutions and the local communities they serve. Ideally research topics would be related to existing activities and issues that needed to be addressed by organisations.

The theme for the three rounds

Each round had a clear theme. These were:

Round One

'New ways of engaging new learners'

Round Two

'Understanding purpose and perseverance – learners' aspirations and commitment to learning'

Round Three

'Creativity in teaching and learning'.

The themes were intentionally broad, offering scope for groups to pose many different questions, whilst addressing a key topical issue relevant to the Skills for Life strategy. It was important that applicants recognised that this initiative was for research, not for activities that are purely development focused. Research was defined as a systematic documenting of activities, through collecting and recording new data so as to develop an underpinning framework for future development, producing information for future use, not simply a change in present provision.

How the PLRI worked

The bidding process

Applications were invited from locally based 'research groups' of between three and six

The initiative offered an opportunity for groups of practitioners to engage in hands-on research.

practitioners based in any region of England. Collaborations between institutions were strongly encouraged, including links with universities. However, the initiative stipulated that the lead applicant must be directly involved with programmes delivering literacy, numeracy and ESOL programmes in any organisational setting. Ideally, groups would be made up of practitioners based in the same institution or within a local 'travel to learn' area in order to minimise communication problems and allow for a local support group to develop.

Each group was required to include a designated Research Support Person (RSP) whose role would be to support day-to-day project activities, arrange and/or deliver research methods training and coordinate report writing. Groups were also expected to link into existing local and regional networks (NRDC, ABSSU, LSDA (now LSN), NIACE and Local Learning Partnerships) by setting up an advisory group for their project.

A budget of up to £10,000 was awarded to each successful project under specified headings. Half of this was paid at the start of the project and the remainder on completion of the project report.

Co-ordinating the initiative

Each round of the initiative was led by an operational team of three: Mary Hamilton, Anita Wilson (Paul Davies for Round Three) and Kathryn James at Lancaster University, supported by an Advisory Group made up of a broad range of professionals in the field and representatives from NRDC. (See Appendix 3 for a full list of members.) The operational team were responsible for day-to-day management of the initiative. The advisory group was responsible not only for monitoring the progress of the initiative and the projects within it, but also for providing a group of critical readers who

assisted in the selection process by reading and shortlisting applications. The final selection panel was also drawn from the advisory group with a remit to ensure as wide a range of institutional settings, specialisms and geographical locations as possible. In addition, each project was allocated a critical friend, often drawn from the advisory group or recommended by them, whose specific area of expertise was felt to be of particular value. Guidelines were drawn up for the role of academic advisor (see Appendix 6). Applications to tender for the first round of projects went out in the summer of 2003.

Links and networks

The projects were not undertaken in isolation. At the initial briefing day, teams were given information about other practitioner-led research initiatives (Research in Practice in Adult Literacy (RaPAL) and a similar Canadian network in British Columbia – RiPAL, for example) and research support personnel offered links to other relevant research and theoretical frameworks. Additionally, the teams were informed about a previous NRDC initiative where teacher-researchers had been attached to existing funded projects (see Ivanič, 2004; Mellor et al., 2004; Tomlin et al., 2006). Teams were also alerted to other research networks in their area such as the Northwest Skills for Life Research forum.

It was hoped that teams might be able to collaborate with one another, but demands of time and the short duration of the projects meant that in the event, the possibilities for this were limited. A number of projects were, however, linked to wider initiatives and national support frameworks. For example, Blackburn and Darwen was linked to the EQUAL project and the Campaign for Learning. The Derbyshire team had additional training support from NIACE and the Somerset workplace project

Each project was allocated a critical friend whose specific area of expertise was felt to be of particular value.

was linked to the Somerset Learning Partnership. The Essex project on reading for pleasure was linked into a National Literacy Trust funded initiative called 'The Vital Link'.

Project teams came together for interim meetings at the halfway point in the research where ideas were shared and progress noted. End of project conferences provided the opportunity for teams to present their findings to a large audience by designing interactive presentations and summarising their findings by means of posters.

All projects were visited at least once by their critical friend and/or a member of the Lancaster team. Projects were given a template for writing their final report and were encouraged to submit drafts to the Lancaster team for comment.

Despite the demanding timescale and the wide geographical spread it is impressive that teams remained consistent. No group had to drop out.² Everyone maintained a presence throughout the life of the projects. Almost every project was represented at the interim meetings and all came to the final conference. All delivered their reports on time. Teams maintained contact both within their partnerships, with the co-ordinating team at Lancaster, the critical friends that were appointed to them and to the research support teams that they had chosen to support them.

Links were made between the various round projects – for example one of the first round projects contributed to the briefing day for the second round and other teams offered to share their experiences of managing and fulfilling the requirements.

Making changes through practitioner-led research

One of the hopes for the projects reported here was that they would lead to change in the field and all projects were asked to comment on the impacts of their work in their reports.

The wider literature reporting on experiences of

practitioner research from the UK and elsewhere suggests that it can be an effective way of engaging with practitioners. For example a recent review of the US literature concludes that practitioner involvement is achieved more effectively through active engagement with research processes, collaboration and dialogue with researchers, rather than simple exposure to existing research findings. The evidence suggests that teachers need to talk together about and reflect on research through local groups and networks. The more sustained the involvement with research, the more fully practitioners understand it (Bingham and Smith, 2003: 10)

The evaluations of a recent similar initiative, the LSDA (now LSN) regional projects by Lin Norman, confirm these findings. They suggest that a number of issues are important to the success of practitioner research projects: paid time for practitioners to engage with the research activities; mentoring and advice in relation to research skills; strong central guidelines and a clear structure to the projects; local peer support, effective project management and good communication between all partners (Norman, 2001, 2002, 2003). Interest in the topics of research needs to be high in order to sustain activity which is typically underpinned by a large amount of 'gift time'. The evaluations were generally positive in finding that the research involvement strengthened regional collaborations and partnerships, produced results with potential practical value and increased enthusiasm for research among the participants (see, for example, Ward and Edwards, 2002).

However, the findings from the LSDA's programme concur with research in the US and in Australia that it is easier to inspire individual change but more complex to impact on the field as a whole. 'Change' can mean a variety of things, all of which can be valuable to the field. Previous writers, such as David Middlewood and his colleagues (Middlewood et al. 1999), have distinguished between:

- changes of attitude, conceptualisation and

² The only exception to this was the one project we lost at the commissioning stage because the proposed project director moved jobs and no-one in her organisation could be found to replace her. Only five, instead of six projects were commissioned, therefore, in Round Three.

- understanding of the issues under study;
- small-scale, specific and local embedding of results; and
- longer term organisational and culture change impacting on policy and practice.

David Middlewood comments:

In most cases researcher practitioners are not likely to disseminate their findings beyond their own institution. Research work intended to lead to institutional improvement usually originates from the identified needs of that particular institution and dissemination may only be the first phase of the implementation or embedding of change.
(Middlewood et al., 1999: 167)

In other words, evidence in and of itself does not make change. It is crucial how and who disseminates this evidence, who feels it to be important and how it is understood to be relevant to practice. These are complicated processes that are unlikely to be affected by a single practitioner's experience of research. In organisational studies of culture and change it is well known that the support of 'key change agents' including senior management is crucial to embedding the findings of projects. By working with groups of practitioners rather than individuals, and by encouraging teams to identify topics of concern with their organisations, it was hoped that such embedding would be easier.

Why practitioner involvement is important

All social policy research now aims to involve user groups and to improve the impact of research. One vital strand is to build research capacity and awareness through engagement with the process of research itself.

NRDC's rationale for supporting practitioner involvement in its research programme is stated in its strategy document. One of the underpinning strategies of NRDC is to 'build research capacity, reflective practice and career development through the systematic engagement of teachers and other practitioners in the centre' (NRDC, 2003: 13). Engagement of practitioners at all stages of the

Centre's work is a particular focus of Programme 4 (professional development) and Programme 5 (content and infrastructure). The strategy document emphasises that impact is viewed as an iterative process occurring throughout the research cycle, not simply a matter of dissemination findings at the end (NRDC, 2003: 17).

Systematic engagement of learners, tutors and managers can make important contributions at each of the common decision stages of the research process: aims, methodologies, data collection, analysis, interpretation, dissemination. They are going to be the ones most affected by the outcomes of the research, and by the processes by which data is collected. In addition, learners, tutors and managers are likely to be well situated to collect and interpret many forms of data, since they are colleagues and peers of those whose views are being sought.

Engaging practitioners in research will ensure that the work done is relevant and geared to the needs of adult learners, and that its value is recognised by teachers. It will increase the sense of ownership of, and commitment to, the research itself, and to any teacher development and other policy and practice proposals which are based on the research.

Involving tutors and managers in conducting the research will in itself be a form of professional development for them. Wherever possible practitioner research activities will be credited toward recognised professional qualifications

The PLRI was designed to contribute both to continuing professional development and to embedding findings from the centre's research projects in the field. PLRI places participants in research projects being carried out by the NRDC and aims to:

- Develop a highly trained pool of ABE professionals who will go on to support other tutors in further training and research activities.
- Facilitate the growth of teacher-researchers in

Impact is viewed as an iterative process occurring throughout the research cycle, not simply a matter of dissemination findings at the end.

the field and encourage a research-led agenda for the teaching of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL.

- Improve and extend dissemination of the research base in order to support practitioners more fully in their work, and enable them to draw on this research in their practice.

An important aspect of this initiative is to engage providing organisations in the programme, thereby increasing their involvement in and awareness of research activities, agendas and outcomes, providing essential infrastructures for support including release from teaching to allow practitioner researchers to carry out their work, becoming more active in disseminating and acting on research outcomes.

Outline of this report

Section 2 is a summary of findings from the studies carried out under the umbrella of the PLRI are presented and in Section 3 we share our experiences of managing and supporting a major Practitioner Research programme. Section 4 summarises the experiences of the practitioner researchers themselves and those of the research support people who were there to help them. Section 5 outlines how the groups have and are continuing to communicate their findings and Section 6 presents the main conclusions from the initiative and makes some recommendations about the future for practitioner research. ■

Summary of findings

Over the three years of the initiative the 17 studies produced a substantial number of findings. To an extent a very large number of these were consistent with the range of findings prevalent in the research literature on adult learning in general and on NRDC's website in particular, such as the important role confidence and self-esteem play in successful learning. Consequently, the summary which follows pays particular attention to those findings which were of particular interest to the practitioner research groups and to which they wanted audiences to pay most attention.

Round One – 'New ways of engaging new learners'

The Skills for Life strategy has undoubtedly raised the profile of basic or essential skills learning. However, the Round One reports showed there are still major barriers to overcome in order to attract those learners who have little tradition in signing up for courses. On a positive note, they also presented encouraging evidence to suggest these barriers can be reduced. For example, in relation to workplace learning, the authors from the Somerset Learning Partnership hoped their report would 'provide encouragement to practitioners that success is possible in what might otherwise have been considered hopeless circumstances'. However, other authors explained that there is no simple, quick fix and that strategies to engage new learners need to be ongoing rather than short term.

The reports suggested that while the high profile Skills for Life programme support learner engagement at national policy level, it is the practical and persistent, day-to-day efforts of local providers and other advocates that is the key to attracting new learners. And it is arguable that practitioner researchers are best placed to shed light on these efforts during research projects such as these. ►

Findings - at a glance

Round One

- Major barriers still need to be overcome to attract learners who traditionally do not sign up for courses. While these barriers can be reduced, there is no simple, quick fix.
- Strategies to engage new learners need to be ongoing rather than short term.
- One of the keys to attracting new learners is the practical and persistent day-to-day efforts of local providers and other advocates.
- Simple, time-effective models of engagement, such as one-hour taster sessions, could be all that is needed to engage or re-engage new learners.
- Trusted local brokers from the community and voluntary sectors can play a useful role in matching potential learners to provision and convincing them that they are 'capable of succeeding'.
- Developing brokers could be crucial in opening up learning opportunities in specific situations, such as the workplace for example, where line managers may find it hard to implement basic skills learning in the face of the demands of competing deadlines.
- Engaging new learners can be made easier if organisations collaborate with one another.
- Effective training requires time and resources. Staff need time to develop the curriculum and test-drive and evaluate different methodologies.

Round Two

- Being able to learn in a relaxed atmosphere, without the pressures and interruptions of everyday life, contributes to making learning a positive experience.
- 'Softer' gains, especially among more vulnerable members of society, need to be valued as much as more measurable achievements.
- There can be a 'ping-pong' effect between feelings and results. Learning how to do something sometimes makes adults feel better about themselves, and because of this, they may be prepared to learn a little more.
- Taster sessions can enable learners to see how useful something like numeracy skills could be, whereas previously they may not have seen the point to such a course.
- Adults change as they learn: the reasons for starting a course can be different to the reasons for continuing with it.
- Effective teaching can be a major factor in influencing adults to commit and persevere with learning.
- Matching activities to learners' interests, goals and motivational needs was found to be a highly successful teaching strategy.
- Extracurricular activities can enable learners to gain wider knowledge of how to deal with life in general.
- A learner who can be shown that progress has been made in one aspect of their life is more likely to view the next learning target positively.

Round Three

- Enjoyment and pleasure can be associated with successful learning – it is not just about commitment and perseverance.
- Linking reading for pleasure activities to the National Curriculum is straightforward, especially when the support, expertise and resources of the library service make it easy to facilitate.
- There is sufficient flexibility in the Skills for Life curriculum to allow creative learning experiences that reflect the interests and culture of young people to match learning outcomes and Skills for Life objectives.
- The 'reminiscence' or sharing memories approach to learning proved extremely popular amongst older learners – it promoted an 'enjoyable and relaxed atmosphere'.
- Involving people in the design of their learning can be a very effective way of improving motivation and boosting levels of enjoyment.
- Activities 'with a real external focus, such as a campaign letter, can be a strong motivation for improving literacy'. It is better to design learning around what people value rather than that which appears to have little immediate use.

The six studies in Round One covered a range of different learning situations, both geographically and in terms of the agencies and types of learners who are involved. Whilst the authors made it clear that customised strategies taking account of local contexts were usually necessary, it was possible for them to make some general comments.

The first is that although the need for more basic or essential skills training might be clearly apparent to policy-makers, potential learners need to be helped to appreciate this. The Somerset Learning Partnership team showed that simple, time-effective models of engagement such as one-hour taster sessions, creatively marketed, might be all that is needed, whilst the authors from the Click project in Derbyshire suggested that trusted local brokers from the community and voluntary sectors can play a very useful role in matching potential learners to provision and convincing them they are capable of succeeding at it and benefiting from it. For instance, they observe that learner confidence is not just 'a by-product of learning but also a precondition to it'.

Developing brokers may be the key to opening up learning opportunities in a specific situation. For example, line managers may not attach enough value to work-based basic skills learning to protect it from the competing demands of deadlines in the council depot or the hospital ward, as can be seen from the projects on health care assistants and the council employees in Blackburn and Derbyshire. Operational demands come before training and, as the NHS researchers state, this is part of the culture of the hospital wards and as such may take many years to change. This was a conclusion that was supported by the Blackburn and Darwen study, which noted that since there was no evaluation framework against which managers can compare learning outcomes against business objectives basic skills training would always be in a vulnerable state.

A second message to come across is that engaging new learners can be made easier if organisations

collaborate with one another. The South East Derbyshire College study shows the value of partnership working between further education and the community and voluntary sectors, and the East Riding project concludes that an effective way of staging training for classroom assistants, especially in more rural areas, is for schools to work together in clusters. Organisations or departments in organisations are often encouraged to compete against each other in the belief that this will lead to increased efficiency, whereas collaboration may, in fact, be the way forward.

Finally, the third message that can be taken from the projects might appear somewhat obvious but that is not to diminish its importance. It is that effective training requires time and resources. For example, the Sheffield College team have shown the value that comes from combining a mixture of learning techniques to deliver a blended programme comprised of material taken from both traditional sources and from popular culture. However, the authors show that for this to happen, staff need time to develop the curriculum and try out and evaluate different methodologies. The constraints brought about by limited training budgets were mentioned in several of the studies, and although some organisations may be enticed by an initial offer of free training they were likely to stop once the free offer had ended. On a brighter note several of the studies show that short training programmes made up of little 'bite-sized' or one-hour sessions can be useful in re-engaging new learners provided they are funded and accredited appropriately.

A second message to come across is that engaging new learners can be made easier if organisations collaborate with one another.

Round Two – ‘Understanding purpose and perseverance – learners’ aspirations and commitment to learning’

The research studies were undertaken by practitioners who had considerable experience of teaching adults. The projects nonetheless provided them with an opportunity to obtain a greater understanding of the adult learning experience. This shows the value of looking at something from a new perspective – research rather than teaching. For example, the Northern College study which analyses the value of residential education noted that whilst many factors were listed by the learners as contributing to their positive experience of residential learning, there appeared to be one overriding factor. This was relaxation and being able to learn without the pressures and interruptions of everyday life such as rushing for buses and getting home to meet children returning from school.

The authors from the Broadway study in London observed how the homeless and vulnerable adults with whom they worked experience a “ping-pong” effect between feelings and results’. They noted how learning how to do something made the adults feel better about themselves, and because of this they were prepared to learn a little more. Consequently, it was vital that tutors in these classes, and also the funders of the programmes, valued the ‘softer’ gains made by learners as much as the more measurable achievements.

There was a similar ping-pong effect experienced by the learners studied by researchers from Brighton and Hove College. These learners had been reluctant to start a numeracy course because they could not see the point of it. However, when offered a numeracy taster session as part of another course they decided to carry on with it because they could now see how useful it was. The authors noted that adults change as they learn and the reasons for starting a course can be different from the reasons for continuing with it.

Sometimes the value of research is to highlight the importance of ‘taken for granted’ knowledge which

had somehow lost its significance or else was not well-understood by policy-makers. The Round Two projects reminded some how effective teaching could be a major factor influencing adults to commit to and persevere with their learning. The York College team found that ‘the key to success was matching the activities to learners’ interests, goals and motivational needs’ and that ‘no one technique will work equally well for all learners’. This research is a useful reminder to teachers although some might think that this is what professional teachers should be doing as a matter of course, and it was this teacher professionalism that was found by other researchers to play a key role in ensuring that learners were satisfied with their course and remained committed to it. Researchers from Islington College found that learner motivation was linked directly to the respect the ESOL learners had for their teachers. As one of them said ‘You can only be happy to come everyday to class if you like your teacher.’

Whereas the previous studies highlighted the importance of effective teaching practices, researchers in Exeter found that curriculum content was also important. Their study of ESOL learners showed how extracurricular activities such as trips and visits were greatly valued and formed a key part of the overall curriculum content and were not simply regarded as a nice-to-have extra. Not only did these activities enable learners to use their newly acquired language skills outside of the classroom, but they made an important contribution in helping learners deal with such day-to-day challenges as making appointments, discussing treatments with doctors, etc. The researchers concluded that people attended the ESOL classes not only for the narrow purpose of learning a new language but as a route into gaining wider knowledge of how to deal with life in general.

The theme of Round Two was ‘Understanding purpose and perseverance – learners’ aspirations and commitment to learning’. In all of the studies it was apparent that commitment to learning was linked, perhaps fairly obviously, to learners feeling



they were getting something from it. To an extent they were keen to make tangible gains such as qualifications, but researchers also highlighted the role played by the less tangible or 'softer' outcomes. The Broadway researchers were very keen to show that although there might be a temptation for teachers to pay less attention to these softer outcomes, often because they did not count towards the funding criteria, there were in fact important reasons why they should be measured. This was partly to do with assuring teachers that they were making progress with learners who had a lot of difficulties, but it was also to do with presenting learners with clear evidence that the time they had spent attending classes was bringing rewards. As mentioned previously, a learner who can be shown that progress has been made in one aspect of their life is more likely to view the next learning target in a more positive light. This was the ping-pong effect which was one of the chief findings made by the Broadway researchers, who developed a measurement tool called 'I Can' and used it to 'capture evidence of change'.

Round Three – 'Creativity in teaching and learning'

Round Three projects were designed under the title of 'Creativity in teaching and learning' and applications were received from those who wished to study the less traditional and/or innovative classroom methods. By its very nature researchers in this round were attracted to creative ways of gathering data such as web blogs and presenting some of their findings through short computer-generated films.

One theme that clearly emerged during these studies was that enjoyment and pleasure were associated with successful learning and it was not just about commitment and perseverance. The study completed by literacy tutors and librarians in Essex showed that encouraging adults just to read

for pleasure could lead to substantial increases in knowledge and skills as well as in emotional development and motivation. The learners who took part in this study reported wider vocabulary, greater confidence in expressing themselves in writing, and being better able to make informed choices about books and increased library membership.

Enjoyment and pleasure also featured in the 'Soft Currency' study carried out by researchers at Exeter Council for Voluntary Service. The purpose of this was to determine what value there was in helping older members of the community develop money management skills (financial literacy) by sharing memories of how they dealt with money matters at different stages of their lives. The 'reminiscence approach' proved to be extremely popular amongst these older learners, and they looked forward to the sessions where they could talk and learn about financial matters in an 'enjoyable and relaxed atmosphere'.

Making learning fun was one of the themes to emerge from the study of the Spectrum Project undertaken by researchers from Future Prospects and York College. The Spectrum Project is a programme of activities designed for young offenders who lack the motivation to take part in more traditional forms of learning. What emerged from the study was clear evidence that involving people in the design of their learning was a very effective way of improving motivation and boosting levels of enjoyment. In particular learners appreciated being involved in 'shaping the timing, activities and focus of sessions'. They also showed a preference for bite-sized activities to break up the time they had to concentrate.

Involving learners in the design of their own learning was also a feature of the research carried out by staff at Dewsbury College. Their study

One theme that clearly emerged during these studies was that enjoyment and pleasure were associated with successful learning.

examined a learner-driven action research network within the Skills for Life department at the College. The research team used diaries, meetings and web blogs to record the impact of the series of changes being made through various action research projects in the department. Learners liked being involved in this process and sharing in the development of 'risk-taking teaching', especially since it was based on new technology. One of the key findings from this study was that tutors had to think of learners in a different way and they needed time to adjust to this and work through this new type of relationship. However, tutors did eventually become comfortable with this approach and at the end of the project it was noted that they were looking forward to taking part in a second wave of learner-driven action research projects in the following academic year.

As with the York project, encouraging young people at risk to improve their literacy skills was also the focus of a study designed by the research team based at the City of Sunderland YMCA Foyer. They had established a peer education project called MAD4U (Making a Difference for You) part of which consisted of campaign activities for improved resources for homeless and at risk young people. The literacy activities within MAD4U included letter writing, lobbying, planning and script writing. The young people were drawn particularly to those activities which could be put to immediate use. This led the Sunderland researchers to conclude that activities 'with a real external focus such as a campaign letter, act as a strong motivation for improving literacy'. Their conclusion was that it was better to design learning around what people value and can do well rather than that which appears to have little immediate use. ■

... it was better to design learning around what people value and can do well rather than that which appears to have little immediate use.

Lessons learned from managing and supporting practitioner research

The PLRI presented staff at Lancaster with a valuable opportunity to put into practice existing ideas of how to support practitioner researchers and to learn new lessons as a result of this experience. These new lessons can be grouped into three categories:

1. selection and launch;
2. ongoing support;
3. completion, report writing and dissemination.

Selection and launch

It was important to strike the right balance between a selection and launch timetable which was organised tightly to make sure the application and selection of projects was as swift as possible but also long and flexible enough to give space for discussion, modification and to make sure the groups of practitioner researchers did not feel hurried along a path they were unsure about. The Round One timetable was considered to have been too tight, so the Round Two and Three timetables were lengthened to make things more comfortable. As a result of the Round One experience an application and selection protocol was established which resulted in a more trouble-free selection process.

