Practitioner Research in Essential Skills

PERSPECTIVES ON ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING
Practitioner Research in Essential Skills

Perspectives on engagement in learning

Edited by Shelley Tracey
Queen’s University Belfast
Foreword

This collection of papers is the outcome of work undertaken by participants on the Diploma in the Teaching and Management of Literacy and Essential Skills at Queen's University Belfast. I have been privileged to follow the development of these studies from their beginnings through to their inclusion in the annual collection of student research papers produced by the Essential Skills programme at Queen’s. Some of these papers reached a wider audience when they were presented at the RaPAL conference last year in Belfast. The studies are the product of a substantial amount of creative work on the part of the authors themselves and the tutors who supported them, led by Shelley Tracey.

The papers in this volume are part of a growing tradition that is committed to sharing the power of research with teachers and with learners as well. They explore innovative topics and methods that arise from contemporary practice in adult literacy groups and classrooms. Their starting points are the everyday concerns of teachers, and their great strength is their close insight into practice. These studies offer an exciting new contribution to the field of adult literacy and I am delighted to see them published for a wider audience.

Professor Mary Hamilton
Lancaster University
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NOTES ON TERMINOLOGY

The term “Essential Skills” has been used in Northern Ireland since 2002 to refer to adult literacy and adult numeracy. It replaces the terms “basic skills”.

The Adult Literacy Core Curriculum is the curriculum which underpins the Skills for Life strategy for adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL in England and Wales, and the Essential Skills for Living strategy in Northern Ireland. The Curriculum focuses on three aspects of communication: speaking and listening, reading, and writing.

Essential Skills literacy learners are assessed at five levels: Entry Level 1, Entry Level 2, Entry level 3, Level 1 and Level 2. The Core Curriculum provides a framework for progression between these levels. Learners at Entry Level 1 usually need a good deal of support with reading and writing, while learners at Level 2 are independent and critical readers, and can communicate effectively both orally and in writing.

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ASDAN</td>
<td>Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BERA</td>
<td>British Educational Research Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BCC</td>
<td>Belfast City Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEL</td>
<td>Department for Employment and Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DfEE</td>
<td>Department for Education and Employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EGSA</td>
<td>Educational Guidance Service for Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EOTAS</td>
<td>Education Other Than At School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESOL</td>
<td>English for Speakers of Other Languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETI</td>
<td>Education and Training Inspectorate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FE</td>
<td>Further Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GCSE</td>
<td>General Certificate of Secondary Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICT</td>
<td>Information and Communications Technologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT</td>
<td>Information Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JTP</td>
<td>Joint Training Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KS4</td>
<td>Key Stage 4 (last two years of compulsory education for 14-16 year olds)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LSDA</td>
<td>Learning Skills Development Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRDC</td>
<td>National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NVQ</td>
<td>Non-vocational qualifications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QUB</td>
<td>Queen’s University Belfast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRC</td>
<td>Southern Regional College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STEPS</td>
<td>Skills Training Evaluation Procedures and Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEA</td>
<td>Workers’ Education Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YTP</td>
<td>Youth Training Programme</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction and acknowledgments

The Learning and Skills Development Agency Northern Ireland (LSDA NI) is committed to making a difference in post-16 education and training by supporting providers in implementing quality improvement strategies and by delivering staff development programmes. We also seek to encourage research to identify good practice based on sound theoretical foundations. We are therefore delighted to collaborate with Queen’s University on this publication. These research projects will provide practical examples of approaches which have been used to engage Essential Skills learners and a reflection on how effective they have been. Essential Skills tutors are keen to look at innovative teaching strategies to serve learners who may not have responded to traditional teaching methods in the past. Encouraging a climate of reflection to identify which of these strategies work and why, and sharing these experiences, is vital for fostering innovation and ultimately for meeting the needs of this group of learners.

Wilma Chrusciak
Development Adviser
LSDA NI

This collection of practitioner research papers brings together the experiences and reflections of nine Essential Skills tutors in Northern Ireland. All of these tutors undertook their research as students on the Essential Skills Tutor Qualifications Programme at Queen’s University Belfast. Practitioner research is included in this programme because it offers opportunities for local practitioners to participate in the development of knowledge and good practice in the field of Essential Skills in Northern Ireland. To date, literacy tutors who have undertaken their qualifications at Queen’s have produced eighty six papers on a range of themes, from case studies of the contexts in which Essential Skills learning occurs to investigations into learners’ reading practices. One of the key themes has been that of motivation and engagement in learning, and the papers included in this collection were chosen because they represented the range of approaches which practitioner researchers have adopted to exploring this theme. Other papers may be viewed on the Essential Skills website at Queen’s:
http://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/SchoolofEducation/ProspectiveStudents/EssentialSkills/

The practitioner research programme at Queen’s has been characterised by effective partnerships: between learners and tutors, tutors and their peers, and course tutors and students. This collection represents another partnership: between Queen’s University Belfast and LSDA Northern Ireland, who has sponsored the publication of this volume and made it possible for practitioner research on Essential Skills in Northern Ireland to reach a wider audience.

Shelley Tracey
Essential Skills Co-ordinator
School of Education, Queen’s University, Belfast

Almost nine years ago, when Key Skills was relatively new, I started working in a training organisation as a Key Skills tutor, working with Jobskills learners from the ages of 16 to 25.

A few years ago Key Skills began to be phased out and to be replaced with Essential Skills. This is how I got into Essential Skills: the qualifications I had achieved for delivering Key Skills were no longer valid, and so I undertook the literacy certificate and diploma courses.

I still work in the same training organisation delivering Essential Skills to 16 to 25 year olds who are undertaking vocational training programmes; I also deliver Essential Skills in a local FE college to young people on similar programmes and to adult learners attending night classes.

Pamela McDowell
1. Exploring text messaging from the perspective of the young people who use it

Pamela McDowell

Introduction

In her report on the role of mobile phones in young people’s lives, Haste (2005, p2) states: ‘The mobile phone is central to the lives of young people. 97% of females and 92% of males in our national sample of 11-21 year olds have access to a mobile phone. Mobile phones are a vital tool for young people’s social lives, but they are also part of self expression.’

The report was a 2004 study into the mobile phone habits of a sample group of young people aged 11 to 21 in England and Wales. I chose the quote because it is applicable to the young people I work with. Mobile phones are absolutely ‘central’ and ‘vital’ to these young people.

I work in a Training Organisation and deliver Essential Skills to Jobskills trainees. Most of the trainees are aged from 16 to 19 years of age, although a few are in their early twenties. In September last year approximately 30 new learners started with our organisation. By October the learners had completed their Essential Skills inductions and initial assessments and had just begun their literacy training with me. It was at this time I chose text messaging as my research topic.

