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RaPAL

Research and Practice in Adult Literacy

Two broad themes have emerged in this bumper "open" issue which criss-cross through the sections; *the effects of government policy* on practice, teacher education, assessment and ensuing consequences; and *learners* as readers, writers, listeners, speakers, reviewers and active citizens living in various social and cultural contexts. It all makes for an exciting "multi-themed" offer to appeal to researchers and practitioners alike.

The Research and Practice in Adult Literacy Network

Who we are
RaPAL is an independent national network of learners, practitioners, teachers, managers and researchers engaged in adult literacies and numeracy. Our support is generated by membership subscription only, and we are therefore completely independent in our views. RaPAL is the only national organisation focusing on the role of literacies in adult life.

What we do
- **campaign** for the rights of adults to have access to the full range of literacies in their lives
- **critique** current policy and practice where it is based on simplistic notions of literacy as skill
- **emphasise** the importance of social context in literacy
- **encourage** collaborative and reflective research
- **believe** in democratic practices in adult literacy
- **create** networks by organising events (including an annual conference) to contribute to national debate
- **publish** a journal three times a year

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We are a friendly group - open to new members and new ideas. Please contact us with any contributions (views, comments, reports and articles) and do not be put off if you are new to the field or if you have not written for a publication before. This Journal is written by and for all learners, tutors and researchers who want to ask questions about this field of work. It does not matter if the questions have been asked before. We want to reflect the many voices within adult literacy and numeracy work and to encourage debate. Why not join in?

Further information can be found at our website: www.rapal.org.uk

The RaPAL Journal expresses a variety of views which do not necessarily reflect those of the editorial group.

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Editorial

Welcome to this 'open' issue of the RaPAL Journal, Spring 2007. Usually, each RaPAL journal contains articles that relate to a topical 'theme' chosen by the production team. Occasionally, however, we find it very useful to produce an 'open' issue so that people whose interests might lie outside our choice of themes have an opportunity to contribute. We have gathered together a large number of articles about teaching literacy, ESOL, numeracy and teacher education that we think you, our readers, will regard as lively, challenging and thought provoking.

Ralf St. Clair opens Section 1 by providing a glimpse of the next RaPAL journal (which looks at international perspectives about literacy) when he talks about the future of literacy research in Canada where changes are taking place. Ralf was invited to participate in discussions about the changes, one of which was concerned with whether or not there would be value in a unified approach for assessment and accountability across the country. RaPAL readers have already experienced the positive and negative effects of this approach and it is interesting to read about it in a Canadian context. Ralf also joined in discussions with one of the few non-profit making literacy organisations in Canada which is trying to ensure that corporate sponsors keep funding research without adopting 'a deficit driven view of literacy skills as an economic productivity issue'.

Sue Oakey, who is a Skills for Life consultant working with The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) in the East of England, tells us about how MLA worked in partnership with The Associated Colleges of the Eastern Region (ACER) to develop a creative approach to the delivery of the Level 4 literacy curriculum. Teacher educators and tutors were introduced to the expertise of archive staff and the original resources held in Record Offices. Sue tells how ACER recommended that these be developed within a literacy as a social practice approach.

Kate Cross describes how her learners on an ESOL and Citizenship course invited their MP to visit and discuss issues that concerned them, including the proposed cuts in ESOL funding from September 2007. This was an example of 'direct citizenship action' and was a very positive experience for the learners.

Between sections one and two there is a conference report by Amy Burgess who attended the Basic Skills Agency Annual Conference in London in March. It had one principal theme: Basic Skills and Employability. Different representatives from employers gave presentations about Basic Skills developments in their own particular field.

Section two starts with Cathie Lacey having a 'conversation' with Margaret Herrington about some of the pedagogical issues in teacher education brought about by the introduction of the new standards from Lifelong Learning, UK (LLUK), which have to be in place by September 2007. They point out that 'Not only are the standards changing but also all teacher education programmes will have to demonstrate that they are using new units of assessment devised by LLUK. This will involve a sea change in the way awarding bodies operate, including higher education institutions (HEIs)'.

Researcher/practitioner Vicky Duckworth shares the effects of her PhD studies on her role as tutor and teacher educator. The aim of the research project is to investigate the impact of joining a basic skills programme on learners and follows their subsequent progression routes. Her article looks at the impact their very participation in the project has on them. It also looks at the effects of working with a researcher/practitioner on fellow members of staff as well as the impact on Vicky herself.

Embedding literacy and numeracy into vocational courses is a very topical issue at the moment and Catriona Carson and Elaine Traynor describe the piloting of numeracy tuition to support nurses with the calculation of drug dosages in an intravenous drug administration course. It involved one of their team attending the course and identifying the different numeracy applications embedded in

often complex language to plan for the numeracy support course. This is a vocational area where accuracy is vital.

Section three opens with Juliet Merrifield who takes an in-depth look at the different accountability systems in the target-driven Skills for Life strategy and argues that these are carefully set up to control and manage. She makes a compelling case for what she calls 'intelligent accountability' which would be 'part of a system that learns', a system which would require innovation and flexibility.

Lin MacKenzie looks at adult learners in three different types of provision: a community-based adult education centre, a family learning centre and a NACRO centre. She explores concepts such as 'social capital', 'cultural capital' and 'social identity' and shows how these are important contributory factors in deciding whether learning is successful or unsuccessful.

Alex Kendall discusses her presentation to the British Educational Research Conference in 2002. It was concerned with the reading habits of 16 to 19 year old students in colleges across the Black Country which she was researching for her PhD. She explains how the data she presented was 'misread' by journalists of the educational press who instinctively assumed that if students did not read novels then they were deficit readers. Alex's reaction to this changed the whole course of her PhD.

Jay Derrick writes about some initial research findings based on the effects of assessment on learner motivation. He expresses misgivings about policy documents that emphasise summative rather than formative assessment and mentions research which indicates that formative assessment produces better attainment.

Kieran Harrington, our Reviews Editor, asked learners in Galway to review some new publications from Gatehouse. It has always been RaPAL's policy to communicate and value the views of both practitioners ***and*** learners and as these resources are publications written with learners in mind it was therefore appropriate to ask learners to review them. Thanks to Paula McDonagh and Marie Summerville for their reviews.

Two broad themes have emerged in this bumper "open" issue which criss-cross through the sections; *the effects of government policy* on practice, teacher education, assessment and ensuing consequences; *and learners* as readers, writers, listeners, speakers, reviewers and active citizens living in various social and cultural contexts. It all makes for an exciting "multi-themed" offer to appeal to researchers and practitioners alike.

We would like to say a special thank you to the authors and also to those who have contributed in other ways to the production of this particular issue. In alphabetical order they are Yvon Appleby, Amy Burgess, Ellayne Fowler, Kieran Harrington, Deirdre Parkinson, Irene Schwab and Karen Tusting.

Gaye Houghton
Colleen Molloy

RaPAL Journals 2007 Themes and Deadlines

Issue	General Theme	Copy deadline
Summer 2007	International Literacies	Fri 29th April 2007
Autumn 2007	Conference 2007 edition: Learning journeys - voices and identities in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL	Fri 28th Sept 2007

What's next in Canadian literacy research?

Ralf St.Clair

Ralf St.Clair works at the University of Glasgow in the Department of Adult and Continuing Education. Before returning to his native city, Ralf worked in the US and Canada in community education and literacy.

In the autumn of 2006 I was lucky enough to be invited to take part in two conversations about the future of literacy research in Canada, mainly because I had done some work with the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) in 2004. The NLS is the branch of the federal government that supports adult literacy and numeracy throughout Canada, though it has to be quite careful about how it performs this role. Literacy and numeracy education in Canada is a provincial matter, as is all education, and the federal government restricts its involvement to research and programme pilots, leaving delivery of services to more local levels. Nonetheless, the federal investment is substantial: between 1997 and 2003 a total of 434 projects were funded across the country in both official languages and every province and territory. Most provincial and territorial organisations are positive about the contributions of the NLS to literacy across Canada.

First Conversation

The first meeting I attended, in Ottawa, was hosted by the NLS, and included the authors who contributed a chapter of a book on accountability and assessment in adult literacy edited by Pat Campbell and published by Grass Roots Press in Edmonton. The topic of the conversation was how literacy programmes could assess learning and evaluate their services, and whether there would be value in a unified approach across Canada. Among those involved in the discussion were Jay Derrick and Juliet Merrifield from the UK, where such issues have, of course, become very important in recent years. My colleague Alisa Belzer (from Rutgers, New Jersey) and I had contributed a chapter looking at the experience of developing national approaches in the US, England and Scotland. These three nations have significantly different approaches, so the emerging issues and consequences of the systems are markedly different. We argued very strongly in our analysis, however, for recognition of the idea that assessment approaches affect the whole educational system, flowing backwards through instruction to influence learners' entire experience in a given setting.

During our meetings the position taken by most of the contributors - and probably the position that will emerge in the official summary - was that accountability and assessment are extremely complex areas, and that "one size fits all" approaches need to be approached with some caution. In particular, there are particular political costs likely to be associated with any attempt to impose a national strategy across Canada. The tack taken by the federal government is often to make "trans-Canadian suggestions," but there are risks in literacy of developing potentially expensive materials based on an approach that is not accepted by the territorial and provincial literacy organisations, meaning that the materials are never put into practice. Among our recommendations was the importance of involving practitioners and policymakers at every level in the involvement of accountability and assessment philosophies and tools.

The discussions about accountability were damped down considerably by the news, released earlier in the week when we met, that the NLS had suffered a substantial funding cut. A new Conservative federal government wanted to make its mark on the Canadian polity, and the NLS were an easy target. Firstly, the NLS are situated within a department that is primarily concerned with employment policy, and that historically tended to offer only limited support to strategies involving education as a pathway to work success. Secondly, the NLS' background is relatively radical - it was established as a way to get federal funds to local community development projects, and has historically emphasised innovative and inclusive research approaches such as practitioner research. Given its organisational location and unfashionable approach, the NLS was an easy target for cuts. The long-term effect of these cuts is still unknown.

Second Conversation

The second meeting, in Toronto in October, was somewhat different. I was invited by ABC-Canada to contribute to discussions they were having about what their role in research should be. ABC-Canada is one of the very few national literacy organisations in Canada, and they were taking advantage of the appointment of a new executive director to think about their contribution to literacy and numeracy education,

particularly areas where they felt they could do well and areas where they were perhaps less effective. ABC-Canada is a non-profit organisation, so one of their continual challenges is keeping corporate sponsors involved without falling into a deficit driven view of literacy skills as an economic productivity issue.

There are important questions about the contributions a voluntary organisation can make to any research area, even with substantial long-term support from the government or other major funder. However, the participants in the discussion did spend some time thinking through the different uses for information on literacy education, and who would be primarily interested in these uses. This framework was used to contextualise discussions about how the organisation could leverage its influence most effectively. In summary, the organisation began to think of research in literacy and numeracy not as a general knowledge generation project, but as a strategic and focused process of knowledge management. This fits well with the federal government's approach to funding research in universities, and should also make it easier to demonstrate the specific benefits of ABC-Canada's work to potential funders.

What happens next?

While the two conversations were conducted among quite small groups, I think that it is possible to see them as representing quite an important change in literacy and numeracy research in Canada. This change is by no means all bad, but there are some potentially negative effects. Any decision not to pursue a unified system of accountability across Canada is, on one level, absolutely justified in theoretical and practical terms, but on another level it makes it difficult to argue for the effects of literacy and numeracy education as an educational sector. So while a consistent framework would be a hard sell to local policymakers and practitioners it might also provide a degree of protection for their work. The decision of ABC-Canada to step back from its emphasis on the conduct of research and to look instead at brokering knowledge makes a lot of sense for the organisation, but it is important to think what this might mean for a sector already divided by province and territory. There is the potential for a vacuum to appear for cross-Canadian approaches and techniques, which could end up being filled by private providers of materials and curricula as is already the case in the US and ever more so in England.

The Canadian case illustrates the vulnerability of approaches to literacy research and practice that emphasise local factors; it is all too easy for a broad brush unfamiliar with, and unaffected by, the subtleties of local experience to sweep in and claim to have universal solutions. Doing the right thing by emphasising literacies as specific local practices carries the risk that others may not, and promises of effectiveness are sometimes heard more clearly than carefully worded cautions in the current results-orientated political context.

To end on a more upbeat note, those involved in the Canadian scene at local and national levels seem to be asking the right questions, and the conversations are still very much open. It will be extremely interesting to see what developments the next few years will hold, and RaPAL will continue to build bridges with our North American colleagues so that we can work together to ensure the best possible outcomes for practitioners and learners.

Connecting Skills for Life Level 4 Literacy Teacher Training to Museums, Libraries and Archives.

Sue Oakey

Sue Oakey is a Skills for Life Consultant with MLA East of England.

Connecting Curriculum to Culture

The Museums, Libraries and Archives (MLA) Council in the East of England is the regional agency for museums, libraries and archives. MLA East of England has a commitment to learning in the widest sense and a particular interest in working in partnership with Skills for Life providers and learners.

A previous MLA East of England funded Skills for Life project called 'All Aboard!' demonstrated the interest and success experienced by Skills for Life providers and learners in Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Luton, Norfolk and Suffolk who accessed the resources available in museums, libraries and archives as part of their Level 1 and Level 2 literacy and numeracy studies.

All Skills for Life tutors are required to gain a level 4 qualification in literacy and/or numeracy as part of their continuing professional development. MLA East of England saw the potential for a creative approach to the delivery of the Level 4 literacy curriculum by introducing Teacher Educators and tutors to the original resources held in Record Offices and the expertise of archive staff. The Associated Colleges of the Eastern Region (ACER) agreed to work in partnership with MLA East of England and recommended Tutor Educators who would be interested in piloting a Level 4 Literacy teaching session as part of their 2006 provision.

The Project

The challenge of this project was to select appropriate resources from the vast amount of archive material available and ensure that the pilot sessions were relevant to the Level 4 course and met FENTO standards. ACER recommended the Barton and Hamilton (1998) approach that identifies literacy as a social practice embedded in the social and cultural environment of the community. Original archive resources provide examples of key social, cultural and historical factors that have affected the development of language and literacy.

MLA East of England Skills for Life Consultant, Sue Oakey and ACER Training and Development Advisor, Bob Read worked with staff in Essex, Hertford and Norwich Record Offices and The Friends of Norfolk Dialect to prepare web based tasks and a three hour teaching session that could be delivered in a local archive.

MLA East of England and ACER wanted Teacher Educators to meet local archive staff and experience using original resources rather than photocopies.

The generic teaching session plan was prepared and referenced to FENTO standards. The session, differentiated in each area by using local resources, was piloted with teacher trainers at Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford, North Hertfordshire College, Hitchin and City College, Norwich. Hertfordshire County Council used the resources as part of Quality Initiative work with a community based charity.

The project made use of film and sound archives, photographs and maps as well as documents. The web based tasks provided information about regional dialects and an introduction to the methodology of researching personal and local history. The teaching session covered aspects of dialect, accent, Standard English, Received Pronunciation, handwriting styles, word derivation, developments in spelling and the importance of context when studying letters, inventories and census documents.

The session evaluations were all positive. Teacher Educators and Tutors were enthusiastic about the intellectual and emotional impact of visiting Record Offices and accessing original resources. The teacher educators independently informed ACER that the session was valuable and appropriate in meeting the requirements of the Level 4 course.

Dissemination

The regional dissemination of the project took place at Norfolk Record Office and included contributions from museums and libraries in the Eastern Region. The guest speaker was Mary Hamilton, Professor of Adult Learning and Literacy at Lancaster University. Professor Hamilton's research and publications, such as *Local Literacies: a study of reading and writing in one community* (1998), are a powerful influence on Skills for Life literacy teaching and the content of the Level 4 Literacy course. MLA East

of England and ACER appreciated Professor Hamilton's interest in the project.
MLA East of England has recently published a booklet entitled 'Skills for Life: connecting with museums, libraries and archives'. The booklet provides information about how Skills for Life providers can access and use resources in Museums, libraries and archives.

Order forms for copies of the free booklet are available from MLA East of England 01284 723100

The generic session plan and the teaching notes used in the project are available on the MLA East of England web site.
www.mlaeastofengland.org.uk

The ACER web site:
www.acer.ac.uk
has a link to the MLA East of England web site.

Reference

Barton, D.P. & Hamilton, M.E. (1998) *Local Literacies: a study of reading and writing in one community.* London, Routledge.

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Citizenship in Action! ESOL Learners Meet Stephen Dorrell MP

Kate Cross

Kate Cross has been teaching modern foreign languages and literacy since 1986. For the last four years she has focussed on teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages and has found this the most professionally rewarding work she has done so far.

Learners on one of the new ESOL and Citizenship courses in Leicestershire had already invited their local Conservative MP, Stephen Dorrell, to come to speak to them about the role of Parliament and his responsibilities as an MP, when the news of the Government's proposed funding cuts in ESOL from September 2007 was announced. The skills and confidence developed through the course supported this group of learners to raise their concerns directly with their MP, thus engaging them in direct citizenship action.

They had been looking at several different topics under the heading *What does it mean to be a citizen in the UK in the 21st century?* Topics included the vocabulary of citizenship, geography, human rights, education, law, Parliament and the electoral system.

It was wonderful to witness the way that learners used their English language skills, which ranged from E1 to emerging E3, to talk about issues which are of importance to everyone. They were able to bring experiences in their home countries and compare and contrast them with their findings in the UK. Learners began to ensure that they watched the news in English every week, in order to talk about, and give their views on, current affairs. For most of them it was the first time they had been invited to speak about events beyond their immediate experience and articulate their opinions in English. For some, it was the first time they had ever thought deeply about current affairs. As learners began to voice their opinions, their confidence grew proportionately.