Applications were not quite as numerous as expected and this may possibly be due to the process still being a little too complicated. However, it did mean those applications which were received were solid, well thought through and relatively easy to convert into research projects which had the potential to be both achievable and valuable.

The groups of practitioner researchers who were selected were invited to a briefing day at Lancaster and this was a very important stage of the launch of the projects. Attendance at the briefing day was mandatory although a couple of groups were unable to attend. The briefing day was important for three



main reasons. First, as a 'getting to know each other' session: ensuring we were all comfortable working together, clarifying expectations and establishing first name-term relationships was absolutely essential. Second, to ensure the projects were achievable. Although groups were given a significant level of resources and access to research support it was nevertheless important to make sure they did not get carried away with over-ambitious projects both in terms of technical feasibility and what they had time to do. In most cases this meant ensuring that projects had a sharp focus and studied a few issues in relative detail rather than trying to cover too much ground. We discussed timetables and the key steps and phases that projects would go through. Finally, it was important to reinforce the idea that projects were predominantly for research rather than development and final reports needed to contain an analysis of findings rather than simply descriptions of activities undertaken.

Ongoing support

The weeks immediately following the briefing day proved to be a very significant period. During this time there was the risk that groups would either drift due to problems of converting research designs into actual fieldwork or else go off in the wrong direction and hit obstacles. Whilst there were reasons why the support team at Lancaster needed to give groups space to establish their own working practices and to avoid over-interference in their projects, experience showed that it was better to make early contact with the groups and to insist on a preliminary on-site meeting. Having said this, it was important to make sure these visits were not perceived by the groups as a burden or a 'checking up' exercise.

Much was learned about the nature of the ongoing support groups needed. It was important to identify those aspects of the studies that groups could easily do by themselves and those where they had less experience and may encounter difficulties. In terms of the latter, the two main areas of difficulty in the start-up phase were: feeling under pressure to produce a wonderful piece of 'cutting-edge' research and planning to collect too much or too diverse a

range of data that would prove very difficult to analyse within the resources and timescale available.

As well as consulting on-site, a variety of explicit research skills training sessions were offered, from the standard sessions of the LSDA toolkit³ to focus groups and reminiscence training, and questionnaire design. We offered access to a Lancaster University Postgraduate Research Methods module by distance learning, but this option was only taken up by two people. It proved not to be easy to synchronise module activities with the PLRI timetables, nor to produce an individual report from a group project for assessment.

Although groups were provided with a standard set of guidelines and support arrangements, for example, the research support people and other mentors, it was also apparent that the situation was different for each group. For example, some research people worked at the heart of the projects whilst others occupied a peripheral position. To some extent this depended on perceptions on whether the support was being given by a research 'expert' to a group of research 'enthusiasts', or whether there was more of a shared understanding of what each could contribute to this thing called practitioner research. The type and way in which research support should be given to groups of practitioner researchers is still open to interpretation and debate, and much depends on the status attached to this type of research both by full-time researchers and by practitioners themselves.

Practitioner research groups varied in their views of the support they received from the various available sources. Although it was important to be proactive in the provision of support so that groups did not drift or flounder, there was a sense that on occasions some of the groups were surprised by the amount of support that was on offer. There is the possibility that the groups who had less confidence found some of the support threatening as it might show up apparent weaknesses in their studies, whereas the more confident groups resented the suggestions made about how their projects might be improved.

³ <http://almond.admin.nene.ac.uk:7777/pls/portal/docs/PAGE/EDUCATION/DOCSTORE/PRACTITIONERRESEARCH.PDF>

Enabling the groups to talk openly about the progress they had made and the obstacles they were facing was extremely valuable, which is why the midpoint meetings held in venues such as the Northern College were a key feature of the ongoing support. Midpoint meetings were used to renew enthusiasm, swap anecdotes and share successes and concerns.

During the first round, we held a one-day meeting but for Rounds Two and Three we extended this to an overnight stay. This gave us more time together and made a significant difference to the feel of the event. Rounds Two and Three received structured training on analysing data at these meetings and we devised a simple pro forma where groups could indicate the stage of progress they had reached and indicate any difficult issues they were facing (see Appendix 8).

The meetings thus served the dual purpose of both easing the pressure on groups by being honest about the troubles and mess research often runs into whilst also boosting their self-esteem as practitioner researchers by reminding them they were taking part in a very significant, national research initiative. The midpoint meetings also helped groups feel comfortable working together and presenting their ideas in public and so formed a useful rehearsal for the more testing end of project dissemination events held in front of much larger audiences. As a further aid in preparing for the project outputs, a template for writing the final report was also given to groups at this point.

Completion, report writing and dissemination

During the completion phase of the research projects the main job of the support team at Lancaster University was to encourage groups to send us drafts for us to comment upon, whilst also ensuring they maintained the prime responsibility for making decisions about what to put in their reports. There was a tendency for some groups to seek frequent advice on relatively small matters which was probably due to lack of experience and/or lack of confidence. In most projects the research support person took a major responsibility for co-ordinating the writing.

In the majority of cases the support offered during the report writing stage mostly consisted of 'pruning', that is, suggesting that reports should be cut back to focus on a smaller number of findings which could be supported by strong evidence. Inevitably this meant discarding other findings which were more speculative and whose weaknesses (in terms of supporting evidence) might diminish the impact made by the report as a whole. Some of the groups took little persuading that this might be a good course of action but some were understandably reluctant to lose any of their findings. What helped in this situation was to ask groups to think back to the main reasons why they wished to do their research in the first place and the type of findings which would be useful to developing their practice.

Preparing for the major dissemination event which was held at the end of each round was a very important part in the completion and writing up of the research reports. For this event groups needed to produce a summary poster about their study (for which a template was also provided) and prepare a short presentation for the whole-event audience and a more detailed one for a workshop. This gave them a useful framework for gradually assembling their ideas into a coherent whole.

In spite of the editing or 'pruning' advice given to the groups there was still a tendency for them to produce reports and sets of appendices which were far larger than was needed. This was partly the result of thinking 'if in doubt include it' but also since so much effort had been put in they were understandably reluctant to lose anything. A positive solution to this problem was to encourage groups to think of other ways and places in which their research experiences could be reported back.

We set a deadline for submission of the final reports. These were read by the co-coordinating team and signed off. Sometimes additional changes were requested at this point. Once the report were signed off by Lancaster, they were sent to the NRDC and went through the normal quality process of review by critical readers. Comments were returned

Enabling the groups to talk openly about the progress they had made and the obstacles they were facing was extremely valuable.

to projects to make further amendments and then the reports were cleared by the DfES Strategy Unit for publication.

This extended process proved to be difficult to handle for practitioner-researchers, and felt somewhat at odds with the needs and expectations of projects to circulate their findings quickly to local interest groups.

There was considerable discussion about the appropriate format for publications (see the Discussion paper in Appendix 5) and an over-burden of expectations from all sides of what small-scale research projects could achieve in comparison with the bigger and more traditionally organised research projects that formed most of NRDC's output. ■

The experiences of practitioner researchers

Their research projects presented the groups with many challenges, and writing up the final reports was frequently done under the pressure of rapidly approaching deadlines. Nevertheless, as they described in their reports, the overwhelming majority of practitioner researchers thought that the overall experience of taking part in the PLRI had been a positive one. The very fact that their projects had been chosen through a process of competitive selection to feature in a national initiative made them feel that what they were about to do was important. This feeling was reinforced because they knew their finished work would be published both in paper form and on NRDC's website. They also appreciated that the level of support provided by NRDC, which included briefing days at Lancaster University, on-site visits, midpoint residentials and dissemination conferences was testament to the importance others were attaching to their research. All of this created a sense of anticipation and the expectation they would deliver sets of findings and reports which would stand the test of public scrutiny.

On the other hand, the groups also commented on the excitement, even fun, of having the opportunity to work on topics in partnership with full-time researchers and have the chance to have a look at how research is done from the inside. Some had done research before as part of a degree course and noted how the relationship they had with university staff during the course of the PLRI was different from their previous research experiences. They felt more of a part of a research community, and whilst this meant having to live up to the pressures and expectations of this standard of research it also enabled them to see at first hand the challenges that research brings and how to deal with these. In some ways the PLRI not only provided them with the textbook rules but also the ongoing fixes and 'tricks of the trade' which are needed to complete a research project.

The experiences reported by the practitioner researchers can be grouped into four categories:

1. a fresh perspective;
2. professional development;
3. boost to status;
4. the usefulness of the findings.

A fresh perspective

A frequent comment made by the groups was that their findings did not come as a surprise to them. They more or less 'knew' beforehand what was happening in their area of work, but the research provided them with a fresh perspective and enabled them to feel more secure with their existing knowledge. This was partly because the research findings, which were the product of a more rigorous and analytical examination, were not at serious odds with their previous views and partly because they appreciated more fully how a given 'fact' or situation might be interpreted differently depending on which evidence was collected and the differing amounts of importance attached to the various pieces of evidence.

In particular they had gained a better understanding of how issues associated with adult learning could be seen differently depending on whether one took a practitioner, research, or policy-making perspective. Some had begun the research hoping to find out what the facts were. They now knew that what they had gained instead was a better understanding of why people can reach different conclusions about what the facts are and what they mean. Combining the practitioner and research perspectives would hopefully help them argue their point more convincingly whilst also making them receptive to alternative interpretations. Their research had been intellectually rewarding and a change from the day-to-day routine of their jobs.

Many of the practitioner researchers had enjoyed the challenge of taking a more deliberately analytical examination of a situation ...

Professional development

In some ways this is linked to the first point in the sense that the PLRI had enabled practitioners to use some of the skills they had in a different context and to be more aware of the extent to which there was an overlap between their occupational and research skills. Many of the practitioner researchers had enjoyed the challenge of taking a more deliberately analytical examination of a situation, one that differed from the type of information collection usually associated with their practitioner roles. Wearing the 'research hat' they paid more attention to how they gathered data, being more conscious of the fact that the quality and significance of the data is likely to vary according to the care with which it is collected. They knew their findings were be subject to scrutiny not just by the supportive mentors with whom they worked but also by more detached critical readers. This helped them 'raise the game' and provided the reason and motivation to develop a clear analysis and to avoid claiming too much for their findings.

In another respect, many also learned that a key skill in the research process is maintaining quality in as many parts of the project as possible, even though the enterprise as a whole might have not gone to plan. For example, what to do when time runs out and not all the data is in, or where a carefully designed sample turns into something far less representative? In particular, where is the cut-off point between a salvageable project and a deeply flawed study?

Many of the projects encountered difficulties but they knew they had to persevere and not give up. Some were anxious that their projects had drifted away from the original plans and were reassured to be told that this happens. The research groups valued this insight into the world of research, which partly demystified the research process for them but also showed that successful research requires skills and



judgement above the purely technical. All this meant that they would be more confident when doing further research and they would read the research done by others with a more experienced eye.

Boost to status

A theme which emerged repeatedly from conversations with the groups during the research was that whilst basic skills teaching had obtained a much higher profile at a national level due to the Skills for Life initiative there is still a feeling prevalent amongst practitioners, especially those working as part of a large organisation, that they still occupy a relatively low position. Therefore, groups welcomed the fact that taking part in the PLRI had boosted their status. There were two dimensions to this: internal and external. Internally, status had been improved because the research groups had become more prominent to other staff. In order to do their studies it had been necessary for them to meet with others to arrange the collection of data through questionnaires, interviews, observations, etc. In a large college, for example, this could have meant working with senior managers and staff in different departments. The research studies were discussed at organisation meetings and members of the research group had more reason to get out and about and talk to others. They were asked about the project and colleagues were curious to know how they obtained the funding and how the link with the NRDC worked. Finally, they wished to know when the findings would be made public and what the implications might be for the organisation as a whole. PLRI had given many of the research teams increased internal visibility.

For other research groups, especially those who worked in smaller organisations, it was often the external value that was mentioned. They thought PLRI had given them 'a voice' and they were now more likely to be taken notice of by the outside world. For them the research had given them an opportunity to talk about a topic with the authority that comes from being able to support their views with evidence and a high profile channel, NRDC, through which to share their thoughts with others. They appreciated that their voice alone was only likely to make a modest impact, but at least they had been able to say something worthwhile and because of the publication process they would forever be associated with these remarks.

The usefulness of the findings

Most of the comments made by the practitioners reported so far have been to do with the process of actually doing the research. Yet the purpose of the PLRI was not simply to provide practitioners with research experience, it was also to enable them to obtain research findings with which to work. Fortunately this proved to be the case, and the usefulness of these findings is the fourth category into which practitioner researcher comments have been placed.

As was mentioned earlier, most of the findings produced by the research groups were not ground-breaking and more often than not served to confirm what practitioners believed was the case anyway. Nevertheless, these findings proved useful in a number of ways. First, they threw additional light on the adult learning process and so helped teaching staff understand the learning experiences of adults in a broader context. Second, the experience of producing a set of findings meant that some of the research groups felt better able to contribute to internal information management and decision-making processes because they had something new to contribute. Third, there was a direct link visible in some of the projects between the findings and suggestions as to how the curriculum, methods of record-keeping and assessment might be developed. This was in terms of both content and methods of delivery. Finally, many of the practitioner researchers believed they were now able to say something with the authority of being able to back up their views with carefully gathered research evidence. This allowed them to comment on what worked well and so led to the sharing and promotion of good practice. It also helped them to pinpoint those areas which needed further thought and development.

The Research Support people

In order to qualify for PLRI funding research groups needed to identify a Research Support Person (RSP) who would advise them on the day-to-day matters of doing research (Appendix 7). The RSP was expected to have a higher degree, recent research experience and either be a member of a research organisation such as a local university or have close links with one. The role of the RSP was anticipated as being crucial to the success of the various projects. As it turned out, their contribution was mixed, ranging

from those who were absolutely at the centre of the research to others who seemed to occupy a more peripheral role and whose input was more limited.

A number of factors were responsible for those situations where the RSP played a central role. Probably the most important was identification with the whole purpose and spirit of practitioner research. Several had been practitioners themselves before moving into research and academic teaching. Their comments suggested they identified as much with the philosophy and language of practice as they did with full-time research. They believed in the intrinsic value of practitioner research.

Another reason for this close involvement was the prior relationships which existed between the RSP and at least some of the members of the research group. This was more often than not the result of joint membership of local networks and other forms of collaboration. In one case the RSP had tutored one of the practitioner researchers on a course at a local university. In several cases, the RSP was already on the spot as a member of the lead organisation, usually someone with a more general research and development role. Being seen as part of the team was an important factor. The practitioner researchers did not want the academic supervisor type of relationship that some had experienced whilst studying for degree courses. They worked better with a flat rather than a hierarchical arrangement where their input and perspective carried equal weight. After all most were highly experienced professionals with considerable expertise in their field of practice.

The RSPs who felt they had a good relationship with their research groups did not have preconceived ideas about how the research should be done. They tended to offer general rather than specific advice and responded to requests. They tried to avoid setting the agenda and providing frameworks and

schedules for the groups to follow. One said she was just there to 'hold things together' whilst another acted as a channel between the group and staff at Lancaster University. Indeed it may have been the fact that since support and guidance was available from Lancaster, RSPs became less concerned with giving advice on specific technical matters and more to do with offering general encouragement and keeping spirits up. For example, by Round Three the arrangements for briefing the research groups, launching the projects and providing central advice were so firmly in place and so clearly structured that some groups may have felt they knew what they were doing and did not initiate contact with their named RSP.

Whilst we know a fair amount about the reasons for the productive relationships between some RSPs and their groups, we know less about those situations where the relationships were not so close. This is chiefly because we had little contact with the RSPs during the course of the projects, during midpoint review meetings or at a specially arranged debriefing day for RSPs. It is possible, but this may be a little speculative, that names were put on applications by some groups mainly to meet the application criterion and these groups managed to do their research with little contact with their RSP. It is likely that the factors which contributed to the close involvement described above, that is, commitment to practitioner research, prior experience of working together and the ability to work together as colleagues rather than as 'students' and supervisors were simply absent in these cases. ■

The research groups felt better able to contribute to internal information management and decision-making processes because they had something new to contribute.

Use and dissemination

One reason why the practitioner research groups showed considerable perseverance and resilience in completing their reports was that they were continually encouraged to think about how they intended to use and disseminate their findings at the end of their projects. For many, the fact that others were showing interest in their work and actually anticipated that their findings would be of interest to others was an important motivating factor.

The ways in which the findings from the three rounds were used and disseminated falls into two broad categories – what they were required to do and what they were encouraged to do. As part of the PLRI contract groups were required to make presentations at an end-of-round dissemination event, design a summary poster and produce a final report which, after passing through critical readers and other editors, would eventually be published on NRDC's website and in paper form too. This was a major 'carrot' because they valued NRDC publications and were frequent visitors to its website. Furthermore, the fact their work was to be posted there alongside others who had more of a track record in academic publishing was a real boost. And as with all researchers they wanted their reports to be made public as soon as possible.

In addition to publishing their findings through official NRDC channels, groups were encouraged to use and disseminate their findings in other ways. Most followed a similar pattern which can best be described as a 'rippling' process, where the greatest impact was made closest to where they worked whilst other messages travelled outwards to meet a wider audience. The extent to which they took steps to have their findings 'travel' depended on their sense of the worth of their findings, their confidence and their interest in developing a profile within the adult learning, literacy and basic skills communities.

At the centre of this ripple effect was the process of getting information to the colleagues with whom they worked and who were naturally interested in the implications of the findings for practice. This was done through staff meetings, placing summaries on local websites, etc. At the centre people were mainly interested in a few practical steps that could be taken in the short term, and

whilst these may seem modest when viewed from outside, they had far greater significance for internal staff who perhaps felt constrained by targets, budgets and so on and who had only limited room for manoeuvre.

The next circle moving outwards from the centre were key decision makers in bodies such as LEAs, LSCs, area boards, etc. The aim here was to influence strategy, bring about more far-reaching change, secure existing and attract new funding. Also located in this region were the local networks and forums made up of people from other agencies, and presentations were made to these. Some members of the research groups had other roles or had moved to new jobs since completing the research, such as teacher training, and they took the findings and the overall experience of doing research with them.

Finally, several of the projects had the opportunity to disseminate their findings at an even greater distance from the centre where they worked. Publishing summaries of reports in journals such as *reflect* and RaPAL was something a few had already achieved and which others hoped to do in the future. Some had also made presentations of their findings at conferences. As well as RaPAL and the Learning and Skills Regional Network conferences, projects took part in workshops at NRDC-organised conferences and at a Practitioner Research conference at Queens University in Belfast.

One feature that possibly distinguishes the use and dissemination of practitioner research findings from those of full-time researchers is that their findings tend to be written with a view to immediate use. This is apparent in at least two respects. First, many of the groups hoped to transform their findings into usable materials for teaching, INSET, assessment, induction and so forth. Second, there is a tendency for them to highlight one or two key messages which they thought might bring about change. Their focus is generally narrower than that of academic, full-time researchers and their practitioner experience means that most of the recommendations they make are rooted in their day-to-day knowledge of how their organisation works. ■

Conclusions and issues for the future of practitioner involvement in NRDC

This final report marks the end of the NRDC Practitioner-Led Research Initiative. Clearly, the groups who have successfully participated in this initiative have gained from it and the field has gained from their involvement. They have begun to make links with other existing networks and other NRDC activities, and we are hopeful that the ripple effects described above will continue, at least for a while.

NRDC has commissioned a short impact project to assess the benefits that have accrued from the initiative and the extent to which the PLRI has met its original objectives. These outcomes will be presented in a separate short report.

One significant outcome of the PLRI is a tried and tested model of supporting practitioner research groups, through to delivery and communication of the findings. We have documented this in some detail in this report so that it will be available to others who might find funding to do similar things in the future. The object is to avoid reinventing the wheel. We offer what we have learned about the the key importance of:

- A focused set of specification documents that give guidance about how to set up a viable project group with the budget allowed (in our case £10,000).
- A structured process of support and monitoring that helped groups deal with obstacles as they arose and to meet deadlines, especially completing the 5,000 report at the end of the project.
- Ideas for 'just-in-time' research training that seems to fit the needs of practitioner research for skill development dovetailed in with the day-to-day process and rhythms of doing small-scale research.

We were not always successful in arranging good quality, day-to-day, on the spot research support, however, and perhaps this depends on the steady building of research capacity in the field so that more mentors emerge who have experienced both research and practice and have a strong commitment to merging the two. We have also failed to resolve the challenges of publication to our own satisfaction. We are still searching for ways of meeting the demands of all the different audiences for the project findings. This will be the subject of continuing debate.

Although this initiative is at an end, in the immediate future NRDC will continue to support practitioner involvement in research by:

- Actively integrating existing practitioner researchers into wider networks that can sustain their interests and involvement with research now that the specific focus of the PLRI no longer exists.
- Attending to the development of research mentors who can broker between the worlds of research, policy and practice.
- Developing appropriate and diverse publication strategies that enable circulation of practitioner research activities and findings.
- Publicising the added value practitioner research brings in complementing and grounding the more traditional research activities of NRDC. ■

People were mainly interested in a few practical steps that could be taken in the short term.

A woman with long brown hair and glasses is shown in profile, looking towards the right. She is sitting at a desk with a notebook open in front of her. The background is a classroom setting with other desks and chairs. The text 'Part 2' is overlaid on the image in a large, white, sans-serif font.

Part 2

**Understanding purpose and
perseverance – learners' aspirations
and commitment to learning**



Summary reports for Round Two

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- ▶ **'I Can': demonstrating soft outcomes for homeless and vulnerable adult learners**
- ▶ **Broadway Homelessness and Support**
- ▶ Harriet Cookson, Geraldine Hale, Catherine Menist and Becky Rice

Introduction

This study looks at the challenging subject of measuring 'soft' outcomes. As essential skills tutors working with vulnerable people, we see inspiring achievements in confidence, motivation and learning but feel frustrated by the hard outcomes, which are unrealistic for many people but are considered as the convincing evidence of learning and form the basis of Skills for Life provision.

The debate about funding soft outcomes centres on what they are and whether they can be measured. Here soft outcomes refers to subjective changes observed by learners and tutors and evidenced through self-assessment and information on changes in behaviour.

Background

Broadway is a charity working with more than 2,000 homeless and vulnerable people every year across 12 London boroughs. Our projects include street outreach, hostel and supported housing accommodation and day centre services. Our learning team offers a range of informal and formal activities in one-to-one and group sessions:

preparation for the National Tests in literacy and numeracy, help with independent living skills (e.g. pre-tenancy and sustaining tenancy training) and information and communications technology (ICT) training.

We believed that an ongoing approach to measuring soft outcomes would motivate learners and tutors, and demonstrate the validity of our work to funders. We decided to design and evaluate a way of systematically recording, evidencing and even measuring these soft outcomes in an action research project.

Research questions

- What are the key soft outcomes of learning for homeless and vulnerable adults?
- How can we measure these soft outcomes?
- Can we link desired soft outcomes to the national curricula for literacy, numeracy and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)?
- Is it helpful to integrate the monitoring of soft outcomes into individual learning plans (ILPs)?

The research

The project was designed and delivered by the manager, the essential skills co-ordinator and a tutor from Broadway's learning team, and was supported by Broadway's research officer.

We conducted an initial consultation through three focus groups, two with staff and one with clients. The design of the soft outcomes tool 'I Can' drew on analysis of existing materials, e.g. confidence inventories and individual learning plans.

We recruited 15 clients, 10 of whom remained throughout the project:

- seven male, three female
- average age at start of project: 43; age range 30 to 51
- seven white British, one white other, one white European (both ESOL) and one black and minority ethnic.

