Teacher involvement proved 'inspirational'

The Literacies for Learning in FE project makes a lot of sense to people who have direct experience of working with vocational students in FE.

As the AoC North West Principals' representative on the LfLFE Advisory Group, **Christine Tyler** (pictured right) attended her first meeting more out of duty than enthusiasm. However, as she now admits, the information emerging from the research related so clearly to her own experiences as a teacher and teacher trainer that she was hooked.

As a college principal in Salford, Christine recognised the need to connect the forms of expression used by students in informal settings to their studies in order to make them realistic and relevant. She was impressed by the results of work being done in the four colleges across a variety of vocational groups and could envisage the practical application of the research to future curriculum development – particularly with the emergence of the new 14-19 diplomas.

On her retirement from Eccles College in 2006, she has continued to take an interest in the research and its future developments, as she is now working as the Colleges Consultant for the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL). In this role, she hopes to contribute a national perspective to the LfLFE work through some of her contacts and to assist in the wider dissemination of learning materials that will be developed as a result of the next stage of research.

In particular, it is the element of practitioner involvement in all this that has made the project so inspiring. Christine's comment at a recent meeting summed it all up:

'It is a joy to see FE teachers doing the research as part of a team. For too long, FE has been "done unto" by HE, and I am delighted that the teacher-researchers at the four participant colleges have made such an effective contribution to research that may well change the way in which vocational subjects are taught in future.'

The project has much to tell us about relevance

Throughout my career I have had the great pleasure of being involved in a number of advisory and/or steering groups for various research projects.

This has allowed me the luxury of shaping and informing research without having to do all of the hard work but also afforded me the opportunity to see how policy and practice might be influenced or initiated by the outcomes. This is particularly true for Literacies for Learning in Further Education (LfLFE).

In Scotland we have a busy policy agenda which includes *A Curriculum for Excellence, Determined to Succeed* and a refresh of our *Lifelong Learning Strategy* and common to them all is the need to ensure that learning is both useful and relevant to the learner. LfLFE has much to tell us about relevance!

The organisation I work for is in the business of assessing learning and what this project has indicated – all too clearly – is that we need to better understand and take account of learners' literacy practices as we develop and apply assessment instruments because we now have robust evidence of the rich, and often sophisticated, literacy practices used in the home and workplace which are not drawn on and reflected in the application of learning and assessments. This was a somewhat uncomfortable but valuable lesson for me!

Another common theme running through the policy agenda is that of learning which enables people to participate fully in the economic, social and cultural life of Scotland. In other words the purposes of learning are multi-faceted and so too must be the learning that support this. So, whilst my advice to all those involved in this project was brief but, hopefully, pertinent, they can rest assured that I gained much more than I gave. I thank them for the privilege of learning from them.

**Carolyn Davidson
Scottish Qualifications Authority**

Recent Project Publications

** indicates publications of particular use to practitioners

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** Carmichael, J. (2007) The Literacy for Learning FE research project - a workshop *Research and Practice in Adult Literacy Journal*, No. 61 (Special issue for RAPAL Conference 2006) pp. 20 – 24.

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To see more *Literacies for Learning in FE* publications and presentations, please visit our website at:

http://www.lancs.ac.uk/lflfe/

LLRC

Literacies for Learning in Further Education

Websites, Lyrics and Blogs:
using students' everyday reading and writing as resources for learning
by Candice Satchwell

During the past three years researchers on this project have been talking to students of all ages (although mainly 16-19) on a wide range of college courses.

We have found that students engage in all kinds of reading and writing outside of college.

They read novels, magazines, newspapers, journals, web pages, computer games instructions, both on computer screens and on paper. They write diaries, song lyrics, text messages, emails, blogs, and websites.

We have encountered an abundance of literacy practices with which students engage every day, but which they often leave at the door as they enter the classroom.

Often their tutors and the students themselves have no idea of the extent of students' everyday uses of literacy.

Teacher training resources

The Project is producing a DVD and CD-ROM package for use in teacher training and Continuing Professional Development for Further Education.
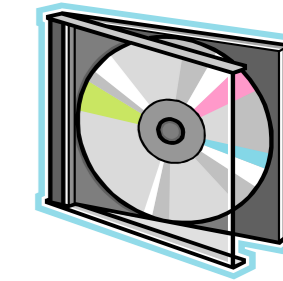
The DVD shows how course tutors researched their students' everyday literacy practices and the role of reading and writing on their courses. It then shows how they used this research to make small changes in their practice, related to literacies for learning.

