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RaPAL

Research and Practice in Adult Literacy

This is edition reflects upon the work of the National Research and Development Centre for literacy and numeracy (NRDC).

Contents

Editorial

In this issue of the RaPAL journal we pause to reflect on the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC). NRDC was set up in 2002 as a consortium by the DfES as part of the Skills for Life strategy. The aim of NRDC is 'to improve teaching practice and inform government policy through the generation of knowledge, by creating a strong research culture and by developing professional practice' (http://www.nrdc.org.uk accessed 1.10.08). A range of writers present a range of views of NRDC – overviews, personal experiences and reviews of materials. In looking back at what has happened since the birth of NRDC in 2002, we are also looking forward to the work that still needs to be addressed.

As editors we write from the perspective of practitioners and teacher trainers working in the field of adult basic education. As such our perspective is that of outsiders, but also as one of the audiences addressed by NRDC research and publications. It is through publications and conferences that NRDC has impacted our own work as teacher trainers on specialist courses, offering materials that addressed the paucity of research that dealt specifically with adults learning literacy, language and numeracy. This has culminated in research and practitioner guides that address the key issue for so many trainers and practitioners – what constitutes effective practice in the classroom?

We all work in predominantly rural areas and NRDC has offered us materials that are easily available and often free. If all publications weren't of the same standard and if research briefings varied in quality, at least they were there. For those of us involved in the early literacy subject specialist courses NRDC has gone a long way to filling some of the gaps in the research base for our work that were noted by Moser in *A Fresh Start* in 1999.

This journal has a different structure to our normal journal, as the focus is very much on reflection. The reflections in this edition fall into two areas – an overview of NRDC and a focus on practitioner research.

We begin with a range of insider views of NRDC. We are grateful for the contribution of Ursula Howard, who was the Director from 2003 – 2008. Ursula looks at the context that the NRDC arose in, its achievements and challenges for the future. Greg Brooks gives an alternative and personal reflection. Greg was Director of the Sheffield arm of NRDC from 2002-2007. Taking a personal perspective, Greg identifies achievements and also explores some of the frustrations arising out the work of the consortium. J.D Carpentieri, who works at NRDC, attempts to answer the question posed to him by a teacher at an NRDC event – 'What's the point of all this research?' Helen Casey and John Vorhaus, current joint directors of NRDC, then look forward to the future.

One of the achievements of NRDC has been the sponsorship of practitioner-research, an area close to the heart of RaPAL. Maxine Burton explores the meaning of practitioner-research and its role in major NRDC research projects. She includes the voices of practitioner researchers in her reflection. Paul Davies looks at the process of practitioner research and some of the tensions

that arise from the different viewpoints and goals of practitioners and university researchers. Mary Hamilton takes a critical view of the tensions already identified by other writers, identifying how policy makers impact on research methodology and again highlights frustrations over publication, already noted by Paul Davies. We conclude this section with a report on a piece of practitioner research by Marcin Lewandowski that he was inspired to undertake by his involvement in the *learner persistence* project. It is interesting to note how this uses an experimental methodology, given Mary's comments in her article on practitioner-research. However, our hope as editors is that Marcin's article will inspire you to undertake some research related to your own practice.

Our reviews for this edition focus on NRDC practitioner guides. Bex Ferriday introduces reviews written by recent trainee teachers. The review section is followed by John Leavey's responses to questions that were sent to a number of people when we were developing this journal. We would like to capture more responses to these questions and you can post your thoughts on our listserv - RAPPALLIST@JISCMAIL.AC.UK

Alongside our reflections on NRDC we include in this edition a celebration of the life of John Glynn, who many RaPAL members will have met over the years at RaPAL conferences. The story of John's life and his contribution to the Gatehouse Project and Pecket Well College tells another story of adult basic education that celebrates a democratic approach to learning that involves both teachers and learners. It is a story that celebrates learners' voices.

(*On a very personal note, my own early experience of adult literacy included a writing weekend as mentioned by Josie Pollentine – Ellayne*).

What this journal celebrates then is the work of students, practitioners and researchers. Our commemoration of John Glynn's life celebrates the ground breaking work of students and practitioners at Gatehouse and Pecket Well. It is important as we take time to reflect on NRDC achievements that we don't forget the important work that came before Skills for Life in England. The move to professionalizing the work force would certainly have made it difficult for John to work as a tutor. In reviewing the first six years of NRDC, the writers in this journal acknowledge the tensions between researchers, policy makers and practitioners and the difficulties of a national body that is a consortium. We hope this edition is a celebration of the work of the many researchers and practitioners that is now embodied in NRDC publications, an encouragement for the timely publication of research already undertaken and a view of research that challenges the positivist tradition and builds on the strong roots that already exist in practice.

Ellayne Fowler
Bex Ferriday
Jackie Sitters

NRDC the first phase 2002 – 2008 – how far have we travelled?

Ursula Howard

Ursula Howard has worked as a practitioner and researcher in adult literacy since 1974, stepping down from her role as Director of NRDC in April 2008. Her PhD and forthcoming book are about literacy learning, practices and policy in the l9th century, in particular writing. Writing remains her keenest interest, and at NRDC she initiated the research on teaching and learning writing as well as 'Voices on the Page', the student writing and publishing project.

Introduction

In this article I will explore how NRDC came into being and its purpose. I will reflect on how its culture was formed; the constraints the Centre has worked with; what it has done that has been new and innovative, and what challenges remain if we are to keep the research agenda alive and well and, above all, relevant to both practice and policy.   I was engaged in NRDC from its inception in summer 2001, and was its Director from 2003-08. This is an insider's perspective.

It is still astonishing that any government, anywhere, would decide to spend £2.5. million a year for three years and extend it to six; advocate longitudinal studies in the lightning-speed world of policy changes, include independent evaluations of its own policies; insist that research be linked to practice through development and teacher education and practitioner research – and promote the practice of cooperation between universities and others on research programmes. But that is what the Labour government did and because of this commitment and as a direct result of the work of NRDC, we know much more now about almost every aspect of our field than we did six years ago.

NRDC was established in 2002, its own stated aim being 'to generate knowledge and transform it into practice' for the benefit of policy and practice. Included in its remit was a brief to 'engage with, refresh and help take forward the Skills for Life strategy'. The centre was to engage with development organizations, teacher educators, and practitioners, in order to devise ways of ensuring that research made a positive difference to teaching and learning. NRDC has produced nearly 100 publications from exploratory and empirical research; 'Reflect' magazine reaches approximately 7,000 practitioners and the centre receives nearly 150,000 visits a year to its website.

NRDC is unique and perhaps for this reason adult literacy colleagues, researchers and governments across the world have been so interested in the Centre, its activities, findings and the extent of its impact.   Searches for similar models elsewhere past and present reveal nothing comparable, apart from the National Centre for the study of Literacy and Learning (NCSALL) in the US – on which NRDC was deliberately modeled by government on the advice of academics in the UK. However, NRDC was a much wider research/practice consortium and managing this has taken a great deal of energy. It is also true to say that NRDC was much closer to policy than NCSALL and this has undoubtedly lead to it being misunderstood and at times even mistrusted by some inside as well as outside the consortium.

The key questions we should now ask are: how much has this new knowledge and the 'know how' of our practical, development work changed the field of literacy, language and numeracy? And how should NRDC's research and development move forward in the future?

The existing research culture which supported NRDC

There is nothing new under the sun: new organizations, new thinking, original pieces of writing and research always emerge from somewhere and build on something. NRDC, like any other innovation, is a product of its context and history. There were at least four streams which flowed into NRDC:

Research and practice together

From the 1970s to 1990s, a generation of literacy practitioners to which I belonged, began to develop and theorise practice, influenced by Freire, Bernstein, Frank Smith and many others. Practitioners, together with supportive researchers, explored the nature of literacy and literacy problems, using social theory, cultural Marxism and the practices in contemporary social movements, such as feminism and the worker-writer movement (Woodin, 2008). Gramsci and the concept of 'organic intellectuals' felt relevant to the aspiration to be our own thinkers and researchers, and we

worked to illuminate the politics, the social class relations and the pedagogies of literacy and the processes of teaching and learning. RAPAL was in part born of this practitioner 'think work', a research and reflective practice network in adult literacy which was still active in 2001, despite the long years of policy neglect, funding cuts, structural changes and a utilitarian approach to 'delivery' (Hamilton and Hillier, 2006). Linked to RAPAL are the 'New Literacy Studies', a multi-disciplinary approach, which has enabled the theorization of literacies, and brought thinkers and practitioners in the US, UK and elsewhere closer together to develop the concept of multiple literacies as social practices, marked by the 'literacy events' in which literacy is used to communicate in everyday life.

Building an evidence base
A second strength informing NRDC was the research and evidence base which had begun to be created by quantitative and evaluative research on adult literacy and numeracy, commissioned by ALBSSU (later BSA) in the l990s. This research was led by John Bynner (who became NRDC's first Director), and together with Sam Parsons he analysed data from the UK birth cohort studies for evidence of the significance of literacy and numeracy and included evaluations of national initiatives, such as Greg Brooks' 'Family Literacy Works'. ALBSSU also developed international research networks, particularly in Europe. And because ALBSSU had a core remit for development activity, innovation and quality improvement, there were links between research and development, and a focus on practical advice for teachers.

Literacy in other phases and places
A third essential element was the scholarship and development activity in relevant areas: childhood literacy and numeracy development, in the UK and elsewhere, fostered by professional associations such as UKRA; research on new and multi-modal literacies; mathematics education and numeracy research in Australia; phonics development in the national curriculum; and seminal work on formative assessment by Black and Wiliam.   There was a burgeoning research culture in FE and adult learning more widely, exemplified by the Learning and Skills Research Network (LSRN) set up by LSDA (think of Ward and Edwards, The Learning Journey, 2002).

Growing CPD and qualifications from the ground

Despite the lack of a coherent national framework for FE professionals, including literacy and numeracy practitioners who worked for decades at its fringes, innovative literacy teacher education and CPD often flourished at local level. This was fed by the work of people in many different organizations: LLU and ILEA, Birkbeck, Goldsmiths College, Lancaster University and all those practitioners who designed college and adult education-based teaching certificates, such as the City and Guilds. Learner-centred accreditation models were debated and developed, through OCNs, and these became an important vehicle of practitioner-led and peer-moderated change. Practitioners saw to it that the spirit of enquiry and continuous development were never extinguished in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL.   Initiatives flourished, however ill-served LLN was by the overarching systems within which they worked. And in the 1990s, FENTO (later LLUK) was established to create the FE standards and a basis for LLN professionals' qualifications and CPD.

Progress was patchy. It was dependent on people's commitment and resources.   Evidence of learners' experience - inspectors' reports apart - remained sparse and it did not indicate whether provision was working for learners. And when the government and invited developers did introduce coherence and shared approaches, creating the new standards, levels, curricula, assessment regimes and planning tools for Skills for Life, they worked at a speed which precluded the extensive consultation which would otherwise have improved them and created a sense of ownership in practice.

The Policy Moment
The new Labour government made a strong commitment to evidence-based policy and research, initiated in education by David Blunkett.   Six national research centres were established of which NRDC was one of the last. NRDC has benefited from joint work with the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning and the Centre for the Economics of Education. The ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) is another example of a planned approach to the organization of research. NRDC's 'Workplace basic skills' project, a quantitative and qualitative study, was mainly funded as part of TLRP.

Research evidence had already begun to matter to policy worldwide. When the OECD's IALS study was published in l998, the evidence was

compelling to a new government and fitted the overall direction of policies aimed at 'effectiveness': raising standards and driving up demand to create a culture of lifelong learning. Governments internationally were increasingly focused on skills for economic competitiveness, and increasingly utilising statistical data to measure outcomes and support spending decisions. The Comprehensive Spending Review system sought numbers to justify the money. To support the success of reforms, major national educational policy initiatives were accompanied by development programmes to support implementation: GNVQ and Key Skills were two examples. The Skills for Life Improvement programme is the latest.

So, NRDC was possible because a pre-existing culture, commitment and activism had flowered in practice and met a national and international policy interest in quantitative evidence, whilst elected politicians were seeking the human stories and meanings that lay behind the stark numbers.

NRDC – how far have we come?
What has NRDC been able to achieve? The remainder of this article will set out some aspects of what NRDC has achieved, then look at what has been less successful and finish with ongoing challenges for the future. I can only give a flavour here of the ground-breaking work of NRDC colleagues.

A community of research and development practices
NRDC brought a group of experienced and respected researchers, practitioners, developers and communication experts to work together over a long period. NRDC has been the forum in which people from different and sometimes mutually suspicious methodological traditions worked closely together for the first time to direct, manage, conduct and present a shared research strategy, and engage practitioners in the process. Quantitative and qualitative researchers, practitioners, teacher educators and development professionals have sat around tables, argued things out, and agreed to take collective decisions. Differences, in concepts, language and viewpoints have always been expressed, but they have been heard. Mutual respect and understanding have grown and there has been recognition – and the resources – to value a both/and, rather than an either/or approach. NRDC has developed a quality assurance system in which academic and practitioner review and feedback, followed by

open discussion, leads to redrafting, further work, and thorough editing to reach final drafts. The quality and credibility of research proposals and publications has been dependent on this process. It is tough, but it has worked well.

Practitioners as researchers and users
NRDC was able to engage practitioners routinely in research in different roles. Teachers were trained as researchers, building on training modules pioneered by Andrew Morris at LSRN in the 1990s. Core to NRDC's strategy was the commitment to practitioner engagement. Led by Mary Hamilton, a typology of practices was developed. The most common has been the engagement of teachers as researchers in all major projects; and the 3 year Practitioner-Led Research Initiative, involving six research projects a year, all working on major themes such as participation, creativity and learners' purposes and persistence. Practitioners were supported by a professional researcher and the researchers had the opportunity to share and comment on the work of other projects. (PLRI Reports: Hamilton and Wilson, 2005; Hamilton et al., 2007; Davies et al. 2007). Practitioners are engaged in editorial groups and quality assurance, and increasingly write for 'reflect'.

Starting with what we know
NRDC was able to adopt best practice by embarking on research in a chosen area with systematic reviews of the literature, and in some cases practice, before embarking on fieldwork. The reviews of numeracy and writing (Coben et al, 2003; Grief et al 2004) were fine examples of this approach and widely cited. The review stage made sure any primary research project and its key questions were still necessary and the design could be refined before primary research was undertaken.