In response to the news of the Government's proposed funding cuts in ESOL from September 2007, learners in ESOL classes across the county were prompted to reflect on the benefits of their ESOL classes, as well as the curtailment of those benefits, if they were unable - for financial reasons - to continue to access learning in ESOL. Some ESOL learners in the County wrote letters to their local MPs, telling them of the progress they had made in their classes and asking them to support the campaign to stop the funding cuts. Three of these letters are reproduced here (names and addresses have been removed).

We are worried about ESOL classes because we might have to pay for it. I am a bengali housewife. ESOL class is very beneficil for me. Now I feel confident. I can talk with School Teacher and doctor. I can help my children homework with their studies. As you know the unemployment rate in our Bengali community is very high.

I come to ESOL classes because one day I want to get a job. I need english to get a job.

As you understand it would not possible for me to pay for the classes. I request you to consider our situation.

My name's (*name removed*)

I came To England on Date 24.9.06.
First, no speaking and reading English, but now very better to understand.
I like class's on day's Monday, Wednesday and Thursday very good.
I love teacher's Kokila and Jay very good teaching.

I like speak English
I like reading book's
I like listening To the radio and watches TV.
My Teacher showed us the Library and we went to cafeteria where I spoke to Angela.

I do voluntary at LOROS (Leicestershire Organisation for the Relief of Suffering) - charity shop now I am more confident.

I am writing about the proposed cuts in funding for ESOL classes.

My name is (*name removed*). I come from Turkey and have been in this country for 3 years.

I started this class in 2005. My English speaking, reading and understanding is very much better now and I feel more confident but if I have to pay for my class I will not be able to come. If I don't come to my class I will forget what I have learned and will not get any better.

I would like to send you a couple of letters from my work friends and my family about my English.

Please support our campaign to prevent these cuts.

In preparation for Stephen Dorrell's visit on March 9th, learners formulated questions they wanted to ask him. These included questions such as: "What did you do to become an MP? "Why are you a Conservative? "What would your party do to improve the NHS? "How can I make an appointment to come and see you? And, "Can you tell us about something you have done which you felt made a difference?" Learners were looking forward with anticipation to the opportunity to engage with their elected representative in Parliament and express their concerns around the funding cuts. This was a refreshing contrast to the cynicism towards politicians expressed in some quarters of the electorate.

Learners host the MP visit

When Mr Dorrell arrived he spoke about his role as an MP to an audience of about seventeen learners and tutors. Learners and tutors alike learned something new from an interesting and informative talk. It was the first time learners had encountered some of the concepts presented and language used, and it was useful to go back over notes made on a flip chart and check that learners had understood. Noting the tutor's efforts to simplify his language structures and provide vocabulary in a visual way, Mr Dorrell was very helpful in expanding on some of the ideas he raised, and by the end of the talk, learners had a much greater understanding of the role of an MP than they had at the start. They were then able to put their questions in turn and have them answered. The empowering effect this had on them cannot be underestimated - many long term residents of the UK have never met an MP, still less had the opportunity to ask a question.

ESOL Learners with M.P. Stephen Dorrell and their tutor, Kate Cross, pictured front right.

Once questions were dealt with, learners and tutors conveyed to Stephen Dorrell their concerns about the proposed funding cuts. He listened carefully as people voiced both their satisfaction with their learning, and their anxieties if their funding ceased. Many felt that they would be unable to afford tuition fees and feared that they would no longer be eligible for free classes and would become isolated from their local communities due to language barriers and loss of confidence in their communication skills. Some explained that they may just be able to afford two hours tuition a week but were currently able to access more than one weekly class, thus benefiting from faster progression under the current funding system.

Learners' Achievements Celebrated

Mr Dorrell then presented ESOL/Citizenship learners with their Adult Learning Service certificates on completion of their statutory 20 hours of learning. It was very rewarding for the learners to have their progress and achievement recognised in this way. Finally, speaking on behalf of the group, a learner proposed a vote of thanks to Mr Dorrell.

Refreshments from different parts of the world, prepared by learners, followed the formal proceedings. The atmosphere was lively with excited learners whose new-found sense of empowerment was evident. They took the opportunity to chat informally with each other and Mr Dorrell. As he left, he asked us to write to him about the funding cuts. Since then, he has written to thank us for our welcome and inform us that he has written to Bill Rammell, Minister for Lifelong Learning and raised our concerns. He will write to us again when the Minister responds. Learners were pleased to read Mr Dorrell's letter and realise how effective their engagement in the democratic process could be.

Reflecting on the whole experience, two things stand out: one is the willingness of Stephen Dorrell to speak to and learn from the group; the other is the way the learners grew in confidence and understanding over a period of six months. At the start of the ESOL/Citizenship course, most had little idea about politics or the way that Parliament works. The course and Stephen Dorrell's visit raised their awareness of the democratic process in a very positive way. How much these learners will be affected by the proposed funding cuts remains to be seen but it is clear that their personal engagement in active citizenship has had an empowering effect on them and hopefully will have on others in the future.

A Review of the Basic Skills Agency Annual Conference: Basic Skills and Employability 2007

Amy Burgess

Amy Burgess is a research student at Lancaster Literacy Research Centre, finishing a PhD on writing and identity in adult literacy education. Before this she spent 10 years working as a literacy tutor in the Bristol area.

The Basic Skills Agency's annual conference was held in London on 28th March. It differed from previous BSA conferences by having just one theme, Basic Skills and Employability, rather than covering a range of issues and sectors. The recently appointed Joint Directors of the BSA, Carol Taylor and Pat Collard, opened the conference by informing delegates about some big changes which will take place in the Agency when it loses its government grant in 2008. It has been looking for ways to continue its work and it now seems very likely that it will merge with NIACE and the consultancy provider, Tribal. Alan Tuckett, Director of NIACE, and Barry Brooks, from Tribal, emphasised that whatever the precise form of the new organisation, its aim will be to act as a challenge and a friend to practitioners and policy-makers alike.

This conference was intended to be more interactive than most. The day was organised around four themes: engagement, context, delivery and management information systems. There was one plenary session on each theme, consisting of an introduction by someone working nationally, followed by a presentation by a representative from a particular project which was considered to be an example of good practice. After each presentation, delegates were given questions to discuss in small groups and group leaders were asked to record answers on laptop computers. All the responses from delegates are now available to read on the BSA website. In addition, there will be a publication in June based on the conference and including delegates' input.

Liz Smith, Director of UnionLearn at the TUC, gave the keynote address. She drew attention to the opportunities provided by the Leitch report and urged colleagues to move beyond a critique of the report's proposals and begin to think about what we can influence in the run up to the comprehensive spending review later this year. She asked us to consider how Leitch's recommendations might work in practice and reminded us of the BSA's definition of basic skills, which talks of adults being able to function *and progress* in everyday life.

After the keynote address, Lisa Capper, from the Skills for Life Strategy Unit, introduced the first of the thematic sessions on delivery. She claimed that Skills for Life is 'delivering what it set out to deliver' and that 'we need to move from implementation to irreversible change' and that we therefore need 'a new delivery model'. Jez Langhorn, National Reputation Manager for McDonald's, provided the example of good practice. He told us that McDonald's aim to recruit people who would otherwise not have much chance in the labour market, and who often have basic skills 'needs'. He explained that McDonald's had tried to de-stigmatise basic skills by setting it within the context of wider personal development and that the vehicle they had chosen for this was their own version of MySpace, because they felt this would be popular with their employees.

The second presentation, on the theme of context, was introduced by Jayne Norman from the Sector Skills Council for Retail, who told us about a set of contextualised 'skills checks' in literacy, numeracy and ESOL, developed in the retail industry, called the Skillsmart Toolkit. Representatives from two companies then explained how the toolkit had been used in their businesses.

Judith Swift, the Union Development Manager at the TUC, introduced the theme of engagement. She spoke of the importance of finding a context and purpose for basic skills learning and of avoiding a deficit model of learners. Rather than focusing on what people apparently can't do, Judith stated, we need to ask 'what do we want to do, given half a chance?' The context and purpose identified by the unions was financial literacy, which, as she pointed out, is something many people find difficult, not only those who apparently have literacy or numeracy difficulties. She then introduced Dave Ward from Link into Learning, which is based in Cornwall. He described how his organisation has worked in partnership with Cornish employers and a number of unions to provide courses in financial literacy, which have proved to be the most popular courses ever offered by Link into Learning.

Finally, Martin Rose, whose role at the BSA is to

liaise with the Army education service, introduced the last presentation. Colonel David Cartwright then spoke of the need for basic skills education in the Army, which takes on approximately 12,000 new recruits each year, more than 50% of whom need to develop their basic skills to the level required by the Army (level one). A particular problem faced by the Army in relation to the education of soldiers is that of tracking individuals and recording progress, for obvious reasons. Colonel Cartwright was honest enough to admit that the Army had made mistakes in designing and implementing their management information system and drew attention to some of the issues which he felt other large providers of workplace basic skills would need to consider when setting up their own systems.

At the end of each group discussion, a panel summarised the comments recorded by group leaders. A number of themes were mentioned repeatedly, including:

- It's important not just to embed basic skills in people's learning, but in their lives.
- We need to remove the stigma attached to ALLN learning so that it becomes a part of everyday life.
- It's necessary to acknowledge the wider benefits of learning; it's not just about employability.

At the beginning of the day Pat Collard warned us that the new format was a high risk strategy for a conference, but by the end she and the other organisers seemed satisfied that it had been successful. Certainly in my group there was plenty of discussion and I look forward to reading all the contributions on the BSA website. Personally, I have not been involved with ALLN in the workplace, so I learnt a lot about the issues involved and was impressed by some of the good practice I heard about, particularly where it was not based on a deficit view of learners. I also welcomed the opportunity to engage in dialogue with other delegates and to have the dialogue recorded so that it can, I hope, be included in discussions between the BSA and policy makers.

New Standards in Teacher Education- Again!

Cathie Lacey & Margaret Herrington

Cathie Lacey works as a lecturer in education at the University of Wolverhampton, focusing on teacher education and especially the 'skills' routes. Margaret Herrington is an experienced teacher educator and visiting professor at the University of Wolverhampton.

Introduction

There are changes ahead in teacher education for all new teachers in the post compulsory sector in England from September 2007. The old FENTO [1] standards are being replaced with new standards from Lifelong Learning, UK (LLUK). Not only are the standards changing but also all teacher education programmes will have to demonstrate that they are using new units of assessment devised by LLUK. This will involve a sea change in the way awarding bodies operate, including higher education institutions (HEIs).

This is an edited version of an email conversation between Cathie Lacey and Margaret Herrington in February and March 2007 about the new changes. We started with a face-to-face discussion followed by an email exchange over a two-week period. Below we offer a flavour of practitioners trying to make sense of new policy both in its own terms and in terms of what it means for one highly engaged teacher educator:

MH: What exactly are the changes which are now being introduced?

CL: Since 1999 teachers in the Post Compulsory Education (PCE) sector have had their initial and in-service education and training mapped to the FENTO standards, although the use of the standards didn't become obligatory till 2001. The standards identified four key values underpinning them - of (1) reflective practice and scholarship, (2) collegiality and collaboration, (3) the centrality of learning and learner autonomy and (4) entitlement, equality and inclusiveness. These values 'opened' the standards, followed by 40 pages of skills and aspects of knowledge (1999).

After a fairly damning Ofsted [2] report in 2003 about the poor quality of some teacher education courses (The Initial Teacher Training of Further Education Teachers, 2003), the government consulted with a wide range of people and organisations to consider the needs of the sector and to recommend ways to develop the strength of teacher education. (I will use the term teacher 'education ' here rather than 'training' as I feel it signals a more appropriate engagement with critical thinking. Training reminds me of Pavlov and his dogs!) This was then followed by a publication called 'Equipping our Teachers for the Future.' (DfES 2004), part of the Success for All initiative. On the surface, then, it seems that there has been plenty of time to focus on the quality and appropriacy of the initiatives and '*to ensure that they are implemented carefully alongside other major changes*' (DfES 2004: 17).

Unfortunately this has not been the case. One of the key elements of the new teacher education vision (sic) is the development of the new standards designed to replace and improve the FENTO ones. '*While the FENTO standards provide a useful outline of the capabilities required of experienced FE teachers, they do not clearly define the standards required of* new *teachers'*. (Ofsted 2003: 5). This is one of the criticisms I would make of the new standards: they are explicitly for all teachers (they are referred to as 'overarching standards' and are to apply to ' teachers, tutors and trainers') and so still do not give a clear benchmark specifically for new teachers.

MH: So they fail to meet one of their own objectives?

CL: Yes, I think so.

MH: But are they otherwise an improvement on the old standards? Can you give me an example of an actual change?

CL: Hmm, an improvement…? Well, I think the new standards themselves are workable, and I would have been happy if they had just published these for us to use. I accept change... But, now all courses from September 2007 must be mapped to new standards via units of assessment. We almost don't need the standards.

MH: What exactly does that mean? Didn't we have to design assessments to include the standards before?

CL: Yes, we had the FENTO standards and awarding bodies and HEIs were able to create their own programmes, showing reference to, and coverage of, the standards. Now we have these new standards, but they are embedded

within assessment units. Curriculum designers will not be able to just use the standards but must show their courses include all the assessment criteria required for that level of course. There are over 100 of these, so there is a real concern that students - who have been over assessed in the past - will be even more assessed. If they have to show attainment of these 100 individual criteria, then there will hardly be time for exploring issues and developing teaching skills. One of them, from the Continuing Personal and Professional Development - (CPPD) section states, 'The learner will… 2.1 Analyse and compare relevant theories, principles and models of reflective practice'. (LLUK, February 2007:51). That seems like an essay of over 3000 words to me!

MH: Maybe the government thinks that it is a fair price to pay for getting a more even system…a basic standard in place across the board?

CL: I'm not convinced that this will mean there *is* a more even system. The awarding bodies (such as City and Guilds or OCR) will be more straitjacketed as they will *have* to use the assessment criteria as they stand (grouped together in units). HEIs are allowed, in essence, to design their own programmes and groupings of criteria, but if they just use all the assessment criteria as they stand, then there will be little space for the challenging, questioning approach of many HEIs. And of course, just because the units of assessment are prescribed does not mean the new programmes will be equally well taught, with equally well qualified and experienced staff, with an equal sense of vision.

According to the 2003 Ofsted report, university courses, mentors and their support for new teachers were viewed as good, on the whole. However, issues of unevenness within this collaborative model were identified, namely the development of subject knowledge and the quality of mentors in the colleges - which could vary widely from excellent to almost non-existent. The changes in the standards and assessment units do not address this.

MH: So you are not convinced the changes to the standards will solve the key problems which the government is trying to address?

CL: No, I'm not. And my worry is that this new system also curtails the freedom of HEIs to play to their strengths of critical thinking and creativity.

MH: Does this development extend government control of the teacher education which is delivered in universities?

CL: I think there is an element of control. Because HEIs are governed by QAA (Quality Assurance Agency for higher education) they are outside the remit of LLUK. ' Although the QAA does not require HEIs to operate within the QCF (Qualifications and Credit Framework), in order to establish articulation between awarding bodies and HEIs, LLUK has developed units of assessment on which all awarding institutions must base their programmes for initial teacher training.' (LLUK 2007:8) This means that changes have to be agreed and cannot be imposed. But, any HEI putting on a teacher education course that is not approved by LLUK (or rather, SVUK - Standards Verification UK, part of LLUK) will suffer as colleges and other prospective employers want the SVUK stamp of approval. So, the insistence on using these assessment criteria means that HEIs are effectively controlled.

MH: This seems to have considerable implications for university-based teacher educators and for where they can position themselves. There appears to be a clash between different aspects of quality. Most people would welcome a system which ensured that teacher education met certain agreed standards across all institutions but quality in teacher education is about something more profound. Is there a danger of diverting attention from the more profound elements of such work with this excessively detailed system?

CL: Well put. I suppose, for me, it is about what 'quality' means. It's very difficult to describe. It is elusive and ultimately subjective it certainly can't be encapsulated in a highly prescriptive list of assessment criteria.

MH: Policy makers may feel that they cannot capture it entirely but meanwhile they will establish the basics. My worry from what you say is that in pinning everything down so tightly, they do not allow the spaces for new ideas and challenge... and presumably even those who were doing extremely well with their teacher education are also having to implement these changes?

CL: Yes, all HEIs and awarding bodies will have to. This is despite the considerable improvement in the teacher education courses inspected between 2003 and 2007 (Ofsted 2007).

MH: Have you any other worries about the new system?

CL: My other sticking point is that the new standards, promised for April 2006, were not really published out of draft form till November 2006 - 6 months late. The units of assessment, the basis of all the new courses, were not available till February 2007. I think it is unreasonable to expect them to be put into place for new courses in September 2007, especially considering that validation - the process that universities need to enable a course to be run in their institution - is a slow and careful process. Trying to work with assessment units given in February for courses in September is really challenging. And if the government really thinks that "This reform is not a quick fix: it will take some years to implement" (DfES 2004: 4), and that, "we should take this opportunity to get the reforms right, avoiding the temptation to rush the reforms or to introduce piecemeal changes" (DfES 2004: 6), why are they going about it in this way?

MH: Is there anything more positive which you can find in these changes?