All the learners involved had mental health issues, past or present; five had a physical disability or health problem and four had substance misuse issues.

Tutors and clients reflected on the process using notes (tutors) and diaries and photo projects (learners). The research officer then carried out in-depth interviews and this data was used to validate and challenge the conclusions drawn from piloting the new approach.

Everyone in the project team shared in the data analysis and the manager did most of the report writing. The project's methods and findings were then disseminated and evaluated.

Method

The three stages in the project cycle were:

1. Development and piloting of the soft outcomes package (the 'I Can' tool, the revised ILP and the mapping tool)
2. Fieldwork using the package

3. Analysis and presentation of data from stages 1 and 2.

We began by using the 'Catching Confidence' tool from the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE). However, although the concept was excellent the format and wording were unsuitable for our client group, so we developed our own soft outcomes tool – 'I Can'.

Findings

Learning outcomes

The most striking finding was that all the learners on the project experienced improved communication and reduced isolation. For example, four clients had been receiving long-term, one-to-one support from the tutor. At first they all scored low in social interaction and felt unable to join a group session. By the end of the project, they were all working in pairs or small groups.

Most learners' scores for reading and writing also increased, especially in relation to the learning objectives on their ILPs. Their levels were not formally reassessed but the ILPs and Records of Achievement (RoAs) indicate concrete improvements in skills.

There seemed to be a ping-pong effect, with increase in confidence leading to improvement in skills and vice versa. One woman learner who could barely read the top 200 sight words on entry to the service also genuinely believed she could not write. At the end of the project she had kept a diary and had just finished reading her first adult library book.

The time allowed for learners to report back on the impact of their learning also enabled tutors to identify unintended or unexpected outcomes. One tutor recorded that her learner said that she wasn't aware until she started reading how untidy her flat was, but was now working on clearing it. For many of Broadway's clients, these outcomes are more realistic and motivating than hard outcomes such as getting a job or going to college.

Most learners' scores for reading and writing also increased, especially in relation to the learning objectives on their ILPs.

Overall

The data show an almost sequential pattern that makes progression towards hard outcomes more likely. For many socially excluded people learning journeys are not linear, and a 'snakes and ladders' analogy is more apt. Despite the striking 'distance travelled' by all learners on the project, several encountered 'snakes' during these four months: one woman went through a 'low' period, one man found out his hostel was closing and returned to substance misuse, and one had her benefits cut for being honest about her progress.

Appraisal of the soft outcomes package*'I Can'*

The soft outcomes tool was the most popular part of the package with learners and tutors alike because of its simplicity and relevance.

Clients were motivated by the self-assessment and how it displayed their confidence visually: the word 'amazed' occurred several times.

Tutors found it a useful diagnostic tool because it breaks confidence down into clear indicators and identifies areas of need that are not picked up in initial interviews.

It acted as a bridge in the tutor–client relationship, increasing awareness of and providing a framework for discussing sensitive issues.

Individual learning plans

Our adapted ILP pro forma was simplified to encourage realistic goal-setting. Tutors worked with learners to develop SMART – specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timebound – targets, which helped to identify the steps for clients to progress and seemed to correlate well with desired learning outcomes. The ILP goals were revisited in reviews.

Two clients were not given an ILP at first, as paperwork can deter vulnerable learners. For other clients the tutor wrote up the ILP, based on notes taken during discussion.

Where learners were introduced to the ILP later they were enthusiastic about it, but the use of ILPs still needs further consultation. In interviews at the end of the project, respondents' recall of the form was lower than their recall of 'I Can'.

Mapping soft outcomes to the core curriculum

Mapping soft outcome indicators to the curriculum demonstrated the relevance to tutors and funders

by tracking interlinked personal and skills achievements.

One RoA recorded evidence of the progress of a male client in working in a group; another cited 'talking to the receptionist and discussing things with her on two separate occasions'. Thus it was also a useful means of formative and summative assessment.

Overall

The success of the 'I Can' package is due to the interaction of the three component tools. This encouraged a cycle of reflection and learning for client and tutor, reinforcing confidence and success, as well as recording challenges and areas for further work.

The package also works well with homeless and vulnerable clients at borderline Entry 3 to Level 1. With adaptation, it worked well for more vulnerable learners and those at a lower level. Even clients who had problems with forms were positive about 'I Can'.

Conclusions

Soft outcomes and learning are inextricably linked: including soft outcomes in ILPs is a crucial way of motivating learners by showing the impact of their learning on their lives.

The 'I Can' package successfully evidences progress and shows the relevance of these outcomes for Skills for Life provision through linking outcomes with the adult core curricula. It also helps with engaging homeless and vulnerable learners, building confidence and trust, individual learning planning and developing skills.

This approach can attract funding for learning, which is a starting point. Performance measurement needs to be about hard skills, knowledge and soft outcomes to enable learners to progress and achieve. It is vital to acknowledge the importance of the self-motivation and application of skills and knowledge that practitioners and learners value so greatly.

The project was small scale and has some obvious limitations: it also raises many further questions for further investigation.

Further research questions

- Is 'I Can' transferable to other settings or would all settings need context-specific tools?
- What is the difference between what we are 'able' to do and what we are 'confident' to do?

- Can 'I Can' be used effectively with ESOL learners below Entry Level 2?
- How could this model work in adult and community learning without support workers?
- How useful would the tool be in capturing longer-term changes?
- How will our learners fare in the longer term?
- Could the work linking soft outcomes to the curricula be extended?

Dissemination

During the pilot we conducted workshops about the research at RaPAL (Research and Practice in Adult Literacy) and LSRN (Learning and Skills Research Network) conferences.

We will continue to use and develop the package with new and existing learners. We are also bringing our findings from the project to an organisation-wide group focusing on more general support planning, and to the ongoing development of Broadway's outcomes framework. We plan to develop a resource providing guidance and advice on capturing soft outcomes to share with other organisations.

We believe there is a gap on Skills for Life teacher training courses in dealing with vulnerable adults and our 'I Can' package could be part of their curriculum.

Being involved in action research

Tutor's reflections

The structure offered by the 'I Can' package has paradoxically afforded me greater freedom, while allowing me to monitor my own and my clients' progress at the same time. As we do not work in an educational establishment, this opportunity to share good practice and share our project was really helpful and made me feel part of a greater whole. Research is now something I value: it gives credence to what otherwise could be assumptions without foundation.

Many of our clients who lack literacy, numeracy and ESOL skills need one-to-one support before they can move towards external learning opportunities. The cost of not addressing this must far outweigh the cost of providing appropriate funding for these services. If we manage to fuel the debate about gaining more appropriate funding, perhaps this research could make a difference beyond Broadway.

Finally, the value of this research lies in the fact that it is practitioner-led. It has served to make me a more effective, reflective tutor. And I enjoyed it.

Project manager's reflections

Soft outcomes in the lives of our clients are what enable them to progress, as our strapline says, 'from street to home'. We needed to develop a framework to capture them, and the Practitioner-led Research Initiative with the NRDC gave us this opportunity.

One of the greatest benefits to the team has been the process of developing and piloting a new, context-specific tool through discussions with tutors and learners about formative assessment. The project has built research capacity and encouraged reflective practice not only in the team, but also within the organisation as a whole. It has increased our awareness of clients' potential as well as their need.

It has also enabled us to build up links with further education and adult and community learning organisations and networks such as RaPAL and NRDC.

The project was ambitious and it has been a challenge to deliver it within the timescale, but it has enabled Broadway to prioritise a crucial piece of work and helped us to understand and demonstrate the impact of learning on clients' lives. ■

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► **What are the motivating and demotivating factors that affect current adult numeracy learners?**

► **City College Brighton and Hove**

► Alison Kelly, Sara Fletcher, Jenny O'Connor, Jane MacIntosh, Anna Smith, Debbie Hollis, Susi Maxwell Stewart, Hillary Humphries, Jo Gull, Corina Fairman and Maria Thomas

Introduction

In the current learning environment, which is driven by ambitious government targets, there is a need to identify and engage new groups of learners. Many agencies have seen a rise in literacy and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision without a parallel rise in numeracy recruitment. This project sought to add to our knowledge of potential learners by investigating adult learners' perceptions and experiences of numeracy teaching and training.

Background

The project aimed to:

- review recent research
- interview approximately 50 current adult learners
- explore adult experiences of and attitudes to numeracy learning
- compare the findings of this research with other relevant research
- share its findings with providers in Brighton and Hove
- use the findings to plan future marketing and delivery opportunities.

The research took place at City College Brighton and

mainly involved basic skills and key skills numeracy lecturers who took part in both the design and the data collection. The research team also worked with Jobcentre Plus and the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NACRO), the crime reduction charity.

A literature review suggested three main themes:

1. 'Steering' (as in some Return to Study, Pre Access or Access courses or key skills as a mandatory part of a vocational course) does not adversely affect motivation.
2. First contact with the college is crucial in helping learners overcome anxieties about returning to study.
3. Learners can become thoroughly engaged with pure or abstract areas of maths. This is important not just for how numeracy is taught but also for how courses are marketed.

Research questions

- What are the motivating and demotivating factors affecting current adult numeracy learners' desire to engage with and succeed on adult numeracy courses?

Many agencies have seen a rise in literacy and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision without a parallel rise in numeracy recruitment.

- To what extent can these factors be incorporated into elements of good practice to recruit, engage and motivate the reluctant numeracy learner?
- Would mandatory extended taster sessions have the motivational force necessary to 'sell' numeracy courses to those who would not have otherwise chosen to study numeracy at this time?

Research design and data collection

First we interviewed 57 current learners, 24 taking key skills as part of a vocational course and 33 on basic skills courses, to discover what motivates or fails to motivate them.

Second, we designed a mandatory (or 'incentivised') taster session for six basic skills learners who would not have chosen to study numeracy at this time.

We collected data about employment, gender, age, learning difficulty, race and language so that comparisons could be made if relevant.

The interview schedules were drafted, reviewed by practitioners, piloted, revised and checked by an outside expert. All the interviewers took part in a training session.

The interviews were carried out in April and May and the responses were used to inform the design of the taster session at the end of May.

Interviews

Practitioners interviewed mainly their own learners in breaks or at the end of teaching sessions, and learners were given a lunch voucher for taking part. The interviews were structured with mainly open questions but listed prompts to help learners if necessary. The schedules clearly indicated which answers were to open questions and which were in response to the prompts.

Taster session

Six learners on basic skills literacy courses at City College attended the session, with the incentives of a £5 Argos voucher and a £3 lunch voucher. The session was structured over two and a half

hours. It began with a welcome, followed by a talk from current numeracy learners. This was followed by a college tour, then a carousel of activities taking 20 minutes each. At lunch the learners received the lunch vouchers and then took part in exit interviews where the Argos vouchers were given out.

The carousel contained the following four activities:

1. Producing a line graph to describe the learner's history of confidence in maths
2. Making boxes
3. Data handling
4. One-to-one interviews to take learner biographies, based on the learners' line graphs prepared earlier.

Findings

Learners were able to give multiple answers to the questions: thus the numbers cited refer to numbers of responses rather than number of learners responding.

Interviews with current key skills learners

All 24 key skill Application of Number learners were on full-time vocational courses. All were aged under 20, and most lived with their parents and did not work. Only five were male.

Sixteen of them indicated that they would not have chosen to study maths if it had not been part of their course; 10 would have done and two made both negative and positive comments.

When asked how they now thought numeracy might help them: 16 suggested practical life skills; 13 confidence; and 11 managing money. Two did not feel the course would help them and six mentioned further study. Fourteen learners suggested that numeracy should be compulsory in all courses.

The key skills learners compared their current numeracy classes favourably to their school experiences, making 84 positive comments compared to only two people who found it harder or unhelpful. They particularly liked the more relaxed

atmosphere, the smaller classes and the different teaching style, and recognised that their own age and attitude were also factors.

However, six said they would not encourage anybody else to do numeracy, despite the fact that this was a closed question. They also suggested that the college needs to make maths more fun.

Interviews with current basic skills learners

Thirty-three basic skills numeracy learners were interviewed, ten of them male, eleven with children. Their ages were spread evenly between 20 and 50, with four people in their seventies. Seven were working full-time, 12 part-time, 2 were working unpaid and 12 were not working. At the college half were working towards Level 1 and eight towards Level 2, with the rest at Entry Level.

Nearly two-thirds of the learners (21) gave interest in the subject/to gain knowledge as a reason for enrolling on the course, while other responses mentioned working towards a qualification (5); gaining confidence (5) and helping children or grandchildren (4).

Reasons given for staying on the course included increasing confidence or self-esteem (24), practical life skills (17), work (13), further study (11), children (10), home finances (10) and gaining a qualification (7).

The learners preferred the basic numeracy class to their maths classes at school because of the more relaxed atmosphere (19); the teachers (13) and smaller classes (12).

Reasons given for not doing the course sooner focused on practical issues such as family and work commitments. Six learners said they did not know the courses existed and half of the learners had problems getting started, most often because of lack of self-confidence (eight responses). When asked what they thought the college could do to encourage more people to do the course, by far the largest response was advertising (19 responses). This

suggests that advertising needs both to inform people about the course and encourage them to do it.

The taster session

The six learners in the taster session were already taking part in basic skills literacy classes. There were three women and three men; ages ranging from 26 to 53. They had varying levels of numeracy confidence and learning difficulties.

They all thought increased confidence with numeracy would help with money and general confidence. Four were keen to use it for DIY and two thought it would help with job opportunities and helping with homework.

This was a very small sample and unrepresentative of the target population, but they all enjoyed the taster session, particularly the activities. Four said a definite 'yes' to doing a numeracy course, while the other two said they would like to complete their literacy courses first. As they were already at the college it was difficult to explore the importance of 'first contact'.

Taking learner biographies rather than using formal diagnostic assessment or individual learning plans (ILPs) worked very well. Combining them with the maths history line graphs helped because:

- the graphs provided a visual representation of learners' confidence in maths over time and was an unthreatening focus of attention for questions
- all the learners immediately understood the function of the graph as a physical representation of information but were so focused on the personal aspect that they were surprised and pleased when it was pointed out to them that this was maths
- they could take their graphs to use at the one-to-one learner biography interview.

Three tutors planned the activities to show that basic skills and maths were about a broader range of

They particularly liked the more relaxed atmosphere, the smaller classes and the different teaching style, and recognised that their own age and attitude were also factors.

topics than just 'number'. The 'boxes' session, for example, developed into a general discussion on packaging and shopping habits in this country. The session also contained some covert selling techniques. For example, projecting the line graphs into the future was a rhetorical device whereby the only way the line could be drawn was going up and, when learners were asked what would make that happen, 'attending a course' was the obvious answer.

The real test will be whether the learners enrol and stay on a basic skills numeracy course, and that cannot be tracked within the remit of this project.

Conclusions

Interviews with current learners

Our data supports the argument that people's motivation for enrolling on a numeracy course is different from their motivation to engage with and succeed on the course, but does not support the argument that functional maths provides only a minor incentive to continue to attend. Most of the key skills learners said they would not have chosen to study numeracy at this time, and most of the basic skills learners gave 'interest in the subject' as their reason for enrolling (i.e. a non-functional reason). However, both key skills and basic skills learners gave predominantly functional reasons for numeracy helping them, contrasting with their reasons (or lack of reasons) for choosing to do it in the first place.

The taster session

There were two main reasons for the success of the session.

1. Firstly, it created a comfortable, fun and confident learning environment that built on learners' previous successes while liberating them from their maths phobias.
2. Secondly, the session contained some covert selling techniques which had the effect not merely of focusing the participants' attention on the positive effects of improved numeracy but, more broadly, of empowering them to take control of their learning.

Dissemination

To support strategic planning of provision, the report will be disseminated within the College and to:

- Providers in Brighton and Hove through the Learning Partnership
- Providers pan-Sussex through the Skills for Life Development Centre
- The 'Numeracy Matters' forum
- Jobcentre Plus, Brighton and Hove
- NACRO.

The taster session will continue to be developed and used to attract potential learners, and the elements of good practice will feed through to curriculum development and delivery.

Reflections on being involved in action research

The research experience provided excellent opportunities for practitioners to broaden their awareness of policy and research issues and receive some basic training in research methodology.

NRDC provided training sessions and forum meetings, with reviews and handouts covering relevant policy development, targets and recent research. This helped the practitioners to situate their professional experience within the wider debate. The project was well supported through established channels and through links with others involved in research at the Institute of Education.

All the practitioners found interviewing learners interesting and worthwhile. They could see the practical impact of the decisions they had made at the design stage, and several suggested it would be worth doing at the beginning of a course.

At an institutional level, the project enabled the practitioners to network with members of staff with whom they would not normally have contact. This has opened up avenues for future development, particularly with teacher training in the college. ■

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- ▶ **Extracurricular activities: added value or wasted resources?**
- ▶ **Exeter College**
- ▶ Fakhira Asfaq, Suzanne Oyo, Saban Ozturk, Tat Ruck, Nrvan El Saied and David Wright

Introduction

Many teachers, volunteers and co-ordinators working in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) feel that much of the work they are doing, beyond the delivery of English language learning in the classroom, is undervalued. They experience little support in terms of funding, resources or understanding of the contribution that such activities make towards engagement and progression.

The practitioners involved in the community ESOL project in Exeter have spent a great deal of time and effort organising a range of extracurricular activities to supplement what happens in the ESOL classroom. They put forward a research proposal to the NRDC to take a closer look at the value of this effort. Given limited time and resources, how far should ESOL providers and practitioners go in supporting extracurricular activities? Do such activities make a significant, perhaps even an essential, contribution to the delivery of ESOL and to the motivation of learners?

Background

The research proposal grew organically out of our work with the Community ESOL Project, a two-year

developmental partnership between Exeter College and the Islamic Centre of the South West (IC), funded by the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC). Support networks and facilities for minority ethnic communities are still in their infancy over much of the south-west of England, with the result that there are many very isolated individuals and small groups who are not easy to reach.

Although most of the initial targets of the community ESOL project related to getting new learners enrolled in classes and building progression routes onto mainstream courses, both the local LSC and Exeter College supported the holistic approach taken by the project team. As much time has gone into setting up activities and classes with no qualification outcome as into setting up and running new ESOL classes.

Research questions

- Are added-value activities peripheral to the delivery of Skills for Life and a potential waste of resources, or are they fundamental to the successful recruitment and progression of Skills for Life learners?

- How much do extracurricular activities contribute towards developing learners' language skills?

Research design

The main group of participants for this research has been ESOL learners from the women-only classes run at the Islamic Centre of the South West over the past two years. All of these learners have participated, to varying degrees, in the extracurricular activities on offer and we wanted them to reflect on what, if anything, they had gained from the different activities they had been involved in alongside the English classes.

It was important to the team that ESOL learners should be active researchers. The research team therefore comprised three learners from classes at the mosque, an ESOL tutor who regularly taught both at the mosque and in college, and a part-time ESOL tutor at the college.

We carried out 16 interviews and ran two focus groups, one with learners and one with volunteers, teachers and project workers. As 'insiders' who were familiar with the interviewees, we did not find it difficult to persuade people to get involved but we did worry about feeling too close to the material. As we learnt more from our training sessions, however, we were reassured and, as the research progressed and themes started to emerge strongly from the data it became less of a problem. However, we did find we forgot to record things simply because we were so used to them. At our residential weekend we were strongly recommended to do more impromptu recording but by the time we got into the habit, the research was nearly over.

Data collection

We started with a focus group for all the learners from the women-only classes to make sure that everybody knew what we were doing. We then arranged a schedule of interviews to be carried out by the ESOL learners in the research team, supported by interpreters where necessary.

We decided to give the interviews a chronological structure: past, present and future.

- What were learners' experiences of the English language, of English language learning, of England in the past (before joining in with classes and activities at the Islamic Centre)?
- How had those things changed in the present?
- What hopes and plans – with work, education, family – did they now have for the future?

We realised too that if we were going to describe the impacts of involvement in extracurricular activities, we would have to tease apart the information by asking distinct questions about language learning, as well as questions about social and personal impacts.

Data analysis

We analysed transcripts of the interviews and identified four major themes:

1. Different ways of learning English
2. Emotional factors
3. Citizenship – knowledge and experience
4. Wider gains.

We then went through the transcripts to identify quotes relating to each of the themes. We also tried some quantitative analysis techniques to see if any clear patterns emerged, discounting any references that were not directly related to language learning. For example: 'My family I want them more better in their life and study' was not counted as it states a general aspiration.

Each word or phrase was then categorised by positive/negative connotations in past, present or future according to context of use.

Findings

The relationship between extracurricular activities and learning English

We found clear evidence that the provision of a range of extracurricular activities was a factor in encouraging learners to attend the ESOL classes at the mosque. ►

It was important to the team that ESOL learners should be active researchers.

During our first focus group session we asked the learners to rank what they enjoyed most about attending the classes. The top four answers were: embroidery club, photography classes, exercise sessions and visits. One participant hastened to add that everyone liked the ESOL classes too, but it is interesting that these were first suggestions. An actively involved learner is more engaged with the language they encounter and the multisensory input helps with deeper level processing and thus with more effective long-term retention.

Another point made very effectively by an informant relates to the type of language learning experience that extracurricular activities offer. Most language-teaching professionals would accept the importance of facilitating opportunities for learners to practise with all the language at their disposal, but much of the language on offer in the ESOL classroom is 'restricted'. At the extracurricular embroidery club, on the other hand, for example, the teacher 'gives us new words'.

A volunteer tutor who had been involved with both classroom support and extracurricular activities commented: 'Visits let learners use language in a more natural, broader way – the language we use in our everyday lives – due to lack of restrictions.' Another volunteer at this session talked about specific skills developed such as expressing opinions or developing an argument.

This is not to suggest that ESOL classes should be abandoned, but it does show that learners value the extracurricular activities partly because of their positive impact on language learning.

Emotional factors

It could be argued that these extracurricular activities can be done by learners for themselves. However, this argument ignores the emotional aspects of language learning.

A clear pattern that emerged in our interviews is the contrast between our informants' descriptions of their emotional states before they enrolled with

the community ESOL project and their current levels of confidence and self-esteem.

References to anxiety and other negative emotions in relation to arrival in the UK and language skills occur again and again in the interviews. Several informants link these negative emotions directly to language skills and to their ability to develop these skills.

Citizenship

In recent years, in response to government initiatives and the Crick Report, citizenship has become a major issue and the subject of citizenship has been assimilated into the National Curriculum with a suggestion that it should include a strong experiential element. It is clear from our findings that a strong programme of extracurricular activities can be an ideal way to provide some of this experience.

One learner who had been on a visit to Devon police headquarters and found herself at home and scared, remembered how the police had said that people should not hesitate to phone them if they were worried about something – that it was every citizen's right. She phoned the police, made herself understood and a police car called round to reassure her. This simple account is evidence of improvements in communication with a public service organisation and of practical experience leading to an increased ability to make use of public services.

Wider gains

There are also benefits for the teachers and the development of their relationship with their learners. One project volunteer remarked that the visits led to 'a reduction in teacher control and increased mutual respect'.

'Wider gains' include the widening of interests and horizons: an extracurricular trip led one informant to enrol for a sign language course. They also include positive benefits for learners' family members. Reporting on an informal reading group

Visits let learners use language in a more natural, broader way.

Extracurricular activities: added value or wasted resources?

at the local library one interviewee said: 'First time I find they have story sessions for children ... and now Omar he have his library card.'

A volunteer tutor also observed that: 'Extracurricular activities at the mosque support empowerment of women by giving them opportunities to socialise, express opinions, widen horizons.'

