



National Research and Development Centre
for adult literacy and numeracy

LISTENING TO LEARNERS

Practitioner research on the Adult Learners' Lives project

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LISTENING TO LEARNERS:

Practitioner research on the Adult Learners' Lives project

The centre pages of this publication contain brief reports on six research projects which were undertaken by practitioner-researchers as part of the NRDC Adult Learners' Lives project during 2003. All six projects involved listening to learners in order to understand links between learning provision and everyday lives more fully, as a basis for developing practice.

BACKGROUND

The Adult Learners' Lives project, based at Lancaster University Literacy Research Centre, is studying people's uses of language, literacy and numeracy at home, in the community and at work, their reasons for attending and continuing to attend classes, their perceptions of what they are learning and of how useful it is to them. As part of its first year activities, this project incorporated a Teacher-Researcher Fellowship Programme. It aimed to ensure an active role for practitioners in the research of the NRDC, and to build capacity for organisations to carry out research and reflective practice in the field of adult Language, Literacy and/or Numeracy (LLN). The involvement of teacher-researchers in the project ensures that the work done is relevant, geared to the needs of adult learners and that its value is recognised by teachers.

The programme was designed for adult LLN practitioners currently working in the field. The six teacher-researchers on the programme were all practitioners at institutions which are research sites for the Adult Learners' Lives project:

Gill Burgess and Carol Woods at
The Adult College, Lancaster

Dianne Beck and Kath Gilbert at
Liverpool Community College

Andrew Hudson at Blackburn College

Russ Hodson at Accrington and
Rossendale College

HOW THE RESEARCH WAS DONE

The six teacher-researchers were seconded to the programme for one day a week for a year (January – December 2003) to learn ways of doing research, to design and carry out their own research project in collaboration with the Adult Learners' Lives research team and to feed back their work to colleagues in their work-place. Their research was integrated with the aims of the Adult Learners' Lives project, and involved them in all stages of the research: establishing aims, design, data collection, data analysis, writing, and identifying implications for their own practice and for their colleges.

The programme provided an intensive experience of undertaking research as a practitioner. As an introduction to research issues and methods, they all took the 'Reflective Research and Evaluation for Professional Practice' Module of the Diploma in Adult Basic Education: Literacy, Numeracy and ESOL at Lancaster University. They had regular meetings with the Adult Learners' Lives researcher attached to their institution to advise them on the design of their research, as well as occasional meetings with the Adult Learners' Lives team as a whole, including a residential seminar focusing on data analysis.

The researchers presented their research at workshops for different audiences, including colleagues and managers in their own colleges, and learning partnerships. They also made poster displays and panel presentations about their research at NRDC regional and national conferences.

THE FOCUS OF THE PROJECTS

Each of the six projects contributes to the overall focus of the Adult Learners' Lives project by researching a particular aspect of the relationship between adults' everyday lives and their LLN classes. Three of the case studies (by Dianne Beck, Russ Hodson and Carol Woods) focus on issues of access and barriers to learning, identifying factors which providers should take into account when planning their recruitment, admissions and support programmes. The other three (by Kath Gilbert, Gill Burgess and Andrew Hudson) focus on learners' everyday numeracy and language practices, identifying ways in which provision can recognise, build on and relate more closely to learners' lives.

THIS PUBLICATION

The research projects were presented as posters which were displayed at several conferences and workshops. This publication is based on the posters.



“ Yeah, like that when I said first time I’d writ [sic] Christmas cards, I’d never ever writ a Christmas card out for anybody. People were saying, “Blimey, what’s wrong with her, she’s sent Christmas cards”. I’d actually done it myself. ”



Barriers to learning

Carol Woods, The Adult College, Lancaster

QUESTIONS

Why do some people experience difficulties in engaging with learning when there are no quantifiable barriers (e.g. recognised learning difficulties, long-term illness, financial constraints, child-care problems)?

Is there a case for success in overcoming non-quantifiable barriers being acknowledged as part of achievement?