CL: Oh, there is a bit of good news, I think. The new units of assessment for teachers of Numeracy, Literacy and ESOL - or maths and English as they are now being tagged - seem much more user-friendly to me than the generic ones. They give quite a lot of scope for us to devise an interesting and challenging approach.

MH: So within the overall standards framework, there is some room for manoeuvre with the units of assessment for Maths and English?

CL: Yes, I think so. If I use the Cert Ed as an example, it is a 120-credit course, of which 90 credits will be based on the generic assessment units referred to above and the remaining 30 on the subject specialism. There are subject specific assessment criteria for each route in Numeracy, Literacy and ESOL. These relate to both subject knowledge and to specialist pedagogy, the latter being something that was missing from the previous subject specialist criteria for literacy.

MH: How would you summarise your feelings at this point?

CL…Change always challenges and the reconsideration engendered by the new standards and assessments is a healthy way of sorting out what we, as a community of teacher educators, feel is the essence of being a good teacher. But it is important to say that 'one size does not fit all' and the notion that nanny knows best (with SVUK/ LLUK/DfES/the government as nanny) needs to be challenged and contested for the sake of the future of post compulsory education. We need a nation of people who challenge and think critically, and who do not simply accept the rhetoric of the powerful, of the government, or of their teachers.

MH: It is difficult to see how newcomers can develop their sense of what it is to be a teacher without the space for critical challenge of the status quo. Thanks Cathie…I am sure this discussion is occurring in many other HEIs!

Our conversation about the impact on teacher education continues. We would welcome feedback from other teacher educators. Please send any comments or observations to the Editor of the next journal.

Notes

1. FENTO refers to the Further Education National Training Organisation
2. Ofsted refers to the Office of Standards in Education

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Numeracy teaching to support the Calculation of Drug Doses section in the Intravenous Drug Administration Course

Catriona Carson / Elaine Traynor

Catriona Carson is responsible for developing a strategic approach to literacy and numeracy services within NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. Elaine Traynor is a Practice Education Facilitator, working within the Practice Development Department of Acute Services Division (Greater Glasgow).

Introduction
This article describes the recent piloting of numeracy tuition to support nurses participating in former South Glasgow University Hospitals Division with the calculation of drug dosages section in the intravenous drug administration course.

The specific objectives were to answer the following questions:

- *What are the numeracy practices involved in learning how to calculate drug dosages for intravenous drug administration?*
- *Can voluntary numeracy tuition encourage nursing staff to complete the mandatory assessment for the intravenous drug administration course?*
- *How effective is voluntary numeracy tuition in raising levels of confidence to calculate intravenous drug doses amongst nursing staff?*
- *How can this improve awareness of numeracy issues in intravenous drug administration training for nursing staff?*

The project was developed in partnership between the NHS and the Workers Educational Association. Glasgow Community Learning Strategy Partnership Adult Literacy and Numeracy Sub Group funded the project.

Context
This pilot project is part of an overall strategy to support NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde develop its potential to engage with learners through staff who are in contact with patients and by piloting workplace learning that supports adult literacy and numeracy learning (ALN) for NHS employees.

There is national recognition that numeracy skills are an issue within the health sector. A national strategy document, 'Identifying and Supporting the Numeracy Needs of Healthcare Staff in Scotland' has recently been at consultation stage (Sabin, 2006, see: http://www.nes.scot.nhs.uk/docs/news/NumeracyConsultationweb.doc).

Anderson & Webster (2001) contend that administration of medications is, probably, the "highest risk task" that nurses carry out and deduce that administration errors can lead to harm for patients, not to mention the potential damaging consequences for nurses involved. Numerical competence is paramount where nurses are administering *intravenous* drugs but, conversely, there is a widening body of international literature demonstrating a general lack of proficiency in numeracy amongst nurses (Sabin, 2001).

The Scottish model of adult literacy and numeracy is outlined in the documents *Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland* (2001) report and the good practice framework (in the *Literacies in the Community: Resources for Practitioners and Managers Pack*, 2000). These set out a social practices model of literacies, characterised by learning planned according to each individual learner's interests and goals, and situated within the context of their lives and literacies practices. Self-determination is a guiding principle, indicating that the identification of potential interest is more relevant than identifying need.

Development and Delivery
It was originally anticipated that six pilot courses of three hours each would be delivered with a total of 30 nursing and midwifery staff. Five sessions were delivered to a total of 18 participants, 17 of whom were female. Three participants spoke English as a second or additional language. The majority of participants were staff nurses. One midwife also participated.

The numeracy sessions were offered at a separate time to the drug calculation classes. This was because the time allotted for numeracy in the intravenous therapy study day was limited and as such did not allow for extra numeracy support for those staff whose numeracy skills proved a barrier to learning. All tutoring took place between 1.30-4.30pm. This was identified as the time most suitable for staff to attend with regards ward routine etc.

Free calculators were provided to participants from The Big Plus campaign, the Scottish literacies marketing campaign.

Findings
What are the numeracy practices involved in learning how to calculate drug doses for intravenous drug administration?

Roisin Deery attended an intravenous drug administration course and analysed the original Drug Administration course materials in order to assess the numeracy and literacy practices involved in IV drug calculation. These materials were then developed and clarified for the dedicated numeracy course.

Roisin broke the numeracy tasks into four applications:

1. Unit conversion
This is to do with converting larger units into smaller units and vice versa e.g. milligrams (mg) into micrograms. A general rule is that micrograms is not abbreviated as it can be confused with 'mg' and may result in an overdose.

1Kg = 1000g 1g = 1000mg
1mg = 1000micrograms 1L = 1000mL

Convert larger unit to smaller unit
- multiply by 1000
kg x 1000 = g

Convert smaller unit to larger unit
- divide by 1000
g ÷ 1000 = kg

Examples of situations used included:
An ampoule of digoxin contains 0.5mg in 2mL. How many micrograms are in 1 mL?

0.5mg in 2mL = 0.5mg x 1000
= 500 micrograms in 2mL

Therefore 250 micrograms per mL

An ampoule of fentanyl contains 0.05mg per mL. How many micrograms are in 2 mL ampoule?

0.05mg per mL = 0.05 x 1000
= 50 micrograms per mL

Therefore 100 micrograms in a 2 mL ampoule.

(Some medicines come ready to use and are already diluted in a liquid, whereas some require to be reconstituted before use. The liquid is generally 'water for injection' but this is not always the case).

2. Dosage
The dosage formula using fractions and multiplication is

$$\text{Dose} = \frac{\text{Want}}{\text{Have}} \times \text{Amount}$$

An everyday context, this could be:

Prescribed (want): 600mg aspirin
Available dose (have) is 300mg
The package (amount) is 1 tablet (the amount in a single tablet will vary - in this case it is 300 mg.)

So if I want 600mg aspirin
$\frac{600\text{mg}}{300\text{mg}} \times 1 \text{ tablet} = 2 \text{ tablets}$

A dosage example from the original course materials:
Calculate the volume of injection containing the required dose where the patient is prescribed 170mg of Aminophylline (what you want). The ampoules contain 250mg (what you have) and the package (the amount the dose is manufactured in) is 10mL (i.e. there is have 250 mg of Aminophylline in every 10 ml of liquid.

$$\frac{\text{Want}}{\text{Have}} \times \frac{\text{Amount (Volume)}}{1} = \text{Dose}$$

Therefore:
$\frac{170 \text{ mg}}{250 \text{ mg}} \times \frac{10 \text{ mL}}{1} = 6.8 \text{ mL}$

3. Flow rate:
Calculation of flow rate involves using multiplication by 60 i.e. changing dose per min to dose per hr by x 60

An example from the original course materials:
Calculate the rate of infusion required to give a patient glycerine trinitrate at 10 micrograms per minute. You have prepared a syringe containing 50mg in 50mL.

The calculations are:
Dose per min to Dose per hr x 60
10 micrograms × 60 (minutes)
= 600 micrograms (per hour)
Next convert 600 micrograms to mg by dividing by 1000 or moving the decimal point back three places: 0.6 mg then, apply formula:

0.6 mg (want) × 50 mL (Volume)
50 mg (have) 1

= The infusion rate should be set at 0.6mL per hour

4. Flow rate and patient weight: integrating patient's weight into fractions formula

An example from the original course materials: Calculate the rate of infusion required to give a patient dobutamine at 5 micrograms per kg per min where the patient weighs 70 kg. You have prepared a syringe containing 250mg in 50mL.

The calculations are:
5 micrograms x 60 (minutes)
= 300 micrograms (per hour)
Next convert 300 micrograms to mg by dividing by 1000 or moving the decimal point back three places
1000 = 0.3 mg
then
0.3mg x 70 (kg patient body weight) = 21mg
then:
21 mg (want) x 50(volume) mL
250 mg (have) 1

= The infusion rate should be set at 4.2 mL per hour

Materials for the numeracy course (which are not discussed here) were developed to help participants work through these applications. The number of steps involved combined makes it complex and there is considerable pressure to get it right. There are also significant literacy tasks involved, for example, in understanding the language of measurement (as well as units of measurement, notation systems and technical language).

Can voluntary numeracy tuition encourage nursing staff to complete the assessment?
12 of the 18 participants attended to improve/refresh their numeracy in order to undertake the course assessment. Of these 6 (50%) successfully completed the assessment within 3 months of the dedicated session. 6 (50%) have yet to complete, giving a completion rate of 50%. Three participants attended prior to attending the intravenous drug administration course and three others attended to update their numeracy skills only.

In order to assess the previous completion rate, we looked at three of the intravenous drug administration courses in February and March 2005. In total 51 nurses attended. We then looked at the three months following each session to see how many nurses had completed the assessment:

17 February: 0/17
21 February: 3/11
24 March: 0/13

This represents three completers out of 51 (6%). There was a 16% completion rate for 2005 as a whole. Thus this pilot has provided clear evidence that voluntary numeracy tuition can potentially increase the completion rate up to 50%.

How effective is voluntary numeracy tuition in raising levels of confidence to calculate intravenous drug doses amongst nursing staff?
Providing an option of dedicated numeracy tuition focused specifically on drug calculations gave participants with limited skills or confidence in their numeracy an opportunity to address this issue directly and in a way which was not disruptive to the main part of the programme.

We asked participants to rate their confidence on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being least confident and 10 being most confident) before and after the numeracy tuition in order to measure their distance travelled. These were completed anonymously. The mean ratings are as follows:

	Before support	After support
Confidence in numeracy skills for drug calculations	4.0	7.4
Confidence in undertaking practice before assessment	4.0	8.3
Feeling ready to undertake assignment	4.4	7.7

Three participants completed a final section asking them to rate their confidence on completion of the assignment. They rated this at 10.

The Practice Education Facilitator asked participants for additional, informal feedback. The comments were positive, identifying the tuition as "extremely helpful" and stating that "it boosted my confidence", and "seeing the calculations done on paper was helpful, as was practising using the calculator". One participant provided evidence that the support would be useful for long-term practice "I struggled doing drug calculations before the session but have no problem now". Participants were also signposted to web links and resources for practice to support self-study.

Diagnostic assessment may be useful in grouping participants to similar skills levels and identifying where a more intensive level of support may be required.

Some variation in skills levels within group tuition is commonplace in literacy and numeracy tuition.

How can this improve awareness of numeracy issues in training for nursing staff?
Awareness of numeracy issues was raised through promoting the training directly to potential participants and by gaining approval for release from senior staff. The principal inclusion criterion for the numeracy session was those who had undertaken or were about to undertake the intravenous drug administration course and had not completed an assessment. Publicity material was targeted at this group though it also invited those who "would just like to improve [their] numeracy skills". Participants who had attended the intravenous drug administration course over the last 12 months were invited to attend by letter. Promotional posters were also sent out. Participation was entirely voluntary. Elaine Traynor sought approval with senior staff for allowing staff to attend the 3 hours long sessions which would require the RNs attending to leave their ward/department areas for this time. In all, only six RNs s (of the 25 booked) failed to attend. Another participant came along to the course but had to return to ward duties early into the session. At least two of those booked were not able to attend due to staff shortages on their wards. Staff who booked or had indicated interest but were unable to participate will be informed of other provision options including future delivery of the course.

Implications
Lack of confidence in numeracy skills can be a barrier to development and training for some nursing and midwifery staff. The evidence from this pilot suggests that voluntary numeracy provision can support staff in overcoming this barrier. The pilot also attracted staff who accessed the numeracy support though they did not have to complete the IV drug calculation assessment. It may be appropriate to consider how to offer numeracy support related to training and development to a broader range of staff.

This pilot was conducted while a national strategy on 'Identifying and Supporting the Numeracy Needs of Healthcare Staff in Scotland' was in development. This project can be used to document in practice some of the issues raised in this strategy document.

The partners involved in the pilot project will explore options to continue to offer this support at future training sessions. The materials developed for the course, including information on Internet resources, will be available to all drug calculation course participants in any future provision. The tutor reported a wide variation in the skills profiles of the participants. New approaches to teaching the numeracy element are being integrated into the drug calculation course. This may reduce need for additional numeracy support for some staff. In the longer term, guidance on numeracy support is expected to emerge from the strategic work being undertaken nationally.

Update
This partnership work has linked into national work and contributed to the development of more work in this area. An evaluation of the pilot project was published and distributed to interested parties within NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. Learning Connections, the development engine for literacy and numeracy in Scotland, also distributed this to members of the numeracy network.

Following the publication of the NHS Education for Scotland (NES) Numeracy in Healthcare Strategy, funding of £5000 for ten numeracy projects was announced by NES in collaboration with Learning Connections.

The awards were distributed to a range of projects, half of which are related to drug calculation with varying approaches. NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde Practice Education Department were awarded funding for their proposal to develop numeracy support as part of the training for drug calculations for IV therapy in partnership with GET AHEAD, a project funding through Glasgow Community Learning Strategy Action Plan to provide literacy and numeracy support to NHS staff. NES and Learning Connections will disseminate results of these projects next year.

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The impact of practitioner research on: self, learners and teachers in training.

Vicky Duckworth

Vicky Duckworth is presently engaged in a longitudinal study which follows basic skills learners' progression routes as part of her doctoral research. From a teacher education and strong basic skills practitioner background she is keen to establish and maintain strong and productive links between practice and research. She strongly believes in the empowering and transforming nature of education.

Introduction

This article is based on a workshop delivered at the RAPAL summer conference in Glasgow in 2006. It offered a snapshot view of the three-year ethnographic longitudinal study, commencing June 2003, in which I remain a researcher/ practitioner. Workshop members focused on the transcripts, questionnaires, case studies collected and creative writing of basic skills learners, which contained images of how they perceived their educational journey. We also explored the impact of action-research on the learner, the institution and the researcher. Some of the issues raised are discussed in this article.

Overview

The main aim of the research is to investigate the motivation and impact of joining a basic skills programme on thirteen learners and follow their subsequent progression routes. As their journey unfolds, learners' 'world picture' and how they perceive their reality in relation to their identity in the public and private domain is explored. The focus is to tell a 'better story' that according to Sarah Ahmed (2004) offers 'crucial mechanisms for the distribution of power'. To facilitate and empower this marginalized group of multi-cultural working class learners to tell their stories, the 'power' will be driven forward by a shift from traditional discourses where representations of 'working-class' homes are seen as pathological or lacking by 'middle-class' observers, whom I would argue have minimal experience of 'working class life' so they 'know very little about working-class culture and practices' (see, Walkerdine et al, 2001:83)

Methodology

Positioning of the research was a fundamental starting point when we discussed the political and ethical considerations of the research. For instance, we took on board a feminist research ethic which involved the 'concern of deconstructing power relations and making the researcher accountable for the knowledge that is produced' (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002: 116)., This stems from ensuring the interviewees are not merely 'objects' of study but equal 'subjects' whereby the power is shared and an egalitarian model established. (see, Oakley, 1991; Reinhartz, 1992) With this in mind, the power of language and its usage and implications on the research was a major factor.

Drawing on post structuralist theorists, such as Roland Barthes (1957) and Derrida (1967) language is never devoid of ideologies. Whether implicit or explicit these can reinforce notions of class division. On sharing an idiomatic use of language with the interviewees, it served to bring about a joint understanding of our similar cultural ideologies, and similar socio-economic history, which positioned me closer to them and to the research; instead of becoming what Skeggs (2004) describes as 'a voyeur who explores the difference of the other'.

Ideologies based on what traditional research counts as valid knowledge can create binary and hierarchical opposites such as 'qualitative and quantitative'; 'positivism and interpretism'; 'objective and subjective'; 'structure and agency'. Within these dualisms the first part is privileged over the other, which is marginalised. For post structural theorists this creates a false view of the world. Another powerful dualism is that of researcher and practitioner. Therefore, if my combined role of researcher/practitioner is not handled sensitively participants may position me as the cultural 'outsider' whereby barriers are put in place and productive communication is strangled and data compromised.

The research takes a critical analysis approach directed at 'transformation'. (See, Carr, W & Kemmis, S) and seeks to be 'a series of commitments to observe and problematise through practice a series of principles of conducting social enquiry' (McTaggart 1948: 248) On choosing ethnography it addresses itself to real people's lives by taking a holistic approach, aiming at whole phenomena, whereby an array of research techniques can be utilised to collect rich data (see, Barton and Hamilton, 1998)

Institutional impact
The impact of having a research/practitioner served to raise and promote 'Best Practice' both internally and externally. The result included: raising teaching and learning standards, improved retention and achievement, meaningful development and implementation of holistic curriculum. (See, Morrish, Horsman and Hofer, 2002)

The research and the ongoing findings impacted on the content and delivery of the FENTO level 3 subject support and level 4 specialist qualifications. Real case studies were embedded into the programme, offering both authentic and local insights into the many barriers Skills for Life (SfL) learners face, and importantly, how these can be successfully addressed and challenged. In turn the programme was held up as 'best practice' both locally and regionally (Professional Development Bulletin, autumn, 2006).

