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for adult literacy and numeracy

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New ways of engaging new learners: lessons from round one of the practitioner-led research initiative.

Edited by: Mary Hamilton and Anita Wilson,
Lancaster University.
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Introduction

This publication brings together the final reports of the first round of the practitioner-led research initiative. The initiative is running for three years between 2004–06. Each round funds six, nine month projects selected through an open competition. The initiative offers an opportunity for groups of practitioners to engage in ‘hands-on’ research. Groups are invited to identify research questions, and to design and carry out projects with structured support from the research community. The initiative is funded by the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) and the European Social Fund (ESF), and co-ordinated by a team at Lancaster University, with the support of a national advisory group comprised of representatives from the field. This document presents the six reports from the first round of projects and locates them within the overall framework of the initiative itself, linking them to current research and practice.

Background

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, Strategy 2003-2007, p13). 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 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; and
- 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. This provides an opportunity to put original research ideas into practice, offering the chance to step back and reflect on practice, and to systematically 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 round one projects

The theme for the first round was ‘**New ways of engaging new learners**’. It was intentionally broad, offering scope for groups to pose many different questions, whilst addressing a key topical issue relevant to the *Skills for Life* policy. Under this theme, it was suggested that projects might pursue:

- 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 (publicity and infrastructure).

- Research that will inform the content and methodology of learning and teaching, working with hard to reach groups (methods and materials).
- Research that will enable the development of appropriate support for adults to reach their learning goals (counselling, use of volunteers, ways of documenting progression).

It was important that applicants recognised that that this fund 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 initiative works

The bidding process

Applications were invited from locally based consortia of between three and six people 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 institutional 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 consultant whose role would be to support day-to-day project activities, arrange and/or deliver research methods training and co-ordinate report writing. Groups were also expected to link into existing local and regional networks (NRDC, *Skills for Life* Strategy Unit, (SFLSU) formerly known as the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit, (ABSSU), the Learning and Skills Development Agency, (LSDA), the National Institute of Continuing Education, (NIACE) and Local Learning Partnerships) by setting up an advisory group for their project.

Co-ordinating the initiative

Each round of the initiative is led overall by a team of three: Mary Hamilton; Anita Wilson; and Kathryn James at Lancaster University. They are supported by an advisory group made up of a broad range of professionals in the field and representatives from NRDC. The operational team are responsible for day-to-day management of the initiative, answering queries from project members monitoring the projects and liaising with the advisory group. The advisory group is responsible not only for monitoring the progress of the initiative and the projects within it, but also provides a group of critical readers to assist in the selection process by reading and shortlisting applications. The final selection panel is 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 is allocated an academic advisor, often drawn from the advisory group or recommended by them, whose specific area of expertise is felt to be of particular value.

Applications to tender for the first round of projects went out in the summer of 2003.

Applications were received and all were taken forward, read and graded by two critical readers before a shortlist of ten were sent to the advisory group. From these six were selected for funding.

Links and networks

The projects were not undertaken in isolation. At an initial briefing day, teams were given information about other practitioner-led research initiatives (for example, Research in Practice in Adult Literacy (RaPAL) (www.literacy.lancaster.ac.uk/rapal), and a similar network in British Columbia – Research in Practice in Adult Literacy (RiPAL) (www.nald.ca/rapal), 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 Beck et al. 2004). Teams were also alerted to other research networks in their area such as the Northwest *Skills for Life* research forum¹.

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 very 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 (please see section five on frontline managers) and the Campaign for Learning, the Derbyshire team had additional training support from NIACE and the Somerset project was linked to the Somerset Learning Partnership.

Project teams came together for an interim meeting at the half-way point in the research where ideas were shared and progress noted. An end of project conference provided the opportunity for teams to present their findings to a large audience 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. Everyone maintained a presence throughout the life of the projects. Every project was represented at the interim meeting and at the final conference. All delivered their reports on time. Teams maintained contact both within their partnerships, with the co-ordinating team at Lancaster, and the critical friends that were appointed to them.

Links will be made between the first and second round projects – for example, one of the first round projects contributed to the briefing day for the second round. Other teams have also offered to share their experiences of managing and fulfilling the requirements for the first round.

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 in their reports all projects were asked to comment on the impacts of their work.

The wider literature reporting on experiences of practitioner-research from the United Kingdom (UK) and elsewhere suggest that it can be an effective way of engaging with

1. Further information at the North West skills for Life research forum can be found at www.literacy.lancaster.ac.uk/links/skillsforlife.htm

practitioners. For example, a recent review of the United States (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).

The evaluations of a recent similar initiative, the LSDA 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 2004).

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 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 that:

"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).

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. It is important to read in the reports presented here the variety of innovative ways in which the projects have tackled this issue of communicating to others about their findings with a view to 'making change happen'. These include an impressive range of visits and presentations to local and national audiences, in some cases bringing learners into the

process; publication, inputs into staff development and local management decision-making. We hope that this summary publication and the publicity offered by the NRDC to this initiative can contribute to the next stage of making the experiences of these projects more widely known.

Project overviews

While the overall title for this round was 'New ways of engaging new learners', projects chose to address the theme from a variety of perspectives ranging across work-place, community, health, college, and classroom settings. They also worked with a wide variety of learners including classroom assistants, health care workers, young people in college, council employees and their frontline managers, employees in small and medium rural enterprise and vulnerable and hard to reach learners.

The projects used a variety of methods of data collection. They supported their case study evidence by referring to demographic statistics of regional populations and groups of learners. Data collection ranged from the use of questionnaires, to observations and semi-structured interviews, and was often supported by telephone conversations and letters, video recordings and photographs. Learners were brought into the process through the evaluation of their own progress and the elicitation of their views of learning experiences. Triangulation was achieved by combining methods – for example, questionnaires followed by interviews, observations backed up by discussion, or the invention of specific tools such as the 'learning wheel' in the Blackburn project or the 'Catching confidence' tool used by the Derbyshire team.

The projects were mindful of ethical considerations raised by conducting research within their own organisations. Ethical problems were encountered in various ways. For some, such as the Blackburn project, it was necessary to maintain a balance between the NRDC project and the links to existing projects being undertaken as part of the Campaign for Learning. For others, such as the Derbyshire project and the Sheffield project, it was deemed important to recognise the vulnerability or the age of the learners. For the East Riding and the Health care projects confidentiality and anonymity were important issues that had to be addressed and resolved.

Three of the six projects focused particularly on recruitment and awareness raising within their chosen context. Two explored innovative ways of working with learners already on courses, and one looked at both of these aspects. This report begins with the project undertaken by a team from South East Derbyshire College, led by Sue Pilbeam. They were working with particularly vulnerable client groups (in situations that required specific attention to issues around exploitation and collaborative working). They also found it essential to consider the ethics of working to collect data around the experiences of these new learners. As with many other PRLI projects they had a specific interest in evaluation but in this case their focus was in trying to gauge soft outcomes such as increased personal confidence and aspiration among learners who were deemed 'hard to reach' or 'vulnerable'. To this end they settled on what they termed a 'community engagement model'. They also made use of a specific tool 'Catching Confidence' (NIACE) which was used in collaboration with the learners in their project. As with the other teams, their results have been fed back into their organisation and indeed further disseminated at regional and national conferences.

The project headed up by Joanne Hall and Lynn Ireland investigated *Skills for Life* provision

for health care assistants in a NHS Trust, identifying the specific needs of learners in healthcare settings as recognised by NHSU in the Annual Report (2003 – 2004). Although other projects, such as the Blackburn and Darwen team and the Somerset Learning Partnership, were also focusing on work-place learning, the practicalities of time and the availability of respondents meant that the researchers in the NHS were required to adapt both themselves and their focus to meet the demands of a very specific and changing research environment. However, the 'absence' rather than the 'presence' of available learners provided them with an opportunity to investigate why people became disengaged from the process of accessing *Skills for Life* provision. It offered a valuable insight – reflected further in other NRDC studies such as *Adult Learners' Lives* as to the complexities of fitting learning into additional demands of everyday life. The ethics of researching in an environment known for its attention to confidentiality and anonymity proved another hurdle for the team, which they overcame by expanding the study to include an element of evaluation for the host organisation.

A consortium of practitioners and researchers based in Sheffield chose to look at the place of blended learning as a way of engaging new learners. While current emphasis is placed on increasing the use of ICT in formal learning environments, blended learning – where elearning is integrated into conventional classroom teaching – is one method that is being used in Sheffield to effect. Their chosen group were young *Skills for Life* learners, who – in line with a number of learners from the other projects – had found conventional schooling to be inappropriate to their needs. Sheffield College was already taking an innovative approach to engaging these learners and had begun to include elements of everyday life – such as violence and homelessness – into their teaching materials. For the purposes of their practitioner-led research initiative, they chose to focus on one element – hip hop – to see whether elements of popular culture could re-engage and develop learners interest and expertise. Mapping popular culture onto mainstream provision has proved to be an effective way of engaging black pupils (Yasin, forthcoming) and Shuaib Meacham (assistant professor at the University of Delaware and hip-hop expert) was already linked to the college. This link not only invigorated the research but allowed links to be made beyond the project itself, something that was taken up by a number of the initiatives in various ways. The Sheffield project also recognised the metaphorical space that its learners inhabited and were guided by their research support team to consider the appropriateness of a 'third space' theory.

Another project – the team from East Riding of Yorkshire led by Cheryl Dillon – focused on learners for whom *Skills for Life* provision was closely tied to the requirements of their job and sought to identify in a sensitive manner the skills gap between required and actual skills levels of classroom assistants. Issues of anonymity and confidentiality noted in the NHS study also applied in the East Riding setting. The East Riding team also used a variety of methods of staged data collection beginning with letters of invitation, followed by self-administered questionnaires and qualitative interviews and added a new dimension to the end of project conference by including video clips of interviews in their presentation. Their results reflected those of the NHS project which suggested that taking learners' views and preferences about learning style into account is essential for successful *Skills for Life* provision. One significant finding was that potential learners in this study – older women, in a rural area – did not favour distance or online learning methods. This is in contrast to the Sheffield College study where online learning was a real incentive to the young people recruited onto the courses there. This suggests that preferences vary between different groups of learners and that such variation is essential to take on board when designing learning opportunities.

The remit of the initiative 'to draw on partnership models' was amply illustrated in the two remaining projects. The fifth project, from Blackburn and Darwen brought together front-line managers and employees to raise awareness of the literacy and numeracy needs of council workers. The sixth, brought together employers and employees in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and investigated the factors which might influence their engagement *Skills for Life* development and provision. Geographically, the teams could not have been more different with the urban Blackburn project contrasting with the rural setting of the Somerset partnership. Like East Riding, both teams engaged with both employers and employees, emphasising the importance of the manager's role in facilitating or blocking learning opportunities for employees. Both also embedded the visual in their work. Blackburn and Darwen organised an awareness-raising day for employers and employees and used a 'literacy wheel' to identify the place of literacy in day to day work-life. The Somerset Learning Partnership employed an attractive visual logo and 'catchy' phraseology, 'an appetite for learning', in order to draw together its various contributors. In each case, implications of findings have been taken up in work-place situations. The Somerset team are organising 'taster' sessions with the view to developing a toolkit for practitioners and the Blackburn and Darwen team are holding awareness-raising days for the workforce. The Blackburn project is a new contribution to a long tradition of research on developing basic skills training within the public services. The Somerset project is a rare piece of research into smaller, rural business environments.

Overall, while varying considerably in their chosen focus, their client group and their varying approaches to addressing the research questions, the projects reflected some generic themes. All relied on teamwork and effective sharing of roles and responsibilities. All showed respect for, and importance of, the inclusion of learners' voices and opinions throughout the process. All recognised that researching alongside their existing roles was both exhilarating and exhausting. Time constraints and working with 'real' people in 'real world' situations brought about a realisation that practitioner-led research can be both rewarding and exasperating. All teams identified that they had been constrained by the timescale for the projects. It was freely admitted that project plans had been somewhat ambitious and that reviews had been required. In some cases – the health project – for example – the focus had to be realigned as events unfolded. For some, such as the Sheffield project, the link to academic theory was felt to be an added bonus. The Blackburn project had the opportunity to draw employees into the research process. The 'CLiCK' team were invited to present their work to a wider audience.

All the projects identified issues that had been raised during the research process that would provide evidence that could be fed into changes or improvements in the way that their partnerships operated. The reflections offered by the project teams are some of the most salient elements of the reports. It is left now only to allow them to speak for themselves about the process, the practice and the outcomes of the first round of the practitioner-led research initiative.

Peer review

This report was read and critically peer reviewed by: Maria Kambouri, Institute of Education; Olivia Sagan, Institute of Education; Katerina Ananiadou, Institute of Education; Oonagh Gormley, Institute of Education; Mike Baynham, University of Leeds; and Sheila Rosenberg.

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1. CLiCK*

Gaining Confidence through Learning

South East Derbyshire College

Susan Pilbeam and Michelle Worthy with: Angela Fell; Mark Huby; Mike Lindahl;
Angela Quinn; Elaine Scogins; and Caitlin Watson

Introduction

Skills for Life promotes participation in learning as a key to addressing the social inclusion of the most vulnerable and hard to reach members of our society. FE institutions historically struggle to engage with this target group. Conversely, the community and voluntary sector have empathy with this client group but lack learning delivery expertise. Can partnership working between FE and the community and voluntary sector address the engagement gap?

This research project focuses on the lack of confidence, motivation and personal aspirations of individuals from these groups and tests the success of the partnership model in encouraging individuals from the target groups into learning. The issue of low confidence is identified as a barrier to participation, "...many have low confidence and low motivation" (*Skills for Life* strategy, p4, DfES 2001). The combination of partnership working, concentrated and long term guidance, support by a known worker, and community based provision appears to enable reluctant learners to access provision which will support the development of literacy and numeracy skills. *Skills for Life* stresses the importance of research to support practitioner theory, "...and research projects in each part of the country will explore different ways of motivating learners, meeting their specific needs and helping them to acquire new reading, writing and number skills as quickly as possible" (*Skills for Life* strategy, p3, DfES 2001). This project measured the impact of this approach in engaging new learners and their progression to provision, which have literacy and numeracy development at heart. Additionally, this research was in direct response to the key aim of NRDC, to improve practice and inform policy through the generation of knowledge, by creating a strong research culture and by developing professional practice.

Aims

The CLiCK project tested the impact of the College's Community Engagement Model in providing long-term support for learners categorised as hard to reach, vulnerable or socially and economically excluded. The research aimed to measure the increase in personal confidence and aspiration of individuals as a result of learning and monitor the learning journey with a specific focus on participation in programmes, which raise literacy and numeracy and the incidence of serial episodes of learning. Within this research study, we regard an 'episode of learning' as participation on one learning programme, which may be a three-hour taster or a longer programme. 'Serial episodes of learning' are therefore defined as moving from one programme to another, we use the term to differentiate between participation in learning and what is generally described as 'progression'. 'Progression'

* The project title is not an acronym but emphasises the need for providers to CLiCK with their learner cohorts to effectively engage them in learning.

implies upward movement, one step after another, whereas the learning patterns observed within this study often consist of a series of lateral moves, sometimes with significant time gaps between episodes, before progression upwards is observed. It should be noted, however, that for the learner serial episodes of learning may indicate personal progression particularly with regard to confidence and personal aspiration.

The CLiCK project focused on a number of research questions and sub-questions:

- Can partnership working between FE, the community and voluntary sector address the engagement gap?
- Does the engagement methodology work?
- Does it have a lasting impact on the lives of the individuals it seeks to target?
- Do learners progress from bite-sized learning to learning which supports and develops literacy and numeracy skills?

Context

The project was led by South East Derbyshire College Community Outreach team in partnership with community and voluntary sector organisations with whom the college had established working relationships. This was a critical success factor in delivering a short project as the team was already formed and learning was already embedded and valued. The partner organisations were:

- Amber Valley Council for voluntary services – a support organisation for the voluntary sector with extensive networks of both community and statutory agencies. The research constituency was focused here on young mothers living in Surestart areas.
- Erewash Mental Health Association – an organisation providing day care support for individuals with mild to moderate mental ill health.
- Community Concern Erewash – a social enterprise providing laundry, lunch club, shopping, home visits, household maintenance and other support services within a deprived community.

Over the past two years these groups, with others, have worked together with the college to develop a learning alliance approach. This approach brings together socially disadvantaged individuals and learning provision and offering high levels of individual support for learners. Within this experience the group discussed the impact of learning on individuals lives and their confidence to progress in terms of their personal development, often in small or lateral steps, but forwards. We believed that this model for community-based engagement was effective and it was this view which formed the basis of this research project.

The research practitioners who were involved with this project were all part of the FE/Voluntary Sector Community Outreach Partnership and this raised the issue of the inside researcher versus the outside researcher debate. Bridges (2002) argues that outsider research has a contribution to make to a greater understanding of the issues without the complication of personal emotional baggage, which an inside researcher might have. Conversely Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) state "...the social world can only be understood from the standpoint of the individuals who are part of the ongoing action being investigated." We believed the strength of this research project was due to the deliberate use of known workers within the community and voluntary sector to engage hard-to-reach individuals into learning. This project may not have been as effective in accessing the

disadvantaged communities if the relationship between the community outreach worker and the participant was not utilised and extended to include the role of a researcher. It is acknowledged that these are resistant individuals within hard-to-reach sectors of society and having achieved a dialogue for action through the known workers, it did not seem appropriate to introduce an outsider researcher.

Research design

This project utilised both quantitative and qualitative research methods to enable a broad examination of the research questions. The quantitative data held on the College Management Information System was analysed to provide a statistical background to the learners engaged using the community outreach approach to learner engagement. The qualitative data collection made use of the recently piloted National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) Catching Confidence research tool and personal observations made by staff of learner behaviour. These approaches were chosen for three key reasons:

- The qualitative elements of the methodology mirrors and extends the Community Outreach Engagement Model, maximising the effectiveness of the close relationship which exists between the researcher and the research subjects.
- The methods take account of the low literacy and numeracy skills inherent within this target group where methods such as self-completing questionnaires may not elicit a high or representative level of response.
- The research methods take into account the needs of the research participants.

Data collection

Quantitative

The quantitative data lends overall stability and rigour to the study and compliments the qualitative methodology supporting the assertions made regarding the make up of the research population. The data analysed is from 226 individual learner data sets (appendix 3). Information includes the identity of the partner who supported and engaged the learner onto the programme along with a categorisation of the social factors which affect the learner. These categorisations include disability, lone parent and employment status.

Qualitative

The Catching Confidence tool used in this project is a research tool designed by a team of four community educationalists at NIACE. The college participated in the national pilot of the research tool and as a result of the experience gained through the pilot, it was felt to be the most appropriate tool to use for this particular project.

Following the staff development learning session about how to use the NIACE confidence grid, it was decided by the project group that a number of amendments were required to the grid tool to make it appropriate to the group of learners involved with this project. Two situations across the top of the grid were re-worded – “At a learning centre” was changed to “At this learning centre” to help the learner understand that we were discussing their current learning experience. It was strongly felt by the group that the category “At work/out and about” needed to be reversed to “Out and about/at work” to reflect the lives of the learners involved, most of whom were not economically active.

One statement on the grid was removed as it was felt it was not appropriate for our group of learners – “I am confident in situations which might be difficult”. A further amendment was made to the question ‘I am confident I have valuable skills to offer’, it was decided to drop the word valuable as it was felt it was a dominant adjective and the statement would produce a better response without it – “I am confident I have skills to offer”.

The Catching Confidence tool (appendix 4) could be considered to appear disarmingly simple on first inspection, but in practice the researchers found it to be far reaching in its effectiveness to measure learner confidence. The grid was designed to be used in groups for maximum effect. However, the project group took the decision to use the tool either in a group situation or a one-to-one interview to suit the learners involved. A total of 36 grids were completed, six within a group situation at a community centre, and 30 on a one-to-one basis either at the premises of the community group or at the individual’s home.

The initial task within the process was to determine what is meant by confidence. Within a group this promoted collaborative discussion. On a one-to-one basis the practitioner researcher and the learner jointly explored a number of meanings until the learner was happy with the definition.

The second task was to define the meaning of the following four categories:

- Highly confident.
- Confident.
- Not confident.
- Low confident.

The learner used the first column to record a response on their confidence levels to each question against the four scenarios listed across the top of the grid. These scenarios are:

- At this centre.
- At home.
- Socially with friends.
- Out and about/at work .

This was repeated until all of the areas of the grid had been completed or completed as far as the learner felt able to. The learner was then asked, at a later stage on the course, to respond to these questions again. The twice-completed grid provides an immediate visual record of the changes in confidence for each learner.



During each interview the practitioners followed a semi-structured interview approach, the grid helping to shape the interview. Further, after each interview with a learner, or after the group session, the research practitioners made notes about how they felt the interview had gone, the role played by the confidence grid, and any other issues that they felt needed recording. The collation of this qualitative information produced an extensive source of data.

Data analysis

The research manager and the project manager undertook the analysis of all the data collected for this project and drafted a first report for the practitioners to discuss and further contribute to.

The information collected on the Catching Confidence grids was turned into qualitative data using a spreadsheet and indicates the increase, decrease or stationary levels of confidence noted by the learners (appendix 5). It should be noted that the grid was not specifically designed by NIACE for this purpose but the project team felt that reference to the data captured by the grid should be included in the final report and producing it in a qualitative format was felt to be the most appropriate option.

The information collected from the interviews undertaken by the practitioners was probed for themes, differences, inter-relationships, etc. This enabled the qualitative data to be grouped into clusters and it became apparent that the data could be grouped into three themes for further analysis – the practitioners' views about the research process, their observations about the learners involved in the project and thirdly, comments made by the learners. The data collected for this project was very manageable in size (36 interviews) and therefore analysis by computer software was felt unnecessary.

Findings

Observations about the learner

One approach taken within this research project was to ask the practitioner to make notes on how they perceived the learner had increased in confidence and how the learner had responded to taking part in this project.

Many positive comments were made about the learners:

“There has been an increase in assertiveness and an improvement in body language.”

“This learner is now enrolling on a Workwise course with additional learning support at a main stream site.”

“Now at University full time and has achieved high marks in coursework but is not socialising a great deal as is more concerned with achieving good work results.”

“Her lifestyle is changing so much I felt really proud of her, she now has her self esteem and self belief back.”

