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RaPAL

keeping learning meaningful



Journal

The Research and Practice in Adult Literacies Network

Welcome

Research and Practice in Adult Literacies (RaPAL) is the only UK-wide organisation that focusses on the role of literacies in adult life. We promote effective and innovative practices in adult literacies teaching, learning and research; and support adult literacies practitioners and researchers. We enjoy engaging in debates that touch on English language and literacy, numeracy and digital skills across homes, communities and workplaces. Through our members, digital journals, conferences and fora, policy and advocacy work, we are active in Europe and have international links.

What we do

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

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The editorial group for 2016-2017 includes the following researchers, practitioners and practitioner-researchers: Gwyneth Allatt, Claire Collins, Samantha Duncan, Sarah Freeman, Tara Furlong, Julie Furnivall, Sue Lownsbrough, Anne Reardon-James, Irene Schwab, Yvonne Spare, Brian Street and Rachel Stubley.

RaPAL members are involved in the compilation of the journal as editors, reviewers and referees.

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. The journal is written by and for all learners, tutors/teachers 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 literacies work and to encourage debate.

Why not join us?

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

The RaPAL Journal is also available from various subscription services: EBSCO, LMInfo and Prenax. The RaPAL journal expresses a variety of views which do not necessarily reflect those of the editorial group. The RaPAL journal was designed by Image Printing Company, Lumsdale, Matlock, Derbyshire



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Contents

Editorial	p.3
Rachel Stublely and Irene Schwab	
Note from the Journal Co-ordinator, Yvonne Spare	p.5
Section 1 - Ideas for teaching	p.6
Learning from aprons	p.6
Helena James	
Role play in Literacy and Customer Care classes	p.7
Eabhan Ní Shuilleabháin	
Section 2 - Developing Research and Practice	p.9
'Laugh your way to confident English': A volunteer-led approach to meeting the needs of migrants	p.9
Anne Smith	
The power of practitioner-led action research in post-16 literacies and wider contexts	p.15
Claire Collins, Bob Read, Ian Grayling and Joss Kang	
Action learning with Irish numeracy tutors	p.19
Angela Cahill, Antoinette Delamere, Mary Bambrick, Daniel Sellers and Tina Byrne	
Did growth mind set messages make a difference?	p.23
Sarah Richards	
Lifelong literacy for all	p.26
Tara Furlong	
Section 3 - Research and Practice: Multi-disciplinary perspectives (peer reviewed)	p.30
Collecting and sharing knowledge: migrant women and family learning	p.30
Sarah Foster	
Stories of Resilience: A Selection of Stories	p.38
Reviews	p.42
<i>Beyond Economic Interests: critical perspectives on adult literacy and numeracy in a globalised world,</i> edited by Keiko Yasukawa and Stephen Black	p.42
Reviewed by Lyn Tett	
<i>Teaching for Historical Literacy: building knowledge in the history classroom,</i> by Matthew T. Downey and Kelly A. Long.	p.43
Reviewed by Liz Parkin	
<i>Polyvocal Professional Learning through Self-Study Research,</i> edited by Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan and Anastasia P. Samaras	p.45
Reviewed by Tara Furlong	
<i>Adult Literacy Policy and Practice: from intrinsic values to instrumentalism,</i> by Gordon Ade-Ojo and Vicky Duckworth	p.47
Reviewed by Genevieve Clarke	
News from the sector	p.49
Tara Furlong	

Editorial

Rachel Stubley and Irene Schwab

Welcome to this edition of the RaPAL journal, which presents writings from adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL educators on the theme of keeping learning meaningful.

In a political climate which encourages freedom of choice and consumer rights (in education as elsewhere), the restrictive nature of much adult literacies learning is striking. The space to develop negotiated, student-centred learning has shrunk dramatically over the last 15 years. Curriculum content, accreditation and, in some cases, even attendance is mandated and controlled, and can 'bracket out the lived experiences of students and teachers' (Comber 2016: xiv). The 'washback' from narrowly-focused (sometimes inappropriate) tests can be a particular challenge to the ingenuity and integrity of adult educators, and to the motivation and progress of adult learners. Elsewhere, teachers can find themselves focusing on collecting evidence and auditing progress rather than on learning and teaching. Tusting reminds us that it is not that teachers cannot cope with change but that they recognise a 'conflict of discourses' where new practices are not based on models of good teaching, which always start with responsiveness to learners (Tusting, 2009). Current educational policies, not just in the UK but across the English-speaking world, seem in conflict with RaPAL's position, that socially-situated learning is crucial to effective adult literacies learning and teaching (Ivanič et al, 2009).

And yet ... adult educators and adult learners continue to find ways to engage in meaningful learning and teaching, and to challenge and resist current strictures. We hope that you, like us, are heartened by the responses to the current environmental and policy contexts which our contributors have shared in this edition of the RaPAL journal. Their responses fall into three broad categories:

Critique and resistance are the focus of two articles on the lived experience of particular groups of women. The first piece in this edition is Helena James' prose poem Learning from Aprons. This is an impassioned elegy for a generation of working class miners' daughters let down by schooling, careers advice and above all the gendered expectations of their girlhoods. In our academic peer-reviewed section 3, Sarah Foster has written a fascinating paper presenting her research into the experiences of migrant women living and attending Family Learning classes in North West London. Her study uses the voices of the learners themselves to show that institutional agendas, such as auditing 'employability' outcomes, are blind to (and perhaps irrelevant to) the women's own processes of knowledge building and sharing.

Teachers as researchers is another powerful and inspiring response to institutional and policy challenge. Claire Collins and her colleagues have supported adult literacies tutors in undertaking practitioner-led action research (PLAR). As well as outlining the methodology and focus of some of these projects, their piece argues for the value of small-scale, qualitative educational research, based on the experiences and insights of teachers themselves. Sarah Richards tells us more about one of the PLAR projects. Her work at Abingdon and Witney College with students retaking maths GCSE aims to promote 'mathematical resilience' through growth mind set messages. Whilst it may be too early to tell yet if they make a difference, her work is full of possibility for the future.

In Ireland too, there have been a number of parallel action learning projects concerned with adult numeracy, published as case studies by the National Adult literacy Agency (NALA). The article, Action learning with Irish numeracy tutors, outlines what three tutors did and the effect it had on their practice. Action Research can be so empowering for teachers, and we are delighted to be able to include the voices of teacher-researchers in this edition.

Editorial

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Tutor and learner creativity is the final response to institutional and policy challenge. Anne Smith describes how Creative English, a small-scale, community-based experimental project has become a national programme for ESOL learners using drama and role-play. On the same topic, Eabhan Ni Shuilleabháin, a tutor in Bangor, North Wales, shares her experience of using role play in employability-focused provision. The work of both these practitioners addresses the (potential) challenges of low motivation and restricted resources in a fun and effective way.

Learners too continue to remind us of the importance of adult education and why we must persevere with our resistance to its diminution. In this edition, we add three more stories of resilience to those already published in RaPAL Journals 87 and 88. They continue to inspire us with their writing about how education helped them take more control over their lives.

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Note from the Journal Coordinator

Yvonne Spare

Yvonne can be contacted on Journal@rapal.org.uk

Hello fellow RaPAL members

This is our third and final edition for this year. Our next event will be our annual Editorial Group meeting on Saturday 3rd September at UCL Institute of Education, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1H. We have succeeded in attracting some new members to our editorial group this summer, including one of our founder members, Brian Street, so we are hoping for a lively and productive day planning our Journals for 2016-17. Don't forget, this group is not just for experienced editors. We also welcome anyone who would like to gain experience by teaming up with one of our regular editors, or if you have ideas about the kinds of things we could include or even about the presentation and layout of the Journals.

We feel that this face-to-face meeting is important, so we provide travel expenses and lunch for everyone. The meeting will start at 11.00 a.m. and last until about 3.00 p.m. and we hope to see as many people there as possible. If you are interested but would like to know more, please contact me on journal@rapal.org.uk for a chat at any time.

One final appeal – our next edition is due out in the autumn, but we would like to make a start on planning for it before our September meeting. Therefore, we are in need of two or three people to make up an editing team for Journal 90: Digital Literacies. Our first digital literacies title came out in 2011 and there have been a great many changes since then. If you would like to see how we viewed this subject back then, issue 74 is available to read on our website [Past Issues](#), with no need for passwords on this public archive.

We are always interested in knowing what you think about your Journal. There is a feedback section on the website so that you can comment on anything you have read in this or previous editions. Follow the link to our [comments space](#) at the bottom of the page, which needs the password that has been circulated with this edition.

'News from the Sector' is to help keep all of us up-to-date with developments. We would welcome details of anything that you know about in the field of literacies teaching and learning that is happening regionally or nationally. Send your messages to either journal@rapal.org.uk or to webweaver@rapal.org.uk and we look forward to hearing from you.

- *Finally, as we go to press, we have the news of our exit from the European Union. Is this likely to have an impact on your work? Are you involved in projects currently receiving European funding that might be adversely affected, or do you think other sources of funding will be found? Might our exit from the EU have an impact on the lives or learning opportunities of the adults you teach? Let us have your comments and we will try to publish them in our next edition.*

Meanwhile, we hope you enjoy this latest edition of the RaPAL Journal.

Best wishes

Yvonne

Learning from Aprons

Helena James

Helena James spent 8 years teaching basic skills on work-based learning and family learning programmes for Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough Council. She currently works for ITEC Skills and Employment as an Adult Provision Delivery Manager.

It's time to support the daughters of the Miners generation. The 60 and 70 somethings that know very well they should've studied more in school. Other things tempted them rather than school work... It was not their fault. The brothers must come first.

Mothers uttered to daughters that they had very little right to education. And even if they enjoyed it, the young daughters of the day coveted what they saw, wondering what they would call their babies. Washing boards and mangles. Wash day on Wednesdays and children running from apron to apron.

Boys dirty faced and empty stomached. Boot scuffed and bold as brass. Where would education get a daughter of that day? Why? What was the point?

Living in houses packed with bodies. Men, lads, boys needed their kettle-hot baths, their bellies filled with broth. Girls know wash, clean, cook and wash and clean.

The book 'Women in Love' sits on the Apron's shelf viewed with eager fear. Full of flighty words that stare out, WE ARE THE FLOWERS OF DISSOLUTION, that fetch a blink to the eye, and nerves that make the hands snap it shut.

It's easier to learn practical things, but still they ponder, wonder, who in their world might be brave enough to explain the world within the words?

The service was to the bread winners, the blue black scarred brothers and fathers that endured for the sake of some or little education.

Where did the sisters and daughters place themselves on the perch when the men went to read the books so lovingly stacked in the windows of the workingmen's clubs, on display and away from their reach?

What did women retrieve from the morsels of that day? Peering through glazed windows and gripping night lights under the covers with dog eared unconsented pages. A tide of change and self-efficacy, they only know... I do not dare to speak on behalf of all women of that time, just the ones I have spent trying to apologise to: that life, the system, schooling had not done its job; that those days were unfortunate – the cycle should have been broken. But back of the class is where they started and stayed.

Careers advisors advised them of cleaning jobs and caring for others. Where were dreams in books and careers of the world ever discussed with the women whose voices couldn't talk their thoughts or type the word 'secretary'?

Role Play in Literacy and Customer Care classes

Eabhan Ní Shuilleabháin

Eabhan has worked for Grwp Llandrillo Menai (an FE colleges group in North Wales) for four years, teaching literacy and digital literacy in Caernarfon, Bangor and Llangefni. This is her third career switch, after working in restaurants and hotels in Ireland and America, and as an editor in an American publishing company. She also writes poetry and is widely published in poetry journals and magazines in Europe and America.

I teach literacy and customer care skills in a range of short courses designed to support the essential skills people need to find employment. These courses target learners who are receiving Jobseeker's Benefit and who are 'actively looking for work'. Students range in age from 18 to 60. They have a wide range of employment experience, including never having been employed. They have diverse levels of education, and have often had negative experiences in their previous schooling.

The main reason I started to use role play is because I found students did not have any practical understanding of the variety of customer behaviour they might have to face, since many of them had either never worked before or had worked in areas that did not deal with the public directly. They were often unable to appreciate how difficult it can be to deal effectively with customer problems, especially when the customer is agitated. However, I found that when students used role plays to explore the types of behaviours that customers display, they understood the problems in resolving customer care issues in a far more visceral way. Role playing customer care scenarios not only ground their learning in the real world of employment but also enable me to take literacy out of a limited textbook environment into its practical use in the workplace.

However, as Marilyn Nathan warns (1997), to manage role plays, "You need a good deal of confidence, because it means relinquishing some of your control over the ... [learners] once they leave their seats" (p. 58). It is much more difficult to control a class broken into several smaller groups, all of whom are occupied at different stages of the activity. The very nature of group work means that the class becomes louder and the tutor must allow free movement and discussion. I found that a certain level of fun and exuberance must be encouraged if role plays are to succeed and tutors must be prepared to relinquish some control to ensure the exercise becomes an enjoyable one.

Role play is also particularly useful for developing the interpersonal skills of learners, giving them the opportunity to practise skills in a risk-free environment. This has certainly been the case in my classes, with learners' overall confidence, self-esteem and interpersonal skills improving as a result of their participation.

Because the role plays we undertake focus on the customer care sector, students see in a very clear manner, even before any formal evaluation takes place, how customer care situations are affected by customer service agents' attitudes, tones and styles of language use (an excellent underpinning for speaking and listening qualifications). We always conclude role plays with feedback and evaluation sessions, whose aim is to facilitate self- and peer-reflection. These phases are extremely important because they enable me to subtly direct the evaluation so that each student contributes to the discussion and so that all relevant points are covered. I ask learners to fill in a review sheet on each role play because they are usually reluctant to comment verbally, believing that the students they are commenting on will think they are being critical or judgemental. However, when given an appropriate handout, students are much more likely to fill in responses to specific questions, such as "What could have been improved in the scenario?"

I use three different strategies: **unscripted role plays**, where students develop their own scenarios; **scripted role plays**, where students are given a dialogue, which they perform in a number of different ways (e.g. illustrating the importance of body language); and **simulated dialogues**, where students write their own dialogue but can simply read it aloud sitting at the desk rather than getting up to perform it.

Initially, students never like role plays and I am always met with groans and questions of “Do we have to?” However, once the students settle down and begin to work on the scenarios, they start to enjoy what they are doing and usually become very engaged in the task. Frequently much fun is had developing the scenario to its fullest potential. Because I make sure we focus on the fun aspect, the actual role playing itself generally goes without a hitch, with students relaxed enough that they don’t feel any pressure with regard to their “acting ability” or lack thereof!