There were two main reasons why I chose this topic. The first was because of the disciplinary problems I was experiencing with my learners, the major problem being their constant use of mobile phones during training sessions. Despite reminders and warnings from myself at the start of every session, learners refused to turn their mobile phones off. Instead they chose to put them on silent so they could still send and receive text messages. The problem was so severe that I banned all learners from even having their mobile phones on display and threatened to confiscate the phone of any learner who persisted in using it. Despite this, learners continued to use their phones to text when they thought I wasn’t looking. The second reason I chose text messaging was because of the fact that all my learners, without exception, were using text abbreviations in their written work.

Text messaging is the most common literacy practice among my learners but it is also the most frustrating obstacle and distraction to learning that I have to deal with in my sessions. I therefore thought it would be interesting to get the points of view of those who use it most often to try and help me understand why it is so popular.

Research Aims

This project aims to explore text messaging from the point of view of the young people who use it. I wanted to briefly examine the mobile phone history and habits of the learners I was working with to try and find out how often they send text messages and why they do so. I mainly wanted to explore the actual text messaging ‘language’ used by the learners. I wanted to know how and where they learned the text abbreviations they use and why they are using the same abbreviations in their written work.
The aims of this research evolved and changed as the research progressed, which worried me until I realised this was a normal part of the research process: ‘Often one’s initial idea of a research problem is only provisional. It may be necessary to refine the nature and scope of the problem several times during the process of clarifying one’s research’ (Lankshear and Knobel 2004, p44). My original aim was to carry out an investigation into the impact of text messaging on young people’s literacy. I had already made up my mind that text messaging was lowering the level of literacy among the young people I was teaching and that my research would prove this.

After reading the various studies and projects already carried out on text messaging I realised two very important things. Firstly, I could not start this project or any other, with my mind already made up as to what the outcome would be. Secondly, text messaging might not be the evil curse I thought it to be and it might actually have its place or its part to play in developing young people’s literacy.

The Participants

All the participants in this research project are Jobskills trainees. They attend our organisation one day a week for NVQ training and their literacy training takes place on the same day. They spend the other four days a week at their work placement. Before starting to work with my case study group I had discussions with Joinery, Childcare and Bricklaying trainees about mobile phones and text messaging. I piloted my questionnaires with Administration and Bricklaying trainees.

My study was carried out with a group of six NVQ Hairdressing trainees. They are all female and are all aged from 17 to 19 years of age. Two of the group are working towards Entry Level 3 qualifications, while the other four are working towards Levels 1 and 2 qualifications. All six learners started with our organisation in October last year and have been attending one day a week since that time. Their literacy training session takes place first thing in the morning.

Methodology

I started by creating questionnaires for learners to complete to find out if they had a mobile phone, how long they had it, what they used it for and how many text messages they sent (Appendix 1). The questionnaires provided me with a small sample of quantitative data. Most of my data would be qualitative, as it would be gathered through group discussions with the learners in my study.

The first discussion started with a general question on whether the group thought mobile phones were a good or bad invention and reasons for their opinions. We progressed to other aspects of mobile phones and I was able to find out specific information about:

- when they turned their mobile phones off;
- what they did if their phones weren’t working;
- why they preferred text messaging to making calls;
- why they sent so many text messages;
- situations where they felt it was inappropriate to answer their phones;
- circumstances where they felt it inappropriate to send a text message rather than make a call;
- their feelings on using text abbreviations;
- situations where they felt using text abbreviations were inappropriate.
During the second discussion, we discussed why learners used the abbreviations they did and how and where they learned to text.

I created a mind map on the Smartboard during the discussions and I made my own notes on the points and thoughts expressed by the learners (Appendix 2). I did not record the discussion because of the lesson I learned during the pilot discussions I had with other trainees. I recorded the very first pilot discussion and it was a disaster. The very fact that the learners knew it was being recorded meant they were completely unresponsive, despite assurances from me that no one but me would hear the recording.

I created worksheet activities for the learners in my study group to complete (Appendix 3). The activities were designed to provide information about the text abbreviations learners used.

Throughout this research project I have observed the learners’ use of text abbreviations in their written work.

**Literature Review**

Until I started this research project, I had no idea that text messaging was such a widely debated topic. In fact I was completely dismissive of text messaging and assumed that the rest of the world was of the same opinion. I was surprised to find that so much importance and value was placed on it and that so much research had been carried out on it.

My literature review showed that educators, psychologists and other experts cannot reach agreement about text messaging, either about its impact on young people’s levels of literacy or about the part it should play in the teaching of literacy. Opinions vary according to the source. Some believe texting improves young people’s literacy, some that it hinders literacy development and others that it has no impact at all.

In September last year, Coventry University researchers Clare Wood and Beverly Plester presented the findings of their research into links between text messaging and levels of literacy in young people. Plester said:

‘So far, our research has suggested that there is no evidence to link a poor ability in standard English to those children who send text messages. In fact, the children who were the best at using ‘textisms’ were also found to be the better spellers and writers.’ (Coventry University, 2006)

In contrast, Glenn Wilson, a psychologist from London University, carried out clinical trials and found the very act of sending or reading electronic messages ‘could impair mental capability even more than smoking cannabis’. Dr Wilson said:

‘The impairment only lasts for as long as the distraction. But you have to ask whether our current obsession with constant communication is causing long-term damage to concentration and mental ability.’ (Txt and email ‘reduce IQ more than cannabis’, *The Daily Mail*, 25th April 2005)

**Findings**

In my group of six Hairdressers, one learner received her first mobile phone when she was in P7, four when they were in first year of secondary school and one when she was in second year of secondary school. All six used text messaging more often than any other feature on their phone and they all sent over 40 text messages every day.
When asked why text messaging was more popular, learners stated the main reason was that it was cheaper and they were all receiving free text messages as part of the deal they had with their phone companies. All the learners stated they preferred to send and receive text messages rather than making phone calls. They were happier texting because they did not have to talk to the other person or see them. They could not really give a specific answer as to why this was the case. I encouraged them to explore this further and they were only able to state that they had always sent text messages and they just felt more comfortable with texting.

This explained why text messaging was more popular than making calls, but not why learners sent so many text messages. When questioned about this, they stated that they did not know why they sent so many. They were all quite open in admitting the texts they sent were usually brief and unimportant and that there was probably no reason for them to send as many as they did. They did say there was a time limit on using their free text messages and they had to make sure they used up all their free messages within the time allocated. This was perhaps one reason why they sent so many.

One very interesting comment was made by one of the learners, who said that when you get a message ‘it just makes you feel all warm and liked’. Obviously this implies the more you get the more you feel liked. There were also comments made to the effect that that when you received a message it was like getting a present. You looked forward to finding out who it was from and opening it up.

I asked the learners if they ever turned their phones off and there was a unanimous ‘no’. When I asked what would they do if their phone was not working, they all said they would use their old one until their new one was repaired. This revealed that they all keep their old phone when they get a new one so they have a back-up phone.

