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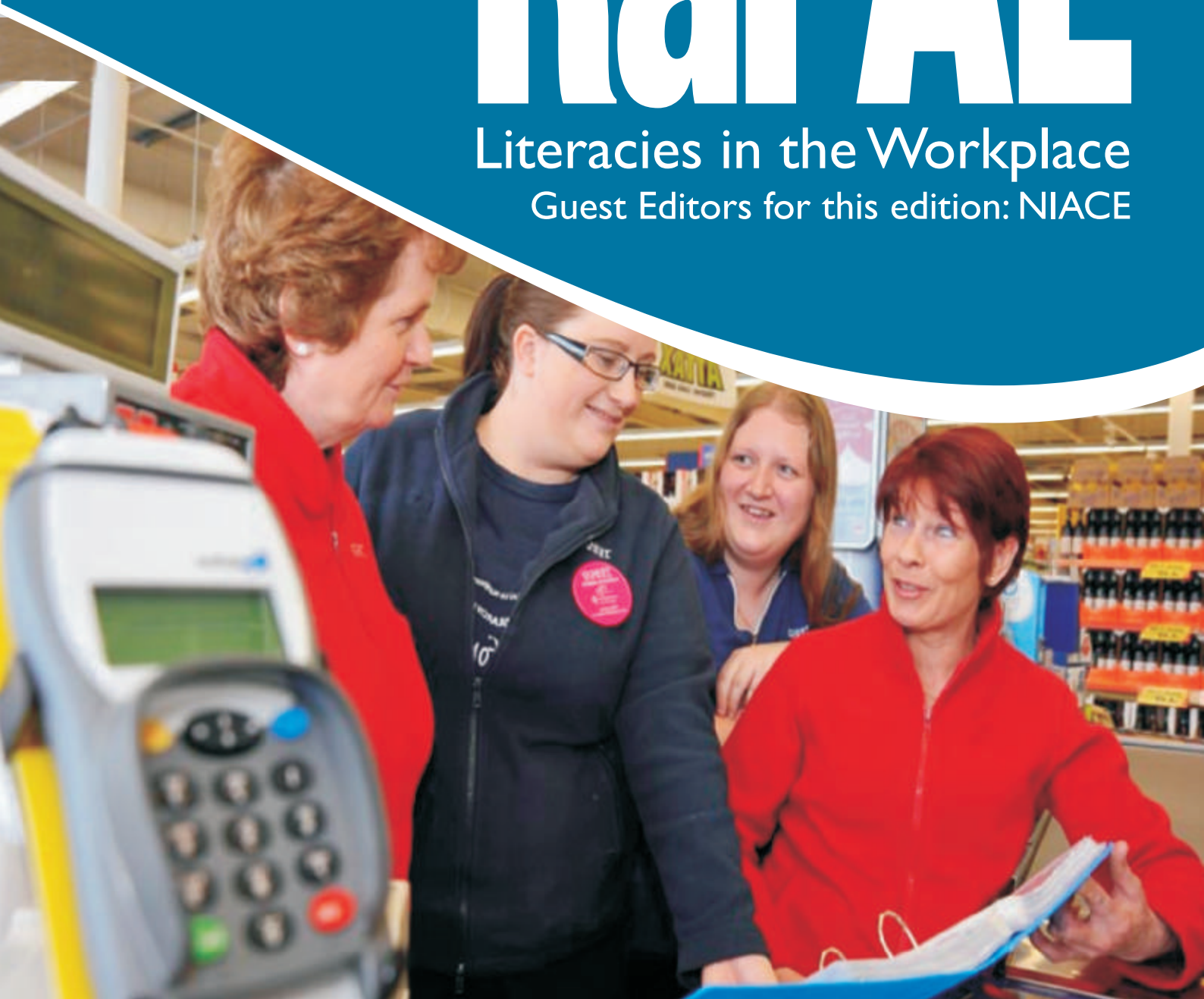
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RaPAL

Literacies in the Workplace

Guest Editors for this edition: NIACE



Journal

Co-ordinated by

niace
promoting adult learning

The Research and Practice in Adult Literacy Network

Who we are

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

What we do

- Campaign for the rights of adults to have access to the full range of literacies in their lives
- Critique current policy and practice where it is based on simplistic notions of literacy as skill
- Emphasise the importance of social context in literacy
- Encourage collaborative and reflective research
- Believe in democratic practices in adult literacy
- Create networks by organising events (including an annual conference) to contribute to national debate
- Publish a journal three times a year

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

Why not join in?

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

The RaPAL Journal expresses a variety of views which do not necessarily reflect those of the editorial group. The RaPAL Journal has been printed by Image Printing Co., Lumsdale, Matlock, Derbyshire.

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Contents

Editorial	1
<i>Jay Derrick and Carol Taylor</i>	
Contributions from Learners, Practitioners, Researchers and Specialists in the Field	
What Did We Actually Get for All That Money?	3
<i>Tony Uden</i>	
Basic Skills at Work: Time For a Workplace Learning Approach?	6
<i>Alexander Braddell</i>	
Is Literacy Learning More Effective When the Employer Makes It Mandatory?	13
<i>Faye McFarlane</i>	
Teaching Literacy in the Workplace	15
<i>Abi Richards</i>	
News from the ESOL Training Field	16
<i>Rachel Öner</i>	
Workplace and the Role of the Unions	18
<i>Judith Swift</i>	
Getting By But Not Getting On	21
<i>Sue Southwood and Davinder Kaur Sandhu</i>	
Learning for Work: Lessons from the Royal Mail, the CWU and Adult Education College	25
<i>An interview with John Maskell by Sarah Freeman</i>	
E-readers in Adult Learning: How Kindles, iPads and Other Handheld Devices Might Change the Way Learners Access Text	27
<i>Sal McKeown</i>	
Reviews	
Sustainable Workplace literacy Provision: Nearer or Farther Away?	30
<i>Review of two recent reports on workplace learning by Jay Derrick</i>	
The Fundamentals of Workplace Learning by Knud Illeris	32
<i>Review by Sarah Freeman</i>	

Front cover image © Caters Photographic
 Tesco Old Swan: Previous winners of an ESF Group Award for Adult Learners' Week.

Editorial

Carol Taylor and Jay Derrick

Carol Taylor is Director of Research and Development at the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education. Jay Derrick is a teacher educator and researcher at the Institute of Education, University of London.

There are two 'stand-out' features of this issue of the *RaPAL Journal*: that its theme is Literacy Learning in the Workplace, and that it has been produced jointly and co-operatively with NIACE, the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education. For the last twenty years, NIACE has consistently argued for the importance of workplace learning. *Towards a Learning Workforce*, published in 1991, argued to government, employers, and educationalists that workplaces have huge unrealised potential for supporting adult learning, that getting on at work is a powerful motivating factor for individual adults to learn, and that work-based learning also benefits individuals in their family lives and as citizens. In 2003 NIACE published *Expanding Learning in the Workplace*, which made a critical theoretical perspective on effective workplace learning accessible to a non-academic audience for the first time. In 2006, another NIACE publication pointed out, again for the first time to a practitioner audience, the decisive importance of *informal* modes of learning in workplaces and elsewhere, and the consequent misalignment of workforce development policy:

"The government's strategy to stimulate learning in the workplace, based solidly on improving the qualifications of the UK workforce, has so far failed to change workers' learning preferences. When seeking to improve their job performance, all groups, but particularly working-class and low-skilled adults, and those who have had little opportunity to participate in structured learning, still favour informal learning."

Since 2007, NIACE has become a major publisher of learning materials for workplace learners, many of them designed to support literacy learning embedded in a wide range of work contexts.

It is clear that NIACE's perspectives on learning in the workplace align well with RaPAL's view of literacy as social practice. NIACE's consistent

arguments for effective policy and practice on workplace learning in general are as relevant as ever today, and have, now as then, even more importance in relation to adult literacy learners. A co-operative initiative on workplace literacy learning between NIACE and RaPAL at this moment, seems to make perfect sense.

Although RaPAL and NIACE have never had a close formal relationship, there has always been a significant number of people who have been members of both organisations since RaPAL was launched in 1986. Until the late 1990s, NIACE deliberately avoided major policy interventions on adult literacy, leaving this role to the Basic Skills Agency (BSA), with which it was closely associated. In the 1990s NIACE made adult basic education one of its major areas of activity in terms of acting as a voice for practitioners, lobbying and influencing policy, initiating and supporting research and development, and publishing; the merger with the BSA in 2007 underlined its position as the lead body on literacy and numeracy. It is wholly appropriate, therefore, that NIACE and RaPAL should now have agreed to produce this joint issue of the *RaPAL Journal*, the first in a planned series of co-operative initiatives, to be followed up, it is hoped, with a jointly organised national literacy conference later in 2012.

It has been a pleasure to be able to work together on this co-produced issue of the *Journal* - from the idea, the meetings, the suggestions for papers, the sharing of the tasks and the final *Journal*. It's been a great example of two organisations working together for the best of reasons, on a topic that is of major importance - that workplaces have a huge, and mainly unrealised, potential for supporting adult learning, that getting on at work is highly motivating and that work based learning also benefits families and communities, and develops active citizenship.

This issue takes as its starting point the view that the workplace is not just another location for literacy learning, but a critically important one. It suggests to literacy funders, organisers, and practitioners that it would be useful to pay more attention to workplace learning in general, about which there is an enormous range of experience and research; and it suggests to

organisers of workplace training programmes of all kinds that experienced literacy practitioners may have insights which will help your programmes be more successful. Policy's response to these propositions is assessed in Tony Uden's polemical piece assessing the achievements of Skills for Life in terms of sustainable workplace literacy after 10 years of significant public funding. Alex Braddell follows this with an evaluation of the standard organisational models for workplace literacy programmes which are one of the key products of the Skills for Life policy initiative, and an examination of alternative approaches. Faye McFarlane asks whether a legal entitlement would support workplace literacy learning; teachers' perspectives on workplace literacy are presented by Abi Richards, who works at one of the longest-standing workplace literacy programmes, at Ginster's in Cornwall; and Rachel Öner discusses the difficulties ESOL learners are experiencing at present in the workplace context.

There is a strong focus in this issue on the perspectives of learners themselves. Sue Southwood and Davinder Sandhu report on UNISON's recent survey of attitudes to workplace learning – 27,000 UNISON members responded to this survey which makes it one of the largest ever carried out, and an important database for further research. Judith Swift, the TUC's National Literacy Development Officer, looks at the developing role of Union Learning Reps, arguing that this is one of the undisputed successes in workplace learning over the past decade. We also have the powerful personal testimony of John Maskell, a Post Office

employee and Outstanding Adult Learner Award winner, writing about the ups and downs of his learning journey through work.

Finally, we have an article on the use of e-readers in the classroom, which, while not specifically focused on workplace learning, highlights the use of new technologies for teaching and learning, and will give those working with learners in the workplace an indication of how to use e-readers to support literacy learning.

The issue is rounded off with two review articles: in the first, Jay Derrick reviews *Improving Literacy at Work* by Alison Wolf and Karen Evans, which reports on the 5-year longitudinal research project investigating the question: what benefits do workplace literacy programmes provide for employers, for learners, and for society in general? In the second, Sarah Freeman looks at *The Fundamentals of Workplace Learning*, the new book by Knud Illeris, Professor of Lifelong Learning at the Danish University of Education.

Welcome to this issue of the RaPAL Journal, jointly produced with NIACE. We hope that it will generate ideas, debates, and feedback! Please contact us at: info@rapal.org.uk

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STOP PRESS

NIACE and RaPAL are collaborating with UCU
to run a conference on basic skills

28 September 2012

UCU Head Office, London

More details to follow

What Did We Actually Get for All That Money?

Tony Uden, Independent Consultant

Such a question might easily make a Daily Mail headline, or a soundbite for a politician keen to belittle the achievements of predecessors. But a reading of the results of the second *National Skills for Life Survey*¹ could understandably prompt that kind of question.

Despite successive 'literacy' campaigns since the first BBC initiative as long ago as 1975, culminating in the unprecedented public investment in the Skills for Life campaign by the last government, the figures are a bit stark.