Scaling up: the power of new knowledge from a large research resource
In the past, much research in our field has been small scale, or driven by individuals' interests. NRDC has been able to engage in large scale empirical studies from which correlations and conclusions could be made from a substantial body of data; and in the case of a longitudinal ethnographic study, 'Adult Learners' Lives', deepen understanding of literacy learners and the meaning and circumstances of learning in people's lives. (Barton et al 2006; Ivanic et al 2006). At the same time we have capitalised on our access to the Birth Cohort Studies – the 1970 British Cohort Study in particular – and we have repeatedly mined these sources for

quantitative evidence of levels of literacy and numeracy in the general population, and of the connections between low skill levels and other indicators of social and economic status. We understand better than we used to how low levels of literacy and numeracy contribute to, and are brought about by, social exclusion, unemployment, low wages, ill health and intergenerational disadvantage. (Bynner and Parsons 2006; Parsons and Bynner, 2007)

Teaching and learning.
Moser (1999) argued that teaching, learning and pedagogy, the heart of literacy and numeracy work, were bereft of research evidence. There had been a tradition of development work and practical guidance led by BSA's predecessors, as well as studies of literacy learning going back to the l970s (Mace, 1979) – but no body of research as such. NRDC bid for additional resources from ESF to carry out five quantitative and qualitative studies on effective teaching and learning – reading, writing, numeracy, ESOL and ICT, together with research on embedding LLN in vocational and wider learning. These studies demonstrated factors which led to learners' progress and highlighted patchy practices and varying degrees of effectiveness. The most pressing issues were taken forward into practice-based development projects, including collaborative writing, the effectiveness of group and pair work, the best uses of ICT and how to use phonics. NRDC has moved teaching, learning and pedagogy forward across literacy, language and numeracy.

The NRDC's research on embedding LLN has made a strong impact on policy. The findings were positive, measurable and fed into the Leitch and World Class Skills agendas. However, vigilance is now needed to make sure that the models of embedding NRDC promoted are actually taken up, so as to avoid the real danger that 'embedding' is taken to mean 'disappearing'. The announcement that the 2010 targets have been met two years early, and the primacy of Train to Gain as the vehicle for Level 2 look likely to put pressure on funding for learning which is genuinely focused on the needs of those learners, of all ages, who need sustained LLN support to reach levels 1 and 2. The signs are not good that Train to Gain will allow such LLN learning to take place.

Literacy and numeracy and ESOL – distinct but linked
NRDC's remit enabled the Centre to bring literacy, numeracy and ESOL closer together. All

three were critically important and interlinked even if, to start with, ESOL seemed less the central focus; this was soon addressed through ESOL specific projects. Indeed, the Leeds-led project on the ESOL/Literacy relationship and student placement practices was an example of how important the interaction can be between the distinct but intertwined components of LLN. Most importantly perhaps, Diana Coben and NRDC numeracy research teams have moved us on from the idea that numeracy is best described as a literacy, a description that was always bound to fail to do justice to both. We have worked to end the 'and numeracy' syndrome. Numeracy and maths have come fully into focus and are now national policy priorities, drawing on NRDC's research and the Maths4Life programme with its design research and innovative pedagogical development and guidance for teachers: 'Thinking through Mathematics'. (Swan, 2006; Swain and Swan, 2007)

Critical Friend to policy – and practice?
NRDC was able to engage with policy makers whilst also presenting evidence which is critical of current policies. Sometimes our findings went with the grain, as with our research on 'embedded', but this was not always the case. The Effective Practice studies, the 'Stepping stones' work on progression, the Entry Level work and other projects have been uncomfortable for policy makers and were argued over. In exploring practice, NRDC has also had a critical friend role: the effective practice studies found some poor practice, over-reliance on formal curricula, too little teaching of writing, and an overwhelming use of worksheets. The work highlighted the need to develop teachers' repertoires and employ a range of pedagogic strategies to suit learners.

Synthesis across progammes and projects: innovative approaches to communicating research
One university researcher called NRDC's short syntheses of key messages from projects on a thematic basis '*findings by numbers*' – a reduced and simplified version of the complex truths explored in individual projects. There's truth in that. However, the positive reception for NRDC's short summaries, 'annual reports' of findings, and syntheses, led by John Vorhaus, have shown us that policy makers, teachers and managers have this in common: they are all people who need research but have little or no time to spare for reading: they need findings and knowledge in a digestible, and immediate

form. The point is to join small pieces of information so that they make sense together and to immediately offer ideas about what should be done to improve things. This has been called 'answering the 'so what' question' and it is vital to successful impact. Clear syntheses are also enabled by the shared efforts in NRDC: peers know each others' work, value it, see connections, and feel comfortable with each others' work in an environment which has been less individualistic and hierarchical than is often the case.

Dissemination isn't enough: development is essential for supporting and improving teaching and learning

NRDCs remit was to link research to development to enable teacher educators and practitioners to use research and take it forward in ways which would benefit learners and learning. Development for NRDC has meant engaging with teacher education in universities and colleges, (new handbooks on literacy and language are about to appear), exploring the findings of research in action research and demonstration projects based in practice, and using research as part of NRDC's contribution to national reform programmes like the SfL Improvement programme and its predecessors. NRDC has also been positioned to help set up PGCE and MA programmes at the Institute of Education, and has developed accessible materials for post-graduate programmes. PhDs and other research-based degrees are growing in our field and it is important we gather data about the extent and content of these: they are part of the academic capacity which NRDC has undoubtedly helped to build, and the work of research students could be written up in 'Reflect' , RAPAL and other journals.

Evaluating Skills for Life

Skills for Life has been evaluated by the NAO, by the Inspectorates, by the Public Accounts Committee, and by LLU+ (the curriculum). NRDC has run two large scale longitudinal and linked-up evaluation studies (quantitative and qualitative) of the impact of Skills for Life on Teachers and on Learners. The NRDC 'Teacher Study' was enhanced by LLUK-sponsored studies, including a 'snapshot' study of the qualifications of teachers in 2006-7. These studies together give us an unprecedented picture of teachers perspectives, values, work patterns, qualifications, CPD. The NRDC 'Learner' study tells us about learners' progress, attitudes, patterns of participation, feelings about learning - and has had some startling findings, including the popularity of 'tests'.

NRDC as an active international forum

NRDC's international work has grown and grown taking shape in seminars, visits and exchanges, joint projects and books, daily email exchanges of information and consultancies. The closest working relationships have been with colleagues in the US and Canada, New Zealand and Australia, though more recently, closer ties have developed with colleagues in many European countries and at the EU. International work has brought new ideas, findings and visiting scholars to the UK (Steve Reder as Visiting Professor in 2004 among them). This has had an impact on policy: the NCSALL work on learners' persistence, 'self study' and the relationship between skills and practices has set a new policy agenda here in the UK; the US study of teaching and learning practices amongst ESL literacy learners; and the New Zealand effective teaching and learning studies all informed the design of the NRDC Effective Practice studies; and the US models of practitioner engagement led by Cristine Smith influenced NRDC's thinking. It has been a two-way process. The NRDC research assessment instruments are now used in other countries. The home international research/practice and policy community (The Republic of Ireland and the four UK countries) met regularly to compare policy priorities and national developments and hear about NRDC's work. And the six NRDC annual research conferences to date offered a forum for much international activity: a book of conference papers will soon be published.

What has NRDC and its partners still to do?

The tip of the iceberg

NRDC is a long way down a long road, but there is much still to do. Nearly every project has exposed deeper questions for analysis and further research beyond the parameters of its first stage. The birth cohort studies are one example. The NRDC 2004 study of literacy and numeracy among the BCS70 cohort, then aged 34, has spawned four further studies beyond 'New Light on Literacy and Numeracy': (Bynner and Parsons, 2006): a project analyzing the Scottish cohort members literacy and numeracy; a study of Entry Level learners commissioned by DfES as soon as 'New Light' appeared; a study comparing the data with data from Steve Reder's study in Portland, Oregon, with a particular focus on uses of ICT in relation to literacy and numeracy levels and practices; and a study looking specifically at the intergenerational transfer of adults skills development and their children's success in school. We know much more could be

discovered from further analysis and follow up studies, and this knowledge could be used to inform policy to create more equal life chances for people living with persistent inequality.

Methods: achievements and limits

NRDC's work has built capacity in qualitative research and even more so in quantitative study. Work has encompassed, primary and secondary analysis, population studies, case studies, action research, ethnography, evaluations, observation studies, correlation studies and the development and trialling of new models. We have used 'before and after' assessment tools to measure progress. There is one type of method we have not been able to use, apart from one review of literature: an experimental study based on randomized controlled trials. This method is seen by some as the pinnacle of research methods and the only way of establishing cause and effect. Three years ago, working with colleagues in the USA, a joint project was designed to take the work on effective teaching and learning from both countries and subject it to a 'what works best' study, so that we could say beyond all doubt what combination of methods are most likely to support learners' progress. Not everyone embraces the science of experimental methods: but the robustness of findings would leave us better equipped to combat the recurrence of simplistic and condescending assumptions about how people learn, such as the recent Channel 4 programme 'Can't read, can't write'. Such programmes show how valuable hard evidence is and how damaging its absence.

Limitations to independence

NRDC's independence has always been qualified. Strong policy interest has its price. Our DIUS/DfES sponsors have only once intervened in a project's method when it was decided to expand the teacher study. They have obviously had a commissioning role in what we study; sometimes it was difficult to reach a consensus. Too many ideas from too many policy-makers resulted, in the 2005-7 work plan, in 47 projects. Some were much too small to answer big questions and severely constrained the linkage between projects in the strategic framework which is the Centre's strength. NRDC has always had to have our outputs cleared for publication and that clearance has sometimes taken a long time, missing key 'moments' to maximize communication. Managing conflicts of interest has sometimes been challenging, as has the change from DIUS to QIA as the major sponsors of research and development: the approach to managing projects is very different,

with QIA intervening much more during the course of a project.

Impact on policy – with limits

Research is only one factor in policy making and certainly not the strongest. So despite 'impact' being prominent in our remit, NRDC's work has had limited impact in changing policy. We have made progress with our work on 'Assessment for Learning', i.e. formative assessment – now welcomed by policy makers. (Looney, J 2008) We have consistently argued for an expansion of the assessment regime to allow writing skills and numerical problem solving. We have not changed that, although functional skills will offer a more inclusive assessment if it can be tailored to adults at all five levels.

Despite calls from the CBI and employers for a focus on writing, the literacy skills and practice which they increasingly need, literacy is still so often synonymous with reading. The government's aim that people should progress vertically is not born out by research on adults' learning patterns. But they cannot progress upwards to a full level 2 or 3 without writing skills. The focus on reading in Skills for Life assessment is therefore counterproductive in meeting policy aims. The Voices on the Page project, now an NRDC/NIACE collaboration, is a tiny, if vocal, project: but where is the published student writing to match Quick Reads? Where is Writing for Pleasure to go with Reading for Pleasure? There is still much work to do on writing, especially as we found such limited classroom practices in a climate where teachers are under pressure to get learners through assessments which don't include writing tasks.

The NRDC findings on the impact of literacy and numeracy at Entry Level 2 and below on people's lives were powerful and convincing to Government ministers.. They made an evidence-based case for changing the level at which the PSA target was set, and for prioritizing funding for people with the greatest learning needs. We showed what gains could be made for this group of people. But despite a warm reception, real interest and extra resources to explore the issue further, we have not seen the changes which were the logical outcome of the research.

Impact on practitioners

Impact on practitioners takes time. When NRDC carried out an external evaluation of its work in 2004-5, we found that NRDC had a strong impact on policy and stakeholders, and on the research community in the UK and internationally. However, we had only begun to

reach practitioners; a few hundred had been involved in doing the research itself, and more than a thousand participated in the teachers' study but there are over 18,000 practitioners and a creative strategy was needed to engage them more effectively. 'Reflect' was born of this need and the clear message from feedback is that it is well received. Our website use grows exponentially. In teacher education, we know our research is now routinely used. But there is still a mountain to climb to enable practitioners and learners, the most important beneficiaries of research, routinely to use research to stimulate, support and help develop better practice.

Networking and partnership
The hope is that NRDC has been a catalyst for networking between networks, and that it will go on playing that role. NRDC developed its own networks initially, but has mainly worked with existing ones: Adult Learning Maths (ALM) NATECLA and RAPAL. For the past few years, we have been able to offer financial support for practitioner bursaries to conferences, as well as to NRDC's conference. Long-term, the LLN field can only benefit from more mutual support and cooperation between UK, European and International networks, more sharing of information about opportunities, and more sharing of knowledge to develop the research agendas for the future. It seems, for now, as if policy interest in research has waned. The funding is certainly moving away from LLN at Entry level, as well as from ESOL. But LLN is still firmly at the centre of post-16 learning and will stay vibrant if practitioners and researchers continue to work together to do the work which is still needed.

NRDC in the future
NRDC is continuing to develop its research and development. It is leading a major research project on family literacy; pursuing research on older LLN learners for an independent body; and conducting a longitudinal study of the impact of literacy and numeracy in the Armed Forces, working with NIACE. Projects for LLUK on developing the LLN workforce continue. And a project on effective styles of leadership of LLN provision is underway. NRDC is continuing to play a leading role in the QIA SfLIP. These are just a few examples of continuing research and development activity and ongoing international networking. The centre is engaged in work for the EU, in New Zealand and for UNESCO. Beyond the era of major direct government spending on research in this area there are possibilities for greater independence in the centre's work.

The work is far from done, but there now exists a strong body of research knowledge and evidence about teaching and learning of adult literacy, language and numeracy. NRDC has been fundamental in achieving that and is ideally equipped to build on it.

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Reflections on NRDC: achievements and influence

Greg Brooks

Greg Brooks was a founder member of the NRDC consortium, and Research Director of the Sheffield arm of NRDC 2002-07. He was from the outset, and remains, a member of its Management Group, but writes here in a personal capacity.

The idea of the *Skills for Life* strategy, and of a Unit to run it and a research and development centre to support it, emerged early in 2001. The Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit, later the *Skills for Life* Strategy Unit, was set up a few months later, and planning for NRDC began immediately. Six consortia put in expressions of interest, of which three were invited to tender. Two joined forces at this point, and the merged consortium won the contract. NRDC came formally into existence on 1 February 2002 (though a few of us had already started work). It received a core grant of £2.5m per year for the six financial years 2002/03-2007/08, and in most years gained substantial extra funding from other contracts. The funding of both the *Skills for Life* Strategy and NRDC in 2002-08 was unprecedented, at least one and perhaps two orders of magnitude larger than ever before in this field.