I have found that when role playing is conducted in this light-hearted way, students are much more engaged and motivated to perform well as customer service agents. For example, I use two different role play scenarios to help students deal with an aggrieved, agitated or complaining customer. No matter what fun is had in the actual performing of the role plays, students clearly see the pitfalls of mishandling such a customer and are left in no doubt as to the critical importance of being effective communicators.

Although there is some preference for scripted role plays (with students frankly stating that already written dialogues are less work for them!), the majority of students recognise that they learn far more when they have to develop the scenario themselves. In fact, many students state that role plays are far more beneficial to their learning than any other teaching strategy. I believe this is because role play satisfies aspects of all learning styles and is experienced in real-time; students are enacting scenarios as and how they would happen in real life and this becomes a sort of first-hand experience that they can process in a very immediate yet long-lasting way. Students also often note that the role play helps to increase their confidence to speak out in groups, which is a very beneficial side effect.

Ultimately, I find that role playing has an extremely positive impact on learning, including on those less measurable aspects of student improvement such as increased self-confidence and self-esteem. I heartily recommend it as one of the most effective and enjoyable ways of supporting meaningful learning.

Reference

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‘Laugh your way to confident English’: A volunteer-led approach to meeting the needs of migrants

Anne Smith

Anne Smith is a teacher, applied theatre practitioner and researcher. She developed the Creative English programme in partnership with learners, as part of her PhD at Queen Mary University of London. She can be contacted at annesmith75@hotmail.co.uk

The context

At a time when £45 million has been removed from the UK’s English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) budget, refugees and migrants face significant challenges in integrating into society. As a teacher in the field, it’s hard not to feel concerned about the negative impact on learners. As Paget and Stevenson (2014) identify, migrants have complex needs and benefit from an approach that is holistic. All teachers know they do far more than teach the formal curriculum – helping learners read letters from landlords and hospitals, translating sentences learners wish to communicate to their child’s teacher or job centre advisor and referring the most vulnerable at times of crisis to other sources of professional help. Poorer mental health outcomes amongst BME communities, especially refugees, are well documented (Tidyman, Gale and Seymour, 2004). Eaves (2015) highlights the challenges facing those on spousal visas, despite high levels of education and skill from their country of origin and a British partner.

In 2005, before the cuts began, I was acting as a supply teacher, covering ESOL classes across three London boroughs. What intrigued me was how frequently learners were uncomfortable and unwilling to speak to classmates, even though they were meeting together four times a week in the classes. Learner anxiety is well documented to disrupt the process of language acquisition (Krashen 1981). I have a background in secondary school Drama and English teaching and knew how positively drama impacted young people in terms of their confidence, language development and relationships with others. I was interested to see if it would have the same effect on adults. A colleague encouraged me to try.

From those early experiments grew a Masters dissertation and eventually a PhD. My PhD focused on the facilitation of belonging. Feelings of shame prevent a sense of belonging (Brown 2011). Shame is often provoked by limited language skills and a lack of familiarity with cultural practices. An intervention provoking joy and laughter can be a powerful act of resistance at a time of difficulty (Thompson 2009) and can have a positive impact on well-being (Brown 2009). I was interested in exploring a more holistic approach, which addressed language, cultural practices, confidence and well-being, increasing the capacity of the class to support one another. During this period, I was constantly told there was no money or interest in what I was doing. I kept on going.

At the same time, I was volunteering with The Open Doors Project, a charity which befriends and runs activities for isolated individuals, often with ESOL needs. In this role, I was meeting lots of amazing, passionate people, who were willing to give up their time to help people learn English, but often without the skills to do it effectively or the time to do any preparation beyond a few minutes before the class started. As a result, it was a less rewarding experience for learners and volunteers. A combination of these experiences birthed what has become the Creative English programme.



In 2013, the Department of Communities and Local Government launched a competition to fund innovative community learning, which would encourage people to learn English and engage in their local communities. It sought to engage those who did not traditionally access formal ESOL provision. Creative English was one of 6 winners. It was rolled out nationally, delivered via members of the FaithAction network in churches, mosques, gurdwaras and community centres. This partnership was significant as statistically members of a faith group are more likely to volunteer than other members of the population and the faith sector is also effective in engaging those traditionally considered hard to reach (Dinham, Furbey and Lowndes 2009). Success was measured in terms of improvements in learner confidence and outcomes such as accessing health and housing services, further education, and new community activities.



Meeting the needs of learners and volunteers

Wherever a *Creative English* class is running, people tell me they know about it through the laughter that rings out through the rest of the building. *Creative English* focuses on language for everyday tasks; it enables learners to talk to shop assistants, doctors, teachers and landlords. However, it uses a 'soap opera' style storyline to create emotional engagement and fun for the learners as they practice mundane, functional language. For example, in my class this week, after some games and exercises building vocabulary and sentence structures helpful in this context, we act out the character 'Sylvia' having to go for an x-ray. The room erupts with laughter. The doctor has asked if she may be pregnant. She is 80 years old! The characters engage the learners emotionally and, although in this case there is a script, usually the interactions are improvised. This provides both the motivation to speak and encourages confidence for real-life conversations, as communication is supported by their tone of voice and gesture and one cannot predict what response will follow. Shared experiences, such as laughing and empathising with a character, build a sense of community, as well as providing a springboard for language.



Fun and joy are integral to motivating the learners, especially those with no or little previous experience of formal education, but also to why the volunteers want to do it. While some of our volunteers have used their involvement in Creative English to facilitate them in progressing into work or professional teacher training, many also participate for purely altruistic motives and the enjoyment of it keeps them coming back week after week. A volunteer explained: 'We have been laughing so much this morning, it's a complete tonic to come here. You could never regard it as work' (Creative English Alliance, 2015a). Coventry University (2015, p.19) highlighted how the 'underlying desire to help the programme participants [...] was reflected in the efforts the teachers made to make learners feel welcome, and to encourage their participation in communicative tasks and activities'.

Props and costumes help to generate the spirit of play in the sessions. The session plans are supplied in a resource case which includes these items and visual aid cards for ease of preparation. Our most iconic prop is a pink wig. At least one of our centres claims to work it into almost every session.



Flexibility is a core value of the programme. Working in partnership with learners in the research generated a flexible structure where learners could start or leave the programme at any point and stay as long as they wanted. The programme itself contains 38 different sessions on the core themes of shopping, health, housing, education, work and community. The self-contained lessons gain their sense of continuity from the familiar characters in the plot. This supported the erratic attendance typical of the most vulnerable learners. Flexibility is also important to the volunteers. Different *Creative English* centres deliver the programme in different ways, which are appropriate to their local context. While most organisations deliver weekly sessions throughout the year, others find Term 1 as a 10 week course better suits their requirements or select sessions to intensively address a specific concern in their community. Flexibility gives volunteers a sense of ownership over the programme. Volunteers and learners often also share the need to fit around childcare requirements, which is addressed in the timing of sessions, peer support in looking after children in the same room and even by involving the children in the sessions.

Delivery through the trusted faith and community sector enables learners who had never accessed English language teaching, even when funding made free ESOL classes available, to engage with the programme. The multiple learning styles encompassed by a drama-based approach suits learners who struggle with written text and shy away from formal education. A grandmother, for example, who had been in the UK for 35 years without learning English, found she was confident enough to go shopping alone for the first time.

From participant to volunteer and beyond

One of the most exciting dimensions has been seeing former learners become volunteers on the programme, promoting a further increase in their confidence and belonging. Often the intermediate learners who come to a class in their local faith or community centre do not perceive themselves as having anything to offer others. This perception can be broken down through different degrees of volunteering encouraged by the programme. Taking full responsibility for the class takes a measure of confidence and commitment. However, mentored by more experienced volunteers, different roles within the class can build confidence and skills. Former learners have been able to get alongside other learners – interpreting, demonstrating activities and facilitating small groups, which has significantly enhanced the ability of *Creative English* to support mixed ability learners. They have also supported with administrative tasks, room set-up and catering.

Lead facilitators who identify learners who would benefit from further personal development are important in this process, encouraging learners to attend the *Creative English* training, where appropriate. Kavita, for example, had studied IT in English at university in India, so her knowledge of English was excellent. However, in practice, she was totally lacking in confidence to speak to people and only went out of her house once a week. When she became a volunteer teaching assistant in a London class, however, her self-esteem soared. Another volunteer facilitator in Dagenham described how she had asked a member of her group to consider volunteering, as the number of beginners meant the class itself was a bit basic for her: 'I could not have predicted the level of enthusiasm with which she greeted the invitation! It has made me realise how powerful it is to show someone that you have faith in them' (Creative English Alliance 2015b).



You don't have to have perfect English to be able to help someone else. While learners' confidence and fluency in English continues to develop in this role, they are also benefitting from relationships with others in the team and the community of wider support it offers. It's a common concern in the voluntary sector to worry what will happen when the volunteers 'run out', but they won't if people are growing into those roles through the class. In fact, those who have personal experience of the challenges learners face can be an inspiration to new arrivals. It takes time and appropriate support and training. However, as Maria, a volunteer lead-facilitator explained:

As a refugee I feel I can understand what other vulnerable migrants are experiencing when they move to the UK and I want to put my experience to good use. When I first moved to the UK it helped to talk to other refugee women in a similar situation - this is what the community want and I can provide it.
[Interview with author]

Maria has had a significant impact on women who would not normally access formal classes, also addressing their wider well-being, because she has shared common experiences and understood cultural barriers they faced.

Conclusion

Passionate individuals who care about their learners make a difference. It's hard sometimes to hold onto hope in a season, where creativity is being squeezed from secondary education and adult education budgets are being slashed, but as teachers we have to be guardians of hope and find ways to keep hold of what we know works for learners, even when it's not in favour.

In 2007, when I started my PhD, I was questioned many times about the value of what I was doing because, 'No-one is interested in that now.' However, I could see it making a difference to learners through the joy, laughter and sense of growing community. In 2015, I have had the privilege to see that 78% of the 1,536 *Creative English* learners surveyed after completing 10 sessions had engaged in new community activities, and 100% claimed to feel more confident. The delivery in familiar faith centres has given many women their first opportunity to learn English: they are able to have privacy at the doctor's for the first time without a family member interpreting; or to phone for help in an emergency without having to wait for a relative to come home. Although no exam result will ever recognise it, it is an incredible milestone for a learner to feel confident enough to take her son to the park for the first time.

Access to formal qualifications is vital in preventing barriers to becoming employable in the field of one's choice. However, there is also space for holistic community alternatives which enable people to function in society and which act as a stepping stone into the next opportunity that is needed, where volunteers and learners all get something out of participating.

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The Power of Practitioner-Led Action Research

Claire Collins, Bob Read, Ian Grayling and Joss Kang

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Introduction

Between 2013 and 2015, a team from the East Midlands Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training (emCETT, now CETTa), led a practitioner-led research programme across England supported by the Education and Training Foundation. The authors and other colleagues worked with over 200 practitioner-researchers during this time and supported them to examine their own practice. The key aim was for practitioners to find ways of improving and better understanding learning in the post-16 contexts in which they worked. In so doing, they engaged in and with research in their own classrooms (using 'classroom' in the broadest sense of the word). In other words, practitioners identified and enquired into real issues they had encountered in their practice and drew on previous research findings to plan improvements they could try out and measure.

In this article, we argue for the value of Practitioner-Led Action Research (PLAR), and refer to examples of such research carried out by adult literacies specialists (maths, English and ICT). In doing so, we also hope to illustrate how PLAR became a vehicle for teacher self-development. This article will act as an introduction to topics that will be explored in future editions of this Journal.

Can teachers be researchers?

In a recent article (TES, 2015), John Hattie stated that:

Teachers should avoid becoming researchers in their classrooms and leave the job to academics

Hattie's viewpoint is echoed by some other respected educational researchers. For example, in a 2016 presentation entitled 'Why teaching will never be a research-based profession (and why that's a Good Thing)', Dylan Wiliam, argued that the idea of teaching as a research-based profession is never going to happen. Wiliam cites the lack of reliability in teachers' research findings, poor design and lack of adequate controls. The emCETT (now CETTa) approach itself challenged dominant approaches to research in education. We did not require that everyone worked at Master's level or that they wrote academic-style research reports. We wanted research to be accessible by practitioners who were not confident to communicate in academic ways. This is because the purpose of action research is not to share findings to inform wider educational theories (though sometimes this can happen). Instead it is to inform teachers about what works in their classrooms and what they can do in their own contexts and unique situations to improve their practice. Furthermore, the process of undertaking this research is in itself of great value, as it enables teachers to try new things and explore their hunches. If the same research in a different classroom yields very different results, this is not to say that the initial research is not valid or useful. It simply shows that the findings are highly situated. Practitioner-Led Action Research, we saw, extends reflective practice and leads to deep learning, initiated and led by teachers. As Wiliam himself argues, 'All teachers should be seeking to improve their practice through a process of "disciplined inquiry"' (Wiliam, 2016) and our argument is that PLAR supports this.

Why does Practitioner-Led Action Research matter now?

Within the teaching landscape 'top down' quality improvement strategies such as graded lesson observations are increasingly being contested (e.g. O'Leary, 2014) and 'bottom up' improvement strategies are becoming much more visible. The growth of 'teach meets', teaching and learning conversations via Twitter and the Uncommon

schools network in the United States are all examples of how teachers are working together to improve their own practice. PLAR fits this emerging pattern of multi-modal conferences between teachers and learners, with teachers examining critically what works in their own 'classrooms'. Importantly, this examination includes gathering feedback from learners before and post intervention, using control groups, listening to what learners say and triangulating this with other secondary sources of data.

Challenging dominant discourses

Practitioner-researchers' hunches (the starting point for PLAR) can sometimes stand in opposition to dominant discourses in education. For example, a researcher in 2015/16 had concerns about the predominance of small group discussion activities in her ESOL classroom following the work of such educationalists as Petty (e.g. 2014) and Swan (2005). She had just read a book called 'Quiet' by Susan Cain (2013) and she felt worried that introvert learners in her classrooms were at a disadvantage during 'buzz group' and 'brainstorming' tasks. The researcher's findings correlated with her hunch and, as a result, she now builds in careful thinking time and quiet, reflective activities into her courses.