These large-scale surveys attempt to present a picture of 'the state of the nation' by looking at basic skills levels in the population as a whole. Since the first such survey in 2003 we can see a significant improvement in literacy at 'Level 2' and above but, despite all that investment of energy and money, there has been no improvement in literacy at the lower levels and the nation's numeracy skills have shown a small decline. 24% of adults (8.1 million people) lack functional numeracy skills and 15% (5.1 million people) lack functional literacy skills.

NIACE was quick to claim the gains as a success for the professionals:

"The headline results of today's survey show a welcome increase in those adults working at Literacy Level 2 (GCSE equivalent) from 44% (in 2003) to 57%, which proves the powerful impact the Skills for Life Strategy has had."

But they are less sure, perhaps, who should shoulder responsibility for the lack of progress in other areas where "the system isn't working".

Quite rightly NIACE highlights the plight of those whose very low literacy and numeracy skills are not being tackled and also calls for special targeted efforts on maths where no progress has been made:

"a skill which can have a greater impact on life chances than literacy. This is why we're calling for a specific challenge fund to help those with the lowest skills."

The Survey came hard on the heels of Lord Boswell's Report². This in itself said little that was startling – possibly because so little has

changed – but made some useful recommendations. Unfortunately these are likely to be hard to implement since they tend to call for the kinds of cross-cutting efforts – bringing together different government departments, harnessing the efforts of central and local government, voluntary organisations and business and using the immense reach of the media – which have so often failed to materialise in the past.

The government admits the current situation is unacceptable and says:

"Building on Lord Boswell's report on adult literacy we have undertaken a major review of how provision is delivered to improve the economic and personal returns to this investment."³

NIACE again shows awareness that the Sfl survey results do not necessarily point to a need for more money:

"The Treasury has quite rightly shown an interest in the impact of the government spend and the fact that, despite an enormous and welcome investment in skills for life over the past decade, there are simply far too many people who have not been helped."⁴

Instead they may illustrate where good intentions may have led to perverse outcomes. They suggest that one reason for this may be that targeting qualifications as the standard of learner achievement may have encouraged teachers to "teach to the test" and concentrate their efforts on those most likely to reach the targets early.

And it Really Does Matter

In what politicians and employers like to call 'the real world', a lack of basic skills presents huge barriers to employment.

The government acknowledges in *Skills for Sustainable Growth*⁵ the obvious truth that British-born adults without basic skills are the product of a schools system that fails large numbers of those from deprived backgrounds:

"Literacy and numeracy skills enable people to function in society, progress into vocational

1. 2011 Skills for Life Survey: headline findings, BIS 2011
2. Work, Society and Lifelong Literacy, NIACE 2011

3. New Challenges, New Chances, BIS 2011
4. NIACE response to the 2011 Skills for Life Survey
5. Skills for Sustainable Growth, BIS 2011

learning and employment, and operate more productively in work. But millions of adults in England lack even basic reading, writing and mathematical skills. We believe this resulted from an unacceptable failure of the education system and that it is therefore only right to give them a second chance to acquire those skills.”⁶

As NIACE wrote in its evidence to the Kennedy Committee as far back as 1997, it continues to be a case of “if at first you don't succeed, you don't succeed.”⁷

The Survey results help us see what has really been happening. Though some progress has been made in literacy it is painfully slow, while numeracy is not improving. ESOL is continually tied up in questions of migration and citizenship and the government does not accept the responsibility for putting things right in the way it does for other basic skills (since this need is not seen as caused by a failure of the UK schools system.) The attempt to include IT in the basic skills family seems to have stalled, even though the government's own digital champion says that unemployed people who can use the web are 25% more likely to find work.⁸

We live in a market economy and the UK is part of the largest free trade area in the world. Those freedoms extend to the labour market. The workforce is not static. It sheds older workers and it absorbs new young entrants and people attracted from other countries with different education systems and different attitudes to work, skills and training. Increasingly in recent years employers have taken on young people from other EU countries who, it is often claimed, are better skilled – even with a better command of English – than some of the products of our schools. While we remain members of the EU, no amount of immigration control (extending only to non-Europeans) or fulminations from Migration Watch will alter that.

Employers are behaving entirely rationally when they employ the most employable; within a free labour market and with more applicants than jobs, that is usually going to mean those with the better qualifications. There are likely to be few vacancies for those who cannot read or write or count – or speak in ways that can be readily understood – wherever they were born.

Of course our education system also has many successes but even these developments, like the

successes made in increasing participation in HE, can have the effect of reinforcing a growing divide in the UK. This learning divide is coming to mirror and, of course entrench, the growing wealth gap and the lack of social mobility that has shown the country sliding down relevant OECD tables over the past few years. Graduates willing to take almost any job - or to work for nothing to get a foot on the ladder – are inflating the skills threshold for gaining employment. Add in the eager pool of better-educated workers from other European countries, and the barriers to employment for those at the bottom of the skills heap are formidable indeed.

Where Do We Go from Here?

NIACE makes some pertinent comments on what the SfL survey shows still needs to be done and how that fits with the recommendations coming out of the Boswell Report:

“The Department for Education must recognise the overriding importance of the family in ensuring that children grow up with good reading and writing skills. The intergenerational transfer of poor skills must be addressed.

We still don't have a fully qualified workforce – teachers must be qualified and have ongoing Continuous Professional Development.

We must invest in ways to engage those with the poorest skills, who are usually those with low self confidence, in poor or no jobs, with a range of other social issues. We should also incentivise providers, enabling community and workplace outreach programmes and the development of innovative ways of working, including partnerships across the public, private and voluntary sectors.”⁹

Another important BIS contribution to the debate is a thoughtful survey of the state of research¹⁰, which allows us to make some assessment of what we know and what we only think we know (shades of Donald Rumsfeld?).

The research had an enviably wide yet quite specific remit:

“Broadly, this review investigates the different elements of a logic chain covering how the delivery of ALN skills (i.e. the funded activities) makes best use of the investment

6. *Ibid*

7. *Widening Participation, Routes to a Learning Society, NIACE 1997*

8. *Martha Lane Fox writing in the Guardian 12.01.12*

9. *NIACE response to the 2011 Skills for Life Survey*

10. *Review of Research and Evaluation on Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy Skills, BIS 2011*

(i.e. inputs) to achieve the greatest economic, social and personal returns (i.e. outcomes) with the widest possible effects (i.e. impacts)."

And for anyone serious about developing evidence-based policies it can make salutary reading. In its conclusion it tells us starkly:

"There is little evidence explicitly linking the assessment of skills needs to the design and delivery of effective, efficient and economical provision leading to demonstrably cost-effective outcomes, such as improved employment, productivity, civic participation or learning progression. No cost-benefit analyses of literacy and numeracy programmes have been carried out that would enable identification of the most efficient modes and models for delivering literacy and numeracy provision."

Ouch! That kind of commentary must give us pause for thought. Do we know what we are doing? Do those who advocate linking funding with 'success' in helping learners reach their goals (or perhaps the government's goals) have the instruments to support and measure those achievements?

Well yes it appears that we do know some things and can heave a sigh of relief that we have not entirely been wasting our time. This survey reassures us that there is good evidence on what constitutes good practice, which includes the benefits of embedding adult literacy and numeracy in vocational programmes, of using a wide range of ways of engaging with learning and of having qualified teachers. Surprisingly there seems to be more evidence on the personal and social impact of this kind of learning than on the 'harder' outcomes.

And there is fairly strong evidence about the efficacy of blended learning – combining face-to-face and technology based, formal and self-study methods – plus the use of what the authors call 'techno-mathematical literacies', which are a combination of ICT, literacy and numeracy skills. The evidence also seems to show that it often takes a learner more than 100 hours of guided learning to make 'significant learning progress'.

New Challenges, New Chances sets out a way forward at least partially consistent with that evidence – a continued effort to professionalise the workforce, moving away from qualification targets and piloting ways to reward learners'

distance travelled, prioritising both young adults leaving school without basic skills and the adult unemployed.

But there is clearly no room for complacency and it will be hard to do now some of the things it might be argued we should have done when money was more plentiful. In the way of things, the lack of progress then may be used to argue that more money is not the answer.

NIACE's little list of things that still need to be done may contain the seeds of a new approach. Not just a need for more teacher training – especially in those 'techno-mathematical skills' – but also investment in family learning to overcome that 'intergenerational problem'.

Perhaps above all there should be redoubled attempts to reach those with the lowest skill levels. One problem with the latter, of course, as with some overlapping special groups like offenders and the homeless is that they are, and are likely to remain, the least likely to find stable paid work. So they would again be in danger of being left out if that is made the measure by which funding is released.

And here we should be able to pick up on some of the very encouraging things said in *New Challenges, New Chances* about focusing publicly-funded community learning opportunities on those currently least likely to participate.

A government which promotes the happiness index and a Minister for Skills who easily understands the kinds of learning programme that would have appealed to William Morris may be receptive to arguments for a little less relentless concentration on utility and employability and a bit more leeway to introduce people to the sheer joy of learning. If it is true that we still need a learning revolution we might do well to remember what Emma Goldman is reputed to have said to the Bolsheviks, "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution."

Basic Skills at Work: Time For a Workplace Learning Approach?

Alexander Braddell

Alexander Braddell has some 15 years experience in workplace basic skills. He has worked at local, regional and national levels with public, voluntary and private sector organisations in a variety of roles. He is currently involved in a project to create a European network for workplace basic skills practitioners. Contact email: alex@bscity.fsnet.co.uk

A recent paper reflected on the failure of Skills for Life to establish any lasting provision in the workplace (Waite, Evans & Kersh, 2011; Braddell 2011a). Drawing on ESRC research carried out between 2003 and 2007 (Wolf, Evans & Bynner, 2009), the paper painted a vivid picture. First, a deluge of Skills for Life funding brought provider-led programmes to life in the workplace. These programmes briefly flowered; then, as Skills for Life imposed its model of classroom groups working towards national qualifications, withered away and died. In their heyday, these programmes flourished on the margins of the workplace offering low-status employees an opportunity – as individuals, rather than work teams – to re-evaluate their attitude to learning. The value of this provision lay in its ability to re-engage adult learners that other provision failed to reach. The requirement to formalise it (classroom groups, qualifications) was impractical in the workplace and so the value was lost – a failure of imagination on the part of policy-makers.

To my mind the failure belongs to the class of category error, specifically the confusion of adult basic education with workplace learning. Skills for Life tried to dress the former up as the latter and achieved neither adult basic education nor workplace learning. Had it focused on extending workplace learning to those most likely to benefit from adult basic education, it might have achieved both.

Over the last decade, I have been involved in a series of practitioner-led action research projects that, taken together, suggest what a practical model of workplace learning might look like.

In 2002, researchers from the ESRC project mentioned above visited the workplace basic skills programme that colleagues and I were delivering to ancillary staff at a large NHS hospital in south-east England. Many of these staff were employed by private companies contracted to deliver services at the hospital. Supported by flexible funding from the South East Regional Development Agency (SEEDA), we

offered learning in literacy (including basic IT skills), numeracy or English language delivered through weekly one-hour classes held on hospital premises. Classes were free to both employees and employers, who allowed staff to attend during paid work time.

Many of the employees – over 50% in some areas – were migrant workers (European, Middle Eastern, African, Asian and Latin American), often with limited English language skills. At one of the private contractors, a company providing food services, we enrolled some 20 learners for ESOL. The company identified the least busy time of day and set aside an area in the hospital restaurant for us to deliver a class.



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For all concerned, it proved a frustrating experience. Like most low skill, low pay workplaces, this one was fairly chaotic. To contain costs, the company employed the bare minimum of staff needed to deliver the service, paid them as little as possible and invested as little as possible in their training. Managers were treated little better. In a time of high employment, staff turnover was high and recruitment difficult. Managers spent their days fire-fighting (i.e. running from problem to problem). They were supportive (to varying degrees) of our programme, but took no practical interest in it.

Of the 20 learners, in any given week a significant proportion would not even be at work

(due to shift patterns, sickness and holiday leave). Of those who were at work, few could actually be released. As a result, it was rare for more than three or four learners to attend class and rare for the same learner to attend class two weeks running.