All the practitioners commented after undertaking the grid exercise about the effect of

external influences on their learner's confidence. These influences are obviously difficult to quantify and were not part of this projects' remit. However, it is important to note this factor, as it would appear to be particularly influential with this group of learners.

"Coming to the centre and accessing learning has given this person some extra confidence in dealing with people. They have got involved in a basic literacy course which is increasing confidence in daily life, e.g. shopping...Feeling less confident at home due to domestic difficulties".

"Depends mainly on husband's moods day to day."

"Socially is now starting to branch out, previously the spouse (who doesn't socialise) held her back."

"All questions for "Out & About" could be marked as stars (lowest rating) as generally there is great reluctance to go out due to insecurities relating to epilepsy."

These examples of external influences clearly illustrate why the confidence grid tool needed to be a flexible research tool. Fortunately the grid was used flexibly by the practitioners, enabling them to adapt its role in response to each learner, one learner did not socialise at home and so these entries were left blank. Another learner felt answering questions relating to their home was not applicable as people are not encouraged to visit. Researching these gaps would make an interesting research project in its own right.

Learner comments/views

Numerous positive comments were made by the learners about the increase in confidence they had experienced through their learning experiences and how this has had an impact on other areas of their lives:

"I feel so much better in myself for having done the course...I didn't think much of myself before this course. I wouldn't have spoken out much but now I'm working on the till and talking to strangers everyday."

"My confidence levels have improved 100 per cent. After 6 years I never thought I would get a job. My confidence improved each week of the course. The job experience was the icing on the cake and led to an interview and a job."

"This course has given me the confidence to apply for jobs which I wouldn't have done before."

One learner felt that progressing to volunteering was evidence that she was a more confident person and signing up for more courses was an indicator that she had gained confidence in her abilities and a further learner described her increase in confidence thus:

"It's like Karaoke – once you've been up for one song you'll get up and do another and that's how I feel about courses!"

As mentioned in the previous section, the role of external factors on confidence was also evident from the learners' comments. Positively, support from outside the learning environment helped one learner who commented how her family testing her ready for the

exams helped her confidence increase. One learner who had enjoyed a course, but then was told that her address did not fall within the designated Sure Start area so she could no longer participate in the project activities, felt her confidence had “been bashed”. Another learner stressed that confidence levels vary according to their physical/mental health at the time hence at another time there may be recorded reductions in confidence.

The role of the tutors in the learning experience was also highlighted as an influential factor in confidence building. A learner went into her course with a positive attitude but her experience ended negatively due to there being, in her view, too many different tutors at the centre which did not help to give her confidence in the college system. Further, a learner experienced a change of tutor who they found much less approachable and was felt to be “a bit critical”, thus the learner felt it “knocked her back a bit”. More positively, another commented that the tutors greatly impacted on how confident she felt within a group. With a good approach and putting learners at ease, the learner felt such activities as group discussions were a less daunting prospect.

Some learners even commented how completing the confidence grid had shown them what steps they had achieved in increasing their confidence. One learner commented that undertaking the grid exercise had made her realise that things had changed in her life, and she felt she was more sociable and her communication skills had improved. She was proud of herself for being able to understand the course, finish it and complete all the coursework. When reviewing the grid, another learner commented that seeing how she had rated herself had further reinforced her confidence and she felt good about the changes her learning experience had brought about. She felt that in increasing her knowledge, she is increasing her self-esteem.

The words of one practitioner succinctly describes the feelings of the majority who were involved in this project:

“I feel really proud of the learners I interviewed, they have all achieved so much and their confidence has grown enormously. It has been a positive learning experience for all of us.”

Conclusion

It should be acknowledged that this project cannot be regarded as wholly representational due to the size of the research constituency. However, we believe that the findings are valuable in their own right and may be transferable to other situations and be of use to other practitioners.

Can partnership working between FE and the community and voluntary sector address the engagement gap? Does the engagement methodology work?

The research process and findings indicated that this partnership model has a powerful impact on the individuals targeted and engaged into learning. The choice of known voluntary sector workers as engagers and researchers was a key factor in the success of our approach. A partnership approach can work in addressing the engagement gap where roles and purpose are clearly defined and where both the college and the voluntary sector partners can see advantages for their own organisational mission and benefits to clients. The role of the

voluntary sector outreach workers in engaging those individuals who have been previously neglected or overlooked by the system appears to far outweigh present recognition or mainstream financial backing.

Factors influencing the impact of learning on the lives of individuals

Learner confidence is a key factor in considering the impact which learning can have on the lives of individuals. Whilst this research has determined that the process of learning appears to increase the confidence of individuals it must also be acknowledged that some level of confidence is required in order to participate initially. So, confidence might be regarded as a by-product of learning but also a pre-condition to it. The social aspects of learning should not be underestimated, this emerged as an important factor in the lasting impact on the lives of our participants, they valued the interaction with others within the group, the voluntary sector workers and the tutors.

Do learners progress from bite-sized learning to learning, which supports and develops literacy and numeracy skills?



The initial indications are that learners do progress to other provision but that this progression is not always what might be regarded as upwards. Van De Stege (2003) observed in her work on the progression of young people on vocational programmes in the Netherlands that learners often made several lateral moves accessing different subject areas of the same level before making an upwards move. She likened this to a climbing frame. This climbing frame of progress was evident with the learners in this study. While learners may follow their own learning path rather than prescribed and traditional routes and timescales, the presence of the outreach worker appears to have a positive effect, enhancing retention, achievement and progression. However, in retrospect this question was perhaps unrealistic to pose in this project given the short time span and the characteristics of the group. Within this small sample we can claim that there was some evidence for progression but only a longitudinal study could elicit whether this is actually the case.

We found that practitioners can make excellent researchers and can often access areas of lives not open to more traditional academic approaches. The researchers in this project were successful in providing an insight into a wide range of issues creating a better understanding of the needs of our target group. Methodology too was important – many research models “take” from the participant. This model gave something back and proved to be a combined two-way development and research process.

Observations on the process of undertaking a practitioner-led research project

Whilst nine months might sound a lengthy period of time for a small-scale practitioner research project, in reality the time scales were tight and it was vital to devise a project timetable at the start of the project. This ensured everyone involved in the project knew what they personally had to do and when it had to be completed by.

It was, therefore, important to have your project team in place by the start of the project as it is felt that trying to establish a team will use up precious project time. Having project team members who are dedicated and empathetic with the cohort was also extremely beneficial. It

was also advantageous that the research 'expert' for the project was a known staff colleague who we could communicate with and involve in the project easily.

The inclusion of staff development days was critical to the project, taking time out to develop and discuss new research skills was extremely important.

A number of the learners felt they could not complete some sections of the grid. It would have been interesting if we could have kept a record of the gaps, hesitations or problems that the learner experienced when completing the confidence grid for further research. These issues might tell an additional story that would be beneficial for practitioners to learn from.

A small number of learners withdrew from the project and, if time had permitted, it would have been informative to research why they had left the course and if there was a pattern to their withdrawals.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Project work plan

South East Derbyshire College NRDC practitioner-led research project – CLiCK project work plan

Activity	Responsibility	Start date 2004	Target completion date 2004
Partner meeting to agree project protocols and agree meetings schedule.	Sue Pilbeam	March	March
Establish contact with critical friend, arrange contact protocols.	Lancaster University	March	March
Establish steering group, agree scope and meeting schedule.	Sue Pilbeam	March	April
Collect quantitative data on learners and commence analysis identifying patterns in attendance and defining learner background.	Michelle Worthy	March	May
Research staff development day for practitioners and project team – interviewing learners, writing up results, ethics, Catching Confidence model.	Sue Pilbeam	March	April
Commence qualitative research using the Catching confidence model.	Research practitioners	April	June
Prepare and present mid-term report.	Sue Pilbeam	June	June
Present Report on work in progress to the East Midlands LSRN Summer Conference.	Sue Pilbeam	June	June
Apply to present paper at the national LSRN conference, Warwick in December 2004.	Sue Pilbeam	May	June
Analyse data.	Michelle Worthy	May	September
Write research report. Include introduction, aims, objectives, methodology, data, key findings, conclusions, future developments.	Sue Pilbeam and Michelle Worthy	September	November
Disseminate findings.	Sue Pilbeam	June	2004 onwards

Appendix 2. Consent forms

Consent form: tutors

Thank you for helping with this research. We now need:

- Your permission for us to use and save the material from the interview.

A copy of the interview will be returned to you for checking. The material will then be analysed by the research team. Once the material has been analysed and interpreted, there are several ways in which it may be reported, stored and used again. We want to make sure that your preferences in relation to these issues are met.

Please circle your answers to the following questions:

1. I have understood the information that I have been told about the project.

Yes / No

2. I am happy to be interviewed as part of the project and to have this used by researchers.

Yes / No

3. I am happy for my interview and transcript, to be stored with the researchers at NIACE.

Yes / No

4. I wish to remain anonymous (not to use my real name) in any project reporting.

Yes / No

5. I am happy for the material (audio tapes and/or transcripts) to go into the archive for other researchers to see it.

Yes / No

6. Other comments.

Signed:

Date:

Consent form. Learners

Thank you for helping with this research. We now need to know:

- Whether you give your permission to use material from the interview.

Please circle your answers to the following questions:

1. I have understood the information that I have been told about this project

Yes / No

2. I am happy to be interviewed as part of the project and to have this used by researchers

Yes / No

3. I am happy for my interview to be stored with the researchers at NIACE.

Yes / No

4. I understand I will remain anonymous (not use my real name) in any project reporting.

Yes / No

5. I am happy for the material to go into archive for other researchers to see it.

Yes / No

6. Other comments

Signed:

Date:

Appendix 3. Learner base line data

Data groups	Number of learners	%
Total	226	
Age range		
16–24 years	36	16
25–49 years	141	62
50+ years	49	22
Gender		
Female	182	81
Male	44	19
Partner referral		
Aspire	10	4
Amber Valley Foyer	10	4
Amber Valley CVS	56	25
Community Concern Erewash	13	6
Erewash CVS	24	11
Erewash Mental Health Associations	20	9
South East Derbyshire College	93	41
Learner background		
Living in rural area	9	4
Lone parent	7	3
Disability	55	24
No other qualifications	1	0
Part-time work	7	3
Part-time work/rural area	1	0
Returner to labour market	112	50
Returner to labour market/ex-offender	1	0
Returner to labour market/homeless	19	8
Returner to labour market/lone parent	6	3
Returner to labour market/rural area	9	4
Unemployment		
Unemployed – male & female	193	85
Males unemployed	44	100
Females unemployed	149	82
Unemployed over 36 months	74	33
- over 36 months and with disability	30	41

Data groups	Number of learners	%
Disability		
Medical	6	3
Mental ill health	30	13
Mobility	7	3
Other	7	3
Physical	3	1
Visual	1	0
Withdrawals*		
	6	3
*Data from MIS		
Ethnic group**		
White		99
Other		1
** Amber Valley & Erewash LA – 98.5 White (Census 2001)		
“Serial learning”		
Learners undertaking a second course	62	27
Course type – (GLH)		
< 3 hours		15
4–20 hours		73
21–100 hours		6
101–200 hours		3
> 200 hours		3

Course title (64 different courses accessed)

AAT Accounting Course	Absolute Beginners Computers
Active Life Healthy Living Level 2	Active Life/Confidence
Adult Access IT	Alternative Therapies
Appointed Persons First Aid	Aromatherapy Introduction
Art, Rolling Prog, Keep Fit, Computers	Basic Skills assessment/Lit/Num
Beginners Spanish	Breakthru IT
Breakthru Music	Breakthru Self Help Comp Therapies
C&G 4248	C&G 7262
C&G Start IT	CACHE Childcare Foundation
CACHE Found Caring for Children	CASH Teaching Assistant
Child Protection Bite Size	Childcare NVQ
CLAIT	Computerised Accounts
Confidence for Women	Craft/Keep Fit
Desk Top Publishing Taster	Door Supervisors Course
E Quals Level 1	Early Years Care & Education NVQ 3
ECDL	Essential Skills
Essential Skills in Literacy	Feng Shui
Feng Shui for Health	Feng Shui Taster
First Aid Appointed Persons	First Aid Course
First Aid for Child Carers	First Aid for Children
Freshstart Computing	Healthy Living – Active Life
ICT Taster	Into to Car Maintenance
Intro to Feng Shui	Intro To IT learndirect
Introduction to the Internet	Manicure & Pedicure
Nail Art Taster	New Clait
NVQ3-Childcare & Education	Playwork NVQ2
Practical Crafts	Sage Accounting Level 1
Self Defence	Self Defence Taster
Sprinter Access Course	Start IT C&G
Stress Management	Successful Style
Support to Return to Learning	Using Digital Camera
Womens Self Defence	

Appendix 4. Catching Confidence research tool**Interview guide**

Interview with practitioners.

Part 1. This part covers your views about confidence in relation to learners.

1. How would you define confidence and self-esteem?
Same or different from research definition?
Why did you choose those words/phrases?
2. From the indicators listed on the grid, which do you think were the most significant to learners?
Are there any other important indicators
What are they?
Why are they important?
3. Did (your?) the learners tend to lose or gain confidence?

In what areas and why? Did this change over time?

4. If we now discuss what seems to bring about changes in learners confidence:
Do you consciously teach to develop confidence?
If so, what approaches do you use?
Which learning activities in your experience bring about changes in confidence?
Does the influence of peers in the learning situation bring about changes in confidence?
What other influences bring about changes in confidence such as Family or friends support?
(Discuss both loss and gains).
5. How do you recognise any changes in an individual learner's confidence?
6. With the learners, how do you reflect on the learning journey they have taken?
Do you use the Catching Confidence tool?
What other methods?
What have you found to be effective, what wasn't?
How are these activities recorded?
7. How have any changes in confidence influenced learners in their learning activities?
8. How have any changes in confidence influenced learners in other aspects of daily life?
9. How have changes in confidence led to learners feeling differently about future learning?
10. Have changes in confidence led to progression by learners?
Please give examples

Part 2. This part will cover the grid activity and research process and will help us to evaluate the effectiveness of our approaches and tools.

11. Did you change/customise the grid, produce supplementary materials?
12. How did you carry out the grid activity?
When, where, how, with who?
13. In what ways did you find the grid activity to be useful?
Why? Please give examples
14. What were the drawbacks of the activity?
How easy was it to use the grid (explore problems)?
15. Did the grid accurately reflect the confidence changes in learners that you observed? In what ways, any examples?
If no – how did you respond/follow up/prompt?
16. If you were to repeat the grid activity, are there any changes you would make?
Why (changes in process, timing, number of learners involved, language, design)?
17. As the facilitators, what changes do you recommend we should make to the design of the activity?

Appendix 5. Quantified Catching Confidence grid data

	Increase +1	Increase +2	Increase +3	Decrease -1	Decrease -2	Decrease -3	No change	N/A
Q1 I am confident when meeting new people								
At this centre	19	5	1	0	0	0	4	0
At home	10	1	1	0	0	0	17	0
Socially with friends	9	4	0	1	0	0	14	1
Out and about or at work	12	4	0	1	0	0	11	1
Q2 I am confident I can learn from this programme								
At this centre	12	4	1	0	2	0	10	0
At home	8	2	3	0	0	0	15	1
Socially with friends	6	4	1	0	0	0	15	3
Out and about or at work	4	3	2	0	0	0	17	3
Q3 I am confident that I can use what I learn in daily life								
At this centre	9	5	2	0	0	0	12	1
At home	9	3	1	0	0	0	16	0
Socially with friends	11	2	0	0	0	0	15	1
Out and about or at work	5	7	1	0	0	0	15	1
Q4 I am confident to speak in a group								
At this centre	11	7	3	1	0	0	7	0
At home	8	2	0	0	0	0	16	3
Socially with friends	8	1	2	0	0	0	17	1
Out and about or at work	10	1	1	0	0	0	16	1
Q5 I am confident to speak to one other unfamiliar person								
At this centre	12	5	2	0	0	0	10	0
At home	7	2	0	0	0	0	20	0
Socially with friends	13	0	0	1	0	0	14	1
Out and about or at work	9	0	2	1	0	0	16	1
Q6 I am confident when writing things down								
At this centre	8	0	0	0	0	0	21	0
At home	4	1	0	0	0	0	23	1
Socially with friends	4	1	0	0	0	0	22	2
Out and about or at work	6	1	0	0	0	0	21	1
Q7 I am confident that I have skills to offer								
At this centre	7	8	0	0	0	0	14	0
At home	4	3	0	0	0	0	22	0
Socially with friends	5	4	0	0	0	0	19	1
Out and about or at work	12	2	1	0	0	0	13	1

	Increase +1	Increase +2	Increase +3	Decrease -1	Decrease -2	Decrease -3	No change	N/A
Q8 I am confident in organising my day to day affairs								
At this centre	9	5	1	0	0	0	13	1
At home	4	2	0	1	0	0	22	0
Socially with friends	4	3	1	0	0	0	20	1
Out and about or at work	6	2	0	0	0	0	20	1
Q9 I feel I am generally a confident person								
At this centre	12	9	1	0	0	0	7	0
At home	7	1	2	0	0	0	19	0
Socially with friends	8	3	1	0	0	0	16	1
Out and about or at work	9	5	1	0	0	0	13	1

Appendix 6. Practitioner researcher comments sheet

How did the interview take place?

In a group How many were present? 1 to 1

How long did the interview take?

15 mins 30 mins 45 mins 60+ mins

How did you feel the session went? Please note any thoughts, comments, problems experienced.

Please note below any relevant comments from the student(s) which you feel may substantiate the information on the Catching Confidence grid.

2. Health care assistants

Evaluation of Essential skills support for health care assistants

Lynn Ireland and Joanne Hall

Introduction

Assessment of, and provision for, essential skills¹ needs is relatively new in the NHS. The trusts concerned with this project have employed full-time essential skills trainers for approximately two years. These posts are still quite rare in the NHS. As this is a relatively new area of workforce development, this evaluation project was considered a useful way to inform future work and help raise awareness of the issues.

Agenda for change

Essential skills in the workplace underpins progression training, assists with recruitment and retention (for instance, such strategies as Return to Practice), and is working in the broader sense towards implementing the NHS Plan and Agenda for Change², which has three key components: widening access, skills escalator and the Knowledge and Skills Framework (KSF).

Widening access

As part of the NHS plan, one of the strategies for recruitment is to promote opportunities to access employment within the NHS to those who have previously not had such access. This is being done through the Health Learning Works programme and the Job Guarantee scheme, both supported by the NHSU³. These programmes work with Job Centre Plus and encourage the long-term unemployed, ethnic minorities, etc. to achieve employment within the NHS. These schemes operate an extended induction programme and in some areas include essential skills development and have a buddy system with union learner representatives.

Skills escalator

This is a means of “growing and changing the workforce ... through a strategy of lifelong learning to constantly renew and extend [staff’s] skills and knowledge enabling them to move up the [skills] escalator.”⁴

“The skills escalator is intended to provide a clear pathway for staff within an organisation who would not necessarily have resources or opportunities available to them ... [staff such as] porters, cleaning staff, clerical assistants, and health care support workers.”

1. Adult basic skills is known as essential skills in the NHS.
2. The NHS’s new pay structure implemented October 2004.
3. NHS University.
4. Department of Health (www.doh.gov.uk, 26.2.03).

Knowledge and Skills Framework (KSF)

KSF is an integral part of Agenda for Change. It is a means of developing skills and knowledge linked to a person's job role. The KSF consists of six core dimensions and 24 specific dimensions. One of the core dimensions is communication, and this along with literacy and numeracy skills will be required to meet their personal development review, an integral part of the KSF. Future literacy and numeracy development will, to some extent, be driven by the needs of individuals' KSF profiles.

Context

The evaluation project was carried out amongst Health Care Assistants (HCAs) in a large acute NHS trust in the north west of England. The HCA role consists of nursing tasks such as bed-making, personal hygiene, feeding, etc. and is separate from that of 'qualified' nurses (known as staff nurses and sisters). Each ward or department in an acute hospital is staffed by a team of staff nurses and HCAs. The HCAs involved in this project were mostly new to nursing in the NHS and most were new to the NHS itself.

They had been recruited in a relatively new way which consisted of starting in blocks of up to 20 on a three-week induction period (previously they would have gone straight onto the ward or been given a much shorter period of induction). The purpose behind the introduction of the three-week induction period was to alleviate persistent recruitment difficulties. Within the Trust, vacancies for HCAs were running at a fairly constant figure of around 90. When staff were being recruited as individuals with only the mandatory two-day Trust-wide induction to the NHS, they often left within a very short period of time. Some HCAs only lasted a week and on occasions some did not return after their first day.

The three-week induction period was brought in to rectify this situation. HCAs would be given an insight into the work expected of them and gain a broad understanding of the role of HCA within the hospital environment. Essential skills training was also relatively new to the NHS and it had already highlighted that there were staff across a range of directorates that would benefit from essential skills development and support.

The essential skills assessment was therefore introduced for HCAs as a means of identifying if they had any literacy or numeracy needs. A literacy course was offered to those at level 1 and below, with a numeracy course to follow later in the year. It is this essential skills assessment and literacy course which interested the project team. It was considered important to gain an understanding of this process and its results in order to improve the planning and delivery of essential skills to HCAs in general, and also to try to gauge the success of the new-style induction period with regard to essential skills.

The age range of those recruited is mixed, from early 20s to mid 50s and they came with a range of qualifications. One had been a matron in a boys' residential school, others had worked in the care sector but most had very limited or no experience of working for the NHS. The groups are predominately female, often women returning to full-time work after raising a family. A number of them were using the HCA route as a means of gaining practical experience before applying for nurse training. There was only a very small number of second language speakers within the groups. Amongst the few male entrants there was one who had been self-employed for a number of years and had reached "a point in my life where I want to do something completely different and I am loving it".

The project team consists of two NHS practitioner-researchers; one other NHS employee based at the Strategic Health Authority; and one research expert based at the LSC. The team also has a 'critical friend', a regional officer of the Basic Skills Agency. The evaluation was conducted by the NHS-based practitioners, both of whom work full-time in the NHS as essential skills trainers and co-ordinators and both of whom have backgrounds as lecturers in further education.

A point to note is that the Trust only advertised the three-week induction for HCAs once, being able to continue to recruit on a rolling basis from that initial advertisement.