In another example, a research team were worried about providing effective feedback on maths and English for all learners, following the work of Hattie and Timperley (2007) and others. Like many others, their organisation had begun to insist on written maths and English feedback across the whole curriculum and they felt that this could have detrimental effects on (non-maths/English specialist) teachers and on learners. The action research cycles they carried out focused on gathering teachers' and learners' views on the effectiveness of their feedback. They found that verbal feedback was often most effective and they developed and trialed tools to help ensure that, where written feedback was given, it was useful and clearly understood by all.

How do you undertake Practitioner-Led Action Research?

In Scotland, where PLAR is a commonly-used approach in adult and further education teacher development, four stages of a PLAR cycle have been identified (see <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/12/15095637/16>)

1. Planning and preparation
2. Data collection
3. Analysis
4. Reporting, disseminating and embedding into practice

The diagram opposite, taken from the Education Scotland 'PLAR' website illustrates these stages. It is important to note that the PLAR cycles described above are iterative. In other words, practitioners can learn from each cycle in order to undertake the next. An example that illustrates this is the work of a research team at Kirklees College in Huddersfield, who decided to investigate English and maths marking and then to develop a framework to support tutors in giving feedback. In order to identify the most useful framework for their non-specialist colleagues in the college, they trialed several different versions, each time collecting and analysing data about their effectiveness in order to design the next versions to trial in the same way. Their research approaches and findings can be seen in a 'WordPress' report they produced as an outcome of their work.



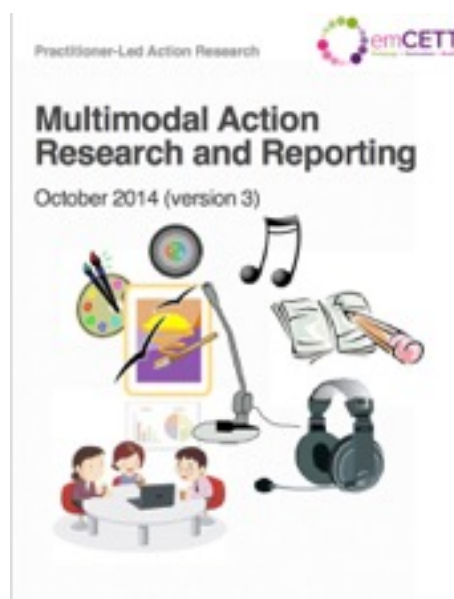
The power of Action Research

Practitioner-Led Action Research can be empowering for practitioners, as it enables them to identify and enquire into real problems or issues that they encounter in their work. The outcomes of their research can empower them to make changes in their practice which they might not otherwise have been able to do. For example, in 2014, researchers at Colchester Institute drew on the work of Dweck et al (e.g. 2010) to investigate what motivates young people on vocational courses to make progress in maths and English (the learners were working towards GCSEs, having not achieved grade Cs in school). The team found that staff and learners had quite different views on the topic and that there were some clear actions that staff could take, for example, to improve learning conversations and the setting of learning goals which connect the development of English and maths skills with vocational excellence. The findings were incorporated in the college's Continuous Improvement Plan, an empowering outcome for the researchers who had led the work. The Spelling Strategies workshop that was offered to vocational staff during the research project became a popular CPD activity at the college.

The PLAR process itself also develops practitioners' capacity to critically question their experience and reflect on their actions. For example, a researcher from Key Training, reflected on her own experience of having Irlen Syndrome and discovering the benefits of using colour overlays when she was reading on page and screen. This led her to develop an assessment for learners using colour overlays and to research the impact of this support strategy on her learners.

Multimodal Reporting

Practitioners on the national PLAR programme were encouraged to use multimodal reporting approaches, such as the production of videos, blogs and deeply layered posters. By promoting the use of multimodal reporting, we drew on the work of Cope and Kalantzis (2000). We will share the rationale behind this approach in more depth in a later article. In brief, we hoped to encourage the production of reports that were accessible, more rapidly assimilated and more memorable for practitioners who rarely have the luxury of time to study in a self-directed way. In regional research peer groups, we discussed multimodality in the context of the researchers' audience who, we felt collectively, would be largely other practitioners, as well as managers and the wider education sector and public and who could access reports freely on the programme website. Furthermore, we anticipated and found that, as practitioners became more proficient and confident in exploring a multimodal approach in recording and presenting their research data, they felt more confident in exploring similar teaching approaches with their learners.



Literacies PLAR projects

As well as the work carried out around marking and feedback and introvert/extrovert English language learners, there were many projects over 2 years that centred on literacies (English, maths and ICT). Literacies research in 2015 included the following:

- Resitting GCSE Maths: do growth mindset messages make a difference? (see Sarah Richards' article in this journal)
- Will our Virtual Maths Centre (Maths Central) increase learner confidence and greater success in maths skills?
- Will completing an additional formative assessment tool, prior to undertaking practice tests, help to improve pass rates for Functional Skills Maths L2?
- What is effective practice in the marking of spelling, punctuation and grammar?
- If ESOL learners are disadvantaged when moving on to Functional Skills, how can we bridge the gap?

These and many other research reports can be accessed at <https://practitionerledactionresearch.com>. You can also access a range of resources on the website including; webinars on topics such as research methods, multimodality and 'What is PLAR?' and an eGuide on multimodal reporting. In a follow-up article we will describe more of the resourceful research projects carried out by teachers to find ways to improve their practice, with a particular focus on those working in adult literacies. We will then be able to explain some of the fundamental principles underlying PLAR as a practical form of ethnographic research that can have far reaching impact in current practice.



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Action learning with Irish numeracy tutors

Angela Cahill, Antoinette Delamere, Mary Bambrick, Daniel Sellers and Tina Byrne

Angela Cahill has worked as an adult literacy and numeracy tutor for the last nine years with Louth and Meath Education and Training Board (LMETB) on the east coast of Ireland. She is currently working with the Community Education service within LMETB.

Antoinette Delamere works for The National Learning Network Arklow as a Resource Teacher. In her role she supports learners that have literacy and numeracy difficulties attain person-centred learning goals and QQI maths and communications qualifications.

Mary Bambrick is a literacy and numeracy tutor with the City of Dublin Education and Training Board. She has most recently undertaken tutoring a class in literacy and numeracy through the backdrop of history.

Daniel Sellers grew up in Leeds. He worked as a numeracy and literacy tutor in Liverpool and East Kilbride before taking on a secondment developing adult numeracy for the Scottish Government. He is now a freelance consultant and has lived and worked in England, Scotland, Ireland and Finland.

Tina Byrne is Research Officer at the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA). She has extensive experience in the area of social research particularly adult literacy and numeracy. Her research work includes case studies on literacy and numeracy practice in Ireland, family literacy research, training needs analysis and ESOL

Background

In 2013, the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) published a set of case studies describing numeracy practice in Ireland. The report, What really counts: case studies of numeracy practice in Ireland (<https://www.nala.ie/resources/numeracy-report-what-really-counts-case-studies-adult-numeracy-practice-ireland>) focused largely on the strategies employed by tutors to teach numeracy to adult learners. Following the launch of the report, NALA invited adult numeracy tutors to take part in an action learning project to measure the impact of What really counts by implementing the practice contained in the case studies.

Ten adult numeracy tutors from around Ireland took part in the action learning project. This article describes the experiences of three of these tutors in their own words. The tutors are:

- Angela Cahill, Louth Adult Learning Service, Louth and Meath Education and Training Board
- Antoinette Delamere, National Learning Network, Arklow
- Mary Bambrick, Colaiste Dhulaigh College of Further Education, Coolock, City of Dublin Education and Training Board

The Project

The project was designed to provide support to 'improve the quality of teaching and learning' (NALA, 2014) and to share learning from a set of case studies about numeracy practice. As part of the project the tutors examined the practice described in the case studies, took ideas and inspiration from them, and set about putting these ideas into practice. They were asked to report back on their findings and on what they had learned about themselves as practitioners.

Angela's experience

What I did: Activity 1- Measurement

I wanted to try out 'spaced learning', which aims to break up classroom sessions into short chunks by mixing thinking time with physical activity. The group had been working on the circumference and area of the circle using worksheets but some of the learners were struggling with the principles and calculations. I hoped that this exercise would make the theory more tangible. I asked the group to measure the diameter of their car tyres, downstairs in the car park. The learners brought the measurements back and used them to work out the wheel's circumference. They then went back and physically measured the circumference and compared the measured circumference to the calculated circumference.

What I learned about myself as a practitioner: Activity 1- Spaced learning

I really enjoyed the activity involved in the exercise and this reinforced for me the benefit of encouraging both physical movement and active learning where learners have to make decisions about their learning. For example, rather than provide a measuring instrument in this class, learners had to decide on what to use to measure the circumference: for example, a standard measuring tape, a piece of string or a paper tape available in pharmacies and used for waist measurement. Making mini-decisions such as these within the classroom encourages learners to become active participants in the learning process rather than passive recipients. Swan (2005) suggests that maths may be seen by learners as something that is 'done' to them. As tutors, we should strive to create an environment where learners are engaged to discuss and explain ideas, to challenge each other and to work collaboratively to share results. Listening to the group discussion (which I had recorded with learners' permission) led to some interesting observations on the accuracy of the measuring instrument, possible sources of error and the fallibility of the calculator. As a tutor it was enlightening to listen to my facilitation of the discussion and noticing that I tend to over-explain at times and to jump in with answers without giving the learners time to think through their ideas. Involvement in this project, gave me the opportunity to review my practice. I now try to resist the temptation to fill a silence in the classroom by supplying an answer. Often a prompt is all that is required to encourage learners to have a go and to arrive at understanding, often through discussion.

What I did: Activity 2 - Scale

The concept of scale had arisen in the classroom in relation to reading maps but the rather awkward scale used made it difficult for the group to grasp the maths involved. In order to make the concept more authentic I suggested we try to plan out the layout of a living room. Learners worked in pairs using one centimetre squared paper and had to choose a reasonable scale to represent the room and to furnish it with scaled representations of furniture chosen from an Argos catalogue.

What I learned about myself as a practitioner: Activity 2 - Collaborative learning

This exercise demonstrated the value of a quiet buzz of activity in the adult numeracy classroom. Having at least one activity per session where there is movement, group work, collaboration and active learning taking place, in my opinion, promotes learning on a deeper level. The learners stated that they enjoyed working in pairs and learning from each other. I asked the group how I could extend the exercise if I was doing it with another group and they came up with some great ideas, such as putting a budget on the furnishing, working out best value, adding in sale items with percentage discounts. Asking the group for their suggestions demonstrated that I valued their opinions and that learning in the classroom is a collaborative effort between tutor and group.

Overall, I found being involved in this action learning project very worthwhile. It provided me with a specific opportunity to reflect on my practice. Reflection may not necessarily be comforting, it may cause us to question our motivations and to re-frame our perspectives. However, this process may result in helping us to make sense of our experiences as tutors, giving us an enhanced confidence in our abilities and a strengthening of our convictions in our teaching methodologies.

Antoinette's experience

I work with learners who have learning difficulties. I tried out three activities from the original case studies.

What I did: Activity 1- Data Handling

From the case studies I took the idea of doing a project-based survey exercise to help students better understand how to display data and how to compile and read graphs. Students carried out a survey in the centre. They chose the survey topic (the use of social media), the questions and who they would interview. After the survey they came back into the classroom, collated the data and incorporated the information into a spreadsheet. Together they chose the best kind of chart to display their findings.

What I learned about myself as a practitioner: Activity 1- Constructivist approaches

Carrying out this activity, and reading the approaches to teaching in the NALA report, encouraged me to reflect critically about my approach to teaching maths. Now I always endeavour to adapt a constructivist approach. This encourages learners to ask questions and work collaboratively with the material, with each other and with the tutor. This data handling activity helped me remember that the more involved the students are, the greater the level of their understanding is likely to be. Now, while planning my lessons I reflect on student involvement, and ask myself, is there a possibility of creating a project-based learning experience? Or, can I include paired work? And, how can I get students to ask questions, especially of the maths? For example, which type of chart will display my findings best? Why do we do this? What if I change the number — what will happen to the answer?

What I did: Activity 2- Number Order

This was a new group of students who hadn't written down or worked with numbers since leaving school many years previously. The activity focused on place value and sequencing numbers. The students called out random numbers (from large whole numbers down to two decimal places) and the task was to write up the numbers on the white board with the correct place values, and then on paper in pairs to put them in ascending order.

What I learned about myself as a practitioner: Activity 2- Peer learning

Again, this activity highlighted to me the value of student involvement and peer work to increase the quality of the learning experience. Previous to this I may have chosen numbers for the students to order but from this exercise I have come to see how allowing the students get involved in creating the material greatly increases their interest and ultimately their learning. Where possible now I try to include an element in all my maths classes where students are involved in providing the material.

What I did: Activity 3- Measurement

I asked students to use a tape to measure a table and a sofa. Initially they didn't know how to hold the tape or where to start reading the measurements. I showed them how to hold and read a tape and how to measure the length, width and height of the furniture.

What I learned about myself as a practitioner: Activity 3 - Teachable moments

This activity helped me as a tutor to understand the idea of capturing 'teachable moments'. Although this initial activity was to learn to use a measuring tape correctly, during the class the students started to discuss the need to measure the doorway to make sure the sofa could fit through the space. We then went on to measure the sofa and the classroom doorway and used the Argos catalogue to pick out sofas we could and couldn't fit through. This showed me that, where appropriate, branching off from the main topic to answer students' practical questions can provide very meaningful learning experiences.

Mary's experience

What I did: Measurement and shape

I work with a learner one-to-one. He was interested in building a new kitchen, so we looked at measurement to show him how to use measuring tools effectively (a ruler and a measuring tape). We also looked at shapes, and learning these using everyday objects.

What I learned about myself as a practitioner:

I learned a number of valuable lessons:

- Not to make assumptions about what a learner does or does not know.
- While I use questioning in teaching spelling and reading, I had not been using it in numeracy lessons. I am now mindful to use this tool, especially when introducing a new topic.
- I have tended to focus on resources as a starting point in covering a topic rather than looking at the topic and what needs to be covered and in what depth, and working from there.
- There can be a fine line between the use of questioning and highlighting what a student does not know. It is important not to overwhelm a learner by highlighting their knowledge gaps, especially when introducing a new topic.
- There are spelling/reading opportunities in numeracy which should be built into the lesson plan.