Conclusions

The message from this research supports recent work that shows literacy education not only as the discrete delivery of reading and writing skills but as social practice. This perspective also focuses on the idea that our views of learning need to expand to incorporate what happens outside the classroom.

In the field of ESOL, with the additional issue of active citizenship, this perspective has even greater resonance. It also reveals a gap between what is happening in the ESOL classroom and the real needs of the learners. Our findings demonstrate that extracurricular activities can make an enormous contribution towards satisfying those neglected needs by helping to build confidence and self-esteem, providing opportunities for real and unpressured engagement with local institutions and services, and helping to develop support networks in the community. It is also clear that these extracurricular activities have a direct impact on language learning itself.

The irony is that the starting title for this research is itself misleading: these activities should be part of the curriculum; they are not adding value to ESOL provision, they are ESOL provision.

We recommend that government organisations, funding bodies and ESOL providers look at ways of offering more support to extracurricular activities in terms of both financial support and recognition.

Dissemination

Locally, these research findings will be disseminated to ESOL providers (Exeter College,

Plymouth College, Open Doors) and to the regional LSC.

Interested parties have formed a community group, the Olive Tree Association, which is applying for funding to co-ordinate a year-long programme of activities among local minority ethnic communities, with the aim of promoting active citizenship learning. The findings of this research are being used to provide evidence of potential outcomes for the funding bids.

Two members of the team are now involved in delivering specialist Level 4 teacher training programmes for Plymouth University, which provides the opportunity to disseminate the findings of this and other NRDC projects to practitioners.

Reflections on being involved in action research

For all of us, being involved in this research has been a process of both personal and professional development. For the ESOL learners in the team, taking responsibility for designing interview questions, for carrying out interviews and for transcribing and translating has meant much more than the opportunity to improve English skills. More importantly, it has been an empowering experience: actually being paid to use our language skills and being listened to by people outside our community, by people from all over the country, has been a very exciting opportunity. For the rest of the team, it has been equally developmental – teaching us new skills, giving us the sense of having a voice and opening up networks of contacts all over the country. ■

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- ▶ **Learners' experiences and perceptions of the impact of residential education on Skills for Life learning**
- ▶ **Northern College for Residential Adult Education**
- ▶ Sue Chattwood, Bronwen Ray, Suzanne Tomlinson and Jill Westerman

Introduction

The Northern College for Residential Adult Education became involved in the second round of NRDC Practitioner-led Research Initiative in Literacy, Numeracy and English for Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) to develop the delivery of adult education for the learners' benefit and, specifically, to investigate the impact of residential learning on Skills for Life learners. The College was in a unique position to carry out this research because residence is central to its delivery.

Background

The project aimed to:

- Investigate the impact of residence on Skills for Life learners' commitment and progress, with the focus on learners' perceptions
- Explore how the intensity of a three-day residential course enhances learners' commitment
- Explore the potential impact of including a residential element in non-residential provision.

It also aimed to raise the profile of Skills for Life at Northern College in South Yorkshire, which is dedicated to the education and training of people

without formal qualifications, from disadvantaged backgrounds, who want to return to learning. The College offers a high level of support and has pioneered an innovative mix of full-time and part-time programmes from basic literacy and numeracy to higher education. Learners come from different backgrounds, are aged from 21 to over 70, and often have families and dependants.

The college is linked to the Skills for Life Consortium in South Yorkshire, the South Yorkshire Professional Development Network and Lifelong Learning Partnerships, and is a partner of Sheffield Hallam University.

It has recently been awarded Learning and Skills Beacon status and received a grade 2 for its Foundation Programme (Literacy and Numeracy) in the 2003 Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) inspection.

The Skills for Life courses include speaking and writing with confidence, reading skills, essay writing and numeracy. National Tests in literacy and numeracy at Levels 1 and 2 are offered to all learners.

Research issue

The key issue in the research was learners' experiences and perceptions of the impact of residential education on Skills for Life learning.

Research design

The research ran from January to September 2005 and moved through initial planning and implementation of data collection, data analysis, report writing and dissemination of project findings.

The college principal provided the team with research support, including advice and guidance at each stage, as did the NRDC.

Ethical issues

Learners who appeared in photographs completed consent forms and learners' names were not used in the report. In fact, once the learners knew what the research was about, they were all keen to contribute.

Literature review

A literature review was undertaken on the theme of residential learning, but little of it seemed to focus on the benefits for learners, or learners' perceptions or short-term courses.

Data collection

Data collection involved:

- a questionnaire for 62 Skills for Life learners from six residential courses
- learners' own accounts produced during two Creative Writing residential courses, accredited at Level 1 through the Open College Network
- two focus group discussions, each with eight learners
- retention and achievement statistics.

The six residential courses represented 25 per cent of the 24 residential Skills for Life courses that ran during the data collection period. The 62 who filled in the questionnaires represented 30 per cent of the total registered 198 learners. These figures thus represent a significant proportion of the total, and the research team believe that the research participants

are representative of the whole cohort.

Data collection began with a Creative Writing residential course. Learners were encouraged to express in writing their ideas on studying in a residential college and also given cameras to record their experience. This course was repeated, with different learners, towards the end of the data collection.

Two focus groups were held, one at the beginning of data collection and one at the end. The first group was used as a starting point to formulate the questionnaire.

Two of the team attended training by NRDC on running a focus group and each held a focus group.

Data analysis

Questionnaires

Data analysis began with a statistical investigation of the questionnaires. They were completed by 62 learners: 19 men and 43 women (31 per cent men and 69 per cent women). This reflected the programme performance indicators for the year, which were 38 per cent men and 62 per cent women. Over half (58 per cent) of the learners were aged under 55, which reflected the programme's overall year age of 52 per cent under 50.

Seventy-six per cent of the learners had previously attended a residential course at Northern College but the difference between those who had and those who had not was not evident in their responses.

Respondents were asked how far they lived from the college: 62 per cent had travelled more than 6 miles, while 38 per cent had travelled less than 6 miles, yet still decided to stay residentially at the College.

Once these statistical details were identified, the open-ended written responses to the questions were analysed and grouped into seven key themes:

1. Intensity of experience
2. Peer support

The key issue in the research was learners' experiences and perceptions of the impact of residential education on Skills for Life learning.

3. Atmosphere
4. Away from everyday life/pressures/routine
5. Time
6. Access to resources
7. Transport/travel.

Focus groups

Once the seven themes had been identified, the focus group data was analysed to gain more qualitative data about learners' perceptions. The group facilitators were members of the research team and so they knew the participants in the focus groups, which may or may not have had an impact on the responses.

The first group comprised learners who had previously been on Skills for Life courses and had progressed onto the College Diploma. Therefore, while they had experience of short courses, they were currently on a nine-month residential course. The second focus group comprised learners selected from questionnaire respondents, who only had the short-course experience.

One of the few differences between the two groups was the confidence with which the participants contributed. The first group were keen to share their experiences while the second group needed more encouragement. However, regardless of these differences, the results of the two focus group discussions were very similar.

Creative Writing courses

The two Creative Writing short courses were designed to enable learners to express their perceptions of residential learning through poems, journals, tabloid-news-style pieces and short stories. This seemed particularly appropriate as the research was practitioner-led and the aim was to explore learners' perceptions. It also proved to be a rich source of data.

Once all the data was assembled, coding the material began: the qualitative data was categorised systematically and results and conclusions drawn.

Findings

Questionnaires

The data suggested that learners valued the time away from home/everyday pressures: 92 per cent of learners cited this as important. An acrostic poem written by one learner contained the phrase 'time to think', and many other comments reflected similar feelings.

As the seven themes became apparent during the questionnaire analysis an overarching theme was also emerging, with learners repeatedly referring to the idea that residence 'allows them to relax'. For example, many learners felt that not having to travel to and from College every day allowed them to relax, because they were not worried about being late.

Focus groups

The focus group data confirmed the seven themes and the overarching theme of 'relaxation' that had emerged from the questionnaires. Both groups felt that residence at college gave them better access to facilities. However, while the short-course learners (the second group) saw the College site as providing easier access between living space and learning space, the Diploma learners (the first group) described the distance between buildings as being more pronounced. The Diploma learners also commented on how being residential can result in intense relationships with other learners. Possibly for learners living for a long time at the College, it becomes their 'everyday' environment, whereas for short-course learners it is a break from the norm.

Comments about a 'feeling of belonging' in the residential setting were echoed across both groups.

Residence, motivation and achievement

The project did not have the time to explore learners' motivations but the findings indicate possible reasons, including a desire to achieve something – like completing a course.

Before doing the data collection, the team tried to identify what it was about the residential experience that contributed to learners' commitment and

Many learners felt that not having to travel to and from College every day allowed them to relax, because they were not worried about being late.

achievement. The Skills for Life programme figures for 2004/5 indicate a 97 per cent retention rate and 92 per cent achievement rate compared to the sector average of 88 per cent and 81 per cent respectively. Although other factors are involved, it is reasonable to suggest that residence contributes to these rates.

Conclusions

We acknowledged at the start of this project that we were starting from the premise that residence is a positive factor. There are negative aspects of residence, such as being away from family, sharing facilities and possible animosity between learners, but none of the short-course questionnaires cited any of these disadvantages: the vast majority of responses were positive.

The research findings confirmed what we already thought, but also enabled us to identify relaxation as the overarching experience of residence for all learners.

To take this study forward, research into the residential experience in other venues and surroundings would be necessary. It would also be worth examining whether the relaxed atmosphere is chiefly important to Skills for Life learners, or whether all adult learners might benefit.

During the focus group discussions, we tried to identify exactly what was beneficial about the residential experience. What emerged was that the seven factors are all important in different degrees for different individuals. It could be seen as a kaleidoscope – the pattern changes, but all the colours are needed to make the pattern. Perhaps what is special is that all learners can access them as far as they need to, to create their own effective learning pattern.

Dissemination

The findings from this project will be disseminated through workshops at regional events, articles in a Skills for Life publication and on the Northern College website, at an NRDC Practitioner-led

Research dissemination event and at in-house staff meetings.

The main aim of the dissemination is to encourage non-residential providers to consider including a residential element in their course delivery.

Reflections on being involved in action research

This project has been a valuable experience for the team, who were fairly new to the concept of action research. It has promoted their reflective practice and provided continuing professional development opportunities, with research training provided both in-house and by NRDC.

The Skills for Life team had collective responsibility for this research, which has enhanced their confidence, while involving the learners in the project has potentially been empowering for the students.

The project has confirmed staff perceptions of learners' feelings about the impact of residence on learners and enabled us to explore these in more depth.

The team were inspired to plan and deliver two new Creative Writing courses that are now part of the general course delivery, and will be developed and included in future Skills for Life programmes.

The project has benefited the whole college by:

- providing evidence for the argument for residential learning
- giving the learners a voice in this argument
- providing staff with the opportunity to develop research skills
- gaining national recognition for the work of the college
- bringing additional income into the college.

The team are now able to integrate research with their teaching and organisational activities and are looking at other areas that might enhance their Skills for Life teaching. ■

A full version of this report is available on the

publications page of the NRDC website:

www.nrdc.org.uk

► **Learner-centred practice: meeting the goals and motivation of learners on Skills for Life programmes**

► **York College**

- Helen Kenwright with Julie Ainsworth, Shona Cuthbertson, Judith Gresty, Nick Haigh and Laura Kent

Introduction

This project was designed to find out what motivates learners to persist and succeed on Skills for Life programmes, and to develop and evaluate some teaching strategies that address learner needs.

Background

York College currently provides for 80 per cent of the city's 16–18-year-old learners and a large proportion of its adult learners, offering a range of basic skills provision. It has a dedicated and independent Learning Development Unit (LDU) with experience of practitioner research in an FE setting and of literacy and numeracy projects.

The LDU co-ordinated the research element of the project and supported the four practitioner-researchers by providing advice, information and training and monthly meetings. The college's Skills for Life co-ordinator helped the practitioners to develop approaches, techniques and materials and was in daily contact. The team met formally twice and also informally to discuss progress and ideas.

Research questions

- What motivates learners to take adult literacy and numeracy programmes?
- What motivates them to continue with the programmes? What goals do they hope their learning will help them to achieve?
- What impact can specific teaching techniques have upon learners' aspirations and motivation? For example, if learners persist with their studies because of growing levels of confidence, can formative assessment techniques be used to support this?

The research

Four practitioners undertook action research projects working with learners on adult literacy and numeracy courses in college and in the workplace. They started with a training session on action research methods and an in-depth workshop on gathering data from learners.

Each practitioner then devised their own research plan tailored to their own learners, research goals and teaching contexts. They also developed their own data collection models using observation, interviews,

If learners persist with their studies because of growing levels of confidence, can formative assessment techniques be used to support this?

focus groups and, in some cases, questionnaires. They began by investigating their learners' current motivation and aspirations, then selected techniques to develop their practice in the classroom. They evaluated and developed these techniques, using further consultation with learners, observation and reflective practice.

Towards the end of the development and data collection phase they received training in data analysis, using their 'live' data, then completed their analysis and interpretations.

Each practitioner worked primarily with their own learners but also, where possible, observed each other's practice and compared outcomes and techniques.

Practitioners were keen to avoid intimidating their learners. They did not record interviews on tape or visibly take too many notes. They made interviews very informal, held group discussions as part of normal class activities, and were sensitive about how they administered questionnaires. They also gained explicit informed consent for involvement in the project from all participants.

The data collected was qualitative and consisted primarily of interview transcripts and notes, observation records, practitioner diaries and course documentation. The records kept for each learner were made anonymous and analysed alongside sample schemes of work and relevant lesson plans. Because the practitioners knew the learners very well, the LDU research team collected and interrogated the outcomes to bring a more objective perspective to the analysis.

Every piece of evidence was used to test emerging findings and, where there was a discrepancy, this was used to alter outcomes or, at the very least, noted as an exception. Practitioners found this particularly useful because sometimes their research was so closely interwoven with their teaching practice that they forgot that informal observation and dialogue with learners were valid methods of data collection.

Once the data had been coded and interrogated, peer techniques were used to check interpretations, with a secondary analysis to reduce the influence of individual perspectives. Comparative techniques were used to draw out similarities and differences between the experiences of different groups of learners and different practitioners.

Findings

What motivates learners?

The learners on this project were largely motivated by the drivers described in a MORI poll for the Basic Skills Agency in 2000. They wanted to:

- feel better about themselves and their skills
- perform better in everyday tasks involving basic skills
- get a job
- perform better at work
- help their children with their learning.

They often had long-standing motivations and aspirations but were spurred into action by a recent event, such as the arrival of grandchildren or losing a job. Some motivations reflected the belief that learning was intrinsically useful; others were linked to external opportunities.

There were also several examples of learners motivating each other. Many of them had thought they were alone in their lack of skills, and found it inspiring that this was not so.

One practitioner found that as learners became aware of how they and their peers were learning, they understood why tasks that seemed easy for one person could be difficult for another. By demonstrating that this was a matter of individual preference and learning style rather than an indicator of intelligence, she successfully motivated her learners to keep trying and significantly raised their confidence.

Practitioners also noted other information, interests and preferences, sometimes concerns or worries that helped them to identify specific approaches to



teaching. The practitioner working with a group of armed-forces learners was aware of potential resistance because it was a mandatory programme. She therefore began by inviting them to write down any positive or negative thoughts, so that she could take them into account and help the learners recognise, as the course progressed, how they were overcoming their obstacles.

Learners from all the groups reported that their lessons were relevant and interesting, although some were not used to having their individual needs and interests catered for and felt that they were being overindulged. The best response to this was persistence and feedback, explaining the learning process, linking achievement to immediate and abstract motivations and demonstrating progress through formative assessment.

Teaching techniques

Once the learners' motivations and goals had been established, each practitioner developed techniques to address these needs.

They carried out learning styles activities with their learners individually and in groups to help the learners to reflect on their past experiences of learning and their preferences and resistances. They then used the outcomes to create individual and group strategies for learning. This helped the learners to take an active approach to their own learning.

In some cases learning and teaching styles were adapted to address wider lifestyle issues. For example, for shift workers who had just completed a long shift, the practitioner provided relaxed sessions with a slow pace, using a higher than usual number of games and discussion sessions to keep them alert and engaged.

Formative assessment

Regular, targeted feedback helped learners to relate their learning to their immediate goal (e.g. obtaining a qualification) and their long-term aims. It needed to include acknowledgement of progress, identifying a

manageable area for improvement and clear guidelines on how to make that improvement. Provided that learners felt secure and had already made progress, group work, peer teaching and assessment also encouraged mutual support.

Resources

Specially designed resources were also effective. One practitioner used colourful objects to demonstrate difficult points. Another used clothes pegs to demonstrate the use of apostrophes. Her learners each wrote a word, cut it out, then folded it to show the contraction and held it together with a clothes peg on which a big apostrophe was drawn.

Individual mini whiteboards allowed learners to experiment with different combinations of words and phrases and to build their confidence by using a medium that allowed easy deletion.

Computers

Computers were useful, both because they were motivating in their own right and because devices such as spellchecks and the delete key were reassuring safety nets that protected learners from feeling embarrassed by their mistakes.

One practitioner worked with a learner who found the computer very helpful. She then gradually introduced other, paper-based, techniques, such as using a dictionary, which the learner was able to do more confidently because they had the computer as backup.

The research

The research itself had a motivating effect. It increased learners' awareness that they were not alone, that there were organisations and academics working to help them and learners like them, and that what they were doing had an importance beyond their own achievement.

The research process also allowed much more consultation and dialogue between practitioners and learners than is usually possible, with opportunities for reflection and development of practice.

The practitioners

Learners responded not just to praise and encouragement, but to their teachers' interest in them, investment in time and energy, confidence in them and their professional skills. Many learners reported that this was the first time they had met a truly 'inspiring' teacher, and that this was a key contributor to their motivation and ultimate success.

Conclusions

There are many identifiable ways in which learning can be designed to address learners' individual goals and motivations. However, it was not particular activities that guaranteed success but matching the activities to learners' interests, goals and motivational needs, and reflecting on learners' feedback and reactions to tasks throughout the programme.

At the end of the study all the learners had progressed not only in learning and skills, but also in their own motivation and hopes for the future.

The research findings will benefit not only the Skills for Life team, but colleagues throughout the college looking for new ways to differentiate their delivery and meet learners' needs more closely.

Dissemination

The evidence described in this report will be presented to colleagues in the LDU Teaching and Learning Bulletin. The team plans to produce one bulletin about how to get to know learners and their goals and motivations, and another about designing inspiring activities tailored to specific learner needs.

The full version of this report will be adapted and included on the LDU website for internal and external visitors, and will include some of the resources developed for other practitioners.

Being involved in action research

The practitioners involved in this project all felt that they and their learners had benefited significantly. The rigour and focus of the research process helped

them to concentrate more effectively, to prioritise and to evaluate the outcomes of their work more thoroughly.

The two practitioners who had not done research before found that it also helped to demystify the process and highlight the overlap between research and learning activities. Learners echoed this and enjoyed taking part in activities that were helping their own teachers to find out more about learning. NRDC publications and information offered a context within which practitioners could locate and apply their own work and also facilitated the sharing of good practice through the credibility the NRDC programme lent to practitioners' work. The opportunity to network with colleagues from the other projects was valuable and we hope will continue.

However, the project also presented significant challenges in terms of time and communication. Although funding was available for cover it was rarely practicable and communication could be tricky because all the practitioners are very busy and many work off site. A project newsletter is planned to help keep colleagues and other project partners aware of the project.

Overall, the project has been a useful and enlightening experience, well supported by NRDC. The team would wholeheartedly recommend this approach to other colleagues considering involvement in such initiatives.

Further research questions

- How can we provide the time to find out what motivates individual learners, when we do not have the focus and resources of a research project?
- How can we work effectively with diverse motivations among a group of learners?
- How can we track and adapt to changes in learner motivation over time?

These issues are difficult to address outside a project, but need to be tackled if the findings of this project are to be thoroughly embedded. ■

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- ▶ **ESOL and learner retention**
- ▶ **City and Islington College**
- ▶ James McGoldrick, Sharon Turner and Frances Weinreich with Melanie Cooke

Introduction

Adult learners often begin an ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) course only to drop out after a couple of weeks for reasons beyond the control of teachers and managers. But many others stay. What helps them to carry on despite the many obstacles they face?

This project used qualitative research methods to explore teaching methods and teacher qualities that might contribute to high levels of learner retention in part-time adult ESOL classes. It emphasised giving a voice to both learners and teachers.

Background

City and Islington is a large general further education (GFE) college in the London Borough of Islington, a part of London with much wealth and prosperity, but also significant poverty and deprivation. Islington is described as the fourth most deprived authority in London: the second most densely populated area attracts a significant number of refugees and asylum-seekers.

Research questions

- What are the methods that ESOL teachers can use to promote learner retention?
- What teacher qualities are valued by learners and seem to positively affect retention?
- What guidelines can teachers follow for improving retention in ESOL classes through the learner–teacher relationship?

The research

The research team interviewed seven teachers employed by the college, including one part-timer. All had consistently achieved high retention rates and had taught ESOL from two to 20+ years. Five were from bilingual families or had themselves learned English as an additional language.

The team devised an ethnographic interview question frame rather than a more predetermined question and answer-style interview process because it was keen to uncover the teachers' stories.

Each teacher suggested seven or eight ESOL learners, who had ideally been in their class for more than one term, to take part in focus groups.

Adult learners often begin an ESOL course only to drop out after a couple of weeks for reasons beyond the control of teachers and managers.

More than 50 learners then took part in seven groups, some during the day and some during the evening. Most were Entry Level 3 adult learners as it was felt they would be able to articulate their ideas. The learners were a variety of ages and spoke a wide range of languages.

The three main researchers from City and Islington knew all the participants, which meant that there were good working relationships but the research could not be entirely unbiased.

Data analysis

Four main themes came up in the discussions: lessons, teachers, teaching and motivation and enjoyment. The focus group data was entered onto grids that were analysed for the final report. The researchers then read transcriptions of their 'own' interviews and noted any areas or themes that came up more than once or could be related in some way to the focus groups. These were discussed in a workshop and an overall analysis was carried out.

Findings

What the learners said

ESOL learners' lives are complex. They are restarting their lives in a new country, often as refugees or asylum seekers, raising families and looking for work, all in a second, third or fourth language. Yet the learners in this study consistently attended classes even when faced with these obstacles.

Goals and aspirations

For a high proportion of learners the main reason they kept coming to ESOL classes was their own motivation: they believed that acquiring a high level of English was essential for integration in the UK, as well as for future economic success and personal fulfilment.

The teachers

The next most motivating factor for learners was the teacher, and they particularly valued the following characteristics:

- Clear explanations: teachers who were patient and persevered using varied approaches until the learners could understand.
- Professionalism: for example, correcting homework promptly and being on time. Learners also mentioned having 'enough information and skills for whatever they teach us' and reinforcing other teachers' reputations.
- Respect and problem resolution: the learners wanted 'friendly', 'soft' control; to be spoken to and treated as equals by the teacher rather than as children. Respect was a key issue for these learners.
- Individual attention: the fourth most frequently mentioned factor was the teacher's ability to give individual attention in the classroom and, more importantly, in tutorials where learners could talk about their personal lives rather than SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timebound) targets or individual learning plans.
- Some learners also mentioned the value of the group, which might offer the opportunity to meet people from other nationalities, to make friends or simply to practise using English.

Attitudes to lessons

Enjoyment and relevance were the key points here. Most of the learners from the focus groups became animated and excited as they explained what went on in their lessons. For ESOL learners enjoyment is not necessarily 'having fun' but a sense of 'newness' which creates a desire to learn. They also needed the lessons to be relevant to their everyday lives and to help them integrate into society at a deeper level than just the functional language in the Skills for Life material.