I asked the learners if they would turn their phones off or to silent in any of the following situations:
• at a job interview;
• sitting an exam;
• at the cinema;
• on an airplane;
• during class;
• visiting someone in hospital.

Only when they were on an airplane would the learners turn off their phones. If they were in a job interview, sitting an exam or at the cinema they would turn their phone to silent. If they were in class or visiting someone in hospital they would not automatically turn their phone to silent. They said it would depend on the teacher or who was with them in the hospital.

The learners acknowledged there were situations where they wouldn’t answer their phones and these were the same situations where they would put their phone on silent. They stated they would answer their phone in certain classes, depending on the teacher and in the hospital depending on who was with them.

In the course of the discussion, none of the learners could think of situations where they felt it was inappropriate to send a text message rather than make a phone call. They are happy to end relationships by text message. They are happy to let people learn bad news by text and do not feel it would be inappropriate for them to learn bad news by text. All of them let their employers know by text if they are unable to attend work and their employers text them back.
When asked about text abbreviations, the group stated they knew that they should not use text abbreviations in their written work but said they did it sometimes without realising. This is clearly evident in the work they produce for me. In one example a learner produced a summary of survey findings using ICT. The work was of a high standard but she had typed ‘u’ for the word ‘you’ throughout the document. I asked her to proofread the work. She did, but failed to spot this mistake. I pointed out to her that she made the same mistake throughout the piece and asked her to check again. She still failed to notice. I pointed to one of the sentences where she used ‘u’. She was unable to see what was wrong. I pointed to the letter ‘u’ and only then did she realise what was wrong. She declared she didn’t notice the mistake when she was proofreading it as she was ‘so used to writing it’.

When I created the worksheets for the learners and right up until the time I asked the learners to complete the worksheets, I believed there was a type of universal text language that all young people knew and used. As part of my literature review I discovered numerous websites that provided a glossary of ‘text speak’ abbreviations. One of the websites is the Macmillan English Dictionary website. It provides a list of recognised text abbreviations and I used some of these abbreviations in my worksheets.

Believing all young people used the same text abbreviations proved to be a serious flaw in my thinking. When completing the worksheets, one of my Entry Level learners stated that she didn’t understand the abbreviations in the worksheet. When I explained them to her she said she didn’t ‘text like that’. The rest of the group had no problem understanding the abbreviations but stated they were unfamiliar with some of them. There were different levels of texting ability among the group just as there were different levels of literacy ability.

When we discussed where, when and how learners learned to text the response was very interesting. At first they just couldn’t offer any explanation. They knew they just had always been able to text. They were asked to think about it. They said that they only had a certain amount of character space per message and that they automatically shortened words to get more into one message. They said they created their own abbreviations, like ‘2DAY’, ‘U’ and ‘Y’. Other abbreviations like ‘GR8T’ and ‘LOL’ were used in text messages they received and the learners then used them when they composed their own messages.

**Conclusion**

My findings reflect those of Haste (2005, p18) in that they show that a mobile phone is more than just an accessory to young learners, that it is ‘more than a communication tool or piece of furniture: it is an extension of their person and expresses their identity and selfhood in a variety of ways, including both how it is used and how it is worn’.

The fact that learners are willing to face the consequences of keeping their phone on rather than turn it off, and the likening of text messages to presents, demonstrates that learners find comfort and reassurance in having a mobile phone.

The sheer number of text messages composed and read by learners every day, goes some way to explaining why they end up using text abbreviations even when they do not mean to and why they fail to spot abbreviations in their written work.
Last November, the Scottish Qualifications Authority was condemned by politicians and teachers’ union representatives after ‘admitting that answers written in text message language will be acceptable in English tests as long as they are correct’. (Jamieson, 2007).

My research is small-scale, but I think it highlights the problems that come with acknowledging text abbreviations as an acceptable form of written literacy. The most significant and surprising findings from my research were that there were different levels of texting ability among the learners and that different learners used different abbreviations. ‘Textspeak’ isn’t formally taught but young people learn it and use it easily. It varies from learner to learner. If we are to accept ‘textspeak’ in learners’ written work then we need to decide against what standards the use of abbreviations will be judged. If we introduce standards then all we are doing is creating another form of written English to be taught alongside Standard English. We would have to educate the educators. Tutors cannot mark work if they don’t understand the abbreviations being used.

On the other hand, my research also clearly demonstrates that text messaging is an extremely important part of my learners’ lives. It is the literacy they practice most often. There are therefore plenty of grounds for further discussion and investigation into the role of text messaging and the role it may play in literacy teaching.

References


**Online References**


Although I felt really overwhelmed and really lost when I started to think about my research topic, I actually enjoyed it once I got started. I really enjoyed the research and found it a worthwhile and very interesting assignment. I learned a lot about text messaging and about my learners. Although I found it tough going at times, I personally think my research was worth it. Without it I would never have got the following little gems from my learners:

- when you get a message ‘it just makes you feel all warm and liked’.
- when you got a message it was like getting a present. You looked forward to finding out who it was from and opening it up.

PRICELESS!”

Pamela McDowell
APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Questionnaire

TEXT MESSAGING QUESTIONNAIRE
For those who HAVE a mobile phone.

Please fill in the following details about yourself.

Name: ...........................................................................................................

Age: ........................................ Male □ Female □

Please answer the following questions.

1) When did you leave school? Month ......................... Year ......................

2) How long have you had a mobile phone? ..........................................................

3) What do you use your mobile phone for?
   (Please tick all that apply)
   To make phone calls □ To send text messages □
   To find out the time □ To find out the date □
   To do calculations □ To take photographs □
   To access the internet □ To read or send emails □
   To listen to music □ To wake you up □

4) Which of the following features do you use MOST often on your phone?
   (Please tick one box only)
   Phone □ Text messaging □
   MP3 player □ Personal organiser □
   Calculator □ Camera □
   Internet □ Email □

5) (Please tick one box only). Approximately how many text messages do you SEND in one day?
   0 – 10 □
   11 – 20 □
   21 – 30 □
   31 – 40 □
   41 + □

Thank you for filling in this questionnaire.
Appendix 2 – Smartboard Notes

MOBILE PHONES
Good or Bad?

- contact
- emergencies
- games
- texting
- alarm
- time & date
- radioactive

- Driving
- signal
- distract
- keep charging
Appendix 3 – Text Messaging Worksheets

TEXT MESSAGING ACTIVITIES
Please complete the following activities.

Name: ...........................................................................................................

1) Look at the following text message abbreviations. Please write the full word beside each abbreviation.

Example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Word</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B4</td>
<td>Before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gr8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2NITE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XLNT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2) Look at the following phrases. Please write them using text message abbreviations.