Should the overcoming of non-quantifiable barriers (i.e. lack of confidence and low self-esteem) be recognised as being worthy of ‘accrediting’ within the **Skills for Life** remit?

Can the funding of courses be justified if learners only gain non-quantifiable outcomes?

GETTING TO THIS

I can say things better now, I know more words, I used to swear a lot, I didn’t know words.

Gradually things come to you, you think, “Oh, I can do that now”.

I can fill forms in myself without asking him (the husband).

I can understand bills now and share household responsibilities more.

As my confidence increases I’m not as shy. People notice me more.

WHY NOT?

You think you’ve left school and that’s it...too late to go.

I know that authority and officialdom frightens me. I can’t understand it.

It feels weird coming into these places.

You feel real foolish because you can’t spell. You feel inadequate.

I was terrified (of approaching college).

Wanted to come for 20 years, but always worked shifts so never been able to.

I was taught by nuns, I was petrified of them; I don’t think I’ve lost that fear.

HOW?

Funding
simplify the funding approach.

Community
take learning out of colleges.

Inclusive
plan and develop appropriate learning opportunities.

Advertising
positive messages – “Build on skills you already have”.

Workplace Skills for Life initiatives
bringing employees’ and employers’ needs together.

A preliminary investigation into how family/domestic violence affects learning

Dianne Beck, Liverpool Community College

AIMS

The aim was to establish if there were any links between, primarily, female adult literacy needs and victims and volunteers in the field of domestic violence

CONTEXT

The founder of the domestic violence project was an adult learner at the Community College. She had requested a course in Business English which I then delivered in the Drop in Study Centre in her local area. Her needs were to write competent formal letters, complete complex forms e.g. to register the project as a company and as a charity; to participate in and chair formal meetings and to raise awareness of the impact of

domestic violence through the development and delivery of courses on the subject within the community and to professionals involved in the care, rescue and treatment of survivors.

Through my involvement with the Community College and the research guided by Lancaster University Literacy Research Centre, I am now Company Secretary of this organisation.

METHODOLOGY

Preliminary interviews were held with the founder of a community-based, voluntary domestic violence project, a volunteer working in the project and a survivor who had been assisted by the project. The initial interviews were held in a Drop in Study Centre.

Secondary interviews were held in the interviewees' homes and picked up some common themes expressed in the first interviews.

Both the founder of the project and the researcher kept notes/journals expressing their thoughts and feelings about the development of the project and the research into it, particularly

where it impacted on literacy needs and skill acquisition.

There has been little research into this area in the UK; a larger body of research exists in Canada and the USA and I have tried to compare and contrast my experiences with a leader in the field, Jenny Horsman.

More recently, because of spontaneous disclosures of histories of domestic violence by other adult learners in the College, I have sent a questionnaire to all literacy practitioners in the Basic Skills Unit to ascertain whether my experience of disclosure is unique or shared by colleagues and if shared,

what numbers and frequencies, ages and genders are involved.

IMPLICATIONS

For the College:

The founder of the group I was working with accessed all manner of courses to help train volunteers, both in the formation of the company and in the development of training courses for the project to deliver. Most of the courses accessed were run in the project's own offices, delivered only to the group, were held in the evenings and carried expenses or child minding funding to eliminate obstacles to learning. It became clear that the founder was in the process of establishing a community of literacy: all decisions, mission statements, statements of aims and plans for future development being made as a group with each member empowered to contribute through developing their knowledge within the

group. The Community College could access these groups through the developing community networks and satisfy training needs by being more flexible in delivery and times of provision. Investigating sources of funding to help pay expenses and childcare costs would be of benefit to the college in the recruitment of 'learning groups'.