Learners' paths
The research facilitated the identification and collection of barriers to progression and success stories. Support structures were put in place to address the barriers, whilst positive images of the success stories and language were incorporated into the college's full and part-time prospectus, the local and national media. The role-models they described motivated a number of 'hard to reach' learners to return to education.

Being a member of the team as a research/practitioner has had a demonstrably positive effect on raising staff awareness.

Below are the results of the questionnaires, completed by both student and qualified tutors, in June 2006.

Questionnaire Responses

In what capacity did you work with a practitioner/researcher?

Alan: Vicky was my mentor during my PGCE work placement. I also worked closely with Vicky during my first year as skills for life tutor

Ailsa: I worked with the Action Researcher in the delivery and Internal Verification of the FENTO Level 3 and Level 4 Literacy qualifications

Jill: As a mentor whilst undertaking my teaching practice on the integrated Level 4 literacy and PGCE.

All participants believed that their experience of engaging with a practitioner researcher has had an impact on their practice.

Alan: It reinforced my focus on the learner. From the outset, Vicky would always establish a strong relationship with each learner and the research she was carrying out, meant she established an even more in-depth history of each student (social and economic factors, etc). ---I picked up many helpful tips and strategies that ensured I placed the student at the centre of whatever I did, during my own teaching.

Ailsa: The experience has been fundamental in the success of the FENTO level 3 and level 4 qualifications as it has enriched the learners' knowledge and awareness of current relevant research which has enabled them to explore, analyse and evaluate theoretical data. Much of the research has enabled the learners to constructively reflect on their own practise, look beyond their own experiences and to a wider spectrum.

Jill: I learnt about best practice within teaching and learning in Basic skills. I was given guidance on the barriers the learners in this area face, particularly with a high proportion of these learners having mental health issues. I was given the chance to appropriate resources to different levels taking into account differences in age, culture and backgrounds. With support, I developed my own schemes of work, contributed to the learners' Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) and review processes and I was also given valuable advice on marking and feedback within Basic Skills.

Working with a Research/Practitioner had an impact on choice of work route, training etc

Alan: Working with Vicky has certainly given me a broad insight into this type of academic research. Should I have more time in the future, this is an area I would definitely consider in terms of continuing my professional development.

Ailsa: Working with an action/researcher has been both beneficial and enlightening and has had both a positive and lasting impact upon my own professional development. It has enabled me to adopt a broader outlook and inspired me to perform my own research in my subject specialism.

Jill: Up to date knowledge of the developments in Basic Skills helps and inspires me to plan my progression within Basic Skills. This sound understanding of Basic Skills, the developments and the nature of its learners is a real inspiration to me as a practitioner.

Impact on Learner

For the first few weeks of the course, Marie M, a single mother of three children, hardly said a word, except to express her fear of writing owing to what she called 'rubbish spelling.' From that silent beginning, Marie turned into a lady full of vital contributions to group discussions.

In these discussions, Marie opened up about her life.

"The course made me feel so alive and full of hope."

Marie began to believe in her potential. Her confidence flourishing, she made choices that she previously thought were 'not for people like me'.

Below Marie tells her story in her own words

Three years ago if I had to fill in anything like a form I couldn't, it may as well have been written in another language. — I would just go to my sister and ask her to fill them in for me and I would just sign them.

--- Through learning to read and write etc, I now see life differently. --- When my children bring homework home I'm right onto it. --- I'm all my children have, if I'd not have returned to education the chances are that my children would have ended up experiencing difficulties in their education. I'm not saying that they won't but if they do, like I did, I can now help them.

--- Returning to education for me was one of the most frightening things that I have ever done, but one of the best ----- I can't believe how much my life has changed. Hopefully in 3 years I will be able to return to work, doing a job of my own choice and at the same time be able to support my children, all because I learnt to read, write and spell.

Successfully passing a level two course in literacy and numeracy; she progressed onto an Access to Nursing Course and is now at university training to be a nurse.

Marie M also expressed how if it wasn't for the supportive communication network of the research group, in the form of the tutor and other interviewees, both in and out of the class room, she would not have 'stuck the course'.

Kath and Marie D's story

Kath came along to the evening Adult Literacy courses with her daughter, Marie.

Having struggled with family circumstances and low skill jobs, she wanted more for herself and her daughter.

Whilst on the course, Kath discovered a talent for writing poetry. She voices how those poems help her to make sense of the world around her and work through some painful experiences that have happened in her life.

Joining a night-class made her realise that she wasn't on her own. There were other like-minded people keen to develop their skills and this gave her the hope, enthusiasm and commitment for her future.

For Marie D, a single mother with three children and a full time job, learning wasn't without its drawbacks and getting to College on harsh wet winter nights required some grit and determination. Along with her mum Kath, they made it through the tough times and successfully completed level 2 in Adult Literacy. With new found self belief, Marie's hopes for the future are moving forward.

Following the learners' progress offered me the opportunity to nominate learners for awards. Marie M received the NIACE, regional 2004 award and the Helena Kennedy Prize. Marie has also been commissioned to write an easy-read autobiography by community publishers, Gate House. She hopes this will inspire others to 'come back' into education.

Finding a Space

As is the dominant case in the Further Education Sector, built on a hierarchal target driven agenda and an ethos of a more remedial take on staff development (teachers are seen as the receivers of knowledge rather than the producers) finding a 'space' to develop a research based approach to Best Practice takes a high level of motivation. For me, exposing and addressing issues relating to the complexities of working with SfL learners remains the impetus. Indeed 'listening to learners' experience of literacy education could contribute significant insights into the development of policy and practice' (Thompson, 2002: 25)

Impact on myself

The interviewing process has been fundamental in gaining both a deeper and more meaningful knowledge of the learning barriers the group face and offering a more therapeutic and holistic programme.

Following the learners' journey led to a deep emotional connection with their narratives. The impact may have been strengthened by my own historical narrative which threads through a similar working-class geographical landscape as theirs. The result was great reflexivity that led to an emotional awareness which those outside the narrative cannot fully understand (Rockhill, 1988) or identify with. Their often raw emotional account of their experiences catapulted me from the comfort zone of supportive tutor who listened before referring the learners to the appropriate services, to that which seemed an intrusion. This freeing of the learners' emotions contradicted the aims of why I had chosen to become a teacher. I wanted to empower and motivate them to reach their potential. Yet roaming into their personal accounts of their life histories I seemed to be thwarting the process. Listening to a young man of twenty-three, with the persona of a 'tough cookie', whilst he opened up and spoke in shame of a childhood battered with physical abuse was one interview amongst others that left me reflecting deeply. It was however, the learners' positive feedback that kept me on board even when it became difficult. I referred a couple of the learners to the counselling service and they voiced how helpful it was in enabling them to see things in a clearer, more positive way. Others spoke of how the interviews had been cathartic and raised issues relating to transformation.

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Can Skills for Life become a system that learns?

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Abstract
This article reviews and critiques accountability in the English Skills for Life strategy. It outlines Skills for Life accountability mechanisms; traces the roots of performance accountability, targets and audits as tools for New Public Management; examines the impact of audit cultures and targets on practice; and concludes by making a case for a more 'intelligent accountability' as part of a system that learns. This would involve stakeholders, develop capacity for professional judgement and foster innovation as a way to manage risk and promote change.

What do we mean by accountability?
Accountability means being 'responsible for the effects of your actions and willing to explain them or be criticised for them' (Longman's Web Dictionary). There are four key elements:

- Responsibility for actions
- Reporting - giving an account
- Entitlement to receive an account
- Consequences - simply reporting is not accountability.

Different models of accountability set out different ways of answering key questions: Who is held accountable? For what? To whom? What are the consequences of failing to meet goals?

The English Skills for Life initiative includes four accountability models:

- **performance accountability** for outcomes achieved by learners - with outcome targets set by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and performance measures set by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC);
- **bureaucratic accountability** - compliance with rules and regulations especially around funding and quality assurance procedures;
- **professional accountability** focused on compliance with standards and external inspection by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted);
- **market accountability** offering students some choice in terms of provider, and limited choice in terms of qualifications.

While all four accountability models are present, the dominant model is performance accountability and targets and performance measures have had a major impact on the initiative. Under this model the *responsibility* of skills for life providers is to achieve the targets they are set, and meet other performance measures required by the funding agency, the LSC. *Reporting* is via the electronic returns of learner data and annual self-assessment reviews (alongside regular inspections). *Entitlement* is held by the LSC in the first instance and ultimately the DfES. *Consequences* of failing to meet targets and other performance measures are financial sanctions.

The Skills for Life strategy set national targets for 750,000 learners to 'improve their literacy and numeracy skills' by 2004 and 1.5 million by 2007 (DfEE, 2001:15). The ten priority groups were:

- 210,000 general basic skills learners
- 130,000 job seekers
- 110,000 young people (16-19)
- 60,000 parents
- 50,000 adults in low-skilled jobs
- 50,000 refugees and speakers of other languages
- 50,000 people who live in disadvantaged communities
- 40,000 other benefit claimants
- 40,000 prisoners and others supervised in the community
- 10,000 public sector employees

So that there could be no uncertainty about what 'improve their literacy and numeracy skills' means, the measure of achievement of the target was to pass a national literacy or numeracy test at Entry 3, Level 1 or 2, or English or maths GCSE. Lower level qualifications do not count towards the target. Although learners may be funded to continue their learning, each learner can be counted only once towards the target. ESOL learners take the same literacy or numeracy tests, although these are embedded in specialist ESOL qualifications with units for speaking and listening and for

writing.
The national tests were chosen for specific reasons: to quickly establish a mass testing regime (using machine scoring rather than human markers, following the fiasco of exam revisions in schools that failed under the weight of demand), allowing learners to access testing on demand, and linking the adult literacy and numeracy tests to the parallel Key Skills for school and college students (Brooks, 2004: 80).

To understand the reasons behind the dominance of performance accountability in Skills for Life we need to place the initiative within a context of global economic and social changes.

The dominance of the performance accountability model
Global economic and social changes present common challenges to governments in industrialised countries. The new work order creates higher expectations about the skills and attributes needed by the workforce (Lankshear, 1997). The new communications order changes modes of communication via information technologies like the internet and mobile telephones (Street, 2001). Both are reshaping society in ways that are hard to predict and control.

Nevertheless, governments need to exercise control; and their response to these challenges has been three-fold:
- the development of 'new public management' to change relationships between central governments and public services;
- the growth of the 'audit culture' through which governments check and control devolved services;
- a focus on risk and risk management.

These responses have been highly developed across most areas of the English government, and it is not surprising that once adult literacy, language and numeracy came into the mainstream of the education system it had to meet new accountability demands.

New public management (NPM)
NPM dates back to the late 1980s and applies to public sector management the concepts and tools of Total Quality Management (TQM) and 'Japanese style management' adopted by many global corporations (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993). NPM decentralises responsibility for delivery of public services but keeps tight central control through increased regulation in pursuit of efficiency and effectiveness. Power sees NPM as an attempt to reconcile two contrary tendencies:

- Centrifugal pressures for the decentralisation and devolution of services and for turning parts of government into enterprises;
- Powerful pressures to retain control over functions that have been made autonomous. (Power, 1994:12)

One of the key elements in NPM is measuring outcomes or results rather than inputs or processes. Within education the focus shifts from how many people participate to indicators of learning or achievement. These are seen as a tool not just to monitor performance but more importantly to create change and drive up standards. NPM sets targets as a way of focusing attention on clearly defined goals.

Audit culture
Educational performance is not easy to measure and most teaching is done far from the eyes of government officials. In this situation policy makers need something to reassure them that their policies are being carried out: the audit. Audits are a response to the difficulties in imposing central control on distant providers (whether these are local government or police forces, NHS hospitals or educational providers). They are control and checking devices that operate through systems of control at every level.

From a beginning in financial audits the concept has spread in what Power has called a 'audit explosion' including 'environmental audits, value for money audits, management audits, forensic audits, data audits, intellectual property audits, medical audits, teaching audits, technology audits, stress audits, democracy audits and many other besides.' (Power, 1994: 1)

Perhaps the key feature of audits in terms of their impact on practice is that they work by becoming self-regulating as we shape our practice to be auditable. Increasingly, service providers carry out their own monitoring and controls so that when the auditors arrive there is evidence that they will accept. The growth of self-assessment across education over the last 10 years has been a little recognised response to the demands of audits.

Risk
The audit culture is fed by anxieties about the

[1] Because education is a devolved function, in which Scotland in particular has taken different approaches, I am focusing on England.

trustworthiness of the agents who deliver public services. It thrives when trust is low. Both the Moser Commission (Moser, 1999) and the Skills for Life Strategy (DfEE, 2001) saw existing basic skills practice as inadequate, with poor teaching, no clear agreement on what should be taught or validation by qualifications. As O'Neill said in her 2002 Reith Lectures, the culture of suspicion is a result of a quest for greater accountability which 'aims at ever more perfect administrative control of institutional and professional life' (O'Neill, 2002:46).

Lack of trust seems particularly endemic in education where teachers, while on the one hand expected to be professionals with high levels of training and qualifications, are on the other hand expected to 'deliver' content through procedures established centrally as effective (Mahony and Hextall, 2000). Because so much teaching is behind closed doors and difficult to monitor directly, the focus of monitoring is on 'results'. In order to be tracked, these results must be measurable, and preferably measurable in a cost-effective way. Complex and subtle qualitative outcomes of learning are not easily measurable: tightly defined targets are.

Impacts of performance accountability

Performance accountability is intended as a means of ensuring that policy goals are achieved. But performance management systems in other contexts have been shown to produce unintended consequences that distort and confuse policy goals. There are three main issues:

- Targets and measures may be measurable and cost-effective but may not reflect well the longer-term policy goals (there are examples from policing where concentrated efforts on reducing crime rates within particular neighbourhoods simply results in displacement of criminal activity and increases in crime rates in the surrounding areas);
- Performance measurement often leads to distortions in which the performance measures are met but this does not advance policy goals (perhaps the most clearcut example is within the NHS, when waiting times in A&E were measured in one week per year, encouraging hospitals to mobilise all possible staff from other wards for that week in order to reduce waiting times);
- Service providers may be encouraged to 'game the numbers' in their reporting against the specific performance targets (we probably all know of FE colleges that put all their learners through a Skills for Life test regardless of whether or not it was appropriate).

Disconnect between policy goals and performance measures

The most complete evidence of unintended consequences of performance measures comes from the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), passed by the US Congress in 1982 to provide job training and other services for youth and adults facing serious barriers to employment. Each year the federal government defined target levels for core outcome measures in employment and skills. The performance outcomes had to be convenient to measure. Short-term labour-market outcomes were relatively easy to measure and quick to produce. Studies of JTPA show that 'in many cases, the short-term outcome measures were weakly and negatively related to longer-term participant earnings and employment gains' (Stecher and Kirby, 2004: 55). These longer-term outcomes were JTPA's real policy goals.

Although JTPA's short-term outcome measures did not reflect long-term policy goals, the measures had two significant impacts on provider behaviour: distortions and gaming.

Distortions

Since providers got paid on the basis of placing clients in work, they made more money from those who could be placed quickly, and lost money on those who needed more support and training. This became known as 'cream skimming', or 'creaming'. Providers had a financial incentive to recruit well-qualified clients who could be easily placed in jobs (mostly white men). Several studies showed that less-educated eligible individuals tended to be under-represented in JTPA programmes. (Stecher and Kirby, 2004: 55)

Gaming the numbers

Providers had an incentive to manipulate reporting data - not to lie outright but to ensure that the best performance reports were submitted. There is evidence that JTPA training centres attempted to maximise their performance by manipulating reporting dates. They used all the means at their disposal to ensure that employers kept their clients employed for the 90 day period that would ensure the providers were paid for the outcome. (Stecher and Kirby, 2004: 56)

Impact of targets and performance measures in Skills for Life

Targets and performance measures are designed to affect behaviour: if they had no effect they would be worthless. The question is whether the

affected behaviour helps achieve policy goals**.**

Unintended consequences

Unintended consequences may already be showing up in the Skills for Life strategy. While the DfES exceeded its 2004 Skills for Life targets, the numbers were dominated by 16-18 year olds. The National Audit Office (NAO) reported that more than half of the qualifications counting toward the July 2004 target were gained by 16-18 year olds, only 15% of the original target (National Audit Office, 2004: 4). The 2005 annual report of the ALI Chief Inspector notes that half the qualifications were gained by 16-18 year olds who were already enrolled on college courses (Chief Inspector, ALI, 2005:9). While there may be a rationale for improving basic skills among this group, it was not the original driver of the Skills for Life policy.

Distorting effect of the national test

The NAO report, while praising the extent of the progress that had been made by the Skills for Life initiative, highlights some significant remaining barriers, in particular attracting older learners and those with the lowest skill levels, and addressing the needs of those with high barriers to learning.

The Skills for Life targets were set at the upper end of the literacy and numeracy scale. Although they were not intended to exclude lower level learners, funding pressures have the effect of privileging learners who are able to pass the test reasonably quickly. The LSC continues to 'prioritise' skills for life learning that leads to a nationally recognised qualification, which excludes the lowest Pre-entry level.