Top tips for tutors

Antoinette and Mary created a 'top tips' handout to share with other tutors at NALA's national numeracy conference in June 2014. Here is a brief extract from the top tips. You can find the full version on NALA's website.

What Really Counts Numeracy Project: Tutor Tips

Use of Questioning:

Allow an appropriate pause after a question to allow time to think - don't jump in with a clue or answer

Measuring:

Use a catalogue to get learners design a room encompasses measurement, scale, problem solving skills (and money - if you ask them to cost or work within a budget)

Money:

Using leaflets for Broadband offers - to cost out the long term cost of changeover

Use of Technology:

Think about how you can use technology - as part of the curriculum, as a delivery mechanism, as a complement to instruction and as an instructional tool

As a tutor don't be afraid to ask colleagues for ideas!

To read the original case studies, see What really counts: Case studies of adult numeracy practice in Ireland (<https://www.nala.ie/resources/numeracy-report-what-really-counts-case-studies-adult-numeracy-practice-ireland>)

To read more detailed accounts of these tutors' and others' experiences, see What really counts next: Action learning project with numeracy tutors.

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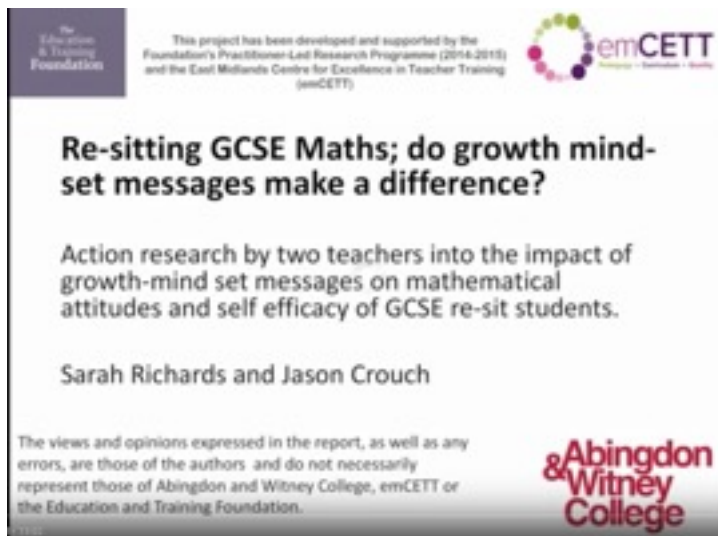
Did growth mind set messages make a difference?

Sarah Richards

Sarah Richards has worked in education for over 30 years, mainly in Latin America and the UK. At present she teaches GCSE maths at Abingdon and Witney Further Education College, Oxfordshire. She also works as a Professional Development Lead with the Education and Training Foundation Maths Pipeline programme.

In recent years the national pass rate for students retaking GCSE maths at further education colleges has been just over 20%. It is therefore not surprising that students are pessimistic about their chances of success when they embark on the compulsory retake course in September. It is very likely that this pessimism, which generally includes the belief of being 'rubbish at maths', impedes learning.

At Abingdon and Witney college in 2014/15 a colleague and I tried systematically to challenge unhelpful beliefs about learning maths by using 'growth mind set messages' to see if this would result in a change in attitudes and attainment. We carried out a practitioner led action research project (funded by the ETF and emCETT) and based our intervention on material and ideas we got from the Stanford University MOOC 'How to Learn Maths for Students'. The MOOC is based Dweck's 'growth mind set' approach and adapted for maths by Jo Boaler and team (Boaler, 2014). The basic messages were that the brain is plastic and it is not 'talent' that makes the difference but: perseverance; making mistakes; struggle; seeking to understand the 'big' ideas; discussion and working with others. Judging by the feedback this approach had a positive impact on the majority of the students. Our report is titled: Resitting GCSE Maths; do growth mind set messages make a difference?



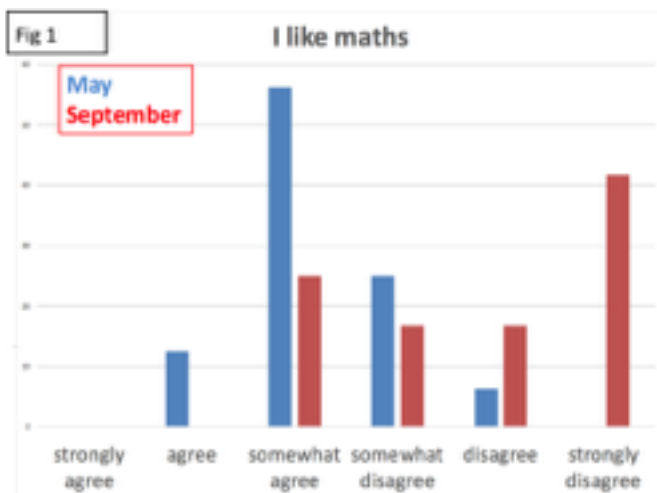
There is also a video made by the students: GCSE Student Interviews:



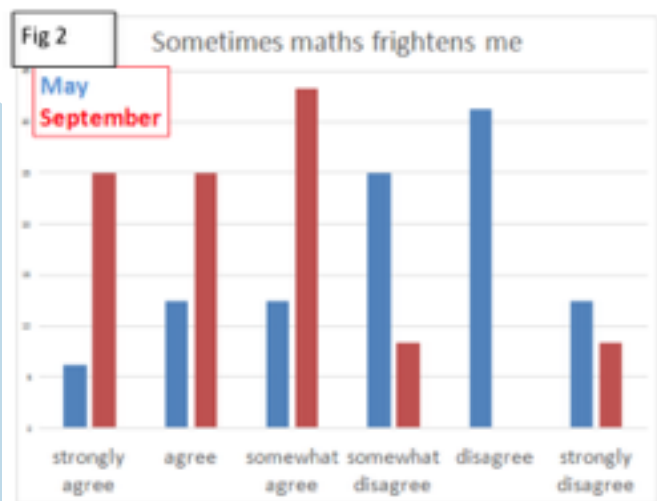
My colleague was a student teacher and the pressures of study, teaching and a new baby meant that he didn't implement all the ideas although he was a great help in discussing the themes. So the final analysis was only done on my 19 students. At the beginning of the year 75% of students said they didn't like maths lessons. At the end of the academic year about 70% of the students reported liking maths lessons; the remaining 30% disliked them less (fig 1). However they did no better in the exam than in previous years when there hadn't been a focus on growth mind set messages (42% of the students passed; 8/19). They all had had a D to begin with; six had made no appreciable mathematical progress and three, who got an E, appeared to have gone backwards! I was disappointed. However, it is now a year on. Although I'm not teaching any of them I see the eight who are still at college around the campus. In September 2015 four of these students said that they were determined to pass this year. One had been particularly negative and grumpy at the beginning of the previous year. It is now June. Because of the progress she has made one has been nominated as college maths student of the year and another one passed the November retake. Eight have sat the June 2016 exams; the results won't be known until August but in the Easter mocks four either passed or did well enough to be predicted a C, one didn't take the exam and three have been a predicted a D. It is perhaps not fair to judge the impact of the messages over just one year. The students come with substantial negative feelings about maths and beliefs about their capacity and it takes time to remedy this.

At the end of the 2014/15 year we were particularly concerned about the students whose attitude to maths had remained negative throughout the year and who appeared to have made little or no progress and, of course, we wanted all the students to do better. Bandura’s concept of ‘self-efficacy’ (Bandura, 1997) appears to offer a way forward as it indicates how the impact of the messages could be increased. Self-efficacy is the strength of a person’s belief that a particular goal can be achieved. It is dependent on context; a person may have high self-efficacy with football but not with plumbing. High self-efficacy is associated with perseverance and success. Bandura (1997) identified four key influences on self-efficacy: verbal support from others; peers’/role models’ performance at similar tasks; how increased physiological arousal is interpreted e.g., nervousness before an exam can be interpreted as a sign of incompetence or of being alert and prepared; and, the most important influence in building self-efficacy, success at similar, challenging tasks. Mind-set messages (verbal support) are of limited use if students are not simultaneously experiencing success at challenging maths tasks.

In order to achieve the all important success at challenging tasks it is necessary to become engaged and stay engaged. Staying engaged when ‘stuck’ is what most students find difficult. This could be because experience has taught them that effort doesn’t necessarily bring success. Students indignantly questioned the mind-set message about ‘keeping going’. Many felt that they had tried hard but it hadn’t worked. At the beginning of the year our students believed that maths was mainly about memorisation; this belief did not change significantly over the year. The use of memorisation as a principal strategy is associated with poorer test scores (PISA 2012). It is not enough to give growth mind-set messages without systematically teaching more effective maths working practices and supporting students to adopt them.



Only providing cognitive strategies is probably not enough. The highly emotional nature of maths learning has to be taken into account too. The 2012 PISA study found that 26% of 15 – 16 year olds in the UK suffered from maths anxiety. This percentage is likely to be much higher in the re-sit group. Maths anxiety was probably a significant factor in the students who still felt negative about maths at the end of the year; about 75% felt negative at the beginning of the year and about 30% at the end (fig 1). High anxiety makes the working memory less efficient and causes avoidance behaviour. Both of these mean less is learned. Students correctly assess that their maths is not up to the required standard but incorrectly attribute the cause to innate incapacity, and so draw the conclusion that effort is pointless.



The majority of students in 2014/2015 reported feeling anxious about maths at the beginning of the year (fig 2) and at the end of the year about 30% were still feeling intimidated.

So this year (2015/16) I have tried explicitly to acknowledge and address maths anxiety. This was done by introducing Johnston-Wilder and Lee’s ‘growth zone model’ metaphor (Johnston-Wilder et al 2013) to the students at the beginning of the year. The model makes it clear that, although the ‘comfort’ zone is necessary for consolidation, it is working in the ‘growth’ zone, with its concomitant feelings of uncertainty, doubt and excitement, that is essential for progress. This approach

shifts the focus away from the deficiencies of the learner to the characteristics of the task. If a task is in the 'anxiety' zone it is because there are underpinning skills and knowledge that have yet to be acquired. It may be that assessment for learning (AfL) is so effective, not only because of all the well known cognitive reasons, but also because of the affective impact. When AfL is done well, students regularly experience satisfaction, and sometimes joy, when they succeed at challenging maths.

The zones metaphor was helpful for various reasons: it reframed feelings of mild anxiety and frustration. They were seen as a necessary and a sign of being in the growth zone. It was helpful with extreme emotional reactions e.g., when a student had maths-induced panic attacks as it enabled her to appreciate that feeling nervous was normal and could be managed (the panic attacks had stopped by the autumn half term). The 'zones' gave a simple vocabulary that could be used to discuss the impact of the maths activity on their emotional state e.g., a student on the autistic spectrum said, 'My problem is I don't have a growth zone. I go straight from comfort to panic.' This led to a conversation about techniques which the student could use to enlarge her maths growth zone; they appear to be helping. The zones metaphor also provided a framework for the growth mind-set messages, e.g., a sign of being in the growth or learning zone is struggling and making mistakes.

The growth mind-set messages can seem simplistic and over optimistic; changing habits of thought is complex and it is unreasonable to expect miracles. The importance of the wider socio-psychological context and whether the maths being taught is of relevance to the students also needs to be taken into account; so too does the fact that some students require individualised and specialist support. Specialist support might have been the crucial missing element for the 3/19 students who appear to have made little progress over the past two years. It could also be that college maths was felt to be irrelevant and not worth the bother.

So what does this mean for the socio-psychological aspects of my practice next year? Like last year I will continue giving the growth mind-set messages (hopefully in a culturally sensitive way) and will set them within the growth zone model. The emphasis has been on enabling individual students to develop mathematical resilience. Next year I aim to explore ways of building a resilient and supportive learning community. The emphasis will be on how each student can contribute to the mathematical progress and well-being of the whole class. There is substantial evidence, both ancient wisdom and modern psychology (Seligman, 2011), that shifting focus away from individual concerns to the group's welfare benefits everyone. So worth a try in the maths classroom!

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Lifelong literacy for all

Tara Furlong

Tara has twenty years' experience in adult education and training in the private and public sectors in the UK and abroad, specialising in integrated English language, literacies and digital learning. She has an ongoing interest in the relationship between multi-modal and contextualised, versus abstracted learning; and its mirror in social and literate practices and language across life spheres. She can be contacted on tara.furlong@designingfutures.uk.

The Uppingham Seminars are a long-running occasional series, facilitated by international literacies specialists who develop a programme through an initial discussion around the themes and challenges of the seminar proposal. This April 2016 at Dunford House, West Sussex UK, there were twenty-two participants from across the globe including representatives from sections of UNESCO, educational NGOs, literacies practitioners, researchers and academics.

I was interested in participating to inspire and inform my own work and to engage in dialogues with peers. The lifelong learning agenda in the UK is under significant stress and the current negotiations around the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) give an opportunity to reflect, take stock and refocus our agendas. It was useful to find that challenges I am aware of in many areas of my work are being addressed at the level of global institutions and their interactions with states. It is a tonic to share the examples of distilled best practices we invest so much of ourselves in developing and keeping alive as going concerns.



To launch the seminar, the international cohort considered the background papers which enabled a diversity of discussion, questions and commentary, which were reformulated to overarching themes for further exploration over the course of two days' plenary and breakout groups.

Brief presentations of specialist work opened up the multiple perspectives inherent in local contexts, interpretations and global frameworks 'to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all' (UN, 2015). It was inspirational to see in evidence in the room and implicitly in the works presented, the sustained individual and societal commitments to addressing deep-rooted challenges and iteratively building better futures for all. The focus of the seminar was on the United Nations (UN) SDGs 2015-2030 agreed in September 2015, and the meaning and implementation of lifelong learning in SDG4: 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. The role of lifelong learning across the other goals (UNESCO, 2014), in terms of implementation and achievement, was considered, in addition to the centrality of gender equality. Literacy threaded as a theme throughout. The UNESCO Education 2030 Framework for Action (FFA) agreed November 2015, provides a more detailed framework for interpretation and implementation of SDG4.



Each SDG comprises targets, such as 'By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy'. Each has associated indicative strategies, such as 'Scale up effective adult literacy and skills programmes involving civil society as partners, building on their rich experience and good practice' and specific indicators such as 'Participation rate of youth/ adults in literacy programme'. It is anticipated that long-term investment in research and development may be substantially directed by these indicators (UN, 2016), due for final stage agreement and publication shortly. As such, it is critical that the indicators match closely to the activities most likely to generate agreed target and final SDG goals, while being sufficiently

open to encourage innovative responses to entrenched challenges. UNESCO's Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) and Institute for Statistics (UIS) triennial Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE) (UIL, 2016) occurs in tandem with Global Education Monitoring (GEM) reporting, both of which contribute to informing and forming international activity. GRALE is due to publish the latest global overview in 2016, identifying major global trends and implications for educational provision.