In 2008/09 NRDC has no core grant, though it has money from other contracts, and the work programme is correspondingly smaller. Also, the consortium has shrunk, and the *Skills for Life* Strategy Unit no longer exists as such, its remaining members having been dispersed during 2008 across various sections within the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills in order to embed it. This is therefore an opportune moment to reflect on NRDC's achievements and influence. Its official account of itself is contained in the Annual Reports, available on the website. Here I will offer my own thoughts on its achievements and influence, and say a little about its history, but need to mention one area I shall not cover: the *Maths4Life* initiative was managed by NRDC but deserves its own chronicler. Also, my many colleagues who have worked strenuously to make NRDC a success will appreciate that, in assessing its work as a whole, it would be invidious to name some but not others; hence the absence of names.

NRDC was led from the outset by a headquarters group based at the Institute of Education, University of London (IoE), and all the following institutions were partners, some throughout 2002-08, others for substantial periods: King's College London, Lancaster University, University of Leeds, University of Nottingham, University of Sheffield; Basic Skills Agency, Learning and Skills Development Agency, LLU+ at South Bank University, NIACE; Liverpool Community College, ROWA (Read On – Write Away!, Derbyshire), Tower Hamlets College. It therefore encompassed research capacity (mainly in universities), national professional development bodies, and large basic skills providers, thus putting substance into the 'research **and** development' title which distinguished it from the half dozen government-funded educational **research** centres which already existed. Two achievements can therefore be mentioned already: NRDC always managed to keep the three sets of interests represented, and always took both parts of its remit seriously.

Outputs

In September 2008 the publications section of the NRDC website listed 130 items: by my count there were 13 *Maths4Life* publications, 16 research reviews, about 47 research reports of one sort or another, 25 practitioner guides, 11 issues of *reflect*, 3 evaluation reports, 3 Briefings, and 12 sundry items (mainly Annual Reports), with about 40 more known to be nearing publication or awaiting DIUS clearance – an impressive number of outputs by any reckoning. Many of the research reviews are weighty and impressive pieces of scholarship; some were controversial, in particular the *Developmental Dyslexia in Adults* review, which caused disquiet in some quarters by exposing the lack of consensus on definitions and identification of dyslexia and the lack of evidence for differential teaching of people with dyslexia. Most of the reviews showed how thin the research base was in many areas (and how much thinner it would have been if the Basic Skills Agency had not been labouring away previously), and therefore how much work needed to be done – precisely why NRDC was set up. I will cover the value and influence of some of the other categories later.

Links

NRDC established excellent partnerships with sibling organisations in several countries, especially the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) in the USA, the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) in Ireland, and Communities Scotland. NRDC carried out a couple of collaborative projects in Ireland and Scotland, a project of the American

Institutes for Research in Washington DC on the teaching of English as a second language to adults provided the inspiration for the Effective Practice studies mentioned below, a joint conference between NRDC and NCSALL on longitudinal studies has led to the production of a joint volume, and many inspiring speakers from other countries presented at NRDC's annual conferences. A particularly fruitful and ongoing link was made with l'Agence Nationale de Lutte Contre l'Illettrisme in France, but few if any with other non-Anglophone countries.

Influence

Among the many examples I could give I will highlight five groups of studies which I think will have enduring influence (and by doing this I do not mean to down-play the rest – I can't cover everything). First, those which used data from the lifetime cohort studies NCDS (which began in 1956) and BCS (which began in 1970): both by gathering and analysing new data from cohort members and by secondary analyses of data from earlier sweeps, the researchers (mainly at IoE) who work on these studies continue to produce valuable insights into basic skills and especially the pervasively bad and intergenerational effects of poor skills. Two results are the renewed attention to adults with skills below Entry level 3, and to giving all children a fairer start in life.

Secondly, the five Effective Practice studies, in reading, writing, ESOL, numeracy and the use of ICT: these were the first large-scale attempts in England (and, except for ESOL, probably in the world) to find out what basic skills teaching was actually like in classrooms, and to try to tease out relationships between the teaching strategies seen and the progress learners made. Some of these studies showed that average progress was small; in all of them, few relationships could be discerned with teaching strategies (though some were detected with the **organisation** of teaching), and rather little that could be called specific pedagogy was observed. I think it's fair to say that this served as a wake-up call to the profession.

Thirdly, those arising from the Adult Learners' Lives study at Lancaster University: these explore and explain in detail just how chaotic some people's lives are, and therefore both the difficulty and the importance of sensitively enabling them to improve their lives and their skills.

Fourthly, the research led by IoE on embedded and less embedded (sometimes wholly separate)

teaching of adult literacy, language and numeracy: the finding that more embedded teaching is related to better progress has profound implications and is already leading to changes in practice. (Whether *Skills for Life* can work as well now it's embedded is less certain.) Lastly, I think that the soon-to-be-published results of the Teacher Study and the Learner Study, though beset by severe data-gathering problems in the early stages, will provide rich insights into the impact of *Skills for Life* on both groups, in terms of the implementation of the strategy, teachers' reactions to it, growth in the sector, the progress made by learners, and the relation of the latter to teachers' views.

Dissemination

Huge efforts were put into this. Six annual conferences were held (2003-08), dozens, if not hundreds, of NRDC presentations were made at other conferences (e.g. RaPAL, Research and Practice in Adult Literacy) and to local seminars, a number of articles appeared in academic and other non-NRDC journals, and the magazine *Reflect* usefully showcased accessible accounts of research projects and their implications for practice. In addition, NRDC has run the *Skills for Life* conferences for the DfES/DIUS for several years, including providing many of the speakers, and huge numbers of copies of reports and other publications have been distributed (of the order of half a million in hard copy, plus probably a similar number of downloads from the website). In the last couple of years, a whole series of practitioner guides has taken the process of useful dissemination further by providing handy and highly practical summaries of findings and advice and resources, building where possible on research results, and always on professional wisdom. These guides in particular have begun to fill the knowledge gap on 'what works' in terms of actual specific pedagogies.

Professional development and capacity-building

At a meeting in January 2001 at which the ideas of *Skills for Life* and NRDC began to emerge, Malcolm Wicks MP, then the relevant junior minister, asked me how many people in England were engaged in research and development in adult basic skills. My answer was 'About 30', and over the next half hour I wrote out the list for him. I mention this for two reasons: first, virtually all of those on the list became involved in NRDC; secondly, it shows just how small that community was – NRDC has brought about a huge increase in the numbers of people involved, and done so by bringing them into research and development projects and

providing the appropriate professional development. At Sheffield, for example, about 30 people took part in our projects as practitioner-researchers. I do not have the national total to hand, but I'm certain that it is well over 200, and many continue to contribute to the field – though the current downsizing means that some are drifting away to other areas.

Two initiatives that deserve honourable mentions here are, first, the Practitioner-Led Research Initiative (PLRI), organised from Lancaster University, which provided small amounts of funding for 18 projects in three rounds and gave these practitioners the chance to devise and run their own projects rather than take part in those designed by others; secondly, the excellent *Voices on the Page* initiative, which has enabled 640 learners to have their writing published on the NRDC website..

Frustrations
It has not, of course, all been plain sailing. In giving NRDC the remit for research and development in this field in England, the government in effect took it away from the Basic Skills Agency and this, I believe, contributed in the longer term to the demise of that worthwhile body, an unfortunate unintended consequence. Early findings from the review of assessment instruments led to the commissioning of NFER to produce a better set of assessment tools for adult literacy, the Go! materials – but a better instrument for assessing adult numeracy was equally badly needed and has so far found no backing or funding from policy-makers. Though I have nothing but praise and thanks for the work and strenuous efforts and valuable outputs of my colleagues at IoE, in my view too large a share of NRDC's funding went to that institution – the other partners could have done with somewhat bigger slices of the cake. Although many worthwhile topics and groups of learners featured in the programme, not nearly enough attention was given to learners with special needs (learning difficulties and/or disabilities). As I've said, a large amount of very good research was done – but only one of the published research reviews used rigorous systematic review methodology, and among the many empirical investigations only two projects using the most rigorous design, the randomised controlled trial, were attempted: one on improving the literacy of young offenders (this collapsed because no control group could be recruited), the other on offering literacy learners a financial incentive to attend (this was completed, and showed no impact on attainment

but a perverse effect on attendance: those who received the incentive on average attended slightly fewer classes than those who did not). Finally, capacity-building has worked at what might be called the junior and lower intermediate levels (in university terms we might think of these as lecturer and senior lecturer), where there are now many more people qualified and active; but it has not worked so well at what might be called the upper intermediate level (in university terms we might think of this as Reader level) – this may pose a problem as those of us who led NRDC at senior level one by one retire.

On balance
In my opinion NRDC has on the whole been both successful and a force for good. It has received a large amount of funding, and spent the great majority of it to good purpose. It has built up a valuable body of knowledge from both research and practice. Many of its findings and outputs will influence the field for years to come. It has brought many more people into the field, and deserves to be supported to continue its valuable work, some of which should seek to redress some of the gaps mentioned just above. I wish those who undertake this every success.

Reflections on NRDC's research: why, how and to what effect?

J.D. Carpentieri

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Why: "What's the point of all this research?"

In early 2007 I found myself at a launch event for the NRDC's Effective Practice research reports. Midway through the day, I was leaning against the bar of the Convention Centre, eating my lunch, when a teacher who had not seen my NRDC badge turned to me and, with no small amount of exasperation, said "I don't know why they spend all this money to do all this research, just to tell us what we already know." Talk about being put on the spot.

Since that day I have thought a great deal about that teacher's question, and her exasperation. I think that each raises important issues, issues I would like to consider here.

The first of those issues is the question of why. Why do governments fund all this research when so many of the answers seem to be staring us in the face? Why not just ask the teachers? These are difficult questions, with answers that are only partially satisfactory.

Part of the answer, and what I said at the time, is that for good and for bad, governments nowadays demand evidence, both for policy and practice. If 1,000 Skills for Life teachers queued up outside Number 10, and each told the Prime Minister exactly the same thing about her job and learners, a government, either Labour or Conservative, could dismiss what it heard as anecdote, the angry stories of a disgruntled, outspoken minority. If, on the other hand, NRDC gets a robust sample of 1,000 teachers and they all have their say, then you have evidence. Evidence that anyone fighting for change or improvement can point to, evidence that teachers and managers can point to, evidence that sympathetic policymakers can point to when arguing with the Treasury.

One of the reasons that evidence is needed is precisely because anecdotes are so powerful. Far from dismissing anecdotes as trivial, good researchers acknowledge, respect and perhaps even fear their immense power. Humans are hardwired to think anecdotally rather than scientifically, and our attraction to anecdotes is so powerful that one good story can cause us to ignore a thousand pieces of robust, contrary evidence. Take the MMR debate. On one side of the argument were hundreds or even thousands of pages of cold, hard statistical evidence showing that there was no connection between the MMR jab and autism, either here in the UK or in other countries. On the other side were distraught, crying parents. For a significant minority of the public (and perhaps a majority of the media), there was little doubt over which side was more believable: MMR uptake has dropped from 92% at the turn of the century to 73% today (Goldacre 2008).

We are storytellers and story lovers, not just by habit but by nature and instinct.
One of the primary roles of research is to force ourselves to fight that instinct, to force ourselves to rigorously query anything and everything, including and perhaps especially that which seems like common sense. That is to say, one of the express purposes of research is to ensure that we are not overly swayed by our love of a good story.

How: research methodologies and research wars

If the key to a good story is how you tell it, then the key to research is how you do it. What matters most is fitness for purpose. Having focused in the previous section of this article on why NRDC does some of its research, I would now like to look at how we do it.

Fitness for purpose is determined by the research question. Sometimes qualitative approaches are best, sometimes quantitative, and sometimes a combination of the two: mixed-methods research.

The millions of people who pay close attention to the exciting and dynamic world of research methodology will be well aware of the sporadic outbreaks of "methodology wars" between battling camps of qualitative and quantitative researchers (see e.g. Gorard 2002 and 2004). For those of you not privy to such contretemps, the story basically boils down to this: some quantitative researchers (and policymakers) believe that quantitative evidence is more valuable than qualitative evidence. On the other

hand, some qualitative researchers distrust quantitative evidence, arguing that it can too easily be misleading -- or, perhaps more accurately, misused. Because quantitative research focuses on numbers rather than humans, they fear that the stories -- and more importantly, the individuals who tell and live them -- will get lost along the way. There is a risk of policymakers and possibly even researchers focusing on the outcomes and purported needs of an "aggregated average learner" who does not actually exist. If such a learner does not exist, will policies and practices aimed at meeting his/her (averaged) needs actually benefit real-life, often spikily profiled, individuals?

Each research method has its time and place. For example, as Polly Toynbee (2008) wrote in the Guardian this summer, the British cohort studies, including the 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS) and the British Cohort Study 1970 (BCS70), are not just some of the world's greatest social science tools, they are some of the world's greatest social science achievements. Using these studies, quantitative researchers including NRDC's John Bynner and Sam Parsons have answered numerous essential questions about the relationships between education, skills, inequality, employment and health -- just to name a few. At the same time, we need qualitative research to put flesh on the bones, to understand the complex lives of real individuals and groups.

Done well, and given the right research question, a mixed-method approach can combine the best of these two worlds. NRDC's embedding research (Casey et al 2006) is just one case in point. In this research, qualitative and quantitative data complemented each other. Learners and teachers spoke of the huge positive impact of embedding, and the statistical analysis not only confirmed those reports, it showed the impact to be even greater than expected.

At the same time, the two methods did provide some seemingly conflicting evidence. While qualitative reports showed that some individuals did a great job teaching both vocational skills and literacy, language and numeracy (LLN), the quantitative evidence indicated that, on the whole, learners in classes where this happened did not perform as well. I say that this data was "seemingly conflicting" because these two pieces of information, while contradictory, are each components of a greater whole. Some individuals are clearly successful at teaching

both vocational skills and LLN, but most of those we sampled were not. This finding -- that it can be done well but that more often than not it isn't -- is subtler, richer and more useful -- both to policy and practice -- than the message that would have been returned by using only one method.

To what effect: evidence-based policy and practice?

The embedding research has had a major impact on both policy and practice. But as Ursula Howard writes in another article in this issue, the same cannot be said for all the evidence NRDC has produced. This is far less a reflection on the NRDC than on the policy making process.