For the practitioner:

Rather than shying away from the subject of family or other kinds of violence within the teaching environment, practitioners should help air the subject and bring it into the open. The weight of keeping family violence secret bears heavily on women and children and directly and indirectly affects their efforts to educate themselves

– particularly when the perpetrator keeps them isolated through financial or other controls and prevents them from pursuing courses and making contact with professionals who might help effect their escape. In the course of this research, both the interviewees I have worked with and those quoted by Jenny Horsman, find an enormous relief in telling their stories, finding common cause with others and being freed of their pain through disclosure. Being heard and believed is the first step out of the circle of degradation and misery that is family violence.

FINDINGS

? 12 years old:

- Disaffected due to poor achievement.
- Low concentration due to keeping the 'secret'.
- Sense of isolation.

? 18 years old:

- Follow in mother's footsteps (learned behaviour/low expectations).
- Follow in dad's footsteps.
- Begin abusive relationship cycle.
- Sense of isolation.

Midnight

Shouting/Fighting.
Too scared to sleep.

? 6 years old:

- Too tired/anxious to learn in school → low achievement/disapproval.
- Family violence effects/issues not raised at school.
- Sense of isolation.

? 24 years old:

- Leave/ return/ leave abusive partner.
- Shame/hurt/pain/trap.
- Ask children to keep quiet.
 - Worry about effect of keeping quiet on children.
- Need to help children with school work.
- Realise need for college.
 - Partner objects.
 - Sense of isolation.

9 AM

Too tired to learn.
Teacher shouts.

3 AM

Anxiety/Disturbed sleep.
How is mum?
Is she crying?
Is she hurt?
Where is dad?

6 AM

Very quiet – too quiet.
How is mum?
Will she be able to go out today?
Can she take me to school?

• Return to partner

➔ reenter cycle

• Return to college

➔ escape cycle

? 30 plus:

- Learn more.
- Take + give support.
- Raise awareness.
- Be aware of learning needs and have power to address them.

? 30 years old:

- Leave/return to abusive partner.
- Begin college course (again).
- Learn something → sense of achievement.
- Leave partner (again) – risk life/death.
- Seek support/education.
- Begin to feel sense of empowerment.

Learners' perspectives on numeracy

Andrew Hudson, Blackburn College

AIMS

To investigate what learners perceive to be numeracy, and their experiences with numeracy practices in work, education and everyday life.

CONTEXT

The learners were attending a Jobcentreplus work based training programme at Blackburn College. The aim is to improve numeracy, literacy, language and employability skills to help learners into employment.

FINDINGS

Numeracy tasks and methods

Learners highlighted tasks involving money, measure and time to be the core competencies they used and needed. They felt that their methods were not the same as those taught in education, and were a composite based on work, life and educational experiences.

Coping Strategies

Strategies to avoid numeracy tasks or to enlist the help of others were carefully constructed to avoid appearing to struggle with numeracy tasks. Numeracy practices often involved social interaction, situated in everyday activities.

IMPLICATIONS

Learners often develop involved situated strategies, understandings and methods. There is a need for these to be recognised and utilised in new learning experiences. This would help to establish and embed new learning into a learner's life.

This could be achieved through:

- Curriculum planning which includes identification of learners' current numeracy practices. This could operate alongside the new diagnostic assessment packages.
- Teaching strategies which interact with learners' lives. Bringing the outside into the classroom and significantly taking new learning outside of the classroom. Learners recording numeracy events through videos, photos and journals help to facilitate this process.



“ I saw this builder. I wanted to know does he use centimetres or inches and if he had any tips. He measures stuff everyday and if he doesn't know how to do it, who does? ”

“ Timetables are confusing, I get baffled, so I would ask someone waiting. If they point to the timetable, I pretend I've forgot my glasses, I even do this with my kids. ”



ESOL women learners and their lives

Gill Burgess, The Adult College, Lancaster

“ Nationality is different but mother thing is same all over the world. ”

AIMS

To investigate:

- how the women cope with accessing services for themselves and their children;
- how they become involved in supportive groups in the community;
- how such involvement may support their learning of spoken English;
- how they experience learning and using English; and
- how they see themselves as wives, mothers, learners, workers, individuals.