This raised difficult questions regarding curriculum design, continuity of learning, learner progress and, for all concerned, impact – there was little evident benefit to learners, their employer or service users (i.e. patients and hospital visitors). All of which was discouraging to learners, their employer and to us. Clearly, to make any significant impact we would need to develop a different approach. This led to the first piece of action research (Arakelian & Braddell, 2005).

Life Outside the Classroom

We started by acknowledging that workplace constraints, in particular the employer's inability to release classroom groups of staff for meaningful amounts of time, made classroom learning impractical. This led us to a simple, but transformative, insight. Work required these learners to interact in English. Instead of trying to take workers away from work so that we could teach them English, perhaps we could support them to learn through these interactions (which would constitute our curriculum) while they worked.



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While no worker had whole hours free for classroom learning, every worker had regular short lulls in activity of five, ten, even 15 minutes, often at predictable times. This was potentially ideal for short, individual coaching sessions, two or three times a week. This implied a programme structured around dip-in, dip-out learning, driven by – or at least flexible enough to accommodate – the learner's work-related concerns of the moment, while retaining coherence and a sense of progression.



With staff and their managers, we identified nine topics, e.g. 'Dealing with instructions', 'Talking about Health and Safety', 'Feedback', 'Being part of a team'. Within each topic we identified learning points such as 'Explaining', 'Asking for help', 'Avoiding a risk' and 'When the job's done'. We mapped these topics and their learning points (60 in all) into a functional syllabus.

For each of our 60 learning 'bites' we produced a pocket-sized card that included a lexical set, grammatical structures (mostly at Common European Framework Level B1), advice on the culture of the British workplace, and a scenario illustrating language use.

This gave us a curriculum with structure and coherence, but also flexibility. There was no set starting or finishing point. One could study these learning points in any order (allowing us to respond to the learner's immediate priority). Moreover, new learning points and topics could easily be incorporated.

Armed with a set of these cards, the teacher would meet the learner in the learner's work

area at a convenient time. Together, learner and teacher would agree the session focus, select an appropriate card, discuss its content and workplace application, practise pronunciation and so forth. The teacher would then leave the card with the learner to support practice activities and fix an appointment say two days later to check the learner's progress. At the next appointment, learner and teacher would decide either to keep working on the card or move on to another.

In addition to this targeted coaching, we hoped our cards would support peer-learning (e.g. two migrants working on a card together, or a native speaker using the card to mentor a migrant colleague) and day-to-day supervision of work activity by managers and supervisors.

We piloted our programme over a ten week period. Our team of six teachers enrolled 26 learners and delivered 230 brief sessions, all in work areas, including corridors and kitchens. These short sessions proved easy to fit into work routines without disrupting the delivery of services or increasing the workload of those staff who were not participating in the programme. Most sessions were 1:1 although in some instances other workers spontaneously joined the enrolled learner.



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The learning cards proved popular. Content was judged relevant and at the right level of difficulty. About two thirds of our learners reported showing the cards to others and half reported using the cards themselves to teach other people.

Managers reported that, as well as speaking more English, workers showed more confidence (e.g. using initiative, opening conversations) and more knowledge of workplace conventions. In their view, the programme had raised morale and reduced absenteeism.

Managers and staff both reported that it was useful to have language teachers in the workplace – someone who had the time to help talk through a problem, language-based or otherwise, with either staff or managers. To the extent that this led employees to perceive their workplace as a supportive one, it benefited their employer too.

Reaction from our teachers was also strongly positive. Regarding the methodology, one said: "Fifteen minutes is just about right for discussing the situation and teaching and practising a couple of useful exponents to the point that they stick. I'm yet to be convinced that more can be done in an hour" (Arakelian & Braddell, 2005).

As a learning provider, we found that sending our teachers directly into the work area greatly increased their understanding of learners' work-related needs, helped them build valuable rapport with managers and enabled them to attract new learners (through contact with staff we had not met previously).

In respect of access to learners, curriculum design, continuity of learning, learner progress and impact, the pilot was encouraging. Where it was less successful, we felt, was in its reliance on teacher-mediation. We had the benefit of a small research grant from the NHS University (NHSU), but under normal circumstances, it would have been too expensive to pay teachers to work in this way – however effective the results. We also noticed that managers and supervisors did not appear to see the learning card system as one they could operate themselves.

Reflecting on these problems led us to a further insight: if work activity could provide a curriculum, might it be possible to link workplace basic skills learning to the organisational systems through which enterprises manage work activity?

Learning through Work

The government's decision to invest in adult literacy, language and numeracy was based on a macro-economic analysis that linked national competitiveness to workforce qualifications (OECD, 1995, 1997, 2000; DfEE, 1999, 2001; PIU, 2001). That is why the prime object of its strategy was for adults to gain basic skills qualifications – hence the standards, curricula and national tests.

Learning needs were defined by the strategy's

qualification targets: any adult who lacked the qualifications that the strategy used as a proxy for adult basic skills, had a 'need' for the learning that led to those qualifications. Workplace classes were merely a convenient way to reach adults who could not or would not enrol in a college class outside of work. The strategy envisaged workplace classes delivered by adult education teachers along essentially the same lines as they were delivered in adult education colleges. That these learners were also workers was incidental. The benefit to employers was simply that their employees were gaining better basic skills.

At the heart of the strategy was a model of learning that defined adult basic skills as generic (i.e. transferable), technical skills that could be transmitted by effective instruction and measured by testing. The skills were specified in curricula, which the workplace basic skills learning provider was expected to contextualise as well as possible to the workplace setting. In other words, provision was based on a pre-determined curriculum for individual adults, not on the needs of any given workplace.

The next piece of research, a project entitled Learning through Work (Braddell, 2009), stepped away from the education-based approach (i.e. standards, curriculum, qualifications) altogether. It premised that the basic skills that matter at work are the communication and information processing skills that work activity demands of workers.

This premise generated a simple hypothesis. The demand to use a skill creates an opportunity to practise the skill. Insofar as work requires workers to apply basic skills, it offers them opportunity to practise the skills. Insofar as opportunity to practise creates an opportunity to learn, work activity itself is a potential basic skills learning opportunity.

Employer-organisations very consciously support work activity (i.e. task and role) with people and performance management systems (CIPD, 2002; Purcell et al, 2003; Robinson, Perryman & Hayday, 2004). If basic skills do matter at work and if employees really do lack them then surely employers had a natural interest in ensuring that their people and performance management systems supported effective utilisation of basic skills? In which case, might on-the-job learning linked to the employer organisation's people and performance management systems offer a practical, sustainable and inclusive approach to workplace basic skills learning?

The trouble was, of course, that there was very little evidence of the impact poor basic skills had on performance at firm level (Newton et al, 2006). Our own anecdotal experience as practitioners suggested that basic communication and information-processing skills did matter in the low-skill, low-pay workplace. They were skills that underpinned task fulfilment, team working and customer service, change management and everything else that happened at work. Poor skill utilisation (not quite the same thing as a skills gap, note) was at the root of much of the chaos we observed in these workplaces. We also knew support with communication and information processing was welcomed by workers and managers both.

With support from SEEDA and other agencies, we brought together employers, academic researchers and workplace basic skills practitioners to explore on-the-job learning opportunities in about fifty low-skill, low-pay workplaces in south east England (Braddell, 2009).

The project included literature reviews (Newton et al, 2006; Wallis, Panagiotakopoulos & Stuart, 2007), an audit of workplace practices (Newton, Miller & Braddell, 2006) and practitioner-led trials of on-the-job basic skills learning (Stuart & Winterton, 2009).

The audit found plentiful evidence that low-skill, low-pay work requires communication and information processing skills, with many examples of poor communication and information processing impacting negatively on work teams' performance. It also found that as skills per se, communication and information processing were invisible to employers, who specified and supported the tasks and outcomes that required utilisation of the skills, but not the skills themselves.

In the practitioner-led trials that followed, a common approach emerged, consisting of on-the-job guidance, supported by materials and mentoring (Stuart & Winterton, 2009). The practitioners identified where work activity required basic skills; helped the employer to specify target behaviours (e.g. how managers and staff should interact with each other and/or customers); diagnosed problems associated with current practices (i.e. how and why actual behaviour departed from target behaviour); created a text that described the target behaviour in a way accessible to all members of the work group; and finally, developed workplace mentors (e.g. a supervisor) able to

communicate the text to staff. From one of these trials, the project published an exemplary on-the-job learning resource (Leadbetter, 2009). This resource realised the aim of our original workplace coaching to create materials that could be used by workplace teams without the mediation of a teacher.

While this on-the-job learning project was in progress, an opportunity for us to investigate the manager's role in workplace basic skills learning arose in the adult social care sector. Conscious that research suggested that at least 20% of social care workers lacked literacy and numeracy while another 20% had limited English language skills (Eborall, 2004), the government agencies responsible for knowledge and skills in the social care sector commissioned a project to address these needs.

We recruited a nationally representative sample of employers and, again using workplace basic skills practitioners, investigated employer practices and perceptions around basic skills. Findings suggested that managers were well aware of basic skills-related performance problems, but lacked the confidence, expertise and resources to address them (Braddell & Dunn, 2006). When it came to individual employees, managers typically regarded basic skills as a difficult, socially stigmatised, educational problem that required remediation from a specialist (one of the less helpful outcomes of the government's basic skills awareness-raising campaigns). Even with access to such expertise, releasing staff to attend basic skills classes would be impractical. As a result, managers tended to live with basic skills problems rather than address them – a finding consistent with our experiences in other sectors. Managers did, however, express a willingness to engage with basic skills issues, providing this could be done within existing constraints. Importantly, their primary motivation to do so derived from their concern for the quality of service delivery, not the concern to develop individual staff.

In response, the project developed a web-based resource for managers. This resource redefined basic skills as social care communication and number skills – in other words, as skills that staff needed to apply in order to work safely and meet quality standards, occupational skills that managers were directly responsible for. The resource provided tools to help managers recognise where they were asking staff to apply the skills and then to check – in a safe, constructive manner that didn't threaten the

employment relationship – that staff had the skills. It then offered guidance on how managers could take appropriate action to manage risk and support skills development – in much the same way as they would with any other occupational skill.

In trials of the resource, facilitated by practitioners, managers responded positively (Braddell & Dunn, 2007). In 2009 the resource was launched nationally (Care Skillsbase, 2009) and user statistics indicate it remains well-used by managers acting independently, without support from learning providers.

From the Learning through Work and the Care Skillsbase projects, a further opportunity arose, also in the care sector. This project drew on the findings of the earlier projects to investigate the potential of informal workplace basic skills learning by informing and supporting the interactions staff have around work activity. In consultation with employers, a set of learning materials in a pocket-sized booklet format were developed to support workplace 'learning conversations' between staff (Braddell, 2011b). These materials offered accessible explanations of why and how communication and number skills are used in care work and included a focus on workplace language for migrant workers. They were designed for workplace use by staff, unmediated by a learning provider. When trialled in workplaces the booklets received strongly positive feedback from both staff and employers. One manager commented: "Excellent... flexible and meets all levels of need. [The only problem we had was] trying to get the books back to pass on. [Staff] wanted to keep them." (Braddell, 2010)

Workplace Learning

My own conclusions from the research described above are as follows:

- To work safely and meet quality standards, workers in low-skill, low-pay roles need basic skills (i.e. the ability to communicate and process information effectively).
- Problems related to communication and information processing arise frequently in the low-skill, low-pay workplace – many workers have limited literacy, English language and numeracy skills.
- Despite this, basic skills remain largely invisible (i.e. unspecified, unsupported) to employers.
- Managers may be aware of performance problems arising from poor basic skills, but tend to accept these problems as a given

and work around them, not least because they lack the confidence, expertise and resources (including time) to address them.