Research design

Evaluation questions

The aim of the project was to provide information to support current and future essential skills training (specifically literacy). The team was also interested in how this impacted on various NHS policies, both locally and nationally. The questions developed to capture this information were:

- What are the HCAs' experiences of their literacy course?
- What are HR and ward managers' views of the development of the HCAs on the literacy course?
- Do any HCAs require further literacy support on their NVQ programme? If so, what is the cost of this in time and money to the wards?
- What are the retention and achievement rates for these HCAs (i.e. how many accept places on the literacy course? Of these, how many complete it? How many start and complete the NVQ programme? How many stay in the NHS? Compare these figures with HCAs not on the literacy course).

Methodology

The original methodology for the project was for a researcher to conduct a recorded interview with each member of the literacy course at the start, part way through the course and on completion. It was also intended that a researcher would seek the views of ward managers and the HR recruitment manager by questionnaire and to seek statistical information on retention from the HR department and on NVQ programme achievement from the training department.

However, it became clear early on in the project that only a very small number of potential learners were going to accept the place on the literacy course. Of those choosing not to accept the place, some had left the NHS but most were still in it. It was then decided that the focus of the project would have to change somewhat. It was decided that it would be relevant to the researchers' practice to attempt to find out what barriers were preventing people from accessing the literacy training. The information gathered would hopefully enable the researchers to improve their essential skills strategy for the induction period. The methodology became as follows:

- The researchers would contact those staff who had left the NHS altogether by postal letter and questionnaire in the first instance, to be followed up by a telephone call if necessary (see appendix 1).
- The researchers would make personal contact with those still working in the Trust but not

taking the literacy course to conduct a structured interview (not taped) (see appendix 2).

- The learners taking the course would be interviewed on tape by the researchers as originally planned (i.e. an interview at the start, middle and end of the course to be transcribed by the researchers).

The timescale for the work would be five to six months.

Data analysis

60 newly-recruited HCAs were assessed for literacy and numeracy levels. Out of these, 33 were found to be at entry 3 or level 1 in literacy and were therefore offered places on an appropriate training course. These courses were to be delivered in-house by a specialist literacy tutor (qualified to level 4) employed by the NHS. They were to be offered at various times at all three hospitals in the Trust.

Of the 33, five accepted a place and started the literacy course. Of these, four completed. These four were interviewed (taped) at the beginning and end of their course; the fifth was interviewed once, at which point she had already given up her course.

Of the people who did not accept a place on the English course, eight left the Trust; two are on long-term sick leave; one is deceased; two were interviewed over the phone (as they work permanent nights) and 15 were interviewed face to face (not taped). The eight who have left were sent postal questionnaires and three have been returned.

All except one were female.

Findings

Interviews with participants in English course

A number of themes occurred in all interviews with all candidates and most of the candidates' views did not change over the period of the interviews. The interviews took place between April and July 2004. The results give the researchers some ideas about why these people accepted the place on the course and in four cases have both enjoyed it and gained something from it, despite experiencing some of the same barriers to learning as the people who chose not to do the course.

The first interview considered their expectations before the course started, their experiences of the first one or two classes, and their experiences of the induction period. The second interview looked at their views of the completed course, their intentions for the future regarding training, and if their views of the induction period had changed now that they had more experience on the wards.

The themes which emerge from four candidates in all interviews were (i) difficulties in being released from the wards to study; (ii) the beneficial effects of the course and their enjoyment of it; and (iii) their good opinion of the usefulness of the induction period.

The fifth candidate agreed about the induction period but did not feel the course was right for her as, having done one class, she thought the level was too low. When she was assessed, her

level was entry 3, with dyslexia indicators, but she did not see the need to increase her skills. This seems to be typical of some people with what professionals might consider as essential skills needs, but who either are happy with their level of skill, or who have not yet appreciated their lack of skills and how this might affect them.

The effects of the course have been increased confidence (mentioned by every candidate), for example, *...more confidence, I feel more confident in spelling, definitely. I won't feel as embarrassed now as what I did...;* increased reading and/or writing at home or at work or both, for example *... I don't feel as embarrassed when someone tells me to write something; I think I'll have to go and have a look up in the dictionary at that one;* all want to do other training (such as the NVQ and one has gone on to do basic IT which her literacy tutor thinks is due to her increased confidence in her writing skills). This latter has probably not changed as a result of the essential skills provision as most of them were already interested in training; but all of them seem to have increased their confidence in their ability to cope with more study.

All five candidates thought the induction period was useful to one extent or another and this view was more pronounced in the second interview. By this time, most candidates had worked with HCAs who had not done this particular induction and were thus able to make some comparisons between the two experiences. They all felt they were better prepared for work on the ward than if they had not had the induction period.

People who left the NHS

Of those that have left the NHS completely, three responded to the postal questionnaire. Two of these did not like the essential skills assessment; they thought it was intrusive and one said it felt like they were being talked down to. The third felt there were no problems with the assessment. One respondent did not start on the ward at all; this seemed to be for other reasons connected with the induction period, not just dissatisfaction with the essential skills assessment (although analysis of their completed questionnaire would suggest they have significant essential skills needs). Another respondent left after one day on the ward and now regrets it; this was due to working conditions on that ward and not related to essential skills. The third left after five months and again this did not appear to be an essential skills-related issue.

The researchers feel there might be evidence here to suggest a problem with the way the essential skills assessment was dealt with during the induction period although other interviews carried out by the researchers suggest that many people were satisfied with the way it was conducted. However, there is some evidence from the staff who remain in the Trust that the assessment was not without its problems (see page 35 for discussion of question 8 of the questionnaire, appendix 2). The assessment was not delivered by an essential skills specialist and was not observed by any of the researchers or any other essential skills practitioner. It is felt reasonable, therefore, to make some changes to the way this is done in future.

People who stayed in the NHS but did not take the course

Of those who did not take the course but are still in the NHS, the answers to question 9, 'Why did you not want the place on the English course that was offered?', were as follows. No-one said they could not get released (possibly because they had not got that far in making arrangements for the course) but four said they did not have enough time to do the course. (The researchers felt that this question might have been better phrased, or left open rather than asking interviewees to put themselves in a category.) Only one said they were not

interested and only one said it was not relevant. Two said they might do it in the future. One is looking for another job. Eight said they did not get the letter. The researchers have ascertained that this is not because correspondence is not reaching the ward but rather because this group of people do not expect to receive mail and therefore do not check the post boxes on the ward carefully enough. They look for their pay slip once a month and once they have found it, stop looking. This will be addressed in future. Of these eight, five are waiting to do the NVQ; two would do the literacy course if it was offered again; and one was not interested in the course. Of the other nine mentioned above, seven want to do the NVQ and one has gone onto nurse training.

Regarding question 8, 'What did you feel about the essential skills assessment...', one thought it was not applicable to their job role; one thought it was "OK", one thought it was superb (and has since started on a numeracy course); the remainder made bland or negative comments, for example, "felt like a child at school but didn't mind", "I've seen the usefulness on reflection", "very basic but not uncomfortable"; and one said they were embarrassed and thought they might be losing their job. This latter was quite worrying as it is a view to which the researchers and the NHS in general do not subscribe. No one will lose their job due to essential skills issues. The researchers wondered if the somewhat negative responses were because they had not yet taken part in any training, i.e. perhaps the potential benefits of any kind of training might become clearer once they had participated in something.

The researchers have concluded from this that working on wards that are constantly short-staffed, creating a demand for extra shifts and long hours, is a major issue for accessing training. The induction period was considered useful but most said they would have liked more time on the ward before starting their jobs because they felt out of their depth for some time. This feeling also has an impact on whether they feel able to take up training opportunities.

Those who took the course possibly have longer term goals to reach and were aware that their level of literacy was a potential barrier to achieving these goals. The opportunity to develop their skills came to them by chance, rather than them having to search for it. Was it therefore worth them overcoming the barriers as they were less than they would be elsewhere?

General themes arising from both groups of staff in the Trust (those who did and did not take the essential skills course) were that mostly they liked their jobs. They mostly had good spoken communication skills and liked the patient contact. Aspects of their jobs they did not like were short-staffing, pay and the heavy work (patient-lifting, etc.). The people who completed the literacy course enjoyed it and benefited from it both at work and at home. There were no differences between staff in different hospitals.

Implications for practice

Essential skills assessment during the induction period for HCAs is to be changed as a result of this project. Now short 'refresher' sessions for English and maths are delivered throughout the induction to prepare the staff for the English and maths assessments towards the end of the three-week period. It is hoped that this will generate a positive view of the assessment procedure itself and of essential skills training opportunities generally as they occur once the induction period is over. It is hoped also that as often as possible an essential skills specialist will carry out the assessment (as well as the refresher sessions).

The way the outcome of the assessment is communicated to staff, together with details of training courses, is to be changed as a result of this project. From now on this kind of information will be communicated face to face as far as possible to encourage attendance on courses.

The researchers have taken note of comments regarding timing and location of courses. It is intended that trainers should be as flexible as possible regarding the time and place of training although it is very difficult to reach people on permanent nights. Ways are being sought to make it attractive for such staff to come in on their off duty or an hour before the start of a shift, etc. Otherwise the literacy course worked very well and the researchers envisage no major changes in the near future.

Due to an increased awareness amongst other training staff of essential skills issues (for example, the NVQ Care team) essential skills assessment is now being included at the start of NVQ programmes and essential skills training will be provided where necessary to increase skills. This is in part due to the work carried out for this project.

As part of the Nursing and Midwifery Council's criteria for entry to nurse training, applicants now have to prove maths and English skills at level 2. This has therefore generated more interest in HCAs' accessing the level 2 numeracy qualification. The researchers are able to promote the benefits of level 2 literacy along side the promotion and delivery of level 2 numeracy.

Regarding other barriers to learning, i.e. time, long shifts, culture, these are obviously more difficult and time-consuming to overcome, and also not necessarily within the researchers' sphere of influence. Essential skills awareness training, however, is planned to continue and be further developed.

Key NHS policies such as the NHS Plan, Agenda for Change and KSF will have considerable impact for staff who might have essential skills needs. Again these can be used as a means of promoting both essential skills awareness and the positive benefits of literacy and numeracy training in the workplace.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this project has produced evidence about barriers to essential skills learning in the NHS and also how successful literacy training can be if these barriers are overcome. The project found that the most common barriers to accessing workplace training were cultural issues on wards surrounding any learning for this staff group. This was probably heightened in the case of essential skills learning, the usefulness of which is not yet recognised by all senior staff on wards; time constraints, due in part to shift patterns, but mostly due to under-staffing on wards creating long shifts and extra shifts; this group of staff seem to take a long time to adjust to working on the wards and in the NHS which affects the likelihood of their taking up training opportunities within this settling-in period. The literacy course was found to be both enjoyable and beneficial for learners; participants reported that it has increased their confidence; it has produced more reading and writing at home and at work; and it has produced skills and confidence in using dictionaries (both medical and non-medical). The project has also provided evidence regarding the essential skills assessment during the three-week induction period which has led to changes in the way this is carried out.

Generally, this project has provided much useful information for the research team and will continue to have an impact on practice. It has also provided the researchers with new skills which will be used in future research and evaluation projects (whether funded or not) as essential skills provision in the NHS is continually expanded and developed.

This type of supported and funded evaluation of essential skills learning in the workplace can only lead to positive changes in attitude and culture within such organisations as the NHS. Subsequently if large organisations like the NHS lead on this type of initiative other organisations and companies will follow. Could this ultimately lead to essential skills training being the norm in every workplace?

Appendices

Appendix 1. Questionnaire for leavers

1. What date did you start?

2. What date did you finish?

3. What ward / department did you work on?

4. Why did you take the job?

5. What were your expectations?

6. What did you think of the three-week induction period?

7. What did you find useful or not useful about the induction?

8. What improvements would you make to the induction?

9. What did you feel about the essential skills assessment (English and maths) which took place during the induction?

10. What did you like about your job?

11. What did you dislike about your job?

12. What were your reasons for leaving?

13. Are you working now? *(please tick)*

Yes *(please go to Q 14)*

No *(please go to Q 15)*

14. Do you work? *(Please tick as many as apply to you).*

- In the NHS
- Outside the NHS
- In care work
- Full-time
- Part-time
- Permanent
- Temporary

Please go to Q 16.

15. Are you looking for work?

- Yes
- No

If yes, what sort of work would you like? *(Please tick as many as apply to you).*

- In the NHS
- Outside the NHS
- In care work
- Full-time
- Part-time
- Permanent
- Temporary

Please go to Q 16.

16. If you are not currently working for the NHS, would you do so again in the future?

17. Would you change anything about your experience in the Trust?

18. Your name (optional)

19. Date

Appendix 2. In strict confidence

1. What date did you start at?

2. What ward/department do you work on?

3. Why did you take the job?

4. What were your expectations?

5. What did you think of the three-week induction period?

6. What did you find useful or not useful about the induction?

7. What improvements would you make to the induction?

8. What did you feel about the essential skills assessment (English and maths) which took place during the induction?

9. Why did you not want the place on the English course that was offered? *(Tick as many as apply to you).*

Not interested

Not enough time

Couldn't get released from the ward/department

Not relevant

Don't want to be in a class with other people

Might do it in the future

Other. *(Please specify).*

10. Are you going to take an NVQ? If yes, when?

Yes No

When

What level? (If known).

11. What do you like about your job?

12. What do you dislike about your job?

13. Your name. (Optional).

14. Date

3. Young People Speak Out

Reaching and engaging new learners using popular culture through a blend of on-line and classroom learning

The Sheffield College

Phil Euesden and Kate McCullough

Introduction

Many young learners leave school with low confidence having experienced failure in English. This project investigated the problem of how they could be re-engaged in developing their literacy skills by embracing aspects of popular culture within the provision of pre-GCSE English teaching. In doing so, we used the idea of 'third space' (Moje et al. 2004). We explored the idea that the discourses of the classroom and those of students' home lives could merge, creating a third space where each of those discourses could be critically viewed. The focus of study was the Young People Speak Out blended learning literacy programme recently developed and piloted in Sheffield College.

Young People Speak Out

It is a recognised problem that 16–19 year old students with low literacy skills often remain unmotivated and stray from re-engagement, vocational and basic skills programmes. In 2001/02 the Sheffield College successfully piloted an online GCSE English course for students working alone and from home. The Young People Speak Out project developed from this, with the idea of re-engaging students using new purpose-designed materials that are online, but to deliver the programme in the classroom where students would have the support of each other and a teacher.

The course was piloted in 2003/04 with nine classes each of up to 18 students. Students take Core Curriculum National tests during the year at entry 3 or level 1. All tasks are matched to this, and simultaneously to GCSE English. Our 16–19 year old learners are mostly on vocational courses at college, and have literacy skills at entry 3 or level 1. Some have aspirations to gain a C at GCSE and continue to level 3 courses (see appendix 1 for details of student profile).

Student experience is at the heart of the course, as the title Young People Speak Out implies. A thematic approach is used, and examples that are local and close to student experience are chosen wherever possible. For example in the unit on Home and Homelessness, learners consider the experiences of a student from our college, 'Sameena', who had to flee Somalia and then compare this with their own experience of leaving home. Literacy skills are embedded in each topic, so that while considering Sameena's story, learners also consider aspects of grammar. Rap is a motivating factor within the course, encouraging engagement with poetic and linguistic analysis. In the Rap and Music unit the linguistic dexterity that young people value highly in rap music is recognised, and then compared with other poetry.

The use of ICT is an integral part of the course content and pedagogy. The materials are 'blended' – that is they are available on The Sheffield College website, and in paper-based versions. A specially equipped classroom with computers, an interactive whiteboard and tables allowed for a flexible learning environment. Presentation is important in improving student confidence and ICT was also used to make attractive displays of the course materials and to take photos of students, which were displayed on the walls, alongside posters of rap artists.

Research design

We collected data by:

- observing three lessons;
- asking all the students (70) who were available in one particular week to fill in questionnaires (appendix 4);
- interviewing ten of these students (appendix 5);
- taping a reflective discussion among the staff teaching on the project; and
- collecting data including the ages and main courses of the students (appendix 1)

By collecting views of the course from students, staff and outside observers, we were able to triangulate about the ways the course was viewed. Although we would collect some statistical data from the questionnaire, much of our data would be 'snapshots' of the course.

The lesson observations were crucial to the way we viewed all this data, and they changed our perspective from being 'teachers' to being 'observers' – a change which led to our being able to view the class as a creative space or 'third space'. As we entered the field, our focus shifted, and drawing on Barton and Hamilton's notion of 'cycling between data and theory' (Barton et al.1998:68) our theoretical framework shifted. This process helped us to formulate the questionnaire and interview questions.

The questionnaires focused on:

- improvement in literacy skills;
- use of ICT; and
- the merging of students' home and college lives.

Students selected themselves for interview. We had intended to select them on their responses to the questionnaires and from recommendations from their teachers, but we were restricted in finding a time that was suitable, and did not want to turn away enthusiastic students.

Teachers' views were sought through a reflective discussion that evaluated the Rap and Poetry unit course materials.

Data was collected from class teachers about age, gender and ethnicity of their students.

Method of data collection

Our reflections on the lesson observations helped us to formulate the questionnaire and interview questions. The questionnaires were designed to have three sections that focused on the three main areas of improvement in literacy skills, use of ICT, and student experience and the creation of a third space. 70 students filled these in during one week in April.

The ten students were interviewed in small groups of between two and four in May. Interviews were structured to build on the questionnaire, offering students an opportunity to develop their views. We intended to tape these but students were not willing to be taped, so one interviewer took notes. Project staff also took part in a tape recorded 'reflective discussion' with class teachers. This was one of a series of discussions which evaluated the Young People Speak Out project. These teachers are our colleagues, and similar discussions had happened on a weekly basis in the first term of the Young People Speak Out project, which probably helped them to feel at ease about our tape recording this discussion. The class teachers provided data about age, gender and ethnicity by completing a proforma (appendix 1).

Data analysis

Organisation and interpretation of data

Lesson observations were written up in a table with columns for interpretation and analysis. Numerical data from the questionnaires was organised into a chart to give an overview of student response to the course. This data was then presented in bar charts for individual questions, and as a summary of all the numerical data (appendix 6). Comments on the questionnaires were tabulated using the three main questionnaire sections. Interview notes were written up to include as many verbatim quotes from students as possible. The reflective discussion was transcribed and a table was made showing the ages, gender and ethnicity of students.

After more discussion about our precise research questions, three main themes were identified:

- Whether the use of popular culture, student experience and local specific content enabled students to make progress in literacy;
- Whether students re-engaged in literacy by bringing their own activities, expertise and knowledge into the classroom; and
- How ICT supported literacy activities.

The data was examined for reference to these themes, and relevant parts highlighted and collated.

Theoretical position

Moll et al. (1989) argue that we all live and operate in homes, families, communities, work places, peer groups and other systems and networks of relationships. Each of these provides us with different sets of knowledge which we can use as we interact within that system or within other systems and networks. The knowledge that can be obtained from one system or network and used to help make sense of that system or network or another system or network can be referred to as a 'fund of knowledge'. We use funds of knowledge to enable us to make sense of

the world and produce what Gee calls discourses – ‘ways of being in the world’ which integrate such things as words, acts, gestures, attitudes, beliefs, purposes, clothes, bodily movements and positions (Gee 1996).

We investigated and analysed the various funds of knowledge that the students brought into the classroom and considered how the students used these funds of knowledge to interact in the classroom, to understand and complete the required work and to therefore produce their own discourses.

Moje et al. (2004) discuss the coming together of ‘knowledges and discourses drawn from different spaces’ and describe this as ‘the construction of ‘third space’ (Moje et al.1989). Third space theory was useful to us as it articulated the way our course managed to create a new kind of Discourse resulting from the coming together of two others. We felt it was this process which made learning worthwhile for our students and thus enabled teachers to re-engage them.

In this research first and second spaces can be thought of as being the students’ home background and the world of education. When a student attends a class, they do not enter a second or a first space, instead they create a third space where they bring funds of knowledge to merge with the discourses that are being created in this third space.

Our view was therefore close to that of Moje who also uses several competing definitions of third space (Moje et al. 2004). We found that a further definition was useful; third space could be a culturally specific environment that students created in the classroom out of their own first spaces and the second place of education (Wilson 2003).

Such a way of perceiving the classroom will not be new to teachers unfamiliar with third space theory. This theory has much in common with theories of student centred teaching and the strategies of teaching new material by working from student experience – moving from the concrete to the abstract. What will perhaps be new is the change of emphasis, and the way that the use of third space theory highlights different aspects of what happens in the classroom.

We were particularly interested in how students responded to the use of ICT, which was both a vehicle for teaching, and a way that the students could demonstrate competence and expertise. We recognised that many of our students would have had experience of the new technologies but that this experience would often be uneven. In many cases students will have been able to study using new technologies in an educational setting, but there is not always a sustained use of this technology within a programme, or from programme to programme (Lankshear and Knobel 1997). There will be a wide variation in the ability of students to access new technologies outside the classroom; there will also be a wide variation in student and teacher competence with these new technologies. We were also aware that much work has already been done about the use of ICT in the classroom (Mellar et al. 2004).

Findings

Does the approach of using popular culture, student experience and local specific content enable 16–19 year old learners to make progress in literacy?

As can be seen from table 1, most students thought that their English had improved as a result of their taking the course.

Table 1. Summary of numerical data from questionnaires – English skills.

Question number		Agree or strongly agree %	Disagree or strongly disagree %
4	I think my understanding of spelling including recognising syllables and consonants has improved.	69.62	3.8
5	I understand what I read in this topic.	77.22	1.27
6	My spoken English is improving.	53.16	10.13
7	I understand how the lyrics of modern music are similar to some older poetry.	62.03	2.53

More than half of questionnaire respondents added comments about how their literacy had improved and most of these comments were positive. 14 students picked out spelling and ten mentioned understanding poetry as areas in which they had made particular progress. Handwriting, use of capital letters, reading skills and understanding of language techniques including syllables and consonants, were also mentioned in the questionnaires and interviews as being areas in which students had improved. In interview one student responded to the question, 'Do you think your English skills have improved on this course?', by reporting that 'My layout and paragraphing have improved. IT teachers have realised that I have improved in using punctuation, full stops and commas. The teacher thought it was not my work and we had an argument about it.'

'It improves your English because it is interesting to you, so it keeps your mind on learning'. (Questionnaire comment)

Opinion was divided about the value of discussions; ESOL questionnaire respondents commented on how their spoken English had improved, but others said they did not need to improve in this area (a view not shared by their teachers).