The effect is to point the system away from people with the greatest needs. NRDC research through a longitudinal study of people born in a single week in 1970 shows that those most affected by literacy and especially numeracy difficulties in terms of life chances are concentrated at or below entry 2 (Bynner and Parsons, 2005: 33). Skills at Entry 2 or below were associated with poor labour market experiences, poor financial, physical and mental health, and little social or political participation.

Measuring learning

Targets have to be defined in narrow and specific terms, usually numeric, in order to be tracked, and must be measured with assessment tools that are simple and cost effective. But such tools may not reflect the complexity of learning. Criticisms from practitioners that the national tests are inadequate measures of literacy and numeracy learning were echoed by the ALI Chief Inspector, who argued that the test content was inappropriate, the multiple choice format ignored the more significant and relevant skills of writing and speaking, and that the numeracy tests called for too high a level of literacy (Chief Inspector ALI, 2005). He warned that many providers were placing the importance of meeting targets above that of meeting learners' individual needs.

Effects on provision

One issue in the growing critique of the audit approach is the expansion of bureaucracy. The Success for All policy initiative from the DfES noted: 'Too much management time has been spent chasing and accounting for funding and not enough on raising standards and relevance of teaching and learning'. (DfES, 2002: 5) In an American study of the impacts on providers of a strongly performance-based accountability system, the National Reporting System (NRS), Belzer documented the costs (money and staff time) of the increased emphasis on documentation and reporting (Belzer, 2003:40). As the NRS was introduced without extra funding, providers had to shift resources from teaching into administration. There have been no studies of the bureaucratic demands of the Skills for Life strategy.

Another negative impact on provision has been the pressure on teachers. As a recent NRDC study found, many teachers experience a tension between two kinds of professionalism. On the one hand, many tutors have a 'responsive professionalism': 'the capacity to listen to learners in order to fine-tune their teaching to make it relevant to people's lives' (Ivanic et al, 2006: 36). On the other hand, tutors have a 'new professionalism' that is based in the requirements of the Skills for Life strategy to meet targets, deliver the core curriculum, administer the required assessment and comply with procedures and paperwork.

> *We found that tutors were often faced with a tension between these two types of professionalism. Often the requirements of the curriculum and institutional constraints made it difficult for them to put students' individual interests and motivations at the centre of their teaching. For example, they experienced a tension between the requirement to teach to the test, and serving the needs of students who wanted to work on their writing.* (Ibid: 37)

While the new professionalism was seen as helping tutors be more systematic in their

teaching than they had been before, some tutors found it was crowding out their responsive professionalism.

Perhaps most importantly, what do we know about the effects on learners of the Skills for Life accountability system? It is difficult to disentangle these from the effects of the increased funding for provision and the work of tutors and providers. National studies indicate high levels of learner satisfaction, especially among learners in adult and community learning (but literacy, language and numeracy learners are not separated in the analysis). We know from smaller scale studies that many learners are positive about being offered qualifications, and may view them more favourably than do teachers.

However, in a study of post-16 (mainly 16-19) education provision looking at whether summative assessment and testing have a positive or negative effect on learners' motivation, Torrance and Coultas found that 'many [learners] fear testing and … there is evidence that this can precipitate drop-out and deter progression' (Torrance and Coultas, 2004: 35). They conclude that 'across the compulsory and post-compulsory sectors as a whole it would appear that summative assessment and testing do more harm than good'. (Ibid)

What are the alternatives? Can accountability systems enhance learning rather than distort it? In the final section we examine two ways to create more responsive and effective accountability for learning:

- Defining success in a way that promotes broader policy goals, by reforming targets and how they are set, and improving ways to assess learning;
- Creating a 'system that learns' by involving practitioners and learners, promoting and learning from innovation, and managing risk through shared ownership.

Searching for a better way

Defining success

The great strength of targets is to focus attention, direct resources and emphasise the political importance of certain policies. This is their appeal to central governments trying to realise an agenda of change. But targets are by their nature simplistic: their purpose is to set a clear and obvious goal, so they must be easily measurable and not open to dispute. When the target is for learning it cannot reflect the complex dynamics, contextual diversity and social and cultural interdependence that shape learning experiences.

One of the biggest problems of the Skills for Life targets is that they define success in such narrow terms. By reducing 'literacy' to passing a short multiple-choice test of one aspect of reading, it ignores other aspects of literacy such as application of skills, literacy practices and critical reflection. By adopting a narrow view of success and creating strong incentives to focus on getting learners through 'the test' there is a risk that the broad policy goals will not be met.

Assessment of literacy, numeracy and language learning is both contentious and difficult. A review of assessment tools in literacy and numeracy found very little relevant research on assessment in the UK (Brooks, 2005). A comprehensive review of literacy assessment by an American author found that none of the formal assessments were designed to assess literacy practices, and that the most commonly used standardised tests measure just one or two components of the reading process and only a few of many aspects of the writing process. (Kruidenier, 2002: 134). Similarly, the English Skills for Life tests seem to measure only a few aspects of reading or numeracy and no writing at all. According to the then head of the Skills for Life Strategy Unit, these tests were intended to be 'an interim approach designed to move us forward in a meaningful and constructive way'. (Brooks, 2004: 47) It may be time for a comprehensive review of their usefulness.

A wider view of literacy would include application of skills and literacy practices - what people do in their lives, work, families, home life and communities. Learner participation and persistence might also be candidates for new measures, as key elements in successful learning outcomes.

Targets can be a useful tool. In individual learning plans, targets can provide clear goals against which learners and tutors can review progress. Targets are negotiated between learner and teacher, refined and adapted over time as part of the learning process. This suggests a role for targets within a 'system that learns' approach to adult learning. Targets could be set from the bottom up, at the level of learning institution or local community. They could be short-term and provisional, focusing attention on a particular issue to be addressed

over a particular timeframe, leading to an action plan.

Creating a system that learns

Learning is how we handle complexity, unpredictability and risk. Problem solving in complex systems requires the ability to identify patterns, analyse and reflect, and test interventions to find what works. In other words it requires innovation and flexibility. Yet accountability systems like Skills for Life are set up to control and carefully manage innovation and reduce flexibility. Chapman identifies three reasons why mechanistic and reductionist approaches like targets must fail in dealing with complex problems like education (Chapman, 2004: 11):

- They assume a linear or at least non-problematic relationship between *cause and effect* when in fact 'complex systems involve hundreds of nested feedback loops which result in significantly non-linear behaviour'.
- They ignore the criticality of *context* in shaping effect;
- They ignore *unintended consequences* - effects can never be fully determined in complex systems because there are too many variables.

Systems that learn use effective feedback on the results of previous actions to promote innovation. Systems thinking requires taking into account the different perspectives (based on different histories, cultures and goals) of the individuals and organisations within a problem domain. It demands an understanding of context. It bases judgements on experience, shared knowledge and evaluation.

O'Neill's Reith Lectures proposed an 'intelligent accountability', including an element of self-governance within a framework of reporting. It allows for substantive and knowledgeable judgement, and enables lessons to be learned from both success and failure. (O'Neill, 2002: 54). It restores some trust in professional judgement while acknowledging that this does not mean professionals can do whatever they want.

The Skills for Life initiative has invested significantly in professional training to bring teachers up to national qualification standards. But performance accountability systems driven by targets and audits are, by their nature, unable to trust the judgements of those closest to the practice. Even learners' judgements are given little weight and teachers' perhaps even less. The Skills for Life strategy could strengthen the capacity of teachers to make good judgements of student performance within a 'community of judgement' in which there is moderation, quality control and a broad range of assessment modes (Wilson, 2004: 4-5).

What would a 'system that learns' approach look like for adult basic skills education?

- Learning to involve people with different perspectives, especially learners, because outcomes depend on learners' actions as well as providers' actions.
- Learning to innovate and evaluate in order to plan further action, because 'what works' is never fixed or fully known.
- Learning to share responsibility, because this builds people's capacity to make good judgements.
- Learning to manage risk through identifying, assessing and judging risks, sharing ownership, planning actions to mitigate or anticipate them, and monitoring and reviewing progress.

A study of 'high stakes' accountability systems in American high schools argues that 'educational accountability systems work when they work by calling forth the energy, motivation, commitment, knowledge, and skill of the people who work in schools and the systems that are supposed to support them' (Elmore, 2003: 195). Creating a real system that learns could not only involve stakeholders, share responsibility and promote innovation. Most important of all it could call forth the energy and commitment, the knowledge and skill of everyone working in Skills for Life.

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Important Notice

Following 20 years of successful publication, **Language Issues** is being re-launched as a partially peer-reviewed journal from July 2007. In addition, a compilation volume of selected articles from the last 20 years will be published under the title of **Key Language Issues** and also launched at the **Annual NATECLA conference** to be held from 6-8 July 2007 at City University, London. Details on http://www.natecla.org.uk/

Powerful learners and learning

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Introduction

Education is not just about vocational learning and jobs, as the government often implies: it is also a social encounter and experience. Adult education is about transformation, individually and in communities. (Merrill, 2004, p 75)

My interest in adult learning is rooted in a definition of learning which goes beyond the notion of learning merely as acquisition of skills and competencies. Instead I have been concerned with identifying instances in which learners perceive themselves as being engaged in a process of personal transformation which repositions them as individuals and expands the range of social resources on which they are able to draw.

This article comes from research carried out for my PhD in which I looked at adult learners and learning in a variety of settings where learning takes place. I was particularly interested in seeing whether the provision met the needs of the learners, whether learners were exploiting the opportunities available to them, what supported them in their learning and whether providers were offering learning environments which allowed for personal transformation. This interest led to me identifying three contrasting sites of adult learning in which I could observe and talk to learners, tutors and managers. I decided to explore what it was that made some adult learners able to really change their lives as a result of learning as an adult, while others did not. The research investigated learners' personal histories and examined the impact of these on them as an individual. It also looked at the learners within the communities in which they lived and, in some cases, worked.

I draw upon a range of related theories which are concerned with explaining the way in which individuals make use of social resources in order to maximise their educational experiences. This progression in turn expands and enriches the range of social resources individuals access. In order to understand this I use the concepts of social and cultural capital, social identity, empowerment and emancipation.

Methods

For this research there were three different sites of learning within the West Midlands, chosen to offer a variety of opportunities for learning available to adults. In each site I observed, interviewed groups and individual learners, and also interviewed tutors and managers of the provision. The fieldwork took place over a period of several months and a total of seventeen interviews took place, of which information from five of the learners is included in this article.

The first site was a community-based adult education centre which was in a suburb of a large city and offered the usual range of adult education classes to the local community, including literacy, numeracy and ESOL. Here the learners were Laurence and Graham, both of whom were attending adult basic education (ABE) literacy classes.

The second site was a family learning centre (FLC), also in a recently regenerated suburb of the same city, where there was a project aimed at supporting women from the local community. Many of the women had mental health problems and some had experience of domestic violence. This project was all about peer support, where the women helped each other utilising the expertise and experience of workers within the centre. The learning opportunities in this site were very different - for example, visits to a local art gallery to work with the community artist - and were dictated by what the women wanted. The learners from this site are Tracy and Maggie.

The third site was a 'Nacro' centre. Nacro (previously NACRO the national association for the care and resettlement of offenders), is a national organisation established in 1966 which specialises in the rehabilitation of offenders and preventative work with those at risk of being involved in the criminal justice system. Workers here have a very specific expertise of working with people who would normally not attend mainstream provision, and who may have behaviour management problems. In this site learners were undertaking a 26 week course as part of their re-employment programme; they were there because the job centre required them to attend, not because they chose to do so. The learner included from this site is Cath.

Theoretical frameworks

As mentioned previously, there were a range of theories which I could draw on to help understand how adult learners were positioned and to see how active they were in the learning process. Exploring social capital enabled me to capture whether this was an important factor in learning bringing the required outcomes. The literature on social capital is vast but the following (Bourdieu 1999, 2000, Cattell 2004, Preston 2003, Putnam 1995, 2000), offer a range of views and perspectives from the USA, France and the UK. For Bourdieu social capital is just one of many resources needed by individuals to compete in a very complex world, while Putnam views social capital as the most important. Most if not all of these writers would agree that social capital means having social networks and support systems which build up over time, normally beginning in the family. Gaining social capital involves all social activity in which an individual takes part and is fundamentally and crucially about reciprocity, trust and seeing the common good. These social aspects of learning and the networks developed by some learners appeared to be significant, both in whether individuals accessed learning opportunities in the first place and whether this led to a repositioning of them as an individual and within the wider community.

While social capital appeared to be an important factor it was important to look wider than this and a closely linked area to social capital was that of social identity (Jenkins, 1996). Social identity is created when individual identity (which is all about self) and community identity (where groups come together for a common purpose) join together. This seemed to capture one of the factors which I felt was necessary for learning to be effective and allow for transformation.

Although social aspects were important there did seem to be other factors influencing learners and the concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1999, 2000) was an obvious choice to investigate. Cultural capital, building on social capital, is a resource which gives advantages gained through knowledge, skills and education which can be invested in the future. It constitutes three elements: the embodied elements include things that are learnt and the language individuals use, their accents and dialects; the objectified element is the cultural goods which individuals may have, such as art, books and other objective signs of learning; the institutional elements are the formal certificates and qualifications that individuals gain throughout life. Evidence of cultural capital from the learners would appear to be significant in terms of them feeling as though they 'belong' in adult education.

Other key issues were empowerment and emancipation (where I used the work of Freire 1972, Foucault 1993 and Mezirow 1991, 2000 and others). I accept that these are loaded terms but I am using empowerment here to mean being able to do things and emancipation as when informed choices are made through a process of critical reflection, where learners become critical thinkers and experience transformation. Lack of power would seem to indicate that a learner is 'done to' rather than being active in their learning and life choices, so this too was an important issue to investigate in the study.

The learners

I now introduce my learners, giving a very short pen portrait of each and commenting afterwards about how they show social and cultural capital, and a general capacity to learn.

***Within ABE**: **Laurence** has a successful career as a butcher. Like many other adult learners he dips in and out of learning. He likes the idea of learning for its own sake, but what prompts him to learn is driven by occupational imperatives. Once that immediate need is addressed he no longer sees the point in carrying on learning in a formal environment.*

For Laurence formal learning is not a comfortable experience:

Yes verbally standing up with a white coat and hat on, confidence no problem at all. Take all that off and sit me down in a classroom is a different kettle of fish, different completely. That's when your hands start to sweat…

He feels caught in a situation where he remains in a job which offers little in the way of personal development or 'using my brain' as he describes it, but, for economic reasons feels he cannot afford to move to something else. He has been offered promotion several times by his employers who see his potential to work wider across the company, but he feels this is too big a risk to take and might expose his 'weaknesses' in the area of writing and spelling.

Yes, I get frustrated that I would like English. I would like to be able to sit and write a letter… I can't, not really. And put all the full stops in and all the proper commas. That's what I would like to be able to do, just sit there freely and write it. That's what I would like to do. That's my aim...

Laurence appeared to have a wealth of social capital. He has social connections with a wide variety of people and the influence of his wife is evident in the cultural capital of their children.

Crossan et al (2003), when discussing learning careers of learners, suggest that these:

> …are contradictory and volatile. They do not travel in one direction alone, but can go into reverse, not once but many times. An explicit rejection of education may form a deeply rooted and recurring component of some individuals' sense of themselves and their place in the world. Yet these non-participant identities may coexist with episodic participation and with values which favour educational achievement in children. (Crossan et al, 2003, p65)

This would appear to describe Laurence's situation quite accurately. He shows the ability to seek the learning he needs to cope with his current job, but sees this as a 'quick fix' rather than long-term development. The outcomes of his learning episodes therefore led to him being enabled to undertake particular tasks demanded of him by others, but do not appear to move him into a position where he is either prepared or really interested in taking further risks. However, he does not dismiss the possibility of returning to learning in the future and has the capacity to access the appropriate resources to do so, if he chooses.

***Within ABE**: **Graham** has an interest in conservation and the environment generally, and for many years has been involved in local community projects such as cleaning up the canals. Graham has always been independent in his interests and has a life-long love of art which he kept hidden from peers:*

So we used to nip down to London … some of me friends were slightly older, they used to want to go into, um, the mucky clubs, y'know the porn film shows, things like … and I really wasn't that interested in 'em… So I made up a relative I used to visit, but what I used to do was go down and visit all the big museums, on me own, wander round. 'Cos I couldn't have told me mates that I was going to visit a museum, they'd have ***… Graham does not work and has made a conscious decision to devote his time to learning so that he improves his chances of obtaining a better job. This decision has brought him into conflict with agencies such as the job centre, over the expectation that he should still be looking for employment. It is only by refusing benefits that he has not been diverted from his purpose. He has challenged some of the structures which might have prevented him taking action seeking an intensive period of learning, and been determined to see through his plan to 'better himself' through education.

Graham's interest and involvement in conservation and the environment generally, might indicate that he has high levels of social capital, but, while he may work with groups on particular projects most of his activity is as an individual, so there is little or no involvement with his community. While he is developing cultural capital, albeit slower than he would like, the frustration at his rate of progress has led him to reconsider his options and may ultimately mean that he returns to work in a factory:

> …if I can't get out of a factory…no. If I'm going to go back into a factory …I won't say it's been a waste of time, but it won't have improved my situation any at all...