In the same article that celebrated the cohort studies, Polly Toynbee lamented successive governments' serial under-use of the important evidence those studies have provided. When the current government came to power, they genuinely did believe they could change that, as eloquently documented by Fiona Reed (2003) of the University of Bristol School for Policy Studies, on whose work the following discussion is based. Soon after entering office, the Blair government mounted a concerted push for evidence-based policy making, publishing a steady stream of papers calling for more and better use of research evidence. Much of the impetus for this was a genuine desire to improve practice. New Labour's stated belief was that "what matters is what works" -- and to find out what really worked, they needed research.

In many ways, this was genuinely forward thinking. The hope was that the conviction politics of the 1970s and 80s would give way to a more objective approach to policy making. And who could deny that policies based on evidence would be better than those which were not?

At its best, evidence-based policy making is a way of attempting to know more than stories alone can tell us. But in the real world, evidence-based policy making gets swept up in an even larger story: that of politics. The problem is that "evidence-based" policy is almost inevitably a misnomer, an exaggeration of the power and role of research evidence. Policies tend to be shaped by far more (and far more powerful) forces then research, including political ideology, power struggles, and simple pragmatism. At best, policy is evidence-influenced. More realistically, the most we may be able to hope for is that policy is evidence-

aware. Rather than forming a blueprint for policy and practice, research is much more likely to have an impact by infiltrating decision-makers' understanding of the world -- and thus over time affecting (whether consciously or unconsciously) what they think and do.

This "Enlightenment model" of the relationship between research, policy and practice is probably the most apt description of the impact that NRDC's research has. In some cases, e.g. embedding, our findings are significantly reshaping policy and practice. The same is true for NRDC's findings on the critical importance of numeracy. In an ideal world, this would happen more often. But in the complicated world we actually live in, perhaps we must accept that most gains will be subtle and small, even if our ambitions and efforts are anything but.

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NRDC: The next phase
John Vorhaus and Helen Casey

John Vorhaus and Helen Casey now share the leadership of NRDC. John is the Research Director. As Executive Director Helen leads on the management of the centre's work and on the development activity.

This article focuses on how NRDC is continuing to consolidate its reputation as an international research and development centre and how we are adapting to a phase of the Centre's existence which no longer includes a core contract with the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS).

It was always expected that NRDC would have to establish itself as an independent and self-sustaining centre, beyond the years of generous financial support from DIUS (and formerly DfES). It was always clear, therefore, that NRDC would be required to secure substantial funding, in addition to DfES and DIUS income, if the Centre was to survive in the longer term. The initial government contract for NRDC was for £2.5m per annum for the first three years; this was then extended for a further two years, and, recently and finally, for a last sixth year. However, from the earliest days of the initial contract with DfES, NRDC has built up a portfolio of activity stemming from alternative funding streams. The volume of work has grown steadily, and by 2007/8 the turnover had risen to approximately £6.5m, of which about £3m came directly from DIUS.

As NRDC continues without the presence of one substantial contract, our challenge has been that of securing a sufficient volume of activity to maintain the healthy financial state of the centre, whilst continuing to develop the knowledge and evidence base to inform policy and practice.

The Institute of Education (IoE), as the lead partner in the NRDC consortium, has always been and continues to be hugely supportive. Having the confidence and the financial support of the IoE behind it, the Centre has proven its ability repeatedly to win substantial new contracts, and we have therefore been able to retain substantial expertise in our central research, development and communication teams.

Of course, we have witnessed a few developments. The consortium as a whole is leaner than it was in the past, in recognition that the work of some of our partners has come to a successful conclusion. And our former Director, Ursula Howard, has recently retired, after five extraordinarily successful years - although we are pleased to say that she retains a significant association with the Centre in her role as Visiting Professorial Fellow.

At the same time we are busy making appointments, most notably, later this year, a new Professor in Adult Skills and Capabilities. The professorial appointment demonstrates the extent of the IoE commitment to NRDC, whilst the title also gives an indication of how the research and development agenda of the Centre is likely to develop over the next few years. Adult literacy, language and numeracy will remain at the heart of what we do, but at the same time there is a need to understand better the relationships between adult basic skills and the characteristics that predispose adults towards either being at risk of social exclusion or of showing resilience in the face of socio-economic disadvantage. Patterns of migration, the changing needs of the workplace and contemporary demands on personal and social life are just three reasons why we continue to need new research into how adult skills and capabilities can bring improvements in learners' lives and in their economic prospects.

The NRDC development team continues to work to link our many research outputs with national development activity. The NRDC development team has been enhanced by the addition of the LSU (London Strategic Unit), which was previously located elsewhere in IoE.

As part of the Skills for Life Improvement Programme, for example, NRDC works to build the capacity of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL teacher education. Through action research with a national group of teacher education providers, we have explored the potential for combining the initial training of ESOL and literacy teachers for Lifelong Learning UK. One recently started project with Unionlearn at the TUC will support ESOL in the workplace, another is working with partnerships between football clubs and adult literacy and numeracy providers.

We also have much more yet to communicate from the research to date, with many publications still in the pipeline. Progress in this area has been much slower than we would like but is promising to keep the NRDC

communications team extremely busy in the months ahead.

NRDC publications and our website. In discussing a small piece of work with the BBC we were told:

"I arrived at the NRDC website to find this goldmine of information – just what I was looking for"

Working together on plans for teacher education support, a colleague from LLU+ remarked:

" I can't remember the last time I led a CPD session without an NRDC publication in my hand. They are so useful."

Increasingly sophisticated information on use of our website tells us not only that we have 12,000 visitors per month, but also which publications are most frequently downloaded. The top of this list for several months running has been the Maths4Life 'Fractions' booklet, a hugely practical and very clear guide for practitioners.
The process we are now embarked upon, re-shaping NRDC as a national research and development centre in its new phase of life, is not yet finished. But what is firmly established is that NRDC is here to stay as an international centre of excellence in adult literacy, language and numeracy, and we confidently expect to build on the centre's strengths in the years to come.

NRDC and the rise of the practitioner - researcher

Maxine Burton

Maxine Burton was an adult literacy practitioner and lecturer in linguistics and phonetics before becoming a researcher. Her interests lie in the historical and social contexts of adult literacy (her doctoral research) and into adult literacy teaching strategies and the linguistic knowledge that underpins them. She has been involved in six NRDC projects, five of which have been based at the University of Sheffield.

Introduction

As someone who has worked on a total of six separate NRDC projects since 2002, it is no understatement to say that NRDC has had a huge impact on my working life. I have written, or contributed to the writing of, numerous research reports and practitioner guides, particularly in relation to teaching and learning strategies in the adult literacy classroom, and taken part in associated dissemination events. It was rather a startling experience to view a TV programme in summer 2008 founded on the premise that adult literacy pedagogy was an area which had received scant attention in terms of research and development until the advent of Phil Beadle! I refer, of course to the controversial Channel 4 programme, broadcast in summer 2008, '*Can't read , Can't write'.*

However, what I would like to examine in this short paper is not so much the impact NRDC research has had on adult literacy policy and practice, per se, but more the effect involvement in NRDC projects has had on those who have taken part. In particular I want to focus on the practitioner-researchers who conducted the fieldwork for the research projects in which I have been directly involved. I hope to assess the impact they have had on the directions research has taken as well as the impact the research has had on them. In the course of the various projects, we made a point of inviting them to share their reactions to being involved and their reflections on the research, and to describe how it had affected their professional lives. Before assessing their role, I shall start by unpacking what we mean by 'practitioner-researcher'.

What is a practitioner-researcher?

We are very familiar now with the term 'practitioner-researcher' but it was a new concept to many of the participants in the early projects. A report from one of those projects felt the need to define the role, also described interchangeably as 'teacher-fieldworker', as follows:

> By definition, a teacher-fieldworker is a practitioner in adult basic skills who has been employed to do research, or fieldwork, for the project…one of the primary benefits of having

teacher-fieldworkers do the research is their familiarity and connections with the individual sites. Due to the sensitive nature of conducting both classroom observations and assessments of adult learners, having research staff who were well-known and liked by both the practitioners who were observed and the adults who were assessed proved to be....beneficial. (Besser *et al*, 2004: 111)

Thus the role is described in a very pragmatic way in terms of benefits to the research. However another section of the report does set out 'Researchers' Reflections' and paves the way for a different sort of relationship. Later references in research project reports to 'practitioner-researchers' seemed to require no justification and reflected a growing appreciation of their role.

The projects

In that early project, from which I have already quoted, I was one of the team of 5 practitioner-researchers, employed 2002-2003, to help explore learners' difficulties with reading (Besser *et al*, 2004). We were charged with conducting classroom observations and interviews with the teachers at sites to which we had access, and administering learner assessments of phonological awareness, word decoding and reading comprehension. The rare opportunity to observe our peers in action in the classroom, and question them, prompted examination of our own practice, which we were eager to share. The 'Researchers' Reflections' (Besser *et al*, 2004, pp. 30-34) were stated to include our own experience as literacy tutors, as well as comments on what was observed, tellingly 'in order to give a sense of 'their voices' within the study' and 'the philosophies they brought to the research' (p.24). Although our class observation notes were impartial and factual, we used the Reflections section to give an account of what we thought were effective teaching strategies, based on our own experience in the classroom. It was notable that many of the strategies we identified were generic ones, ranging over, for example, boosting learners' self-esteem, giving praise, building a relationship of trust, varying strategies according to the individual, valuing group 'cohesion', engaging students in discussion, not

making pre-assumptions about abilities.

For the major Effective Practice Study on reading, 2003-06, (one of a suite of 5 NRDC projects) although I did still conduct some of my own fieldwork, my main role here was as a Research Fellow, helping to oversee the day-to-day running of the project, which involved 454 learners in 59 classes across England. Our team of 11 practitioner-researchers with their contacts in the field were invaluable in helping us gain access to a range of providers, and could offer useful 'street cred' when it came to gaining the trust of the teachers and their learners. Training the practitioner-researchers in research methods was an important part of the project as we didn't just want detailed log notes of class observations, and semi-structured interviews with the teachers. We also asked them to do first-level analyses of general teaching strategies and specific teaching strategies for reading, using special coded sheets. This demanded sophisticated research skills and most seemed to relish the challenge. A core group of 5 practitioner-researchers who worked on the project for both academic years contributed further insights to the final report (Brooks *et al, 2007)* by writing qualitative analyses of topics of their choice, namely,

- Teachers' perceptions of learners' progress and the impact of the core curriculum on the nature of this assessment (pp 54-55)
- Writing which supports reading (pp. 55-58)
- Observed use of ICT (pp.58-61)
- Patterns of classroom activity 2003/04 and their implications (pp. 45-6)
- Error analysis (from the reading comprehension assessment) (p.29).

A particular feature of the report was a section, 8.5, in which these practitioner-researchers were invited to share their experience of working on the project. The following extracts, using their own words, give a flavour of how they felt (page references are again to Brooks *et al*, 2007):

- Observing practice and also looking at observations carried out by other members of the project in order to look at writing to support reading has served to make me more critical of my own planning and teaching….My developmental journey continued when I attended research conferences and not only heard about current research being undertaken but also was involved in talking about our project to others. This showed me how much insight I had gained during my role

as a practitioner-researcher (Colette Beazley, p 62)
- My research knowledge has gained both from quantitative and qualitative research analysis of classroom observations and from discussions within the team around methodology….attendance at conferences and seminars has enabled me to look laterally at possibilities for research into literacy within a vocational area (Judy Davey, p. 62)
- The most interesting or beneficial [aspect] to me personally….carrying out the classroom observations would have to be near the top, including meeting learners and gaining their trust and developing skills in maintaining as objective and non-interventionist a stance as possible….I learned that in research work you cannot have too much attention to detail. It is this discovery which has kindled in me an interest, and an ambition, to continue working in the research field (Richard Finnigan, p. 63)
- Here was the opportunity to take a closer look at some of those different methods, to see what works and maybe to learn something myself in the process….I had the privilege of sitting in with a wider group of tutors than I would have under any other circumstances and this allowed me a much broader perspective…With an objective eye I could see how these factors were working without the familiar pressure of managing it all myself (Yvonne Spare, p. 65)
- I have gained a valuable insight into the world of research and feel encouraged to do more…I was encouraged to participate in workshops [at conferences] and explain the methodology and aim of the reading project…Being a member of the research team meant I was no longer confined to the bottom of the staircase, but met educationalists from every step. It was interesting to hear policy firsthand and see how it can be misinterpreted as it filters down…….the experience of working on the project has indirectly sustained my enthusiasm for teaching (Jan Wainwright, p. 64).

Not only do these comments illustrate that our practitioner-researchers gained valuable insights to inform their own teaching, enhanced research skills and confidence, but also, importantly they felt they had made significant contributions to knowledge in the field, with shared ownership of the research findings. Indeed, coming directly out of their experience was one of the key recommendations in the report:

Teachers already in the field appear to have little opportunity for reflection on their practice. Our practitioner-researchers' accounts suggest that more opportunities need to be provided for teachers to observe in other practitioners' classrooms. (p. 69)

With the idea of reflective practice at the forefront, NRDC next embarked on writing a set of practitioner guides to effective practice, in close consultation with groups of practitioners, practitioner-researchers and teacher-trainers. Prior to starting to write the Guide to teaching reading (Burton, 2007), I started off the collaborative process at the 2006 RaPAL conference by leading a workshop which invited the participants to share their views about what such a guide should cover (Burton, 2006/7). The process continued with my reading consultation group of eleven teachers, researchers and teacher-trainers, including eight of the practitioner-researchers who had worked on the Effective Practice in reading Study. The Guide drew on the findings from the reading study, extended to include other guidelines to good practice, with teaching ideas and suggestions from our consultant group. Above all, the hope in writing the guide was that 'it will help to simulate reflection by teachers on their own practice', (Burton, 2007, p. vii) in the sense that every teacher can be a practitioner-researcher, whether in the context of a project or of their institution – or just their own classroom .