The CD-ROM provides activities and additional resources for use in professional development workshops. This DVD and CD-ROM resource will be available *free of charge* for a short period.

If you would like to be sent a copy, please send your name and address to Roz Ivanič by email (r.ivanic@lancaster.ac.uk) or by hard mail to:

The Literacy Research Centre, Lancaster University, Lancaster, LA1 4YD

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University of Stirling and LfLFE project researcher JUNE SMITH looks at significant findings from researching Childcare courses across four FE colleges

Inappropriate tasks lead to students' failure

June Smith, LfLFE project researcher

The vocational area we looked at across all four of the participating colleges was Childcare.

Over the two years the researchers collected data relating to how their students engaged with literacy at home and at college. To do this they carried out individual and group interviews, observed students in class and collected literacy artefacts students used at home and at college.

The students and units

In total we looked closely at eight units: 4 at a lower level (SCQF 4 or 5 in Scotland and level 1 and 2 in England) and 4 at a higher level (SCQF 7 in Scotland and level 3 in England). Each unit consists 36- 40 hrs of learning and teaching. The 32 Childcare students involved in the project were almost all young learners aged 16-19, and on full time courses. Thirty one were female and one was male.

Some of the findings

One of the most significant findings from our research is that *Childcare students have to develop a wider variety of literacy practices than students on many other courses.* Some of these are not surprising, for example, academic practices such as note-taking and writing essays. However, they also have to develop the literacy practices within their placement such as reading aloud to children, making a collage or producing a play schedule for the children. They also have to develop additional literacy practices in order to provide evidence of activities undertaken within the placement for assessment purposes. This new set of literacy practices are ones that the students are unlikely to have met before and are unlikely to meet again. It is therefore not always clear to them who their audience

is or why they have to write these documents other than because it is a course requirement. Childcare students are also asked to keep reflective journals and demonstrate key/ core skills. This is even more problematic for the students when these course-specific practices and the differences among them are not explicitly discussed. In contrast, a student on a course such as social science only has to develop traditional academic literacy practices.

A second significant finding is that *there was a greater variety of literacy demands on lower level Childcare courses than on higher level courses.* Our four tutors' reasons for adopting this variety were:
- to engage the students' in a positive way,
- to keep them interested in the subject, and
- to help them to integrate

learning, assessment and the world of childcare.

This variety expected on lower level courses means that these courses can be more complex from a literacy perspective than higher level courses. This challenges common sense understandings.

At the lower levels, not only did students have to learn to develop literacy practices they would not need in the workplace, as shown in the example on the opposite page, but these same practices would not be required at the higher levels of study either. At the higher levels students receive a more consistent message about appropriate forms of reading and writing, where they would be required to produce only one or at most two text-types for assessment purposes: essays and reports.

A SCQF level 5/level 2 group were asked to produce (as an assessment) a handbook aimed at parents to help them understand their child's developmental stages between 0 and five years.

In giving them something different and potentially engaging, the teacher had added a new dimension to the task of demonstrating knowledge. The students had to develop a new set of practices around leaflet production.

The students' concerns centered around how to address this audience; how to get a professional finish so that it looked neat; the layout they would have to adopt and which images to use if any. They could not draw on their

own literacy experiences as none of the group were parents and none came from a background of media production. What made it more difficult was that they were not directly taught how to produce a leaflet. It was thought that because they had no basic skills problems, they would be able to do this. This

An example of a task involving complex literacy practices on a lower level childcare course

assumption treats 'literacy' as a transferable skill, and ignores the complex range of activities that surround any form of text.

Both students and staff enjoyed the experience of producing the leaflet because it was practical, they could work collaboratively, they could use pictures either

drawn by themselves or taken from magazines, it was multi-modal and multi-media, non-linear and generative. As a learning activity it had many benefits.

However, there were too many purposes and too many audiences for this task to be successful as an assessment.