Example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phrase</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bye for now</td>
<td>B F N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See you later</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you ok?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the moment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be right back</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be seeing you</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3) Please look at the following message. Write it out using text message abbreviations.

Hi Alice

How are you? Can you please let me know where you are going to meet me tonight? I forgot what you told me. Send me a text message to let me know. See you later.

4) Please read the following text message. Write it out in proper English.

txt spk is lyk da bst fing sinc sliced bred! i luv txt spk its so mch quickr an easier an u can use it in loadza stuff lyk msn, email, an obviously txtin. an also notes in class!

lol
I came to Essential Skill via a circuitous route: I developed an interest in teaching as a result of the support I was giving my daughter with her moderate learning difficulties. I realised that I wanted to become involved in some aspect of teaching and, initially, became a literacy assistant in a local primary school. When I heard about the certificate in Essential Skills, it seemed like the next natural step in my journey. It has been an incredible learning process as I had no previous formal teaching experience, but the Certificate and Diploma courses at Queen’s have given me a foundation on which to build my teaching knowledge and practice.

I have been working with adult learners this year and have had the added challenge of working with adults who are profoundly deaf. I also had to develop an effective working relationship with their interpreter. The needs of adult learners are different to those of the 16-19 years with whom I had started my teaching practice. It has been a new area of experience and a very rewarding one. It was, however, the needs of 16-19 year olds that encouraged me to participate in practitioner research, irrespective of the course requirement to do so. I felt that I needed to undertake research into how they learned if I was going establish a teaching environment that facilitated their learning and mine.

Kim McAnespie
2. The theories of motivation and their relevance to Essential Skills learners within Further Education: a case study

Kim McAnespie

Introduction

As a tutor, and now as a practitioner researcher, I am still on a quest to identify what motivates my learners to learn, to participate and to engage fully in the process of learning. The impetus for my research began, as a means of validating what I had already learnt and observed about motivation, but I also believed there had to be more to uncover, as there were students who were not being engaged in the learning process, and this was my ultimate challenge. I felt that I was not embarking on this journey alone, as I was aware of the dilemmas faced by other Essential Skills tutors and hoped that aspects of my research would shed light on their situations, as well as allowing me to become more informed and directed.

It is difficult to select an all-inclusive definition of motivation, but I have chosen one which I believe is most relevant to my context. The term ‘student motivation’ refers to a student’s willingness, need, desire and compulsion to participate in and be successful in, the learning process.’ (Bomia et al 1997, p.1)

By identifying the views of my students I hoped to gain a better understanding of how they perceived the learning experience and their part within it. The concerns of colleagues would add another dimension to this understanding and my research.

Research Aims

The aim of this research is to ascertain if the theories that tutors are taught in relation to student motivation are actually relevant to the students themselves, and if this relevance can be built on and, in some cases, taught. My belief is that the theories are relevant and that I have used them as the foundation for my teaching and planning, but I feel that while some students may identify with the theories, others will not see the relevance for their learning. In order to discover if this is in fact the case, I have embarked on a case study of my students, which has involved an initial class on motivation; a questionnaire completed by the students; a discussion of the results with the students and finally a discussion with other tutors, both in Essential Skills and vocational courses. In undertaking this research I hope my findings are useful to myself and also to other tutors who are in a similar situation. Incorporating my findings into future practice is essential in order to use what has been gained through this process in a positive and proactive manner.

The Participants

I collected my data mainly from the group of fifteen students I teach within Further Education. They attend Essential Skills classes twice a week for a period of an hour on each occasion. They are aged between 16 and 19 years and are in the first year of their vocational studies. There is a
mixture of attitudes towards the class, with some students attending because they enjoy the class and actively participate, to students who feel that it is of no benefit to them and they continually engage in behaviour that is to their detriment and the detriment of the other students. They are a lively group who, in the main, get on extremely well with each other socially, and within the class. There are, however, a number of students who express frustration at the behaviour and non-participation of their fellow students.

I also interviewed other tutors within Essential Skills and Further Education in relation to what they believed motivated their students and what was relevant to them. I believe that by including the views of other tutors I added to the importance of the information I gathered during the research process.

**Methodology**

I selected a number of research methods in order to ascertain if the theories of motivation are relevant to my students. I planned to conduct the research over a period of one month with the students, and had to use class time due to restrictions in their timetable. I felt that this would allow me adequate time to carry out the planned activities and to reflect on the findings. The interviews with the tutors were over an extended period of two months so that I had an overall picture of what my research entailed at the end of the process. I began with a general introduction to the idea of motivation within a class lesson. Students actively took part in a class discussion in relation to the elements that must be present in order to be motivated to undertake any task, whether it is keeping fit or participating in an Essential Skills lesson. The students were asked to reflect on their own views in relation to motivation and also to consider how others influence their levels of motivation. At this early stage, students identified that they had difficulty in starting a task and seeing it through. There were times when they felt that they just could not be bothered to make any effort no matter what the activity (their views). They believed that this attitude transferred over into their educational environment and that they did find they had problems with setting goals for achieving a task or persevering with it.

With these general statements obtained from the students, I used the theories of motivation to create statements contained in a questionnaire. The students willingly participated in the research and were interested in knowing what the results would be. I could see that they could be motivated to participate when they were involved and included in the task at hand.

A focus group discussion of the findings with students allowed for a greater understanding of their selections within the questionnaire.

Throughout this process I held discussions with other tutors as another source of information, and to broaden the scope of my research. I felt that this placed my research firmly within my own context and that my findings would have further relevance for the organisation as a whole.

The research process progressed through the following stages, as outlined above.

1. Class on motivation – general introduction and class discussion on topic.
2. Questionnaire completed anonymously by the students.
3. Discussion of the finding with the students and expansion of answers given.
4. A continual process of discussion with other tutors, and collation of their views in relation to student motivation.

I believe that by selecting these methods I was able to build up a more representative picture of what was happening with learning and motivation in my context. Each stage of the process built on the results of the previous one, allowing the area of research to be observed and commented on from different perspectives, which contributed to a more comprehensive analysis.

The research focused on my students’ ideas of what was relevant to them in the learning process; how they viewed the learning environment and experience; if they could identify their responsibility for learning; the process then progressed to including the views of other tutors by way of short, informal interviews and discussions.

My research took the form of a case study, with the findings analysed using a qualitative approach. I have presented the data as I found them, and many instances of individual perceptions of the topic have been included, which I feel contributes to the findings and makes them extremely relevant to the time and context of the research. I was searching for an understanding of the phenomenon of motivation and how my students view and relate to it, therefore I feel that the use of a case study was appropriate for this purpose.