Conclusion

Before the advent of NRDC, there seems to have been little public recognition of the role of the practitioner-researcher. Now after highly successful capacity-building in the field, there is a significant body of practitioner-researchers who can both benefit research, and derive benefit from it. Indeed the whole area of 'practitioner research' and its corollary, 'reflective practice', has been opened up over the past six years, and NRDC has instigated several rounds of practitioner-led action research projects (Hamilton et al, 2007). This is a welcome development in a field where practitioner agency has not always been apparent and at times practitioners have felt powerless in the face of bureaucracy. However as Mary Hamilton and Yvonne Hillier point out, in the past, 'where there was no practice or protocol, practitioners created their imagined worlds, for example in the way that they devised training, created materials and shared these to foster a developing notion of good practice.' (Hamilton and Hillier, 2006, p. 73). Thus, in essence, the label, 'practitioner-researcher', is a

way of giving a new voice to a much older concept.

I can think of no better way of summing up the role of the practitioner-researcher than by quoting the closing words of the Practitioner Guide to teaching reading:

> Your contribution to extending knowledge in the field of adult literacy as a practitioner-researcher is valid and valuable. As one of our consultant teachers [Jan Wainwright] memorably wrote of her involvement in the Reading Study, '***Although research should inform practice, practice can inform research. The practitioner-researchers embody this symbiosis'*** (Burton, 2007, p.35)

With grateful thanks to all the practitioner-researchers with whom I have worked on NRDC projects, 2002-07:
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The Practitioner-Led Research Initiative: Doing Practitioner Research in a Favourable Climate

Paul Davies

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Practitioner research is often carried out in a relatively unfavourable climate. Resources are limited, it has to be fitted in between the day to day demands of work and there is the added complication of producing a report which not only meets certain research standards and criteria but is written in a way that is useful to other practitioners. Those who took part in the NRDC funded Practitioner-led Research Initiative (PLRI), however, had a slightly more favourable climate in which to do their studies. They had the relative luxury of a 9 month period in which to complete their projects, were supplied with a range of technical advice from staff at Lancaster University, research support advisers and others, and had confidence in the quality of their proposals knowing that they had been successful following a competitive selection process.

The PLRI ran for three years between 2004 and 2006. Each annual round had a theme which were:

- Round One 'New ways of engaging new learners'
- Round Two 'Understanding purpose and perseverance – learners' aspirations and commitment to learning'
- Round Three 'Creativity in teaching and learning.

Applications came from locally based 'research groups' of between three and six practitioners, and during the life of the programme 16 research projects were completed in a range of settings from Sunderland in the north-east to Exeter in the south-west.

Part of the NRDC strategy was to build research capacity and to support practitioners being more fully engaged with the research process. Staff at Lancaster University had supported a number of practitioner research programmes in the past both in adult learning and amongst school teachers, and were sensitive to the fact that whilst this type of study had many strong points, there were also associated problems.

Chief amongst these was whether practitioner research reports would be viewed positively by the wider research and policy making communities.

One of the issues associated with practitioner research is the relationship between the practitioner and the full time researcher who provides supports and comments on the work. In strictly research experience terms this is usually an unbalanced relationship which has to be managed carefully to prevent the practitioner simply turning into the pupil or apprentice of the full time researcher. Because the PLRI research groups had survived a competitive selection process, the relationship seemed less 'unbalanced' since the practitioners thought they had already made a good start. In retrospect this now appears to be one of the key strengths of the PLRI, and in future it seems sensible not to start a practitioner research study until the practitioners feel confident enough to defend their ideas in the face of outside comment.

Having established this relationship of mutual respect, it was in most cases relatively easy to work with the practitioner research groups as their turned their research ideas into a set of practical data collecting practices. The main focus of early discussions was ensuring the practitioners did not get carried away with over-ambitious projects; over-ambitious both in terms of what they had time to do and their existing research experience. For example, research questions often needed to be expressed in more modest terms as practitioners became more familiar with the fact that collecting valid and reliable data in social settings is quite challenging. Helping people who were hugely enthusiastic about doing a study view research as 'problematic' provided both a bit of realism at the start and a bit of comfort at the end when they acknowledged that not everything had gone to plan.

A second support point was the need to make sure that the studies would produce research 'findings' rather than 'descriptions' of new

20

developments. Many of the practitioners spent a substantial amount of time in their day to day jobs writing proposals for funds based on the assumed value of a new development idea. Their research reports, however, needed to be based on evidence about the performance or impact of the new development and it was also necessary to show how this evidence had been gathered, how it had been categorised into different types and what patterns and themes were starting to emerge. The need to undertake thorough (rather than complex) analysis of data is an area where practitioners often require support.

Another of the strengths of the PLRI was that funds were available to support the practitioner research groups during their 'research journeys'. This consisted of visits to their research 'sites', mid project meetings organised by the University, continual email contacts and telephone calls. One of the practitioners explained that he was not sure at the outset what type of support he needed, but in retrospect he felt that he and his team of practitioners had benefited from:

- Inspiration
- Confidence
- Practical Support

It was this practical support given during the research journey that enabled practitioners to maintain momentum and avoid some of the serious difficulties that might have prevented them from completing their projects. Providing advice to practitioner researchers can be a delicate matter. One temptation is (if the full time researcher thinks the project risks going off course) to suggest major changes so that the project is undertaken in a way the full time researcher would have done so him/herself. This might provide an immediate and easy fix but it hardly empowers the practitioner and tends to reduce them to the role of pupil. Although we do not have complete knowledge of how the PLRI practitioners felt during the support phase, many said they found the way we intervened appropriate. This was possibly because the people who supported the PLRI at Lancaster viewed practitioner studies as a legitimate research strand which might well have different characteristics to the type of research carried out by the full time researchers. It was important for us to 'put ourselves in the shoes of' the practitioners and to understand what they wanted to achieve by doing research. For example, they may want to assemble a body of evidence would could be

reasonably used to support one course of action at work rather than another.

The part of the PLRI which caused most difficulty was the end phase where research reports were read by critical readers, approved by the NRDC and cleared for publication. For many of the practitioners this took a very long time and was a frustrating period. One of the issues associated with practitioner researcher is the mismatch in timescales between practitioners and full time researchers in terms of publication. This is apparent not just in the PLRI but in other programmes too. For example, in projects involving school teacher researchers there have been difficulties when the teachers wanted to have the results published quickly to coincide with schools' decision making cycles (often summer term in time for the new school year) whilst project support staff felt it was better to delay publication until the reports were finally 'ready'.

Many of the practitioner research groups within the PLRI wanted speedy publication. In several cases it was hard to maintain the group at work as some staff were moving to other posts and others had their cover time removed and could no longer devote much time to the study. On occasions the research had been sponsored and supported by senior managers who had their own timescales and who exerting pressure. On the other hand, NRDC were understandably keen to protect the integrity of their publication channels and wanted to ensure that the practitioner research reports would sit comfortably alongside those major studies carried out by full time researchers that were also published under the NRDC umbrella and on their website.

Tensions created during the publication process do highlight an unresolved issue that is associated with practitioner research. Practitioners often choose to research a work-based problem that might require very specific and time-bound data. Disseminating findings as quickly as possible so they can be used in practice is very important for them. In contrast to this full time researchers view their findings as 'knowledge' which is as likely to be as useful in 12 months or two years as it is now. Consequently, they regard it as important to refine and adapt their findings until they are fully satisfied with them, even if this results in a delay in publication.

The final phase of the PLRI was a follow up study carried out by Kathryn James at the

Literacy Research Centre at Lancaster. She wanted to find out what impact the PLRI had on the practitioners and their organisations. Almost all of the practitioners reported gaining something from the project, mostly in terms of new skills, new contacts and a greater readiness to engage with research and use it in their work. They thought their findings had an impact on how they worked and some impact on their immediate work teams and colleagues. However, there appeared to be little evidence that the PLRI reports had that much influence on the wider organisation. Some senior managers explained that they had viewed PLRI as an opportunity to develop staff rather than adapt procedures in the light of the research findings. In other cases, senior managers had moved on and the new comers had different concerns to those studied through the PLRI.

Continued contact with some of the PRLI practitioners through a range of ways showed that whereas the project had the legacy of making them more engaged with research, they had not become practitioner researchers in the sense that they planned to carry out frequent work based projects in the years ahead. PLRI had enabled them to carry out a study in a very favourable climate and they would do other research if they were presented with these conditions again. They thought that PLRI could be used as an interesting case study of what practitioners can do in such a favourable research climate, but thought that any future work based studies they might be involved with would be more modest affairs, but undertaken with the skills and concern for standards that their involvement with PLRI had given them.

Practitioners Leading the Field? Supporting practitioner involvement through research.

Mary Hamilton

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In this paper I reflect on the experience of developing and supporting the practitioner-led research initiative (PLRI) within the National Research and Development Centre (Hamilton and Wilson, 2005; Hamilton et al, 2007; Hamilton and James, 2007). The Practitioner-Led Research Initiative (PLRI) ran for three years between 2004-06. It drew on the European Social Fund (ESF) as well as core funding from the NRDC, and was co-ordinated by a team at Lancaster University. Each round funded up to six, nine month projects selected through an open competition. The initiative offered an opportunity for groups of practitioners to engage in 'hands-on' research. Groups were invited to identify research questions, design and carry out projects with structured support from the research community. Within the scope of a broad theme, practitioners were invited to pose researchable questions that would be useful to them, their employing institutions and the local communities they serve. Ideally these were linked to existing activities and issues that organizations wished to explore.

My own role in the PLRI was to help design, promote and co-ordinate it as an academic advocate with strong links to practitioner communities in ALNE over a long period of time. Looking back on this experience now, I can compare what it was like working with practitioners in this government funded initiative with other contexts, especially RaPAL as a voluntary network. I aim to pull out some of the key factors that appear to enable or constrain practitioner voices, their ability to develop ideas about the work they do and to produce and shape public knowledge about literacy learning under these different circumstances.

The Policy Environment of Skills for Life
It is important to understand the policy environment within which the PLRI developed, the ways that practitioners were construed by the policy, and the notion of research that informed it. While this background is familiar to RaPAL readers, it is worth summarising what I judge to be the key features of it from the

perspective of practitioner research and involvement.

The *Skills for Life* strategy (Sk4L) was the first time that a national government in England had committed serious funding and policy attention to adult literacy, language and numeracy (Hamilton and Hillier, 2006). Large sums of public money were allocated and ambitious targets set to improve basic skills in the adult population up to 2010 (DES, 2001). Core curricula in literacy, numeracy, and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL were developed, based on the National Curriculum in schools. When the new strategy was announced it seemed a great opportunity and many people with experience as practitioners, managers and researchers were drawn in to help with implementing it. However, as time went on, the possibilities for consultation and shaping of the strategy were reduced. The targets set for providers were tied to outcome-related funding based on a national test along with close auditing and inspection of programme quality. This, as in other areas of public policy at the time, led to what has been called a "high stakes" target culture which has generally been acknowledged to have put great pressure on practitioners and skewed recruitment in unintended ways (Bathmaker, 2007).

Teachers, many of them part-time and sessional workers in Further Education (FE) or community-based programmes, were viewed by the strategy as inadequately trained. The informal, practice-based knowledge accumulated over many years by experienced teachers was seen as of little value. A new specialised qualification structure and professional standards were created within the FE sector with the aim of raising professional status and skills and to equip teachers to deliver the new curriculum.

As in other areas of New Labour social policy, the idea of "evidence-based" practice was pursued strongly in this under-researched field (see Slavin, 2002). The NRDC was one of the

agencies set up to fill the gaps in the evidence and to generate expert knowledge that could guide teacher action. Within the core curriculum, the new test of achievement and the model of teacher training, the dominant view of knowledge was positivist: expert facts needed to be transmitted to both teachers and learners in order to enhance practice and learning. Professional development was seen as acquiring and applying new, externally generated, knowledge, and was motivated by a belief in scientific solutions to the question of "what works?" However, this runs counter to some of the key assumptions and epistemological goals of practitioner research, which focuses on legitimising and supporting the collaborative construction and shaping of practice-based knowledge by teachers themselves (Lytle and Cochrane-Smith, 1993; Middleton 1999).

One of the underpinning strategies of the NRDC was to build research capacity, reflective practice and career development through the systematic engagement of teachers and other practitioners in its work. This commitment presented the opportunity for a funded initiative in practitioner research. However, it should be clear from the description above that the policy environment within which this opportunity arose also set up some tensions and contradictions that the PLRI had to negotiate. Below I identify specific decision-making moments where these manifested themselves in the PLRI, from the initial bid for funding to the final publication of findings.

To analyse this experience I draw on a "deliberative policy analysis" perspective (see Fischer, 2003). This approach asserts that much of the policy implementation process goes on through "deliberation" - argumentation and paperwork negotiated between actors at all levels. Opportunities for deliberation are determined in part by the formal consultative spaces that exist and partly through informal networks. The terms in which debates and discourses are framed act to exclude certain groups and affect the agency that key players are able to exercise. It is within these spaces that practitioner research in Sk4L was positioned and, I will argue, the strength of practitioner voices was regulated.

Key decision-making points in the PLRI

Framing Practitioner Research
I have described above how the SK4L strategy already framed research in particular ways and how the culture of accountability and high

visibility for all funded activities reduced risk-taking. Overlaid on this context were the processes of obtaining the funding from the NRDC and writing the project guidelines for applicants. These were very carefully drawn to anticipate the wide range of proposals that we might receive. In contrast to organizations like RaPAL which have always tried to *widen* the definition of what counts as research, the PLRI began by drawing boundaries around what could be funded and accepted in the context of NRDC activities and inevitably defined research as a specialist space apart from practice. Proposals needed a good deal of organization and thought ahead of being funded, and this favoured groups who were already collaborating in some way, and those who had some institutional support for it, thereby excluding many other practitioners who might have had only an embryonic interest in research.

The bidding process
The PLRI projects were chosen through an open competition, with national bids for £10,000 per project. This was comparatively generous resourcing, especially the funding for practitioners' time. These resources were designed to be attractive to employing organizations as much as to individual practitioners, but this risked perverse consequences. The nature of the funding affected the motivation for becoming involved. Unlike RaPAL where practitioners already interested in research come together to find out more and to hear each others experiences in a kind of solidarity network, the PLRI groups came forward because of the money available, and the chance to extend work they were already doing. Not all had thought about "practitioner research" before, or were aware of the debates around it and its potential for taking control of knowledge-making. Some had very traditional ideas about what research is and should be.

The process of selecting projects shapes them still further: successful projects had to address a broad theme already decided by the NRDC. The chosen projects needed to align with NRDC agendas and with the policy more generally and to complement one another. Although we hoped the themes could be widely interpreted, NRDC's priorities inevitably acted as a powerful filtering overlay to the work that practitioners proposed.