- Employers and managers are motivated by collective performance outcomes, rather than personal development or basic skills qualifications for workers.
- To impact on collective performance, learning needs to change workplace behaviour. For this to happen learning must focus directly on work activity and it must involve managers.
- Managers (and workers) tend to see work activity in terms of tasks not skill. It is helpful, therefore, to focus on the task application of basic skills (e.g. exactly what to say to the customer) rather than the abstracted skill (e.g. speaking politely).
- Employers, managers and staff welcome external support, provided that the support is tailored to the actual needs of the workplace and delivered within the existing constraints of the workplace.
- Low-skill, low-pay workplaces tend to be under-resourced and chaotic, with very limited access to learning for staff – off-the-job basic skills learning in classroom groups is not practical.
- Work activity presents good opportunity for on-the-job basic skills learning, including informal learning, linked to and supportive of organisations' existing systems of people and performance management.
- Linking basic skills learning directly to work activity maximises impact on collective performance and organisational outcomes (the factors that motivate employers). It also addresses the problem of staff release.
- At its simplest, a workplace learning approach involves making the skills visible to managers and staff, supporting on-the-job and informal learning.
- In this approach, the practitioner's role is to facilitate, rather than deliver, learning.

In summary, there is significant need for basic skills learning in the low-skill, low-pay workplace. It is difficult to address this need through conventional adult education classes in the workplace. A workplace learning approach is practical. By linking learning to the management of work activity (a collective process in which all take part), learning directly supports performance in a way that is motivating to employers. This sort of systematic, collective learning is inclusive and available to all – it transforms the workplace into a learning space.

Employers lack the awareness, expertise and

resources to do this on their own. They need help from practitioners who combine expertise in adult basic education with an understanding of workplace dynamics and who can help to facilitate the learning that should arise naturally from work.

The title of the paper referred to at the beginning of this article was, *Is Workplace 'Skills for Life' Provision Sustainable in the UK?*

Learning, individual and collective, is meant to be a constant function of work. There is little reason to think that Workplace Skills for Life was ever intended to be sustainable. The strategy's explicit goal, after all, was to "eliminate the problem of poor literacy and numeracy skills altogether" (DfEE, 2001:4). A noble aim, but reality is surely otherwise. As last year's Skills for Life survey reminds us, those with limited basic skills we are likely always to have among us. For sustainable workplace learning, we need an approach that is both inclusive and practical.

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Is Literacy Learning More Effective When the Employer Makes it Mandatory?

Faye McFarlane

Faye has taught in FE for the past 8 years, originally as an NVQ assessor in a vocational setting. She currently works for Cornwall College Business as Lead Trainer in the Work Skills Training Academy and delivers discrete and embedded literacy and numeracy courses out in employer workplaces all around Cornwall and Devon.

I am a literacy and numeracy college lecturer in the beautiful county of Cornwall and hold level 5 qualifications in each area as a Subject Specialist. I have been delivering programmes in the workplace for the past 5 years and have recently found myself deliberating the above question...

Background

I teach adult basic skills to first line managers for a food manufacturing company and have helped members of the workforce to successfully gain over one hundred qualifications in literacy and numeracy at Level 2. Originally the employer sought basic skills training as an optional course to offer to existing employees in their training facility. The pilot worked well. However, this first cohort of learners was motivated to try the course without having identified any particular basic skills need. They were all ambassadors for training in the company so were pretty well engaged with the idea and supported it fully. This direction changed when the pilot ended and was offered on a voluntary basis to the wider workforce. Unfortunately, despite spreading the word from the success of the first group in internal newsletters and advertising the course on workplace notice boards, there was little interest in literacy and numeracy courses.

Significant Changes



The employer still wanted to deliver basic skills on site and felt a great deal of frustration that employees were not taking advantage of these funded courses; vitally, they had also identified a real need for

some of their employees to enhance their literacy and communication skills. The workplace had changed and food manufacturing now needed its employees to read and digest a great deal more information, particularly in health and safety legislation to inform safe working practices when operating sometimes complex machinery. The reporting structure which had

largely involved verbal communication now required the completion of reports and scheduling tasks for all managers as well as daily written maintenance checks on all machinery.

Skills for All

The company had another dilemma: when advertising for new staff their advertisements asked applicants for maths and English qualifications at GCSE (or equivalent) level. However, a great many members of staff did not have skills at these levels as they had not been seen as an important factor for working in food manufacturing. This meant a workforce with an ever-widening range of basic skills levels. They consulted with a specialist organisation that looked into the basic skills requirements expected of their first line managers and found that to be effective in their job these managers needed to be working at Level 2 in literacy and numeracy.

Mandatory Basic Skills Classes

The managers were then required, as a condition of their employment, to take part in a programme to gain the necessary skills required for their job role. This involved a technical certificate, NVQ and basic skills at Level 2 in literacy and numeracy. The initial reaction by the workforce was that relevant qualifications were good, yet there was still a reluctance to take up the maths and English qualifications. The employer encouraged the learners as much as possible by allowing them paid time off to study along with the extra incentive of a pay rise when they completed all relevant qualifications.

Conclusions

This felt like a bold move to me. I could identify with the thoughts behind making the learning mandatory but did spare a thought for those who had been in their roles for decades without, in their minds, the need to 'prove' their maths and English skills. I could understand how the idea of this whole management workforce approach would reach those who really needed to brush up on their skills, albeit without the personal realisation of this requirement. I asked

myself how this would appeal to the learners with equivalent but out-of-date qualifications. Would they respond well to this 'forced' approach?



Everyone's a Winner

To date I have found that all learners have appreciated being given the chance to brush up their skills in the working

environment. Once

they realise that it is not 'like school' and their old barriers to learning have been overcome, they appreciate the fact that they have been given the opportunity to refresh literacy and numeracy skills very much as they would a workplace First Aid or Health and Safety certificate. The feedback to date has been positive and the business is now looking at the basic skill level requirement for all roles in the organisation to allow everyone the opportunity to function well in basic skills. So yes, in this instance, literacy learning has been more effective when the employer has made it mandatory – I only hope that more companies try this approach in the future.

Teaching Literacy in the Workplace

Abi Richards

Abi works at Cambridge Regional College, Cambridge, in the Academy of Essential Skills as a Literacy/Functional Skills Lecturer. Her prime role is to teach adult literacy to the adult community, including in the workplace, at all levels. However, she also works in mainstream vocational areas teaching Functional Skills English – all levels – GCSE and Entry Level ICT. In addition, she is part of the teacher training team, delivering the English element of a course entitled 'Integrating Functional Skills' to teachers and workplace assessors. This is a 10-week course that gives teachers the skills and strategies to deliver/integrate Functional Skills into their vocational teaching.

One may assume that if a person is employed and has been through the rigors of application, interview and second interview, a job is secure, final, for life. However, with an increasing number of unemployed and mounting redundancies, companies are turning to new ways of ensuring staff are 'up to the job'.

Gaining a literacy qualification is, for many employed people, a condition of employment. More companies are turning to Further Education lecturers to come out of the classroom and teach in the workplace. For many students attending college, literacy is about developing the skills they missed through mainstream education, or lack of attention to their needs. This is easier when delivering in the classroom but how successful can it really be on a pizza delivery shop floor, hospital or factory?

Classroom teaching carries with it a certain familiarity; learners will be of similar levels and ages, and often have a common vocational objective. Delivering in the workplace presents its own challenges; the vocational objective may be very different; levels will be considerably more varied, and the age of the group can differ quite significantly. Literacy delivery is often met with scepticism, or from my experiences, a feeling of inadequacy. Add to that a lack of quality delivery time and relevant resources and a varying mix of teaching locations, and a flexible approach and empathetic attitude is a priority.

The majority of my experience teaching in the workplace has been either in small businesses or, recently, a major NHS hospital. Upon arrival I find that students feel almost resentful of the situation in which they have found themselves. Literacy is often confused with literature and the expectation is that I am suddenly going to produce copies of *Catcher in the Rye* or *Hamlet* to be analysed and agonised over. When students discover that my job is to help them to improve their reading, writing and communication skills there is a collective sigh of relief before reality sets in, and the learners discover that the qualifications they have already achieved are not enough. Breaking down the barrier towards the relevancy of the qualification

can be the hardest part of the programme and therefore a good relationship with the learners and a clear objective is essential.

Finding source material to keep these learners engaged is always challenging and many of my colleagues struggle to find enough 'adult' material to focus the learner whilst making it both interesting to learn and teach. Indeed, there is plenty of material for relevant levels, but planning and adaptation of the resources focuses my attention for the first couple of weeks. In my experience, a few weeks into the course the learners begin to enjoy this second – or in some cases, first – opportunity to develop good reading and communication skills.



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The recent introduction of Functional Skills as part of the government's agenda presents a new challenge; the time taken to achieve a functional skills qualification at Level 1 or 2 is considerably longer than with Skills for Life qualifications and more underpinning. Therefore, rigorous assessment of learners prior to the start of the course is essential. Learners can be reassured that it is perfectly natural to forget things that once appeared so simple, and that with the emphasis of a good reading programme, and writing more frequently these 'forgotten' lessons can be recovered.

Personally, teaching in the workplace is a refreshing change from the classroom and an opportunity to remind myself that it is not always about statistics and budgets; it is about keeping people employed and secure for life.

News from the ESOL Training Field

Rachel Öner

Rachel Öner MFL, QTLS, is the Skills for Life Programme Manager at Poultec Training Ltd in Norwich. She has 23 years' experience of English teaching (EFL, ESOL and Literacy) in work-based learning and community learning provision. Rachel has written and worked on several national projects including the National Skills Academy's ESOL for Food Manufacturing book and the booklet on Effective Communication with a Multi Language Workforce on behalf of the Co-Operative and has had articles published in several publications including LSIS Citizenship News and NATECLA. Contact rachel.oner@poultec.co.uk, tel:01362850983

Rachel Öner has corresponded with RaPAL in the past couple of months to let us know about how ESOL workbased provision, in particular, is faring in view of the restrictions that the government has put on English Second Language across all education sectors. Poultec Training (originally founded in 1997 to serve the Poultry industry), now offers vocational courses in Food Manufacturing, Agriculture, Retail, Customer Service, Business Administration, Management and Hospitality and Catering. Assessors and trainers all come from the industries they are providing training to. Finding out about Poultec www.poultec.co.uk gives some insight into the enormity of the scale of UK ESOL, literacy and numeracy workbased provision alone.



© Positive Negatives

Rachel had reported to NATECLA (NATECLA News no. 96, Autumn 2011), that employers were dismayed by the severe 2011 cuts in funding for ESOL. As in so many situations in the country at the moment, the cuts have come at a time when the companies are already struggling. Employers often have a considerable number of ESOL speakers in their workforces. Without the ESOL specialist training needed the overall productivity and staff retention is still further threatened.

Rachel pointed out how finely tailored the ESOL courses and other Skills for Life courses have been to employers' needs:

"Poultec Training is successful in what we do due to not only the sector knowledge of the staff that work there, but also the relationship and trust they have with the employers. Our models for delivering Literacy in the workplace have very much followed those of the ESOL workplace courses. Each course is set up after discussions on employer needs as well as that of the learner and criteria for accreditation bodies. Wherever possible and with help from assessors, courses are contextualised to the employer's industry and use source material from the employer: paperwork, manuals, work instructions etc that the learner can easily identify tasks and place into context. In addition, many 'functional' activities are included which prepare learners for future higher level learning programmes."

Rachel was asked to what extent ESOL and literacy learners study together:

"Opportunities are given for ESOL and Literacy learners to study together. One of the main remits of workplace learning is that a provider must be flexible to employers' needs. The courses are tailored in content and in scheduling. In the Food Manufacturing industry in particular, workers' shift patterns may mean that learners on different

programmes of study are only available at the same class time. The classes are designed so that it is the topics and the skills that are being developed that matter. Learners with ESOL needs get a boost to their confidence from being placed with native English speakers who in turn gain a lot from the experience of sharing cultural experiences."

But she also pointed out that, "Adult literacy classes are also very constructive and have their place." But, "while literacy classes are often valuable to a higher level ESOL learner with some formal ESOL training behind them, they are not always suitable for low level ESOL learners with specific needs."

Rachel commented on the current funding policy, observing how the government avoids making statements about cuts to workplace funding and the implications for employers:

"There has been no change in policy from the government about ESOL workplace funding. The recent BIS Statement *New Challenges, New Chances, Further Education and Skills System Reform Plan: Building a World Class Skills System* avoided this thorny issue. There has been a recent opportunity for providers to apply for workplace funding (including ESOL) via ESF streams, but these are few and far between."