**Literature Review**

A wealth of writing has been produced in relation to the theories of motivation and it would be impossible to make reference to all who have contributed to this field of knowledge and expertise. As I had already examined many of the theories through my own learning context, I felt that it would be beneficial and a natural progression to use these theories as the basis for my research, and also to use the subsequent findings to inform my practice and, if possible, the practice of other tutors.

I had implemented many of the ideas voiced by theorists in relation to classroom environment, teaching materials, feedback and support. I could identify the relevance of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Lawrence 2000) and how it related to my students. I observed that a number of my students had remained at a level where their physiological needs determined their participation and behaviour. By undertaking this research and allowing the students to have access to the findings and an input into the final contents of this paper, I hoped that they would become more informed in a relative way to what they needed as learners in the learning process.

Vygotsky (Moll 1990) highlighted the need for peer support and learning and how it was extremely important to work with and receive support from one’s peers. The statements within the questionnaire reflected this idea and asked the students to identify with it or to discuss why it was not relevant to them.

Many of the issues raised by Daines, Daines and Graham (1993) I believed to be relevant to my students. They needed to feel that the resources and activities within my class were appropriate and suited to their needs. They needed to identify with the importance of feedback on their work and participation.

Carl Rogers (1969) outlines the need for a teacher to adopt the role of facilitator and to promote independence in the learning process with students. I was particularly interested in finding out if
this was an element of learning that my students would believe to be important to them and how it could be fostered for the future.

Petty (1998) asked tutors to acknowledge the importance of the reasons for learning and participation, and to question how these could be incorporated into both the learning programme and experience. These were of real significance to me, and again I wanted to discover if my students could identify these within my teaching programme and if they felt it was relevant to them to have them incorporated.

Motivation for This Research Paper

I felt that whilst I had read a considerable number of books about motivation and had endeavoured to put the theory into practice, I wanted to explore how the students viewed their learning experience and how they could explain it, if they were asked. I believed that by conducting my research I could improve my understanding of what my students needed to participate in class and to enjoy the learning experience. I also felt it showed them that I could listen to their views and be informed by what they had to say.

Findings

The questionnaire

Students were asked to read the statements in the table below, and then decide how relevant each was to them. They selected from 1-5, with 5 being the most relevant.

**Questionnaire results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Relevance of statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 It is important to pass my course</td>
<td>0 0 2 2 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 The qualification is useful to me</td>
<td>0 1 0 4 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 I need regular breaks or my concentration falls</td>
<td>0 3 2 6 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 The layout of the classroom affects how I work</td>
<td>3 4 5 1 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 I like to work as part of a group</td>
<td>0 2 8 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 I learn best when the topic relates to my life/interests</td>
<td>0 1 3 2 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 I feel that feedback on participation/work is very important</td>
<td>1 4 8 2 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 I use feedback to help me make improvements in my work</td>
<td>1 1 2 5 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 I believe that it is important to have targets to work to</td>
<td>0 1 3 9 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 I receive satisfaction from achieving goals/targets and understand their importance for my learning</td>
<td>0 0 3 4 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 It is important to receive support from my peers when working/learning</td>
<td>0 2 2 8 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 The resources and activities on the course are relevant to my learning needs</td>
<td>0 0 5 7 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 It is important that the tutor helps me to work independently</td>
<td>0 0 3 6 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 I would like to have more involvement in the setting of topics and lesson content</td>
<td>1 1 6 4 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 It is important to learn to take responsibility for my own learning</td>
<td>0 0 4 4 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion of results with students

I have included aspects of the discussion between the students and myself where new issues have been raised in relation to what motivates them to participate in the learning process. There were results that confirmed the link between the theories of motivation and practice, but I feel it is more relevant to concentrate on the new issues.

**Statement 1. It is important for me to pass my course.**
Most students selected this as the most relevant to them. However, when the statement was related solely to Essential Skills, the students almost reversed their selection and stated that they did not believe it was important to pass the course.

**Statement 2. The qualification for which I am studying is useful to me.**
The majority of students selected this as most relevant to them. When asked to clarify their reason for selection, it was again connected with their vocational course.

**Statement 5. I like to work as part of a group.**
Students felt that whilst it was good at times to work as part of a group, there were occasions when they would rather work alone. They stated that as part of a group, some people chose to work, while others did not participate fully.

**Statement 9. I believe that it is important to have targets to work to.**
Targets were important to the students on the whole, but when discussed further, it was apparent that they had difficulty in identifying these and also working towards them. There was also the idea that there were no consequences for not achieving targets or completing work and that this worked adversely on some students, who then decided not to participate or handed work in late.

**Statement 10. I receive satisfaction from achieving goals/ targets and understand their importance for my learning.**
Students felt that they simply got on with the work without setting targets for its completion. They did not see the importance of planning to prevent them from constantly being under pressure to meet deadlines. They stated that they would need more assistance on planning for completion of assignments and course work. A number of students stated they often could not motivate themselves to complete tasks.

**Statement 13. I think that it is important that the tutor helps us to work independently.**
A number of students felt that this was necessary, as they wished to go on to university and could see that they would be required to work independently in that setting. However, there were students who did not see the significance of independent learning.

**Statement 15. I feel that it is important to learn to take responsibility for my own learning.**
Students stated that they would have to want to learn and this would depend on the course, its content and the type of learning involved. It would have to be relevant to their needs or, more specifically, to what they saw as relevant. Other students expressed the view that they were not sure how to take this responsibility and would need support and instruction.
Selection of views expressed by tutors during short informal interviews:

- Tutors felt that students did not at times see the relevance of their assignments to the course they were studying.
- Students had difficulty in using the resources they were given in order to complete assignments.
- Behaviour and attendance were issues.
- The students did not know how to study or to plan for the completion of work on time.
- Students did not seem to be overly concerned about missing deadlines, and tutors felt that perhaps they were given too many chances, and therefore did not attempt to keep within deadlines.
- Independence was an area of concern and tutors felt that students did not know how to take responsibility for their learning.
- Tutors continually strove to provide resources and lessons that were relevant to the students, but the students had difficulty in identifying with this. Tutors also used methods of teaching specifically designed to promote participation, for example, group work and changes in teaching style.
- Tutors believed there was a need to work together to promote an environment of respect, participation and progress. Tutors felt that on occasions they did not receive respect from a number of their students. They identified a need for students to work within a framework that ensured participation and the successful completion of work, as well as progress in learning.

Discussion of Findings

The questionnaire results showed how relevant the theories of motivation were to the students, even if they did not have any direct knowledge of what these theories were. They could see how certain elements had to be in place if they were to be motivated to learn and to participate. Whilst the students’ answers to the questionnaire demonstrated a consistent link between theory and practice, the discussions that took place about the result, provided a fuller and more accurate picture of how the students felt. It was during this discussion session that students were able to expand and provide reasons for their selections. They highlighted areas of weakness in their own development where they felt they needed assistance, or where they could not see the relevance of what they were learning or doing. They also highlighted the need to raise the profile of Essential Skills as part of students’ vocational courses, so that students valued it and believed it added to their learning. I feel that it is within these areas that the research really came into its own and provided an insight into what the students need in order to participate and therefore learn and progress.