Concerns about the production of a leaflet got in the way of their passing the assessment, which required them to cover all the elements of the learning outcomes.

In this particular case, all of the students had to remediate their assessment because

aspects of the performance criteria had not been fulfilled.

This may well have been a legitimate learning experience if they would have to produce such a document when qualified. However their teacher said that they would be unlikely ever to have to do this.

What is significant here is the genre of writing for the assessment and its relationship to the course and to the future area of work. Writing a leaflet aimed at parents is a highly specialised literacy practice.

While the teacher's intention may be to make the assignment more interesting, it is not necessarily made more relevant by imposing a literacy demand which will not be useful in the workplace.

Students' everyday literacy practices

The project found that students' everyday literacy practices tend to be:

- *Part and parcel of 'doing something'*
- *Shared* – often collaborating with others, either physically or virtually
- *Purposeful*
- *With a clear audience*
- *Self-determined - in terms of the reading and/or writing, how to do it, when and where*
- *Multi-media - i.e. involving variety, choice and/or combination of media (paper and electronic)*
- *Multi-modal - i.e. involving variety, choice and/ or combination of modes (language, symbols, pictures, colour, and/or sound)*
- *Non-linear - i.e. involving complex, varied reading paths, and often with reading and writing integrated into the same activity*
- *Generative - i.e. involving meaning-making, creativity*
- *Agentic - i.e. involving an active role for the person*
- *Holding out roles, identities and values with which students identify*

Literacy practices in college

We have investigated the range and extent of the requirements on 32 courses in 11 different curriculum areas, including Child Care, Painting and Decorating, Catering, History, and Science.

In comparison with the diversity of literacy practices in students' own lives, we have found that the reading and writing students do on their college courses tend to be relatively restricted, with a particular focus on assessment.

Students are expected to take down notes from whiteboards or PowerPoint presentations, to read handouts and textbooks, to write essays and reports, and complete log books. On lower level courses in particular, students are often also required

to make leaflets, pamphlets or posters, often with the intention of making the content more 'interesting' for the students, as in the example on the right.

As students go into school or college they are often expected to leave behind their own 'literacy practices' (i.e. ways of using reading and writing) as they take up those required for their courses.

Our research suggests that if students' own practices are acknowledged and built upon, these can act as resources for their learning.

continued...

Bridging the gap

After collecting information about the different kinds of literacy practices in and out of college, tutors involved in the project as practitioner-researchers began to try out changes in practice. These changes were designed to build on what they had come to know about their students' everyday practices.

Each change in practice depended on the particular students, the subject and level of the course and the future held out by the course, for example leading to higher education or a particular job. The changes in practice also depended on the tutors' own professional expertise and preferences: what amounted to a change in practice for one tutor might be an established practice for another.

What the changes in practice had in common was that each tutor thought thought creatively about how the reading and writing on the course could be fine-tuned so that they would help students succeed on their courses rather than acting as barriers to success. The example on the right is just one out of over thirty.

Using the findings from the research

When classroom and assessment activities incorporate literacy practices which are more resonant with students' everyday literacy practices, they are more likely to lead to learning. Awareness of the characteristics of students' everyday literacy practices (as listed above) can lead to fine-tuning pedagogic literacy practices, which can in turn increase learning opportunities.

All changes in practice need to take account of the specific context in which they are situated. Teachers wishing to build on the understandings of the project might begin by considering in some detail the nature of the reading and writing they are expecting their students to do. This will include identifying:

- what activities the reading and writing is part of (or is it just for its own sake?);
- what the form and content of the reading and writing is;
- who the students are doing it with, and for whom;
- who is making decisions about process, content and form;
- how the reading and writing relates to the students' sense of who they are and who they want to become,
- when, for how long, and where they are reading and writing;
- with what tools, technologies or artefacts, and, crucially,
- for what purposes.

If the answers to these questions are unclear or can be seen to be noticeably dissonant with the characteristics of students' everyday literacy practices, even small changes to one or more dimensions can make a big difference to students' experience of that reading and/ or writing. Our research showed that such changes can significantly enhance the creation of learning opportunities in the classroom.

A longer version of this article is appearing in the May 2007 edition of The Leader, the monthly newsletter of the Association of School and College Lecturers, available at www.leadermagazine.co.uk