CONTEXT

Interviews with women from a variety of national, educational and professional backgrounds who share the common experience of settling in the UK, having babies and bringing up small children here; all are ESOL learners past or present from the college.

FINDINGS

Learning and using English: awareness of different *competences* leads to differing learning *aspirations*; language is a *barrier* to work, health and children's services and to integration with the local community; *prior learning* experiences are important; a premium is placed on *practice*; involvement in *community groups* is valuable for language learning; *college* is a place for learning and *confidence* building; *barriers* to formal learning opportunities are *childcare*, *health issues*, *cost*; *feelings* are crucial and inseparable from *learning* and *life* issues.

Involvement in community groups depends on whether the woman is joining *established* communities – *individual* contacts are crucial for *isolated* women; the *church* plays a key role; *children* can form bridges with others; *literacy* links women with community groups.

Coping - dependence and independence: women are *supporters* as well as *supported*; access a wide range of support from different individuals/groups; are *resourceful* in overcoming barriers; use their *literacy* skills to develop their oracy; are *de-skilled* and *re-skilled* – which is inextricably linked with *language learning*; face *uncertain* futures; are sometimes coping *alone*.

The women present themselves as focused on *home* and *family*; as putting their own needs *after* those of their families; as regarding their own *professional* development as secondary to their husbands'; as seeing their learning as a way of *fulfilling* themselves as individuals; as *proactive*, *reflective* and *responsible* learners, making the most of their *opportunities*.

IMPLICATIONS

- Valuable community resources exist which we could draw better on to support our learners.
- College providers need to be creative and proactive in reaching isolated women learners.
- Less experienced/confident learners need support/training to turn informal encounters into learning opportunities.
- Flexible childcare and attendance arrangements are an essential part of access to learning for ESOL women with young families.
- Current funding arrangements appear to be depriving women of language learning opportunities at the time they need it most – which can ultimately handicap the whole family.
- We must keep listening to our learners – they know what works for them.

How maths shapes lives:

Exploring attitudes to and uses of numeracy in daily life
Beginning to bring everyday numeracies into the classroom

Kath Gilbert, Liverpool Community College

AIMS

As a numeracy practitioner in a drop-in context, I felt I wanted to get a deeper understanding of the role of numeracy in people's lives and experiences. I hoped this would help to democratise the teaching situation and make learning more relevant.

CONTEXT

I interviewed maths learners and centre workers (mainly women with families) in a small adult college site in the dockside area of Liverpool, where I teach. I asked about past learning histories and present uses and feelings about numeracy.

I also ran a questionnaire around the centre, and suggested that students photograph their maths experiences.

“ Even the poorest people in the city are like that - doesn't matter how much you budgeted, you're still budgeting. Even if you're only living off £30 a week, you're still budgeting to make sure the kids are fed. ”

Eileen

THE BRICK WALL WHERE LEARNING STOPPED...



OR DIDN'T

'I think everything you need to know, you acquire – I kind of learnt more what I needed to know at the time I needed to learn it' **Trish**

Lauren photographed the view which was once full of busy streets and houses. Now you can see the river. We worked out how far you can see now.



QUESTIONNAIRE

You need a shelf for an alcove which measures 24 inches. In the shop the shelf lengths are in cm.

Would you:

- a) have measured in cm in the first place?
- b) go home and try again?
- c) ask for help?
- d) convert it to cm? – please say how
- e) buy what you think looks right?



DIRECTIONS

The most important outcome for me was the privilege of seeing the unique quality of each life viewed through the lens of numeracy – three-dimensional beings with a road behind and ahead. During the research, the questionnaires and photos, the classroom began to feel more open and democratic, more reflective of people's lives. By respecting people's own methods

and understandings, the questionnaire helped to put these on the agenda and reinforce people's confidence in their abilities. I would like to develop this process to focus attention on everyday practices and experiences and thereby open up opportunities for people to situate learning more firmly in their lives.