There were areas of correlation between the information provided by the students and the tutors, which may now be the foundation for future work and lessons for addressing these issues. These include the idea that some students do not know how to take responsibility for their own learning. Tutors felt this was an area for development, and my students stated they felt that they would need support to help them identify the skills necessary to allow them to take such responsibility.

Some students believed that there were no consequences for non-attendance or failing to complete work to deadlines. The tutors expressed concerns in relation to this, as they felt torn between wanting the students to succeed, yet being frustrated by the students’ lack of commitment to course requirements.
Both students and tutors commented on the importance of the setting of goals and the ability to work to deadlines. Some students felt that they did not use goals effectively in assisting them to complete work on time and that they would need assistance in this area. The ability to study was also an area identified by tutors and this was reflected in the way students felt about organising their time efficiently.

As a tutor I have been encouraged to use group-learning activities, and have felt that they work effectively for the majority of the time. The students highlighted the issue that some students participate fully in the activities and produce most of the work, while others do not take an active role. I have observed this within my classes and have tried to address this situation by changing the group dynamics. Teaching students how to work effectively in groups could further improve the use of such teaching methods.

**Conclusion**

Motivation is an extremely important aspect of teaching, both for students and tutors. The use of the theories within the research allowed for an examination of them and their relevance for my group of students, but during the process the relevance was added to by the contribution of other tutors and also the students’ further discussion of the topic. What has emerged is that students need guidance throughout the learning process. There are many skills students need in order to participate successfully in this process: the ability to study; the ability to organise their time effectively; taking responsibility for their own learning and seeing the relevance of what they are being taught. I feel that as a result of this research I have become more aware of the need to provide support and teaching in these areas. I believe that if students receive this guidance they can learn how to learn and how important their participation is in the learning process. This has been a small study in relation to the topic and there are no doubt much larger and more in depth research papers into this area, but this process has provided me with new information and another direction for me to concentrate on when I am working towards engaging my students. I believe there are students within my context who would benefit greatly from being part of a mentoring scheme and that this could improve the rates of participation, retention and success.

There are further questions to be explored in relation to this topic and there will be many who will follow me down this path in search of the answer to what motivates students. If I have been able to provide an insight for other tutors within Essential Skills and also other vocational courses, then I have achieved what I set out to and feel that the whole process has been extremely valuable. The choice of a case study was appropriate to my circumstances and to what I wanted to research. It gave me the opportunity to engage with my students at another level and in particular showed them that I valued their opinions on the topic.

Another important aspect highlighted during the research was that some of my students have perhaps not reached the level of learning needed to engage in group learning effectively or to realise that they need to ask for help from others in order to succeed. They may not yet have reached the Zone of Proximal Development identified by Vygotsky (Moll 1990), and this needs to be addressed in the planning of the learning process.

Individual learning plans are already in existence, but students have expressed their difficulties in using these effectively and also in establishing goals and targets. I know of the existence of mentoring schemes within Further Education and feel that this could provide the support students need. A scheme such as this would allow students to engage in the learning process whilst being
Practitioner Research in Essential Skills: Perspectives on engagement in learning

guided and directed effectively. The levels of retention and success would ultimately be improved and all involved would benefit. Making student motivation a priority is essential, along with the concept of modelling and communicating the value of lifelong learning (Renchler, 1992). Students tend to see learning as an immediate activity and not one that they will be engaged in throughout their lives. As discussed by Anderman and Midley (1998) and Lumsden (1994), all students would benefit from higher levels of engagement and motivation to succeed. This process needs to be facilitated in the classroom and within the educational organisation, so that students are aware of its importance and its relevance to their participation and success.

References


Daines, J, Daines, C and Graham, B. (1993, 3RD edition) Adult Learning, Adult Teaching. University of Nottingham


Nelson Thones


I believe I learnt an incredible amount through undertaking the research paper. I developed a greater understanding of the students I was working with and how they felt about their learning and the methods they employed. The research also allowed me to identify areas that I needed to develop within my own teaching style and I have been able to incorporate these into my present teaching.

Practitioner research was a completely new experience to me and I was quite daunted at first about embarking on what I had previously viewed as a very scientific method, but I found that within Essential Skills it emerged as a relevant and informative process. I believe that tutors should participate in research as it is an opportunity to select a particular area of interest, research it and use those findings to improve their teaching and, more importantly, the experience of their learners within the learning environment.

Kim McAnespie
I think that I have always been a frustrated teacher. Having worked as a bank manager and latterly a classroom assistant, I decided in 2004 that it was time to do something about it. I went, as I now advise some of my learners to do, to the Educational Guidance Service for Adults. They told me how I might go about becoming qualified and the rest is history.

My work has been varied and the learners even more so. My current essential skills class is a group of sixteen to twenty four year olds, whom I find the most demanding to work with, and extremely different from the Reminiscence work with older people which I have also been involved with more recently. However, the contrast between the two is refreshing.

The idea of carrying out research was initially daunting and I felt overwhelmed by the choice of topics that a practitioner could choose to explore. It was beneficial for my butterfly brain to be forced into thinking precisely about praise and how I would carry out the research. In approaching my research I probably thought that I knew in essence what the result would be, but my findings did surprise me and I think that is one of the interesting things about the whole process.

Suzanne Martin
3. The Power of Praise: examining the impact of praise in the adult learning context

Suzanne Martin

Introduction

Many learners come to adult literacy classes with emotional ‘baggage’ and low self-esteem. They are like icebergs, with only a small piece of this emotional bulk showing on top and the larger part hidden beneath in an often impenetrable sea. Tutors are not counsellors, but their attitude and how they respond to learners with praise and positive feedback must have a huge impact on learners and their potential performance in adult literacy classes.

‘Success breeds success, by a virtuous circle. As a result, the effects of success and reinforcement are much greater than many teachers realise.’ Petty (1998, p36)

Is praise really as important as we think it is, and if so, do we use it enough? I am concerned that as tutors we should be aware of how and when we use praise and not think that it is something we do automatically.

Research Aims

The research aims to determine through questionnaires and group discussions
- How learners respond to praise by gaining feedback from learners.
- In what way teachers use praise and positive reinforcement.
- The implications for tutors’ practice.

The Participants

Data for this research was collected from four adult literacy classes from different contexts, two male and two predominantly female. This enabled me to gain a cross section of opinion on the subject. The learners varied from employed men in their thirties and forties to unemployed young men in the sixteen to twenty four year old category. The women attended community literacy classes, one of which was based in an area of social deprivation. In addition, learners were of differing academic abilities, ranging from Entry Level 2 to Level 2.
The tutors whom I observed had all been teaching for a minimum of three years in the field of adult literacy.