Supporting the Projects
In working with these projects we balanced along the edges between developing practice, theory and practical research skills. There was a great opportunity to align practitioner research

activities with the NRDC's broader research programme but this was only patchily successful (numeracy and IT were good examples). An interested and sympathetic consultative group was a positive support to the initiative as was the simple device of paid conference participation for the practitioner researchers. These wedged the door open, but making links with other researchers and maintaining the visibility of the initiative took constant attention. Where academics *did* offer their support, the hierarchical relations between academic researchers and practitioners were apt to intervene especially as these were reinforced by the policy research culture. There were some outstanding examples of good support but also some disappointments and difficulty in finding skilled mentors.

Communicating the findings
There were particular dissatisfactions around the communication strategy for project findings. This resulted from a lack of agreement about what counts as "quality" in practitioner research and a lack of time to discuss this or to find innovative solutions in a difficult but crucial area (see Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2005 for a good exploration of the issues).

The dissemination stage seemed to crystallise wider tensions between the relative value of process and product in practitioner research along with inappropriate expectations of the outputs as compared with large-scale funded research. Creative ways of expressing practitioner and learner voices in dissemination and publication (such as different conference formats and the design of posters which could be used with a variety of audiences) were to some extent explored but we were constantly drawn back to the traditional norms of academic research publication with its emphasis on written formats. These stripped away the detail and innovation of practitioner approaches to communicating findings. Contentious issues of timing and speed of feedback arose. The NRDC had a long process of clearance that passed through several institutional layers as far as the central strategy unit. Practitioners, on the other hand, needed to be able to feed back their findings to colleagues and funders speedily, while they were still topical. The issue of appropriate peer reviewers for project reports was also difficult to resolve.

Sustainability. The PLRI set out with ambitious aims to affect the field in the longer term and to enhance prevalent discourses of research, by strengthening networks, embedding the findings

and an enquiry stance within organizations. The impact study carried out at the end of the initiative (see Hamilton and James, 2007) suggested that while practitioners as individuals had been strongly and positively affected by their experience of research, it was much rarer for organizational change to result and the new networks created by the initiative were fragile.

Conclusion
Like all policy initiatives, there were some successes, some unintended consequences, contradictions and shortfalls between the aims and the outcomes of the PLRI. On the positive side new models of support were developed and tested and the practitioners directly involved experienced a range of lasting benefits. On the negative side the PLRI had little effect on organizational practice.

Returning to the deliberative policy analysis framework described above, I would argue that the PLRI was able to open up only a small space for discussion and practitioner voices in which dominant discourses of research could be challenged. This was because the way in which it was framed by a policy environment that strongly constrained and controlled it. Issues about the appropriate communication of findings remained unresolved. The links set up through the PLRI were difficult to sustain as the funding that flourished for the 5 years of the SK4L policy wave receded.

RaPAL often feels very vulnerably positioned on the edges of policy and organizational power. But through its "hybrid" journal and independent, self-organized network, it has carved out a small but powerful and lasting space for practitioner research as its committed and critically sophisticated membership steers it through changing policy conditions.

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Assessment, motivation and language learning – research into the effect/impact of assessment on second language learning

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Introduction

In November 2006, I attended a Skills for Life conference during which I had the pleasure of meeting John Vorhaus who delivered an inspiring workshop on 'learner persistence'. After the workshop, I approached John to see how I could get involved. This resulted in the centre where I was employed at the time, becoming a 'core site' and led to some interesting encounters with other researchers from NRDC, e.g. some tutors and learners were interviewed. The interviews helped to highlight certain common factors in our practice which facilitate learner persistence; a few examples are listed below:

- Relaxed and friendly atmosphere
- Mutual respect
- Recognising achievements

Having realised how important these factors were, we could enhance them in our own practice. This led to a strengthened rapport between learners and tutors and a better understanding of the needs of both the new learners and those who had been in training for some time. As a result of this we noticed an increased satisfaction amongst our learners which led to improved retention and achievement rates, particularly in groups where tutors were directly involved in the project.

I have described this in greater detail in an article published in the NRDC magazine – 'reflect' (Lewandowski, 2008).

My initial interest in the NRDC persistence project has veered in other directions such as formative assessment and motivation which were inspired by the project and are thus related to it in many ways. For example, one of the things I wanted to find out was whether or not the effective use of assessment could have an effect on learner motivation to learn and thus help improve their persistence.

In what follows I describe my research interests inspired by the 'persistence' project. I will also describe a small scale study that I have carried out so far and present its initial findings which I hope will develop into a larger study.

Background

What this research attempts to achieve, in the long term, is to reinforce the links between the three ideas mentioned in the title above, namely, assessment, motivation and language learning. It also sets out to discover how assessment can be used effectively to facilitate, rather than simply assess, language learning by motivating learners extrinsically and by providing a strong stimulus for revising in order to prepare for tests. It will be particularly interesting to see what effect assessments will have in an adult learning context where participation is free and voluntary and where the drive to attend classes is determined by various types of motivation (e.g. intrinsic, extrinsic). It is hoped that the extrinsic nature of assessment will reinforce the existing motivation whether it be extrinsic or intrinsic (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Deci and Ryan (1985) distinguish five distinct categories along the extrinsic-intrinsic continuum. They include: external regulation (i.e., motivation coming entirely from external sources such as rewards or threats); introjected regulation (i.e., externally imposed rules that students accept as norms they should follow in order not to feel guilty); identified regulation (i.e., engaging in an activity because the individual highly values it and sees its usefulness); integrated regulation (i.e., involving choiceful behaviour that is fully assimilated with the individuals other values, needs, and identity); and pure intrinsic regulation.

It has been argued (e.g. Locke and Latham, 1990 in Dornyei, 2001) that goals can be very powerful motivators as they:

a. direct attention and effort
b. regulate effort expenditure
c. encourage persistence until the goal is accomplished
d. promote the search for relevant action plans

That is why goals are particularly important in long lasting tasks such as language learning for they provide smaller more manageable targets by which to measure one's progress and

achievement. Taking regular tests may therefore have a powerful motivation function as they mark progress and provide immediate incentive and feedback (Dornyei 2001: 26).

Furthermore, I would argue that regular tests, if set with prior notice, can lead to an increase in the time spent on learning in their own time (e.g. at home) by providing an important stimulus for learners to revise the material covered in the class. In a language classroom this can further reinforce the linguistic items in question potentially leading to their internalisation. This is particularly important in contexts where learners attend shorter courses where the time spent on learning in class alone is not sufficient for learners to progress between levels.

On the other hand the pressure of being assessed and low test scores may de-motivate learners and therefore hinder their progress, lower their attendance or lead to increased dropout rates among the participants some of which has been described in research related to assessment in compulsory educational settings (e.g. Paris, S., et.al, 1991; Gordon, S. & Reese, M. 1997).

In fact, there has been a fair amount of discussion relating to the issue of assessment. Assessment can be differentiated into formative and summative assessment.

Formative assessment, also referred to as assessment **for** learning, takes place at various stages of a learning programme and is used to review the learner's progress and to inform future actions and steps that need to be taken in order to address any emerging issues.

Summative assessment, on the other hand, typically takes place at the end of a learning programme or to sum up a specific period of learning. It, therefore, looks at the learner's achievement of some standards and curriculum documents. For this reason, it is also referred to as assessment **of** learning.

In practice, however, the distinction is no longer so apparent. Many practitioners believe that they use assessment formatively with their learners when they set tests to measure their learners' progress or distance travelled; however, often due to time constraints the only feedback learners receive is the test score and the test itself may be filed away for accountability purposes. Lack of adequate feedback means that what was intended as formative assessment is really a summative assessment which sums up a specific period of learning.

Hardly any of the research on assessment, I have come across, focuses specifically on ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes or the impact of assessment on L2 learning in general. This research would therefore bring together three disciplines: L2 learning, motivation, and classroom pedagogy. As such it would inform the best/most effective practice in ESOL classes in relation to assessment.

Research questions
The study so far has looked at two questions:
1. To what extent does the use of formative assessment in the ESOL classroom motivate learners and enable them to progress further in their language learning.
2. Will the effects (i.e. language gains) of the use of formative assessment be durable in learners?

Method:
In this experiment I compared two groups of learners all assessed at E2. The learners were randomly placed in two different groups. Both groups were taught using the same teaching materials and followed the same syllabus. **The courses were relatively short. They ran over 12 weeks with two classes per week which constituted 60 guided learning hours.**
Both groups were subjected to testing at regular intervals, however only the experimental group were given a week's notice prior to the test. **The tests were based on** the covered (mainly grammatical) material. In addition to the tests learners were also pre and post tested. Learners in both groups were given feedback on their performance in the tests.
Group 1 (control) – three assessments without notice
Group 2 (experimental) – three assessments with notice

Participants
All participants in this study were female ($n = 15$). There were seven learners in the control group and eight learners in the experimental group. The participants were adult learners on English for Speakers of Other Languages courses. The age of the participants ranged from 20 to 55 ($m = 35.8$) in the control group and from 20 to 51 ($m = 33.5$) in the experimental group. The ethnic makeup in the groups was representative of the local community, i.e. a mixture of Somalis, Eastern Europeans, Iranians, Iraqis, but also Japanese, Chinese, and Indian.

Their length of residence (LoR) ranged from 2 years to 13 years ($m = 4$) in the control group and from 6 months to 10 years ($m = 3.75$) in the experimental group. The courses were funded and thus to meet the funding criteria only unemployed learners could attend them.

Procedure
As mentioned above the learners attended the classes twice a week over twelve weeks which resulted in sixty guided learning hours.
To measure language gains and distance travelled both groups were tested before and after the experiment, i.e. at the beginning and the end of the course. In order to make the comparison of the obtained data possible, the same instrument was used in both the pre-test and the post-test. The pre/post tests were based on the linguistic items being taught on the course. At E2 they involved structures such as the Present Simple/Continuous tenses Present Perfect, Past Simple, comparative and superlatives adjectives, articles, etc. Thus, on each occasion the participants completed the same test, once as a pre-test and again as a post-test.

During their course participants in both groups (control and experimental) were asked to complete three tests (approximately one every month). Participants in the experimental group received a week's notice prior to each test and participants in the control group received no notice.

The tests were rather formal and their nature was summative, as they were set when certain topics on the syllabus had been covered. All groups (control and experimental) received feedback based on their performance. The feedback, referred to learners' strengths and weaknesses giving the learners an opportunity to reflect on and address their weaknesses. It was given orally in one-to-one reviews. Learners' performance on the test was discussed and the weaknesses were recorded in an individual learning plan as action points. One could therefore argue that these assessments are also formative as defined by Black and Wiliam:

> (…) the term 'assessment' refers to all those activities undertaken by teachers, *and by their students in assessing themselves*, which provide information to be used as feedback 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 the needs.
(Black and Wiliam 1998)

The subsequent tests, in addition to recent material, also touched upon material covered in the earlier tests which learners in the experimental groups were reminded about at the notice stage. This allowed them to revise, and thus reinforce, a wider range of language.

At the end of the course all participants were asked to complete a questionnaire to find out how long they had studied before each test and why they studied. The time spent on revising was compared with overall results. It was intended that a combination of quantitative and qualitative date analysis would provide a full and objective picture of the processes that may take place as a result of the intervention.

Results
The results seem to confirm the notion that regular assessments with prior notice impact positively on language learning in more ways than one. I have not carried out any statistical analysis of the data as the sample I looked at is too small to generalise any results. In this study the experimental group made greater progress compared to the control group despite scoring lower on the pre-test (see table 1 below).

Table 1. Average scores on pre-tests and post-tests

	Pre-test average %	Post-test average %
Experimental group	22	43
Control group	34	33

In addition to this the experimental group performed consistently better on all tests throughout the course (see table 2 below).

Table 2. Average scores on tests

	Test 1 average %	Test 2 average %	Test 3 average %
Experimental group	71	65	65
Control group	43	51	41

I also collected qualitative, albeit anecdotal, evidence relating to learners' attitudes to testing. This was done through interviews with the learners as well as questionnaires. When asked about regular and scheduled assessments, learners commented that although they occasionally found them stressful, they also found them stimulating, e.g. 5 out of 7 participants admitted that they studied more

because they knew they were going to be tested. 5 out of 7 participants found the tests to be important (all learners found them important with 5 out of 7 learners grading them either *important* or *very important*). Formal tests, it seems, gave the less motivated learners the necessary stimulus to revise.

The retention and attendance rates were also better in the experimental group with 85% completing the course (one drop-out) compared to 57% completing in the control group (3 drop-outs).

Discussion
Due to the small size of the samples it is impossible to state with all certainty that the encouraging results reported above can be attributed to the intervention (i.e. testing with prior notice). Moreover, the groups were taught by two different teachers and although they are both very experienced, teacher effect cannot be ruled out.

Thus, the experiment will have to be repeated a number of times with different tutors/learners before any results can be generalised. However, it has provided some answers to the two research questions.

The first question asked was: *To what extent does the use of formative assessment in the ESOL classroom motivate learners and enable them to progress further in their language learning.* As seen above, the answer to this question was sought using interviews with the learners and questionnaires. The responses provided by the participants in the experimental group were positive. Learners were clearly motivated by the tests and appreciated the notice which allowed them revise and prepare for the tests. They admitted that they studied more because of the notice. They also 'liked' tests and found them an important part of learning. **In a review one learner commented: *'I have learnt more in three months here than after a year at the college'*** However, to date the evidence is largely anecdotal and more questionnaires will have to be completed to ascertain the positive impact on motivation.

The second question was: *Will the effects (i.e. language gains) of the use of formative assessment be durable in learners?* The delay between the pre-test and the post-test was three months. Participants in either group were not told about the post-test. Therefore, they could not specifically revise for it. The interval

between the last test and the post-test was a week, a month between the second test and the post-test and two months between the first test and the post-test. One could, therefore, argue that the effects were durable.

Interestingly, 4 out of 7 learners from the experimental group continued their learning at a higher level (E3), which compares to 1 out of 7 from the control group. There was a month and a half long break between the terms. As I hoped to continue the research with them, I assessed them using a similar test. The results showed that all learners who completed their learning at E2 did well on items covered in the E2 class and, as expected, not so well on items expected at E3. This means that over a month after completing their learning they retained information covered in their E2 classes.

It, therefore, seems that learners have the need to be tested formally. It allows them to monitor/check their own progress and act upon feedback provided by the test results as well as the teacher. This, in turn, enables them to set their own individual targets. More importantly, tests can provide a stimulus powerful enough to encourage these otherwise busy people to revise and thus extend learning activities beyond the classroom.