In interview when the question of whether this sort of learning prepared you for GCSE was raised one student said "I prefer traditional teaching because I think I learn more that way. At school in Yemen I was taught traditionally", then contradicted herself a few seconds later, by saying, "It is better than it was for me being taught Arabic at school in Yemen because we are allowed to talk to each other. Over there you didn't have any discussions".

Teachers felt that 'course materials brought the students back to literacy' and that students were 'hitting basic skills and key skills targets, but the discussions became central to the course (for the students)'. This implied that the combination of relevant themes with literacy activities had been successful. Most teachers found the sections on syllables and stress particularly helpful in teaching spelling. They also noted that "Articles produced by the students were of a high quality"; and "Students were pleased with what they had done... they

had expressed their own ideas and opinions and their work looked good.” It was suggested that some of the work produced on the course should be used as GCSE coursework.

‘I learned how to put words together’. Questionnaire comment

Quality review retention figures show a big improvement, up to 80 per cent from 67 per cent in similar classes the previous year. As the qualification aim was changed at the same time as this course was piloted, the achievement figures were not strictly comparable, but 95 per cent of students on the pilot project gained a national qualification or completed a portfolio of work including an ILP.

Are students able to re-engage with literacy by bringing their own identities, expertise and knowledge into the blended learning classroom?

In asking this question we were specifically addressing both the extent to which students created discourses in the third space of the classroom and brought funds of knowledge gained in class into their everyday life. We had designed some questions for the questionnaire on this topic, and the responses are summarised in table 2 below.

Table 2. Summary of numerical data from questionnaires – thematic approach and third space

Question number		Agree or strongly agree %	Disagree or strongly disagree %
1	I found the Rap and Poetry topic interesting	78.58	12.85
3	I talk about this topic outside the classroom	31.43	50

“I do talk about this class with my mates and I say how great this class is. I really enjoy it” (Questionnaire comment)

It can be seen that 50 per cent of students said that they did not talk about the topic outside the classroom, one student adding, ‘I don’t talk about my work to anyone’. However 31.43 per cent of our sample responded positively to this question. Comments such as, ‘Not about the topics but, i.e. the violence’ revealed that even some students who responded negatively felt a degree of interest.

Several questionnaire comments revealed how students took funds of knowledge derived from the classroom with them into their homes and social lives. For example one student wrote, ‘I discuss some topics of our work outside the classroom such as the homelessness topic. I advised a homeless friend to go to the council.’ This was a clear indication of re-engagement with the classroom as a place that was relevant to life outside.

“I like rapping that is why it is interesting to learn about it.” (Questionnaire comment)

Conversely, questionnaire responses to the statement ‘I found the ‘Rap and Poetry topic interesting’ also revealed that students used funds of knowledge from outside the classroom to create a bridge between their views and expertise about popular culture, in this case Rap music, and the academic content of the course. One student wrote, ‘I found it really rewarding! Because I’ve listen to rap music nearly all my life. But I never look at it in the

different pre-septic (perspective), as I did with the coursework.' In the teachers' reflective discussion it was noted that students had brought in their own examples of rap music in Arabic and Polish, as well as other sorts of music – again a clear indication that outside funds of knowledge were being brought into the classroom.

"I really like rap music and it was fun to learn about poetry in a different way"
(Questionnaire response)

Interviews probed how students had responded to the topic of rap music, and in these discussions there was also clear evidence of how home funds of knowledge were being brought into the class. One student commented "I enjoyed learning about how poetry and rap are produced and how rap can become lyrics about how people feel." They realised the topic had a relevance to them that went beyond the popularity of the art form itself, with students making comments such as, "The 'Rap and Poetry' is really interesting, for the fact that rap is all about personal experience and other problems that could affect the society".

In interview one student also recognised and clearly expressed the pedagogical justification for teaching poetry through accessible content that was perceived as relevant, such as rap: "Linking poetry to rap was a good idea because rap is easier to relate to because it is so popular in everyday life." Another particularly articulate student commented, "The way of teaching poetry through a common medium such as rap is both effective and enjoyable to students."

The way in which a third space classroom can challenge and interrupt existing relationships was also demonstrated in much of the data. For example students' pride in their own expertise, particularly in the use of ICT was evident in comments they made in interview, and was commented on in the notes on lesson observations. In one lesson the observer noted, "J. (the teacher) didn't in any way pretend to be a computer expert. Several students had better ICT skills and offered advice to him. He took this advice and acted on it. When the printer ran out of paper he said 'It's out of petrol.'... The class recognised J's English skills and didn't criticise his lack of ICT skills'. In this class the students' confidence was seen to be enhanced by an overt recognition that they had ICT skills far ahead of those of their teachers. They gained a sense of themselves as experts, and also benefited from the teacher's willingness to 'model' how to be a learner.

'I was the ICT technician for the whole class'. (Interview comment)

The way in which students' sense of their own worth was raised is perhaps the way in which the adult/young person relationship is most consciously interrupted. This was also observed by researchers who pointed out in notes on a lesson observation how displays are used to raise the self-respect of the students and show appreciation of their culture both in and outside the classroom. "There is a poster called Young People Speak Out with images of students on the course at the back of the room...similar to one outside with photographs of stars, of pupils, of pupils' work and quotations from artists... The institution is showing ...appreciation of the popular cultural artefacts... Through similar display packaging as used for the male rap star posters, the teachers have positioned students similarly; they are part of the popular culture that is respected in the room."

Displays are one way in which ICT is used to help to create a third space, but observers also noted that students use of ICT facilities in the classroom for activities that went far beyond the

course materials gave a positive message to students about their activities outside the classroom. In the course of one lesson students were observed using MSN hotmail, a message board, tuning in to Radio Sheffield, accessing websites in Polish and Arabic and looking up a soap quiz. Although not part of the curriculum or the lesson plan, these are all activities that involve literacy; acceptance of them can be seen as legitimising the students' own ways of spending time, and making sure that the sessions stay relevant to young adults' lives, as well as generating enthusiasm for the course.

The course was organised in such a way that teachers were able to extend discussions and bring extension activities on the topics into the classroom. This was recognised in the reflective discussion topics on this course. Teachers commented that they had brought in materials on limericks and counting, nursery rhymes, and the story of Grendel; they had also asked the students to create similes, made a CD of different sorts of music, and one teacher had designed three raps and then written one for his students. As one teacher explained in the taped reflective discussion, "The topics gave an anchor and you can be creative around that". A final point in this discussion emphasised the interaction between staff and students and how both viewed the classroom, "the whole course is about the teachers and students bringing themselves into the classroom. The materials just provide the starting point."

How does ICT support literacy activities for students in the blended classroom?

The way ICT was used to give students positive images of themselves through teachers acknowledging and using their expertise, through the use of displays, and through affirmation of their own ICT activities has already been discussed in the previous section.

The use of ICT alongside paper-based materials also appears to have helped some students to make progress in literacy because of the better presentation and quality of their work. Numerical responses to the questionnaires are summarised below.

Table 3. Summary of numerical data from questionnaires – the use of ICT

Question number		Agree or strongly agree %	Disagree or strongly disagree %
8	I am using my ICT skills and developing new skills	64.7	13.23
9	I can concentrate better when I work on the computer	65.22	14.5
10	I would usually choose to work on the computer	63.77	13.04

We have already discussed that a possible reason for students' preference for working on the computer might be embarrassment at their poor presentation skills and a large number of comments on the questionnaire cited bad handwriting as a reason for preferring the computer. Comments included, "I don't like working on paper due to my handwriting skills being poor", and, "My writing isn't neat and it looks good on the computer so I can concentrate better." This last student makes a conscious link between presentation and concentration, showing that poor presentation and having to concentrate on it positively distracts her from what she is writing.

"More ideas come to me when I start to type" (Questionnaire comment)

In the reflective discussion, teachers also commented that students' pride in their work was closely allied to presentation. "Students were pleased with what they'd done... The spelling, punctuation and grammar was poor but they had expressed their own ideas and opinions and

their work looked good – they put pictures in”; “Students feel good about themselves if they can mimic well presented materials. Students at a low level technically are brought up to a higher standard.”

Confidence in the accuracy of their work is another common theme in responses to the questionnaire: students wrote, “I like working on computers because if I spell a word wrong it will help to correct it”; “Working on computers helps me with spelling, grammar and every other aspect of my work”; “I enjoy working on the computer as you can correct mistakes easier.” It is implicit in these statements that students perceive their skills to be ‘poor’, and that computers give them confidence that they can express what they want to say without fear of making mistakes.

Other ways in which computers enhanced the course are perhaps simpler. In responses to the questionnaire students commented that they preferred computers because they were faster, a typical comment being, “The computer saves time and the work is presented better. Paper can become boring and tiring”. It was clear that many students function at a higher level of literacy using ICT than paper based materials, and that the new technology was important in boosting confidence.

Conclusion

We expect our research to have a practical impact on how young learners can be re-engaged with literacy. For teachers two challenges are raised:

- to teach young learners using topics that have direct relevance to their lives; and
- to manage the classroom so that technology can be fully exploited in the literacy classroom.

For colleges and other institutions we suggest four important challenges:

- to provide suitable flexible accommodation with adequate ICT facilities;
- to give staff the time for curriculum development, to create the content that meets the needs of their particular students;
- to give staff time to consider methodology and to evaluate their own curriculum; and
- to provide relevant training in managing a blend of technology and traditional learning in the classroom.

Process of carrying out a practitioner-led research project

We began the project with a narrow, focused research area and were fortunate to work with Julia Davies and Kate Pahl from the University of Sheffield who had a research support role on the project and whose advice about how to conduct our research was invaluable. They provided us with an extensive reading list of background material that enabled us to frame our research and to understand the importance of a theoretical background. We were also supported by two ‘critical friends’ Shuaib Meacham and Maria Kambouri, who agreed to read and comment on our report.

Our first major problem was refining and agreeing exactly what our aims and research questions would be. We were a new and large team and initially spent an apparently disproportionate amount of time on discussing the ‘500 word summary’ to be submitted to the NRDC. Although the scope of the project and how we would work together became much

clearer during these discussions, our precise aims continued to be a matter of debate while we were collecting the data. Indeed some debate continued right up to the time of writing this report. In retrospect the scope of this project has not allowed us to fully analyse and exploit the data we have collected, and we would have liked to re-work the questionnaire and interview questions to more fully take account of third space theory.

Our second problem was keeping to deadlines. It was particularly important that we collected our data before our students disappeared in June. Despite dire warnings, we needed the rigour of reminders from the NRDC and our University of Sheffield partners to keep us on track.

Ideas for further research

Further research on this topic might include a follow-up study to track what happens to students when they have completed the course, an investigation of gender differences in the approach to ICT, connections between technology and social inclusion, research on the effectiveness of training on the use of technology in the classroom, and how experiential learning can be integrated into the literacy classroom.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the following people:

Julie Hooper, for her help and support in producing this research. We were grateful for her invaluable comments and assistance on the early drafts; Michelle Howell, who was brought into the project specifically to help with our data collection and who produced comprehensive and accurate data; Val Petersen, who helped decide the focus and direction of this project and for organising and holding meetings on reflective practice and who also kindly allowed us frequent access to her class and students; the English staff at The Sheffield College who willingly supported us in our research; all the 'blended learning' students at The Sheffield College who completed our questionnaire, took part in interviews, and welcomed us into their lessons as observers.

We would also like to acknowledge the substantial help we received from Julia Davis and Kate Pahl throughout this project. They gave guidance on research, analysis, drafting and in the production of the final version of this report.

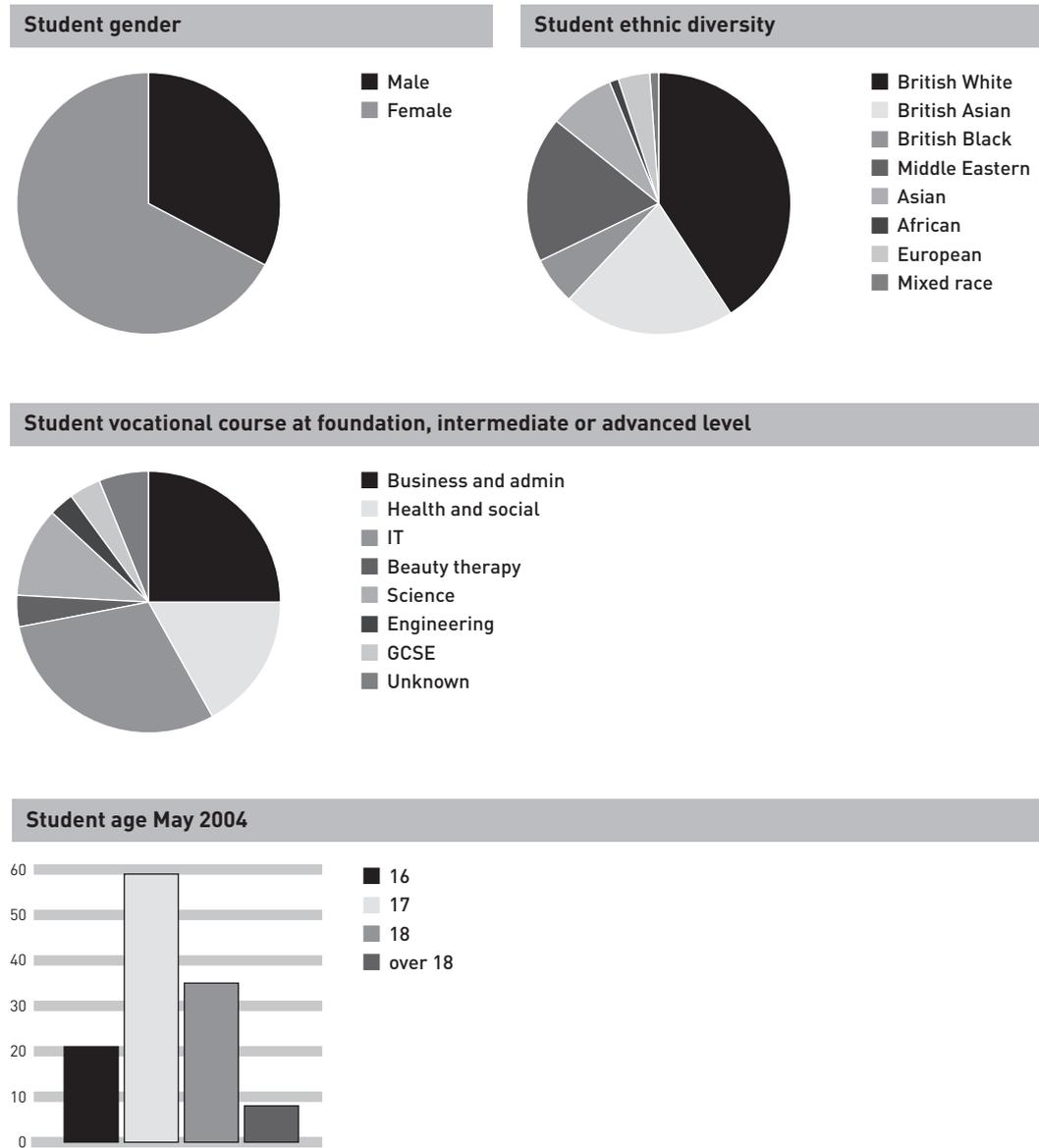
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Appendices

Appendix 1. Student profile

Data collected from 72 students who attended eight classes during one week in May 2004.



Breakdown of student ethnicity

Ethnicity	%	Ethnicity	%
British white	41	Saudi	1
British Asian	22	Egyptian	1
Somalian	7	Eritrean	1
Yemeni	7	Indian	1
Pakistani	6	Polish	1
British black	6	Bangladeshi	1
Russian	1	Uzbek	1
Arabic	1	Mixed	1

Appendix 2. Leaflet for students

Dear Student,

YOUR TURN TO SPEAK OUT!

You have been taught English in a number of ways this year:

- Through the use of computers
- Through prepared booklets
- Through lots of discussions
- Through the topic of Homes and Homelessness
- Through the Poetry Unit where the skills of poetry are taught through rap
- By the visit of Bassline Entertainment which was to support the work done in the classroom

Now we want to know what you think about these different parts of your lessons

A group of your lecturers with some 'expert help' from Sheffield University, are doing a research project to find out just how successful this project has been – and of course we can't do it without your help.

Appendix 3. Letter to staff

The Sheffield College
 Castle College
 F Block, Granville Road, Sheffield, S2 2RL
 Tel: 0114 2602035
 phil.euesden@sheffcol.ac.uk

Dear ,

The purpose of this letter is to ask for your help in evaluating the blended learning project.

Those of you who are working on it know that there are two ideas behind Young People Speak Out. One is to engage our entry 3/ level 1 students in learning literacy skills by using popular culture; that is by basing the materials on their own cultural and social experiences – the

themes of Homes and Homelessness, Rap and Poetry, and Views on Violence (unit 3) . The recent visit of Bassline Entertainment, which resulted in so much publicity, was to enrich this curriculum and to reinforce the theme of 'young people speak out'.

The second idea is that ILT should be an intrinsic part of our students' learning experience. They often enjoy using computers, and this may be a 'way in' to improving their literacy skills. The materials are mapped to both the Core Curriculum and GCSE English.

Members of the online team have secured funding for this evaluation from the NRDC (National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy.) The research project is to evaluate the effectiveness of Young People Speak Out, both as a blended learning project and as a set of materials based on the students' own experience. Our aim is, officially, 'to quantify the success of this course, disseminate good practice, raise its profile regionally and nationally and equip several of our teaching staff in research techniques that they could then use to investigate other provision and thus ensure that the college can improve its service to our learners.' The people working on this project are Phil, Julie, Val and Kate McCullough, with Julia Davies and Kate Pahl from the University of Sheffield. Shuaib Meacham from the University of Delaware, who some of you heard speaking at the recent literacy conference at Sheffield University, has agreed to be our 'critical friend', which could add weight to our findings.

Details of all the projects that are being funded by the NRDC can be found on their website <http://www.nrdc.org.uk>

Your help

Obviously we need your help to do this. Michelle has already agreed to liaise with you about this.

We will be approaching you individually to ask if we can

- Profile the groups so that we can choose a representative sample
- Observe how students react to online materials in some lessons
- Visit some classes to ask learners to complete online questionnaires
- Conduct in depth interviews with selected learners, which will be taped and transcribed
- Have 'reflective discussions' with lecturers and learners about the project; these will also be taped and transcribed.

We plan to write this up, and to hold some 'dissemination events' in the autumn.

We hope that you will join in with some or all of these activities; a main aim is to include as many people as possible, both lecturers and learners in the research project, so that we can refine and improve our ideas. Our belief is that by examining and discussing our practices we can attract new basic skills learners.

We would like to start by inviting you to a lunchtime meeting to explain what we are doing, and the roles of the other researchers. FREE FOOD will be provided at 12.00 on Thursday May 6th in F113.

In the meantime, if you would like any more detailed information about this project we would love to talk to you, or you can email us.

Phil Euesden on behalf of the team

Appendix 4. Questionnaire

The Sheffield College Pre-GCSE English – Course evaluation

Name

Please complete this questionnaire to help the College evaluate the **Rap and Poetry** topic from the Pre GCSE English blended learning course. The College evaluates all its courses so that we can make continual improvements for our learners. The only people who can properly evaluate a course are its students, so we really do value your opinions.

Do you agree with the following statements?

Use a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 =strongly agree.

You should mark one box against each statement, like this **X**. We would be very interested in hearing all your comments in the comment box below each question.

General

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	1	2	3	4	5
I found the 'Rap and Poetry' topic interesting.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Comment

The activities are just about right for me – not too easy, not too difficult.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
---	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------

Comment

I talk about this topic outside the classroom.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
--	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------

Comment

English Skills

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	1	2	3	4	5
I think my understanding of spelling, including recognising syllables and consonants, has improved during this topic.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Comment

I understand what I read on this topic.

Comment

My spoken English is improving on this topic.

Comment

I understand how the lyrics of modern music (e.g .Naz) use the same techniques as traditional poetry (e.g. Blake).

Comment

IT					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	1	2	3	4	5

I am using my IT skills and developing new skills.

Comment

I can concentrate better when I work on the computer.

Comment

I would usually choose to work on the computer.

Comment

I would usually choose to work on paper.

Comment

I think that class discussions have helped me with my learning for this topic

Comment

A mixture of class work, discussions, working at the

computer and working at the table helps me to concentrate.

Comment

In classroom discussion I have been able to talk about *(please tick one or more of the boxes)*

My home life	<input type="checkbox"/>	Friendships	<input type="checkbox"/>
My favourite music	<input type="checkbox"/>	My life outside college	<input type="checkbox"/>
My opinions	<input type="checkbox"/>	Painful experiences	<input type="checkbox"/>
Soaps	<input type="checkbox"/>	Happy experiences	<input type="checkbox"/>
Web sites	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Other (please specify)	<input type="checkbox"/>		

We would be very interested if you gave more information about points you have ticked

I have used the computer in this class for *(please tick one or more of the boxes)*

Reading course materials online	<input type="checkbox"/>	Instant messaging	<input type="checkbox"/>
Discussion boards	<input type="checkbox"/>	Visiting websites	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other courses	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Other (please specify)	<input type="checkbox"/>		

We would be very interested if you gave more information about points you have ticked

I have used the computer outside the classroom for *(please tick one or more of the boxes)*

Downloading music/videos/ DVDs/ringtones/etc	<input type="checkbox"/>	Instant messaging	<input type="checkbox"/>
Visiting websites	<input type="checkbox"/>	Emailing	<input type="checkbox"/>
Discussion boards	<input type="checkbox"/>	Chatrooms	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please specify)	<input type="checkbox"/>		

We would be very interested if you gave more information about points you have ticked

I have been able to bring my favourite music into this course.

If you agree with this statement write down which type of music you have brought in.

Comment

What other topics would you like included in the Young People Speak Out course?.

Comment

Choose a word in the following statement that shows what you think about the course

The 'Young People Speak Out' course is a _____ place to be

Can you write a question of your own that we could use in a future questionnaire or interview?
Please supply your answer to the question

Appendix 5. Interview questions

'Third space'

Many people had different views about the Rap and Poetry topic. What were your views?

Do you listen to rap outside the classroom?

Did you learn anything about rap?

Were you interested in the artists at all? Did you have a favourite?

Did you talk about the topic outside the classroom? With whom?

Would you have liked to look at other types of music?

Has the course helped you to understand the language techniques used by writers of rap music?

Did any of the units allow you to bring into the classroom topics or issues or materials that you might talk about outside the classroom?