Methodology

I had considered carrying out research by conducting part of a lesson with praise and one without to see how the learners responded. I decided that this was unethical as it would be unfair to subject sensitive learners to give a lesson without any positive feedback. In addition, it would be virtually impossible to conduct a fair test as the repercussions of one part of the test would impact on the other, i.e. the impact of the use of praise may linger on to the part of the lesson carried out without it and vice versa. There would also be other issues which would impact on the comparison
of the two sessions such as the learners’ concentration span, the difficulty of finding two similar types of content for the lesson and the problem of effectively measuring the learners’ responses.

The findings were gathered by both quantitative and qualitative methods:

1. Questionnaire
2. Group Discussion
3. Observation of experienced tutor.
4. Permission was gained from all of the tutors and learners who signed forms saying that they were willing to participate and could withdraw at any time. The purpose of the research was explained to all involved.

1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire was issued to the literacy classes involved in the group discussion in order that they could think in advance about some of the issues concerning praise and contribute more effectively to the group discussion. It was designed to see how learners reacted to praise using a Likert-type scale, with categories from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Using a scale rather than asking the learners how they felt about certain situations would avoid the difficulties which some learners might have in expressing how they felt in writing. The group discussion would provide the forum for this.

2. Group Discussion

The same method was used for each discussion. I conducted the group discussion using the same initial questions for each group. These discussions all took place when each group was well established (a minimum of eight to nine weeks into their course) in order for them to feel familiar with their peer group and relaxed enough to speak freely in front of them. I was familiar with two of the groups as I was their volunteer tutor and the remaining two had their tutors present at the time of the discussion. The discussions were taped as unobtrusively as possible, with the learners’ consent.

3. Tutor Observations

Four observations of tutors, in varying fields of adult literacy from vocational to community literacy programmes, were carried out recording their use of praise and positive feedback.

Literature Review

Trying to find published work on the subject of praise was remarkably difficult; this subject was normally only referred to briefly within the context of motivation. However the World Wide Web provided many articles and references from educators in many different settings, but mostly concentrating on praise in the context of primary and secondary education.

An examination of the writing and research on praise by the teaching profession seems to suggest that the misuse of praise might be almost as detrimental as not using it at all. ‘praising students for doing what’s expected suggests that the teacher believes they would typically or otherwise do the wrong thing if not praised. Many students interpret this as a measure of their low ability which ultimately may be damaging to self esteem or lead to a situation of mistrust.’ www.shsu.edu/~henrikse
On the other hand, ‘students offered genuine praise for effort or authentic task achievement proceed to feel more competent in handling new challenges.’ (ibid.)

Although the literature review provided interesting and sometimes conflicting information on praise and its potential both negative and positive I wanted to see if this research was borne out in the adult learning environment. It was also noted that ‘Teachers tend not to be as positive as they think they are.’ www.highlandschools-virtualib.org.uk. I was concerned by this finding and thought that if true, this is something which tutors should be made aware of.

**Motivation**

I was working with a group of woman learners in West Belfast. Compiling portfolios was an uphill struggle as learners lacked focus and seemed to be easily distracted from their work. They felt that they were not capable of doing what was required to accomplish the task. Even breaking the process down into smaller achievable parts did not seem to have the desired effect to make the task’s completion within reach. Only the use of praise and positive feedback seemed to help learners focus on their work and make a significant difference. I wanted to find out more about this and if it was true of other groups of learners.

**Findings**

**The Questionnaire**

The questionnaire was completed by 26 learners. It consisted of sixteen questions or statements. Each participant was asked to enter the letter which most closely matched is/her own view on the subject. The letters represented four views, A – Strongly disagree, B – Disagree, C – Agree, D – Strongly Agree. I deliberately excluded the Don’t Know option as I felt that this might be too quick and easy a choice for learners to pick and that they would have to think more deeply about what they were being asked if they had to pick from these four options. During the completion of the questionnaire no learner asked if they could put Don’t Know or said they could not find an appropriate answer from the choices.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Overall % Who Agree</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>Overall % Who Disagree</th>
<th>Total No. Learners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you like being praised?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is it important for you to receive praise from your tutor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does praise make you feel good?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does praise make you feel uncomfortable?</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How you react when someone else is praised. Do you wish it was you who is receiving the praise?</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The following are some phrases which tutors use to praise learners. Do you think these are good ways of using praise?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well Done</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Super work</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your opinion was well expressed</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just what I am looking for</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The content of your talk was fantastic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You listened well and absorbed all the points</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like the way you ...</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is it important for you to receive praise from the other learners in the class?</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel that the praise the tutor gives you is genuine?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you work harder at your task after you have been praised?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results

Only three out of twenty six learners disliked being praised and of this only one strongly agreed that they felt this way. It was interesting that the individual who felt this way was a learner who thinks that all classes are a waste of time and only turns up because he is being paid to do so and will face the wrath of a ferocious mother if he does not attend.

In response to the question as to whether specific praise was preferred to general comments such as ‘Well Done’, there was a small margin of difference between the learners’ preferences, and the general ones seemed to carry more weight. It was difficult to express this difference in the specific and general use of phrases in a questionnaire and I am unsure if I achieved this by these questions. Nevertheless the overwhelming finding was that praise, when genuinely given, is always well received.

Group Discussion

I conducted the focused group discussions using the questions below as a starting point. However, each discussion took on a life of its own according to the experiences of the group.

Is it important for you to receive praise from your tutors during your literacy classes? Why is that?
How does it make you feel when you are praised?
Does praise always make you feel good?
Does it ever make you feel uncomfortable? When would that be?
How do you know if praise is genuine?
When does praise not work for you?
Do tutors use praise often enough?
Are you ever praised in other situations outside the class?
What is the best thing a tutor can say to you?

Group 1: Poleglass Women’s Community Group

The subject of praise evoked strong responses from all of the learners and even the normally quieter women contributed freely. It was evident that praise played a very big part for them in boosting their confidence. One learner said that she liked ‘the reassurance of praise’.

It was difficult to avoid the issue of negative school experiences and it was obvious that the learners’ teachers had not provided any positive reinforcement even to the most capable of the woman. It was only the middle class daughters of professionals who received praise. Many of the woman said they ‘wanted to feel valued and for one ‘I think that it (praise) is very much a core part of it.’

The learners indicated that with regard to praise, they were not looking for anything more than to be told ‘good’ or ‘well done’ and tactfully to be told where they have made a mistake in order to prevent them from making another one.

One learner said: ‘When I was at school I was told I wouldn’t amount to anything. The teachers were horrible, horrible.’ This same learner said praise was about how you were made to feel in class: ‘it’s all about treating you as individuals and having time for us.’
Learners felt that they received plenty of praise from their tutor and they always felt that it was genuinely given.