What the teachers said

The teachers talked with enthusiasm about their work and the learners and all stated that they 'love teaching'. They presented themselves as caring, compassionate and fair people who treat their learners equally; some also mentioned empathy with their learners.



The teacher's role

There seemed to be a range of approaches to fostering a successful working environment. One teacher described how she reduces the power divide between teacher and learners by demonstrating that she herself has weaknesses; another talked of finding common interests.

The teachers were serious about their professional duties, setting homework and marking it promptly, as well as taking on the considerable institutional demands of record-keeping and examination preparation. They also carried out a pastoral, supportive role for their learners, making time for chats and giving informal advice.

Induction

The teachers interviewed agreed the importance of course induction as a time for establishing ground rules, setting the scene, negotiating targets and establishing the tone for the whole year. Some also believe it is important to show the value of being in the class and 'winning over' the learners.

Teachers involved their learners in shaping the course and the learners noticed this and appreciated it.

Planning

The teachers stressed the importance of careful lesson planning. Most checked that learners knew the long-term goals of the course, as well as the objectives for each lesson, and they all saw the importance of group and pair work.

Formative assessment can play a motivating role: 'even things like half-term tests, they actually look forward to that, if they've got a goal then they know they have to work hard'.

Teachers talking about learners*Relevance*

Teachers agreed with learners that the work they do in class must be relevant. Some teachers make a considerable effort to stress to their groups the impact that English language learning can have on their lives.

Respect

Like the learners they emphasised the importance of respect. Some teachers suggested learning to say something in their learners' mother tongues: one could say 'good' in 30 languages. They saw the process of teaching/learning English as a joint venture.

Achievements

Like the learners, teachers repeatedly commented that learners must feel they are learning and getting somewhere with their English.

Learners' lives

Teachers viewed the tutorials as key to knowing something about learners' lives and what may affect their attendance and learning. Some teachers also talked about boundaries to their involvement and needing to decide when referrals to other professionals would be appropriate.

Enjoyment

The teacher interviews gave the sense that the classroom was not only a place for work, but also for enjoyment. Enjoyment was also implicit in the way that they expressed their passion for language learning and the value of their work.

Conclusions

The project confirmed that the teacher has an important role in retention. The students in the project perceived the quality of the teaching as the key motivator for retention after their primary motivator. They identified the crucial characteristics of good teaching as: planning, transparency and a clear purpose, backed up by mutual respect and a supportive relationship established carefully and early.

The ESOL teachers in the study demonstrated a remarkable ability to deal with the complex needs and demands of their ESOL learners. They not only managed those needs but also taught a language. This involved employing a range of strategies to keep their learners attending, including entertaining, supporting, listening, protecting and advising – as well as teaching.

Teachers involved their learners in shaping the course and the learners noticed this and appreciated it.

Another key finding of this research was that adult ESOL learners have strong opinions and need to be heard. Learners often returned to the issue of respect, stating this as central to the teacher–learner relationship.

However, the research also confirmed that even the most experienced teachers with a good track record find that their learners sometimes drop out. The fluid nature of ESOL learners' lives means this is sometimes unavoidable. And dropout does not necessarily imply a negative; learners sometimes leave because they have found jobs or moved on.

This project did not aim to deliver a new range of strategies for teachers: on the contrary, many teachers are already doing what is required to keep learners coming to class. However, learners consistently commented on areas of their teachers' teaching approach that they liked. It may be that often they were able to comment because their teachers had made it very clear what they were doing. Many teachers made a conscious effort to ensure learners could see what they were doing, whether projecting their objectives onto the whiteboard, or talking explicitly about class rules and expectations. This transparency is also important to demonstrate that learning has taken place. Learners need to feel this and teachers need to facilitate this understanding.

The first few weeks can be a crucial time for retention, a time to establish ground rules and 'sell' the course to learners. It is also a time to set the class up as a stable environment for learners (when other parts of their lives may not be stable) and to encourage learners to take responsibility for this.

Retention is about more than just 'learning' in a quantifiable sense: learners are also being provided with a sense of personal well-being and fulfilment, and a social forum for at least six or so hours a week.

Dissemination

The research team has written a short piece for a college newsletter and presented an in-house workshop at City and Islington College. The project has been posted on the DfES website. Locally, the research team plans to run further training events at the College and will talk about the project to senior management. The team is also planning to write an article for *Language Issues*.

Being involved in action research

The practitioner-led research has been an overwhelmingly positive experience, but has also involved a steep learning curve.

The team has developed research skills that include devising interview question frames, organising research pilots, running 'ethnographic-style' interviews, holding focus groups, analysing data and writing the report.

They have grown into a tight, supportive, skill-sharing team and established links with researchers at King's College and Lancaster University. Meeting and training with the other research teams taking part in the PLRI has also been valuable.

Teachers and learners taking part in the project have felt empowered through their involvement – and enjoyed being given (to some extent) free rein to express their ideas and beliefs about ESOL. It has also been a wonderful opportunity for the research team to take some time out from the practice of teaching and training to look at ESOL from a new perspective.

The team has learned a lot from the research process and made some important contacts in the UK educational research field. The project has encouraged us to focus on our own classroom practice, and reflect on how our methods are perceived by learners. City and Islington College has benefited by having three members of staff who have been trained in research methods that could be applied to future in-house projects. ■

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Part 3

Creativity in teaching and learning



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- ▶ **Learner-centred action research at Dewsbury College**
- ▶ **Dewsbury College**
- ▶ Cathy Clarkson and Vasiliki Scurfield

Introduction

This summary describes a learner-centred, practitioner-led action research project undertaken by the Skills for Life team at Dewsbury College in West Yorkshire based around teaching and learning support for experienced tutors.

Background

The overall aim of the project was to instigate a practitioner-led action research network (ARN) in the Skills for Life department to support creative innovation in classrooms. The college has a good mentoring system for new tutors, consisting mainly of tutors of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) but also incorporating other Skills for Life tutors. An evaluation of this system in 2005 highlighted the value of peer support and cross-departmental links and the last inspection included a cross-college recommendation that peer observations would help to strengthen teaching and learning, but this had not happened in any formal or recognised way.

Research questions

- How can an action research network support tutors

in continuing professional development?

- How can the network support tutors in becoming action researchers?
- How can learners be actively, usefully and centrally involved in action research projects?
- How can action research affect practice?

Research design

Skills for Life tutors at Dewsbury College formed an action research network. Tutors in the network undertook small action research projects involving their learners and arranged for their written reflections and comments to be used for the data analysis. They also took part in interviews at the end of the project. Data were collected during the first two terms of the project, autumn 2005 and spring 2006. The third term, summer 2006, allowed time for data analysis and writing the report.

This project was innovative in two principal ways: it integrated learners' voices into the action research and it employed new technology as a useful communications tool.

Data collection

Tutor interviews provided data on tutors' perceptions

of their own 'distance travelled' and their perceptions of the learners' views on the project and on the network.

They kept diaries on a community blog which provided qualitative data about their own action research projects, comments on others' projects and reflections about the project.

Learners discussed and reviewed their views and opinions on any changes in the classroom during the project. Four group interviews were conducted with one evening group and two outreach classes, and one mixed-group learner forum of daytime college students.

Three out of the six tutors kept class blogs on www.blogger.com and one tutor's project involved a virtual social network which incorporated a blog.

There were six hour-long meetings throughout the project, including a final group evaluation session.

The tutors devised a pro forma to record observations and for setting up reciprocal observations with other members of the action research network. The focus of each observation was negotiated between the observer and observed tutor in advance and feedback was given after the event.

The projects

Project a – Cathy

I did a 'mini' action research project with a Level 1 ESOL group where they had a choice of various activities. Feedback from the learners gave me the confidence to extend this into something bigger for my Entry Level 3 tutor group.

This class produced a giant class ILP (individual learning plan). First activities and topics were ranked in order of importance, then SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timebound) targets were matched to each one. Four of these topics were chosen to be group targets and then individuals chose their own priorities from the rest.

Project b – Frieda

I explored and tested, with a group of outreach Entry Level 3 ESOL learners, the use of social networks in terms of promoting independent learning, peer collaboration and improving the learners' English writing skills. Taking learning outside the classroom and being able to communicate with them whenever it was needed was also my intent.

The learners took an active part in the project by choosing which website they would like to use and also selecting topics they would like to write about.

Project c – Tina

I decided to start a peer-teaching project combined with a blog and noticeboard for evaluation and reviews at each stage of the project. The research would involve me learning to not be in complete control during the class and students considering learning new grammar from a teaching perspective. Both of these would be new skills for all concerned and a chance for students to directly compare teacher- and student-led methods of learning grammar.

Project d – Beth

My Level 2 students were not very independent and also not very effective in the decision-making process. My project involved introducing my students to De Bono and his coloured hats to help them understand and improve their discussion and decision-making skills. Then they used these skills to develop a class scheme of work (SOW) for six weeks. They decided on topics and content of lessons, even homework, and then transferred their choices to a college SOW pro forma.

Project e – Anita

Numeracy classes are run on a workshop basis. I wanted to change that, to get people talking to each other, learning things together, and to improve the group dynamic and to make numeracy fun!

I started by ending the sessions with treasure hunts around the room. The class was jigsawed into groups and they pulled out of a hat a task to search the room



to find pieces of information that they would then feed back to the rest of the group. It continued through the year using the interactive whiteboard with students coming up to the front and solving problems with help from their classmates.

Project f – Julia

Aim: improve my students' writing in preparation for exams by getting them to proofread more effectively. I intended to do this by introducing peer marking to Entry Level 1 and Entry Level 2 students. I started by introducing a marking code and had the students group mark a text to correctly identify mistakes.

The next stage was to graduate the activities so eventually the students would be comfortable peer marking and this should impact on their own proofreading and accuracy. I also used dictation, as I have never used this before, to tie into checking work.

Action research network activities

Meetings

The meetings were timetabled from September. The first three revolved around debates on action research, how to involve learners and the blog. The last three focused on what was happening in the classroom, feedback from learners, developing peer observations and a final evaluation of the whole project.

Peer observations

The group developed a simple schedule reflecting key elements:

- Learning process and not judgemental
- Equal, with both the observer and observed teacher wanting to learn and develop from the experience
- Aims of the observation should be negotiated and agreed beforehand
- Space on the observation schedule is provided for joint reflections after the observations.

Tutor diary

A single page blog was selected because one person was the administrator, each tutor could be subscribed just once and all posts could easily be read and commented on

Findings

Tutor interviews

The interviews demonstrated that all the tutors valued their participation in the action research network for the time and space it gave for sharing ideas and peer support, especially peer observations. Negotiating the outcomes was particularly useful, along with the opportunity to watch other tutors in the classroom.

They also identified some weaknesses: a slow start, a lack of clarity in the beginning and the failure of blogs to operate at full potential.

All involved the learners at some stage of the action research cycle and felt the the learners benefited. They talked about increased confidence in using new technologies, being more aware about their work, more prepared to collaborate and doing more learning outside the classroom. None talked about students improving their literacy, language or numeracy.

Network blog

Tutors wrote positively about how the network was different from the norm of teaching; they focused on sharing and 'stealing' ideas and used the blog to support each other. The blog also reflects the tutors' initial nervousness and shows how the projects seem to have evolved through a mixture of bouncing ideas off one another, involving the learners and the reflective cycle of action research.

Learner forums

Learners' views on the effectiveness and benefits of the projects varied but all the learners were happy with their involvement. Where tutors relinquished control to learners, learners embraced this in their language, literacy or numeracy development. One group involved in peer teaching talked about

All involved the learners at some stage of the action research cycle and felt the the learners benefited

learning from each other and their growing confidence.

Student blogs

Most comments from the learners stated that they liked or enjoyed the projects but rarely why. Some focused on their language learning; others wrote more generally about learning from each other. They also expressed their successes in terms of 'soft outcomes'; that it was good but hard work to choose in this way, and made them focus on what they want to learn.

Conclusions

Both tutor and learners have benefited from a learner-centred action research network. Putting the learners at the centre of individual projects contributed to its success and created an environment that nurtured motivation. However, while the meetings and peer observations were an essential part of the network, more consideration needs to go into the role of written reflections via a blog.

All tutors reported that their learners benefited from greater independence, greater involvement and interest in their own learning. Learners also reported development of literacy, language or numeracy.

The network allowed tutors to take the risk that things may go wrong. Many tutors reported that they might have done some kind of innovation in the classroom without the support of the network but that it wouldn't have been as large scale, as structured or as focused.

Although most tutors in this study were not interested in being academic researchers, they wholeheartedly embraced the collaborative aspects of the network, such as peer observations and face-to-face meetings.

The network also demonstrated that learners can be involved in their learning in alternative ways to a paper-based ILP connected to SMART targets. This potentially presents a challenge to the individualised way in which policy in Entry Level Skills for Life classes is often implemented.

The network has been effective in promoting creativity in teaching and learning, and lessons learnt can be carried over to the next cycle, whether this is again in Skills for Life or spread wider across the College.

Dissemination

We hope to disseminate results to the whole college and also generally through NRDC. One of the project leaders may develop the project into an MA dissertation. Support and encouragement will be provided to tutors who wish to write up results of individual projects. Two tutors have already presented at the RSC_YH Regional Conference on the use of blogs and social networks.

Another action research network is planned for 2006–07 and we are canvassing senior management to make space and time available for similar projects in the future.

Reflections on being involved in action research

Some of the issues raised in the first term and the confusion about the learners' involvement and use of the blogs happened because the project leaders themselves were unclear about the extent to which learners could be involved. It would have been useful to clarify how much the blog was available for use as a personal space for reflection versus the need for data for the PLRI project.

If a network were to be run again it would be useful to look at the long-term impact on learners, the department, the college and individual tutors. How would the network feed into the college's formal observation cycle? Given the widespread dislike of formal observation among colleagues, we feel that informal peer observation should maintain a strictly separate existence.

There is also potential for a ripple effect. If the network becomes part of college practice, might it encourage all tutors to be more overt in experimentation, reflection and sharing? Among the tutors taking part in the network, strategies used in individual projects have been absorbed into their mainstream teaching. ■

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publications page of the NRDC website:

www.nrdc.org.uk

► **Weaving reading for pleasure into the Skills for Life adult literacy curriculum**

► **Essex**

► Sue Oakey

Introduction

This research focused on the effects of incorporating reading for pleasure into Skills for Life literacy classes based on the adult literacy curriculum and whether there is evidence to support the link between creative reading and the acquisition of functional literacy skills.

Skills for Life literacy tutors are increasingly under pressure to demonstrate learner progression by meeting the requirements of the National Literacy Tests at Level 1 and Level 2. They experience a tension between providing creative 'learner-centred' teaching and learning experiences, and the pressure of teaching to the requirements of the tests. As a result the experience of reading for pleasure is in danger of being pushed to the margins of group and individual learner experiences and viewed as time-consuming and inappropriate as a class activity.

Background

The partnership between Essex County Council Adult and Community Learning and Essex County Council Libraries began in 2000 when they worked together to develop criteria that enabled library staff to identify mainstream books that were accessible to

emergent readers in Skills for Life classes. The partnership has continued with library staff visiting classes and learners visiting libraries.

Essex Libraries have developed a service to emergent readers that is embedded into their staff training, stock selection and procedures, with Quick Read collections at all the libraries. Their work has informed the development of the national Vital Link programme which focuses particularly on how creative reading activity through libraries can motivate students and engage new learners, and takes partnership between the library and Skills for Life sectors as its starting point.

The aims of this project were to:

- Investigate the links between innovative reading activity with learners and greater enjoyment, motivation, progression and the more functional acquisition of skills that support adult learners in meeting the Government's ambitions for learner achievement
- Enable Skills for Life practitioners to reflect on their everyday practice in more detail to uncover the impact of book-related activity for learners

- Begin to address the link between wider reading and vocabulary acquisition
- Begin to address how emotion, attitude and motivation affect cognitive growth with adult learners – all areas that can be affected by an engagement in reading
- Identify aspects of good practice and helpful information that support partnership working between Skills for Life tutors and library staff.

Research question

What are the links between innovative reading activity with learners and greater enjoyment, motivation, progression and skills acquisition?

Research design

The project began in September 2005 and work with the learners was completed by April 2006.

Eight Skills for Life tutors working at adult community colleges across Essex agreed to track the impact of innovative book-related activities. The 57 learners who volunteered to take part attended adult literacy classes linked to the National Tests at Level 1 or Level 2 in Chelmsford, Canvey Island, Colchester, Basildon, Brentwood, Harlow, Maldon and Warley.

The project was introduced to the tutors as appropriate for learners who were emergent readers ranging from literacy Entry Level 3 to Level 2, but the tutors also included learners who were interested and enthusiastic, and adapted their teaching strategies accordingly. The variation of reading ability in the Entry Level 1 to Entry Level 3 range is in accordance with the 'spiky profiles' of adult learners, who are often better at reading than writing.

Library staff visited seven of the literacy classes and advised the tutor in Colchester. They used the Vital Link toolkit reading activities to interest and engage the learners and after detailed discussions about individual preferences and personal interests returned to the groups with a range of appropriate books.

Tutors planned the reading activities and integrated them into their courses. None had any problem linking the reading for pleasure work to the adult literacy curriculum. Learners worked with their tutors to complete reading diaries and book reviews. Library staff visited to discuss learners' and tutors' responses to the books and to provide more Quick Reads. Learners and tutors also provided feedback comments at focus group meetings. Tutors were funded for an extra two hours a week to complete paperwork and meet colleagues to share ideas and experiences. The learners completed a questionnaire at the beginning and at the end of the project.

Data collection

The initial questionnaire established a baseline of information about the 57 adult learners. Most were aged 25–49 with the younger and older age groups almost equally represented. Women outnumbered men and there were no men under 25. Learners identified a wide range of interests including cooking, gardening, ICT, craftwork and art.

Over half (67 per cent) of the learners already belonged to the library but only half of these visited it regularly (at least once a month), so overall a third of learners accessed a library regularly.

Eleven learners had taken part in a Quick Read project in 2003 but only five visited the library regularly. Of the remaining six learners one has mobility difficulties, one prefers to buy books and four of the learners rarely visit a library.

During the project tutors and library staff met in Chelmsford to share good practice and information. Paul Davies from NRDC gave a presentation entitled 'The use of soft outcomes in research'. The research practitioner led the focus group sessions and passed on the comments collected to library staff who matched them to the five generic learning outcomes, a tool that measures the outcomes and impact of learning and demonstrates how cultural organisations contribute to the learning. ►

What are the links between innovative reading activity with learners and greater enjoyment, motivation, progression and skills acquisition?

Data analysis

A wide range of data was collected from tutors and learners. Learner responses to the questions were collated, summarised and recorded on Excel spreadsheets and bar charts so that information could be traced back to individual learners. The perceptions and experiences of the tutors, library staff, learners and the research practitioner linked together to form a strong body of evidence.

Findings

The initial questionnaire

Only 35 learners (61 per cent) responded to the question about their attitude to reading at the start of the project. Half of those said they enjoyed it but did not have enough time; the rest said that they were either nervous about reading or disliked it. Overall there was a lack of enthusiasm about reading, particularly reading books. Less than half the learners read anything often and official letters and magazines were read more frequently than fiction/non-fiction books.

The final project questionnaire

The final project questionnaire demonstrated the impact of the project on the enjoyment, learning and motivation of the learners. Learners said that they had learnt more about their own reading tastes and felt more confident about their skills and abilities generally. These responses also came through very strongly in the focus groups and were supported by the tutor evaluations of individual learners. They were more hesitant about assessing their ability to think creatively but still gave a 65 per cent positive response.

Learners also said that they felt more motivated to learn. Skills for Life learners have often overcome huge barriers to learning and are well motivated but nervous about their abilities. Their greater motivation may have been linked to increased self-confidence.

Tutor evaluation questionnaire

It is interesting to compare the learners' responses to the final questionnaire and their tutors'

evaluations of the impact of the project. The learners seem to have gained more from the project than their tutors realised. Their tutors were positive about the outcomes but the learners responded more strongly to every question.

Focus group information

Library staff linked the comments from learners to the generic learning outcomes. Enjoyment, inspiration and creativity scored the highest, followed by activity, behaviour and progression. These are the infrastructure supporting the acquisition of skills, knowledge and understanding that affect attitudes and values.

Conclusions

The main messages from Skills for Life tutors are these:

- The support, expertise and resources of the library service make it easy to include reading for pleasure in delivery of the National Literacy Curriculum.
- The Vital Link reading resources are powerful tools in engaging learners' interests.
- Introducing reading for pleasure enables tutors and learners to share their individual interests.
- Linking the activities to the National Curriculum is straightforward.
- The improvement in learner self-confidence supports the development of functional skills.
- Oral literacy work is greatly enhanced by the confidence gained from reading for pleasure.

Some key points emerged from the research evidence:

- The importance of the freedom not to finish a book.
- Learners who rarely read a book agreed that they disliked thick books with dense print. Learners with poor memories found it difficult to resume their place in a book if they had to stop reading part-way through a chapter.
- Library staff and tutors used games and discussions to introduce learners to the Quick

Less than half the learners read anything often and official letters and magazines were read more frequently than fiction/non-fiction books.

Reads and supported learners through the first chapter of the book. Speaking and listening activities enabled learners to share their perceptions and consider different attitudes and values.

- Learners felt less isolated after reading about issues that they recognised and more confident about giving opinions based on experience.
- Learners were eager to rewrite the endings of books that they felt could be improved. The freedom to use their own ideas was a powerful motivator in supporting their writing.

Functional literacy skills

The learners identified a wide range of improvements linked to their reading activities, particularly:

- improvement in vocabulary
- increased awareness of the importance of punctuation
- improvement in spelling
- improvement in summarising and writing book reviews
- improvement in discussion skills
- the confidence to give an opinion about a book.

Tutor evaluations also identified improvement in these areas.

Quick Reads

Tutors found it easy to use the Quick Read texts for functional literacy topics and the learners found it easier to work on text analysis because they understood the broader context of the text within the story. Tutors also recorded that learners became aware of how an author's choice of language can indicate the genre of a book and this influenced their own creative writing.

Library membership

The 11 learners who had taken part in a previous Quick Read project said that they now knew more about the facilities in libraries and 14 learners joined the library as a result of the project.

The figures suggest that the reading for pleasure project had most impact in supporting the transition from Entry Level 3 to Level 1 and Level 1 to Level 2.

Use and dissemination

The findings from this research were disseminated at the national NRDC dissemination event in London in July 2006 and the local dissemination event in Essex during autumn term 2006.

The Vital Link will publicise the research and Essex Library Service and Essex Adult and Community Learning Service intend to produce good practice guidelines based on feedback from library staff and ACL tutors involved in the project.

The research clearly supports further development of Quick Reads for adults who enjoy reading but do not have time to read long books, and for adolescents who are reluctant readers.

Research practitioner comments

It has been a pleasure to be involved in the project because the practitioners, library staff and learners in Essex worked with such enthusiasm and enjoyment.

The amount of information has been vast, and sorting and ordering it all has been challenging. Contacting tutors, nearly all of whom work part-time, was not always easy and visiting all the projects in locations across Essex meant that travelling time and mileage exceeded the original specifications of the project.

However, putting faces to names on questionnaires was invaluable as the learners were more prepared to talk about their learning experiences.

Skills for Life tutors and library staff in Essex have excellent working relationships. The project has provided further evidence of the strength of the partnerships and the advantages for both services and for the Skills for Life learners. ■

A full version of this report is available on the

publications page of the NRDC website:

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► **Stepping up – a peer-education project for young homeless people**

► **Sunderland YMCA Foyer**

► Sarah Rennie and Stephen McKinlay

Introduction

Sunderland YMCA Foyer provides accommodation and support for young people who are, or are at risk of being, homeless. These young people often fall into the Government's broad category of not in education, employment or training (NEET) and are designated hard-to-reach learners: as such they form one of the key target groups for Skills for Life.

