



National Research and Development Centre
for adult literacy and numeracy

Research briefing



Persistence

This is one of a series of publications produced to provide up-to-date summaries of recent research findings from the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) and associated organisations. The series features summaries in each of the following areas:

- Embedding
- Family literacy, learning and numeracy (FLLN)
- Formative assessment
- ICT
- Literacy and ESOL
- Numeracy
- Persistence
- Priority groups
- Progression

Persistence

Introduction

There are no simple answers to the question of why some adult learners persist with their studies while others do not. Even the best teachers and providers will find that some of their students leave their course early. Some of these individuals will never return to formal learning. Often, however, they are merely dipping out rather than dropping out.

To understand persistence, which has been under-researched in the UK, it is essential to distinguish it from retention. Whereas the latter is a provider-centred concept, persistence puts the learner at the heart of the equation – in effect, turning retention inside out.

NRDC is currently engaged in a multi-year study of persistence for the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA). This paper summarises findings from this ongoing study, as well as those from other recent research projects, including a series of NRDC practitioner-led research initiatives investigating persistence and perseverance. One of the challenges we are now researching is how formal learning providers can support learners even when they are no longer in formal learning, and how to encourage them to move back into it again. That will require more flexibility from providers, and more support for learners who are outside any formal learning environment. In a word, the system must become more demand-led.



Persistence

What the research shows

Persistence is a learner-centred concept, focusing on how, from the learner's point of view, he or she is supported throughout the learning journey, both during formal study and during periods of self-directed learning.

Dropping out or dipping out?

Putting the learner at the heart of the equation helps illuminate the complex nature of persistence. Whereas a provider-centred focus might see a non-continuing learner as dropping out, a learner-centred focus acknowledges that learners may merely be 'dipping out' for a while, generally because of other, more pressing responsibilities such as family and work. Research shows that breaks in attendance do not necessarily equate to dropping out altogether, and that inconsistent participation or attendance does not necessarily mean non-persistence (Litster, forthcoming 2008). That is, while from a provider's standpoint a learner may appear to be irregularly engaged in learning, from a learner's perspective periods of formal provision sandwiched by breaks of self-directed study or even no study at all may be natural and logical components of a lifelong learning journey.

A system that seeks to facilitate persistence and progression should be able to accommodate such an 'irregular' or 'inconsistent' journey. One of the challenges the NRDC is now investigating is how to help keep such learners 'warm' until they are ready to dip in again. For more information on the development work NRDC is undertaking in this area, go to www.stickwithit.org.uk

Barriers to persistence

Learners may face many obstacles to persistence (Litster, forthcoming 2008). These obstacles can be classified as situational, institutional and dispositional. Situational barriers include the problems of day-to-day life that prevent continuity in study such as

illness, childcare and family problems, employment issues, and very practical concerns such as cost, time and distance to travel.

Institutional barriers are those related to the rules and procedures of the organisation where learning is taking place or the restrictions relating to the system of provision itself. These can

Persistence is retention turned inside out, putting learners, rather than providers, at the heart of the equation.

include factors such as inconvenient class times or limited ranges of provision. Issues to do with accreditation and funding also come under this category.

Dispositional barriers concern learners' attitudes to learning. These are often informed by previous poor experiences and issues such as low self-confidence, lack of motivation, and emotional constraints developed as a result of turbulent and unpredictable lives. Of the three types of barriers, dispositional ones may have the most impact on learner persistence. As this is also the area that is least understood by educationalists, more research is urgently required.

Time on task

Time can also be a significant barrier. American evidence (Porter et al. 2005) suggests that, in the English context, learners are likely to need on average 150–200 hours in time on task to improve their literacy by one level within the Skills for Life qualifications framework. ('Time on task' refers to the combination of formal and self-directed

learning.) From many learners, this is a daunting length of time.

Subject differences

NRDC has found that barriers to persistence may differ across subjects. Hurdles faced by numeracy learners often differ from those faced by literacy learners. The former are more likely to cite dispositional barriers such as psychological and academic issues, whereas ESOL learners are more likely to face barriers to access to provision and progression routes into employment.

Demographic characteristics

Despite the complex combination of barriers to persistence, or perhaps because of it, there appear to be few differences in the demographic characteristics of adults who persist in their studies and those who do not, although further work is currently being carried out in this area by NRDC. However, some differences have been noted. Research in the US indicates that immigrants, those over 30, and parents of teenage or grown-up children appear more likely to persist (Litster, forthcoming 2008).