The role of referral agencies in *Skills for Life* provision in Stacksteads and the implications for learners

Russ Hodson, Accrington and Rossendale College

AIMS

- Investigate learners' journeys
- Evaluate the role of referral agencies
- Compare / contrast learners' experiences
- Evaluate the impact of collaborative and competitive approaches to Skills for Life learning in Stacksteads

CONTEXT

Stacksteads is one of three wards which make up Bacup, a town with a population of 15,000 situated in the borough of Rossendale, Lancashire. It is part of the 20% most deprived wards in the UK. There are an estimated 3,200 people with literacy / numeracy needs in the town yet there is very little Basic Skills provision in the area.

Stacksteads sits within the reach of four colleges: Accrington & Rossendale, Burnley, Nelson & Colne and Rochdale. Accrington & Rossendale College has tried unsuccessfully to put on Basic Skills provision in the area for a number of years.

There is a "gap" in the research in this area and I hope to develop a "learner voice" through my research findings.

There is also a distinct social aspect to the research: I am not viewing Basic Skills in isolation but as part of a chain of related social factors which prevent people from participating, achieving or progressing in learning.

The research was tied in with a real educational situation – a Basic Skills class being run in a Youth Training centre in the area.

Data snapshot 1 –

ex-heroin-addict who has severe bouts of epilepsy

Researcher: What other agencies have you been involved with in the last couple of years? Give me a picture of who else has been involved in your life.

Student 1: None, I've been on me own...If it weren't for this place I'd still be up the wall...If it weren't for {a key worker in the centre} I dunno where I'd be. She found me sat down in Bacup crying me eyes out in the pouring rain. She brought me here...

Researcher: Going back to your writing, what writers do you like?

Student 1: Science fiction...I've got this idea at the moment, it's like everyone says there's been too many vampire films, it's about vampires who kill people 'cos they're heroin addicts, it's something in the blood, it's like vampires doing the world a favour...by killing all the smack heads.

Data snapshot 2 –

referral agency interview

We run IT classes and have a project with milestones and outcomes which are well known by other bodies in the area. However, another organisation set up IT classes in a building opposite ours.

Data snapshot 3 –

key partner in local forum

I don't think it (the forum) has achieved anything yet ...we have shared goals coming from central government but we don't have the ability to share it out. God help Fred when he sticks his head out of the water and says "I want to do English" 'cos we're all on him... Floating around with this idea of learned helplessness is a feeling that education's "not for me, it's for other people"...it's a very poor area and learning to read and write are not top of the agenda, finding the dinner money or feeding the kids is top of the agenda.

Local groups are dependent on agencies and aren't strong enough to drive forward without the statutory agencies, many of which are only in the area for a limited timespan.

METHODS

Classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with learners, interviews with key informants (partners, tutors and referral agencies) and photos.

FINDINGS

- Wide variation in the level of support offered to individuals by referral agencies
- Wide variation in prior learning experiences
- Lack of shared goals amongst partners
- The importance of a relevant curriculum to learners

IMPLICATIONS

- Reaching out to learners project set up to work on the ground with the communities of Stacksteads
- Collaboration versus competition philosophies need to be unravelled to improve Basic Skills learning experiences
- Much greater shared ownership of the design of learning needed (multi-agency)

This research was carried out as part of the NRDC Adult Learners' Lives project, based at Lancaster University and directed by David Barton and Roz Ivanič. The six teacher-researchers on the programme worked alongside Adult Learners' Lives researchers. They were all practitioners at institutions which are research sites for the project.

Gill Burgess and Carol Woods, based at The Adult College, Lancaster, worked with Karin Tusting.

Dianne Beck and Kath Gilbert, based at Liverpool Community College, worked with Yvon Appleby.

Andrew Hudson, based at Blackburn College, and Russ Hodson, based at Accrington and Rossendale College, worked with Rachel Hodge.

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