The Training and Education Department at the YMCA set up a peer-education project called MAD4U (Making a Difference for You) in 2005 to use the experience of young people who have been homeless themselves to:

- raise awareness of youth homelessness
- help improve services provided to homeless young people through lobbying and campaigning
- deliver training to help young people gain a successful leaving home experience.

The project is strongly learner-centred and involves young people in planning, giving presentations, lobbying on homelessness issues, developing and delivering peer-education sessions. Literacy learning is embedded in all of these activities but

not usually clearly articulated by the staff or recognised and valued by the young people themselves.

Background

The research project aimed to explore these literacy practices and enable the young people involved to value their literacy learning. The team at the YMCA preferred a social practices model of literacy to the more conventional Skills for Life provision. It enabled them to make sense of the literacy involved in the peer-education work and focused on the positive rather than the negative implicit in the NEET label.

The project was a partnership between Sunderland YMCA Training Department and Sunderland University, School of Education and Lifelong Learning.

The YMCA runs several short programmes including Entry to Employment (e2e) and the Learning Power Award, which is specifically designed for learners who have experienced homelessness or are currently homeless. Other courses are funded through the adult and community learning fund.

Literacy learning is embedded in all of these activities but not usually clearly articulated by the staff or recognised and valued by the young people themselves.

Research questions

- What literacy practices are involved in the peer-education project?
- What evaluation methods will enable young people to value their literacy learning?

Research design

The research was carried out between October 2005 and May 2006 with a group of young people who were already working together on the MAD4U project. It studied real-world settings in a particular place and a particular time, dealing with real people in their context and seeking to represent the participants' perspectives.

The young people were involved from the beginning: there were regular discussions about the progress of the research and one member of the groups attended the PLRI launch. The emerging findings were fed back so that any apparent inconsistencies or misrepresentation could be corrected. The young people read and commented on the case studies and chose their own pseudonyms.

Four interviews were carried out and there was also feedback from professionals.

Data collection

Data were collected through observation of what the young people did and the 'artefacts' they produced – see the following case studies for examples.

We tried a variety of methods to help young people reflect on their experiences of which the heart, head, bag and bin exercise was the most successful. Here the heart represented a change of feeling or attitude; the head something learnt; the bag something they could take away, a transferable skill; and the bin something they would rather forget about.

Data analysis

We first constructed a grid to organise our data, splitting it into sections by theme and by source.

We devised a framework for the case studies and the interviews and discussed it with the team. The first draft was also discussed with the team and with the subjects to gain feedback, new insights and a different perspective.

We then analysed the case studies and the raw data from which they sprang to see if we could identify any common themes, patterns and differences.

We measured the engagement in some literacy practices and evaluative methods and lack of engagement in others through what Roger Hart (1992) called the Ladder of Young People's Participation.

Case study 1

Sophie is 22. She has borderline personality disorder and has led a turbulent life. School has bad memories for her and she left without any qualifications. She has been with the Prince's Trust, the Venture Trust and Fairbridge but finds that the course is over just as she is beginning to assert herself.

She has been a very committed MAD4U member, rarely missing meetings and travelling to Birmingham, London and Lancaster to represent it.

Sophie wants to work for Sunderland YMCA Foyer as a support worker and has begun her first 'proper job', at an outdoor pursuits centre in summer holidays working with schoolchildren.

She said: 'Being part of MAD4U gave me inner strength to try and overcome my personality disorder so I can play a bigger part. Coming to MAD4U gave me the confidence to attend the job interview in Cumbria.'

During the head, heart, bin and bag exercise Sophie highlighted being able to discuss things with authority figures as a major transferable outcome and using ICT to create a newsletter. She placed her use of poetry in the heart section and the public



speaking skills, refugee awareness and child protection course in the head section. She assessed creating a newsletter and promotional work as the tasks that showed the highest degree of learner participation.

Case study 2

Sarah is 18; she is 'bubbly, cheerful and talkative', 'a bit aggressive' but her aggression can be channelled.

Sarah says she enjoyed school but suffered from bullying both at age eight and then later in life while attending college, which led to her withdrawal from the course. She hated PE but enjoyed practical lessons such as cookery and enjoyed work placements, for example childcare.

She wants to become a hairdresser, get married and settle down with kids. She is currently trying to get into college again and has said, more than once, that volunteering with MAD4U pushed her to do this: 'Since doing MAD4U I have been thinking about going back to college ... I don't know ... because I am sick of being stuck in the house all of the time. The only time I go out is for MAD4U'.

As part of MAD4U Sarah attended training courses, sent mail-outs, created and delivered a presentation and worked on a video. During the head, heart, bin and bag exercise she listed all these in the bag category; put training courses and creating the presentation in 'head learning', and poetry and delivering the presentation in heart because of the increase in confidence they engendered.

Case study 3

Nicola is 18. She enjoyed primary school but disliked secondary school. She did a painting and decorating course after school, only because 'her mate was doing it'.

Nicola has had her training severely disrupted because of moving from town to town but has settled recently and completed an e2e course, passing a National Test in literacy. She wants to work in

childcare but has discovered that her criminal record may hinder this.

She enrolled on the e2e programme at the YMCA . The e2e course runs in the morning with a drop-in in the building in the afternoon. Catering (sometimes literally) for the young homeless in the city centre, the drop-in is the obvious recruiting centre for MAD4U.

This led to Nicola being a leading light in the short MAD4U film developed with Connexions Direct. As well as contributing to ideas and scriptwriting, Nicola was one of the main characters, but did not realise what literacy practices she might have demonstrated until she was helped to value the activity as a rounded learning experience based on the following tasks:

- script reading
- script writing, in a team
- speaking and actively listening to another young person while rehearsing.

Asked what she now thought of the activity in relation to learning she admitted that it had encouraged her to talk more, giving her confidence to express her opinions.

Findings

The amount of quality literacy work that was being generated contradicted homeless young people's supposedly 'hard to reach' label, but the other element of the research project was to help young people value what they were doing.

Corrections to texts were made later because the person desires that the finished product will reflect the effort that has gone into it. They seek the approval of the facilitator and their peers and it is often here that the learning takes place.

Of the approaches we tried, the questionnaire, with its predefined 'tick-box' answers, was the least participative, there seemed no motivation to complete the journal and web blog and the tree

As well as contributing to ideas and scriptwriting, Nicola was one of the main characters.

exercise was viewed as too abstract. By far the most successful evaluation method/reflective device was the heart, head, bag and bin method, perhaps because it gave a loose structure to the young people, inviting very open opinions.

This also rang true for the semi-structured informal interviews. They were taped and transcribed to enable a natural conversational style, while the structure helped to keep things on track. The existing good relationship between the interviewer and interviewee ensured a positive atmosphere.

Housing professionals who had attended a presentation by the MAD4U group gave written feedback on structured sheets as did the two YMCA researchers. This triangulated feedback provided objective, reliable data for the three case studies.

Accreditation was also possible. All the MAD4U group were working towards the Learning Power Award. All the young people in the case studies have achieved Level 1 certification.

Truly to learn a person must approach the task from an intrinsically motivated perspective. Extrinsic incentives (payment, food) are easy to dangle in front of a young homeless person and the task will be completed, but learning will not necessarily have taken place.

Conclusions

- Real-life literacy practices, particularly with a campaigning focus, act as strong motivations for improving literacy, i.e. 'to get the words right'.
- The MAD4U group proves that once motivation is tapped, things happen, including growth of confidence, assertiveness, personal growth, raised aspirations and skills development.
- The literacy practices and evaluation approaches that were most motivating were the ones in which the young people actively took part in the decisions about what they were doing, why and the language in which it should be expressed.

This language included visual images.

- Real learning takes place by encouraging these practices. This cannot be easily replicated in traditional classroom settings with a focus on functional literacy development. Skills for Life funding should acknowledge this.
- Explicitly involving young people in their own action research is the best way to help them reflect on their literacy development. The main positive outcome is increased confidence, which arises from being valued for what they can contribute, and being viewed as an expert in something – probably for the first time.

Comments

Working with homeless young people brings many challenges. As we try to help young people to develop we are inevitably drawn into the chaos that can surround their lives. The research project allowed us to take a step back and analyse the work we do and why we do it in a more rigorous way. The support we received from the Lancaster Research Team was second to none: they helped us to:

- develop our own voice
- gain confidence that what we had to say really mattered
- put what we had to say into a suitable framework
- broaden our reading and our minds.

To make a case for change based on evidence is an empowering feeling and one that I would advocate to anyone who thinks they have something to say or who would like to change the system. The NRDC Practitioner-led Research Initiative has given a structure to this that can also be viewed as mirroring what we try to do with the MAD4U group.■

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- ▶ **Spectrum: working to engage young offenders**
- ▶ **Future Prospects and York College**
- ▶ Eamonn Addison and Andy Bucklee

Introduction

This project attempted to identify effective teaching and learning strategies and barriers to learning for young people not in education, employment or training (the group known as NEET). It specifically aimed to engage young people involved in youth offending or antisocial behaviour. Data were gathered from working with 16 to 25-year-olds within this target group: from interviews, observations, training sessions, practical outdoor group activities, video evidence and life and citizenship skills activities.

Background

We entitled the project 'Spectrum', a non-stigmatising title that a group could identify with. To meet the funding guidelines we aimed to work with 16 young people for a minimum of four hours re-introducing them to appropriate citizenship/social skills through new and innovative ways of learning that would also help to develop their literacy and numeracy levels. For some, these fundamental core skills had lapsed and not progressed since they had left formal secondary education.

We also aimed to develop the research skills of learners and practitioners, including using innovative

participatory methodologies and techniques appropriate for learners likely to be resistant or hostile towards 'traditional' research activities, such as questionnaires and interviews.

The project was a collaborative venture between Future Prospects, which undertook the research and development activity, and York College, which provided support and project management through its Learning Development Unit (LDU).

Future Prospects is a partnership funded by over 28 organisations that delivers numeracy and literacy courses for marginalised groups, such as minority ethnic groups, drug users, homeless people and young offenders. The two practitioners involved in the project had more than seven years' experience working with a range of hard-to-reach groups, including young offenders.

York College provided regular meetings and contact. Training events and project meetings included time for discussion and networking, and were also open to members of the Advisory Group. Initial findings from the project were shared with the Safer York Partnership and the Connexions service.

Research questions

- Can creative learning methods and specific creative practices stimulate, interest and motivate young offenders taking mandatory literacy and/or numeracy programmes, and if so, how?
- How can teachers develop creative activities within the constraints of curriculum and assessment requirements?
- How can current teaching practice in creative and expressive arts inform development in adult numeracy/literacy provision for young offenders, and vice versa?
- Can creative learning practices play a key part in changing offending behaviour?

Research design

The research involved two practitioners and three groups of learners, 17 learners in all, engaged in two to four week courses, which could lead to the National Test. Learners helped to develop appropriate, non-threatening techniques for data collection and made video diaries during their courses. Professional fieldworkers were available to undertake interviews. The Future Prospects project manager made regular classroom observations and practitioners kept diaries of their practice. Learners made visits to college classes in creative and expressive arts vocational areas to help identify interesting activities and features.

Grounded theory techniques were used to ensure that findings are rooted in the learners' experiences; constant comparison and principles of inclusion were applied to make sure that the research evidence accurately and reliably reflected all the data.

All the statutory agencies that worked with young people in this group were contacted and informed about the Spectrum project.

The project manager, who was based at the LDU, supported the project with training. The unit also provided training opportunities for the practitioners and learners, and held regular meetings with the project team.

How can current teaching practice in creative and expressive arts inform development in adult numeracy/literacy provision for young offenders, and vice versa?

Data collection

Digital video cameras were used to capture session evidence and highlight:

- the relations between the tutors and students
- student-to-student interactions
- the evaluation of individual responses to certain learning modules and the various learning styles.

Throughout the programme students appeared reluctant to speak when they were reminded that filming was going on so it was agreed to gather data through other means. However, when the students took some responsibility for the filming itself and the activity was based around interviewing and communication techniques, students became more at ease.

Each session ended with inviting the learners to respond verbally to the day's activities: what was enjoyable, what have they learnt, what was and wasn't useful? Using a whiteboard and pen, the tutor wrote up their responses. This informal group approach seemed less threatening for the individual and didn't require the learners to read and answer questions with a written response.

Individual student review sheets were introduced early on. They invited students to circle a number from one to ten, according to how much or how little they enjoyed an activity, and also to add comments.

Throughout all the sessions delivered at the college, the project facilitators used a purpose-made spinning wheel device, which determined which participant would do what and when. It got the students up and out of their chairs and involved in the session. The style of material and the topics were also designed to aid the students' concentration and ability to work positively with the group that day, especially as the numbers attending varied from day to day, as well as from week to week.

The practitioners delivering Spectrum kept daily work and observation sheets and met every day to discuss all aspects from the learning material to student issues.

Findings

- The team achieved enhanced levels of motivation and engagement in learning among young offenders.
- The successful areas of engagement included:
 - (a) the concept of increased earning power, skills for work and earning money
 - (b) using youth culture, fashion labels and identifying brands
 - (c) examining criminal activity itself, using literature and case studies to learn literacy and to unpick the myths behind gang culture. (Not as glamorous as many young people imagine.)
- The project provided inspiration to practitioners to help develop creativity in the numeracy/literacy curriculum, and to embed adult literacy and numeracy in the curriculum of other vocational subjects.

The key findings were based around the use of changing teaching methods that drew on different learning styles. All classroom-based sessions rotated between visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learning, each of no more than 10 minutes. The client group was unable to remain still, especially when seated. This required careful management because, although the aim was to provide a learning style to suit the learners, we also aimed to work on improving attention span and application.

Multimedia were used to capture evidence of learning and creative learning resources within the existing curriculum framework. The client group readily engaged with the materials and did not initially relate the experience to literacy learning. For example at the end of each session, learners provided feedback on 'What did you learn today?' This included factual details such as how to open a bank account or how to conduct an interview, not correctly spelling personal information or asking appropriate questions to meet the situation.

What 'creative' aspects of Spectrum worked well?

- At the beginning of each session, as a group, we decided on at least two set breaks within a four-hour learning period.
- We used simple activities/worksheets that took only about ten minutes to complete.
- None of the students could be excluded from the entire programme but if they demonstrated inappropriate behaviour, they would be asked to leave that session, think about their actions and come back the following day.
- Having two facilitators in each session helped us to manage the client group and, if necessary, offered additional one-to-one support.
- Focused research into areas of interest helped to promote the group's initial interest. Exercises and activities were created to balance this with working on Skills for Life goals. Learners were then reminded that they had attempted, completed and then achieved something – because it had retained their interest.

What aspects of Spectrum didn't work so well?

- Different rooms in college were allocated each day so the students had no regular base and course work could not be displayed.
- Students who were trying to attend the project but still involving themselves with petty crime and social disorder offences struggled to make regular attendance.
- Funding restrictions that determined when the project needed to be up and delivered worked against thorough planning and establishing referral processes.

Conclusions

The project found that the styles of provision to which young people respond best are those that reflect their genuine interests and use learning styles that are different from pre-16 education. There is sufficient flexibility in the Skills for Life curriculum to allow creative learning experiences that reflect the interests and culture of young people to match learning outcomes and Skills for Life objectives.

The project provided inspiration to practitioners to help develop creativity in the numeracy/literacy curriculum.

Cross-fertilisation with multimedia was an effective tool for engagement as was blending learning into other less academic areas around personal and social education. The key barriers to bringing in creative practices from other curriculum areas are staff flexibility and support from management. There was also productive collaboration across departments at FE level.

However, there are still issues to be addressed regarding the capacity to invest in curriculum development and around whether the further education (FE) sector is willing to spend guided learning hours on activity that is not purely focused on National Test achievement.

This research activity successfully developed the reflective and analytical skills of the learners and practitioners but it turned out that film was not always to be the most straightforward way of capturing research data.

Good practice and creative techniques have been shared, and adult literacy and numeracy integrated into the curriculum of vocational subjects such as Music Technology, Art and Design, and Media Studies. The research will also benefit the wider research community, complementing and furthering existing knowledge in this vital area of teaching and learning.

We were not able to test how well the creative practices could be absorbed into mainstream FE delivery practices but the LDU has identified a potential role for the ethos of the delivery as part of an intervention strategy for learners who have behavioural issues.

Another area of research to develop would be the impact of learning on antisocial behaviour. Changing negative behaviour patterns is essential to creating the right environment for learning and work. During the programme, people who were attending regularly were changing their offending behaviour. At the end of the programme, after attending each day for at least two weeks, their routine had

changed so they displayed different behaviour. Whether their offending had changed is difficult to assess, but they had developed the tools to change a pattern of behaviour. The next step would be to apply these tools to other areas of their lives.

Use and dissemination

A set of bespoke activities and associated resources is being prepared to be available as a web-based resource. The research findings have been shared within the College and at the PLRI event in London.

We are going to build on the research and embed it as part of staff development and service research and development. We also intend to develop practice to improve the quality of research.

The next goal is to look at the impact of behaviour and routine on learning and work achievement. We are currently developing innovative practice on the back of the Spectrum project, which will focus on a model of person-centred positive routine improvement.

Comments

The pilot research project provided us with an excellent opportunity to devise and implement a strategy of working in groups with young offenders. Previously the focus has been on one-to-one work, but this was missing a great chance to work on social and citizenship skills.

As practitioners, we struggled at times to balance gathering data with delivering a learning programme for a tough group of learners. A key learning experience was to focus ourselves throughout the project on exactly what we were attempting to achieve. Although the process was enlightening and successful, in the future we will integrate the research element further into the heart of the learning programme. ■

A full version of this report is available on the

publications page of the NRDC website:

www.nrdc.org.uk

▶ **Soft Currency:
memory and money**

▶ **The Soft Currency Team**

- ▶ Alan Gorman, Professor Garth Allen, Jane Mace, Bill Greenwell, David Wright, Caroline Denham, Wendy Hearn, Von Mathieson, Ronnie Plagerson

Introduction

Soft Currency (SC) was a small-scale, practitioner-led action research project carried out between June 2005 and June 2006. Our team consisted of ten researchers. Other key contributors were three teachers at a local primary school; approximately 30 children at the primary school aged 8 to 9 and 11 interviewees aged 57 to 89.

Background

SC was based in the Learning and Development Department of Exeter Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) which comprises a local membership of about 130 voluntary bodies, plus a further network of organisations through its volunteer centre. Its main aim was to find out whether we could use reminiscence work to elicit a learner-centred financial literacy curriculum for older people and, in the process, ascertain levels of financial literacy in older people.

Research question

In attempting to address soft and hard outcomes, we narrowed our research questions until we had one reformulated question:

- How effective is reminiscence work for exploring older people's financial literacy, utilising the framework of the generic learning outcomes?

In particular, we were attracted by the GLO blend of soft outcomes (enjoyment, inspiration, creativity, attitudes, values) and hard outcomes (knowledge, understanding, activity, behaviour and progression, skills).

Research design

We were looking for ways of:

- researching conversational techniques that might point us to what motivates our learners
- in the case of non-accredited learning – implementing RARPA (Recognising and Recording Progress in Achievement).

An initial impetus for us was the question: how can we gather soft and hard data relating to older people's levels of financial literacy? Conversation through reminiscence work presented itself as a promising route into this enquiry. Conversations with learners also form a major contribution to RARPA's approach.

We also wanted to produce evidence that could help to restore:

- greater control of the adult education agenda to genuine collaboration between learners and tutors
- concomitant trust in practitioners' professional judgement and adult learners' personal accountability.

We decided to focus on a particular sub-species of storytelling, namely reminiscence, triggered by an existing project called 'Money In Later Life' (MILL). Inspired by MILL, we determined that SC would explore reminiscence as a means of ascertaining the levels of financial literacy of older people and of identifying a financial literacy curriculum in the process.

For the purposes of this study, we then adopted the view that if a person is *financially literate* they will at various levels of competency:

- demonstrate a grasp of relevant financial language, vocabulary and/or concepts
- be able to call on appropriate numeracy skills to perform financial assessments, transactions and decisions, great or small.

We also adopted the assumption of the Financial Services Authority (FSA) that 'the extent of a person's financial capability can be measured by examining their behaviour' (FSA 2005: 2).

As studies suggest that learning in older age confers significant mental and physical health benefits we decided not to exclude older learners from consideration simply because they were not enrolled, or intending to enrol, on a formal course of study. We took the Exeter CVS MILL volunteers as models of 'lifelong learners': they were reaching out to the hard-to-reach in their communities, helping them with their queries about budgeting or benefits, and in so doing were updating their own financial literacy skills. In this broad sense, as far as we were concerned, they were learners. Moreover, these were learners who would expect to have a say in

determining their curriculum. Therefore, we took a principled position in 'starting from where the learners were', that is, we tried to avoid imposing a pre-designed agenda on them.

Older people have been identified in more than one study among the 'consumers that need the most help in improving their financial capability'. In particular, we were interested in the degree and ways in which, if any, age is a determining factor in the variation of the components of financial literacy, and whether the different circumstances brought about by living through particular decades also had a significant bearing on financial capability in later life.

In the baseline FSA study, researchers identify 'three key elements that determine financial capability' (FSA 2005: 5):

1. knowledge and understanding
2. skills
3. confidence and attitudes.

These elements, conditioned by age, are major factors in shaping financial literacy in later life. The causes of variation, or of age-determined financial literacy, are, in their model:

- a person's experience and circumstances
- their personality (FSA 2005: 20).

This observation gave us the confidence to include psychological and sociological factors in an investigation of older people's financial literacy, and incorporate them into our data analysis.

Starting where the learners are

The actual mix of these elements changed continuously but the dominant model, the framework for handling these elements, emerged as a focus on the role of oral reminiscence as a means of allowing people to clarify their own perception of their financial capabilities and the capabilities of others.

Older people have been identified in more than one study among the 'consumers that need the most help in improving their financial capability'.

Data collection

Twenty-two older people aged 57 to 97 participated in the study. We met them in four semi-structured group meetings and ten one-to-one semi-structured interviews.

Meetings

The information was collected on video and in notes by the team members. They took it in turns to chair the meeting and occasionally joined in. Permission to record the meetings was sought and granted. The topics covered in the discussion included:

- the cost of clothes, food and sweets
- the 'waste not want not' mentality contrasted with 'built-in obsolescence'
- the reduction in the cost of replacing goods rendering 'make do and mend' obsolete
- paying the insurance man in instalments (1p per week)
- leaving the money for the milkman on the kitchen table
- the mother in the family determining budgets, etc.

An initial analysis of this meeting indicated that participants used this reminiscence opportunity among peers predominantly to share their knowledge (58 per cent of topics), then to talk about the values associated with money and attitudes to money (37 per cent), and very rarely as a way of displaying any financial or numeracy skills (2 per cent).

The second SC meeting took place in January 2006 in a local primary school. The head teacher and the maths teacher prepared their 8 to 9-year-old pupils to think about the theme of money by introducing it as a study topic in the weeks before. Compared to the previous meeting, the spread between the three categories was far more even (approximately 30 per cent in each of the three columns).

One-to-one interviews

The one-to-one interviews took place in May and June 2006, in interviewees' homes. There were 12 interviewees – 9 women, 3 men – interviewed in 11 interviews (one of the interviews was conducted with two interviewees). Their ages ranged from 57 to 89. Six interviewers were recruited into the SC team by personal invitation on an hourly rate, only one had done any interviewing or reminiscence work before.