The workplace training for ESOL students is also beset with the complications of the withdrawal of some Skills for Life qualifications and with not knowing when the Skills for Life ESOL qualifications will end:

"ESOL learners at Levels 1 or 2 will have to take Functional Skills from September as the National Literacy Test has been scrapped. Overall, this move for ESOL learners is even more damaging and will put pressure on tutors and learners in the course of study and pressure on providers who are being pressured to deliver qualifications in a shorter time for less funding."



Interior of an IT training vehicle built for Poultec Training Ltd

The picture Rachel gives is a reflection of what is happening to previously government-funded ESOL in all education sectors. Her description draws attention to the precarious relationship ESOL also shares with literacy and numeracy. While there are advantages for learners in interacting with their peers in these other Skills for Life fields there is also greater danger than ever of the highly specialist language teaching aspect of workbased learning becoming seriously minimised.

(Sarah Freeman reporting for RaPAL)

Workplace Literacy and the Role of Unions

Judith Swift

Before the launch of unionlearn, Judith worked nationally for TUC Learning Services since it was set up in 1998. Her role has been to support the work of unions and union learning representatives, particularly through the Union Learning Fund, which started in October 1998. Judith has had responsibility for co-ordinating the TUC support to unions in ULF and also for Skills for Life. The last few years have seen a rapid expansion of unions and union learning representatives engaged in learning including personal, professional and workforce development. A wide range of unions are currently involved. Judith was appointed as Union Development Manager for unionlearn in January 2006 and is responsible for supporting unions and their ULR's to develop their learning and skills strategies. She was awarded the MBE in 2005 for her Trades Union and Skills for Life work. Immediately before joining Learning Services, Judith worked as a TUC tutor in the North West delivering courses for union representatives and health and safety representatives. Her wider background in FE also includes teaching English and German primarily, but a few other bits and pieces too.

Context

The National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) Independent Inquiry into literacy has reminded us all that much remains to be done to improve the levels of literacy in the UK in order for large numbers of adults to be able to keep pace and thrive in today's world. This is particularly challenging for adults in the workplace.

Those who have been most let down are at Entry Level, yet the demands of the modern workplace mean that it is critical that those who face the barriers receive support and encouragement. It is almost impossible to find occupations which do not require increasing levels of reading, writing and oral communications.

The Union Experience

Ofsted judged that Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) provide "outstanding peer support" as "mentors, advocates, negotiators, role models and advisors" which is good news for workplaces all over the country where over 22,000 ULRs are based. The report praised ULRs as "highly effective as role models", whose input learners value highly and cite as one of the most important elements in their learning.'

In this article, I would like to give some examples of how unions are making a difference to both learners and their employers by helping to improve literacy levels in imaginative and supportive ways.

Reading and Writing

Quick Reads, workplace book swap clubs, the Six Book Challenge and World Book Day are now all part of the landscape in workplaces where

unions and employers work together. Over 450 unionlearn Workplace Learning Centres are good examples of this in action.

As Kevin Sheldon, an Usdaw ULR posted as his Facebook status:

"Another great adult literacy class last night, everyone changed books in the library as part of the Six Book Challenge, great to see people who had never read, beginning to see the joy of reading, discussing the books they had read and swapping stories and suggestions for further books, really great class to work in, spelling improving as well, and a heated debate discussing fact and opinion to boot."

Quick Reads author Andy McNab said:

"Reading and literacy changed my life. So it is wonderful to see partnerships with the union such as the one at McVitie's working so successfully to promote and encourage reading through programmes like the Six Book Challenge."

The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) and the Wiltshire & Dorset Bus Company have worked in tandem to improve the lives of individual workers as well as the performance of the company.

Keith Nottle looks forward to the end of his shift when he can go home and relax, helping his two boys with their homework. It's a simple pleasure that many of us take for granted, but it's a new experience for the Cornish bus driver.

"It makes me feel great," he beams. "My reading wasn't up to scratch because I didn't

need it for my job before but I challenged myself to improve, and that's what I've done. I can now sit down with the boys and help them a bit. That's what I did it for."

Keith moved from Cornwall, where he prepared meat for pasties, a few years ago. His new job – driving a bus around his adopted county of Dorset – required a higher standard of literacy so, with the help of the RMT, he set about improving.

"My new job means I need to read and write more because everything needs to be written down, filling out forms, safety checks," he explains.

"Before I started this job I didn't need to do this sort of thing, but I love learning now."

His employer, Wiltshire & Dorset Bus Company, reaps the benefit of his new skills.

"Any new skills are good for any company," says Staff Manager Phil Keys. "We found our staff retention increased dramatically when we gave our drivers better training. It gave them more confidence and Union Learning has given the same drivers even more confidence. It's been good for us."

"To give you an example: there was an incident on one of the buses a while ago and it was quicker for me to take the information from Keith and fill in the form myself than it was for Keith to fill it in. That's changing now."

"I can't fill in all the form, but I will be able to soon," adds Keith. "If I get a form I can read it now. I might get stuck on a word, but I can read it."

It's not just his boss who's noticed a change in Keith – it's his colleagues too.

"When he first came here he was very quiet, kept himself to himself," says ULR Kevin Sanderson. "Now he's more confident, more outgoing. He's a different guy altogether. Everyone sees the difference in him."

Unions are helping their workmates, friends and families to become more confident in all aspects of writing – both the writing they need for their jobs and beyond.

Unionlearn in Yorkshire and the Humber have been running an annual writing competition

since 2008. All entrants have their stories or poems published in an anthology by unionlearn – and there is never any shortage of stories. This year the National Union of Mineworkers won a prize for the first time and collected their award from the region's ULR Conference. This has led to the Coal Board lending support to the union work. Sharon Burke, the unionlearn Regional Co-ordinator says:

"We have stories and poems from far and wide. The most important thing is that 'ordinary' people are extraordinary and have a real story to tell – and can do so for the first time in their lives!"

Readability

Kath Woods, a Trade Union Education and literacy teacher from Wirral Metropolitan College, says:

"Training the ULRs is very worthwhile. One very popular activity is asking them to bring in a range of workplace documentation covering policies, procedures and general information. We look at the readability levels and it is always an eye opener! In many cases the reps have had to deal with disciplinary cases and the root of the issue has been that their workmates haven't been able to understand the written instructions. They are able to go back to the workplace and work positively with the employers on both reviewing documentation and supporting employees to improve their literacy skills."

Usdaw is one of Britain's largest Trade Unions with over 414,000 members nationwide. Members of Usdaw work in a variety of occupations and industries including shop workers, factory and warehouse workers, drivers, call centres, clerical workers, insurance agents, milk round and dairy process, butchers and meat packers, catering, laundries, chemical processing, home shopping and pharmaceutical. An Ofsted Good Practice Report looks at the work Usdaw have carried out with McVitie's.

Jonathan Waterhouse is the Lead Usdaw Union Learning Representative at McVitie's. He says:

"I had a poor education in a deprived part of Manchester myself and I got a raw deal at school. I improved my own literacy when I became a ULR. If you've got someone who is in his 50s with no qualifications and you are trying to interest them in English and maths, it needs to be in an environment where they feel relaxed, and I think we've cracked that in

our learning centre because our learners have achieved more than 150 Skills for Life qualifications. When it comes to helping people in English and maths I can feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand up because I know just what that means."

Lesley Flood, McVitie's Training Co-ordinator goes on to say:

"The increasingly sophisticated audit and customer requirements need an educated and proactive rather than a passive workforce. The tests we use for all staff before they are offered permanent jobs are through SHL Testing. They are set at about Level 1 in Maths and English. Support is now offered before and after the tests by the learning centre to ensure staff, especially agency staff, are able to pass the tests. Jonathan's like a conductor, bringing in different sections of his orchestra (the ULR team) to meet different people's needs. He's brilliant at matching different workers to the representative with the right skills for them. Work like this just didn't happen overnight!"

McVitie's is introducing a new position in their production process; that of Advanced Team Member. Advanced Team Members have to work through SHL-provided tests and the pass rate at Manchester, where they are supported through the learning centre, is higher than at any other McVitie's site.

Speaking and Listening

This is often the 'forgotten' curriculum area and yet so important in the workplace. Employers have gone on record to say that the importance of communications crosses all sectors whether the driver is customer care in retail or in the health sector. Understanding oral instructions, the ability to contribute confidently to team meetings and team settings and the importance of good communications are key to improving morale and getting on at work through promotion processes. However, although there has been excellent material in the Adult Literacy curriculum, it has been rarely used, as speaking and listening play no role in the current Skills for Life tests.

Challenges

The reductions in funding for literacy provision and the government's emphasis moving away from adults in the workplace mean that new challenges have emerged. It is accepted that workplace delivery requires innovation and flexibility but the funding regime means that

unions, employers and providers need to develop models to facilitate learning. Unionlearn have developed flexible e-learning partnerships with providers and employers built upon learning centres. The Wiltshire & Dorset Bus Company have benefited from this model. Catherine Payne, a tutor from New College says:

"I give the learners as much support as I can, but sorting out learning with the shift patterns is very, very difficult. Keith does a lot of work at home but if those hours were required during work time without the flexibility of working at home, it would be virtually impossible."

Does bus driver Keith Nottle feel the extra work is worth the effort? "Oh yes," he nods. "I've worked hard but it's worth it. I'm a different guy."

One thing is clear – eLearning reaches the most disadvantaged, but it is not a cheap or easy option. The learner-support model is critical and the ULR and tutors are vitally important to ensure that wherever and whenever the individual is learning they have a secure arrangement for accessing the support they need when they need it.

Unionlearn have produced a practical and free literacy, language and numeracy pack providing information and tips on:

- General issues within language, literacy and numeracy
- Reading
- Writing
- Numeracy
- Speaking and listening
- Dyslexia

To pick up a copy, use the following link:
www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications/index.cfm?rmPubID=79

Links to Websites Referred to in the Article

NIACE: <http://www.niace.org.uk/>
The role of union learning representatives in developing employability skills in partnership with employers: TUC Unionlearn (Ofsted Good Practice report):
<http://www.goodpractice.ofsted.gov.uk/downloads/documents/Unionlearn.pdf>
RMT: <http://www.rmt.org.uk/>
unionlearn: <http://www.unionlearn.org.uk/>
Usdaw: <http://www.usdaw.org.uk/>

Getting By But Not Getting On

Sue Southwood and Davinder Kaur Sandhu

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UNISON is Britain and Europe's biggest public sector union with more than 1.3 million members working in local authorities, the NHS, the police service, colleges and schools, the electricity, gas and water industries, transport and the voluntary sector. Last year, UNISON commissioned NIACE to undertake research to find out about the skills, confidence, attitudes and needs of its members in relation to literacy, numeracy and using computers in order to inform the development of its Skills for Life Strategy to support members to get the most from their membership.

A staggering 27,055 UNISON members responded to the survey, providing an interesting and significant set of data from adults in the workplace. This article discusses our findings and the full research report, *Skilled for Work* (Aldridge et al, 2011) can be found at: http://www.unison.org.uk/laos/news_view.asp?did=7570.

Improved access to personal development and learning, better health and safety and understanding of employment rights are explicit components of UNISON's commitment to members. Unions can make the case to employers about the business benefits of workplace learning and help education providers and employers work together effectively. Union learning is a success story of the last decade with the growth of unionlearn, the creation of Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) and investment in access to workplace learning. ULRs have been successful in making literacy and numeracy levels more visible as well as encouraging members into learning. A participant from our discussion group stated:

"We are capturing learners who may not have come forward to progress with numeracy or literacy but they feel comfortable to discuss and take forward their learning once the support has been discussed regarding Skills for Life."

Research by the employers' organisation, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) suggests "employers are not entirely happy about the competency levels of their current staff, with low-skill employees presenting a real concern – only a third (35%) of employers described their skill levels as good. Around 40% of employers are

concerned about employees' basic skills" (CBI, 2008).

NRDC research consistently shows correlations between low basic skills and workplace achievement. "People who reach adulthood with poor skills are more than twice as likely to be unemployed, and are far less likely to receive work-related training, get a promotion or receive a raise." (Carpentieri et al, 2009).