Critical formative activity includes international agreements around the SDGs and the FFA generated by almost two hundred Member States' educational representatives, academics and other education professionals. In November 2015 the UNESCO general conference adopted detailed recommendations on adult learning and education, and other areas such as technical and vocational education and training (TVET). These documents give guidance to Member States on areas of action to achieve stated aims and objectives across policy; governance; financing; participation, inclusion and equity; quality; and international co-operation. Literacy is recognised as the foundation for lifelong learning; social equity is emphasised, particularly gender equality; and stakeholder participation, partnership and decentralisation promote concepts of learning cities, towns and villages.

Capacity for comparative data collection and evaluation from the national level to local stands out as a significant area of development building on pre-2015 work on Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals 2000-2015 (Benavot and Stepanek Lockhart, 2016). These lie on international variably-defined concepts of 'foundational', 'transferable', 'vocational' and 'soft' skills. Provision globally is overwhelmingly non-formal and consequently non-standardised; and in the UK there is a renewed drive to develop integrated literacies through all forms and levels of provision (Furlong, 2016). These factors present challenges to large-scale comparative evaluation and associated policy and resourcing responses. There is a range of international survey instruments, such as the OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). However, the degree to which they may be applicable to lower income countries' capacity to quantify their populations' skills objectively has been debated.

Flexibility of context and informed learner choice were identified as critical to adult learning, where this is seen as everyday learning; while adult education is framed as planned educational activities. The necessity of multi-path multi-entry-point educational provision which recognises prior learning from non-formal and informal routes was emphasised repeatedly. Queries were raised regarding the balance between education and other development goals in funded activity which mobilises communities drawing on themes of health and well-being, community and society, as well as employment and labour market outcomes.

Within the incredible diversity of education experience present, two participants specialised in inter-generational and community learning projects and we were fortunate to hear about their work. Others specialised in integrated literacies and vocational learning provision.

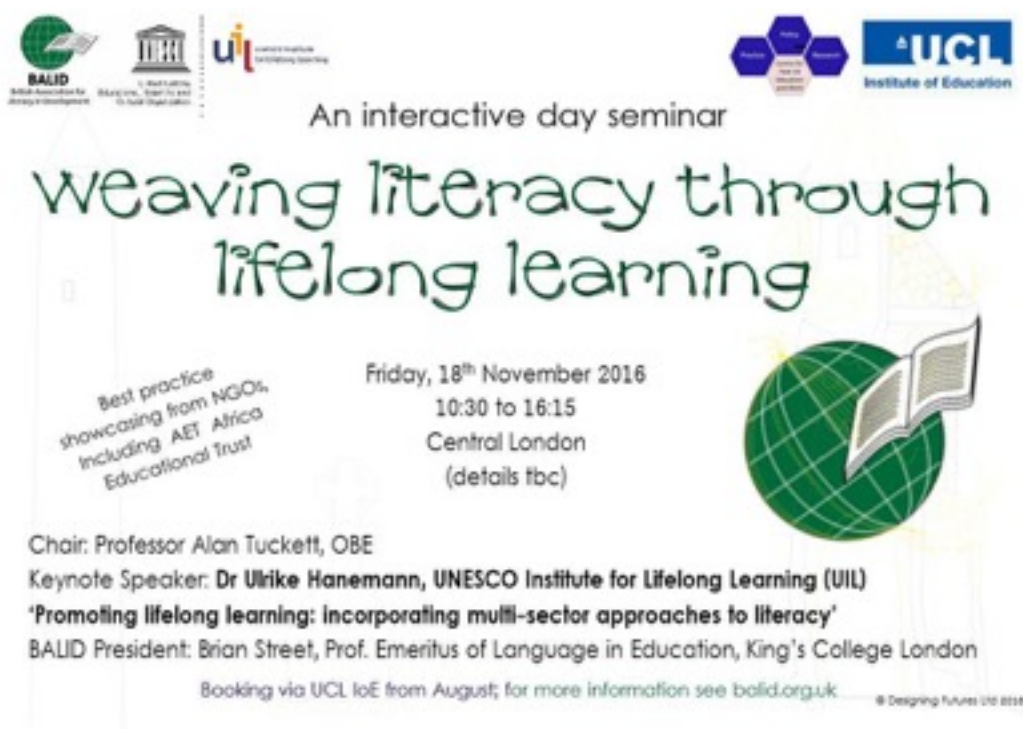
- 'Academy of Parents in Leadership' at National Louis University in the USA supports family learning environments in combination with community and leadership development and parents' work skills. It runs for a session a week over ten to twelve weeks. This form of university-hosted course, with academic-led workshops accumulating college credits, was a major confidence boost and motivator for participants, many of whom may not have completed school. All participants engage in a school and community project as part of the programme, such as creating a school PTO (parents and teachers organisation). Participation in the course has led to parents resuming or starting college, going back to attain more English skills, or become part of school-led initiatives, such as the parent teacher organisations (PTO) or bilingual parent associations (BPAC).
- The Centre for Lifelong Learning, Makerere University, Uganda, presented on local NGO work which brings together ethno-linguistically diverse communities at rotating annual events to reinforce their informal literacies practices and intergenerational learning. They argue that this support is critical to responding to the challenges facing current generations (Ngaka, Graham, Masagazi Masaazi and Anyandru, 2015).

UNESCO's Institute for Lifelong Learning database www.unesco.org/uil/litbase/ provides a collection of articles on effective teaching and learning practices in adult literacies.

The seminar participants considered the role of language and dialogue in engaging, motivating and underpinning learning, thought and cognitive development at all levels. For adult learners in particular, they concluded, it is not just learning basic 'reading, writing and a bit of speaking and listening' but criticality and application in every 'literacy' domain, whether media, science or computer. Interest was expressed in quality control mechanisms such as integrated assignment briefs, portfolios, moderation practices, qualification outcomes and staff development. This ties in to my own current research and long-term work interests in learning organisations, networks and systemic quality improvement mechanisms.

I continuously find myself inspired by the commitment and successes of lifelong learning provision in the UK and abroad, in the face of all the challenges that present. A recent article in The Guardian "We're still failing to teach children to read, after all these years" (Comings, 2016) gives reason to be grateful for progress to date, although also shows how far we have to go. We live in hope that effective practices, once in existence, can be supported to gradually take root and grow in new contexts.

As a follow-up to the Uppingham Seminar in April, the British Association of Literacy in Development (BALID) is arranging a day seminar on literacies in lifelong learning, Friday 18 November 2016 at UCL Institute of Education in London, details to be confirmed.



BALID British Association for Literacy in Development
UCL Institute of Education
UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL)

An interactive day seminar

Weaving literacy through lifelong learning

Best practice showcasing from NGOs, including AET Africa Educational Trust

Friday, 18th November 2016
 10:30 to 16:15
 Central London
 (details tbc)

Chair: Professor Alan Tuckett, OBE
 Keynote Speaker: **Dr Ulrike Hanemann, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL)**
 'Promoting lifelong learning: incorporating multi-sector approaches to literacy'
 BALID President: Brian Street, Prof. Emeritus of Language in Education, King's College London

Booking via UCL IoE from August; for more information see balid.org.uk

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Collecting and sharing knowledge: migrant women and family learning

Sarah Foster

Sarah Foster is an adult educator who has worked in adult and community education in London for over 30 years. She worked as an ESOL teacher and co-ordinator for a long period and for the past 10 years has worked in the field of Family Learning. In 2011 she returned to learning and completed an MSc in Education Power and Social Change at Birkbeck, University of London. She is interested in community-based adult education as a field for challenge and resistance, for both practitioners and students.

Introduction

This article presents some key findings from a research project into the learning experiences of migrant women in community-based Family Learning courses in North West London. It focuses on the element of my research which examined the relationship between institutional audit and assessment practices, driven by wider policy priorities, and the lived experience of these women as learners and knowledge builders.

Family Learning and the Policy Context

The policy context for Family Learning is changing as the historically broad flow of adult and community education provision is channeled into the increasingly narrow policy stream of 'employability'. Although Family Learning, and some other strands of adult community education, have yet to be completely absorbed into this stream, the assessment and recording requirements associated with the employability agenda are lapping at the edges of our provision, as outlined below.

The image of community education as being relatively informal and responsive to community needs can mask underlying policies heavily weighted towards individualism, often ignoring deep and persistent inequalities associated with factors such as class, race and gender. Policy themes such as social cohesion, inclusion and participation, along with terms such as 'parent empowerment' and 'empowering communities', have been used loosely and unreflexively in many policy documents. Though sounding benign, such discourse is steeped in an ideology where inclusion is only achieved through adherence to the prescribed norms of the dominant culture. Increasingly this means participation defined as economic participation through employment, and empowerment only within safe boundaries (Jackson, 2011, Johnston, 2003). Empowerment is limited to an active citizenship which still complies within an often very unequal system, rather than empowerment to challenge it.

In the Family Learning context there is an emphasis on reaching out to parents perceived as excluded. Clarke (2006) describes a cultural and moral discourse in which these marginalised groups are too often negatively represented, and much has been written about the importance of challenging this (Clegg & McNulty, 2002; Clarke, 2006; Bagley & Ackerly, 2006, Thompson, 2005). Many policies aimed at families increasingly throw the responsibility to break the cycle of poverty back on to individuals. There is a tendency to see individual empowerment as the route out of exclusion and poverty. The building of individual 'confidence' is often cited, and, in my view, overused as a positive outcome. For those seeking evidence of policy success it is an easy and convenient slippage of meaning to equate confidence with power. The particular relevance of these policies for this study, is that, in the settings under consideration, the deficit view of families that do not adhere to the norms of the dominant culture, and the individualisation of solutions to what are conceived as their social problems, are often closely identified with migrant women.

Situated on the margins of mainstream policy and practice, Family Learning courses have been more likely to be exempt from the more stringent regulations for assessment and for monitoring outcomes, and the requirements of the employability agenda have been addressed with a lighter touch. Where there is no accreditation, the RARPA process (Recognition and Recording of Progression and Achievement) is the required method of assessment. In some cases, however, documentation such as 'route to work plans' have been introduced, and 'soft' outcomes such as increased confidence are claimed as being early-stage employability outcomes. This sets up a contradiction in the messages women may be receiving through this kind of provision, in terms of inclusion and participation. On the

one hand they must be 'good parents', devoting themselves to breaking the cycle of poverty through supporting their children's learning and development in quite a prescribed way. On the other hand, they must be 'good economic citizens', and see education opportunities and outcomes solely in relation to their employability.

I support the view of Preston and others (Preston, 2006, Martin, 2006, Thompson, 2005) that the trend within community-based services for collecting qualitative data on learners is often no more than the 'auditing of individualised learning within a moral framework of (normatively) good citizenship and behaviour' (Preston, 2006:167). The data becomes 'the property of provider' (ibid) and is used merely to justify funding claims. There is also a need to question the benefit, especially to the learner, of seemingly endless evaluations and surveys. I would again agree with Preston (2006) that lurking within the positive argument that we should give marginalised learners a 'voice', is a danger of conflating this with real empowerment.

Bellis and Morris (2003) in their work focusing specifically on asylum seekers, argue for a move away from inclusion being equated with acceptance of unquestioned norms of the majority culture. In their study of learner identities Clegg & McNulty (2002) sum up some of these themes in their argument that policy connections between lifelong learning, employment and inclusion misunderstand the links 'between people's lives and learning'.

This project examines to what extent, if at all, the processes of learning taking place in and around community-based centres are linked with inclusion, within the narrow definitions that predominate. I was interested to see how the collecting and sharing of knowledge that these women were engaged with, matched, diverged from, escaped or resisted this policy and assessment context.

Research practice

My research perspective draws on feminist originated ideas on positioning, awareness and purpose. As described by Kelly it is, 'about the questions we have asked, the way we locate ourselves within our questions and the purpose of our work' (Kelly in Maynard & Purvis 2002). Järviluoma is helpful in highlighting how the researcher brings his/her own experiences of the gendered world to research and 'participates in the construction of gender in the course of the research as well' (Järviluoma et al 2003: 25). McDowell's approach emphasises positioning in relation to different knowledges and power structures and the importance of a commitment 'to making visible the claims of the less powerful' (McDowell 1992: 408). Two of the principles of feminist research outlined by Cohen & Mannion (2011) - the relation between theory and practice, and connecting the public and private - are also key.

Maynard & Purvis (2002) rightly stress that gender should not be isolated from race, class, disability and other factors of oppression. I took a decision however, not to collect in-depth background information on the participants, though some came up naturally in the interviews. These women repeatedly get asked sets of questions when they are accessing services, for data collection by providers. I wanted to distance myself from this kind of questioning and for participants to experience the interviews as something distinct from this. This choice does result in a shortfall in information relating to social and economic factors, which make up a particularly complex picture for diasporic groups, who are often socially and economically repositioned as a result of migration. This was a dilemma as a researcher, especially as these women are too commonly viewed as a homogenised group, and targeted in policies of inclusion simply because they are from migrant groups, while other contextual factors are ignored.

For me, the gendered nature of the research was reflected in how the methods played out for both myself and participants. The delaying of interviews because of commitments to cook for a school event, cancellation because of child sickness, interruptions to feed a child, the last minute cancellation a class because of a family emergency – all these highlight the porosity of boundaries between the fields of home, family, learning, caring, educating and community activity that women are active in. My research was bound up with the rhythm of these women's lives and the negotiation of time in the competing fields of work, study and home in my own. The gendered nature of the kind of learning and knowledge under consideration is a thread running through the project and it was important that the research practice fitted this.

The centres under consideration provided suitable and interesting multicultural contexts in which to conduct the research. They are hybrid spaces where cultures, generations and ways of learning are mixed. Being closely knit with

the caring roles and everyday responsibilities and experience of the women using them, they are spaces where boundaries between domestic and public arenas are less distinct. These characteristics, along with the ways in which policy agendas are put into practice, create a complex dynamic for both practitioners and service users from which a variety of processes related to inclusion and resistance can spring. Being government funded but community based, they highlight tensions between policy and resistance.