Data analysis

After the first interview-scripts became available, we decided to allow the scripts to speak for themselves, recording what emerged from them and then coming up with analytical categories. We thus gradually came to two broad headings:

- value judgements: values
- statements of fact: knowledge, skills.

Value judgements (40 per cent of statements)

Most of the value judgements related to personal outlook or self-evaluation, which tied into how highly the FSA (2005: 20) rated older people's personality and experiences when assessing their financial literacy.

The highest proportion of value judgements (55 per cent) expressed the speaker's personal outlook on a variety of finance-related topics: 6 per cent of those touched on the interviewee's own income, 19 per cent related to their savings and 39 per cent were about the speaker's own spending.

Self-evaluation was the focus of 15 per cent of all value judgements, most of which (69 per cent) suggested quite high self-esteem. When interviewees wished they had done things differently, they usually (73 per cent) expressed their wishes in positive terms ('I wish I had ...' as opposed to 'I wish I hadn't ...').

Statements of fact (60 per cent of statements)

Over a quarter (26 per cent) of all the statements of fact identified related to financial literacy or financial capability. A further 6 per cent included the use of financial terminology and/or concepts, with just under half of these instances consisting of appropriate use of financial concepts in the absence of precise financial terminology. The biggest proportion (35 per cent of the total), however, related to events, situations or behaviours that affected the speaker, in 47 per cent of cases positively.

Other types of factual statement included cultural, social and political observations, of which one-third related to issues of wealth and poverty, another third to gender issues, the rest to power issues. Only a tiny percentage (2 per cent) of such statements were about age or class. Of the significant others referred to in a financial context, most (74 per cent) were family members, the rest being outsiders (such as bank managers).

In the development of the interview analysis that followed, we wanted to see if we could base the beginnings of a learner-centred financial literacy programme on the statements we had gathered. To do this we returned to generic learning outcomes.

Data analysis by generic learning outcomes

We used a selection of statements quoted directly from interviews, classified them according to the SC criteria and translated these into generic learning outcomes which then led to suggestions of topics for

a financial literacy programme as outlined below. However, clearly, these areas overlap.

Knowledge and understanding

- rounding
- decimal conversions
- tracking income and expenditure
- key financial terms.

Skills

- discussion: alternative exchange systems, e.g. barter
- filling in a tax return.

Attitudes and values

- how much pocket money should children get?
- what should children be taught about money management, and how?
- if I won the lottery ...

Enjoyment, inspiration and creativity

- spending versus saving
- how is money to be enjoyed?
- risk versus security
- is there a relationship between hard work and monetary reward?

Activity, behaviour, progression

- budgeting and keeping domestic accounts
- choosing a savings account
- the pros and cons of credit.

Reflections

Action research, as I experienced it through SC, requires flexibility and thinking on one's feet, because things don't always go to plan. The unfolding of the project – its analytical framework as well as its events – gave me a sense of adventure, and it was

good to be able to rely on the SC team to embrace this adventure with good humour.

SC's findings, however small-scale, have something to offer financial literacy education providers for older people by way of a respectful and enjoyable approach to learner-centred curriculum design and informal initial assessment, targeted at older people.

Our experience of working with older people has opened our eyes to a use for reminiscence work and empowering them to raise their own issues for discussion in their own way. I would say, therefore, in answer to our research question, that the reminiscence work carried out by the SC team was effective in exploring older people's financial literacy.

Where next?

It would be worth exploring the same research question on a bigger scale and looking again at intergenerational educational work.

The following questions are also interesting:

- Is it worth adding financial literacy to the existing medical programmes exploring the health and social benefits of reminiscence work, for example in slowing down the advance of Alzheimer's?
- Would more general literacy and numeracy programmes, or other subjects, be as effective as financial literacy at stimulating reminiscence work in older people?
- What role could storytelling have in empowering learners and identifying a learner-centred Skills for Life curriculum?

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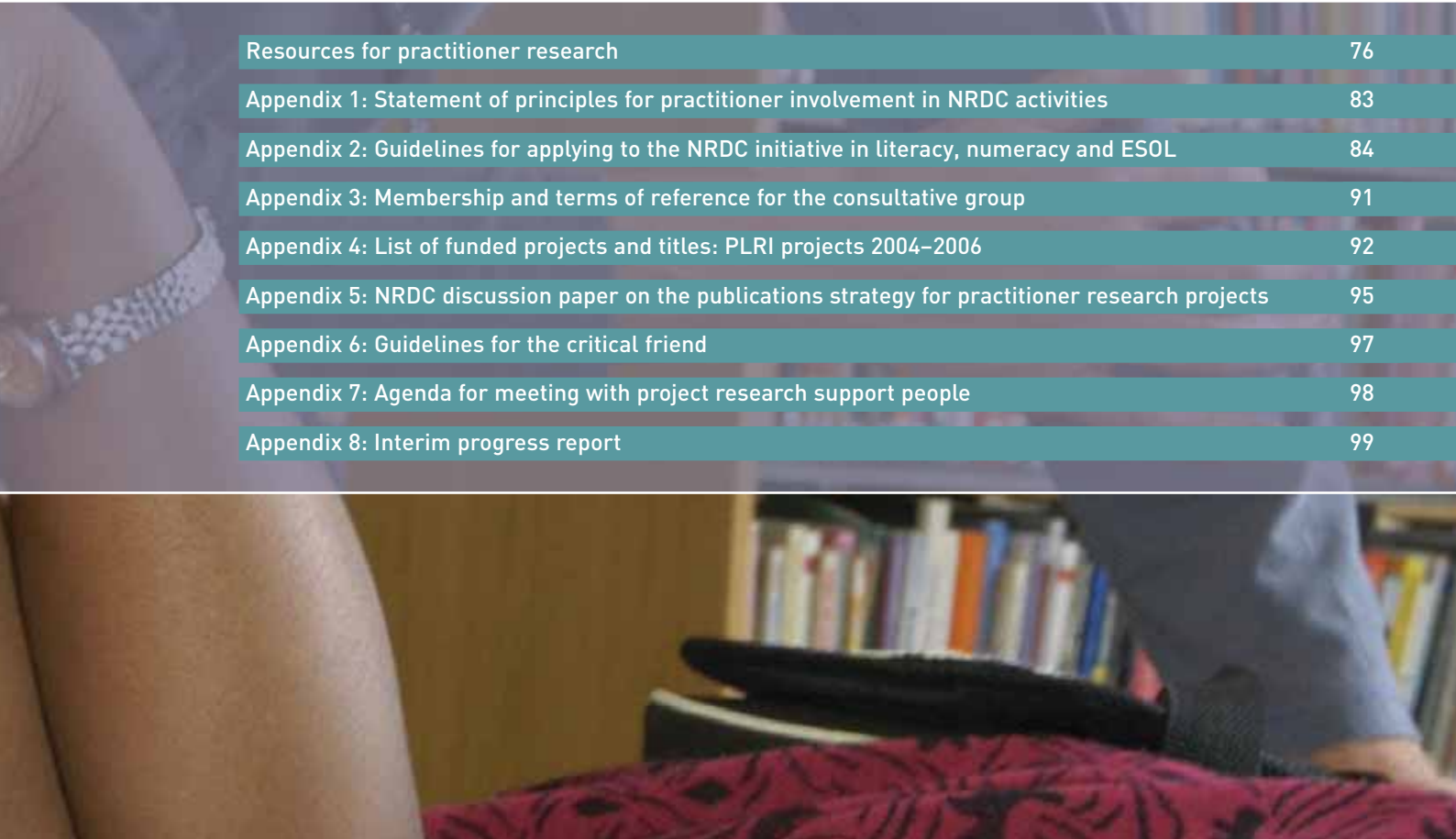


Part 4

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► Resources for practitioner research

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Some useful websites

There are many useful resources available on the web. Some sites that are especially relevant to adult literacy and numeracy are indicated here. It is particularly worth browsing these sites for online resources and publications. Many also have excellent links.

UK

NRDC <http://www.nrdc.org.uk>

Research and Practice in Adult Literacy (RaPAL) is a membership organisation at <http://www.literacy.lancaster.ac.uk/rapal>. RaPAL publishes a bulletin three times a year and the index of back issues is listed on the website. Hard copies of all the bulletins are kept at Lancaster and we can photocopy (within reason!) particular articles you would like to read.

A parallel organisation now exists in Canada: the Research in Practice in Adult Literacy group (RiPAL) can be found at <http://www.nald.ca/ripal/about.htm>. This site has many downloadable reports and other resources.

Australia

The Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium (ALNARC) has many

publications online at <http://www.staff.vu.edu.au/alnarc>. In particular, you might like to browse among the papers posted in the online forum at <http://www.staff.vu.edu.au/alnarc/onlineforum/index.html>.

From the British Association of Settlements and Social Action Centres (BASSAC) website, download a resource paper on 'Doing Community Research' – their website address is <http://www.bassac.org.uk>. Find this paper from the home page by going to 'news and services'| 'resources'| 'resource papers'. This is a very useful site more generally if you are involved in community-based literacy work.

The Centre for Development Studies, University of Swansea is home to the Participatory Ethnographic Evaluation and Research (PEER) Network. See: <http://www.peer-method.com/index.html>

USA

The Virginia Adult Educators Network is a useful site for links within the USA. It also contains an excellent, short and succinct guide to Practitioner Research which can be found at <http://www.aelweb.vcu.edu/resguide/resguide1.html>. This includes general, reassuring advice and case studies of practitioners talking about their experiences of doing projects. Highly recommended!

Adult Education Teacher Inquiry Projects and Related Research Resources is a part of the Literacy Resources Rhode Island website. These pages provide information about and reports of Rhode Island practitioner inquiry and research work, as well as links to other practitioner research-related sites. http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Sweaver_Center/Literacy_Resources/inquiry.html.

The US National Center for Studies in Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) at <http://www.ncsall.gse.harvard.edu> is similar to the English National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy. Among many other things, it publishes an online journal called *Focus on Basics*.

Practitioner-oriented journals and newsletters

UK

NRDC <http://www.nrdc.org.uk> publishes a regular newsletter, *reflect*.

Research and Practice in Adult Literacy (RaPAL)
<http://www.literacy.lancaster.ac.uk/rapal> publishes
a journal three times a year.

The *Adults Learning Maths* network <http://www.alm-online.org/> publishes the ALM Newsletter and also
organises conferences.

NATECLA (The National Association for Teaching
English and other Community Languages to Adults)
<http://www.natecla.org.uk/> organise an annual
conference and publish the journal *Language Issues*.

Canada

Literacies is a national forum that includes
university-based researchers, programme-based
researchers, policy makers and programme
workers. Its goal is to cross fences and unite the
range of fields and disciplines that touch literacy.
<http://www.literacyjournal.ca>.

Australia

Literacy and Numeracy Studies is an international
journal in the education and training of adults
focusing on the many and complex ways that
language, literacy and numeracy are implicated in
adult life. [http://www.education.uts.edu.au/
lns/index.html](http://www.education.uts.edu.au/lns/index.html)

US

The National Center for Studies in Adult Learning
and Literacy (NCSALL) at
<http://www.ncsall.gse.harvard.edu> publishes an
online journal called *Focus on Basics*.

- ▶ **Appendices**
- ▶ **Appendix 1**
- ▶ **Statement of principles for practitioner involvement in NRDC activities**

As far as practicable, practitioners should be involved at all stages of NRDC's research programme. They will have important contributions to make in decision making at each stage of the research process: aims, methodology, data collection, interpretation, communication, embedding and impact on policy and practice.

Wherever possible, learners, tutors and managers should be involved in the conduct of research carried out by NRDC as co-researchers from the earliest stages. This is important in order to ensure that the work done is relevant and geared to the needs of adult learners, and that its value is recognised by practitioners and their institutions. It will increase the sense of ownership of and commitment to the research itself, and to any teacher development and other policy and practice proposals which are based on the research.

Involving tutors and managers in conducting the research will in itself be a form of professional development for them. Wherever possible these activities will be credited towards recognised professional qualifications. Practitioners will also be encouraged to link into existing research and practice networks.

To facilitate these aims, all projects funded by NRDC will be required to state in their proposals how they will engage practitioners in the different stages of the research process and to include appropriate support for this in their budgets.

Any project wishing to have a paid element of practitioner involvement will be encouraged to build this into the budget and research design at the proposal stage.

Operational plans will monitor the activities and outcomes of practitioner engagement.

Practical variations on these principles will be related to:

- The desire of practitioners for step by step involvement in research
- Current environmental constraints on recruitment and cover
- Variations in characteristics of research projects in the NRDC programme, e.g. timing and research sites
- Capacity of host universities and other advisory/mentoring and resourcing institutions.

► Appendix 2

► Guidelines for applying to the NRDC initiative in literacy, numeracy and ESOL

Section 1: General guidance

What is the Practitioner-Led Research Initiative?

This is an initiative to develop practitioner-led research. Up to six small-scale, nine-month projects will be funded, addressing a common theme: *New ways of engaging new learners*. Up to £10,000 will be available for each project.

This initiative is an important addition to NRDC's programme of activities. It is designed to be an opportunity for practitioners to put research ideas into practice, to step back and reflect on practice and to explore systematically day-to-day issues arising from the Skills for Life policy. It is intended to spread a research culture within the field and to draw in a constituency of new practitioner researchers. It will contribute to the underpinning strategy of the centre by inviting practitioners to identify problems, formulate research questions, design and carry out projects with structured support from the research community.

Closing date for first round applications is 5 p.m. on 2 February 2004. Late or incomplete applications will not be accepted. All applicants are advised to keep proof of postage.

The first round of projects will run from March 2004–November 2004.

Purpose of the initiative

The aims of the programme are to:

- Identify problems and issues in the field of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL and to address them through research.
- Build research capacity in the field.
- Produce findings which will give new insights into adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL.
- Embed the activities of NRDC in practice.
- Strengthen networks which will link practice, research, development and policy.

The programme will be monitored and reviewed during the first year in relation to these aims.

Theme

The theme for the first round will be 'New ways of engaging new learners'. This theme is intentionally broad, enabling scope for groups to pose many different questions, whilst addressing a key topical issue relevant to the Skills for Life policy. The intention is to allow room to pose researchable questions expressed in ways that are useful to practitioners, organisations and the local communities they serve. Ideally the research topic will be related to activities already engaged in and issues that need to be addressed locally. 'New learners' can be adults who are not currently learning in any organisation and who may find formal organisations hard to access. They can also be adults already involved as learners but who are not currently working on literacy, numeracy and ESOL.

Under the broad theme, projects might pursue:

1. Research into the needs and characteristics of adults and their communities that will enable better decisions to be made about publicising and organising appropriate learning opportunities and make organisations more accessible to potential learners.
2. Research that will inform the content and methodology of learning and teaching working with new groups of learners.
3. Research that will enable the development of appropriate support for adults to reach their learning goals, for example: new forms of advice and guidance, use of volunteers, new collaborations between practitioners, ways of documenting progression, new ways of supporting learners towards vocational goals.

Priority will be given to projects that link to the interests and activities of employing organisations. Please note that this fund is for *research*. Resources will not be forthcoming for staff development and other activities which could and should be otherwise supported. For the purposes of this initiative, research is defined as:

Systematic documentation of and reflection on activities, through collecting and recording new data so

as to develop an underpinning framework for future development. Research produces information for future use, not simply a change in present provision.

Who can apply?

Applications are invited from locally based consortia of between 3 and 6 people led by those who are directly involved with Skills for Life learners in any organisational setting in England. These can be colleges, adult community learning centres, the voluntary sector, prisons or the workplace. Collaborations between organisations are encouraged, including links with universities. However, the lead applicant must be *directly involved* with Skills for Life learners. Ideally, groups will be made up of practitioners based in the same organisation or within a local 'travel to learn' area to minimise communication problems and allow for a local support group to develop.

What arrangements must there be for research support in the group?

Each group *must* include someone whose role will be to offer research support in day-to-day project activities. This person will provide a link to academic research methods advice and traditions, offer relevant reading, arrange and/or deliver research methods training and assist with the final dissemination strategy for the project, including co-ordinating production of the final written report. This person should be someone with a postgraduate qualification that includes research training, and some practical research experience. Links with a local university should be made wherever possible.

In addition, groups will be expected to link into existing local and regional networks (such as NRDC, BSA, LSDA, NIACE and ABSSU Regional Co-ordinators, and Local Learning Partnerships). The NRDC will arrange an initial briefing day for all projects funded through the initiative, an interim advisory meeting and a dissemination event at the end of the project period. All groups are expected to take part in these events.

What happens when applications have been submitted?

Proposals will be assessed by an independent specialist panel during the first two weeks of February. The NRDC will arrange an initial briefing meeting for all successful project groups to meet one another shortly after this date.

How will payments be made?

Project grants will be paid directly to the organisation

of the lead applicant in two separate instalments, half at the outset and half at the end of the project upon production of audited accounts from the organisation and submission of a written research report. The group via the lead applicant will be responsible for planning and monitoring expenditure. Guidelines for the written report will be made available through NRDC's website.

Grants will be to a maximum of £10,000 per project.

Allowable costs

The following types of expenditure can be claimed. The bulk of expenditure must be focused on the research investigation rather than the purchase of hardware materials or equipment. Suggestions are made below about the approximate proportions of the budget that might be spent on each element:

- Research support person's time (daily rate, up to 50 per cent of the project budget can be spent on this).
- Cover costs for practitioners involved in the project (daily rate, up to 50 per cent of the project budget can be spent on this).
- Administrative support (state daily rate or fractional post).
- Research training costs (maximum £1,000).
- Fieldwork expenses (photocopying, consumables, etc.).
- Travel to meetings (state number of meetings).
- Costs for learners involved in the project (e.g. travel costs, vouchers, prize draws, etc.).
- Payment to organisations for facilitation and promotion of the project (one-off fee).
- 'Expert research' advice from a specialist in the topic of the research (daily rate or freely offered by NRDC consortium members).

How will progress on the project be monitored and evaluated?

You should review your own progress throughout your research and groups will receive a self-monitoring questionnaire from NRDC to help evaluate that progress.

NRDC will set up an external advisory group for the initiative, and will allocate a link person to each group who will act as a 'critical friend', offering advice throughout.

Your senior manager is also expected to provide support during the research process and help with monitoring and disseminating your outcomes or findings.

Section 2: Notes of guidance for submitting your application

Submissions must be no more than nine pages and must comprise:

- A. Completed Project Application cover sheet
- B. Written supporting statement
- C. A signed supporting statement from a senior manager in the lead applicant's organisation
- D. A signed statement and cv from the person taking the research support role in the group
- E. Completed Project Application checklist.

A. Information to be included on the cover sheet:

1. Name of organisation submitting the application
2. Project title
3. Members of the project group
4. Details of person providing research support
5. Project summary and proposed outcomes.

B. Information to be included in accompanying written statement:

6. Project overview
7. Project aims
8. Research questions
9. Research design and methods
10. Research support plans
11. Organisational context for the project
12. Timetable
13. Summary of costs
14. Expected outcomes
15. Communication and impact
16. Ethics
17. Other relevant information
18. Feedback on the application process.

C. Senior manager's statement:

A signed supporting statement from a senior manager in the lead applicant's organisation identifying the ways in which your research proposal is supported by the organisation.

D. Statement from research support person:

An individualised statement written and signed by the person who will take the research support role in your group, demonstrating that communication has been established between you and the support person. This should also explain how and at what points they will support your project and how they might help disseminate the research findings. They should also include a cv.

A. Information for application cover sheet

1. *Name of organisation submitting the application*
This should be the organisation that will receive the contract for the project and with which the lead applicant is affiliated. A senior manager from this organisation must endorse the project.
2. *Project title* This will be used by NRDC to identify your project. The title should briefly express the key focus of the project.
3. *Members of the project group* A clear project manager who will liaise with programme co-ordinators at NRDC must be identified within the group. This person is the lead applicant. They will deal with finance for the project and take overall responsibility for seeing the project through. The project manager may be, but is not necessarily, the research support person.
4. You should list the names of all the other group members, their organisational affiliations and their roles in the project (for example, practitioner researcher, data analysis specialist).
5. *Details of person providing research support* Each group *must* include someone whose role will be to offer research support in day-to-day project activities, arrange and/or deliver research methods training and co-ordinate report writing. This should be someone with a postgraduate qualification that includes research training, and some practical research experience. Links with a local university should be made wherever possible. This person should attach a statement explaining how they will support the group and the nature of their expertise and they should attach their cv.
6. *Project summary and outcomes* (maximum 500 words) This summary elaborates on the title, with a summary of the aims, methods and outcomes.

B. Information to be included in your written statement

Project overview

You should describe the background and rationale to your proposed project, covering the following points:

- Relevance/evidence of need for this research
- How it addresses the theme 'New ways of engaging new learners'

- References to other relevant research
- How the project will add to our knowledge
- Who will benefit from the project and how
- How your research will enhance adult literacy, numeracy or ESOL provision in your organisation. Be as specific as possible.

Project aims

Your project should have a clear aim stating what you hope to find out and how this will make a difference to the field of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL. You should consider your aims in relation to the goals or outcomes of the project. Please consult the accompanying document, *Further Ideas for Designing a Small-Scale Research Project*, for guidance on how to define your aims and objectives.

Research questions

Your project aims should be developed in the form of one or more questions that your research will answer. Please consult the accompanying document, *Further Ideas for Designing a Small-Scale Research Project*, for guidance on how to define your research questions.

Research design and methods

Your application must describe and justify the 'why, what, who, where and when?' of your research design. You need to specify your data collection methods and why you have chosen them (e.g. interview, diary, questionnaire, observation), the numbers of participants that will be involved, how you will interpret the data, how you will present the findings, where and to what audiences. In defining your project some practical principles to bear in mind are:

- consider how to involve learners in decision-making at different stages of the project
- consider possible collaborations between different organisations and agencies
- keep it simple and manageable within existing staff commitments and activities
- be creative about methods used to collect data: don't just think about a survey questionnaire
- find an appropriate research support person to work in your group (NRDC may be able to suggest a possible person in your locality)
- be clear about how you will manage the research process from day-to-day
- think about how you will network with others in your local area
- think about how you will communicate your findings.

A range of research methods is possible. Because of the small-scale and action-research nature of practitioner research, data collection is likely to include observation, interview, document collection and data on learner outcomes. You may also choose to use the funding for handling quantitative, statistical data and tests, and project research could, for instance, revolve around the statistical data already collected by an organisation for its own purposes.

Analysis will draw on a range of models as appropriate, including for example grounded theory, situated cognition, discourse analysis and participant action research as well as basic quantitative techniques.

Collaborative and co-operative methodologies involving learners in the decision-making processes of the project will be encouraged.

Possible project designs include:

- A group of practitioners meeting regularly to document and reflect on some aspect their practice relevant to the theme – an extension of the idea of a 'study circle'.
- Each person individually collects parallel data on a common theme (as in the recent LSDA 'Learners Journeys' report) meeting to synchronise and collectively write up results.
- Group members comparing two or more different contexts, pairing up to observe/visit each other's classrooms.
- Analysis of existing statistical data to answer new questions or allow new information to emerge, e.g. participation data, or information on progression.
- An action research design where you try out something new, an intervention is made and carefully documented for its effects on an existing context, e.g. a new method of screening learners or documenting progress.

Please consult the accompanying document *Further Ideas for Designing a Small-Scale Research Project*, for other suggestions.

Research support plans

You will need to give details in your application of:

- The research methods training the group will need and how you will access it
- The role of the person in the group who is providing research support.



Possibilities for training include pre-training, staged training days integrated into the phases of the research itself, buying in, for example, parts of the LSDA Research Toolkit and Project management handbook, or enrolling members of the group onto a university-run research methods module.