Did the English lessons this year allow you to talk or write about things that were important or interesting to you? (Friends, feelings, opinions, interests)?

In English lessons this year, were you able to show or use skills or knowledge that you had gained outside the classroom (for example in your home life)?

Teaching issues

The pre-GCSE English course is a blended learning course that uses a mix of traditional teaching and online materials. Which of these have you enjoyed and learnt from the most?

Do you think your IT skills have improved on this course?

What ICT experience did you have before you started the course? (Using Word / the web / emailing / sending attachments / Publisher / other applications)

Have you improved on these?

Have you learned any new skills?

Do you have any ICT skills that you have not been able to use on the course?

Do you think your English skills have improved on this course?

What sorts of things do you remember learning in English lessons at school? (Prompts?)

Have you been able to build on these this year?

Which of the following have most improved during the year (reading, writing, speaking, listening)?

Is there any part of a lesson or a unit that you remember especially? Can you say why?

General

Would you like a blended GCSE course, or would you prefer to be taught this course traditionally?

Do you find this course more rewarding than the work you studied in school?

Would you recommend this course to a friend? Why/not?

Appendix 6. Summary of findings

Data from questionnaires completed by 70 students in may 2004

		Agree or strongly agree %	Disagree or strongly disagree %
General			
1	I found the Rap and Poetry topic interesting	78.58	12.85
2	The activities are just about right for me	60	11.43
3	I talk about this topic outside the classroom	31.43	50
English skills			
4	I think my understanding of spelling including recognising syllables and consonants has improved	78.75	4.29
5	I understand what I read in this topic	87.14	1.43
6	My spoken English is improving	60	11.43
7	I understand how the lyrics of modern music are similar to some older poetry	72.06	2.94
IT skills			
8	I am using my IT skills and developing new skills	64.7	13.23
9	I can concentrate better when I work on the computer	65.22	14.5
Blended learning			
10	I would usually choose to work on the computer	63.77	13.04
11	I would usually choose to work on paper	24.63	42.03
12	I think that class discussions have helped me this year	71.44	9.99
13	A mixture of class discussions, computer and working at the table helps me to concentrate	77.14	7.15

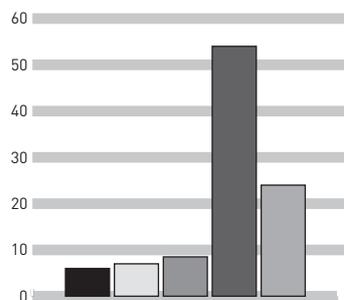
Charts showing numerical findings from questionnaires

1. General questions

Strongly disagree
 Disagree
 Neither agree or disagree
 Agree
 Strongly agree

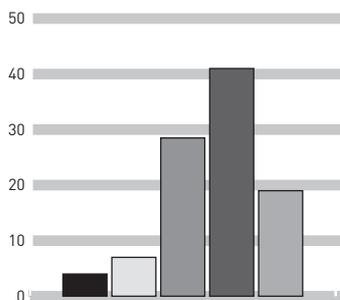
1.

I found the Rap and Poetry topic interesting



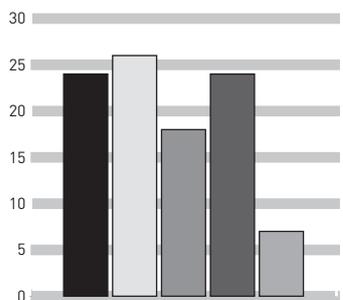
2.

The activities are just about right for me



3.

I talk about this topic outside the classroom

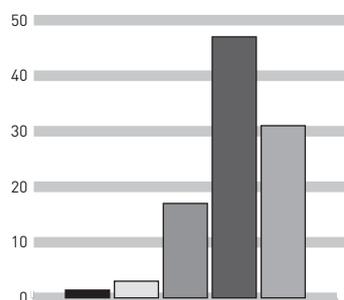


2. Questions on English skills

Strongly disagree
 Disagree
 Neither agree or disagree
 Agree
 Strongly agree

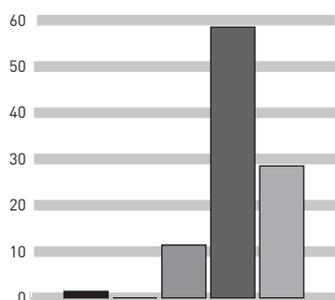
4.

I think my understanding of spelling, including recognising syllables and consonants has improved



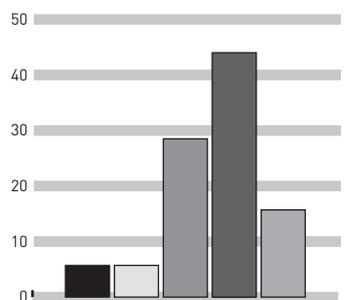
5.

I understand what I read on this topic



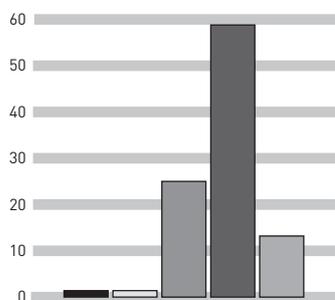
6.

My spoken English is improving on this topic



7.

I understand how the lyrics of modern music (e.g. Nas) use the same techniques as traditional poetry (e.g. Blake)

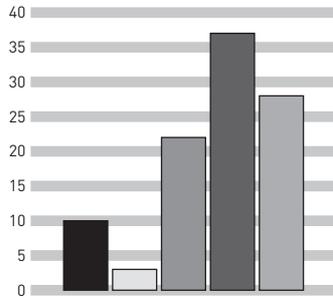


3. ICT questions

■ Strongly disagree □ Disagree ■ Neither agree or disagree ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree

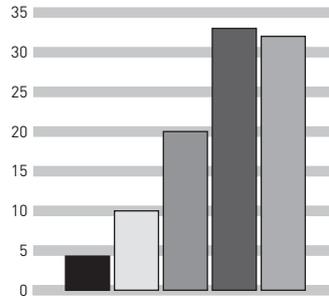
8.

I am using my ICT skills and developing new skills



9.

I can concentrate better when I work on the computer

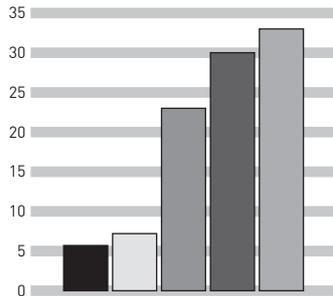


4. Blended learning questions

■ Strongly disagree □ Disagree ■ Neither agree or disagree ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree

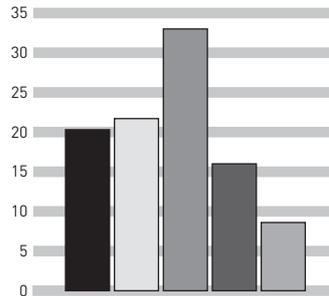
10.

I would usually choose to work on the computer



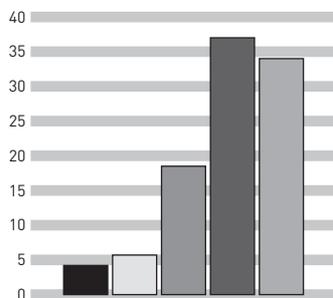
11.

I would usually choose to work on paper



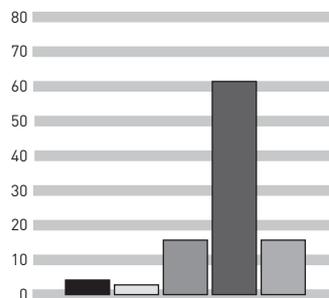
12.

I think the class discussions have helped me this year



13.

A mixture of class discussions, computer and working on paper helps me to concentrate



4. Classroom assistants

What methods could be used to engage classroom assistants working in schools and in the post-16 sector to improve their own literacy and numeracy skills through the *Skills for Life* agenda?

East Riding of Yorkshire Learning Partnership

Mrs Diane Breckon, East Riding of Yorkshire Adult Education; Mrs Cheryl Dillon, Bishop Burton College; Mrs Shirley Hebden, Skills for Life Resource Centre Manager; Dr Andrew Henworth, Bishop Burton College; Mrs Helen Kitson, East Riding College; and Dr Ann Mimmack, *Skills for Life* Manager

Introduction

The initial focus of the project came from observations and concerns raised by members of the team who are involved in the delivery of a variety of learning support qualifications, including the Certificate in Adult Learner Support, NVQ levels 2 and 3 for teaching assistants, the Certificate in Learning Support and the Certificate in Supporting Community Learning. These qualifications are largely aimed at classroom assistants and volunteer tutors and there have been concerns that some members of the client group do not have the literacy and numeracy skills required for what is an increasingly demanding role. Recent initiatives in both compulsory and further education have increased the demands placed upon support staff. The level of competence required of classroom assistants should be sufficient to effectively support the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies (NLS/NNS) and the *Skills for Life* agenda. The latest research into national adult literacy and numeracy showed that the population of the East Riding has a skills gap in both literacy and numeracy greater than the national average of 20.7 per cent.

In a previous role the research practitioner was employed in a support role at an inner city, mainstream secondary school acting as line manager for the teacher aides and classroom support assistants. On many occasions there was a concern over their level of competency. For example, in some cases learners were being supported in subjects with a high literacy content (English, geography, history), by members of staff who were struggling with their own literacy. These factors led the team to hypothesise that many classroom assistants may not have a level of literacy and numeracy to meet the requirements of the job.

Project aims

The research team decided to conduct an investigation to analyse the feasibility of delivering *Skills for Life* training to classroom assistants in all sectors. The aims of the project were to:

- conduct a confidential survey into the attitudes to (own) learning of classroom assistants in schools and further education establishments; and
- discover the incentives and methods which would engage classroom assistants to take up

training in order to achieve the new national qualifications in numeracy and/or literacy.

Research questions

The initial hypothesis was based upon a deficit model of a basic skills need. In response to this the team sought to move to find a positive outcome. The main research question was, therefore:

“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?”

This first question was broken down into smaller, bite-sized issues, which could be investigated through the research process.

1. Do teaching assistants have the appropriate level of numeracy and literacy qualification to meet the requirements of the role?
2. Do teaching assistants consider it necessary to have a level 2 qualification in literacy and numeracy?
3. Do establishment managers consider the training needs (in literacy and numeracy) for teaching assistants?
4. What incentives would motivate teaching assistants to participate in *Skills for Life* courses?
5. What methods of delivery would encourage teaching assistants to take up training, which leads to a qualification in literacy or numeracy?

The context and the team



The East Riding of Yorkshire Learning Partnership – *Skills for Life* Consortium (SfLC) has been created in response to the many new initiatives which have come into being through the *Skills for Life* agenda. The consortium comprises of members from the main providers of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL in the East Riding of Yorkshire, including FE Colleges. The Adult Education Service and the manager of the local *Skills for Life* Resource Centre. The SfLC has acted as

a steering group for initiatives such as the Move On Campaign and Supporting Community Learning. All members of the team sit on the Humberside Basic Skills Strategy and Communications group, which has the oversight for basic skills in the local Learning Skills Council (LSC) area. In addition to this the team is part of the management and production team for the Humberside Basic Skills Training and Development Consortium, which, managed by the University of Hull, has been given the remit of developing the three levels of professional qualifications.

The county of East Yorkshire covers approximately 1,000 square miles, a large percentage of which is rural (population of approximately 320 per square mile). Education in East Yorkshire is funded by the local LSC which is situated in the adjoining city of Kingston upon Hull. In order to keep the project as manageable as possible, the team decided to focus the research in the East Riding.

Research design

The field of research included 162 organisations (primary schools, secondary schools, special schools and FE colleges). Initially it was anticipated that there might be between five and ten support assistants in each establishment. The group soon realised that these figures had been underestimated. The response slips requested between seven and 20 questionnaires for each establishment.

The team felt that the most effective method of data collection, for such a large sample, would be the use of a carefully designed questionnaire augmented by a series of interviews. The questionnaire had many drafts before a final version was settled upon (appendix 1). The whole group worked together in face-to-face meetings and via electronic discussions to ensure that all angles and areas had been covered. The team felt that it was important for the target group to have input into the data collection tool and opinions were canvassed, in meetings and discussions, from a selection of classroom assistants.

Sound ethical practices should be observed when undertaking a research project. The team adhered to the guidelines given in 'Professional Development in Action – Methodology Handbook' (Faulkner et al. 1991). One ethical issue highlighted at the planning stage was that of confidentiality because of the sensitive nature of skills need. Members of the group were aware that individuals may query the use of the information; possibly being suspicious that it would be used by establishment managers in order to change working structures. The team realised that it would be necessary to assure respondents that their comments and responses would remain in the safe keeping of the SfLC; individual names would only be used with permission and the data and other information collected would be used for the survey only.

Methods of data collection

Both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods were used. The questionnaires supplied quantitative data for analysis and had been devised to extract the maximum amount of data from a two-page document.

The first stage of the data collection process involved sending a request to the managers of each of the 162 establishments. The letter outlined the purpose of the programme and asked for expressions of interest.

Responses were received from five secondary schools, two colleges of FE, and 15 primary schools. This response equates to 13 per cent of the sample. A total of 231 questionnaires were delivered across the establishments. The documents were sent to a named member of the staff and each respondent was supplied with an envelope to ensure complete confidentiality. 93 questionnaires were returned, which gave a 40 per cent response rate.

The collection of qualitative data took several forms. Interviews were conducted with representatives of the East Riding Education Service and the Schools Improvement Service. These meetings provided the project with background information of the work that was already being undertaken within the East Riding – including the Remodelling Agenda (NRT 2004) and the introduction of the Higher Level Teaching Assistant awards (HLTA 2004).

Members of the research team also proved to be a valuable source of information. The

combined experiences of the team members provided qualitative data from different perspectives. This was used to create the background of the project and to add depth at strategic points. These discussions were recorded in minutes of meetings.

The final method of data collection took the form of interviews with some of the respondents. Six establishments indicated that they would be prepared to allow their staff to take part in interviews; four establishment managers also offered to be interviewed. Interviews took place towards the end of the summer term and at the beginning of the autumn term. In all 18 teaching assistants were interviewed (in small groups) and four establishment managers individually gave their perspective on the subject.

A set of questions was designed for the two groups of respondents in order to ensure continuity and that the data collection was fair (appendices 2 and 3). Each of the interviews was captured on a digital voice recorder (with permission of the interviewees) and the responses transcribed in relation to the initial questions.

Background research and information gathering from external sources was also used to supplement and complement the practical aspects of the research.

The findings

At the meetings with the representative from the East Riding Local Education Authority (LEA) the following points were raised:

- Teaching assistants¹ are required to undertake a level of responsibility for 24 areas within the classroom (display, collecting dinner money, entering data, etc.) in addition to pupil support. This is aimed to release teachers to concentrate upon the learner contact and day to day teaching.
- A hierarchy of teaching assistants, based upon qualifications, is being developed. Teaching assistants may be required to work towards the HLTA award, and if appropriate become trained up to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS).
- East Riding Education Service has developed a scheme, through the Schools' Improvement Service, which provides support and advice for teaching assistants.

A further meeting, with the representative from the Schools Improvement Service, highlighted that a survey of training needs had been commissioned for teaching assistants. The respondents had asked for training in practical issues such as IT, behaviour management and first aid. This led to the assumption that support staff were confident with their own literacy and numeracy skills, or that at that time they had not considered it to be an issue. The Move On Campaign was introduced following this survey and several members of support staff had subsequently taken up places on training courses.

The responses gathered from the questionnaire confirm that, as expected, classroom assistants are predominantly women in the 'middle age' bracket.

- Of 93 responses only two were from males.
- The total responses included an overwhelming majority of individuals aged from 31 to 50.
- Only four respondents were under 30 years of age.

1. The title teaching assistants has now superseded all other titles for support workers in the compulsory sectors.

This was also supported in a document produced to summarise the findings of an evaluation exercise conducted by Ofsted (HMI 2002). The predominance of one age group raises major concerns about potential capacity building problems over the next decade.

Do teaching assistants have the appropriate level of numeracy and literacy qualification to meet the requirements of the role? Do teaching assistants consider it necessary to have a level 2 qualification in literacy and numeracy?

The comments received during the interview process were mixed. Teaching assistants from the primary sector were more concerned over the acquisition of mechanical skills that would allow them to support learners for the NLS and NNS. In some cases they did not feel confident in supporting the new methods of working – particularly in numeracy. A significant number of interviewees felt it a priority to improve their personal IT skills. Individuals agreed that, if it was thought necessary, they would be willing to access training to update their skills in literacy and numeracy.

Teaching assistants from the secondary sector were more concerned about their IT skills than those required for supporting literacy and numeracy. Some respondents did concede, however, that sometimes they faced difficulty when supporting learners at GCSE level.

Support staff from the FE sector were more ready to share a concern over their own level of skill. With the introduction of *Skills for Life*, and the embedding of literacy and numeracy within vocational areas, support assistants and tutors are required to ensure that the learners work to the National Standards for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (QCA 2000). These individuals were open about their concerns and enquired as to the availability of provision to improve their skills.

The interviews conducted with the managers of the establishments showed a real concern for the need for teaching and support assistants to be qualified to an appropriate level. The managers felt that without the underpinning skills developed as a result of level 2 qualifications, support staff would have difficulty in understanding the complexities of the acquisition of literacy and numeracy. In order to support a learner effectively, at any age, it is imperative that an individual is able to consider and suggest alternatives, and to have appropriate questioning skills that will allow the learner to explore these alternatives.

This point of view supported that raised by Ofsted:

“Many teaching assistants have no formal qualifications but have become qualified by virtue of long experience. Increasingly, new teaching assistants are required by schools or LEAs to have formal qualifications” (HMI 2002)

Do establishment managers consider the training needs (in literacy and numeracy) for teaching assistants?

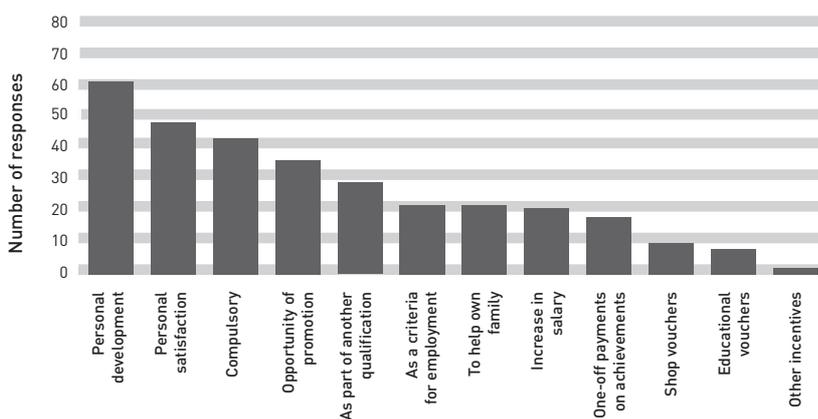
Establishment managers are committed to the continued development of support staff in all areas, and would welcome the introduction of training in literacy and numeracy. One area of concern for managers is the issue of funding. School budgets are planned to include a sum for staff development, but this is not sufficient to cover the training needs of every member of teaching and non-teaching staff. School managers were interested to learn of the free training supplied through the *Skills for Life* agenda. The manager interviewed from the FE sector was aware of the funding available and has already instigated training for staff.

As a response to the remodelling agenda and the concern over work-life balance issues the LEA has undertaken to address the training needs of teaching assistants in the compulsory sector. A programme of staff development has been planned and is in the process of implementation. Teaching assistants have access to a support network which includes a discussion forum (held each term) and a dedicated web site.

What incentives would motivate teaching assistants to participate in *Skills for Life* courses?

The fourth research question looked at further methods of which would encourage individuals to take up training. The subject of incentives can be controversial; the group's recent involvement in the Move On campaign involved some lengthy discussion as to the appropriateness of offering rewards for participation. The results given by the questionnaires were not particularly conclusive. Analysis of data showed that individuals gave more than one response to the question and that these were mixed. The majority of respondents replied that they would be prepared to take up training for personal and professional development reasons, possibly linked to an increase in salary.

Figure 1. Incentives to take up training



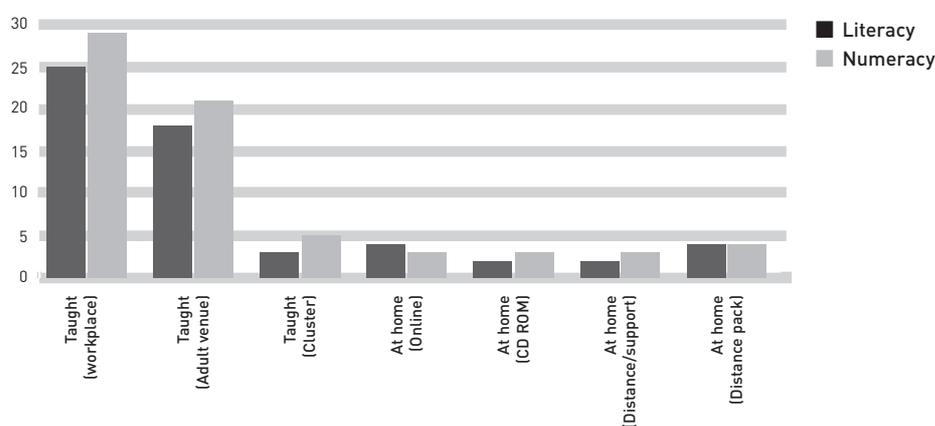
What methods of delivery would encourage teaching assistants to take up training, which will lead to a qualification in literacy or numeracy?

The overarching theme of the PLRI asks participant groups to investigate new methods of delivery in order to attract new learners to *Skills for Life* learning. The final research question was designed to gauge the interest, of potential learners, in particular ways of learning. Several new methods of study are now available to any individual who wishes to take up learning. *Skills for Life* programmes can be accessed through online programmes with organisations such as learnDirect. Distance learning is available which would allow learners to participate in their own time, in their own homes. These new developments enhance and complement the more traditional forms of teaching and learning accessed through face-to-face delivery. The team thought that classroom assistants would be willing to take up *Skills for Life* training if it was offered in a more accessible way thus removing the embarrassment of having to reveal limitations in basic skills to peers and colleagues.