The project eventually resulted in eighteen semi-structured interviews, twelve with mothers across five Children's Centres and two primary schools and six with education and community practitioners. The student participants in the research were all 'ESOL learners' however they used the centres for a range of learning opportunities and their responses are not limited to their experience of ESOL or Family Learning.

Research Findings

Formal and informal learning

Both formal and informal learning were considered within the study. All organised courses taking place in community settings are considered as formal (though they may be quite informal in style, they nearly always have predetermined outcomes). Any learning that takes place, intentionally or unintentionally, through interactions outside planned sessions is referred to as informal. The settings and type of provision shape the learning in a way that makes both important as different knowledges can be gained from each. Hillier (2011: 143), referring to Smith and Spurling, characterises informal learning as 'always occurring, unplanned and though "prevalen" often unrecognised'. Morrice (2009: 669) states in relation to refugees that 'formal planned learning is only a very small part of the totality of significant learning'; similarly Jackson (2010) sees it as only the visible tip of the iceberg. Some suggest that the two are in fact not always distinct (McGivney, 2004).

Some participants saw little separation between formal and informal learning as they described a whole experience of courses, events, activities and facilities. Informal learning was not always articulated as such and often expressed through the value attached to inter-cultural exchange, or through interactions and relationships with a range of staff. However, in some cases there was a sense of hierarchy; knowledge gained more formally was more highly valued because it was recognised more widely.

The knowledge women gain through informal learning is highly gendered; because it is mainly about home, education, children, friends, services, it is likely to be less widely valued. It is mainly circulated and recognised within their own circles as mothers and as migrant women. The 'knowers' and what is 'known' that Jackson talks about (Jackson, 2007) are operating in the same field. In some cases the value of it seems to be unrecognised even by the 'knowers'.

Collecting and sharing knowledge

Though often automatically included in the 'hard to reach' category prioritised by policy makers, the evidence collected shows many of the women participants to be active agents in the search for participation in formal and informal learning opportunities. Their initial motivation is often because of their responsibilities as the main contact with services and because of a desire to gain skills in order to support their children's learning.

A striking feature of the participants' description of their learning experiences was its being expressed as an activity of collecting knowledge, taking what they want from the landscape of learning available to them and assembling their own picture. Their knowledge is pieced together from multiple ways of learning, from experiences and from relationships with professionals and each other. The image of items in a bag, given by one interviewee, encapsulates the process of collecting, using and sharing, that came across so strongly.

'It's like having a bag – the more things in it the more I can give out.'

What they choose to collect in their bag and what they choose to do with it, makes it their own. It is a highly active process that belies the image of migrant women as reluctant, problematic, passive, and it is certainly not the simple consumption of learning associated with models of assimilation. There is little evidence of a desire to belong within the dominant culture without considering the terms on which they wish to be included.

Learning and the sharing of learning are not easily separated. What clearly stood out was the number of women who expressed sharing information as a responsibility or duty; in any knowledge gained a potential for sharing was always considered. They share with children, partners, family members and other women. As the main mediators with services it was clear that the exchange of knowledge in this area was highly valued by participants and the gendered nature of the knowledge collected was highlighted

'If my husband he don't know about something, because he always busy with his work, I have experience, I know, I just tell him Oh yeah, I know something about this one today.'

'We swap each other and sometimes some new things come out for the mothers... so they share it with me, I share it with them.'

What seems particularly important to the participants is the accumulation of shared knowledge about learning itself. This collective culture centred on the exchange of information about learning opportunities of all kinds, spills out beyond the confines of the centres into the playground and the street as part of everyday interaction.

'Now we ask each other, when we go out, like dropping the kids, [we] say, "Oh you know I'm going this course, I'm doing this".'

Being informed, getting involved, resisting

Many women expressed the desire to be involved in the schools and centres in a variety of ways. This is framed in terms of 'knowing' and interestingly, language ability is not always the key. Again this was not seen as an individualised gain; rather there was clear recognition of the power of an approach that accumulates not only knowledge itself but also people who are 'knowers'.

'Now I feel like I can, I want to be at the meetings. Now I want to be involved in everything...I want to know Ok...Although I have difficulty speaking, they say you can't talk, why you going there, but still - I'll say.'

'Also as a group we can do everything; we can. I don't want it to be me only the one with an education, the one who knows'

At a school with a high proportion of Somali parents and a very active Parent Support worker (also a research participant) there was evidence of what can happen when this collective culture of accumulation and sharing of knowledge is activated. The parents were able to successfully challenge the school on several issues including cost of school trips for those with large families and a fingerprint recognition system for children signing books in and out. As Mohamed (1999) also highlights in her study of Somali women in Canada, the parents are challenging the way they are, "socially constructed as problematic, dependent on the system, and unable to adjust to life" in a new country.

Jackson cites Freire's view that through education people can become 'capable of knowing that they know and knowing that they don't' and discover 'they can make and remake themselves' (Freire, 2004 in Jackson, 2010). The collective action taking place amongst these groups seems to spring in part from this awareness and from new social bonds created through learning, from the creation of a learning culture and importantly through viewing learning as a shared resource.

Inter-culture / dominant culture

Inter-cultural links were a very strong theme in the interviews. Participants frequently described the informal learning experience as an exchange, happening across cultural groups at least as often as within groups. Interestingly, there was no special mention of a dominant host culture but much said about variety.

Significantly, one of the main reasons for learning English was so they could talk to each other, not necessarily to native English speakers. However, learning English was also seen as a kind of activator without which the other kinds of knowledge they have gained, or indeed already have, cannot be recognized outside their own groupings.

'If I stay at home, only I've got my country ideas, there's no chance, no. This is..I can meet all the people, those who come from different communities and different, different views and experience.'

It is interesting that so much activity takes place amongst cultural groups sharing a disadvantaged or marginalised position (Brah, 1996) and is only partially or indirectly mediated by the dominant culture. The cultural mix of the area, where diasporic groups make up about half the population and where there is a wide range of communities rather than one dominant group clearly has an influence on this (Office of National Statistics 2009).

Individual v collective practice

The research seemed to reveal that learning and the accumulation of knowledge for these women, far from being perceived as the individual journey it is set up to be in policy and practice, was an activity dependent on sharing, exchange and collectivity. The issue of recognition within and beyond the circles they moved in was also important and it had an impact on the ways they determined the value of their own learning. I drew on theories of social and relational capital to explore this further.

The building of social capital is often seen as key to combating the exclusion of individuals and communities. In their study of Sure Start Children's Centres, Bagley and Ackerley (2006) cite Gewirtz (2005) who distinguishes between bonding, bridging and linking social capital; the first being networks within groups, the second being horizontal connections between heterogeneous groups and the last, vertical associations providing links to more powerful individuals and institutions. Morrice (2007), in a study of refugee groups, also distinguishes between bonding and bridging capital.

Jackson (2010 & 2011) writes that the building of social capital can be beneficial but also exclusive. The social capital built by marginalised groups may not be valued by dominant groups, 'social capital that is developed for example by women in the home or community.' (Jackson, 2011: 5). In her article about migrant women using social spaces for informal learning Jackson (2010), proposes that they are building what she names as 'relational capital'. This can be the formation of networks replacing those damaged by the migration experience and also about finding ways of understanding new relationships and, 'different ways of knowing and experiencing in sometimes competing worlds' (Jackson, 2010: 249). In contrast to social capital, which is about accumulating individual benefits and privileges, the process of building relational capital is described as a more collective experience based on the formation of 'communities of practice', building a 'repertoire of resources'; a 'collective stock' (ibid 250).

The strong desire to collect and share found amongst the participants could be viewed in terms of concepts of 'linking' or 'bridging' social capital. But as it seems rooted in a desire to include, rather than build a privileged group that potentially excludes (though as marginalized groups who would they exclude?). It seems to coincide more with Jackson's (2010) notion of communities of practice that produce relational capital and a 'collective stock' of resources.

Research conclusion

An analysis of the findings of the project suggests that migrant women attending classes are engaged with active processes of collecting, sharing and utilising their learning in ways which do not match current discourses of inclusion and whose participation is not necessarily on the terms that providers and policy makers intend. In

particular, they do not fit neatly with the individualisation of problems and solutions relating to members of groups conceived as excluded and problematic.

These participants challenge the positioning of migrant women as passive consumers of the courses they are targeted for by those of us who collaborate in this sector to provide them. However, this is not to devalue the courses themselves: it is clear that these are highly valued. It seems especially important that there is a range of provision, both in terms of subject (with ESOL often being the core), and in terms of formality or informality. This allows for a rich resource from which women can choose to fill their 'bags', and where the collective processes of knowledge-building and sharing can take place.

The nature of the hybrid spaces provided by the centres is important. They are places where women can operate in their multiple roles and where the complexity and porosity of boundaries between these roles can be recognised and valued as a strength. They are also key to the processes of building and developing these roles as well as new ones.

For me, the value and power of these individual and collective knowledge gains go far beyond what are sometimes called 'soft outcomes'; they are not in our control, they are gained and used on the students' own terms and are just as much about action and resistance as compliance and inclusion. Most importantly in my view, these outcomes belong to learners. They are not ours to take possession of, to be pinned down, boxed and ticked. I hope that I have been able to use the data I have collected to show that the claims we often make on learning do not reflect the complex and varied learning processes taking place in people's lives and cannot and should not be appropriated in this way.

I hope my research serves as is a reminder to challenge the way migrant women learners are recognized in our workplaces and beyond. We should give value to the seemingly everyday, but often powerful, processes of knowledge building they are engaged in without seeking to make a claim on them. In a practical way, we can be thoughtful about what we try and 'capture', and what it is not appropriate for us to make claims on, when designing and completing 'Individual Learning Plans' and evaluations for the RARPA process. And we can acknowledge that in our day-to-day working life, where there is little time to talk to students in depth, there is much that may not even come to our attention.

Mirza (2009) uses the analogy of a quilt to describe how women work – using what they have, putting pieces together, making a whole that is more than the sum of its parts, a sometimes slow but powerful creative process. The image was also suggested by one of the women practitioners I spoke to:

'It's like a patchwork quilt almost isn't it?'

Just as powerful was the student's metaphor of a bag for collecting and sharing knowledge. In the highly gendered sector which is adult and community education, these two images can support us (learners and practitioners) in resisting individualistic and simplistic ideas of achievement and outcomes, and acknowledging the collective and creative learning processes that happen within and beyond our institutions.

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Stories of Resilience

Tara Furlong

Resilience: Stories of Adult Learning is a learner voice co-publication between RaPAL and ACAL (Australian Council for Adult Literacy) with support from our respective Adult Learners Weeks. The project is now in publication. However, RaPAL are happy to continue to receive stories to publish in this section of the journal. Tara can be contacted on webweaver@rapal.org.uk.

Star Painter, Learning in Wiltshire

Hi, I am Star and I guess the very beginning of my journey I don't quite remember due to my very full life. I first embarked on a course set up by the lovely ladies from the Family Learning Team in Wiltshire, very much needed at the time, called Time for U, and have never looked back. They had inspired something in me: not just to go forward but to help other parent carers succeed in a brighter achievable future. Having set a group up, I needed to do something different to all other groups that seemed to be going stale. I do believe without the support of Lucinda and her lovely tutors, I would never have achieved being here writing this. They saw something in me too.



After attending several more courses, I became so positive in achieving greater things. I then entered employment after enrolling on my third course. Sadly my life and health took a turn for the worst, but this did not stop me continuing my learning. I spent a long time also with my parent carers on so much negativity that it has been amazing to put some fantastic positive learning in the mix to filter through and ignite that spark we all have. I feel very proud of my mums, dads and grandparents who share my journey and who are taking my lead and changing their future. Words simply cannot explain how that feels. I have carers who have anxieties, socialising issues to name a few, and they pushed harder than they have before. I am so very proud of all of them.

This is still the beginning of my journey but my path has changed. I always feel sad to complete a course as today we have all completed our SEAL course. It always leaves me thirsty for more and the lovely team here in Wiltshire keep a tight hold of us and have some amazing courses in the new year for us all. Life and learning stops with you, reach out and take it by both horns and give it some welly.

Tutor Perspective

Star, 37, lives in Wiltshire. She is a single mother and has two children. Three years ago in 2012, she started a carers' group aimed at supporting families who have children with special educational needs. The group, which began with five members, now has fifty families and it is growing from strength to strength. Star promotes adult learning; both formal and informal. Her passion and belief in improving lives through learning has developed from an often difficult path.

Star experienced family domestic violence and was a heroin addict. She became estranged from her Cornish family. In 2005 she made the decision to build bridges with her family and to turn her life around. She attended a rehabilitation project and underwent CBT for a year. Her return to Cornwall led her to supporting vulnerable women; prolific offenders who were involved with repeated petty crimes. She trained the groups to be volunteers, supporting their local community. Her vision to support others stayed with her when she became a mum.

Having moved to Wiltshire, Star then found herself in a challenging partnership which has resulted in her being a single parent. Her daughter was born in 2008 and was diagnosed with ADHD, autism, a sensory processing disorder and PDA (pathological demand avoidance). Her son, born in 2009, was diagnosed with autism, low muscle tones and no spatial awareness. Both children have sleep disorders. The diagnosis of her children's conditions was a catalyst for change for Star. It was the birth of her son that started her determined journey to support other families.

Star was nominated for an Adult Learners' Week award 2015 because she is a committed learner, a great ambassador for encouraging others to either return to learning or engage for the first time. Her personal progress bears little weight for her as her intention is to support others. During the past three years, Star has attended five Wiltshire Council community learning programmes and a workshop: Time 4 U, Budgets and Bargains, Cooking from Scratch, Family SEAL, an outdoors activity course and a family Circus Skills workshop. As part of the Cooking from Scratch programme, she has achieved the RSPH L2 Award in Healthier Food and Special Diets.

The carers' group has been running for three years and meets fortnightly. There is no screening for joining the group. Star ensures that the group is supportive to the families who attend as they are all aware of the demands that children who have similar conditions need. She also understands the pressures for families who have children with complex needs. The group is growing owing to Star's constant energy to ensure that families do not feel isolated. She is also actively engaging with other support networks to ensure that the members of the group receive relevant and appropriate information.