Conclusion
As mentioned above, it is too early to state with confidence that the good progress made by the experimental group was due to the experimental condition the learners were placed under. The study has, however, highlighted certain interesting aspects of classroom pedagogy which could inform good practice in ESOL classes.

This research will continue until a large enough and varied enough sample has been collected and analysed. It is anticipated that the same methodology will be used including the research instruments used for collecting the qualitative and quantitative data. Future experiments will also look at the frequency of testing, i.e. will the frequency with which formative assessments are administered affect language gains?

The opportunity to carry out your own research project can be a very motivating and revealing experience for any practitioner. To be able to find out independently what works/doesn't work or to verify the claims of others as to what

is/isn't effective practice can be extremely empowering. Through their work NRDC gives practitioners opportunities to become involved in research projects and enables them to take research into their own hands, enriching their teaching experience as it has mine.

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Reports and Reviews

Introduction
Bex Ferriday

Bex has been working for the School of Education and Training based at Cornwall College for a little over five years. She is course manager on the Level 5 Diploma in Teaching English (Literacy) in the Lifelong Learning Sector, the Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector, the Level 3 Award in Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector and the Level 2 Certificate in Learner Support. She is about to embark on a PhD in Education using distance learning. She is also a Doctor Who anorak.

Last year, the outgoing Level 4 Certificate of Professional Development in Teaching Literacy was replaced by a new Level 5 Diploma. As with the level four course before it, this diploma was designed for practitioners wishing to gain subject specialist status in the teaching of English (Literacy) in the adult education sector01579 372301. Two groups of students studying the University of Plymouth (UoP) model: Jackie Sitters' UoP campus - based group of traditional learners and my own online group (studying at Cornwall College) were asked to write the reviews highlighted below, and certainly rose to the challenge.

The requirement for self directed study within teacher education brings with it the need for robust, meaningful and relevant research based texts and teaching materials. Teachers in training are asked as part of their study to research elements of generic and subject specialist practice – and in these days of mandatory Continuing Professional Development (CPD), such research is no longer solely for the trainee teacher or practitioner wishing to improve own knowledge – it is something we all need to focus on.

This is where National Research and Development Centre (NRDC) materials play an increasingly vital role. I would suggest that *all* practitioners within the Lifelong Learning Sector, though especially those in a Skills for Life role, should be made aware of the wealth of research-based reports and practitioner guides available to them - often free of charge. As the reviewers named below have stated, the selection of reports and guides available are practical, user friendly, and often signpost the intended audience to further reading, research or resource-gathering opportunities as well as providing a range of teaching tips and tricks in

easy-to-digest chunks. Certainly, the publications reviewed below are pitched at a level that, though easy to read and quick to process, do not patronise the reader – conversely, nor do they "put off" their perspective audience by being overly wordy, image or colour-free or thick enough to give the reader a hernia when lifting!

Importantly, the content of many publications has whetted practitioners' teaching appetites and given them renewed enthusiasm – something that can only be applauded. Research findings included in NRDC publications are always thought provoking and relevant and often provoke as many questions from readers as they answer. Moreover, they encourage reflection and ongoing improvement to practitioners' teaching.

Suggested teaching strategies and materials are always welcomed: I know that my learners have responded positively when issued copies of Maxine Burton's *Reading* and Sue Grief and Jan Chatterton's *Writing* Practitioner Guides at the start of their training programmes, and they continue to dip into these and other NRDC texts long after these courses have ended.

This leads me to reviews of three texts available from the National Research and Development Centre.

There is an oft-cited relationship between learner engagement and success, often related to links between literacy learning and students' wider vocational needs and / or personal interests. It also seems apparent that an individual learner's state of mind can also be attributed to levels of success – the more confident or relaxed the learner, the greater the achievement. The first review here, of Maxine Burton's aforementioned publication, highlights the importance of forging and maintaining such links. The psychological benefits of routine, the need to link session content to plenary consolidation and the advantage of regular college attendance and self-directed study are also highlighted in the guide and cited by reviewer Angela Brewser as wholly beneficial – and speaking as a practitioner of online provision, I certainly agree with Angela's comments!

Rosanna Griffith – Mumby speaks in her review of the importance of imaginative and multi-sensory content, as mentioned in Burton's

Reading Guide. On a wholly positive note, she goes on to mention how suggested resources and methods listed therein sparked her enthusiasm for further research. Rosanna also speaks of the aesthetic structure of the guide – a concept equally important as content to any prospective reader. I would agree with the comment that the guide is well sign-posted and provides a useful starting point for further research into reading theories, strategies and resources. The fact that both she and Angela before her appear to find elements of their own practice have improved as a result of reading this text can only mean that it should find space on every discerning practitioner's shelf!

Sally Haywood has very kindly provided the two final reviews. In her evaluation of *Responding to People's Lives: Developing Adult Teaching and Learning,* by Yvon Appleby and David Barton, Sally, again like Angela Brewser before her, highlights the need to relate teaching resources to learners' lives in order to gain results. She asks pertinent questions in her first review: why, seemingly, are we only highlighting this need now? Would it not be logical to assume that this link should be explicit from the onset of a course of study? She then goes on to comment that perhaps questions like this wouldn't need to be asked if student—led learning was placed higher on the skills agenda than the need to hit targets.

Sally goes on to look at further research taken by Yvon Appleby in her review of *Bridges into Learning for Adults who find Provision Hard to Reach: Developing Adult Teaching and Learning*, another in the practitioner guide series of publications. Here again the question of appropriacy raises its head and the college environment's methodology is compared to literacy provision in the community: indeed, the slant taken in the final report is wholly related to community-based provision. In a review that links explicitly to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and emphasises a "step-by-step" approach to learner progress (and in doing so, seemingly bypasses notions of "dropping out" or "failing"), Sally looks at how this approach links to the suggestion of investigating the amount of time tutors are given to develop learners' social skills and self-confidence as well as their academic skills. Her writing goes on to take the repeated theme of all four reviews full circle, by mentioning again the importance of linking teaching to learners' emotional and vocational needs and outside interests.

I urge you to examine each review and let them whet your appetite for the publications they introduce. Going on to read each full text in depth is a worthwhile experience, whatever your job role or perspective.

NRDC Practitioner Guides: READING by Maxine Burton
(ISBN 978 1 86201 339 1)
Angela Brewser
Angela was on Plymouth University's Diploma course last year and found the practitioner guides very interesting. She is currently teaching in the Adult & Community learning team and is hoping that some of what she learnt last year can now be put into practice. In particular, she would like to improve attendance and encourage better progress for some learners by employing suggestions outlined in the guide.

Burton outlines the key findings from the study which includes relating literacy learning to a context relevant to the learner as this will build confidence by allowing the learner to start with what they know and feel comfortable with. In my practice, I have found that working with adult learners and enquiring what subjects they are interested in not only builds a better teacher/student relationship but also allows the learner to relax and feel better about them self. Many start their course feeling anxious but start to build their confidence when they realize that their existing knowledge is valued. One of my learners who had previously worked as a gardener was genuinely surprised when other members of the group were interested in what he had grown and what he knew about gardens.

Another factor indentified as key to learners making better progress, is regular attendance and spending extra time studying at home. Although many learners have chaotic lives and may not have ideal facilities at home for quiet study or reading, alternative venues can be suggested such as going to their local library. Regular attendance at college can also be encouraged by discussing at the end of the lesson what will be covered the following week so that students can look forward, knowing that their attendance is expected and wanted by the rest of the group. I have found that when learners miss a lesson, a phone call or short note in the post expressing concern at their absence will very often prompt their return the next week – one commented to me that she hadn't realized that she'd be missed. Obviously, attendance is very much connected to motivation, so establishing a clear idea of why students are there is essential.

The study also revealed that students should be

allowed sufficient time to learn (around 150 hours was ideal) and that learners who spend less time working alone and more time in pairs will make better progress. This will depend upon the nature of the group and making the correct 'pairings' to avoid personality clashes. The guide touched upon the varying importance of peer tutoring, phonics, language activity (scribing) and comprehension, and these strategies could be used in different situations to improve reading.

Useful points raised were the importance of humour to make learning enjoyable, and that teachers should acknowledge their own mistakes as "it is liberating for learners to know that 'professionals' don't always get it right!"

NRDC Practitioner Guides:
READING by Maxine Burton
(ISBN 978 1 86201 339 1)
Rosanna Griffith-Mumby

During my time as a literacy trainee teacher, I found the practitioner guides very interesting resources but discovered the 'reading practitioner guide' to be most invaluable. Not only was it informative and interesting but also inspirational. Since the guide is based on extensive research as an informative source the findings have much more credibility and relevance to practitioners. In terms of interest, some of the findings were new and the recommendations innovative. As an inspirational source, the guides prompt practitioners to diverse teaching techniques as well as contemplate further research.

I had found it challenging working within my teaching practice with a weaker reader. I was interested in understanding more about reading and identifying various strategies for teaching reading to a diversity of individuals and groups. The guide is very practical in suggesting methods based on the underpinning research such as innovative, active homework, webquests, paired reading, performance reading using film, TV and play scripts, learners' own writing and using audiobooks or books written for emergent readers. The guide provided a range of informative and links to other resources that were a great assistance. I found the guides so inspirational that this new interest propelled me to do further research on aspects of reading, which I shared with my colleagues.

Not only is the guide informative but also the structure of the guide is user-friendly. For busy practitioners, resources need to be seen as being easily accessible and easily read. The size of the guide makes it initial appearance favourable. The layout of the guide is also systematic making it easy to follow and pinpoint particular aspects of the information that practitioners wish to access quickly. The beige boxes with information on methods and suggestions for various aspects of teaching reading were incredibly useful. For example, the suggestion box on 'materials to encourage reading fluency' signposts play and film scripts to use in reading activities.

It is useful that the guide takes a pragmatic approach to reading and the theories surrounding teaching and learning reading. Although the guide only outlines some theories related to reading, it signposts other literature to investigate more in-depth. Personally I accessed the McShane publication and found the additional information very useful not only for my coursework but considering for application in future practice.

One criticism is that the guide concentrates on reading as separate from writing and the other components of language literacy. The author has justified this by saying that the guide focuses on specific skills and related strategies. As practitioners it is useful to apply the suggested methods keeping in mind the integration of reading, writing, speaking and listening.

As a new teacher the guide has made me excited to try some of the methods but most importantly it has encouraged my interest in research, and areas to consider regarding the development of students' reading skills such as oral reading fluency, reciprocal teaching, phonics and language experience. Overall I have learned that there exists lots of scope for experimenting & developing innovative approaches with learners. Research into reading with adults is quite meagre but the guide highlights opportunities for future practitioner research.

Responding to people's lives. Developing adult teaching and learning. practitioner guides. (2008) NIACE, Leicester.
Yvon Appleby and David Barton
ISBN 978-1-86201-333-8
37 A5 pages. £9.95
www.niace.org.uk/publications

Sally Haywood
Sally has been working as a learndirect skills for life tutor in Cornwall for several years, supporting learners with their online learning. Having gained a PGCE and subject specialist qualifications in numeracy at Level 4 and literacy at Level 5 she is now training other tutors and also plans to work with adult learners in the community in work-based and regeneration projects.

For all but those who are brand new to teaching, this booklet may create a vague sense of unease. It does not emit the positive breezy atmosphere of some of the other excellent guides in the series, such as the literacy and numeracy practitioner guides, nor does it give a list of useful practical examples or suggestions. Yet it does achieve its aim of taking its target audience – teachers, new or experienced, including those involved with delivering Initial Teacher Training and Continuous Professional Development programmes – of carefully encouraging readers to reflect on the balance they achieve between using teaching resources that truly relate to their learners' lives and fulfilling requirements for assessment, testing and targets.

The guide is one of a series commissioned by NIACE to examine good practice in adult education. It has taken the findings of a three year study into Adult Learners' Lives and developed what is referred to as a "social practice approach to teaching". This takes into account the cognitive, emotional and social aspects of learning and the pedagogy is presented in the form of five guiding principles: research everyday practices, take account of learners' lives, learn by participation, learn in safe, supported contexts and the somewhat obscure "locate literacy learning in other forms of meaning-making" which refers to considering different ways of communicating.
My reaction to the introductory explanation of the social practice approach was an overwhelming sense of déjà vu. Could it really be that, in 2008, we are being advised to take into consideration our learners' lives and the importance of this in their literacy, language and numeracy learning? Surely, this has been at the

forefront of all work with adult learners for years now? If not, then what is the point of the Individual Learning Plans we have been refining for years, getting learners more involved with making their learning relevant to them?

Yet, the interesting, if limited, selection of case studies given to illustrate the methodology illustrates that perhaps, with a little effort, more could be done to enhance the benefits learners get from their learning if we are less rigid in our pursuit of national test passes and more open to a wider range of learning opportunities.

The authors of the guide do consider the conflicting issues that teachers have to resolve in the question of how to respond to learner's lives more effectively. How are we to balance finding out and using personal details of learner's histories with the necessity for professional boundary-setting, data protection and learner confidentiality? How are teachers to find the time to have these discussions, create resources with the learner and deliver exciting, individualised learning programmes for groups of learners in a variety of learning environments, all within the constraints of funding issues? In that sense, there is nothing really new but it serves as a reminder that the answers deserve to be continually challenged as all the research points to the greater value learners derive when their lives outside the classroom are connected to that within.

The document manages to be timid yet provocative, behind the times yet perhaps leading us to the way forward. It reflects the confusion that many of us feel but if even one teacher makes one learner happier as a result of reflecting on and changing their practice, surely it's worth some feelings of disquiet?

Bridges into learning for adults who find provision hard to reach. Developing adult teaching and learning: practitioner guides. (2008) NIACE, Leicester.
Yvon Appleby
ISBN 978-1-86201-340-7
33 A5 pages. £9.95
www.niace.org.uk/publications

Sally Haywood
This guide, one of nine in the series so far, aimed at teachers, teacher-educators, providers and funders, takes a sympathetic look at the provision of literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) support in community projects. It considers the differences between the challenges

of community-based learning, illustrated by a small number of carefully-chosen case studies, and 'traditional' college-based learning and prompts us to question the validity of government targets which measure success in terms of achieving qualifications within a defined period of time, when the reality is that success for many learners can take many forms.
Yvon Appleby has produced a thought-provoking and thorough analysis of the issues, setting out four guidelines for community provision in terms of a social practice approach: take account of people's current circumstances and responsibilities; take account of people's barriers to learning; take account of people's feeling of social exclusion; and recognise and build on people's existing skills, competencies and interests.