Unfortunately this hypothesis could not have been further off the mark. The responses collected in face-to-face interviews overwhelmingly pointed to a preference for taught sessions. With very few exceptions the classroom assistants asserted that they would be more comfortable accessing the training in a venue with which they were familiar (usually the workplace) and in the presence of their colleagues. Individuals felt that the support given by members of their peer groups would outweigh the embarrassment felt by the admission of any gap in skills.

The questionnaire responses confirmed this. Of the respondents who replied to this section of the form, an overwhelming 81 per cent chose the option of face-to-face delivery and preferred it to take place in their workplace.

Figure 2. Preferred methods of study - literacy and numeracy



In discussion the teaching assistants commented that the greatest incentive to take up training would be if it was built in to the timetable, as the majority of interviewees felt that the work-life balance issue affected their ability to access training. Unfortunately the establishment managers felt this would be a viable option only for one-off courses, as long-term programmes of study would take the assistants away from their role of supporting learners. There is not the flexibility in funding to pay for large amounts of staff cover.

Using the findings to move forward

The findings have raised several issues and areas for concern and development. The members of the team are in agreement that the East Riding Learning Partnership (*Skills for Life* sub group) will act upon them to continue to develop *Skills for Life* provision in the region.

Tentative links have already been made with a local primary school cluster with a view to a collaborative response to the findings. A possible outcome of the research will be to introduce a Move On programme. The head teacher concerned is willing to allow her premises and resources to be used to provide training for teaching assistants from within the cluster. The programme will be staffed by *Skills for Life* tutors from the East Riding Learning Partnership (ERLP). Following a pilot scheme in this area it is hoped that other schools will take up the training.

The original plan for the project included a series of outcomes. One of these was to extrapolate the results to give a national overview. The results of the questionnaires did not give a balanced sample of respondents. The research advisors feel that the gender and age balance could be a particularity of the East Riding of Yorkshire but may possibly relate to other rural areas. To compare and contrast the results nationally it would be necessary to repeat the study in other rural areas and also in urban areas.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Questionnaire

Please answer all of the questions that apply to you. Leave any blank that do not apply, or that you may not feel comfortable answering.

Section 1. About you

How old are you? Under 30 31–40 41–50 51+

Are you: Male Female

Would you describe yourself as:

Black African	<input type="checkbox"/>	Black Caribbean	<input type="checkbox"/>	Black Other	<input type="checkbox"/>
Bangladeshi	<input type="checkbox"/>	Indian	<input type="checkbox"/>	Pakistani	<input type="checkbox"/>
White Irish	<input type="checkbox"/>	White European	<input type="checkbox"/>	White British	<input type="checkbox"/>
White Other	<input type="checkbox"/>	Chinese	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other	<input type="checkbox"/>

Section 2. About your role

1. What is your job title?

2. In what types of institution do you work? (E.g. primary /secondary schools, FE college, etc.)

3. With what age group(s) do you work? (Tick all that apply)

0–5 5–7 7–11 11–14 14–16 16–19 19+

4. How many hours per week do you estimate that you spend in supporting literacy and numeracy across the curriculum?

Lit Num

5. What other areas do you support?

6. Do you have any of the following qualifications (please tick):

English O'Level	<input type="checkbox"/>
CSE Grade 1	<input type="checkbox"/>
English (Language) GCSE (A* to C)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Key Skills Communication (level 2)	<input type="checkbox"/>
National Test Literacy (level 2)	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other equivalent level 2 literacy qualification (please specify)

7. Do you have any of the following qualifications (please tick):

- Maths O'Level
- CSE Grade 1
- Maths GCSE (A* to C)
- Key Skills Application of Number (level 2)
- National Test Numeracy (level 2)
- Other equivalent level 2 numeracy qualification (please specify)
-

8. Do you think you would benefit from updating your qualifications? (Please tick if yes)

Lit Num

Section 3. Updating your qualifications

At the moment all courses and qualifications for adult literacy and numeracy are free to the learner and there are several study options available.

9. Your literacy

If you wanted to take up a new qualification which method(s) would you consider?
Please number in order of preference (1 being most preferred)

- a) Taught class (at local adult venue) See question 11
- b) Taught class (in workplace)
- c) Taught class (in local cluster group)
- d) At home (distance learning with support)
- e) At home (distance learning pack)
- f) At home (online)
- g) At home (CD ROM)

10. Your numeracy

If you wanted to take up a new qualification which method(s) would you consider? Please number in order of preference (1 being most preferred)

- a) Taught class (at local adult venue) See question 11
- b) Taught class (in workplace)
- c) Taught class (in local cluster group)
- d) At home (distance learning with support)
- e) At home (distance learning pack)
- f) At home (online)
- g) At home (CD ROM)

11. How far would you be prepared to travel to attend a class? _____ miles.

12. What would encourage you to take courses in literacy and numeracy?
Please tick any that apply.

- | | |
|--|--------------------------|
| Opportunity of promotion | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Compulsory (e.g. tied to new teaching assistant structure) | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| As part of another qualification (e.g. City and Guilds 9295) | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| As a criteria for employment | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Personal development | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Personal satisfaction | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| To help own family | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other incentives such as: | |
| • Increase in salary | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • One-off payment on achievement | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Shop vouchers | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Educational vouchers | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Appendix 2. Interview questions

Managers

1. Do you think it is important that non-teaching staff should have a qualification in literacy and numeracy?
2. So should it be essential criteria for employment? Do you stipulate it?
3. Is there a hierarchy for teaching assistants in the school?
4. Is there a plan to introduce one? What will the criteria be?
5. Have any of the staff applied for HLTA status?
6. Do the teaching assistants take part in staff development within the school? Are they encouraged/supported to take part in the programmes run by the LEA?
7. Would it be feasible to offer literacy and numeracy classes to teaching assistants on the school premises – possibly staffed by teachers from the school?

Any other comments?

Appendix 3. Interview Questions

Teaching Assistants

1. Do you think you need to have a qualification in literacy and numeracy to do your job?
2. If this was essential criteria for applying for a job would it put you off applying?
3. Is there any form of development available to you at the moment?
4. How do you access this?
5. Do you think there should be?
6. What types of in-service training have you already had? How do you access this?
7. What would you like to see on offer for personal development?
8. Has anyone applied for the Higher Level Teaching Assistant status?
9. Have you ever approached someone at the school/LEA to request training? What was the response?
10. How would you feel about being taught on-site by a colleague/member of the teaching staff?
11. What are your thoughts on on-line learning, or the use of a CD Rom?

Any other comments?

5. Frontline managers

Improving workplace training and support for council employees

Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council

Sajida Ali, Nicola Raynor and Alison Smith

Introduction

The aim of the project was to investigate how frontline managers and supervisors can raise the profile of the benefits of *Skills for Life* among the workforce and mould their staff into learning communities. There is general agreement that a numerate, literate and IT literate staff allow for more flexible work practices and provide better customer service in the workplace. However, *Skills for Life* training often takes second place to vocational training. The role of frontline managers in affecting the views of the workforce is a pivotal one and deserves careful consideration.

Context

Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council has introduced many initiatives in the field of adult learning and *Skills for Life*; these include forming Learning Specialist Partnerships and encouraging local people to take an active role in the community at large. However, there still appear to be obstacles to *Skills for Life* learning.

A clue as to why this is may lie in the work of Rolph (2003) who wrote that: ¹

“Responsibility for learning and training is increasingly being placed on managers and employees rather than human resource professionals. Research shows, however, that employees exhibit low levels of motivation to manage their own learning. This problem can be exacerbated if line managers are either poorly trained to support learning, or if they simply don’t think it is worth their time and effort. If having a highly skilled and trained workforce provides organisations with a competitive advantage, then employees and their line managers must be encouraged to take learning and training seriously.”

Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council recognises that frontline managers are becoming more responsible for the support provided to their staff and that it is important to recognise, support and engage this vital resource in meeting learners’ *Skills for Life* needs.

The council’s 2003 Needs Analysis suggested that:

“Given that nearly one in two respondents were classified at entry level or below in one or both of the assessments, it seems likely that many people either:

1. Rolfe, J. (2003). ‘The Critical Role of Managers in New Business’, **New Business Magazine Ltd**. London, UK.

- do not realise the negative effect their weak skills have on their lives;
- have found jobs that demanded only the appropriate level of skill; or
- have developed coping strategies so their limitations are not exposed.²

Consideration of these ideas has led Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council to look at how much the learning environment is affected by the work environment and particularly the frontline managers.

This project compliments the EQUAL³ project on awareness of *Skills for Life* in the workforce.

Research questions

- Is there a need for training in basic literacy and numeracy within the council workforce?
- Are frontline managers aware of the *Skills for Life* initiative?
- If they are aware, do they see it as part of their role to educate their workforce in literacy, numeracy and IT?
- What is their (workforce and management) attitude towards *Skills for Life*?
- How can we reinforce a positive image of *Skills for Life*?

Research design

The research design has its roots in phenomenology, as it is taken from the belief that training and education is important to the person and is difficult to measure in a similar manner to phenomena such as temperature and distance. Listening to the respondents would form the focus of this research as the council's workforce is given several opportunities to develop and disseminate their thoughts on *Skills for Life*. It was decided to gain a broad overview of the whole council by using a questionnaire. As the study took place in the workplace there was a danger that respondents would give the opinions that they perceived the researcher or the senior management team wanted to hear. This was overcome to some extent by the use of an anonymous questionnaire. This was followed up by a focus group comprising 12 teams of 10 people. The teams were selected from the council workforce as a whole and included both frontline managers and staff.

Questionnaires

In conducting the survey, 2,000 questionnaires (see appendix 1) were sent out, of which 326 were returned. All the people who received a questionnaire worked for Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council and so the sampling was clustered; any conclusions drawn must be seen in this light. However, the findings reflect the types of issues that may affect councils, workplaces and frontline managers around the country and larger scale research is needed to gain a more in-depth understanding of these issues.

The initial research was followed up by a technique based on grounded theory. In this, the theory emerges from the data. A mixed group of 120 frontline managers and staff were put into 12 groups. Each group was given a "game" to play in which they had to discuss ways in which literacy skills would help to improve their capabilities at work and whether specific vocational qualities would be enhanced through attending training in literacy. This activity was

2. DfES (2003). *Skills for Life Survey research Brief*. <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfilesRB490.pdf>

3. Funded through the European Social Fund, Equal is an initiative which tests and promotes new means of combating all forms of discrimination and inequalities in the labour market, both for those in work and for those seeking work, through transnational co-operation. <http://www.equal.ecotec.co.uk/>

devised by the group of six researchers. Each of the 12 groups was given a board that had the following categories on it: instruction, customers, morale, costing, confidence and efficiency. Each group then discussed whether literacy skills may be used to improve those general areas of performance and recorded their thoughts onto card. The results from each of the 12 groups were collected and analysed in a similar form to that of grounded theory where themes were grouped together to determine whether or not there were any underlying issues that affected skills for life training within the council.

As a third stage in the research process, short, semi-structured interviews were held with frontline managers and staff from various departments throughout the council. These interviews were transcribed and categorised, depending upon content. Once transcribed, the text underwent a system of in vivo coding on a paragraph by paragraph basis. In vivo literally means occurring in a living organism although, in research terms, it is used to mean taken directly from the source. In our study, we transcribed each interview and then looked at the meaning of each paragraph. The way we did this was to highlight the most important word or phrase from each paragraph and that became the code. Hence, the code was taken from the source. To follow on from this, we looked at the codes to see which ones were similar in nature and grouped the evidence together in larger sets. This is called coding on. We repeated this a few times, until we ended up with a manageable number of words or phrases which allowed us to come up with some possible rules that could be applied.

Data analysis

The data was collected from returned questionnaires, cards from the literacy training and transcripts from the short interviews. Each of these was dealt with separately, but the results of the questionnaires and the cards informed the short interview questions.

Findings

First questionnaire

In the tables below we have used a scale where 1 suggests a tendency towards learning and valuing knowledge and 5 suggests the opposite.

Reading

Questions 1a, 1b and 1c focused on the respondent's attitude towards reading. A score of 1 or 2 for questions 1a or 1b indicates that the respondent uses reading regularly and may be a fluent reader. A score of 3, 4 or 5 indicates that they may need help with their reading, although not enjoying reading does not necessarily indicate a lack of ability in this area.

Statement	Average score
1a) I like reading books about places and things. I use reading to find things out	1.8
1b) I like reading stories and novels. I use reading for entertainment	1.8

Most people who work in the council do not read much, although the numbers for the first two statements indicate that they like reading.

Numeracy

A score of 1 or 2 on either of questions 1d and 1e indicates that a respondent feels confident with their numeracy skills whereas a score of 3 or over indicates a lack of confidence.

Statement	Average score
1d) I used to love maths when I was at school	3.2
1e) I use maths for my job	2.5

It appears from this statement that most people who work for the council did not like maths when they were at school, although a substantial portion of them have to use it for their job role.

Attitude of line managers

Questions 1f, 1g, 1h, 1i, and 1j are trying to identify the connection between courses and line managers. A response of 1 or 2 for questions 1f, 1h, 1i and 1j indicates that the respondent believes that they are offered enough courses and advice to satisfy their needs. Question 1g indicates that their line manager values courses and goes on them.

Statement	Average score
1f) I have been given the opportunity to go on lots of courses since I started working with the council	2.2
1g) My line manager goes on lots of courses	2.6
1h) My line manager recommends courses for me to go on to help me with the way I do my job	2.5
1i) My line manager recommends courses for me to go on to keep me up to date with the skills that I need for my job	3.3
1j) My line manager recommends courses for me to go on to help me improve my reading and writing ability	4.4

When asked about courses, it appears that there is a significant difference between managers recommending going on courses and managers recommending going on courses to improve *Skills for Life* capability.

Courses

Questions 1k, 1l, 1m, 1n and 1o are designed to find out the attitudes to courses in general with questions 1n and 1o explicitly asking about attitudes to courses. Question m is designed to test whether or not the respondent attaches a greater value to vocational courses as opposed to *Skills for Life* courses.

Statement	Average score
1k) If offered a course on reading for enjoyment, I would go.	3.4
1l) If offered a course on arithmetic, I would go.	3.5
1m) If offered a course on health and safety at work, I would go.	2.4
1n) I enjoy going on courses.	2.1

Skills for Life

Questions 1q and 1r look at the value that a respondent places on the *Skills for Life* strategy.

For each of these questions, a high value would indicate a positive outlook on the need for *Skills for Life*.

Statement	Average score
1q) I think practicing my reading and writing skills is important	2.2
1r) I think that knowing your times tables is important	2.0

It is interesting to note that there appears to be more agreement with these statements yet fewer people appear to be willing to go on a course where they may acquire this knowledge.

Support

Questions 1s, 1t, 1u, 1v, 1w and 1x indicate where the respondent would turn for help and whether or not the respondent would expect work to help with problems with numeracy and literacy.

Statement	Average score
1s) My line manager has meetings with me as an individual to talk about courses I might go on and how to help me	2.9
1t) My line manager is someone I can talk to about things I don't understand	1.9
1u) If I need help with something in work, I can go and see my line manager about it	1.7
1v) If I need help with something not to do with work I can go and see my line manager	2.6
1w) I ask my workmates if I need help with something	1.9
1x) I try and work it out myself if I need help with something	2.0

The prevailing attitude of staff appears to be that they ask their workmates about problems as opposed to their managers.

Confidence

Questions 1y and 1z are explicitly there to indicate confidence levels in maths and English.

Statement	Average score
1y) I think I am good at Maths	2.4
1z) I think I am good at English	1.7

The score of 2.4 for maths indicates that members of staff feel quite confident in their ability to do maths. Interestingly, there is a significantly higher confidence in the staff's perception of their ability to cope with English.

Second questionnaire

The results from the pilot study were examined, as above and consideration was given to the questions. A smaller questionnaire was then sent out, from which we received 326 returns. These answered the following questions. As above, the figures are given as averages.

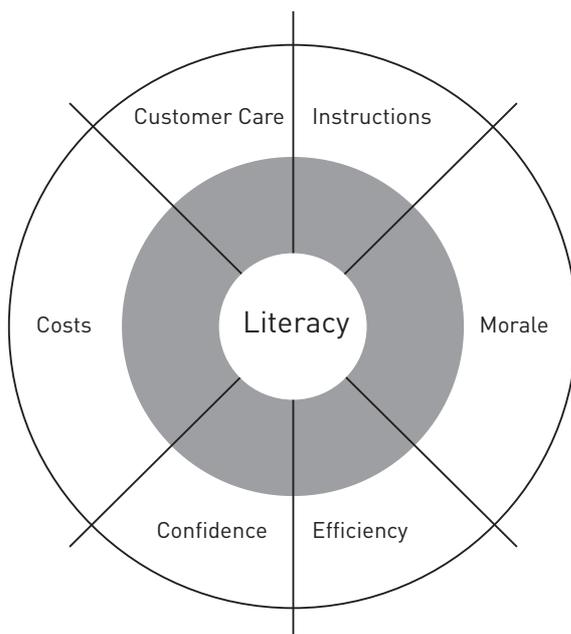
Statement	Average score
A) Since I started working for the council, I have had the opportunity to go on lots of courses	2.64
B) I enjoy going on courses to do with my job	2.87
C) I have regular meetings with my line manager to talk about courses I might go on and how they would help me	2.97
D) My line manager suggests courses for me to help me in the way I do my job and to update my skills	2.62
E) If I need help or guidance with something at work, I can easily go and see my line manager about it	2.81
F) If I need help with something, I ask my workmates	2.17
G) Overall, I enjoyed my time at school	3.18
H) When I was at school, I used to love maths	3.78
I) I think I am good at Maths	3.14
J) I think I am good at English	2.51

These results support the findings of the pilot in that people feel more confident with English than maths.

Literacy wheel

Using the literacy wheel and the instructions below we asked people to think about literacy at work.

Instructions



Look at the board you have been given. At the centre, there is the word literacy (meaning reading and writing). If your team had a higher literacy level, how would it impact on your work? Around the edge of the board are six areas. Some of them will improve through higher literacy, others may remain unchanged and some may worsen. As a group, discuss and record your thoughts on how literacy impacts on the areas mentioned around the board.

Examples of the responses are given overleaf:

Section	Response
Instructions	Overall increased literacy skills were seen to have a positive effect on the ways in which employees communicate; promoting good working practices and facilitating greater understanding and efficiency. Employees believe that raising their literacy skills will enable them to “give and take clear instructions,” and follow instructions more effectively. They said that improved literacy skills “enable better understanding” and allow them to deal with written communication more efficiently. The employees also felt that raising their literacy skills will “improve health and safety.”
Customer Care	All staff commented positively on the effects of increased staff literacy skills on customer care and many workers realised the impact this would have on the reputation of the council. Employees felt that with improved literacy skills they would be able to deal with customers more confidently, their communication would improve, e.g. by telephone and that they would make fewer mistakes. Some workers suggested that as a direct result of these changes, “the impression on customers would be good.” The number of customers’ complaints would reduce, and the reputation of the council would improve. Some staff felt that increased literacy skills would encourage them to take a “pride in representing the company.”
Morale	Most employees felt that raising literacy skills will have a positive impact on staff morale if adequate support is provided. However, some did have reservations and thought that improved literacy skills could lead to professional dissatisfaction and that some employees might feel that they “can do a better job elsewhere.” Employees said that morale would improve for a number of different reasons. They felt that investment in staff would make them feel more valued. Some said they would feel “more valued and less confused.” Employees thought improved literacy skills would build their confidence and raise their self-esteem, and make them feel like the employer “values their work.” They also said that their improved confidence should increase productivity.
Efficiency	On the whole, employees felt that raising their literacy skills would increase efficiency. The only negative effect noted was the possible “inefficiency due to staff release” which some staff felt would cause an initial decrease in efficiency. Employees said that “learning encourages thinking about the job.” They felt that efficiency will improve as a result of improved communication. Staff thought raised literacy skills would enable them to record information better, and complete tasks faster and to a higher standard. Many said that there would be “fewer mistakes” and “fewer misunderstandings” therefore less time would be spent correcting errors!
Costing	Most employees commented on the initial cost outlay, but recognised that this “short term rise” would result in long term savings. Staff felt that increased literacy skills would reduce unnecessary costs, e.g. wastage/ errors. Employees would make “less mistakes” and there would be “less time used to correct them!” Some staff said that improved literacy skills could bring “higher wages and promotion.” Others however had a more

negative view and felt that increased skills could lead to a more expensive workforce which they feared could create job losses. Several employees said that there would be “better retention” and that you could “grow your own” candidates for jobs.

Confidence	The majority of employees feel that improving their literacy skills will raise their confidence. They said that improved skills and learning will “improve their confidence and through that their self-esteem, morale and aspirations.” They felt that their increased confidence will improve working relationships, a benefit to both employer and employee. Some employees said that increased literacy skills will make them more confident because they will become more articulate. Others feared this could have a negative effect and “lead to being a less compliant workforce.” Another fear expressed by a few workers is that “sole up skilling could lead to isolation.”
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Generally, employees saw improved literacy skills in a positive light, citing increased efficiency and fewer complaints as possible vocationally related outcomes.

Conclusions

Several issues and points which emerged from the study, such as communication of the *Skills for Life* policy; conflict with work; changing job roles and the management of learning, deserve consideration, discussion and/or further investigation.

Communication issues

[Interviewer] “How about your manager, I mean how supportive has he been with your drive for learning new skills?”

[Respondent] “He is brilliant, he is no problem at all, he is very supportive of training and would back me all the way. To be honest if I went to my manager asking for some training, he would make every effort to find out what facilities existed within the council to meet my needs.”

There seemed to be an overwhelming embracement of training and development throughout many council sections. This did vary from person to person and was mainly concerned with vocational training. *Skills for Life* seemed less important to most interviewees.

[Interviewer] “Are you interested in studying further... skills for life so to speak?”

[Respondent] “No.”

[Interviewer] “Why not?”

[Respondent] “Well because if you think about it, I’m happy with what I am doing and all I need is the training which my manager provides for me so that I can progress further.”

Practice and understanding of what skills for life meant varied across departments. Understanding of *Skills for Life* was not a universal attribute among managers. Some

managers only understood what was meant by the “*Skills for Life*” term and learning needs; some understood and were proactive in promoting the training and issues associated with the *Skills for Life* initiative; some did not understand, but thought they did; and, some did not understand and did not see it as being relevant to their work.

“We are all positively encouraged to learn more, even if it is not directly related to our current job, as long as it is something around it, we are encouraged to do it definitely.”