Star has been an important link for the Wiltshire Council Community Learning team. Initially, a Time 4U course was organised for her group which was well attended owing to Star's persistence in encouraging the group to join. The group were apprehensive to enrol owing to having been out of learning for some time and had few/low qualifications. She helped with transport and became a link between the programme and the group. After the Time 4U programme, she was determined to keep the learning going for the group. They identified a need for budgeting, as some of the learners receive benefits, so they ran Budgets and Bargains as a follow on course. Again, Star encouraged the group to attend. An opportunity arose to run a circus skills holiday activity in her area, Star advised about an appropriate venue which the families could access, and she encouraged her group to attend. Star understood that the group needed some advice about cooking meals from scratch. They cooked together using their budgeting skills and are created healthy, family meals. The course had embedded learning about nutrition so the group took the L2 Award in Healthier Food and Special Diets.

It is evident that Star has been key for the group to both access and continue to learn together. She constantly uses social media, phone calls, cups of coffee, offers a listening ear to reassure others that they don't have to feel isolated. She understands that if families have children with special educational needs, other families may not be keen to socialise. Star could not access an appropriate school place for her daughter for 15 months. Without any local family help, this could have resulted in Star having to save her energy to manage at home. However, this created stronger links with the group. Her positive determination has enabled families to both learn and share separate time, away from home, in a supportive environment. Some of the group are now accessing Open University courses. The group will shortly gain charity status.

Star recognises that she is very determined to keep the learning momentum for both herself and others; 'It's the Cornish in me! I'm not prepared to accept a situation. I want to make it better. I want to empower others to be independent and not accept when there can be a solution if one is determined to find a way through.' What is Star's advice to others? 'Do it! Bite the bullet and don't be scared of the unknown.'

Weston College with HM Prison Services

Weston College deliver the OLASS 4 contract to thousands of offenders in prisons across the South West. Weston College also have the contract to deliver learning and skills in IRC The Verne. The teams focus on providing outstanding delivery to learners, to help them with their learning and raising aspirations whilst also ensuring that the education provided meets the needs of the learners and employers.

This true story has been anonymised.

My Life with Education

My name is D. I'm 26 years old. I have four children. I live in Bristol with my Nan and dad and I have a beautiful girlfriend.

When I was at school I hated it! I just found school boring. I was just not interested. I just couldn't wait to leave! I did stay at school to finish my GCSEs but had quite poor results. They were either poor or I failed them! At the age of sixteen, when I left school, I joined the Army. From the first day of joining I felt like I belonged. It was my passion! To top it all off, I didn't need any qualifications to join. I just needed to be fit. I loved it when I was in the Army, loved the fitness, the chance to explore, that you always have someone looking out for you and the chance to defend my country.

I joined the army in 2005. After three tours of Iraq, I started my tours of Afghanistan. On my sixth tour of Afghanistan (2009), I was captured as a prisoner of war. I was captured for fifty eight days before we escaped. After this, I was taken off active duty because I was suffering with post traumatic stress disorder. I was still in the Army though as a Recruitment Officer in Bristol. As a Recruitment Officer, it was my job to go around to year assemblies to inspire the young adults to join the Army when they finish school. After doing this for three years, I received an honourable discharge from the Army.

In 2013 I ended up stealing petrol as I couldn't afford to keep taking my disabled son to hospital, which was a two hundred mile round trip every day. As a consequence, I ended up coming to prison!!! After being in prison for six months, I decided that when I was released from prison, I wanted to go to college to study Auto Electrics. As education was free while I was in prison and I had time on my hands, I decided to take level 2 in Maths and English, as well as lots of level 2 courses in other subjects, so I could start on level 2 in Auto Electrics instead of starting on level 1. When I started doing Education again I was surprised to find that I really enjoyed it.

When I decided to start Education again, I found I had to overcome some things. I was at a lower level than what I thought I was and what I needed. I had to study harder than everyone in my class. I had to learn more than everyone but I only had the same time as everyone else. I needed to be highly motivated! I did have some blocks to overcome as well, like dyslexia. I found it hard to read anything that wasn't on a blue background. It was hard to complete work on time. I really had to work hard! The way I overcame my blocks was PURE DETERMINATION. I was determined to pass level 2 Maths and English, so I got my head down and studied.

I'm now an English Peer Mentor. I help students who are in a similar situation as I was in with their English studies. I help them to learn and be ready for their exams. It's a trusted position as I help the teacher with administration forms and I also do important administration work. I honestly believe education has changed my life. It has given me things to work towards and new goals in life. When I'm released from prison it's going to give me the chance to start on level 2 Auto Electrics instead Of level 1. It has also given me the confidence to help my children with their homework, instead of looking for an excuse not to!

All I can say to anyone who feels lost or who are not sure what to do with their lives, is to think about education. It can open doors, give you confidence, and you're never too old to learn. It also might save your life like it did mine. I am now 26 years old. I used to hate education but now I very much enjoy it. After my time in the Army, I thought my life was over. To be honest, with the help of education, I now realise my life is just starting over!

Stewart Bell, Perth and Kinross Council



I looked 'dyslexic' up in my Chambers Adult Learners' Dictionary (not an easy word for me to find – it's hard when "y" replaces the vowel "i"!) and this is what it says, "A dyslexic person has difficulty in learning to recognise and form written words correctly." Well that sounds like me and indeed it is me

I am very lucky and proud to be a member of the Letham Thursday night adult literacy group which is a free class run by Perth and Kinross Council. Thursday night is one of the highlights of my week now. There are no tests or exams – it's all about the learners' needs and wishes. And so it's not like school or college in any way. One paid member of staff directs the group with the help of trained volunteers.

For the first twelve months of my learning experience I had one-to-one classes. I started by learning the sounds of each letter and then two-letter sounds. I was as slow as a snail and it was so hard and frustrating at times. I was then moved into a group. There we'd do a group warm-up and then split up to do one-to-one sessions. At this stage of my learning, I felt I was making real progress. I became as hungry as a bear and was coming on in leaps and bounds.

When you're an adult who can't read or write, it's hard! Because I look normal (maybe not what my mates say!) everybody just assumes you can. In a sad way I didn't miss what I never had. I had my ways of getting by. I just accepted it, got on with it and made the best of it. But I always wished I could read and write. Now I have learned to read, it is a joy and thrill in my life.

Here are just few examples how reading has helped me since I learnt, and, of course, what I missed out on all those wasted years. Buying a newspaper is something I've done every day since I started work at the age of sixteen over thirty years ago. I did so because that's what everyone else did, so I wanted to be the same. I looked at the pictures and tried to work out the stories that were illustrated by the pictures. After a bit, I started to recognise the easy words and kind of make sense of the articles in my own way.

My tutors have encouraged me to read books. They introduced me to Quick Reads and the Open Door series which are written for adults but which are not over-long or particularly wordy. I have read quite a few now and have really enjoyed most of them. Time is my biggest enemy however when I'm reading! So I always keep a book in my jacket pocket in case I get a chance to dip in. A few years ago at my literacy class I, along with my fellow learners, was challenged to write a story on the subject of "A Day Like This" for the Scottish Book Trust. I wrote about my experiences as an adult literacy learner. When I am writing about myself it helps me believe in myself. And it showed on paper how much progress I was making.

One of the biggest benefits for me was being able to leave notes for my wife and kids and also writing down messages from phone calls. Before, I couldn't think about doing either. It was always a big problem for me. I couldn't write a note to Mary to tell her I'd gone out, where I was or what time to expect me home. Taking names and addresses over the phone was a nightmare. That nightmare has become a better dream. Another plus is being able to read instructions for myself, and not relying on someone else to do it for me. Medication was always a difficult one because that's something you can't really safely guess at, but I did sometimes! Other more obvious examples are form filling, raffle tickets, competition forms and so on where you have at a minimum to be able to write your name and address. When I'm out and about I can now read, and, more importantly, understand signs and directions. How important is that?

I used to have to kid on I was, for example, reading a newspaper when everyone else around me was reading theirs. You can get quite good at bluffing. More importantly for my sanity I don't have to be dishonest or lie about it any more. I feel in this regard that it has made me a better person and I am more comfortable in and with myself. One of my biggest thrills is being able to read what I want. A particular interest of mine is whisky. Tasting it (in moderation of course!) is what it's all about, but being able to read about the different types of whisky and its manufacture is a real thrill for me now. Now I subscribe to two whisky magazines. I really enjoy reading whisky reference books. This has got me reading avidly at home. I now own about 45 different whisky books and aim to add more. Only last week I pre-ordered a whisky book which will not be published for another four months. I can't walk past a book shop now without going in. And to think that not all that long ago I didn't even notice books or bookshops! To be honest I was scared of them.

And so my adult learning has helped me loads. From what I've recorded I hope you can see I feel different, something which has improved my life. I can't commend highly enough the people I've worked with (tutors and fellow learners), the methods used or the valuable material I've worked with. I really wish everyone with my experience could benefit the same!

Beyond Economic Interests: critical perspectives on adult literacy and numeracy in a globalised world (2016)

Edited by: Keiko Yasukawa and Stephen Black

Cost: £28.00

Publisher: Sense Publishers, Amsterdam

Pages: 254

ISBN 978-94-6300-442-8

Reviewed by Lyn Tett

Lyn Tett has been involved in adult literacies since 1979 as a practitioner, policy maker and researcher. She is currently Professor Emerita at the University of Edinburgh and Professor of Community Education at the University of Huddersfield. Email: l.tett@hud.ac.uk

This book's aim is 'to critique the one-dimensional discourse of literacy and numeracy as human capital' drawing mainly on researchers working in Australia and New Zealand and it fulfils its aim admirably. The eleven authors from the southern hemisphere bring critical perspectives on adult literacy and numeracy from diverse sites of research: policy, classrooms, workplaces, cultural institutions and communities. In addition there are four contributors from the UK that provide wider international perspectives in order to situate the southern hemisphere contributions within international discourses.

The book is organised into three parts: part 1 provides a theoretical framing of the role of powerful international surveys, especially those of the OECD, in promoting globalisation (3 chapters); part 2 provides a diverse series of accounts of how globalisation is impacting on adult literacy and numeracy practices but also how resistance and agency has been exerted in local contexts (7 chapters); part 3 illustrates different ways in which collective activism has challenged the dominant discourse of an individualised skills-based deficit model of literacy and numeracy and suggests alternative futures (4 chapters).

Part 1 of the book is concerned with directly analysing and critiquing the global trends and dominant human capital discourse emanating from the OECD. Each of the three chapters considers different ways in which the OECD surveys such as ALL and PIACC standardise 'the assessment of populations across nations despite variations on languages and cultural contexts' (xi) in ways that allow countries to be compared in league tables. These league tables are then used by countries 'to analyse their population's performance in relation to their national productivity agendas, which themselves are influenced by global trends' (ibid.). This results in the privileging of the economic interests of industry over other socio-cultural benefits of education and training, and this in turn becomes a globalising phenomenon.

In part 2 the authors start from the theoretical position that context is inseparable from the meanings that people acquire in their everyday lives, which is a social practice approach that is historically and culturally contingent. Together these seven chapters suggest that what is happening at the coalface of literacy and numeracy practices is 'motivated by interests and possibilities much broader and richer than the economic interests of industry and the nation state' (xii). The authors in this section also show how practitioners and learners can nearly always find spaces and places to pursue 'learning that matters for the lived experiences of adults and their communities' (xiii) and thus disrupt the dominant human capital discourse.

Part 3 aims to provide the resources that will 'help participants in the field to develop a critical perspective ... and imagine alternative futures' (xiii) through an exploration of different sites of critical action. Throughout the importance of collective effort on the ground by the field of adult literacy and numeracy practitioners and researchers is emphasised in order to make a difference in and for the lives of people and their communities. We are also reminded that this will take moral and political courage and I am sure that readers will be only too aware of this in these troubling times. This section includes a case study of RaPAL (Duckworth & Hamilton) that discusses the significance of research and practice in adult literacy in the UK and will be of particular interest to our readers.

Overall I found this a very interesting and stimulating book. It shows how there are spaces 'to speak truth to power' that we can all utilise to disrupt the dominant human capital discourse. It also gives us the theoretical and practical resources to draw on in our endeavour to pursue the learning that matters to adults. There is something for everybody whether you are a practitioner, policy maker or researcher and I wholeheartedly recommend it.

Teaching for historical literacy: building knowledge in the history classroom (2016)

Matthew T. Downey and Kelly A. Long.

Cost: £26.30

Publisher: Routledge, New York and Abingdon, Oxon.

Pages: 192

ISBN: 978-1-138-85958-6

Reviewed by Liz Parkin

Liz Parkin is a retired Adult Literacy Tutor (inc. ESOL) and Family Literacy Coordinator, with an interest in active citizenship and intercultural matters

Ireland, where I live, is in what has been named as 'a decade of centenaries' with 2016 having significant commemorations of the Easter Rising and the WW1 Battle of the Somme in which thousands of soldiers from Ireland died. As well as events around the country, newspapers have been producing special supplements; there has been extensive TV coverage of commemorations; there are television dramatisations and lots of books, some of which have been chosen as One City, One Book or One Book, One Community choices for this year. So, a book about historical literacy has the potential to be very relevant.

In an appreciation for a 'veteran political correspondent' who had recently died, Dr. Diarmaid Ferriter, one of Ireland's foremost contemporary historians, wrote '...active citizenship needs to be about lively inquiry into how we have got to where we are, not through fashioning a project of denigration or forgetting, but by making an honest effort to distinguish between memory, myth and reality' (Irish Times, 23-4-2016).

Citizenship, hopefully active citizenship, is one of the goals of adult education and, by extension, of adult literacy development, so that resonated when I read it. The final sentence of Downey and Long's Teaching for Historical Literacy reads: "We seek to be literate about history so that we use it in informed and thoughtful ways to address the challenges and opportunities of the present." The content of the book held much that is of relevance to literacy tutors as we try to address this aspect of the work.

This is an American publication, so many of the topics used as examples would not be ones we might address but the methods to address them are transferable across the Atlantic and many are relevant to our work despite the assertion at the beginning of the book of the distinctive nature of historical literacy skills (6). The book is intended for school teachers at both elementary and high schools (primary and second-level) but is based within the insights of Howard Gardner's (1985) Cognitive Revolution (5), so uses many of the premises familiar to adult literacy tutors, such as recognising prior knowledge. However, they use the term 'activate prior learning' (my italics), (75) which makes the process more dynamic and they recognise that learning comes from sources such as family, TV, films etc. as well as schooling. One of the outcomes I worked towards with some family literacy students was the demystification of school subject terminology, including history, especially when children were making the transition to second-level. Many did not value their own knowledge because it was not school learning so this recognition of informal sources is positive.