As mentioned above, you must carefully specify the role of the research support person in your group. They might: provide a link to academic research methods advice and traditions, offer relevant reading, arrange and supervise research training or assist with the final dissemination strategy for the project, including co-ordinating production of the final written report.

Organisational context for the project

Applications can be from a group of people working in one organisation, or a group collaborating across different organisations. You are strongly advised to set up a group of people who are geographically close enough to communicate regularly with one another.

You should briefly describe:

- What organisations are represented in the group.
- What role these organisations will play in the research collaboration and in project management.
- What networks the project group is linked to (e.g. RaPAL, LSRN, NATECLA, LSDA regional, ALM etc.).
- How you will ensure that a local support group exists among members of the research group.
- How you will monitor and evaluate your work on the project.

Timetable

Give details of how will you organise your time on the project.

A timetable must be included, with milestones for each point in the research process. You will be asked to briefly report to the NRDC on the progress of the project at three-monthly intervals using these milestones.

It is suggested that you allow approximately two months to set the project up, four months for data collection and three months for analysis, dissemination and report writing.

Summary of costs

See Section 1 of the general guidelines for categories of allowable costs and timing of payments. You should include a full statement of the project's planned expenditure using these headings.

Expected outcomes

Groups will be expected to:

- Identify a problem or issue that would benefit from research.
- Decide a research question.
- Design a research project to investigate the question.
- Decide appropriate methodology.
- Carry out the research.
- Write up the findings.
- Network with other groups funded by the scheme and share expertise.
- Participate in briefing days and dissemination events to share work with other researchers.

You must prepare a summary report of the research project for NRDC of around 5,000 words, including a two-page summary.

Communication and impact

You will need to exchange ideas and discuss your research strategy, data and developing analyses within your group. Explain how you plan to do this, through electronic and face-to-face discussion as appropriate. The kinds of questions you might consider are:

- How (and how often) will group members communicate with one another during the project (through meetings, e-mail etc.)?
- How will you keep your organisations and research sites informed about your activities?
- How will you communicate and disseminate your findings to the wider field?
- How will you liaise with NRDC?
- How will you network with other funded projects?

Ethics

Your project should involve research methods and relationships that are respectful of all participants involved, especially learners. Applicants are expected to have consulted the ethical guidelines for research used by the British Educational Research Association <http://www.bera.ac.uk/guidelines.html> or the British Association of Applied Linguistics <http://www.baal.org.uk/ethicsug.htm> and to outline any ethical issues likely to arise in the course of the proposed project.

Other relevant information

Please include here any other essential information not covered by our headings.

Feedback on the application process

Your comments on the process of application for this initiative and the design of the guidance materials are welcomed. Please relay these through Kathryn James at Lancaster (address as above).

Additional guidance for applications*Ideas for designing a small-scale research project*

These ideas are for your additional guidance in designing a research study for your application (adapted from the DfES' Best Practice Guidelines for Research).

1. What are the aims of your research?
What is it you would like to find out?

- The initial focus for your project is likely to come from an issue or puzzle that you have identified in the course of your everyday work. Moving from this initial focus (e.g. improving the initial assessment process with new learners in an organisation) to a clear and researchable question is an important part of defining your project.
- Applications for NRDC's Practitioner-Led Research Initiative need a clear aim. The more specific you can be, the more rewarding the experience is likely to be and the greater your chance of success.
- Aims which practitioners have chosen to pursue in previous investigations have included, for example:
 - I. to investigate the role of referral agencies in learners' take-up of provision in a local area
 - II. to investigate learners' perceptions of progress in literacy programmes
 - III. to investigate learners' and tutors' attitudes to accreditation
 - IV. to explore the literacy practices and needs of participants in a domestic violence support group.

2. Developing your research question(s)

- One frequent problem people have in defining small-scale research is setting out an aim, e.g. 'to develop learners' writing' without then proceeding to identify what they wanted to find out in the form of a research question, e.g. 'how could a residential writing workshop be used to produce new kinds of writing with "entry level"

learners in a workplace setting'?

- In deciding on a researchable question, it is worth thinking ahead to the outcomes you hope your research will produce. What difference do you expect your study to make? What will it be able to tell us that will be useful to the field of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL?
 - Your question will also help you decide on the evidence to collect and ensure that data helps your goal and keeps your project manageable. Make sure your aims are in proportion to the time and resources you will have available. Practitioner research is always more rewarding for the practitioner and credible to colleagues if it has manageable and specific aims. If you aim to find out whether a strategy has an impact do not forget to document how the strategy was implemented as well. Other people, inspired by your results to try it out, will want to know how you did it!
3. Methods: How will you identify the relevant data you are going to collect? How will you collect, analyse and evaluate the data? How do they link to your aims and what is known already?
 - This is an important aspect of your research design because these methods are the activities that help you turn your plans into a practical reality and any description of what you will do helps assessors feel confident that your proposal has been properly thought through.
 - This aspect in particular is where your project research support person should be able to help. Ask them and your colleagues for ideas about relevant research. You could consult a local college or university librarian about search strategies too.

What data will I collect?

- You need to collect information that helps you answer your question. You also need workable strategies for collecting data. Ideally your data should also be useful on a day-to-day basis as well as in answering your question.
- Examples of data that practitioners have found manageable and useful include:
 - I. creating peer observation records through visiting one another's learning groups and organisations
 - II. making video or sound recordings of learner/tutor interactions
 - III. collecting practitioner diaries or learner commentaries to identify their perspective on lessons/activities

IV. using questionnaires with learners or interviewing them to explore their thinking and understanding.

How will I check that my data is valid?

- Being clear why you are collecting data is an important part of ensuring they are valid. Reasons for collecting data during investigations in the past have included trying to identify:
 - I. changes in patterns of learners' responses and interactions in response to specific strategies
 - II. the types of questions asked by learners and tutors and the ways in which these change as initial assessment strategies are implemented
 - III. alterations in tutors' practices as a result of the introduction of new training.
- It is often better to collect different kinds of information, which allow you to check validity by cross-referencing (a process called triangulation) than to collect larger amounts of identical data. For example, practitioners who have reviewed video recordings of learning sessions alongside learning logs or learners' commentaries on the video material have been surprised (often pleasantly) about the differences between learners' perceptions and their own.

How will I analyse data and draw conclusions?

- It is important to allocate time for analysing your data and to avoid rushing to conclusions. In particular, it is important to check that evidence contradicts any emerging patterns as well as evidence that confirms them.
4. Timetable: How are you going to organise your time during the research? What is your timeline for identifying data? When will you collect, analyse and interpret it? How much time do you need to allow for writing up what you have done?
- You need to describe:
 - I. how you will phase your research
 - II. the timescale for:
 - a. data collection
 - b. analysis
 - c. writing up your report.
 - Remember to leave plenty of time for data analysis: this often gets overlooked. It can be helpful to allow time to test your strategies for collecting data since they might need refining in the context of busy organisations.

5. How will you monitor your own learning and professional development during the research?

- As practitioners you will have lots of ideas for monitoring learning. Remember to plan how you will obtain positive criticism and support from others alongside steps for personal reflection.

6. Organisational context: how do you intend to evaluate your research?

- If your expected outcomes are clear and your methods relevant to them, it should be easy to identify how the work you are undertaking contributes to this.

7. What are the expected outcomes or findings of your research? How will the research process be helpful to adult learners?

- This question is asking you to explain what will be different if your project meets its aims.
- Think about outcomes in relation to your own and your colleagues' development as well as your learners. It is also better to describe detailed outcomes and ways of assessing them than to offer sweeping or general claims.
- Aim to explore connections between strategies and outcomes rather than trying to test cause and effect. There are too many variables in learning settings to make this feasible.

8. Considering impact: How will your research help to improve teaching and learning? How do you propose to communicate your research findings to other practitioners?

- You might be able to answer these questions by referring to previous projects in your organisation or to research carried out previously by practitioners or academics. If your aims are quite abstract (e.g. improving learner motivation) you need to link these to specific examples of how this will affect teaching and learning in particular settings or with particular groups of learners.
- You need to think about how you want to share your work in your own organisation through local and regional networks and through professional organisations. Often the most effective networks for dissemination are personal and involve visits and discussion rather than writing or presenting a formal paper.

► Appendix 3

► Membership and terms of reference for the consultative group

Anita Wilson, Lancaster University/NRDC
 Yvon Appleby, Lancaster University/NRDC
 David Budge, NRDC
 David Mallows, NRDC
 Diana Coben, Kings College
 Helen Casey, NRDC
 Juliet Merrifield, Friends Centre, Brighton
 Jan Eldred, NIACE
 Jane Ward, NIACE
 Jay Derrick, Consultant
 Jenny Gartland, JRG Ltd
 Jenny Gardiner, Association of Colleges
 Judith Edwards, LSDA
 Mike Baynham, Leeds University
 Maria Kambouri, Institute of Education/NRDC
 Fiona MacDonald, Learning Connections, Scotland
 Mary Hamilton, Lancaster University/NRDC
 Nyona Chanda, Consultant
 Oonagh Gormley, Institute of Education/NRDC
 Olivia Sagan, NRDC
 Philida Schellekens, NATECLA and Consultant
 Sheila Rosenberg, NATECLA and Consultant
 Margaret Siudek, Croydon College
 Simon James, LSDA
 Ursula Howard, NRDC
 Yvonne Hillier, City University, London

The consultative group will:

1. Assist the NRDC and project directors in decision-making and strategy in relation to the initiative across the three rounds of funding.
2. Meet a maximum of three times per year, in London or Lancaster.
3. Communicate regularly by e-mail and or phone commenting on and offering advice about draft documents and operational issues.
4. Receive and comment on evaluation reports from the initiative.
5. Assist in the selection of practitioner-led research projects, by joining the shortlisting and selection panels as appropriate.
6. Assist projects with communicating their findings in order to ensure projects have an impact on practice and policy.

Membership of the group

Up to 20 people will be drawn from the following groups:

1. Members of NRDC project management for the PLRI.
2. A range of interested people with specific expertise drawn from the wider NRDC consortium.
3. Representatives from related organisations (e.g. ABBSU, LSDA, NIACE, LSRN, BSA, universities, practitioner networks in literacy, numeracy and ESOL).
4. Representatives from a range of providing organisations and funders such as community, private training providers, FE, prison and workplace.
5. International representatives with specific expertise in PLR activity and policy, including other countries in the UK.

Mary Hamilton
Lancaster University
March 2004

► **Appendix 4**
 ► **List of funded projects and titles:
 PLRI projects 2004–2006**

Round One projects 2004

‘New ways of engaging new learners’

Project title	Organisation	Project leaders
What methods could be used to engage classroom assistants, who work in school and post-16 sectors, to improve their own literacy and numeracy skills through the Skills for Life agenda?	Bishop Burton College Bishop Burton East Yorkshire HU17 8QG	Cheryl Dillon – Project Lead
CLiCK Reaching and engaging new learners using popular culture through a blend of online and classroom learning	South East Derbyshire College 1–5 Church Street Ripley Derbyshire DE5 3BU The Sheffield College Granville Road Sheffield S2 2RL	Cheryl Dillon – Project Lead
Improving workplace training and support for council employees	Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council BBC Learning Centre 22–26 Darwin Street Blackburn Lancashire BB2 2EA	Hamid Patel – Project Lead
Engaging new learners in rural SMEs	69 Spa Road Weymouth Dorset DT3 5EP	Sandi Wales – Project Lead
Essential skills support for health care assistants	c/o Lancaster University Literacy Research Centre Institute for Advanced Studies Lancaster University Lancaster LA1 4YD	Lynn Ireland – Project Lead

Round Two projects**'Understanding purpose and perseverance – learners' aspirations and commitment to learning'**

Project title	Organisation	Project leaders
What motivates or demotivates adults to improve their numeracy skills?	Brighton and Hove City College Pelham Street Brighton East Sussex	Sara Fletcher – Project Lead Alison Kelly – Researcher
Extracurricular activities and ESOL: adding value or wasting resources?	Exeter College Community ESOL Project Exeter College 12 York Road Exeter Devon	David Wright - Project Lead
Learner-centred practice: provision to meet the goals and motivation of learner on Skills for Life programmes	Learning Development Unit York College Tadcaster Road York YO24 1UA	Helen Kenwright – Project Lead
'I Can': measuring soft outcomes for homeless and vulnerable learners	Broadway Central Office Chaucer House White Hart Yard London SE1 1NX	Harriet Cookson – Project Lead
Participants' perspectives on the factors in teacher method and teacher qualities which promote learner retention in part-time adult ESOL courses	Cityand Islington College City and Islington College Dalby House 396–398 City Road London EC1V 2QA	James McGoldrick – Project Lead
Learner perceptions of the impact of residence on skills for life learning	Northern College for Residential Adult Education Wentworth Castle Stainborough Barnsley South Yorkshire S75 3ET	Bronwen Hiles – Project Lead



Round Three projects**'Creativity in teaching and learning'**

Project title	Organisation	Project leaders
Weaving reading for pleasure into the adult literacy curriculum	Essex County Council Adult Community Learning Adult Community Learning County Hall Chelmsford Essex CM2 6WN	Sue Oakey – Project Lead/ Researcher
Creative approaches to overcoming barriers to learning with young offenders on Skills for Life programmes – tried and tested	Future Prospects – York College Learning Development Unit York College Tadcaster Road York YO24 1UA	Helen Kenwright – Project Lead Andy Bucklee
Literacy and numeracy practices in a peer education project for young people at risk	City of Sunderland YMCA Foyer 2 Toward Road Sunderland SR1	Sarah Rennie – Project Lead Stephen McKinlay
Learners, tutors and action research: instigating learner-centred research in Skills for Life	Dewsbury College Halifax Road Dewsbury WF13 2AS	Cathy Clarkson – Project Lead Vasiliki Scurfield
Soft Currency	Exeter Council for Voluntary Services Wat Tyler House King William Street Exeter EX4 6PD	Alan Gorman – Project Lead

► Appendix 5

► NRDC discussion paper on the publications strategy for practitioner research projects

Why practitioner research?

One of the underpinning strategies of NRDC is to 'build research capacity, reflective practice and career development through the systematic engagement of teachers and other practitioners in the centre' (NRDC, 2003: p.13). The overall intention of the practitioner-led research initiative is to publicise and support this strategy by drawing in a new constituency of beginning practitioner researchers. The aims are to:

- build research capacity in the field
- produce findings which will give new insights into adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL
- embed the activities of NRDC in practice
- strengthen networks linking practice, research and policy.

Drawing on a model of partnership working, the initiative was intended to be of benefit to practitioners and their organisations in a number of ways, providing an opportunity to put original research ideas into practice, offering the chance to step back and reflect on practice, and to explore systematically day-to-day issues arising from the Skills For Life policy.

Within the scope of a broad theme, practitioners were invited to pose researchable questions that would be useful to them, their employing institutions and the local communities they serve. Ideally research topics would be related to existing activities and issues that needed to be addressed by organisations.

Practitioner research is frequently challenging to others in the research/policy community because it shows that research can be done and written up in different ways. It can also show how the 'ordinary' can be a source of creative research ideas, with the emphasis placed on the practical, small-scale issues which dominate the working lives of practitioners.

Who are the potential audiences for practitioner research?

Policy-makers to whom PR offers accessible, grounded and fine-grained findings that can complement large-scale surveys and other traditional research, as well as insights into practitioners perspectives and concerns.

Participants in the projects: practitioners and their sponsoring organisations who took part in the research. PR offers validation of their status and knowledge-base, visibility, levers for funding locally, ideas to feed into training and management strategies.

Other practitioners aspiring or interested in PR: models of what PR can accomplish, how it's done and supported, pitfalls and benefits, how it can be communicated. Evidence suggests (e.g. see Bingham and Smith, 2003) that practitioners engage best with research if they have first-hand involvement in the process, and that practitioners are more likely to take notice of, and value, research that has been produced with the involvement of other practitioners

Academic researchers in the field of ALNE, to enable links to be made with other NRDC reports, to double-check/validate their own findings and perspectives, to obtain ideas for new research angles, factors they may have overlooked. Also to get a better understanding of how to maximise the input of practitioners and to manage good research relationships with them. Through PR practitioners express their views of what it is like to be involved with research, and the potential benefits to themselves. The process adopted by NRDC ICT projects is a particularly good example of this.

What are the implications for NRDC's publications strategy?

There are many implications, some of which are relevant more broadly to NRDC's communications strategy.

- Multiple formats should be considered for different audiences. Creative use of different



modes of communication – diagrams, images and oral presentations as well as the written word – are important in order to attract those who would not normally read a research report.

- Whilst the use of web publication offers chances for rapid feedback and circulation of material for training purposes, care needs to be taken that isn't considered 'second-best'. A printed report still has high status and may be especially valued where practitioners are trying to establish credibility for their work or organisation. It is important to practitioners to have got something in print. It makes them feel less dependent on the views passed down from 'the great and the good'.
- The web offers other possibilities, e.g. for interactive forums, based around written project reports and other linked documents, such as policy and discussion papers.
- It is important to look for similarities between interested groups as well as differences. For example, policy-makers and practitioners have similar needs for accessible, succinct reports that address their specific interests and can fit into busy lives. However, they may be convinced by different types of evidence.
- Reports need to differentiate local/national/international audiences, e.g. press releases might be aimed especially at local media.
- Non-technical summaries of up to four pages are useful to accompany full reports.
- Technical reports that detail the methodology and support process can be valuable additional documents. The readership for these are the sponsoring organisations and the research community more generally.
- Key message summaries to practitioners that emphasise the process 'How to do it' and how it feels and what will happen if you try ... These could include personal comments from practitioners who have been through the process. We have many examples from the project reports.
- Key message summaries that emphasise the substantive findings and how they fit with what we already know or what others are doing.
- Offer help for practitioners to put together oral presentation of research findings: videos, CDs, production of audiovisual materials to accompany conference and workshop presentations (visually interesting posters, PowerPoint presentations).
- Layout and format of reports should be eye-catching – creative use of visuals is essential.

**Mary Hamilton with Paul Davies,
PLRI July 2006**

► Appendix 6

► Guidelines for the critical friend

Role of the NRDC academic mentor

Definition of a critical friend:

A trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens and offers critiques of a person's work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work.

Costa, A. and Kallick, B. (1993) 'Through the lens of a critical friend'. *Educational Leadership*, 51(2): 49-51.

You have agreed to be NRDC's 'academic mentor' for the Practitioner-Led Research Initiative project named above. We feel that it might be helpful to give you a sense of what will be expected. These suggestions are not definitive, of course, and we expect that you will negotiate your involvement with your particular project in whatever way you all feel most appropriate.

Why you have been asked

You have been approached because you have expertise in the content area of the selected project. This means that you may have access to information, experience, or resources that the project members may not be aware of or that you may be able to give input into content-area discussion or issues that the team are dealing with.

What is expected of you

Again, this is negotiable but we are not expecting that you will have a great deal of day-to-day involvement with the project as each team is additionally supported by other colleagues with a range of knowledge and experience. In addition to

the involvement of their line managers, each team also has access to a named research support person who can be accessed locally. The role of this person is to offer guidance and training in relation to research methodology and project management. Again, negotiation with your project team would be the most obvious way of working through how you will be involved.

Suggestions as to how you might fulfil your role are:

- Being available throughout the project to offer advice by e-mail or phone
- Giving feedback on project plans, data collection and analysis
- Suggesting helpful resources
- Visiting the project and/or the research site
- Attending interim report meetings
- Helping to publicise and disseminate the work of the project through NRDC and your own networks.

Additional information

The operational team are very appreciative of the fact that you are making a voluntary contribution to support promising and innovative research projects. If we can be of any further assistance please do not hesitate to get in touch with us.

(Append details of the project, including original proposal, contact details, names of people in the team.)

► Appendix 7

► Agenda for meeting with project research support people

Quaker Meeting House, Euston, London, 2 March 2006

Meeting for research support people 2 March. We have always seen the role of the research support person as vital to the activities of each project and especially important to ensuring completion of the project report. Our impression looking back across the three rounds of funding is that this important role has been carried out very differently in different projects and that the nature of the relationship between the RSP and group activities has varied, depending on the composition of the groups, the kind of research being carried out, the specialist skills of the RSP, etc.

However, we have never really discussed how the role has worked out in practice with RSPs themselves and this meeting is an opportunity to explore the possible models of research support that have been developed in the initiative, and the pros and cons of these. The point is to inform the final report of the PLRI that we have to write and also to suggest the ways in which practitioner research can best be encouraged and embedded in the future.

The brief we suggested in our guidelines in the application pack about the role of the research support person was as follows:

Each group must include someone whose role will be to offer research support in day-to-day project activities. This person will provide a link to academic research methods advice and traditions, offer relevant reading, arrange and/or deliver research methods training, assist with the final dissemination strategy for the project, including co-ordinating production of the final written report. This person should be someone with a post-graduate qualification that includes research training, and some practical research experience. Links with a local university should be made wherever possible.

In addition, groups will be expected to link into existing local and regional networks (such as NRDC, BSA, LSDA, NIACE and ABSSU Regional Co-ordinators and Local Learning Partnerships). NRDC

will arrange an initial briefing day for all projects funded through the initiative, an interim advisory meeting and a dissemination event at the end of the project period. All groups are expected to take part in these events.

Issues for discussion at the meeting

- What part did you play in the writing of the initial project proposal, and if so did you consider your role as RS at that point?
- What role did you play in your PR project?
- Were you doubling up with other roles (e.g. project management)?
- Did you do things you hadn't anticipated you would have to?
- At what points in the life of the project were you called on?
- Were there particular moments in the project when your input was crucial? If so, what were these and why?
- Were there conflicts or sensitivities involved in your role?
- Was it difficult to get from action to reflection in your project group?
- What affects the persistence of practitioner researchers?
- What are your views about the value of practitioner research: lip-service? Converted to it?
- Do you feel there is a tension between the quality of the process and the outcomes from practitioner led research?
- The importance of money to buy people's time – is this important? Is it double-edged in encouraging people to dream up ideas they would otherwise not think of just to get the money?
- The importance of time and timing more generally ... can money buy it?

- ▶ **Appendix 8**
- ▶ **Interim progress report**

Project title**Contact details****Project applicant****Organisation****Address****Telephone****Fax****E-mail**

Please provide details of your work undertaken and who carried out that work. The following headings can be used as a guideline; please do feel free to add any additional headings you feel would help at the end of the document.

Brief overview – What has happened so far on your project?

Timetables and milestones – Have you kept to schedule?

Data collection – How is your data collection going?

Training – What research training has your team undertaken?

Academic advisor – What role has your academic advisor played?

Plusses and minuses – Are there issues and ideas that may help others doing projects?

Project communication and management – Have the project team kept in touch? Have the financial arrangements been smooth?

Other project activities – Is there additional information you think we should know?

Please indicate additional support, if any, you would like us to provide

Name

Signature

Date

Once completed and signed please forward to:

Kathryn James

Educational Research, County South, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YD

E-mail: kathryn.james@lancaster.ac.uk

Those interested in finding out more about the wider movement towards developing practitioners as researchers/developers and practitioner-led research can contact the following:

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NRDC is a consortium of partners led by the Institute of Education, University of London. It includes:

- Lancaster University
- University of Nottingham
- University of Sheffield
- East London Pathfinder
- Liverpool Lifelong Learning Partnership

- National Institute of Adult Continuing Education
- Basic Skills Agency
- Learning and Skills Network
- LLU+, London South Bank University
- King's College London
- University of Leeds

Funded by the Department for Education and Skills as part of **Skills for Life:** the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills.