The teams that knew most about *Skills for Life* had managers who championed learning. A positive attitude to *Skills for Life* and learning from frontline managers is an important lever towards encouraging and engaging staff participation in learning. There were many positive stories where managers have actively promoted learning as part of their workforce development programme. These managers were generally more effective in developing learning communities of their staff. Often, where managers were more aware of *Skills for Life* programmes, staff felt more valued.

Conflict with work

The perceived conflict with targets and work possibly form the largest barrier to *Skills for Life* in the council. Employees of the council state time and again that staff development is seen as a priority by the Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council, but the replacement of staff on courses with “stand-in” staff is not available.

“There’s very little external training because again that’s budgets... we don’t have massive training budgets and again we don’t have the time to send a lot of staff on training because we are a busy venue. Yeah. We work 24 hours a day, seven days a week and if you [sometimes think] it’s beneficial to the organisation and the individual but it’s not helping you get your event on at 7 o’clock at night.”

The perception among some managers was that there was a tension between their operational role and their training or learning support role. Constraints such as time spent on learning support could affect their ability to meet deadlines.

Managing learning

Formal education played only a small part in the overall learning process at work. Most learning occurred on an informal level. Some managers had formalised the learning of their staff by collaborating with them to develop a personal development plan.

“I think, at the end of the day, good training comes down to the individual managers pushing that within their particular section or department.”

Frontline managers that have a positive attitude about learning *Skills for Life* are able to identify anecdotal evidence of business and production benefits. However, there is no evaluation framework against which managers can compare learning outcomes against business objectives. There have been instances of managers where they have attempted to fit people to *Skills for Life* training and have not known who to contact in this regard.

“Well I think all the departments would want to send their employees on training and stuff but due to the nature of the jobs, for example here in Direct Services, it’s a bit difficult because if a person is off on training then the job will not get done. Time is a

real big factor and whether the manager or supervisor whoever is able to get cover for the employee gone.”

Time for all training events is mentioned by a significant number of respondents as a possible block to training. Respondents generally acknowledge the role of managers and supervisors in encouraging their personal development, but some state that time is a factor. An additional factor in the provision of training is that of staff cover. Many areas appear to factor in time and budget into the education equation, thereby effectively blocking staff development in areas not seen as directly essential to the job role of the employee.

The majority of the money for training is spent on existing managers to enhance their vocational and managerial skills. There has been a large change in the role of Council frontline managers. This has resulted in an increased workload and responsibility. The Council are firmly behind the concept of staff development, although this tends to be on vocational as opposed to *Skills for Life* training.

Implications

The Council need more training for frontline managers and potential frontline managers in order to allow them to take on this new role of being a facilitator of learning. It is suggested that a training pack be developed for frontline managers which will allow them to meet these new responsibilities with added confidence. The development team for this training pack will need to incorporate frontline managers within its ranks in order to provide ownership for them. This should make those involved in the development more enthusiastic in their approach to the training and this enthusiasm will hopefully have a domino affect with other members of staff.

Some thought will need to be given to how to overcome time considerations when planning and executing staff development. One possible solution would be a distance learning or online learning model.

Evaluation of the practitioner-led research experience

Overall, the research team have found this project a positive experience; below are some comments that expand on this for each member of the team.

“I have managed to develop my research skills, namely, arranging and undertaking interviews, as well as, transcribing and collating responses. I learnt about probing interviewees in order to ascertain relevant and up to date information, and, about making interviewees feel comfortable by building an effective working relationship and rapport with them.”

I have developed useful contacts in many departments of the council and this has helped me to provide them with relevant and up to date information about learning opportunities. My role as a researcher on this project has enabled me to develop skills that I can use in other areas of my work.” (Sajid Mohammed)

“My background has been in providing advice and guidance to residents of Blackburn and Darwen on areas of learning, training and employment. This has provided me with solid foundations on how to interact with different groups. The project however did

provide me with an insight into the difficulties an employer encounters by trying to upskill their staff through training/ learning as well as maintaining the service/ rate of production. It also provided me with an understanding of existing staff and their needs and barriers to learning/ training. (Sajida Sarwar)

“I found the methodology with regards to the literacy wheel an excellent example of an educational tool that not only we developed, but implemented with great success. Getting managers to reveal their own problem areas encouraged other managers to admit that they could also improve. The idea that everyone can improve is seen as a valid and inclusive theme. In addition to which I believe that this research has been beneficial to me as a researcher allowing me to share my skills and knowledge with others, thereby allowing them the opportunity to contribute towards the success of this project. I personally have been able to develop my own expertise and knowledge in terms of the issues departments’ experience, the culture within that department and the needs of employees within the organisation.” (Alison Smith)

“During the course of this research project I have developed many skills that will be beneficial for both my professional and personal development; overall I feel that my experience of this project has been extremely interesting.” (Nicola Raynor)

What I feel was extremely useful for the individuals working within this project was the opportunity provided to the group to explore a variety of research methods and decide which would be the best method to use. Individuals understood the complexities of carrying out interviews and the thought and effort that goes into developing research. I found the literacy wheel was an innovative and useful tool which was implemented with great success, extracting information in a non-threatening and enjoyable manner and feel that this is something that I would like to explore further for future research projects. Overall my experience on this project has been extremely positive and motivating.” (Sajida Ali)

Appendices

Appendix 1. *Skills for Life* quiz

1. The statements below have a scale attached to them. You have to say whether you agree or disagree with the statements.

Circle	If you... with the statement
1	Strongly agree
2	Mainly agree
3	Are not sure whether you agree
4	Mainly disagree
5	Strongly disagree

There are a couple of places where you have to write down what you think about something. In these questions, you will be given a line upon which to write.

Please answer the questions as honestly as possible. We are interested in your opinions. You can put your name on the sheet if you wish, but this is totally voluntary.

Thank you for taking the time to fill in and return this quiz. We hope to use it to improve our service and make your life better.

- a. I like reading books about places and things. I use reading to find things out.

1 2 3 4 5

- b. I like reading stories and novels. I use reading for entertainment.

1 2 3 4 5

- c. I do not read much.

1 2 3 4 5

- d. I used to love maths when I was at school.

1 2 3 4 5

- e. I use maths for my job.

1 2 3 4 5

- f. I have been given the opportunity to go on lots of courses since I started working for the council.

1 2 3 4 5

g. My line manager goes on a lot of courses.

1 2 3 4 5

h. My line manager recommends courses for me to go on to help me with the way I do my job.

1 2 3 4 5

i. My line manager recommends courses for me to go on to keep me up to date with the skills that I need to do my job.

1 2 3 4 5

j. My line manager recommends courses for me to go on to help me to improve my reading and writing ability.

1 2 3 4 5

k. If offered a course on reading for enjoyment, I would go.

1 2 3 4 5

l. If offered a course on arithmetic, I would go.

1 2 3 4 5

m. If offered a course on health and safety at work, I would go.

1 2 3 4 5

n. I enjoy going on courses.

1 2 3 4 5

o. I think that going on courses is a waste of time.

1 2 3 4 5

p. What is the last course you went on?

q. I think practicing my reading and writing skills is important.

1 2 3 4 5

r. I think that knowing your times tables is important.

1 2 3 4 5

- s. My line manager has meetings with me as an individual to talk about courses I might go on and how to help me.

1 2 3 4 5

- t. My line manager is someone I can talk to about things I don't understand.

1 2 3 4 5

- u. If I need help with something in work, I can go and see my line manager about it.

1 2 3 4 5

- v. If I need help with something not to do with work, I can go and see my line manager about it.

1 2 3 4 5

- w. I ask my workmates if I need help with something.

1 2 3 4 5

- x. I try and work it out myself if I need help with something.

1 2 3 4 5

- y. I think I am good at maths.

1 2 3 4 5

- z. I think I am good at English.

1 2 3 4 5

- 2 Do you have any comments about any of the courses you have been on or would have liked to have gone on?

- 3 What is 25 multiplied by 7?

- 4 How did you work it out?

5 Do you feel you get to go on all the courses you want to?

Yes /No (Please circle)

6 Have you been offered a place on an English or maths course in the last 12 months?

Yes /No (Please circle)

7 Do you think work should help you with your English and maths?

Yes / No (Please circle)

8 Do you have anything at all you would like to say or bring to our attention about English and maths support while working with the Council?

9 Do you have anything at all you would like to say or bring to our attention about any courses you have done while working for the council?

Thank you for helping us by completing this quiz. If you would like to put your name on the questionnaire, you may, but you don't have to. Please post it in the internal post to: Workforce Development Research Team.

Appendix 3. Interview Plan

1. What did you think of the questionnaire? (Show them to remind them).
2. Do you like going on courses?
3. Does your line manager help you at work? How?
4. Do you feel confident with numbers? At what level would you put yourself?
5. Have you done any courses for work? Which ones? Did you find them useful? How did you find out about them?
6. Do you talk to your manager about where you want to go and what you want to do in the future?
7. In what section do you work?
8. Have you heard of *Skills for Life*? What are they? Do you think the council should offer you training in them? Has anyone ever asked you if you would like training in them? Do you think it would have any effect on how well you did your job?
9. Does your manager go on training courses? Does (s)he talk to you about them at all? What does he say about them? Does (s)he ever show you how to do things at work? What type of things? Do you find this useful?

6. Small and Medium- sized enterprises (SMEs)

Engaging new learners in rural SMEs

Somerset Learning Partnership

Anne D Adams, Dr Margy Cockburn, Jim Crawley, Sandi Wales

Introduction

The issue of skills remains high on the national agenda, with *Skills for Life* key to the success of the imagined transformation of skills levels among the workforce in England. Engaging new learners employed in Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs¹) has always been a challenge. This is particularly so here in the rural South West, where the vast majority of businesses are classed as SMEs. Numerous barriers to engagement in learning have been shown to exist for employees and employers, including access, timing, location, advice and reluctance of adults to reveal their needs in LLN.

The main aim of this project was to investigate how adult LLN practitioners can engage more employers and employees from SMEs, within the Somerset area, in LLN provision in the workplace. To achieve this the project set out to:

- analyse the factors which influence the engagement of employers and employees in *Skills for Life* provision
- identify the implications of those factors for *Skills for Life* practitioners
- advocate changes to practitioner practices to better support the needs of SMEs in rural areas

Context

The research was managed by the workplace adviser of the South West *Skills for Life* Unit. The Unit is supported by the South West Regional Development Agency, the six local LSCs, Government Office South West and Ufi/learndirect. The Unit works within the South West Region to lead, co-ordinate and support developments in LLN provision, to strengthen and add value to local activity and to build capacity.

There are four main FE colleges in the region (Bridgwater, Yeovil, Strode and Somerset College of Arts & Technology) and, as part of an LSC funded short-term project, they each appointed an EEPW to offer essential skills training for employees and this had already been operating with some success. The work of the EEPWs provided access to both SMEs and their employees, so was used as the central focus of the project. It was originally intended that all four EEPWs would contribute as practitioner/researchers but, in the end, only two (from Strode and Yeovil) were able to take part.

The SMEs approached in the course of this project operate across a range of industries which

1. An SME was defined by the European Commission on 8 May 2003 as a medium-sized company employing less than 250, small – less than 50 and micro – less than 10

are typically found in the South West. They included a company involved in both the design and manufacture of specialist automotive parts; manufacturers and finishers in the food and drink industry and producers of local products – typically cider, baby foods, desserts and cheeses and an area representative of family and micro businesses in tourism and leisure. For all businesses approached, seasonality and/or shift working were part of the normal working pattern.

Research design

The project team began by carrying out a literature review to ensure that any possible duplication of research done up until now in this field was avoided. The review also yielded some “conventional wisdoms”, such as barriers around timing, access, flexibility of providers, etc. This enabled the team to design the semi-structured questionnaire/prompt sheets for the interviews, in a way that captured views relating to these issues (see appendices 1 and 2).

Two main methods of data collection were used to create a collaborative and co-operative methodology:

- Semi-structured interviews with individuals, using the questionnaire/prompt sheets mentioned above.
- Group discussions/focus groups.

This methodology enabled the participants to make decisions on whether they would prefer individual interviews, or group discussions/focus groups. The decision, of course, depended on the practical commitments and time restraints of the employers and employees.

Employer Engagement Project Workers (EPPWs), who were already familiar and “accepted” in the workplace, adopted a sensitive but open and engaging approach, to ensure that views were freely expressed and valued. As a goodwill gesture, all participants were rewarded with a £10 gift voucher which emphasised the appreciation of their contributions towards the research.

Some research participants (employees) also agreed to take part in a workshop at the national *Skills for Life* conference in London. Statements based on the “conventional wisdom” gathered from the literature review were discussed and workshop delegates were asked to state whether they felt they were “fact or fiction”. Then, in turn, a response to each statement was given by one of the research participants, sharing their own personal views.

Method of data collection

Each researcher collected data using semi-structured interviews and/or group discussions/focus groups. A common agreed approach was followed to introduce the interviews or discussions, to reinforce confidentiality and explain key terms to interviewees before commencing. Audio recording of interviews was agreed in advance as optional, but was, in practice, used in every case.

The interviews in participating SMEs were carried out in the workplace, using the two previously-agreed questionnaires/prompt sheets (see appendices 1 and 2) as a schedule. The

two EEPWs interviewed 26 employees, seven management staff from five SMEs, and one EEPW also interviewed one other worker involved in supporting SMEs in Somerset. The employer questionnaire / prompt sheet was also used with this interviewee. The project manager interviewed the two EEPWs together and held a further interview with an LSC Employer Engagement Broker, in order to determine the barriers that he had encountered in the previous 12 months with regard to engaging SMEs. These two interviews used questions derived from the themes of the project and did not use a pre-determined set of prompts.

Data analysis

The analysis of research data took place through a series of linked stages. In addition to the audio recordings each interview was written up as notes, with some comments included from the researcher. There were, therefore, three main bodies of data:

- Notes from interviews carried out by EEPW 1.
- Notes from interviews carried out by EEPW 2.
- Notes from the interviews carried out by the project manager.

(plus audio tapes of all interviews).

The project team continued through to full data analysis in four ways:

- The project manager produced a summary of the questionnaire data from SMEs in note and table form.
- The researchers revisited their data and made additional notes to further develop analysis.
- The project team met for a day to review all the data as a group.
- After that day, the research support person listened to the interview with the EEPWs again and noted key points which could be used in further analysis.

Specialist computer software was not used for analysis, but tables in MS Word provided a useful means of collating and presenting some data for further discussion at the group review meeting. This approach to gathering data allowed the project team to draw out depth and breadth in the data through sharing and reflection; the group meetings were particularly helpful in this respect.

The analysis was largely qualitative, as the questionnaires/prompt sheets were purposely not designed to give quantitative results. General themes were drawn out from the interviews, using quotes, etc. with only a few statistics included (e.g. gender, age, time since last learning).

Literature review

Factors affecting engagement of employers and employees

A key regional document for the South West (SLIM 2002) provides a well-constructed analysis of issues, needs and development priorities in this field, and its structure has been used to shape this section of the review.

Although the need for higher LLN skills for jobs is increasing and data on the negative impact

on the earnings for individuals of poor LLN is robust (DfES 2003b), data on the genuine costs and benefits of LLN training is limited (SLIM 2002). Businesses also do not necessarily readily accept a responsibility for training for LLN, and in a very recent report (FSB 2004), levels of satisfaction by rural small businesses with the LLN skills of their employees was seen to be high.

Making the positive case for improving LLN among the workforce to the businesses themselves can therefore be problematic. The target groups in the workforce tend also to be those who are less motivated to learn, and do not necessarily recognise that they have LLN needs, so convincing them and raising their aspirations is a further challenge. (Ananiadou et al. 2003; LSC 2003; LSW 2004; Macleod 2003; Payne 2002; SLIM 2002).

The current infrastructure for workplace learning in general and LLN training in particular, and its relationship to the national qualifications framework, appears not to provide a clear and accessible 'way in' for most employers and employees (Ananiadou et al. 2003; Atkin and Merchant 2004; FSB 2004; Hughes et al 2002. Learning South West 2004; Payne 2002; SLIM 2002).

Although provision in LLN for workplace learning is developing rapidly, and examples of good practice exist, particularly in large organisations, the range, quality and effectiveness of provision, and its effectiveness for SMEs, still needs considerable improvement (Ananiadou et al. 2003; LSW 2004; Macleod 2003; Payne 2002; Taylor and Cameron 2002; SLIM 2002).

Research relating to LLN does not provide a full, detailed and analytical picture of the scale and nature of the LLN problem in the workplace, models of best practice, or models and arguments for developing LLN provision. (LSW 2004; Payne 2002; SLIM 2002).

The status and development of LLN teachers and organisers has tended to be low, and on the boundaries of provision. There is a need to develop their skills, enhance their status and draw more into mainstream (SLIM 2002).

SMEs in particular

SLIM (2002) includes a series of issues which are considered to be particular to SMEs:

- Finding the right contact person is not always easy.
- The dispersed rural geography of the SW makes marketing, development and delivery of training to SMEs time consuming and expensive for providers in comparison with more traditional provision.
- Core business often keeps SMEs 'too busy' to engage in training
- Networking with competitors is regarded with suspicion.
- Perceptions that staff would be lost through training were present.
- Previous bad experiences of training leads to a negative attitude.
- Subsidised training can develop expectations that it will remain free.
- Problems with lack of in-house facilities for training.
- Lack of flexibility perceived by providers in terms of time and location.

Emerging models

There is evidence emerging (LSW, SSW 2004; Maclaren and Marshall 1998; SLIM 2002) that partnership and brokerage models can be successful; to do so they appear to need to include employers, employees, education and training providers and professional bodies, and adopt

multilayered, sustainable approaches. (LSW, SSW 2004; Maclaren and Marshall 1998; SLIM 2002). The curriculum used should be flexible, coherent, negotiated and adaptable, and make maximum use of the potential of new technology (Macleod 2003; Payne 2002; SLIM 2002). Wider issues and benefits such as a focus on student personal development, sustainability in learning, organisational development and social inclusion should not be lost amongst business priorities. Existing achievements in family learning, basic skills and work-based learning should be recognised and built on (Atkin and Merchant 2004; FSB 2004; LSW 2004; LSW / SSW 2004; Maclaren and Marshall 1998; Macleod 2003; SLIM 2002; Sutherland 2002; Taylor and Cameron 2002; Taylor 2003)

Summary of literature review

- A more co-ordinated overall approach is needed from strategy through to delivery and quality assurance. (Atkin and Merchant 2004; FSB 2004; LSW 2004; Maclaren and Marshall 1998; Macleod 2003; SLIM 2002; Sutherland 2002; Taylor and Cameron 2002; Taylor 2003).
- Providers and other key stakeholders need to reach out to employers, positively promote their services, and provide clear information, advice and guidance to support this. (Atkin and Merchant 2004; LSW 2004; LSW / SSW 2004; SLIM 2002; Sutherland 2002).
- LLN training should include consolidation and progression, and encourage learning in the workplace within a strong culture of equality of opportunity, partnership and social cohesion. (LSW / SSW 2004; SLIM 2002; Sutherland 2002; Taylor and Cameron 2002; Taylor 2003).
- New approaches to personnel involved in workplace LLN, including learning brokers/advisors; workplace learning champions; outreach workers; employee development workers will be needed. Central importance of non teaching staff (Atkin and Merchant 2004; LSW 2004; SLIM 2002).
- Considerably more funded training for LLN staff is needed (SLIM 2002).
- Initial and diagnostic assessment/needs analysis models need to be developed and incorporated, including an 'initial facilitated reflection process' for businesses (LSW 2004; SLIM 2002).
- Substantially more research needs to be undertaken in this field (Payne 2002; SLIM 2002).

Findings

Engagement with learning in SMEs in the South West

The project worked entirely with medium-sized enterprises, so the findings are based on data from medium-sized companies only. The employees interviewed were all actively engaged in learning, and there were no interviews carried out with employees who were not engaged in learning. However, employees were asked if they knew anyone who had not been able to take part in learning and, if so, they were asked to state the reasons why.

An LSC worker employed to engage with SMEs in the geographical area concerned was also interviewed. The rationale was to ensure that the view of someone working with non-engaged SMEs was represented. This interview reinforced some previously held beliefs, as shown in the literature review, about some employers:

"They are very reluctant ... they don't want to upset their employees employees are like "hen's teeth" and they don't want to do anything that is going to cause them difficulties and so therefore they put in place strategies for dealing with issues that occur, without really getting down to the issue of trying to sort them out."

What factors influence the engagement of employees and employers in SMEs in rural areas?

Current data on adult learning demonstrates that older adults who have been out of learning for some time are amongst the most difficult to engage in learning. (DfES 2003a and b). The profile of the interviewees on this project suggests a different story. Our group of interviewed employees fall mainly into the categories of the conventionally hard to engage, yet had all been successfully engaged in learning. The table below indicates the gender, age and time elapsed since last formal learning of the employees who were interviewed:

Male	Female
12	14

Age	Number
16–25	5
26–35	3
36–45	9
46–55	7
56–65	2

Time out of formal learning	Number
Less than 6 months	1
6 months–2 years	4
3–5 years	5
6–10 years	2
11 plus years	14

In summary, of the 26 employee respondents, 18 (70 per cent) are over 35 and 21 (81 per cent) had been out of learning for between three and over 11 years.

All of the participants had become engaged in *Skills for Life* learning at their workplace, suggesting that even the most hard to reach potential learners can still be reached. They were also very positive about gaining qualifications (some 75 per cent indicated they would wish to gain a *Skills for Life* qualification), which has often been seen as unlikely to be the case with hard to reach learners.

The wider benefits of learning

The participants (employers and employees) indicated the key benefits which emerged from the learning were indeed the wider benefits of improved confidence and morale amongst participants; improved team work across the business; improvement of employee CVs and, among the employers, recognition of their employees' LLN needs.

The benefits of learning which were most mentioned by employees were growing confidence, better team morale at work, better awareness of their *Skills for Life* needs, improved job skills and prospects to go further in life and work.

"I want to go on now and do maths – I was always terrible at maths at school. I want to learn the basics; I just want to be able to do it for me." (Employee)

The benefits of learning which were most mentioned by employers were growing employee confidence and morale, better team working and improved business prospects.

“What really impressed me is the confidence that comes with doing the courses, it just shines through, and that makes a difference to what happens on the job.” (Employer)

What innovative strategies can be used by practitioners to deliver the most appropriate Skills for Life provision for SMEs in rural areas?