However, there is little research on perceptions of skills in working life and how they impact on participation in workplace training, access to promotional opportunities and union involvement. Literacy practices are diverse and dynamic. They are situated, not only in everyday activities but also in relationships and can be influenced by psychological factors such as mood, emotion, power or lack of power, and this is particularly true for the workplace. For many, writing under pressure is more difficult and the notion of pressure can take different forms – a tight deadline or the perceived importance of a task. All this makes measurement of such skills difficult and unlikely to be measured accurately by a test, especially in the workplace. Reder (2011) suggests "we should be interested in adults' perceptions of changes in their basic skills over time" and that self-reporting can provide useful feedback. He adds that "carefully developed and properly administered, such measures may be superior to standardised tests". We were interested in levels of confidence in literacy practices and this informed our approach.

Our survey used specific examples of practices to ask participants how easy or difficult they find various 'everyday' tasks at home and at work. For the purposes of this survey, we used the following definitions:

Literacy includes reading, writing, speaking and listening. At work this can be reading signs, posters, union information, emails or reports, taking part in meetings or writing emails or messages.

Numeracy includes everyday maths skills. At work this can be estimating time, using money, completing timesheets, measuring, understanding payslips, working out mileage allowance or calculating annual leave.

Computer skills include writing emails, word processing, using spreadsheets and using the Internet to find information.



The survey was launched in mid-October and was open for 7 weeks. It was distributed to all UNISON members with an active email account, over 400,000; all staff through ULR Net and e-bulletin and at networks and branches via UNISON staff. In addition it appeared in the UNISON magazines *InFocus* and *Inside Out*. Paper copies and online links were available at three national UNISON conferences. Responses equated to about 2% of UNISON members and around 94% of these were submitted online. A Likert scale was used where respondents specified their level of agreement to a statement. This enabled us to gather a large amount of quantitative data and there was also an opportunity for respondents to write in more detail about the effect and impact of basic skills at work, and many respondents did include some interesting details. We recognise this methodology was skewed towards those members with office-based or higher-level occupations and, although there were opportunities for union learning reps to complete surveys on members' behalf, it perhaps only provides part of the overall picture.

Findings

This research provides a rich set of data for UNISON and adds to our knowledge about skills in the workplace. The sample size far exceeds the sample size used in the Skills for Life Surveys 2003 and 2011.

Broadly, it finds that significant numbers of UNISON members find writing more difficult than reading; numeracy more difficult than literacy and speaking in a group difficult. When it comes to using computers, respondents find using social networking sites and Excel more difficult than using Word or accessing the Internet for information. While most respondents are confident in their abilities to undertake straightforward reading, writing and speaking tasks, they have more difficulty in using these skills at higher levels. Where respondents believe

their literacy and numeracy skills are lower than needed for their current work, they are more likely to have been held back by them, not to take on extra responsibilities, or apply for a promotion or a training course. This is more marked for those who feel that their numeracy skills are much lower than needed. Of this group, one third have been held back from applying for a promotion or taking on extra responsibilities and almost a quarter have chosen not to apply for training courses.

Respondents were more likely to say that they were not required to undertake the numeracy tasks listed than they were the literacy tasks even though some of these tasks, such as understanding wage slips and estimating, are likely to be relevant to most, if not all, UNISON members. This is in line with wider numeracy research, "People simply do not recognize the mathematics in their daily practice – as mathematics" (Wedge, 2010) and that there is tendency "for individuals to categorise the mathematics they can do as 'common sense', reserving the term 'mathematics' for that which they cannot do" (Coben, 2003).

There is an issue with skills becoming rusty over time and this is particularly true for numeracy, where work may require skills that have not been used for many years.

"Now undertaking more work that requires numeracy – 30+ years since I failed my O-level maths!" (Professional, male, aged 40-49 years)

Even when skills levels are broadly adequate, members may lack confidence on a day-to-day basis. As one respondent told us:

"I just get very nervous when I have to write anything other than general emails and notes. I do not put myself forward to do extra work that involves report writing. I look at other roles or vacancies but always worry that due to poor exam results in maths and English I can't apply. It's more a confidence thing now as more and more people younger than me seem to have much better exams results than me." (Administrator, female, aged 50+ years)

Many members feel their reading, writing or oral communication sometimes let them down or prevent them undertaking certain activities at work or participating in their union. In the workplace, we are required to tackle a range of texts in the form of emails, notice boards and reports that will be written in a variety of styles, may contain significant levels of jargon and

assume a level of subject knowledge. It is not enough to simply be able to read; it is also important to have the confidence to tackle a range of texts. This is supported by the survey finding that 89% of respondents find it very easy to read a short document, although this drops to 59% for reading a long document. Readability is also a recognised barrier to some adults in the workplace. One member from the discussion group suggested that complicated paperwork and policy documents could also be a barrier to getting involved and playing an active part in the union.

The workplace also demands confidence in oral communication and members need to use a range of skills. However, one in eight finds speaking to the public at work difficult and one in five has difficulty speaking in groups. This not only impacts upon performance at work, for example through individuals not contributing at meetings, but may also be a key factor in members not becoming active in their union. The more difficult members find speaking to the public, the less likely they are to apply for promotion, take on extra responsibilities, apply for training courses, get involved in the union or become active in the union in comparison to those who find speaking in a group easy. A member from the discussion group stated, "People do not feel confident to 'speak up and speak out'".

Findings also suggest some UNISON members find higher level writing skills more difficult. Only 1 - 2% of respondents find simple writing tasks difficult (writing messages, filling in short forms, writing emails) but this climbs to 50% for longer writing tasks (reports and longer documents). Members who find writing reports difficult are more likely to report that their confidence in their skills has a negative impact on them at work and their participation in the union in comparison to those who find writing reports easy.

12% of members feel that their computer skills are lower than needed, 7% believe this in relation to their numeracy and just 4% in relation to their literacy. But a contradiction in the findings is the high level of respondents who would be interested in developing their skills further. 52% of respondents said that they would like to improve their computer skills, 33% would like to improve their numeracy and one quarter would like to improve their literacy. This attitude towards skills development appears to have little relationship with the extent to which respondents believe that their skills match those needed within their current job suggesting that a substantial proportion of UNISON members are

likely to have a positive attitude towards improving basic skills. This is supported by the discussion group where the prevailing view was that it is not difficult to recruit members onto Skills for Life courses, with those not attending often facing barriers associated with funding for training or employers not allowing time off for study.

Between 8 and 9% of respondents said that a lack of confidence in their literacy and numeracy has held them back from becoming more active in the union, (taking on a role or responsibility or standing for election) or becoming more involved in the union (reading newsletters, going to meetings or voting in elections). However, this climbs to nearly 20% for those with lower than needed literacy or numeracy.

Conclusion

These findings not only have serious implications for the individuals concerned but also for their employers. Confidence in literacy, numeracy and using computers are vital for UNISON members at work, at home and to be active and involved in their union. They are important for taking up learning opportunities, working smartly and effectively, taking on new responsibilities, adapting to changing working practices and applying for promotion. Low confidence in their abilities holds members back. 14% state that their confidence in literacy or numeracy has stopped them from taking on extra responsibilities and 16% state their skills have stopped them from applying for promotion. To put these figures into context, 16% of survey respondents equates to 4,329 respondents and potentially around 220,000 UNISON members.

In addition, members need support to keep up with the rapidly changing nature of technology in the workplace. There is a marked difference in using different aspects of technology; respondents found using spreadsheets more difficult than word-processing, perhaps reflecting greater numbers reporting numeracy difficulties than for literacy. 29% had never tried to use social networking sites, such as Facebook. Interestingly, where respondents had tried, the majority (65%) found this to be very or quite easy. This suggests a technology divide between those who want to use social media and can easily do so and perhaps those who don't want to because they feel they don't know how.

Good literacy, numeracy and computer skills are essential to motivate and raise aspirations of UNISON members and help them to make the most of workplace opportunities and assess their future career options. Employers benefit from

strong skills as businesses and services are improved. The economy and our prospects for growth benefit. Unions benefit from an active and involved membership.

Literacy and numeracy needs are often hidden in the workplace and therefore real skill levels and the impact of these are largely unknown. This is confirmed by some respondents:

“My numeracy skills aren't up to scratch and so I try to avoid working with numbers, as I get flustered very easily due to lack of confidence.” (Professional, male, aged 50+ years)

Although the majority of respondents state their skills levels are adequate, a significant proportion of respondents are keen to develop their skills further, with a substantial minority reporting that their lack of confidence in literacy and numeracy has had a negative impact on their ability to progress at work or to become more involved and active in the union.

Respondents who believe that their literacy and numeracy skills are lower than needed for their current work, were more likely to have been held back by them and are around twice as likely not to take on extra responsibilities, nor apply for a promotion or a training course, than those who feel their skills are about right or higher than needed. The contrast is even greater among those who feel that their numeracy skills are much lower than needed, where one third have been held back from applying for a promotion or taking on extra responsibilities and a quarter have chosen not to apply for training courses. These findings demonstrate a real need to develop the skills and confidence of those who believe their current levels of literacy and numeracy are lower than needed in the workplace.

This research shows that many members need support with higher level skills such as managing budgets, writing and reading long documents and speaking in a group. It shows significant numbers of members have difficulty accessing written information and therefore written communication in the workplace needs to be accessible and other methods should be used to get messages across to members. The overall message is that members are getting by but not getting on.

Next Steps

This research makes a strong case for UNISON to continue developing a Skills for Life strategy to boost members' skills and effectiveness at branch, regional and national level. It suggests

an unmet appetite for learning. As a result of this research UNISON plans to:

- raise awareness at branch, regional and national level regarding literacy, numeracy and computer skills and the impact of poor skills on members
- ensure written communication is accessible and to use other methods to get messages across to members
- organise learning promotion and support so that members are aware of existing and future learning opportunities.

Finally, government should recognise this important set of data in any future planning for funding and promoting learning at work as it reveals an unmet appetite for learning and reveals some interesting details about how people in the workplace feel about their skills.

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Learning for Work: Lessons from the Royal Mail, the CWU and Adult Education College

An interview with John Maskell by Sarah Freeman

Sarah has taught for nearly 40 years in the fields of Adult Literacy, ESOL and Teacher Education. Sarah is also a researcher in her specialist teaching field, currently undertaking Ed.Doc studies at Sheffield University.



"I'm very vocal and when I highlight the problem with the dyslexia I get help..."

I chose to interview John Maskell on behalf of RaPAL and NIACE's combined special issue Workplaces Journal because of his

experience learning, working and representing his colleagues through the CWU (Communications Workers Union). John's path to success has been mainly because of his determination to represent his fellow workers fairly and his powerful motivation to achieve and learn more about union politics and employment law.

John tells me that his return to studies was initiated when he became union rep for his local union branch in South London in the late 1990s. He was sent to a Health and Safety course at the TUC's learning centre in a South London college. He admits that he hadn't been in school since very early secondary school days. He had specific difficulties with reading and writing which weren't recognised at school; his only happy memories are of metalwork, woodwork and sports lessons. The CWU provided a dyslexia assessment for John and he was diagnosed severely dyslexic. He decided to join a local college's Skills for Life Literacy & Numeracy scheme where he was able to improve his literacy and numeracy skills while still working on the specific tasks he needed to do for the union. He became Branch Secretary in 2009.

My main aim was to understand how much he had learned from work, from training in the union and from formal adult education. What is his estimation of each of these contexts as a centre of learning?

John says that he believes that he has learnt nothing from the workplace – his local Royal Mail

sorting office, where he has been working as a postal worker doing shifts and deliveries. He feels that his years as Branch Secretary have been frustrated by a lack of provision for in-house training at his own place of work. A year or so ago, John tells me that he asked his managers to set up a work classroom. He had noticed that those postal workers, for whom English is a second language, have particular difficulty and he pointed out that the CWU, through the TUC, can supply equipment and a room. However, the only improvement for those with English as a second language and other literacy difficulties has been that union members can offer to sit down, in their own time, and help others when there are forms to fill and paperwork to read.