***Within the FLC: Maggie** is someone who has a strong disposition to learn and who also encourages her own family in their learning endeavours. She has friends and colleagues from a variety of areas of her life and manages to combine studying, work and home life in what appears to be an effective way. She knows what she wants from life and is following a path which will enable her to achieve this, although it has not always gone according to plan and she sometimes feels frustrated by what she perceives as slow progress. Maggie states that having received support from the FLC at a low point in her own life, she now wants to pay something back and she does this by remaining on the management committee and visiting when she can.*

I think there are actually people here who are not confident, because you look at everybody else and you think oh they are really confident but when you come here you realise that's not reality, a lot of people are unhappy. A lot of people are not content. A lot of people do feel trapped. A lot of people do feel depressed. But if you get help from somewhere you kind of always remember that help. You never ever forget. What you're going through, that pain lessens, but you never forget the help you had. Even if you wanted to forget, you couldn't and it kind of drives you to do the same thing…It's like a domino effect.

Maggie has a capacity to make her own decisions and choices, finding her way through the opportunities afforded and situations

encountered along the way. She appears to have many of the resources I identified as important for learning, possibly stemming from the cultural capital invested in her by her mother and wider family.

Within the FLC: Tracy *has a longstanding relationship with the area and the local community and cares deeply for other women in her immediate locality. Once Tracy feels she can trust an individual then they are allowed to get close to her, but this does not happen easily and people have to prove themselves to her first.*

It's not the learning, it's the release of all the stresses of life. That's the whole meaning of having the class because a lot of the women that come to that class have family problems like I did, depression and stuff and once you get there it's a nice group of women and we all support each other and we don't think about nothing depressing, we just have a nice time and do art and it's like getting something for yourself instead for everyone else and that's nice, you get a lot of pride out of your work and that's nice, I like that.

Tracy invests in developing the social and cultural capital of her children, striving to give them life chances which she did not experience given her disrupted childhood. She has career aspirations which are challenging (becoming a social worker) and her lack of social identity and cultural capital would appear to make this very difficult. Tracy's attitude to others in a similar position to herself, and her capacity to take action on their behalf is significant. She rejects being stifled by structures which inhibit what can happen and is prepared to fight for what she thinks should be done.

> …we went out of our way, me and her did, to go all around [area] with a questionnaire, knocking doors and going in and asking people, did they know about the centre? Did they know what facilities were available to them? and why if they did know about it why didn't they come in? Most of them were single parents probably suffering with depression so it's hard for them to just come out on their own, because I know what that is like.

While Tracy is well and has the support she needs on a personal level then this appears to be how she acts, but it does feel somewhat fragile, as though she could easily be diverted from her purpose.

Within NACRO: Cath, *had a very unhappy childhood, working with her sibling to provide a home for the younger children. Her life at school was also miserable:*

When I came home with a ruler mark across my legs and on my hand - Mum went up and beat the teacher up. And then after that I got picked on. I got picked on worse….

She later found herself in an abusive relationship in which she felt helpless, but the strength of her feelings for her daughter and the support they gave each other pulled them through. Despite many low times in her life Cath remains optimistic about the future. Now that she's free from over ten years of depression she says she is discovering herself again:

It's been a different life. I've actually seen the other side of life where I can leave the home… and I am out, and it's me, and nobody else.

She invests in her daughter's development, and is proud to see her as 'different' to the rest of the family. Now that she is well again Cath knows what she wants to do with her life and is making sure that she gives herself the best chance to achieve this.

Within Nacro none of the adult learners interviewed appeared to have resources to support them in terms of social capital or cultural capital and their disposition was more about survival than learning. All were attending the centre because they had to as part of their contract with the employment services; or risk losing benefits. However, Cath, despite the difficulties of her earlier life, shows a disposition to make choices about her life now. She would appear to have the capacity to become even more active as her confidence grows.

Networks, communities and identities

The capacity of adult learners to develop social capital is just one of the factors that determines how they are positioned in the world. In line with the 'social perspective' view of LLN (Ivanic et al, 2006), I see social networks as crucial for learners but not all members of society find it easy to establish these. Maggie and Laurence probably have the most developed social networks, with Maggie having a variety of networks in which she functions. Graham and Cath have more limited networks although Graham does have his art and conservation networks if he chooses to use them.

Other than Tracy, Maggie and Cath few of the learners displayed a social identity (Jenkins, 1996) which Putnam (1995, 2000) found to be necessary for the production of social capital. As stated earlier, social capital begins in the family and builds up over time, moving into other areas of social activity and is centred around issues of reciprocity, mutuality, trust and common good. Maggie is probably the only learner who shows all these capabilities, with Tracy and Cath, in line with Hall (1999), Putnam (1995) and Ranson (2000), mentioning trust as important to them. The remaining learners appear to function almost exclusively within the family unit. The exception to this is Graham who, other than from his environmental work, which is now spasmodic, appears currently to have little social capital. It may be that lack of employment, poverty and exclusion, as Cattell (2004) suggests, means high levels of social capital are not available to these learners and there is evidence, particularly from the Nacro site, that Field (2003) is correct when he suggests that to develop social capital an individual needs to be able to navigate uncertainty in their life.

Within the FLC women spoke passionately about the support they received, both from each other and from staff at the FLC. In times of difficulty the centre provided a safe haven, a place where they were neither judged nor excluded, with a guarantee of finding support from another human being. For many it seemed to be a replacement for family support, or as another dimension to this. What is clear is that the work of the FLC supports the New Labour policy of raising levels of social capital, and it may also enhance the social capital of their families.

Power, 'choice' and emancipation

Superficially, it could be argued that making choices as an adult is easy; however, choice is not an unproblematic concept. Many individuals find themselves in situations where they have no genuine choice, such as pupils in school, prisoners or members of groups which are socially, culturally or politically disenfranchised and they therefore tend to act as others require them to. These others are the ones with power; the power to make and impose choices. The many manifestations of the exercise of power in interchanges between individuals and groups pose real theoretical challenges; this partly explains why the concept is examined so widely and in such depth. For adult learners lack of power can be a significant factor.

Graham, Maggie and Tracy display 'power with' which Norton (2002) describes as based on respect and a capacity for collective agency with their communities. Giving and receiving support to show relational agency (the giving and receiving of support) described by Edwards and MacKenzie (2005) did seem a factor in each of the sites, but was a particularly strong feature of the FLC.

While Graham, Tracy, Maggie and to some extent Cath all show the ability for critical reflection which Brookfield (1987, 1995) and Mezirow (1991) feel is important so that individuals do not see themselves as helpless within the world, other learners did not show this capacity. Some could be seen as socially excluded because of their lack of economic, social and political involvement in life (Cattell, 2004). It is hard to see how the socially excluded could participate in effective adult learning given the social factors which impinge on their lives, and this appeared to be true for those suffering with mental and other health problems and other material disadvantages which seemed to prevent them from participation.

Graham in particular seems to fit Foucault's (1993) description of learning reaffirming a position of little power, and this could also apply to the Nacro learners who are restricted to a relatively limited curriculum within non-negotiable timescales. Self-belief and confidence needed to show 'power from within' (Norton, 2002) was only really in evidence from Maggie in all aspects of her life. Laurence does display this, but only in his work life and Graham, while he used to show this capacity, is now doing so less and less as time goes on. In contrast, both Tracy and Cath are beginning to develop in this area. For individuals to have a voice, to experience equality and social justice (Foley 1999, Freire 1972, Griffiths 2003, Martin 2000, Merrill 2004, Thompson 2000), is obviously crucial, but only Maggie, Tracy, Cath and, within part of his life, Laurence, feel that this is true for them. Other learners do not. Williamson (1998) describes lack of power by communities over decisions made for them by others and although Graham has a vision about global issues and makes efforts to add to the debate, and Tracy wants to be more involved in her local community but is unsure how to do so effectively, neither could be said to be influential or to have any control.

Returning to Foucault (1993), who said that while empowerment of others might be possible, emancipation cannot be conferred on a person because 'liberty is a practice', it seems that the

evidence from these case studies would indicate that this is true. Worryingly, it seems that the finding from recent NRDC research (Parsons and Bynner, 2005) that there are particular problems for adults, especially men, with very low basic skills, leading isolated lives and being prone to depression, is mirrored in this study. These socioeconomic problems must not go unchallenged, or we are at risk of depriving members of our society of the education to which they are entitled and deserve.

Learner provision and settings

It can be seen that the environments for learning are significant, not least for the effect on the learners themselves. The institutional structures which impinge on this study are varied. Nacro is a relatively inflexible and highly controlled centre of learning; ABE is also controlled in the sense that it is funded and monitored by government. The FLC, because it is functioning outside the formal field of adult learning, is less controlled in some ways, but dependent on multi-agencies for funding, and has a diverse remit in terms of delivery. All are trying to give the best service they can to their learners.

Within Nacro and ABE most of the learning opportunities appear to be formal, or, in the case of some outreach work in ABE, semi-formal. All have paperwork to complete for monitoring and evaluation purposes and to ensure funding. Skills for Life (DfES 2001a), the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum (DfES, 2001b) and responses to Moser's 'A Fresh Start' (DfEE 1999) were all in evidence in these two centres. Staff were well-aware of policies which impinged on them and the options available to learners in terms of entitlement to education. It also seems that the language of 'Opportunity and Excellence' (DfES 2003) permeates the adult education field where it is up to the individual to succeed in their endeavours. In addition, learners and staff at Nacro were very conscious of the tight restrictions imposed by New Deal and other 'back to work' initiatives which dictated almost every minute of their work. The FLC, in contrast, appeared little affected by any education policies and was more concerned with economic, social and welfare policies, as one might expect. The learners here were encouraged to grow as individuals in a mutually supportive environment and, as they became more independent, to access learning opportunities in the local community and beyond. This informality appears to be its strength.

The staff with whom these adult learners work have a common 'student-centred' approach. This is true both for the FLC, where the women and their needs are central to the work of the staff, and for the opposite situation at Nacro where learners are required to attend or face financial penalty. All the staff mentioned 'building confidence' or 'self esteem' of learners as an integral part of the service they provide, and many mentioned the importance of treating individuals as adults. Managers balance, sometimes with difficulty, the tensions of reconciling what policy dictates should happen with what they see as good practice for the learners; mediating wherever they can to offer the best provision possible.

Discussion

From my research it appears that there is a social aspect to learning and support from others is important to learners as is building trusting relationships; this may stem from the impact of previous negative experiences of education. Having certain kinds of capital appears to influence learners' choices and decisions in life. It is apparent that while many managers and teachers are working within controlling structures they are attempting to give learners a positive experience of learning as an adult and offering real choices, but it is equally true that opportunities for learning need to be varied to suit individuals and their communities. Finally, for learning to be truly emancipatory, it appears that it must offer transformation for the individual.

Some implications of these findings are that any adult education provision needs to take account of the social nature of learning and capitalise on opportunities for group learning and learning in less formal contexts. Funding must be available and accessible without complex and time-consuming bidding processes and narrowing down of the curriculum for adults is counter-productive. I suggest that family, or other social structures, are crucial in engendering various capitals which are needed when competing in a field like adult education.

There is evidence that without adequate support, both in the learning situation and within life generally, adults will struggle to succeed as learners. Evidence from a small study of local learning completed by Downing (2005) also found that adequate support for learners was crucial, as was provision tailored to their specific needs and situation. Research from the NRDC (Atkin, Rose, and Shier, 2005) into rural provision of basic skills also found that the

relationship between tutor and learner was a 'key factor for success' (p9) and that it was particularly important to fit the provision to the lives of the learners, not to the needs of the provider. They too found that learners preferred local provision and that accessibility was an issue. It would appear that evidence is mounting that tailoring the provision to the learners, even if this increases the cost, is more effective in the long term. Ivanic and Tseng (2005) remind us that 'social interaction is the key mechanism through which learning takes place (p5), and this appears to be borne out by the learners in this study.

While Skills for Life policies have been greeted with mixed reactions it is evident that a significant factor is that adult education has a higher profile nationally than before 2001, and that the status of teachers within adult education has been raised. There are increasing opportunities for adults to take up learning, both within the workplace and outside and the body of research about adult learning is growing, thanks mainly to the work of the NRDC. However, the recent Leitch Review (2006) of skills in the UK revealed that there are still five million adults without functional literacy (the ability to live and work within the social systems of the country), and 17 million with inadequate numeracy skills. It is important that future initiatives look to offering provision of adult learning which is not purely about skills acquisition, but also allows for individuals to become personally transformed by that learning.

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Reading reader identities: stories about young adults reading

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Background

In 2002 the Times Higher Education supplement ran a report which challenged and reoriented my thinking about reading and readers and had a profound impact on the theorising I then was immersed in as part of the PhD research process. The report sought to re-present a selection of the findings from a reading habits survey I had (tentatively) presented to the British Educational Research conference a few weeks previously. The report entitled '*Books lose out to tabloids*' read,

> Half of the FE students taking English courses in a deprived part of the Midlands rarely or never read for pleasure, according to a survey of students aged sixteen to nineteen at seven colleges in the Black Country.
>
> Their most popular reading matter is tabloid newspapers and magazines. Four out of five of the 340 students surveyed were studying for A-levels and three-quarters were female, yet 15 per cent said they never read for pleasure and 34 per cent did not do so regularly.
>
> The rest read for pleasure at least once or twice a week but only 3 per cent did so every day. Most preferred to socialise and watch TV.
>
> The findings were presented to last week's British Educational Research Association conference by Alex Kendall of the University of Wolverhampton. They supported views of college teachers who told her many A-level students had "poor reading skills and weak vocabulary" and few read beyond their coursework. (Passmore,2002:32)

Some months later the press office at my University was contacted by a BBC Radio researcher who had come across the BERA abstract via the TES article and wanted to invite me to contribute to a late night BBC radio discussion programme addressed to the BBC 'Big Read' campaign. The "students don't read novels" quote in the TES article had caught the researcher's eye and I was invited to share my knowledge about the 'illiteracy' of young people and also to identify a high consuming or idiosyncratic reader who might also join the discussion. The research seemed 'instinctively' to be making a connection between students choices about not to read novels and the degree to which they were or weren't 'literate'. And indeed it was not implied that the 'interesting' reader might be found amongst the student participants.

Reading these readings

The report of the research by Passmore was printed in the Times Educational Supplement (TES), on the front page of the FE Focus section, on September 20th 2002. This page is devoted to 'news' items pertinent to the further education sector; the articles that accompanied this one were entitled 'Birth of learning accounts mark II' and the main headline 'exclusive' "Surprise pay U-turn to halt strike threat". Passmore's report was clearly positioned within the context of 'news'. I had initially been contacted by the TES the week before the BERA conference when an abstract of the paper had been published in the conference material. The abstract had been very succinct:

This paper explores the initial findings of the first stage of a study of the reading practices of sixteen to nineteen year olds studying in FE environments across the Black Country. The study comprises a survey of reading habits followed by a qualitative, ethnographic exploration of reading practices and discursive constructions of readers and reading within a single institution. This paper is concerned with and begins to theorise the initial - whole cohort - findings of the reading habits survey. (Kendall, 2002a:35)

The reporter who contacted me had requested a full copy of the paper and on receipt, and before publication of her article, we had a telephone discussion about the points she had selected to include and why she thought they would be of interest to her readership. A particular concern was that 'these students of English', all the participants had been following an English programme, seemed to show no special interest in or particular preference for reading novels or

the types of texts which might be categorised as 'literary'. I pointed out that this particular statistic was one of many findings outlined in the paper and that there were many other reasons why teachers might feel optimistic about what the participants had reported. I reiterated this point of view in a letter to the TES:

I write with regard to what I felt was a misleading report of my study into the reading habits of Black Country sixteen to nineteen year olds (FE Focus 25/09/02). Whilst it was accurate to report that 49% of participants rarely or never chose to read fiction, to isolate this finding from their very positive responses about other types of reading, in particular magazines and newspapers, is both selective and value driven. These readers reported a varied, interesting diet of reading; 89% reported reading a newspaper most days or everyday, their top five most popular authors included Stephen King and Jane Austen, and 56% read a magazine everyday. Participants expressed a clear preference for recreational reading over playing computer games and 66% reported spending at least half an hour reading for pleasure every day. Unlike your reporter, I felt that there was much in these findings for further education teachers to feel optimistic about. The participants in this study were self-confident readers making conscious and purposeful decisions about what, when and where to read. It is surely high time that we began to recognise, respect and value both the range of reading young people engage in and the reading cultures within which they participate. (Kendall, 2002b: 32)

Whilst I am not claiming that the TES simplistically reproduces or represents the value base of teaching professionals, or that teaching professionals are a knowable, easily described, homogeneous group outside of their professional commonality, what is significant is that Passmore's 'choice' to single out the issue of students not reading fiction or 'literature', and her (and our?) implied 'otherness' to them, is considered 'newsworthy'. So much so that it is an issue which might legitimately command coverage, and a dominant positioning, within a professional weekly newspaper. Passmore appears to take for granted the approval of her audience, and the positioning of the report would seem to suggest an editorial confidence about readers' sympathy for her concerns and anxieties.