Ideas such as understanding the vocabulary of a discipline maybe pose more of a challenge. Quoting Readance et al (2000, 46) they write 'students who lack the vocabulary of a discipline or subject-matter remain "outsiders" to its way of thinking' (100). In recent years the 1901 and 1911 Irish census returns have been made available online, for free. Many students have loved searching through them, but I don't think I ever thought of referring to them as 'primary sources'. If we agree with the statement should we be more diligent about equipping adult literacy learners with the vocabulary of grammar?

The book is brimming with ideas that adult literacy tutors could use. Chronological understanding through the use of timelines could be built using family and local history (which I always found to be very popular topics) as foundations for national and international links. Once 'estd.' was understood, many students sought it enthusiastically around the city. If "doing history" means "writing history" (p8) this could be a way for students to engage. It might also be a way for students, including ESOL students, to relate to the notion of culture changing across time as well as space. Several ESOL learners in some of the ESOL/literacy groups I worked with at levels 1 and 2 seemed to think that Irish culture now was how Irish culture had always been.

What is [adult literacy]'s 'Big Idea' (p57)?; the importance of the phrasing of questions; reading for comprehension, especially, perhaps, learning to pick out key points; enticing learners into reading and writing in as many ways as possible; perspective analysis – all jumped out as relevant to enhancing adult literacy practice. But they are not the only relevant ideas in this book. If your learners are at all interested in history and you think it could be a fruitful area for exploration with them, then you could find in this book, much to inspire your practice, whether in UK or Ireland.

Polyvocal professional learning through self-study research

Edited by: Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan and Anastasia P. Samaras

Cost: £21.50

Publisher: Sense Publishers, Amsterdam

Pages: 266

ISBN 978-9463002189

Reviewed by Tara Furlong

Tara has twenty years' experience in adult education and training in the private and public sectors in the UK and abroad, specialising in integrated English language, literacies and digital learning. She has an ongoing interest in the relationship between multi-modal and contextualised, versus abstracted learning; and its mirror in social and literate practices and language across life spheres. She can be contacted on tara.furlong@designingfutures.uk

There is so much activity and literature recently recognising the value of practitioners engaging with and in research as part of professional learning communities, whether as Practitioner Action Research, Joint Practice Development, Lesson Study or any number of other options, that I was interested to read this book. The contributing editors sought to draw on their expertise as teacher educators (not literacies specialists!) who develop professional practice through encouraging and supporting self-study research, and to investigate others' self-study research across trans-disciplinary domains, contexts and cultures. These are a collection of very small-scale, qualitative projects utilising a hybridity of practices. A strength of the book is its incorporation of multi-cultural perspectives and the utilisation of arts to explore and express.

The second chapter discusses the use of artefacts, personal and professional artefacts, to open dialogues and beyond this to establish salient themes and ways forward that might otherwise not be revealed. The artefacts serve as a platform to query the evidence bases of commentary. While the book is not organised into sections, each paper found its authors paired to another's to act as 'critical friends' through the development process. In this way the papers themselves became abstracted artefacts, and peers' multi-perspectival feedback the base of collaborative editing to ensure domain-specific projects were readable by a wider audience. The editors' emphasis on 'polyvocal' reflects the value they attribute to this formative process with 'critical friends' on self-directed investigation, as they detail in the introductory chapter.

In the following chapters I found some very interesting methodologies behind literacy education practices. Chapter 3 for example storylines the challenges of a hearing teacher working towards drawing on existing literacy practices in her deaf learners to build second language written literacy. Introducing free creative writing time and projects increased participation and motivation, as she integrated learners' preference to draw on each other as resources into learning rather than formal reference tools. In addition to teaching and learning processes, learners' assertive feedback and commentary was recorded and drawn on as a developmental resource in the project toolkit.

In Chapter 7, self-portraiture around critical incidents symbolically identified items and themes which again were used for self-analysis in the context of development. Further tools across chapters included digital interactions and spaces, storytelling, doctoral supervisory methods, critical incidents questionnaires, multiple perspectives tasks, and NVivo, the qualitative data analysis software.

Chapter 10 incorporates a double helix of dual voice poems created from learner feedback and teacher critiques on one side against the teacher's analysis and responses on the other. Poetry is drawn on as a reflective tool in a number of projects as it allows many perceptions to be expressed and meaning may remain contested. Creating poems out of others' key vocabulary or expressions is another flexible method of interaction.

Many of the initial contexts were not research rich and may have had little established culture of educators conducting any form of research, let alone into their own practice. Enquiry methods may have left some of these comparatively junior staff open to challenge and competence queries. Furthermore, the use of the reporting style for these types of research reports formed another interesting area of discussion in the final chapter, where the authors consider how these forms of activity lie on a continuum between reflective (first person), through collaborative (second person), to large-scaler 'institutional' (third person) research. This appears to be used as a metaphor for reflection on research scales and processes rather than suggested as definitions in formal writing.

Participants appreciated feeling the backing of an international education movement in teacher development when paying attention to addressing the seeming minutiae of seemingly insuperable challenges of practice rooted in local contexts and the self-administered personal practice interrogations. All of the participants discussed the meaningful formation, personal and professional, extracted from the processes of qualitative reflective research activity and professional practice development.

The book serves as a useful reflection point on small-scale individual-initiated research for professional development across disciplines internationally, barriers frequently faced, and potential motivators, strategies and tools for forging ahead. It focuses on self-reflective praxis and knowledge generation in response to locally identified problems across diverse contexts. The arts-based methods are further utilised for accessibility and inclusivity with local stakeholders. Dialogue is emphasised throughout the text for its mutual negotiation and moderation functions.

Adult Literacy Policy and Practice: From Intrinsic Values to Instrumentalism

By Gordon Ade-Ojo and Vicky Duckworth

Cost: £45.00 (hardcover; can also be purchased as e-book)

Publisher: Palgrave Macmillan

Pages: 138

ISBN: 978-1137535108

Reviewed by Genevieve Clarke

Genevieve Clarke is a Programme Manager at The Reading Agency, an independent charity that inspires more people to read more, encourages them to share their enjoyment of reading and celebrates the difference that reading makes to all our lives. She coordinates the annual 'Reading Ahead' programme (formerly 'Six Book Challenge') for less confident readers which in 2015 reached 48,000 people through public libraries, adult community learning, colleges, prisons and workplaces.

I was very keen to read this book as I have long been interested in the interplay between policy and practice in adult literacy. As the title implies, the authors' main thesis is the shift from a focus on intrinsic values (i.e. education for its own sake) to a more instrumentalist position (i.e. as a means to an end, in this case dictated by the ideology of successive governments) which, in their view, happened as early as the late 1970s. I am sure there is much truth in what they say and indeed there is evidence of this continuing direction of travel in current discussions around functional skills reform. I also applaud the authors' attempt to pose an alternative model based on a transformative and more creative approach. However I am not sure that they fully tackle the dilemma facing any service dependent upon public sector funding: how to build in accountability without saddling the system with a deadening bureaucracy. It is a crucial debate that deserves far more air time than it gets, but I'm not sure that this book allows it to surface sufficiently clearly.

This is partly because, in my view, the four chapters are very uneven in terms of content and style. Chapter 1 focuses on terminology but I am afraid that this reader struggled with this long preamble – not least because the first mention of 'adult literacy' only appears on page 25!

I was relieved to find that Chapter 2 began to deal with the history, dividing the last few decades into three main periods: 1970s to early 1980s; early 1980s to mid-1990s; and mid-1990s to date. This starts well and I felt I was really learning something about the early days of a movement that I only joined in the 1990s, classically as a volunteer tutor. In fact it doesn't bring us right up to date but mainly covers the first two of these periods. Undoubtedly they provide ample evidence for the oft-stated move to an instrumentalist view of adult literacy with employability as a key driver. I share the authors' concern about policies predicated upon false assumptions. Yet I found their negative view of any link between adult literacy policy and the world of work too simplistic and even patronising when, for many learners, progression to a job may well be the main goal of their studies, especially if it pays for the needs of a family.

Instead it was left for Chapter 3 to tackle the significance of the Moser Report published in 1999. Here again I was eager to read the authors' views of yet another turning-point which at least brought new funding into the field. But most of this chapter gives us a repetitive critique of the instrumentalist position of the Moser Committee itself without naming any of its members or setting out its conclusions or any detail of the Skills for Life agenda that flowed from it.

Finally Chapter 4 allows the authors to redress the balance by outlining an alternative vision that could help to shape future policy and practice. This is indeed refreshing and something to which most tutors of my acquaintance would still relate to in terms of starting where the learners are. This is home territory for RaPAL members with reference to the New Literacy Studies and ethnographic research by Brian Street, Shirley Brice Heath and Vicky Duckworth herself. I was particularly glad to see mention of creativity as my own interest has focused on the use of reading for pleasure as a way of integrating everyday practices into adult literacy provision and encouraging learner autonomy and confidence-building. But, reassuring as this was, it takes us back into the field of literacy theory rather than tackling the implications for policymakers and their funders.

While I admire the spirit of enquiry behind the book and share much of the authors' scepticism about the drivers for education policy, I think it would have benefited from some judicious editing to allow the main arguments to shine through. I also feel that the authors have been let down by lack of attention to editorial detail, presumably on the part of the publishers. Most notable are the interchangeability of the terms 'vocationalisation' and 'vocalisation' (with the latter erroneous use of the word even appearing in the index) and the misspelling of Alan Tuckett's name, surely one of the main upholders of an intrinsic approach to education.

In conclusion I think this book brings some important observations to the table at a time when the future of adult literacy is yet again hanging in the balance, but hope that the authors will find other more succinct ways to make them. We all owe it to the learners to ensure that the system works for them.

News from the Sector

Tara Furlong

Tara can be contacted on webweaver@rapal.org.uk

RaPAL AGM and Openings

We are delighted to have a full officer team again post-AGM, but there is still room for new volunteers! We encourage article contributions, and members in junior editorial roles, such as supporting a lead editor in putting together an edition of the Journal. We have project work that comes up from time to time, and are interested in looking at running a future Regional Colloquium or other events; let us know what you are interested in and value in developing your practice and local networks. These are great professional development experiences, working with friendly, supportive peers. Thank you to everyone who has come forward in recent months with an interest in taking forward lines of activity.

Member Consultation

In response to feedback, we are looking at renovating our digital offering (including website, social media, etc.). We are considering launching a fresh members' survey over the next few months. It has been two years since the last one, which gave useful guidance on members' priorities and interests and helped RaPAL focus on our core members' values such as developing the Journal.

In the meantime, please do have a look at and think about our digital offer, what you get out of it, and what you would like to see. We will do what we can. I am sure the survey will cover a few more areas about your priorities and interests, so please do look out for it.

Funding Streams for Small Provision

With the changes in adult, further and community education, there appears to be increasing potential for smaller providers and partnerships with strong local ties to satisfy elements of local provision in the future. This may be particularly the case at lower literacy levels but we shall have to see what works out. The LEPs (Local Enterprise Partnerships), Apprenticeship Frameworks, SFA (Skills Funding Agency) and DWP (Department of Work and Pensions) all have cyclical funding available to bid for in different capacities.

While completely independent small-scale provision remains challenging, Campaign for Learning have worked with LEPs to develop a database of providers. This includes smaller providers who can register their details and run searches for other providers suitable to combine with them in joint funding bids which would contract under joint quality assurance frameworks.

RaPAL would love to hear how members are getting on with this.

Support with Apprenticeships

For those of you working in apprenticeships, a new support portal has been launched by the Education and Training Foundation and the Association of Employment and Learning Providers, here <http://futureapprenticeships.org.uk/>

Exploring how community learning centres can foster effective virtual lifelong learning environments

Community learning centres (CLCs) are very active hubs for lifelong learning throughout the Asia-Pacific region, providing non-formal and informal learning opportunities for all community members. More here <http://www.uil.unesco.org/exploring-how-community-learning-centres-can-foster-effective-virtual-lifelong-learning-environments>

UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities

On a final note, for those of you that haven't heard about these recent initiatives, video clips and city stories here <http://www.uil.unesco.org/lifelong-learning/project>. Trikala, Greece, is the latest member. "The city has been badly hit by the economic crisis, which has led to massive unemployment. Youth unemployment, which currently stands at 27 per cent, is a particular cause for concern. Using the learning city concept and the philosophy of lifelong learning, the city seeks to help residents of all ages acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes they need to contribute to the city's recovery, fulfil their potential and enjoy a better quality of life..."

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. Our journal is now produced online and so we welcome articles, reviews, reports, commentaries, images or video 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 Ireland, 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.

We want to encourage new writers as well as those with experience and to cover a range of topics. We aim to have three different kinds of articles in the journal plus a reviews section; these are slightly different in length and focus. We welcome illustration and graphics for any of the sections and now have the facility to embed audio and video files into the journal. The journal has a different theme for each edition but we welcome general contributions too.

Below you will see more details about the different themes and topics:

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.

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.

3. Research and Practice: multi-disciplinary perspectives

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

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

Reviews

Reviews and reports of books, articles and materials (including online materials) should be between 50 to 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 to 3 line biography and your contact details. You can write the review based on your experience of using the book, article or materials in your role as practitioner, teacher trainer, and researcher or as a student.

Submitting your work

1. If you are responding to a call for articles via the RaPAL email list or directly by an editor you will have been given the email address of the editor(s) for submitting your work, together with a deadline date and the theme of the journal.
2. If you are submitting a piece of work that you would like RaPAL to consider for publication that has not been written as a result of a call for articles, please send it to journal@rapal.org.uk in the first instance. The journal coordinator will then let you know what the next steps will be.
3. All contributions should have the name of the author(s), a title and contact email address and telephone number. You should also include a short 2 to 3 line biography. Sections, sub-sections and any images should be clearly indicated or labelled (further guidance on image size is on the website www.rapal.org.uk).
4. All referencing should follow the Harvard system.
5. Articles should be word processed in a sans serif font, double-spaced with clearly numbered pages.
6. The article should be sent to journal@rapal.org.uk

What happens next?

1. Editors are appointed for each edition of the journal. They review all contributions and will offer feedback, constructive comment and suggestions for developing the piece as appropriate.
2. Articles submitted for the third category 'Research and Practice: multi-disciplinary perspectives' will be peer-reviewed by an experienced academic, research or practitioner in the field in addition to being edited.
3. The editor(s) will let you know whether your article has been accepted and will send you a final copy before publication.

If you have any questions, please contact the journal coordinator by emailing journal@rapal.org.uk

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