The idea of a formal buddy system was subsequently suggested, where those who were in need of support of one kind or another could be supported by buddies at no significant cost to the company but this was not taken up. So what about the union learning provision? This is what really makes John happy and his enthusiasm shines through – there are debates and the courses are challenging. He has now done a course in Branch Secretary duties, in media studies (in how to deal with journalists and be interviewed) and a year's course in employment law which consisted of four residential weeks. He tells me that he would like to study the history of the Labour movement next.

John says that the union has also provided him with up-to-date dyslexia software which makes a tremendous difference. He can dictate what he wants to say to the computer instead of struggling with writing all his letters, reports and essays. He has also been able to advise and support other colleagues with these tasks. In new learning situations with union colleagues John always explains that he is dyslexic as soon as possible and this often opens doors for others to admit their difficulties too. The course leaders will always do their best to provide him with the support he requires.

The adult education college has been a mixed

blessing, according to John. On the one hand he knows he benefited from taking the literacy and numeracy courses which led to qualifications. He was helped more than anywhere else in Dyslexia Support classes at the college. He was able to bring in the kind of work that he was struggling with in his union role – including tricky cases and disputes with management – and the dyslexia specialist teacher was able to assist with whatever the difficulties were, creating both a learning experience and an individualised support system. The coursework was also adapted specifically to his needs where possible.

On the other hand, he says that the college was not able to provide him with the support or even the full number of hours when he did a web design course. His request for help was mislaid and other administrative difficulties frustrated the smooth running of what had been an expensive course to attend. He perceived the service outside the classroom to be impersonal and second rate.

I asked John what he would focus on in the way of educational provision if he was able to open a learning centre. He would firstly help people with English as a second language and others with learning difficulties. But he would also want everyone to have access to assistive software and just plain computers. He also sees a future in mobile phone learning too. Technology is almost as important to him as helping his colleagues with their day-to-day employment problems. He would also like to create an audio books resource so that when he continues his studies he can listen to a recording of the course books and associated reading.

John is very articulate and an accomplished negotiator; within the CWU he has both contributed and received very valuable input. He is an exceptional learner and he won both a TUC award and a NIACE Adult Learner award in 2007. But on his account it seems he is up against other organisations where the channels of communication are not functioning sufficiently well to make sense of his unique work/adult learner identity. Nevertheless he could continue to make dynamic progress as he is a natural critic – always questioning the existing structures and demanding greater and faster improvements.

E-readers in Adult Learning: How Kindles, iPads and Other Handheld Devices Might Change the Way Learners Access Text

Sally McKeown

Sally McKeown is a trainer and journalist. She has taught in schools and colleges, supporting students with a range of learning needs. She has also worked for government agencies and is now a freelance consultant, focusing on dyslexia, gifted and talented, learning disabilities, assistive technology and e-Learning.

They said they would never catch on but sit on any train these days or at an airport and you are certain to see someone with a Kindle or other e-reader. But is that woman sitting opposite you on the bus reading the latest Scandinavian crime thriller, a recipe, or *Full House*, Maeve Binchy's latest contribution to the Quick Read series? One of the delights of a Kindle is that your choice of reading material is totally private. You can be a beginner reader or a professor. What is on your screen is entirely your own affair.

Back in 2009 I was one of the authors of NIACE's *Screens and Pages: Technology and Reading for Pleasure*. E-readers were not quite in their infancy, but certainly not as prevalent as today. One of the most successful interventions was the Quick Reads initiative which was being used in adult learning, in libraries and in the workplace too. We ran training events around the country and time and again people reported that Quick Reads on E-readers were proving popular.

At that time there was a lot of debate about the advantages for authors. Toby Young, author of *How to Lose Friends and Alienate People*, believed they would have many benefits both for readers and the publishing industry, "The great thing about electronic books is that in the long run they will benefit writers, creating an easier way to enable first-time authors to get their work in front of the public. That will be a revolutionary change!"¹

Three years later e-readers are big business:

Amazon.com is now selling more Kindle books than paperback books. Since the beginning of the year, for every 100 paperback books Amazon has sold, the company has sold 115 Kindle books.

The British bought 12.7m e-books in the first half of 2011, double the amount for the same period in 2010, according to the Publishers Association.

E-readers are here to stay but what can they offer to adult learning and in the workplace? NIACE itself had an online reading group at the time of the Screens and Pages project and found that it worked well for a dispersed workforce. Everyone could have a copy of the text which does not always happen with print books. It also seemed to encourage people to participate, make reading a more pleasurable activity (even for those who could not finish the book) and allow people to make notes on the page so they did not forget the points they wanted to make. It was an ideal solution for people who had little time and for whom reading for pleasure is a priority.

NIACE is actively engaged in evaluating the technology and seeing its potential for work with adults who need to build their confidence and skills in reading. They held a seminar in Leicester in February in conjunction with The Association for Learning Technology (ALT). In the autumn they are publishing *e-Books for Adult Learning* by Sandie Gay and Tina Richardson.

Case Study – E-book Readers and The Newcastle Skills for Life Experiment

Paul Miller from RSC North and Judith Rust from Newcastle City Learning ran an e-reader project from October to December 2011 with a small group of learners who struggled with reading and, in some cases, who had additional support needs. The project had six Kindles and a number of Quick Reads.

They used the e-text to develop the sort of activities that tutors use with print books: activities such as replacing punctuation from an edited text, putting in capital letters, picking out letter patterns, scanning and identifying high frequency words or finding words which start with the same letter.

They were initially unsure about how learners with dyslexia would react but in fact the Kindles were well received because they could make text

1. *The Big Question: Do electronic books threaten the future of traditional publishing? The Independent 24 July 2008*

less dense. Readers can choose how big they want the font to be and the number of words to a line. Some might find a sepia background makes text easier to read while others will like white text on a black background.

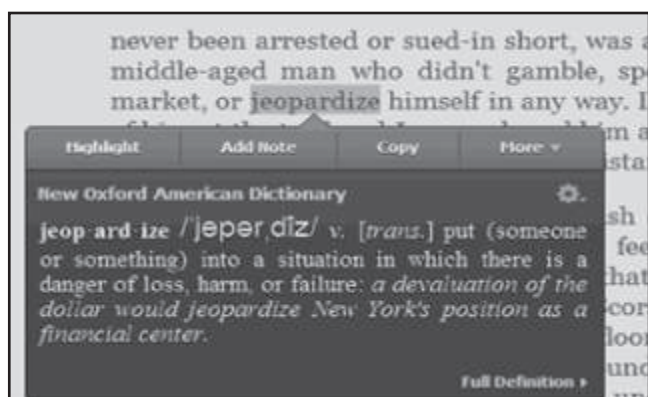
Of the 7 learners, 3 have bought their own e-readers. Some are putting a coloured filter over the screen to change the background colour while others find that the anti glare screen is enough to overcome visual stress. They are now reading more than they did in the pre-Kindle days. One learner is tackling *Wuthering Heights* which would have been beyond her reading competence using a conventional print book. However, she has found that the speech engine is not particularly good at pronouncing the title and of course, it does not have a Yorkshire accent!

Advantages of E-readers

On most devices you can change the font size. It can be set up so there are fewer words on a page, a benefit for those who struggle with reading.

Readers can use the speech facility to read words which are unfamiliar or where the learner is unsure of the pronunciation. The speech facility can benefit learners with a visual impairment.

The contextualised dictionary helps those learners who do not understand some of the vocabulary. Double click on an unfamiliar word and it will bring up definitions in a window on the page.



The bookmark facility is especially useful for learners who do not have good skimming and scanning skills, who might waste a lot of time trying to find where they finished reading last time. Readers don't lose their place in the way they do with a printed book.

There are some useful study functions: a learner can add notes and annotations. They might also

want to highlight text and tweet it and Amazon will put a link to it so other learners can see it. It is impossible to lose books. If a reader leaves their Kindle on the train they can download the books from Amazon again.

Tutors who are using e-readers report that learners seem able to engage with text on a higher level via an e-reader than with a conventional book. The Kindle is proving popular with older learners and in family learning. It is lighter than a book so it is good for people with arthritis or similar problems. The anti-glare screen and compact size are attractive features for many readers. Finding large print books is not always easy but it is not a problem with e-book readers. It could be useful for family learning and for older learners, perhaps for reminiscence work.

E-readers have a positive image. They are seen as an attractive technology for young people and increasingly they are being used in public. One advantage is that you cannot see what someone is reading so one could be accessing basic skills materials or *War and Peace*. E-books can also be used with readers' own personal mobile devices.

You can read from the Kindle in the classroom just as you would with a book. Often peer support develops in the classroom as the more confident help the less confident. Battery life is excellent for a Kindle. It may only need recharging once a month whereas iPods and iPads will need recharging much more often.

There is plenty of material available now for e-readers including the Gutenberg collection – all totally free – JISC FE e-books collection plus training materials for offender learning. Students are driving up the demand for e-books and publishers are trying to respond. Multimedia and interactive e-books are beginning to emerge for new devices such as Kindle Fire.

Challenges of E-readers

Cost is an issue for many centres. Publishers have started to produce materials in different formats and for different devices to tap into the enthusiasm for e-readers. There are, however, issues of interoperability. Not all formats will work on different devices. Some are keen on ASCII, a code which is a more universal so e-books in this format will be readable in the future when other formats have fallen by the wayside.

Classroom management is a big issue. Tutors

are not always confident about using e-readers and may need technical support and training. There might be conflict if students are more digitally minded than the tutors. Also it can be hard to develop interactive work from an e-text. In FE colleges providers need to produce evidence of learner achievement. How can centres do that if they cannot print out from a device?

Some users dislike the speech because it is mechanised and has an American accent. If it is slowed down it becomes slurred which makes it hard to decipher. There is no text to speech on the new Kindle. Accessibility will continue to be an issue and may get worse if device manufacturers decide they will not support it.

Older learners seem to like using the Kindle but perhaps younger people will prefer to use the smaller mobile technologies such as their own Smartphones to engage with e-books and e-materials. This might be most cost effective for centres but cause more pressure on teaching staff. E-readers such as Kindle only do one thing but many learners want to multi task. It might be an advantage for someone who is easily distracted, but those who want to do research, access Twitter and emails, might do better with an iPad.

Copyright is an issue. There is a tension between publishers who want to protect their own and their authors' livelihoods and the need of centres to get maximum value for their investment. **Virginia Havergall** has pointed out that surveys show that only about half of the e-books you can purchase qualify for lending/borrowing. See <http://www.edukindle.com/2011/02/beg-borrow-but-please-don%E2%80%99t-steal-how-to-share-e-books-at-school/> Certainly you cannot share and pass on e-books in the way you might with a printed book.

Costs

Prices as on 15 February 2012 from John Lewis were:

Apple iPad 2	16GB	32 GB	64 GB
Wi Fi	£399	£479	£559
Wi Fi + 3G	£499	£579	£659

Kindle WiFi e-reader £89

Kindle keyboard 3G + Wi-Fi e-reader £149

Questions for Centres to Consider

Do the tutors have their own E- readers?

If not, can they borrow one to use?

How will you introduce E-readers into a class?

Maybe start with just one learner and then cascade.

Will learners take them home?

Does your centre have insurance?

What texts will you use?

Check out Quick Reads or something learners are familiar with.

How will you start using E-readers with a learner?

Show how to open the book

Then how to book mark so they can find place easily

Then how to change the font

What if we can't afford E-readers?

You can download Kindle software free onto smartphones or computers and then buy e-books.

Where can we get e-books?

Amazon and the iTunes store.

Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/> has 38000 free e-books

How much do e-books cost?

Some are free, some cost 60p; others are more expensive.

The simplicity of an e-reader such as a Kindle may well encourage some practiced readers to try this particular kind of electronic technology first. But whichever handheld electronic device is used, it is likely to be leading the way forward for learners of literacies and other subjects.

There is a very strong argument for using smaller electronic devices as part of the equipment for learning in the workplace. Learning definitely has to be squeezed into the odd moments of a heavily pressurized workforce and if virtual learning environments, websites and other electronic resources are available the bite-size approach is going to become increasingly popular.

Sustainable Workplace Literacy Provision: Nearer or Farther Away?