Passmore's articulation of the 'problem' of sixteen to nineteen year olds as readers began to reverberate with the reflections on students in other bits of data I'd collected. Here experienced teachers John and Mary are talking,

> **John**: many A level students *do not read*. Some have *limited vocabulary* and *weak understanding of grammar*. At A level *limited reading* means that students *do not have the cultural capital* to enable them to do well at A level.
>
> **Mary**: many A level students have *poor reading skills* and *weak vocabulary*…very few undertake additional reading other than for coursework. *Very few read a decent paper* and only *a minority seem to read novels.*

As I began to re-read this data with 'new eyes' I noted a resonance with Passmore's representation of a group of readers 'in deficit'. The vocabulary of insufficiency, "poor", "limited", "weak" writes large an estimation of inadequacy. Below some new teachers can be heard making similar judgements:

> **Carole:** (*what do you expect of your students as readers?)* Of my GCSE students *not very much*. I remember going into that class and they said they don't read, *they just don't read. I actually had this really weird experience the first few weeks of* teaching I actually felt like I realised that they didn't think I could hear them when they were chatting and I was really thinking about this and I'd say come on, come on pay attention but I thought that they were *actually treating me like I was some kind of visual thing* the TV or something…and I think it because they're so used to this...TV kind of *passive,* you don't interact there's no dialogue you just watch this thing move around and when you're not interested you chat to a friend...I think the whole kind of being really passive, computer games, TV kind of culture I think it's really tangible in those *lower ability groups*
>
> **William:** I expect them to read but I've no real belief that they will, they might read *consumer magazines* like Empire and Total Film but they *won't read anything beyond that.*
>
> **Sue:** I did a questionnaire [for teacher training module] about what reading material they used and how they engaged with the reading materials on the course. Their answers, well the sensible ones, to what reading materials they read out of college,

was adverts and magazines occasionally so they haven't engaged with any texts. Why haven't they? *Why have they got to 16, 17, 18, 19 without having engaged with books?*

I revisited my literature review notes to find echoes of these assumptions and disappointments elsewhere. Writing about the recreational reading habits of first year College students Gallik writes:

When my colleagues and I interview prospective students, we always seem to ask about their reading habits. 'Do you read for pleasure?' We ask, hoping for the 'yes' that we think will reveal an interest in matters academic and thereby portend future collegial success. We ask this question over and over, year after year, because we assume that there is a relationship between reading and academic success: we believe that better students read more than poorer ones. (Gallik, 1999: 480)

In his study Gallik found no connection between pleasure reading in term time and academic achievement and only a weak correlation for vacation reading and achievement. A majority of students stated that they would read more if they had more time but only a minority actually increased their recreational reading during vacation time. Nevertheless Gallik takes comfort in finding that a high percentage of students expressed a positive attitude towards reading.

Gallik's feelings here are interesting because they suggest something about why teachers want students to read, it is as much, perhaps more, a *feeling about* reading books than any 'knowns' or 'provens' about the relationship between recreational book reading and academic success. There are a number of ideas at play here about the wider literacy curriculum, and how discursive constructions of what it means to read and be a reader are mediated and organised within (and through) educational, and wider social, settings.

In the above accounts readers are clearly being defined through the texts they associate themselves with. Teacher preferred texts are primarily 'print based', academic or literary, and clear distinctions are drawn between those that have intrinsic worth and value - in other parts of her narrative new teacher Sue talks about "texts with beauty" and 'other' texts. Notably texts that fall into the latter category are often those that students self-select. Texts in the former category are perceived to make demands on the reader and as such are associated with interactivity, achievement and self-development. Texts in the latter category, by contrast, are associated with passivity and lower status activities, less 'reading' more 'viewing' or 'consuming'.

When talking about students reading these teachers seem caught up in a process of 'othering' (Atkinson, 2004) which constitutes students as in 'deficit', the defining 'other' to the professional, educated 'us' to whom Passmore's article was directed, the same 'us' invited to share in her disappointments.

Furthermore within this set of understandings the activity of 'reading' is defined and determined by the nature (and medium) of the text one engages with; interacting with literature is *reading*; interacting with a magazine *consuming*; interacting with film or TV *viewing*. Thus it is the particular text, and its social and cultural status that determines how these teachers make sense of textual encounters. Within this dynamic reading is less the process of engaging with text *per se* but an activity associated only with particular *kinds* of artefact/text, whether or not one is said to be 'reading' is dependent upon the object of one's gaze. Thus some texts, and the act of engaging with them, are valorised and reified, whilst others are rejected. The good reader, like the good learner (Avis, Bathmaker & Kendall, 2002) may be bound to and referenced from teacher's notions about learning through which their own identities as learners and academics are interwoven and managed. Where the good learner is characterised by 'their relationship to their chosen subject or discipline' their 'commitment', through being 'academically gifted', 'independent' and 'motivated' (Avis et al, 2001: 13) so the good reader resonates with the teachers' own understandings of the legitimised practice. Here new teacher Carole (Kendall et al; 2002) seems to speak the 'legitimate other' to Passmore's reading of students as readers:

Carole: Yeah, I just love reading, not just literature but I love reading the Sunday papers, I just love, if I lost my eyesight and I had to read through braille it would be so difficult because I know it's so limiting so yeah I mean if I had more money…I just, I think there's certain stages when I've gone for certain books I mean I went through a whole psychology phase in my teens when I was trying to work out my own whatever, work out my own personal angst through reading

psychology books. I'm quite spiritual so I read loads and loads of things on eastern spiritual philosophy.

Elsewhere (Kendall 2002, 2005) I have drawn upon Bourdieu's (1992, 2002) thesis of 'distinction' and Bernstein's notion of 'recognition and realisation' (Bernstein, 2000) to think through the ways in which 'teachers' and the institutional contexts within which they participate might function to understand and reproduce particular values about reading and readers and in doing so create the "conditions of possibility" (Foucault in Kendall and Wickham: 1999: 37) that make the quotes above 'sayable'.

Bourdieu's notion of distinction offers a means of making sense of the ideas about text that emerge from the data explored above. Bourdieu argues that texts are cultural artefacts which operate within an economy of 'symbolic exchange' That is to say that as cultural objects, texts have 'value' defined in terms of both their context of production *and* the nature of the discursive social/cultural trajectories through which they are 'reflexively mobilised' (Gauntlett, 2002) by agents (teachers and learners) and institutions (colleges) towards the management of self and the exercising of power. Texts in this sense are understood as signifiers, as material and visible sites around and upon which ideas or 'discursivities' are structured and imposed. Texts as "cultural objects operate for Bourdieu within their own economy of symbolic value" (Colebrook 1997:103) functioning as currency within markets of social, cultural and capital exchange.

Bourdieu identifies educational institutions as 'sites' that occupy a 'state of domination' (Foucault, 2000:283) within this discursive market. That is to say that through the enactment of their specific practices they set *and* gate-keep social value/s, in this case about the meanings and relative values of different kinds of texts, a right acquired through a long term strategic, political and historical positioning within relations of power. Educational institutions, Bourdieu further argues, claim a right to name the legitimate both within the boundaries of their specialist fields *and* beyond. Thus Bourdieu sees educational institutions as constantly producing and reproducing their own reference points, and their merits, not just for the institution and its stakeholders but for the wider cultural nexus within which it is situated and participates.

Through this lens reading 'choice' is always already meaningful in terms of the systems of cultural exchange within which it functions and operates:

Certain texts, and ways of reading those texts, do not have a monetary value. But they have a value in so far as they embody a principle of aesthetic autonomy, which is no less culturally-determined or valued. It depends upon valorising certain authors...certain ways of reading…as well as the positions of those who confer certain values. (Colebrook, 1997:107)

Thus it is the text, and its profit 'status' (in cultural capital terms) that determines whether these teachers might consider engaging with it to be reading or not. The text is given a set of pre-existing, fixed, meanings that the reader, consumer or viewer taps into. What is wholly ignored is what readers might actually be *doing* with the texts they encounter and the critical readings they may indeed bring to bear upon them.

Young people may often then, find themselves in educational contexts within which a fairly pervasive set of discursive constructions exists about how they should 'be' as readers and the terms on which they are expected to participate in particular literacy practices. There exists an implicit understanding that some kinds of leisure reading are a vital, *although extra-curricula and untaught,* complement to the pedagogic process and there are clear tensions about reading cultures, interests and meanings around texts between young people and the professional and institutional understandings with which they come into contact.

Thinking a bit differently

Ideas about 'identity', ' self', 'discourse' that sit most comfortably within feminist and post-structuralist ways of thinking offer alternative ways of thinking through the data above. Although there is not the space to do justice to these ideas here, as a summary these ways of thinking can be understood to share a "de-centring and deconstructive manner" (Ryan, 2001:8) that prefers "to operate against totalizing theories of meaning or knowledge" (ibid. 4) or modernist, structuralist notions of 'self'. The liberal humanist understanding of 'identity' as a unified 'truth', "a singular logic of presence" (Rhedding, 200:1) is resisted, its common-sense of 'self' is problematised and retold as an unfinished, dynamic game of story telling about identity rather than a fixed point

from which 'truth' about an 'individual' may take reference. Giddens argues that:

> self-identity…is not a set of traits or observable characteristics. It is a person's own reflexive understanding of their biography. Self-identity has continuity that is, it cannot easily be completely changed at will but that continuity is only a product of the person's reflexive beliefs about their own biography. (Giddens 1991:53)

Self-identity is "bound up with capacity to keep a particular narrative going" (ibid. 54). Foucault goes further, arguing a more 'surface', 'exteriorised' view of 'self', Kendall and Wickham explain:

> in choosing to problematise this figure of the individual, partly by using the term 'subject' or 'subjectivity…Foucaultians seek to explain how this emerging psychological invention came to be seen as the 'site' where sexuality, and so on, take place, and how it becomes an object of 'technologies of the self (1999: 53)

'Self' here is a locus at which social transformations are effected and around which an illusion of essentiality [about the self] is constructed in order to achieve a particular sociological effect. Where ethics are understood to be the "sets of standards to do with being a particular sort of person" (Foucault, 2000: 264) technologies of the self:

> might as well…[be understood] as the (internal and external) practice of our (internal) ethics… the technologies of self are how we think and act to achieve this. Such acts though, are not done for show, to give an impression to an audience; they may be practised for the individual's own sake. (Foucault, 2000: 266)

For Foucault the construction of 'self' is a "truth game" (2000: 224) that human beings play out to understand, indeed *be* 'themselves'. Throughout this performance of self 'subjects' are active, but not sovereign agents in the process of production, they are:

> the punctuation of discourse, and provide the bodies on and through which discourse may act. In line with this we may say that subjects form some of the conditions for knowledge (Kendall and Wickham 1999: 53)

so that:

> rather than think of the 'individual' in different sites, we can think of different subject positions taken up in discourse, positions that can be and are contradictory and irrational. (Kendall and Wickham 1999: 54)

Collectively these ideas seek to 'open up' truth regimes of 'common-sense' to an examination of the social relations which construct and sustain them. This weaving together of ideas under the embrace of post-structuralism and feminism is not*:*

> about a search for rules, for methods, which when applied are guaranteed to produce a certain result or repeatable responses. Even displacing ones. (Elan, 1990: 24).

Rather it is a reflexive patchwork of 'thinking tools' (Grenfell and James, 1998) that mobilise an alternative and experimental approach to research: for this particular project 'the reader' becomes 'subject position' 'negotiating' the discourses about literacy that permeate the interiority and exteriority of institutional spaces.

So how to put these ideas to work towards *post-structurally valid* ways of thinking about readers and reading?

The grammar of self outlined above makes it possible to see the 'reading subject', as *relationally situated* to reading practices that are in turn "patterned by social institutions and power relationships" (Barton and Hamilton,1998:7). Although Barton and Hamilton, and advocates of the New Literacy Studies do not necessarily explicitly draw upon a post-structuralist discourse their understandings of literacy sit sympathetically with post-structuralist sensibilities:

> some literacies become more dominant, visible, influential than others…Literacy is historically situated…Literacy practices change, and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making (ibid.7).

Here moments of 'literacy', like those of 'subjectivity', might be understood not as

> reflections of…pure forms of objects, but rather the result of temporary discursive luminosity; they allow a thing to exist only as a flash, sparkle or shimmer (Kendall and Wickham, 1999: 40).

and, like the 'play' of subject identity ' are *always already* shifting and in flux. Thus the meanings reading subjects make for reading and readers are contextually bound:

> What…[the subject] can know and how it knows is always influenced by its temporality and its participation in a community of meanings (Usher and Edwards 2000:35)

In these terms the discursive field of literacy, or "community of meanings" through which literacy becomes to be known, becomes also a way by which the subject might come to 'know itself' as discourses "constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern" (Weedon, 1993: 108).

Within the grammar of post-structuralism then, an exploration of reading within any context *can only* explore the meanings of reading and reader played out at a particular social, cultural or institutional locus. Thus we *might only* ask about sixteen to nineteen year old readers in Black Country colleges:

- What discourses about reading and readers are mobilised within this particular domain and which are dominant?
- How are different readers situated by these dominant or 'legitimate' discourses and for what purposes?
- How do different readers situate themselves within and without powerful and less powerful discourse? For what purposes? *And at what risk*?

Towards concluding

If as Paechter describes "what happens in the…curriculum is fundamental to people's lives" (2000:1) and that "if the curriculum excludes or marginalizes some groups or discounts their ideas, it will make it harder for members of those groups to benefit from the education system" (ibid.) then the ways in which reading and readers are understood within educational frames and how different groups of learners might be situated by such understandings is crucial to issues of social justice and therefore pertinent for all of us involved in the project of literacy education. The more detailed findings of the survey that forms the starting point of this article (Kendall, 2005) found that home language is a crucial factor in determining patterns of reading outside college and that where English is not the home language students may be more likely to engage in leisure pursuits, watching films, reading on the internet and playing on the computer. Clearly such reading habits may not only not help readers to recognise and realise the preferred identities of the literacy curricula (in its own terms) but more significantly those habits might also be defined as the valueless 'other' within the context of curricula and by those who index taste to it.

This raises some important questions for teachers working with young adults and it is pertinent to invoke at this point Street's (1999) challenge to literacy teachers to 'work against the grain'. He challenges us to work against the grain but warns that to do so may not afford the comfort of 'constituting others' against whom we might unite in the name of 'enlightenment', 'empowerment' and 'emancipation'. In fact going against the grain may not mean going against a purely external impulse at all. Rather it might demand a re-evaluation and re-assessment of everything we feel we 'know' and have 'learned' ourselves to 'be'. Going against the grain my require us to dismantle and destabilise our sense of 'self' and in doing so our 'tastes', status, identities and relationships to and with others at the professional, personal, institutional and social selves as we must ask:

- How does this domain of practice constitute reading and reader identities; teachers, students, achievers, non-achievers?
- How have I come to be constituted as a particular kind of (successful?) reader in this context and how am I situated in relation to other kinds of readers?
- Do I feel socially and politically comfortable here?
- How does an acceptance of this positioning impact upon the readers who are 'other' to my reading identity? Am I comfortable with this?
- What opportunities and privileges does my positioning afford me? At *what costs and to whom*?
- How do I currently work with or against the 'design grammars' of this field?
- To what extent do I labour for and help to constitute the insulation that 'protects' my positioning as a powerful reader?
- What implications does my positioning have for issues of social justice?
- Why and how might I do teaching differently? To serve who/or what?

What Street is signalling is clear, that in going against the grain we may be called upon to constantly re-negotiate our sense of self. Different ways of knowing literacy may demand

different ways of knowing about ourselves; as readers, as advocates, as interlopers and as shapers of different kinds of literacy practices. To best serve our students we must first undergo a process of re-knowing our reading selves and the values that underpin our stories of 'self'.

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Improving Formative Assessment: Looking at pedagogy in post-compulsory education, including adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL

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Introduction

New Labour's intense interest in education in schools and colleges as well as adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL over the past ten years, has resulted in policies in all these areas which represent a consistent vision of what it sees as the key objectives in trying to improve educational provision, whatever the setting. These are firstly, define the content of the curriculum, and secondly, put in a powerful monitoring and compliance system, using quantifiable outcomes as measured through qualifications, to ensure that teachers and providers don't stray off the path.

What is much less often mentioned in policy documents is pedagogy, or what you might call the science (or art) of teaching and learning. Pedagogy is more about what teachers and learners actually do in their learning, than the subject being learnt, or whether or not qualifications are involved. This relative silence about pedagogy seems to suggest that in the view of policy it isn't important; that the job of teachers is to concentrate solely on covering the curriculum and getting students to pass the final assessment. The task of learners in this view is passively to 'consume' the curriculum 'delivered' by the teacher, and to try to satisfy the prescribed assessment criteria. This even applies in general to trainee teachers: new developments have focused mainly on deciding on the content standards for training programmes, and systems for assessing outcomes, rather than on how best to train, and how best to organise training programmes (to ensure, for example, that trainees receive frequent and effective formative feedback on their teaching practice).