The two researchers who were working as EEPWs were experienced *Skills for Life* practitioners, and also had significant experience of management in business. The engagement in the project enabled them to reflect critically on their practice and, as a result, to more fully conceptualise the innovative strategies to engage SMEs overleaf. Although they had worked independently of each other before the beginning of the project, as the work progressed, a remarkable similarity of approach emerged. The “value added approach” is the term they have used to describe the way they carried out their work, and it has at its centre the notion that engaging SMEs and their employees in *Skills for Life* learning would also bring wider benefits to themselves and their employers.

The SMEs were offered an opportunity for all their staff to take part in a one hour taster session. Particular care had been taken to offer flexibility to support working patterns across the business and thus encourage the widest possible participation. There had been no coercion or reward offered by the employer, other than the offer to attend during a scheduled one-hour period during the working day. All taster sessions were delivered as small group sessions and were delivered over a number of days to accommodate the whole workforce.

The EEPWs were direct, open and positive about the learning that was available. It was made clear that it would involve assessing and developing maths and English skills in a positive, supportive and enjoyable way, and that these starting points could lead on to national qualifications.

Quotes from interviews supported these views:

“It was important to see the tests and what you were letting yourself in for. You don’t want lots of talk and big ideas, you want the nitty-gritty to measure yourself against so you know what level you are.” (Employee)

It was also made clear that this was personal development and therefore confidential to the individual, i.e. there was not a company “agenda”.

“It has really helped me to have the confidence not to hide the fact that I am not at all good at spelling.” (Employee)

The employers and employees were encouraged to see the opportunity to take part as something which ‘added value’ both for the company and the employees as individuals.

“I really enjoyed it; it made me feel good about learning and quite pleased with myself that I did it. I would really like a computer at home now.” (Employee)

Business needs, flexibility and responsiveness were central but these were approached through the idea of an entitlement to learning.

The approach was one of “brushing-up” and developing latent skills in the broadest sense and consciously did not make use of training needs analysis or organisational needs analysis as this was considered to be too focused on the organisation, rather than on the individual and would have made poor use of limited time. It should be noted that topic driven embedded LLN courses (e.g. Step up to Interior Design) were offered in half of the sample companies. However employees overwhelmingly chose qualification based courses leading to the National Test in preference; the “feel good factor” of achieving the National Test was promoted from the outset.

“Going on the course has made me feel good about myself. I feel great that I’m not just a dumb blonde. I have proved a point. My father would have been very proud”
(Employee).

Other innovative strategies to overcome challenges

There were organisational strategies to overcome. The EEPWs needed to innovate and negotiate around some of the inflexible and problematic infrastructures within their colleges and associated organisations, especially relating to enrolment and training. The taster learning activities that were agreed with companies as being suitable were not large enough to meet enrolment expectations (i.e. were less than three hours). This meant a database was created specially to keep a register of participants, rather than using a college MIS system.

Accessing appropriate staffing at the times companies wanted training was also problematic. These barriers did not stop the work going ahead, however, but certainly slowed some aspects down – for example finding appropriate times for taster sessions to fit in with work patterns and finding sufficient appropriate and available staff to deliver sessions.

Key messages

Some of the conventional notions of the barriers to successful engagement, such as access, timing, location and reluctance of adults to reveal their LLN needs, have been questioned. This should provide encouragement to practitioners that success is possible in what might otherwise have been considered hopeless circumstances. It should also underline that there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach and adapting any approach to the particular context is all-important.

The research findings support a simple and positive model of approach and delivery that overcomes some of the identified problems. The model is time-effective for all parties with a minimum of commitment required from employees/ers in the initial stage. Furthermore organising “taster” sessions that are open to all offers learning opportunities across the company (including management) so is wholly inclusive and non-discriminatory. Access is gained to those with considerable support needs within a positive approach that avoids singling out any individual as “having problems”. The decision to take up the learning opportunities offered is the learner’s own rather than a decision imposed by the company and the focus of the courses offered is personal development rather than company-identified targets and this is seen as empowering by respondents.

- Key to the effectiveness of engaging new learners is a programme negotiated around learners’ personal needs and aspirations and a flexible, on-site model of delivery.
- Practitioners can be open and honest in offering LLN support and qualifications, as this has not been a deterrent.

- LSC needs to recognise and fund units of learning activity as short as one hour to assist engagement of learners; provider infrastructure and data capture will also need to adapt to allow for this type of provision.
- Providers must recognise specific staffing implications for on-site working, such as:
 - Recognition of travel time in both timetabling and contracts.
 - Staff availability for continuity of provision for the whole calendar year – i.e. 48-50 week/year provision.
 - Staffing and recognition of support required for unsocial hours working – i.e. nightshifts.
 - Focus of timetabling requirements around the shift change-over period and the need for flexibility to support students on alternating (double day) shifts.
 - Providers need to employ dedicated workplace *Skills for Life* practitioners in order to establish positive relationships with SMEs.

Comments on the process of carrying out a practitioner-led research project

As researchers already working amongst the target community, much was achieved in a short time. As established practitioners, the researchers had a good knowledge of the rural economy served by their organisations and within which the SMEs operated. This allowed pertinent questions to be framed.

Benefits:

- The relationship with respondents was already formed to varying degrees, which made the research more time efficient for all parties.
- As practitioners, the researchers had established access to company management and employee groups who might otherwise have been reluctant to come forward.
- The research process has highlighted common aims between companies and education partners and cemented the relationship.
- The research relationship has led to one major spin-off for respondents. This has been their public participation at a national dissemination event – learners and employers have been given a voice and their comments not merely consigned to print.

Challenges:

- The major challenge with practitioner-led work is undoubtedly dovetailing research and dissemination time into a full teaching schedule. However, within a small-scale project the gains far outweigh the difficulties.

Conclusions

This project has given researcher-practitioners the opportunity to take an objective overview of their own practice and reflect on their approach. Dissemination events have widened and enriched the researchers' network with benefits for all parties.

The involvement in funded research has also had a spin-off in terms of the self-perception of the researchers as engaged in a valuable and valued field. Essential Skills, as an area, has not completely shaken off the "Cinderella" syndrome and having an official body recognise the worth of the work being done has certainly improved self-esteem.

Of particular impact has been the researcher/practitioners' realisation that, completely independently, each has adopted similar and successful models of engagement. This has both validated the approach and removed some of the feelings of isolation in carrying out employer engagement work.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Employers' questionnaire

- Start interview by defining "training":
"literacy, language, numeracy and IT (or English, Maths & IT), delivered in the workplace"
- Ensure participant of confidentiality

About the company and its training policy

No of employees (total in company)	
No of employees taking part in provision	
Postcode/location	
Sector	Construction Manufacturing – if so, what is manufactured? Distribution Finance & business Education and public admin Health & social work Other?
Is your business seasonal?	Yes/no
Do you have "down time"?	Yes/no
Does your company have a Union Learning Representative?	Yes/no
Do you have Investors in People status?	Yes/no/applying
Are you an ISO 9000 company?	Yes/no/applying
Does the company have a dedicated learning centre on-site?	Yes/no
Do you have training budget?	Yes/no
Do you have training policy?	Yes/no
Who has responsibility for your training plan?	
Have you had any advice and guidance on training from any external agency? If so, which? How long ago?	
Have you ever been approached by any other external training agency? If so, which?	
Can you describe your experience of working with other external training agencies?	
Does legislation require you to get involved in training initiatives? (eg Care Sector's need to have 50% of workers qualified to NVQ 2 by 2005 – excluding Health & Safety, etc)	

Before the course

Before the course began, did you feel that your employees needed training in Literacy, Language or Numeracy?

What were the major reasons why you accepted our offer?

Free
On-site
Flexible timings
Relevant to workforce
Relevant to your business needs
Delivered by local experienced staff
Believed it would improve staff retention
Other?

On accepting this offer of learning, did the company make the learning opportunities available to all employees (whatever the job role) if they chose to attend?

Before the course began, what did you envisage or suppose to be the greatest barrier to uptake on the course?

In "actuality", what were the barriers?

Was a Taster session offered to everyone in paid time? Yes/no

How were the employees identified (those who take up the training)?

Did the employees participate in their own time or did you allow them paid time off?

About the course

How well is the training provided matched to your organisation's skills needs/training/business plan?

Have you experienced any problems in your involvement?

Time off for learning
Covering employees' jobs
High proportion of part-time or temporary workers
Responsiveness of the provider
Bureaucracy and paperwork
Attitudes of the employees
Attitudes of the supervisors/line managers
Finding space in which to accommodate learning sessions
"presenting" the learning to the workforce
Other?

How concerned are you that the trainees might use their new skills to apply for a better paid job in another company?

Does the company reward or provide recognition of employees' personal development?

When the initial short course finishes, will you continue to upskill your workforce, by:

Referring new employees
Encouraging learners to progress/continue
Establishing a workplace learning centre
Other?

What factors encourage you to continue participating?

Do you feel that employee perception of your company has been enhanced by the learning opportunities you have made possible?

Now you've had experience of the course, what have been the **positive** outcomes?

Now you've had experience of the course, what have been the **negative** outcomes?

Appendix 2: Employees' Questionnaire

- Start interview by defining "training":
"literacy, language, numeracy and IT (or English, Maths & IT), delivered in the workplace"
- Ensure participant of confidentiality

About you and your previous learning

Gender	M/F
Is English your first language?	Yes/No
If no, which is your first language?	
If English is not your first language, how/where did you learn English?	
Age	16-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65, 66+
If you're learning in a group of people, is there any help you would need?	Sight impairment, hearing impairment, dyslexia, other
When was the last time you did any formal learning?	Less than 6 months, 6 mths-2 yrs, 3-5 yrs, 6-10 yrs, 11+ yrs
What is the highest qualification you possess?	

About your job

How long have you worked here?	Less than 6 months, 6 mths-2 yrs, 3-5 yrs, 6-10 yrs, 11+ yrs
Do you work full-time or part-time?	Full-time/part-time
Is your job seasonal?	Yes/No
Do you work shifts? If so, what are they?	
Are you a member of a trade union?	Yes/No
How well do you agree with the following statements: "My job suits me well"	strongly agree, tend to agree, tend to disagree, strongly disagree
"I am happy in my current job"	strongly agree, tend to agree, tend to disagree, strongly disagree
"I can do a more challenging job than the one I am doing"	strongly agree, tend to agree, tend to disagree, strongly disagree
"I am keen to get on and find a better job"	strongly agree, tend to agree, tend to disagree, strongly disagree
"Sometimes I find my job a bit of a struggle"	strongly agree, tend to agree, tend to disagree, strongly disagree

Before the course

Who did you hear about the pilot from?	Manager
	Union/union learning rep/TUC learning services
	College
	Taster session
	Other?
Did you have any concerns before you came on the course? What were they?	
Were your worries (above) borne out or unjustified?	
What motivated you to sign up to the training?	Chance to get a qualification
	Held in work time
	Free course
	Chance to improve literacy & numeracy for everyday needs
	To help the children with their learning
	Other?
Who motivated you to sign up to the training?	Your colleagues
	Your ULR
	Your manager/supervisor
	Your family
	The college tutor
	Other, eg forthcoming redundancy

During/after the course

Were there any difficulties for you accessing the learning opportunities?	
Was the course what you expected?	
How were you supported by your employer?	
Has it helped you ...	At work
	At home
	In any other way
What have you got from the course?	
Which of the following statements reflects your views:	The training will mean I am less likely to lose my job
	I hope to be promoted or regraded as a result of training
	I hope to get a wage increase as a result of training
	I am more likely to apply for a better job with better pay with another employer
	I am more likely to do a further course
Have you got any plans for further learning? If yes, where?	Yes/no
Overall, what have you found out about yourself as a result of taking part in this course?	Skills?
	Personality?

Do you know anyone who hasn't been able to access the learning opportunities?

If so, why not?

Would you be willing to take part in any dissemination events concerning this research project? (All expenses paid!)	Yes/No
--	--------

Thank you for taking part!

In appreciation of your time, please accept this gift voucher with our compliments!

Appendix 3

The National Picture regarding SMEs

'There were an estimated 4.0 million business enterprises in the UK at the start of 2003. This compares with an estimated 3.8 million business enterprises in the UK at the start of 2002. This estimate, and figures in this release, comprises the private sector (including public corporations and nationalised bodies) and therefore excludes Government and non-profit organisations. Almost all of these enterprises (99.2 per cent) were small (0 – 49 employees). Only 26,000 (0.6 per cent) were medium-sized (50 – 249 employees) and 6,000 (0.2 per cent) were large (250 or more employees).' (National Office of Statistics 2004:1).

Rural enterprises

'Studies estimate that rural firms represent nearly a third of all registered businesses in England, with 8 per cent more per head of population than urban areas. In addition, rural business employs over 5.35 million people across the country, in areas beyond the traditional farming and tourism sector.' (Federation of Small Businesses 2004 : 4).

The South West

'The highest concentration of rural businesses are in the South West (24 per cent,) Scotland (18 per cent) and the South East (16 per cent.) The lowest numbers of rural businesses are in Greater London (1 per cent) Yorkshire and Humberside (3 per cent) and North East (3 per cent) Only in Scotland did the number of rural businesses exceed the urban ones.' (FSB 2004:8).

LLN skills in the South West

"It is estimated by the Basic Skills Agency that 670,000 residents of working age have poor literacy and numeracy skills and there is also a significant minority of residents of working age (370,000) who have no qualifications." (SWRDA 2002 : 15).

Afterword

We asked Dr Marina Niks, from the University of British Columbia, to offer a comparative perspective on the contribution of the NRDC's initiative to the field of practitioner-led research more generally. Dr Niks has based her comments on her own extensive experience of working as a 'research friend' with practitioner research groups in Canada.

It is not typical to find a collection of research reports by adult literacy and numeracy practitioners. Except for a similar collection from Alberta, I have not come across one. I was aware of the NRDC's initiative and eager to see what practitioners in England chose to research, how they went about it, what challenges and successes they elected to share and how they described their experiences in writing. It was refreshing to find that even within one general theme – new ways of engaging new learners – the six reports describe a variety of topics, approaches, contexts and findings. This variety reflects the potential of practitioner research as it offers perspectives held by, and suggestions proposed by, those who work with learners on a daily basis.

One of the goals of the NRDC initiative was to impact the field. The six reports give the readers the sense that the research has already made an impact. The chosen research methods have changes embedded in them. For example, the report by the Somerset Learning Partnership describes how they implemented one-hour taster sessions. This impact on the field is also reflected in the quick implementation of findings to programmes such as the links that the team from East Riding of Yorkshire made with a local primary school cluster, or the changes that Joanne Hall and Lynne Ireland report.

There are other ways in which these projects have already made an impact. The consortium based in Sheffield, and the practitioner researchers who studied the need for special support in the workplace for health care assistants, state that they have acquired new skills. The Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council group describes how practitioners gained insights into other partners' perspectives. I would argue that seeing practitioners engage in research can have a significant effect even on those who are not themselves carrying out research as they recognise that they too can produce knowledge and that their knowledge and perspectives are important. The fact that the practitioners were funded by NRDC added a layer of recognition that cannot be underestimated. As the team from the Somerset Learning Partnership states:

The involvement in funded research has also had a spin-off in terms of the self-perception of the researchers as engaged in a valuable and valued field. Essential skills, as an area, has not completely shaken off the "Cinderella" syndrome and having an official body recognise the worth of the work being done has certainly improved self-esteem. (See section six of this report).

In British Columbia we have also found in the last few years that the involvement of adult literacy practitioners in research has had an impact in how their organisations regard them. Kate Nonesuch, a literacy instructor at Malaspina University College, was referred to as a "professor" by the local media by virtue of her involvement in the practitioner research project 'Dancing in the Dark' (2003). She remarked that in spite of having worked at the college for nearly 15 years, it was only after she started the research project that she was invited to present her work to administrators. When Leonne Beebe who has over 30 years experience

as a literacy and numeracy instructor applied to her institution's Research Ethics Board for permission to conduct her project with her students' writing for data, she realised she was the first practitioner going through this process at the University College of the Fraser Valley. The whole process, Leonne found, was as educating for her as it was for the board members.

In Canada there has been a growing interest in practitioner research within a larger research in practice framework that also includes reading and responding to research, reflecting on practice in light of research, and applying research findings to practice (Horsman and Norton, 1999). The underlying interest in most of the Canadian initiatives has been to make an impact on the field by bringing practice and research closer together, by means of facilitating "conversations" between practitioners and research. These conversations have taken many shapes. In British Columbia since 1999 we have supported practitioner research in a number of ways. We have offered research training workshops that focus on demystifying the research process while giving practitioners tools to carry out projects on their own, facilitated online conferences about specific research topics and projects, supported individuals and groups who were doing research, advocated for more funding for practitioner research, developed new projects that included practitioners as researchers and coordinated practitioner research projects. What we see emerging is what Paula Davies and Diana Twiss, two practitioner-researchers described during one meeting as "the creation of a culture of research amongst practitioners" in the province.

There are several similarities between the projects presented here and those carried out in British Columbia. For example, both initiatives place a high value on collaboration among practitioner researchers. NRDC's initiative encouraged groups led by practitioners to apply. In British Columbia we have supported the formation of research teams (Dancing in the Dark, 2003; Hardwired for Hope, 2005) and created projects where practitioners working on individual projects had a small group of colleagues also involved in research to share their experiences with RiPP. We believe that one of the main benefits of engaging in research is breaking the isolation that many practitioners feel in their work. Even when they work in large organisations and are friends with their colleagues, practitioners tell us that they do not have a space to talk about and reflect on their practice. Being part of a research team can create that space. In that sense, practitioner research is a professional development activity.

Another similarity between the projects presented here and the ones British Columbian practitioners have taken on is the close relationship with a mentor or what we call a "research friend." Susan Pilbeam and Michelle Worthy explicitly refer to some of the characteristics that made this role work for them.

It was also advantageous that the research 'expert' for the project was a known staff colleague who we could communicate with and involve with the project easily .

In British Columbia, university graduate students have mostly played the role of research friends. We are now starting to see practitioner-researchers seek methodological advice and feedback on drafts from other experienced practitioner researchers.

There are also some parallels in the issues that practitioner researchers bring up in their studies. For example, 'learner confidence,' a topic that is referred to in at least two of the NRDC practitioner led research projects, has also surfaced in several of the projects in British Columbia. Naming the Magic (2001) includes five techniques for documenting non-academic outcomes. "Confidence" appears in most of them. In Dancing in the Dark (2003), self-

confidence is articulated as one of five aspects of agency. In all cases, there is an emphasis on the close interaction between confidence and learning.

The fact that similar ideas are emerging in different contexts suggests the need to create opportunities for practitioners to share their experiences with each other. Producing written reports and making these available in print and online is one way of encouraging the exchange of ideas. However, we have heard from many practitioners that they prefer other ways of communication. Face-to-face events such as conferences and workshops seem to be the preferred formats. In Canada we have held three events that brought practitioners and researchers together to discuss ongoing projects and possibilities for the future. We have also been fortunate to have a few British Columbian practitioners attend the RaPAL conferences in the past three years. They come back energised by the way their research has been received and by the potential of future relationships with practitioners England.

Opportunities to share ideas among practitioner researchers would also allow us to explore peculiarities in the way different groups approach research. While reading the six reports included in this volume, I realised that most of the reports produced in British Columbia have placed a strong emphasis on describing the collaborative nature of the research process. We have encouraged practitioners to extensively reflect on how they and their practice were affected by their involvement in research and how their research was influenced by their experience as practitioners. We invited them to bring themselves into the reports. This has led to lengthy reports that take a long time to write and demand a deep self-reflection process. As I work with practitioner researchers I realise that the hardest stage in research for them is the writing phase. Even when research activities involve additional – many times unpaid – hours, I have found that they are able to collect data without major hurdles. But, although practitioners are used to writing as part of their daily practice, research analysis and writing can become an insurmountable obstacle. As I read the NRDC reports and consider the duration of these projects, I realise that we have a lot to learn from our colleagues in England.

We have a lot to share as well. In the past seven years we have developed a strong network of practitioners interested in research in practice in British Columbia. We understand that there are some contextual factors that have facilitated the development of this network.

Practitioners who work in colleges in the province typically have a stable, secure and well paid job that includes paid professional development time. These practitioners are therefore more likely to engage in research projects. We also know that collaborative projects add a layer to the projects that can be both rewarding and challenging. Working with others can be enriching and fun. Negotiating process and content can also be hard and takes time.

Practitioners who have had some involvement in policy-making or professional organisations are typically more interested in participating. As much as they are interested in their daily practice, they also want to affect the field. Research in practice offers them the opportunity to develop new knowledge and articulate what they know as practitioners in a way that can be “heard” by others in and beyond the field.

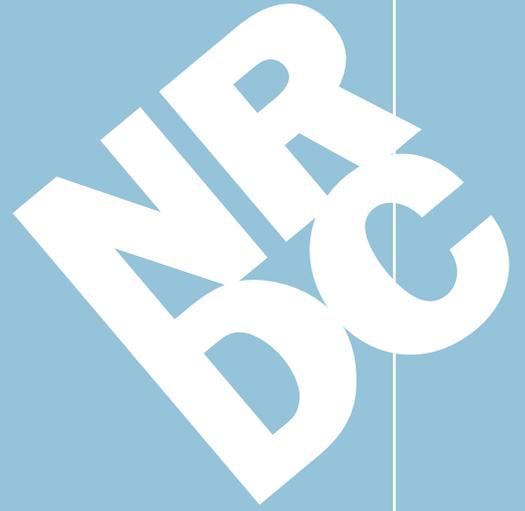
Research has also been described as the “flavour of the month” for funders. Some practitioners have complained that while funding for program delivery has been cut, research funding seems to have increased. We have seen how practitioners apply for research funding to compensate for the shortcomings of their program delivery budgets. There is mistrust on the part of some practitioners about the underlying political decision to fund practitioner research. One concern is that practitioners will be adding one more task to their already full workload without an appropriate compensation. Those who see a hidden agenda in the

impetus for research in practice also argue that because practitioner research projects are arguably inherently small scale and qualitative in nature, policy makers, academic researchers and funders will never consider it to be “true” research regardless of the quality and the potential impact on the field.

These are exciting times for research in practice in Canada. A national project is underway to develop a framework for research in practice in adult literacy. With many opportunities for practitioner engagement, this project will conduct an inventory of research in practice in adult literacy in English speaking Canada and make recommendations for the future direction of the movement. The learnings we can take from experiences in other countries can only enrich the findings and contribute to the development of practitioner research across contexts.

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