Improving Literacy at Work

Alison Wolf and Karen Evans, with Katerina Anadiadou, Liam Aspin, Andrew Jenkins, Sue Southwood and Edmund Waite.
London and New York: Routledge (2010)
Price £23.99 ISBN: 978-0-415-54872-4
208 pages

there was no manager in post who had any recollection of or knowledge about the courses which had taken place. National figures on company start-ups and closures show that this is quite typical, while the public sector is also characterised by constant reorganization." (Wolf and Evans 2011, p. 162)

Evaluation of the Skills for Life at Work Project

Sarah Ainsley, Mark Rickinson, Jacqui Shepherd, Jocelyn Owen, and Greg Brookes.
Confederation of British Teachers April 2011, available online at
<http://www.cfbt.com/pdf/Evaluation%20of%20the%20Skills%20For%20Life%20at%20Work%20Project.pdf> (accessed 04-03-12)

Reviewed by Jay Derrick, Institute of Education, University of London. Jay worked for many years as a teacher and manager of adult basic education in adult and further education organisations. He is now working as a teacher educator and researcher. Contact: j.derrick@ioe.ac.uk

One of the main messages evident from these two reports, both published about 12 months ago, is how fragile and short-term the network of workplace literacy provision in this country is, even after 10 years of Skills for Life. Even to describe it as a network is inaccurate, because there are virtually no connections or interactions between different programmes, and there is now no organisation in a position even to overview it, let alone to support, coordinate or lead it. Until a few years ago we at least had the Workplace Basic Skills Network: a tiny voluntary organisation, yes, but a disproportionately active and cheerful forum for sharing ideas and giving support and training to basic skills teachers, colleges and employers setting up workplace provision; sadly that is now gone, and there is nothing else like it around now.

The key feature of British workplace literacy provision is chronic short-termism, according to *Improving Literacy at Work*:

"Few individual enterprises are in a position to develop stable learning institutions. In the space of just over two years, 14% of our sites had closed altogether. In over half,

I myself was peripherally involved in the early stages of the study reported on in Wolf and Evans's book, helping with the job of identifying and locating workplace provision and negotiating agreement from the managers, teachers and learners concerned to take part in the research. It was a fascinating but frustrating task. It was fascinating because even within the same occupational sector, workplaces are so different from each other, so specific and situated (this is one of the most interesting issues explored in these two reports). But it was frustrating because though we mostly encountered enthusiasm and goodwill, more often than not the provision we had been told about had recently finished, or was about to finish. Projects like this were often curtailed because the temporary funding stream it was dependent on had come to an end, or because managers had been unable to release students regularly enough for the provider college's targets to be met. This picture is echoed precisely in Alex Braddell's article elsewhere in this issue of the RaPAL Journal (Braddell, 2012).

Nevertheless, the 5-year longitudinal TLRP-funded research project reported on by *Improving Literacy at Work* succeeded in recruiting 500 learners, along with associated managers, tutors and union officials, working in 53 different workplaces across four occupational sectors in England and Scotland. The study aimed to find out whether workplace literacy programmes succeed in enabling learners to make 'substantive, long-term changes in measured basic skills and other life course variables'; whether they help increase the productivity of the sponsoring organisations; and to understand better the relationships between formal learning, life in the workplace, careers, and life and learning outside the workplace. It collected data, including test data, from its subjects three times over a 30 month time period, using a specially designed test

instrument (quite different from the national Skills for Life test), and employed mixed methods of data collection and analysis. 200 learners completed all stages of the research: the attrition rate certainly being another indicator of the fragility and instability of most provision. The book locates the study clearly in the policy and research context of IALS, Moser, and Skills for Life, but also within the rich conceptual and analytical debates about workplace learning in general, a perspective that may well be relatively unfamiliar to many readers of the RaPAL Journal. In particular, the study focuses on both individual and social dimensions of learning, and looks at these from the contrasting theoretical perspectives of literacy seen as 'human capital' and as 'social practice'. These perspectives are firmly linked to the valuable theoretical model of 'expansive' and 'restrictive' workplace learning cultures (Unwin and Fuller, 2003). The discussion is also located within the much broader research debates about learning and the life-course.

The study's findings are, very briefly, that literacy programmes do benefit the individuals who participate in them, in terms of their learning and confidence both in and outside work; but that, though most employers recognise and value these benefits to individuals, they do not in general seem to recognise these programmes' effects on workplace productivity. The researchers cleverly find a way to use the short-term nature of Skills for Life funding to their advantage, by investigating what happens when state funding comes to an end; and asking whether the employers find the provision of workplace literacy programmes valuable enough to continue funding it themselves:

"The real test of employer responses to training outcomes is, of course, where they subsequently put their money. If workplace basic skills had the impact that government expected, one would predict subsequent changes in employers' training activity....Our sample produced no such heady reports, and no major changes in training expenditures. Among the 46 sites which were still extant at the time of our follow-up interviews, only six were still actively involved in programmes that offered workplace basic skills provision to employees; every one of those six had become involved in basic skills provision prior to receiving SFL funding." (Wolf and Evans, 2011, 121).

The conclusion we have to draw, surely, is that

most employers are happy to accept government funding for workplace basic skills training, but will not fund it themselves.

The University of Sussex report evaluating a CfBT-led, LSIS-funded project supporting workplace basic skills provision in the South-East region, also reports learner gains from workplace literacy programmes in the 30 organisations researched, but comes to more upbeat conclusions about productivity:

"While few employers were able to provide clear quantifiable evidence of productivity gains, many were able to illustrate benefits in terms of improvements in specific workplace tasks and activities. This was the case even though economic motivation had not been a key reason for undertaking the training." (Ainsley et al. 2011, 20)

The authors quote a range of employers and learners who participated in the study, who spoke about increased confidence, improvements in writing tasks, time management, verbal communication and interpersonal skills, fewer errors, and reduced absenteeism. Some employers make general claims about improved productivity: the evidence provided for this is based on qualitative judgments rather than quantitative data. In fact, the conclusions of both studies are very similar, though the tone of the second is more positive. Wolf and Evans have an interesting discussion about employers' evaluations of provision, suggesting that as long as government funding may be available to support it, it is in their interests to present it in a positive light. The fact that the second of these studies is based on a single round of interviews and focus groups with employers and learners towards the end of a fixed-term state-funded initiative provides circumstantial evidence supporting this view.

Wolf and Evans suggest that what is needed, therefore, is:

"An approach which emphasizes entitlements for individual learners, not for employers and workplaces; and for demand driven by individual learners, not by government preconceptions about skill gaps and skill needs." (Wolf and Evans pp. 162-163)

They suggest looking at models from other countries like the US, where employers can get tax breaks from making provision available to their employees, or by subsidising them to participate in college-based programmes. They

also suggest adopting adult learning voucher systems and strengthening the Union Learning Rep model by bringing trade unions into the funding loop.

Neither report has much to say about different pedagogical approaches to workplace literacy learning; this complex issue is discussed in Braddell's paper elsewhere in this Journal (Braddell, 2012). These reports are both reminders that the issue for the UK is still whether workplace literacy happens at all, rather than how best to do it. On a more optimistic note, perhaps it is possible that policy thinking in the future will learn, from the failure of the top-down, micro-management style of *Skills for Life*, to establish stable workplace literacy provision wherever it is needed, that more can be achieved from looser, enabling policy frameworks than from over-specified command-and-control systems.

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- Braddell, A. (2012). Basic skills at work: Time for a workplace learning approach? *RaPAL Journal No 77*
- Unwin, L. and Fuller, A. (2003). *Expanding Learning in the Workplace: making more of individual and organisational potential, A NIACE policy discussion paper*. Leicester: NIACE

The Fundamentals of Workplace Learning: Understanding How People Learn in Working Life

Knud Illeris

Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, (2010)

ISBN 9780415579070

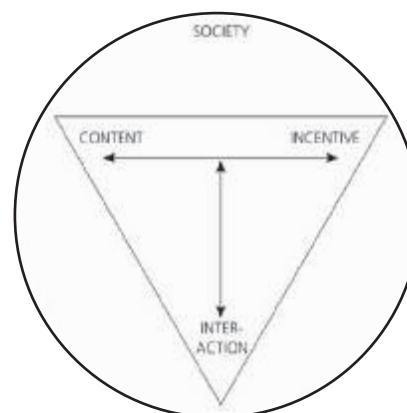
Price £23.99. 192 pages

Reviewed by Sarah Freeman

"Learning that encompasses overview, understanding and the development of personal competences cannot be implemented without increased respect for those who participate in the learning processes, for their situation, interests and needs and, ultimately, for themselves." (Illeris, K, 2011, 160)

Illeris, a distinguished Danish academic, is regarded as a ground breaking thinker in the field of Lifelong Learning. The great attraction of his learning theories is embodied twice in the above quotation, which is among his concluding remarks to his book on *The Fundamentals of Workplace Learning: Understanding How People Learn in Working Life*. Firstly, it is in his reference at the beginning of the quote to the type of learning that will encompass 'overview'; this is characteristic of his perspective in that he

employs overview of an organisation, its management systems, its technological development and of all the factors that influence a person's capacity to learn.



Learning Dimensions (Knud Illeris, 2002)

Secondly, he refers to the need for increased respect for the learners themselves. This is a necessary appeal in an educational climate where the chief objective is so often governed by meeting economic targets. As Illeris sees it, knowledge has become a commodity and it is less likely to engage learners while it remains as apparently the most important principle behind educating the workers.

Knud Illeris, who was until recently Professor of Lifelong Learning at Aarhus University, Denmark, has explored how we learn extensively. Illeris has retired to research and write further about learning theory, continually matching the theory up to the latest thinking about the rapid changes in society and the global factors affecting relationships in day-to-day life. He explains his ideas diagrammatically and his key text, *The Three Dimensions of Learning* (2002), was drawn on by Scottish colleagues. They applied his holistic view to the thinking behind the social practices approach to The Wheel, the adult 'literacies' curriculum in 2005
<http://www.aloscotland.com/alo/files/ALNCurriculumFramework.pdf>.

Illeris explains, illustrating this clearly through the use of triangles throughout his work, how within a tension field of learning we are influenced by three powerful influences – namely the cognitive, the emotional and fundamental, and, all around us, the social. He regards our social context as the environment in which the three tensions are played out. I have always found his approach to social practices the most comprehensive of any – that is, the social context is very important but must be

regarded as a backdrop as well as one of the players in the learning process – but NOT the most important player. The diagram used in this review was taken from a fascinating website (see link at end of this review) on lifelong learning which originates in South Africa. This essential Illeris diagram illustrates how 'content' plays only a tripartite role in an employee's experiences – this being the 'cognitive' process. The other influences are 'incentive' which is about how motivated a person will be depending very much on their 'emotional' health; and 'interaction' – how easy it is for them to facilitate their part in the society they are working within – is the remaining tension.

In the workplaces book Illeris has presented an advanced theory for workplace learning where he locates a person's sense of identity as being played out between their content and incentive points, but their workplace practice being an individual reaction to the pulls of the community they work with and also the workplace ethos.

Their propensity to learn is located within the centre of all these influences.

This book is definitely worth reading if you are looking for a refreshing, easy to read yet seminal work about learning theory. He doesn't apply his theory to literacies learning in particular but the implications can be straightforwardly related to basic skills and their place in workplace learning environments.

References

Illeris, K. (2002) *The Three Dimensions of Learning: Contemporary Learning Theory in the tension field between cognitive, emotional and social*. Lancaster, NIACE. Roskilde, Denmark: Roskilde University Press

The Diagram above, 'Learning Dimensions' Knud Illeris is taken from http://psychsoma.co.za/learning_in_vivo/lifelong_learning/ (accessed 11.03.2012)



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Writing Guidelines

Why not write something for the RaPAL Journal?

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

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

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

Guidelines for Contributors

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

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

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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 6,000 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:

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- **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 or 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 to one of the journal co-ordinators

Julie Meredith
meredith_julie@yahoo.co.uk

Sarah Freeman
azdak@btopenworld.com
 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 your 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.
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Please contact us if you want to discuss any ideas you have for contributing to the journal.

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