In many respects, these principles surely apply to every learning environment but the difficulties appear to be magnified in their severity in community-based projects where disadvantaged individuals first have to struggle to survive before they can think about any learning they may do. Appleby hints that teachers new to this area may need more training and guidance than is currently provided in teacher training programmes on how to handle the situations which arise. As I am about to start work in this area, I have read this section with particular care!
I enjoyed reading the case studies about the intangible value learners attach to their learning, and, even though there was not always a clear-cut 'happy ending', the point was well illustrated that, even if people have to dip in and out of learning, they do not necessarily consider this uneven progression as failure, rather a step on the journey towards self-improvement.

Appleby suggests that, rather than considering learners "hard to reach", it is set time scales and timetables that are out of their reach, making regular attendance, and therefore success, difficult to achieve. She prefers to think in terms of "interrupted learning" rather than "dropping out" or "failing" and recommends taking a broader, long-term view of progress and achievement. This seems to be a sensible outlook but there are obvious difficulties in terms of finding and justifying the funding required to support outcomes which are difficult to predict, define and measure.

Appleby raises the issue of funding as she explains the frustration for teachers who need far longer than is usually allowed to develop in their learners the self-confidence required to

deal with their complex lives and move forward on to successful learning. There are more questions raised than answers but there is a suggestion that funding could be harnessed from a combination of council or governmental budgets, addressing different aspects and areas of the learners' needs.

The challenge, then, is to make learning opportunities available at the 'right time' in an individual's life. Successful tutors offer learners "a bridge to cross over what might feel like a big divide", enabling them to progress onto more formal provision.Anyone involved in adult learning will concur with the need to recognise that one type of learning does not fit all and that the definition of success is wider than a piece of paper. Appleby reminds us to focus on what learners *can* do rather than concentrating on their difficulties and to show learners how these skills are valued within formal qualification structures. She refers to a "social practice approach" which promotes the view that formal learning is likely to be more successful if we incorporate elements of the learner's lives, continuing the message from the sister publication she co-authored with David Barton: *Responding to Peoples' Lives (2008)* that learning should be meaningful and relevant.

Whilst this may not make the best bedtime reading, and might benefit from more convincingly positive case studies, it serves its purpose well in raising awareness and perhaps increasing the profile of community-based learning.

Voices from the Field:
Personal response to NRDC
John Leavey
Yvon Appleby sent out these questions to a number of recipients and we are very grateful for John Leavey's reply. We would like to hear the thoughts of other practitioners, researchers and students and there is a place on the RaPAL website where you can post your own answers to these questions. We will include a collection of these in a future journal.

Your name
John Leavey
Your job (tutor, researcher, organiser etc)
Development Coordinator, (Learning Connections, Scottish Government)
Q: Have you used NRDC publications including the Reflect magazine in your work - what has been the impact, if any?
Yes. I've referred colleagues to articles - for

their information and as evidence to support cases. I've also contributed an article on the Scottish Strategy and had one piece of research reviewed. The impact has been positive: people listen more attentively to evidence based argument; published articles reinforce the value of the strategy (especially when accompanied by a positive commentary is from a respected English expert!); all research benefits from wide dissemination but especially so if it is related to cross-sector practice – Reflect reaches a very varied audience including perhaps some who might not read a more formal research report unless it directly concerns them.

Q: Have you attended any of the conferences - what have you gained, if anything?
I've been to several conferences, and dissemination events. I have presented workshops at some, the feedback from which has been especially useful. The networking and development of good working relationships with colleagues from other countries has been even more useful and has resulted in a number of cooperative and collaborative projects.

Q: Have you read/used any of the research reports?
Yes, in much the same way as Reflect;
- as evidence,
- to help develop thinking for Scottish research and practice development initiatives,
- as examples of good practice in research, presentation and dissemination.

Q: Have you benefited in any other way from the work of the NRDC?
Yes, in lots of ways. NRDC has always shown a readiness to share information, experience and findings as well as encouragement and support for what we are trying to achieve in Scotland. I think it's important to note that benefits from using Reflect and research reports are founded on the respect in which NRDC is held by practitioners, researchers and policy makers. The dissemination strategy that has made research findings freely available has been a vital part of establishing this reputation.

Q: What would you like to see in the NRDC do in the future?
More of the same, and in particular maintaining the commitment to using research evidence to **make a difference** to practice, and to inform policy. This includes all the activities; conducting research, conferences, dissemination events, practice development publications, research summaries, précis, focused interpretations and commentaries, encouraging contributions from the field.
NRDC has also acted as an important link between different countries, through international research projects and conferences, which should continue.
There was a proposal to create a bank of research data that might then be available for future researchers, for secondary analysis, etc. I don't k now where this got to but it would be extremely useful for policy-makers, academic researchers, and practitioner-researchers.

A Celebration of John Glynn
1st August 1957 - 1st January 2008

Mary Hamilton

John Glynn, who died in January this year was a pioneering figure in adult literacy who worked with a number of key organizations to develop student participation and voices though writing and publishing. John lived through three decades of innovation and struggle in adult literacy. He touched a side of that work that, in my view, was amongst the most challenging and innovative. This work dissolved boundaries between tutors and students, explored democratic learning structures and developed a body of expertise in collaborating with new writers to inform teachers and the whole education system about the experience of learning to read and write as an adult. These aspects of adult literacy work are now firmly sidelined by the policy priorities of a different age and are, in my view, one of the great unrealized potentials of the field.

It was a privilege to be at John's funeral and to hear the personal tributes, the warmth of his family, the friends he supported and inspired, his many roles as a volunteer. I was struck, though, by how his "official cv" did not represent much of what I knew of him as a professional colleague within RaPAL, Gatehouse books and Pecket Well college. The tributes recorded below redress this to some degree, putting on record the breadth and importance of his interventions to a generation of us who have learned, taught and researched in adult literacy.

The tributes printed here are from Gillian Frost and Peter Goode, both founder members of Pecket Well College where John worked for many years.

John, Gillian and Peter were all interviewed for the Changing Faces Project and these interviews are part of the archive evidence logged in the national social science archive. For those who are interested in finding out more, there is an account of the history of the student writing and publishing movement including John's role in it, on the Changing Faces website at http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/projects/edres/changingfaces/

Gillian Frost   (now Josie Pollentine)

John, the opener of doors,
the breaker of barriers,
the fun and laughter bringer,
the pint drinker,
the innovator,
the enabler,
the thinker,
the artist, the poet, the publisher,
the tutor, the computer expert,
the administrator,
the business man,
the family man,
the very proud father,
at the forefront of life,
propelling his own dreams
and the dreams of others
forward into reality,
with his renowned, dogged determination and obstinacy

remembered now
as the quiet and humorous warrior,
others now will continue his battles.

I had the privilege and pleasure to know John Glynn all his adult life.   He had needed all his courage to present himself to the Adult Basic Skills section of the Abraham Moss Centre, Manchester in 1974, where I worked as an Adult Literacy Organiser. He had waited patiently to be able to reveal for the first time the secret he had cleverly kept throughout his schooldays. He needed the safer environment of adult education in order to do something about his difficulties with writing. He was an apprentice painter and decorator, excelling in everything except the written requirements of the day release college component. He was always someone who reflected on his experience and on society in general, as well as being fun loving, beer drinking and a passionate supporter of Manchester City.

John's growth accompanied, was nourished by and nourished the decades of the student writing movement from its early days in the mid 70's to its maturity in the 80's and its spawning of new developments in adult basic education from the early 80's onwards. He played a critical role in this process, as a seeder of ideas, as a reassuring enabler, as a breaker of barriers, as someone who could interpret the experience of people with difficulties with the written word to any audience, including the academic.

John took a leading role in the production of *Second Chance*, the ABE students' magazine at the Abraham Moss Centre. He was involved in the campaigns fought at the centre to protect the standards of provision. From there he abandoned his ambition to set up his own painting and decorating business in order to become one of the founder workers of the Gatehouse Project (set up by Jenny Derbyshire and Patricia Duffin) in 1977. This project was, to my knowledge, the first to employ students from adult basic education. This work, as part of a team, enabled many people to produce their writing in the most accessible and attractive form possible. He shared his skills with colleagues and others in adult basic education in a way which encouraged people to have a go. He made new things non-threatening and fun. The co-operative model underlying the practices at the Gatehouse project gave John experience in all aspects of the work of the project, from lay-out to encouraging writing, to book-keeping and sales.

John's development and confidence grew apace. The student writing movement gave him an arena in which to contribute his strengths and ideas. He worked with many to enable them to publish their own work. He was involved in the formation of the National Students Association in 1982, the only time there has been a formal adult basic education student movement. He was also a leading contributor to the ideas, process and production of the Gatehouse writing development pack, *Opening Time compiled and edited by Chris Hoy and myself, design and layout by John Glynn.* John was a thinker; he loved ideas and analysis. He stimulated and challenged others to debate. John's own section of the pack, entitled 'School a Wasted Childhood', must be one of the most powerful indictments of the education system and the experience of someone with unrecognised dyslexia within it, a telling analysis of the process of creating a sense of failure. John does not solely recount his school experience, he analyses it. It is personal experience transformed into sociology. All trainee teachers, educational policy makers and theorists should read it

By this time, John no longer defined himself as a student. He was part of a group of people with experience of tackling difficulties with the written word who led the process of creating *Opening Time*. This shared endeavor was a departure from the accepted model of tutors developing the ideas, the pedagogy, the practice and the learning materials **for** the students.

From there, the next step was training, running workshops also as a joint endeavor. John, in his role at Gatehouse, organized what may have been the first workshops run jointly by tutors and writers from adult basic education. He persuaded funders to accept the revolutionary idea of paying the 'learners' as tutors. The writers of different sections of *Opening Time* ran workshops alongside tutors in which they shared their experience of writing and learning with mixed groups of students and tutors.

John was also part of the movement for residential education in adult basic education which grew out of the students and tutors collective *Write First Time* and started with the first course at Losehill Hall, Derbyshire,in 1975. Writing weekends began to take place all over the country, encouraged by the ALBSU funded *Writing Development Project* (Sue Gardener), the Gatehouse project (Patricia Duffin and Stella Fitzpatrick and John Glynn) and the *Special Events* project (Robert Merry).

This movement culminated in a *Write First Time* writing week at Nottingham University in 1985 which in its turn sparked off another process. New writers from all over the country came together at the residential week, including a group from Halifax near the village of Pecket Well. From this event, the idea took root that residential education should be available to all in ABE and a group was formed to open the first residential centre for adult basic education in the country - Pecket Well College. As one of the founder members, I was encouraged by John in tackling this enterprise. John was a supportive figure in the background, a role he often preferred, as in the development of the NSA. He never pushed himself into a leading role but quietly and profoundly influenced and encouraged developments in movements and individuals alike. A participant in one of Pecket Well College's residential courses, Jan Halliday, someone who had been more or less housebound for a while, had lost confidence and become depressed, described how John, a workshop leader on the course, gently nudged her into taking the lead in directing a play being improvised by fellow participants.
The model that had flowered at Gatehouse grew at Pecket Well College, where the founding idea was a partnership between practitioners and participants in adult basic education. John had played an important part in developing the concept and practice that underlied the new college: the whole process as a joint enterprise, from the planning (provision, physical environment) funding, publicity, management,

to running and evaluating the provision. He participated with Gatehouse in helping to run workshops on the residential courses. He joined us again as a workshop leader in running Pecket Publishing Project (alongside Hilary Dyter), one of our most popular and successful courses which undertook research, wrote and edited and produced a series of publications. After this John took on the thankless task of the finances of the college, at a time when we were receiving major funding. Later, John became a workshop leader on his own. He enlivened the events which played a big part in bonding people at Pecket with his imagination and playfulness.

He had been developing his own ambitions and career at the same time. He had trained in IT and computer programming, he had left Gatehouse to set up his own painting and decorating and later bathroom renovation business. He always shared his skills with us at Pecket, and helped run our door sign workshops, where able-bodied and disabled members alike, designed tactile door signs for our newly opened college, so that people could easily identify different rooms. He headed the team of volunteers, again able-bodied and disabled people, to paint the college, finding ways to involve everyone regardless of their disability.

Much of the work John did for the college over the years was on a voluntary basis, but he also worked regularly as a workshop leader for many years, always an enabler.

John would not have been able to play his role in this way at Pecket Well College, if the current trend to professionalism in adult education teaching had taken place at that time. How many people will be precluded in the future from moving flexibly across roles in the way that John did?

During this time, John developed Multiple Sclerosis and had to give up his own business, but he continued working for Pecket until the last year of his life, when our financial difficulties meant we could no longer employ him. John lives on not only in the hearts of all those who knew him, those who loved him and those who valued and respected him, but also in the words and images of countless people in the many publications he helped to bring to life with dedication, skill and flair.

Even in his much shortened life, his impact on the lives of many has been profound and for the good. He will be sorely missed.

■■ Writing Guidelines ■■■■■■■ RaPAL

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 **Yvon Appleby at: University of Central Lancashire, Preston, PR1 2HE or to YAppleby@uclan.ac.uk**
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.

Editors, themes and deadlines

Edition	Theme	Deadline	Editors
Spring (April)	Open Edition	End of February	Alex Kendall, Rob Smith, Cathie Lacey, Matt O'Leary, Chris Winter and Mandy French
Summer (September)	Changing landscapes of literacy and language learning	End of July	Shelley Tracy and Nora Hughes
Winter (December)	Conference Edition	End of September	Amy Burgess and Gaye Houghton

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As we move to placing copies of the journal which are two years old on the web site we thought the back copies could be distributed free to Rapal members. These will make a great resource for teaching or research. We have some packs of almost **complete sets** with one each of the issues from the late 1980's up to 2006. We also have some packs of 20 of one edition which we have **multiple copies** of between the years 2002 – 2006.

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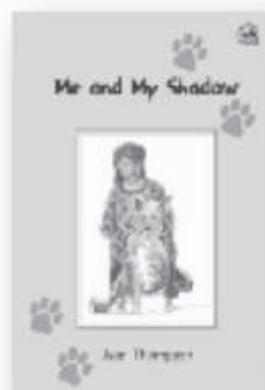
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Inside this issue