Non-traditional learners

Non-traditional learners – including those who are 'hard to reach' or 'at risk' – appear to be the least likely to persist. For these learners to persist, engagement with learning has to occur at the 'right time', with the emphasis on small steps, such as an improvement in self-confidence, rather than a focus on qualifications. It may also help to encourage learners to speak openly and honestly about aspects of their learning which they feel present barriers to participation, and negotiating a way forward with them. Furthermore, providers and practitioners can develop ways to serve these learners, in partnership with support organisations. This may mean taking steps to provide structure and ongoing support to learners stepping back into the formal learning environment.

Supporting and encouraging persistence

There are a range of strategies that can encourage learners to persist. Underlying all of them is awareness. Teachers, support staff and managers need to be aware of the complex lives led by most learners, and of the positive and negative forces that support and hinder persistence.

Positive forces include:

- sponsors/mentors
- learner satisfaction
- goals
- effective pedagogy
- learner-centred organisational cultures.

Sponsors – individuals in learners' social networks who support them, either directly in their education or indirectly, e.g. through providing childcare – have been shown to be particularly important in encouraging persistence (Porter et al. 2005).

Achievement and goals

Promoting a sense of learner satisfaction and achievement can be particularly important for vulnerable learners, for whom achievement is often more appropriately measured in terms of so-called soft outcomes such as increased self-confidence, trust and motivation.

Setting and revisiting goals also helps improve persistence. Practitioners should help learners to identify goals and the steps necessary to achieve them, and learners should be encouraged to measure their progress along the way. For practitioners the challenge is to match learning activities to learners' interest, needs and goals, and then to engage in continual dialogue with learners about their progress.

Pedagogy

Effective pedagogy and supportive teacher-learner relationships also encourage learner motivation and persistence.

Effective pedagogy requires:

- good planning
- clear objectives
- personalising learning as far as possible
- creating a safe and relaxed learning environment
- encouraging the development of a community of learners.

The latter involves helping learners work together to support each other, and letting learners know that their absence is noticed (and felt) and that teachers and fellow learners care about the reasons for the absence.

Organisational supports

Organisational culture and climate also play a key role. This goes beyond the creation of a relaxed learning environment, and includes more structural factors such as the provision of good information, advice and guidance, along with appropriate progression routes. Support strategies should be put in place, including assistance in areas such as childcare, transport and referral procedures for external agencies. Organisations also need to review their operational procedures in order to remove any obvious barriers to persistence such as limited opening hours, lack of flexible, drop in and off-site classes, and limited access to IT. They should also review their curricula to ensure they meet the needs of their learners, in particular vulnerable or non-traditional individuals.

Practitioner professional development can also help support persistence. Skills for Life teachers need information on strategies and tactics that can support increased learner persistence; teachers may also benefit from training programmes on techniques for developing dialogue with learners.

Learners who appear to be dropping out may merely be 'dipping out'. A system that seeks to encourage persistence and progression should be able to accommodate this and keep these learners 'warm' until they return to formal learning.

Persistence

Scope of this paper

This paper summarises recent research on persistence in adult learning. The paper draws in particular on three NRDC research and development initiatives.

Motivating Skills for Life learners to persist, progress and achieve (the 'Stick with it' project)

This research and development project, carried out by the NRDC for the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA), investigates persistence in Skills for Life, with the aim of improving provision. For more information on this ongoing project, go to www.stickwithit.org.uk

Practitioners leading research

This is a collection of reports (Hamilton et al. 2007) on projects carried out as part of the practitioner-led research initiative funded by NRDC and the European Social Fund between 2004 and 2006. The initiative funded small groups of practitioners to carry out research projects in their own organisations. The projects drawn on for this paper had the goal of understanding purpose and perseverance.

Progression from non-counting provision to counting provision

This NRDC research project uses quantitative analysis of Learning and Skills Council (LSC) data in order to begin developing a picture of the actions of individuals who enrolled on LSC-funded courses between 2000 and 2005 that were not counting towards Skills for Life targets.

References and further reading

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Persistence

Key points

- Whereas retention is a provider-centred concept, persistence puts the learner at the heart of the equation – in effect, turning retention inside out.
- Research shows that learners who appear to be dropping out of provision may only be ‘dipping out’ for a while, generally to meet other commitments.
- Despite the complex combination of barriers to persistence, there appear to be few differences in the demographic characteristics of adults who persist in their studies and those who do not.
- However, to encourage persistence by vulnerable learners, the emphasis should be on small steps, such as an improvement in self-confidence, rather than on qualifications.
- Among the range of strategies that can help learners to persist, a particularly important factor appears to be the presence of a ‘sponsor’: someone in the learner’s social network who supports and encourages their learning goals.

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