During the same period, however, ongoing research in the schools sector has been strongly suggesting that an increased focus on pedagogy might produce better attainment, and that the narrow focus on a strictly-defined curriculum enforced by target-driven compliance and funding systems, might actually be damaging sustainable learning, particularly for less confident learners (see for example Black and Wiliam 1998, Black et al 2002, Gardner 2006). These findings were supported by a systematic review of the effects of assessment on learner motivation (Harlen and Crick 2003). The key concept in this renewed focus on pedagogy are the terms '*formative assessment*', sometimes known as '*assessment for learning*', defined as follows:

> *Assessment for learning is any assessment for which the first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting students' learning. It thus differs from assessment designed primarily to serve the purposes of accountability, or of ranking, or of certifying competence (summative assessment). An assessment activity can help learning if it provides information to be used as feedback, by teachers, and by their students, in assessing themselves and each other, to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Such assessment becomes 'formative assessment' when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching work to meet learning needs*. (Adapted slightly from Black et al 2002)

'Formative assessment' is thus less a distinct element or 'stage' of teaching and learning than an approach to it, one that emphasises the effectiveness of students being active as organisers and evaluators of their own learning, of learning through dialogue and collaboration rather than transmission, and of the value of questioning, discussion and dialogue between teacher and students, and between students, not least for fine tuning lesson and course planning. Formative assessment is seen as being an important factor in developing and maintaining student motivation for learning in the present and for the future, but it has also been suggested that its value for learning can be diminished through a process of 'bureaucratisation' in which it becomes a series of procedures which teachers implement mechanically because they have to, in which the 'letter' rather than the 'spirit' of formative

assessment is seen, and without most of its potential benefits (Ecclestone 2006). *In this view, for example, Individual Learning Plan pro-formas can be used to serve learning or to serve the administrative requirements of the system: it depends what the teacher actually does with it, and on the way the student is involved.*

The Improving Formative Assessment Project

These issues are now being researched in post-compulsory educational settings, specifically in full-time 16-19 vocational and Key Skills programmes in colleges, Entry to Employment (E2E) provision, and in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL courses in adult education settings. The project is called Improving Formative Assessment (IFA), it began in September 2005, and is funded by the Nuffield Foundation, the National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy (NRDC), the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), and the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA), is led by Kathryn Ecclestone (now at Oxford Brookes University), and involves researchers from Brighton and Exeter Universities, as well as from the NRDC at the Institute of Education, the Learning and Skills Network (LSN), and NIACE. The research fieldwork is being carried out in two phases over two years, and involves about 60 teachers and 200 students. The methodology being used is 'a problem-based approach to professional development': it sees engaging in research work as valuable professional development for teachers, and involves working closely with groups of teachers and learners, in which specific pedagogical interventions are developed and implemented by each teacher during one academic year, and evaluated jointly by researchers and teachers, with contributions from learners too. These interventions include:

- Students drawing up their own criteria about what makes a good assignment
- Developing questioning and feedback techniques (e.g., waiting time, open-ended questions encouraging problem-solving, etc)
- Students devising their own marking scheme
- Tutorials
- Less tutor talking time, more student talking time
- Self- and peer-assessment

Data is collected through interviews, questionnaires, and observations. Three times during the year the teachers attend 'Development Days' led by members of the research team, at which issues are explored, debated, and evaluated. Following the completion of the fieldwork in July 2007, the project will produce a number of publications including journal articles, two collections of papers and a final report, as well as a range of 'Black Box'-type pamphlets aimed at practitioners (following the highly-successful publications reporting on the schools-based research (see for example Hodgen and Wiliam (2006) and Marshall and Wiliam (2006)), professional development materials, and a literature review on adult learning (to which the OECD has contributed funding).

An important question for the project is the extent to which the findings need to be differentiated between different subjects of learning and settings for learning. Should we expect to find that the key issues in formative assessment in adult literacy are significantly different to those in GCSE mathematics or AVCE qualifications in Science, or A Level History? Within the literature on adult learning and formative assessment, our review found a high degree of consistency in the broad recommendations made by the books and articles surveyed, of which more than half had a focus on one or all of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL.

Emerging Findings

Some of the emerging findings from this review and from the fieldwork are cautiously presented here. These should not be taken as definitive findings at this stage, and comments on them would be most welcome.

- Teachers have diverse ideas and levels of understanding about formative assessment
- Teachers of adult literacy and numeracy in community settings tend to see formative assessment as more integrated with teaching methods and less didactic than further education teachers working on full-time vocational programmes
- There is a useful distinction between formative assessment as instrumental coaching towards summative goals and formative assessment that strives for engagement in longer term or 'sustainable' learning (Boud 2000)
- A method or approach and its timing during a course, does not in itself make an assessment formative or summative
- Various dimensions of local 'learning cultures' (Hodkinson et al 2004) exert a strong influence over ideas and practices in

formative assessment
- Most students value both oral and written feedback: *'I don't care if my work is written all over, written comments, as long as they are positive! They definitely motivate me more I think'* (Rachel, IFA student)
- Motivation fluctuates over a course and is affected by course-related and external factors
- Students are both strategic and pragmatic about their learning, but can be deeply motivated by a good teacher, an interesting topic, and getting on well with their peers
- During the timespan of the intervention, the research methodology changed most of the teachers' ideas about formative assessment
- All the teachers valued the space the project offered them to think, and the opportunity to define and work on a problem that is meaningful to them.

Issues for Teachers

The literature review suggests that the following issues are important for teachers:

- They need to have a clear understanding of the difference between summative and formative assessment.
- *Learning is best structured, as far as possible, as dialogue between themselves and their students, and between students*, and this should be open-ended and exploratory rather than a series of routine exchanges
- Effective teachers continually evaluate, maintain and extend their communication skills, with a particular focus on listening for empathy and understanding, and on questioning and feedback to develop learning, as well as on exposition, explanation and transmission of information. Communicative practices that work with one group or individual may not work so well with another: critical, for example, are students' own experiences of schooling and their beliefs about learning, because *these influence how they respond to particular teaching styles and approaches*
- Feedback, whether verbal or written, is more effective when it is focussed on the task rather than the person. It should be constructive and practical, and be returned as soon as possible. *Giving grades or marks can demotivate students, especially those who are least confident, and particularly if the grades are made public and compared.*
- *The best teachers develop a repertoire of questioning techniques*, and share ideas with colleagues to maintain and develop this repertoire. Most useful are open questions that require students to find their own words. It is important to give students time for thinking before answering. Double questions, leading questions, rhetorical questions and closed questions (those looking for a unique correct answer) discourage learners from reflecting on the problem, or from revealing that they do not understand it.
- Summative assessment processes can be used formatively. For example*, students can develop their own marking schemes and collectively evaluate them*, or work in groups to construct 'perfect answers'.
- Teachers should use formative assessment activities to find out more about their learners' motivation and understanding, so as to inform planning and differentiation, both in the long term and immediately.
- Formative assessment activities depend for their effectiveness on students being relaxed and feeling secure enough to face challenges and take risks in asking questions or advancing propositions that may reveal their lack of understanding. *A key part of the teachers' role is to create an atmosphere in which students are willing to take these risks.*
- *Self-assessment and peer-assessment are central elements of most effective learning situations,* and in particular, students should be encouraged critically to evaluate the decisions and assessments of the teacher. This may need to be introduced gradually if students are not used to taking a participatory role in learning.
- The language and concepts of assessment usually need to be taught. The language of official assessment criteria may be intended to be neutral and unthreatening, but in trying to be precise, it often becomes highly technical and inaccessible to learners in practice*. Encouraging learners to develop, discuss and evaluate their own assessment criteria and assessment materials, will help them understand the language of official assessment criteria.*
- Improving confidence is a key aim of most adult students, who are generally highly-motivated to learn. 'Traditional' transmission modes of teaching in which students are seen as passive recipients of learning, are unlikely to be effective for many adult learners. *Focussing on a range of assessment activities as key elements of the learning process can help develop motivation, confidence and autonomy.*
- The fundamental aim of most students is to

achieve successful performance (for example in using literacy skills in real life situations), characterised by fluency and confidence which can only be developed through practice. *Learners need practical collaborative experience of making, exchanging and discussing judgements of the quality of work,* whether it be pieces of writing, dramatic performances, wiring houses, or training new teachers, and whoever the work is by

- The best teachers aim to balance the short-term demands of summative assessment with a view to the needs of learners in the longer term. This implies focussing on the capacity of learners to plan, develop and evaluate their own learning and that of others.

For further information about the IFA research project, please go to http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/education/centres/cdell/ifa/

If you have any questions or comments on this article, please contact me on jay.derrick@blueyonder.co.uk

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***Sam the Man*, B L Hinde, Gatehouse Media Limited**

ISBN 978 1 84231 022 9
48 A5 pages, 48 illustrations
£6.95

email: info@gatehousebooks.com

Reviewed by Paula McDonagh
Student at Galway Adult Basic Education Service

Sam the Man is the first in the series of phonic adult beginner readers. It is laid out easily in five chapters and each chapter concentrates on a different short vowel. Words and sentences are repeated from chapter to chapter and this helps the reader to remember them.

The workbook is very useful and the exercises are photocopiable. There are exercises on spelling and word-ordering and there are also opportunities for creative writing and discussions.

I like the book because it is based on everyday life - some of the characters enter a life of crime - and deals with human emotions. I would recommend the book to other adult learners mainly because it is easy to read and because it is very interesting.

***Secrets,* Sue Torr MBE, Gatehouse Media Limited**

ISBN 978-1-84231-024-3
64 A5 pages, 13 illustrations by pupils at Mount Wise Primary School
Photographs from author's collection
Price: £6.95

email: info@gatehousebooks.com

Reviewed by Marie Summerville
Student at Galway Adult Basic Education Service

The book is aimed at adults who are developing their reading and writing skills, although the ideas and experiences presented in the book make it fascinating for any reader.

It is laid out so that the left-hand pages tell the writer's full story, while the right-hand pages summarize this in shorter bullet-point type sentences accompanied by illustrations.

The book is trying to reach out to people who escaped from school without learning to read and write. It shows that people are not really alone, that there is help and support available. *Secrets* will get that message to a lot more people and help them to take action and to transform their lives.

The writer tells the story of how she struggled with the skills most adults take for granted and says it's like being blind. The struggle went through many different circumstances in her life, until she finally got the support and encouragement to gain the confidence to improve her reading and writing. Her life changed from being full of frustration, fear, embarrassment and isolation to one that is full of happiness and confidence. She is not ashamed anymore.

Apart from being good reading practice, the book is very realistic and convincing and this is why I would recommend it. My first impression was that it could be very inspiring for people who are working on improving their reading and writing. My final impression is that it was.

Writing Guidelines

Why not write something for the RaPAL Journal?

We invite contributions from anyone involved in the field of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL education to write and share ideas, practice and research with RaPAL readers. This can be writing from learners, ideas linking research and practice, comments about teaching, training or observations about policy. We welcome articles, reviews, reports, commentaries or cartoons that will stimulate interest and discussion.

The journal is published three times a year and represents an independent space, which allows critical reflection and comment linking research with practice in the field of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL nationally and internationally.

The RaPAL network includes learners, managers, practitioners, researchers, tutors, teacher trainers, and librarians in adult, further and higher education in the UK. It also has an international membership that covers Canada, USA, New Zealand, Australia, South America, Europe and Africa.

Guidelines for Contributors
All contributions should be written in an accessible way for a wide and international readership.

- Writing should be readable avoiding jargon. Where acronyms are used these should be clearly explained.
- Ethical guidelines should be followed particularly when writing about individuals or groups. Permission must be gained from those being represented and they should be represented fairly.
- We are interested in linking research and practice; you may have something you wish to contribute but are not sure it will fit. If this is the case please contact the editors to discuss this.
- Writing should encourage debate and reflection, challenging dominant and taken for granted assumption about literacy, numeracy and ESOL.

Journal Structure
We want to encourage new writers as well as those with experience and to cover a range of topics, to do this the journal is divided into three main sections and a review section. Each section is slightly different in length and focus. We welcome illustrations and graphics for any of the sections. The journal has a different theme for each edition but welcomes general contributions particularly for Section 1 and Section 2 and for reviews.

Section 1. Ideas for teaching
This section is for descriptive and reflective pieces on teaching and learning. It is a good place to have a first go at writing for publication and can be based on experiences of learners and teachers in a range of settings. Pieces can be up to 1,000 words long.

Section 2. Developing Research and Practice
This section covers a range of contributions from research and practice. In terms of research this could be experience of practitioner research, of taking part in research projects, commenting on research findings or of trying out ideas from research in practice. In terms of practice this could be about trying out new ideas and pushing back boundaries. Contributions should include reflection and critique. Pieces for this section should be between 1,000 2,000 words long including references.

Section 3. Research and Practice: Multi-disciplinary perspectives
This section is for more sustained analytical pieces about research, practice or policy. The pieces will be up to 4,000 words long including references and will have refereed journal status. Although articles in this section are more theoretically and analytically developed they should nevertheless be clearly written for a general readership. Both empirical work and theoretical perspectives should be accessible and clearly explained. Writing for this section should:

- **Relate to the practices** of learning and teaching adult literacy, numeracy or ESOL.
- **Link to research** by describing and analysing new research findings relating this and any critical discussion to existing research studies.
- **Provide critical informed analysis** of the topic including reference to theoretical underpinning.
- **Write coherently and accessibly avoiding impenetrable language and assumed meanings.** The piece should have a clear structure and layout using the Harvard referencing system and notes where applicable. All Terminology should be explained, particularly for an international readership.

Review Section
Reviews and reports of books, articles, and materials including CD should be between 50 800 words long. They should clearly state the name of the piece being reviewed, the author, year of publication, name and location of publisher and cost. You should also include your name, a short 2-3 line biography and your contact details. You can write the review based upon your experience of using the book, article of materials in your role as a practitioner, teacher trainer, and researcher or as a student.

Submitting your work
1. Check the deadline dates and themes which are available in the journal and on the website.
2. All contributions should have the name of the author/s, a title and contact details which include postal address, email address and phone number. We would also like a short 2-3-line biography to accompany your piece. Sections, subsections, graphs or diagrams should be clearly indicated or labelled.
3. Send a copy either in electronic form or in hard copy to the journal co-ordinator **Deirdre Parkinson at: deirdre@dp-associates.org.uk** or to 20 Alnwick Drive, Glasgow G76 OAZ
4. Your contribution should be word processed, in Arial size 12 font, double spaced on A4 paper with numbered pages.

What happens next
1. Editors and members of the Editorial Group review contributions for Section 1 and Section 2. Contributions for Section 3 are peer reviewed by a mixture of experienced academic, research and practice referees.
2. Feedback is provided by the editor/s within eight weeks of submission. This will include constructive comment and any suggestions for developing the piece if necessary.
3. You will be informed whether you piece has been accepted, subject to alterations, and if so the editor/s will work on a final editing process. Any final copy will be sent to authors prior to publishing.
4. Where work is not accepted the editor/s may suggest more relevant or alternative places for publication.

Please contact us if you want to discuss any ideas you have for contributing to the journal.

FORTHCOMING VACANCIES ON THE RAPAL MANAGEMENT GROUP

Elections will be held at the AGM in Belfast in June for several positions which will become vacant as the current post-holders will have served the maximum time in those positions. Please consider whether you can help to maintain and develop RaPAL's progress by being nominated for the posts below:

Chair
The Chair oversees RaPAL's strategic development, chairs the regular Management Group meetings and AGM and is crucial to developing RaPAL over the next 2-3 years.

Ordinary Member
Being elected as an ordinary member of the RaPAL Management Group team is a very good way of introducing yourself to how the organisation works. The post, which lasts for one year, enables you to help out with various projects and is also good grounding if you are considering standing for an Officer's post at later date.

Journal Co-ordinator
The Journal Co-ordinator organises the Annual Editorial Meeting, which, amongst other things, reviews the previous year's journals, selects new themes and editors for the coming year and sets copy deadlines. S/he works closely with the editors of each issue, co-ordinates the layout of the journal prior to its proof-reading and printing and reports regularly to the Management Group and annually to the RaPAL AGM.

Production Editor
The role of production editor involves seeing each issue of the journal through the final stages of editing and production before despatching it to members. When the editors have put the journal together, the production editor is responsible for detailed proof reading of the final version, agreeing amendments with the printer and liaising with the printer while it's being produced. At this stage you receive address labels from the membership secretary so that you can send the journals out as soon as they arrive from the printer.

RaPAL Membership form

RaPAL Membership Fees for 2006-2007

	UK & Eire	Other EU	Outside EU
Individual Membership*			
Full-time	£35	£50	£50
Low-waged, unwaged, student	£20	£30	£30
** includes 1 copy of the RaPAL Journal*			
Institutional Membership			
2 copies of Journal	£70	£75	£75
3-5 copies of Journal	£90	£100	£100
6-10 copies of Journal	£135	N/A	N/A

Help us to DOUBLE RaPAL's Membership in 2006-2007!

We are always keen to attract new individual and institutional members.
Please copy or pass this page to friends, colleagues and your workplace library and encourage them to join RaPAL now!

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If you **DON'T** want us to add your email address to the RaPAL circulation list (RAPALLIST) please tick here ☐

Special interests:

I wish to join RaPAL. (Please see table of membership fees for 2006-07)

Please pay by one of the methods below (tick box):

- ☐ I enclose a cheque (made payable to RaPAL) for £
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Please send your completed application form and cheque (if appropriate) to:

Kathryn James
RaPAL Membership Secretary
Department of Educational Research
County South
Lancaster University
Lancaster LA1 4YD

RaPAL Conference 2007

Learning journeys voices and identities in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL

Friday 15th June 2007 from 10.00 a.m. to Saturday 16th June 4.00 p.m.

The conference will take place at Queen's University Belfast, which is situated in the vibrant area of Botanic Avenue, beside the Botanic Gardens, close to the city centre, and accessible from the George Best Belfast City Airport and the Aldergrove International Airport.

If you are a first-time visitor to the city, we hope that you will give yourself the time to explore Belfast and beyond and have a wonderful Northern Ireland experience. We can offer information about touring and local events while you are here.

Pre-conference event 14th June

There will be an optional pre-conference event from 3.00 pm. On 14th June. The theme is *Local Voices.* A reception will be organised in the evening to welcome travellers.

Friday 15th June

Keynote address by Inez Bailey, Director of NALA, the National Adult Literacy Agency, Ireland, on

"Identity, Access and Participation in Adult Literacy Programmes"

At lunch-time, local literacy learners will be involved in presentations on the theme of **Learners' Voices.**

You are most welcome to attend the conference dinner in the evening. This event offers storytelling and traditional music. Accommodation will be available at the halls of residence. You will also be directed to information about B&B and hotel accommodation.

Further information and details about registration will be available on the Queen's University Belfast School of Education website:
http://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/SchoolofEducation/