**Group 2: St Margaret’s, Women’s Community Group**

This was another closely knit women’s group, with one male member. This learner has mild learning disabilities.

These learners also referred to their school experiences and one learner said of these, ‘Praise stays with you and so does rejection. You close up into yourself.’

Learners were able to quote incidences of when they were praised. One learner at an FE college was told, when she produced a cake in Home Economics class, ‘Oh ...(name), that’s really, really good – I felt brilliant!’ Another woman said that the only time she received praise was from her doctor when she had come through an operation.

Although the learners were all friends and their peers’ opinions did matter to them, it was definitely the teacher’s rather than the peer group’s praise which mattered most to them.

They said that they knew when praise was ‘just being nice’, which was they thought was annoying rather than being of any benefit. They made reference to the written comments they received on their marked work which ‘helps you to go on’. A similar comment was made by one of the learners who said it had taken her a lot of courage to actually come on the course and the praise ‘encourages you to go on.’

**Group 3: Belfast City Council Employees, Men’s Group**

I wondered if the findings from the discussion would be very different for this group of employed men, most of them in long-term stable employment, but they too referred to the confidence which being praised gave them.

On reflecting on their school experience, learners said that it was important when they were boys not to be thought of as a ‘teacher’s pet’ and it was preferable to have positive reinforcement in the form of comments written on their work.

Most agreed that praise was ‘very important even in work – you want to be noticed and appreciated.’ Another said it ‘gave me encouragement – well done’, and liked this even if it was part of constructive criticism. This was followed his comment that ‘Any idiot can open his mouth and criticise but it is not every person can give constructive criticism’. This was an interesting turn in the discussion took. The learner thought that praise accompanied by how to do something better was a valuable way to use praise.

The learners liked to hear positive comments from their peers, but as with the other groups, it was the tutor’s praise which was important to them. At the end of the discussion one learner summed it up by saying ‘If you’re learning something and getting praise and seen to be taking in the knowledge and using it, yes, you need praise.’
Group 4: Donegall Road, Employment Seekers

This group is made up of predominantly unemployed young men in the seventeen to twenty-four year-old age group. They were not as articulate as the other three groups especially when talking about their feelings and seemed to be less able to reflect on their experience. They were also less experienced in taking part in a discussion e.g. turn taking and making relevant comments at the appropriate time. I think this group may have responded better to having the discussion being conducted by someone with whom they were not familiar and with me observing and recording the information.

For most of the learners, their school education was quite recent and from their comments they seemed to feel relatively ambivalent about the experience. When asked if they received praise at school, some said they did when they worked at the subjects they enjoyed. One learner said he received praise for ‘turning up’. I believe he only achieved twenty percent attendance at school.

With one exception, all learners agreed that praise makes you feel good. A few said it can be embarrassing to be praised.

One of the older members of the group liked to work hard all the time so praise did not make him work harder but he just liked to hear it. One learner said ‘it makes you feel proud of your stuff’.

Tutor Observations

All the tutors used praise throughout their lessons, although some did so more than others. The tutors responded to their learners with praises like ‘excellent’, ‘that’s great’ and ‘super’. In one case in particular the tutor’s use of comments which were written on the learner’s work were very encouraging, and it was this tutor’s comments to which one learner had referred in the group discussion.

The manner in which the tutors used praise reflected their personalities, i.e. some more serious and intense, others more fun and exuberant. They all had favourite phrases and words.

It was evident from observing the lessons that the giving and receiving of praise was a two way process. It appeared that praise was more frequently given when there was an enthusiastic response from the learner. Some words of praise were given which I almost missed when transcribing the lesson, because they were delivered in a monotone which did not highlight their importance to me or the learner.

The tutors’ knowledge of the individuals in their class was very important in their use of praise as they know who deserves or needs praise for their efforts and what is most meaningful to them. Examples are when a quiet learner who rarely speaks out receives praise for contributing to discussion or a poor speller receives positive feedback for a piece of work with fewer spelling errors.

Discussion of findings

Across all of the groups, learners valued being praised, and it affected virtually all the learners in a positive way. Three of the discussion groups stirred strong emotions, which demonstrated how strongly learners felt about the praise and the importance of a subject which has been presented only as a subheading hidden under the topic of motivation.
The group discussions revealed the learners’ sensitivities which lie hidden and by accident, it took a discussion of this kind to draw them to the surface. Tutors do not have the luxury of having this knowledge and I felt that their use of praise could only serve to help these learners overcome their fears. For many learners, their time in an adult learning group may provide their only experience of praise.

The discussions also showed that praise involves an element of progression. It helps learners to move on and provides feedback on their progress, even if it is just a ‘well done’. Equally importantly it can be used, as shown in the BCC discussion, as a means of delivering constructive criticism in the ‘2 Stars and 1 wish’ principle where the tutor gives two elements of praise and one of area for improvement.

The manner in which praise is given is very significant. From the observations of tutors it appeared to be much more meaningful when delivered in an enthusiastic manner together with eye contact and the appropriate body language. As long as the praise is genuine, the words are of lesser importance. It was obvious that in a class where praise was used the learners seemed relaxed and responded well to the tutor. This emphasised the responsive nature of praise where it is part of a two way process. This then leads to the difficulty of maintaining its use in an unresponsive class where it is hard to find much about the learners’ behaviour to praise.

**Conclusions**

Praise is as important as we think it is, in fact even more important than we realise. Eighty eight percent of learners agreed that it made them work harder.

Although the tutors I observed all used praise effectively and instinctively there may be occasions when tutors do not use praise as much as they should. Further research on a larger group of tutors would be necessary to discover how aware tutors are of their use of positive reinforcement.

Knowing how crucial positive feedback is to learners, it is a tutor’s responsibility to ensure that it is effectively incorporated into her teaching and its use not taken for granted. Lesson evaluation may be a suitable occasion to access how effectively praise has been used.

Finally, it is important to remember that learners in most classes attend on a voluntary basis, and that some words of praise can mean the difference between them leaving or staying.

**References**


**Online references**


The word ‘research’ probably frightens tutors who are embarking on it. I feel it is easier to think of it as an investigation into an aspect of adult literacy which interests one or which affects one’s work and delving into this area will enlighten the work one does. As a well-known advertisement says, “Just do it”.

Suzanne Martin
I am employed at The Link Works in Newry, where I have been working in Essential Skills for over ten years. I undertook my research with learners on the Jobskills programme. My learners are both male and female, aged between 16 and 18 years, and are working in a variety of occupational areas; Bricklaying, Joiner, Administration and Childcare. The majority of my learners had negative learning experiences at school and left with few or no formal qualifications.

To better equip me to engage my learners, I felt I needed to explore (a) their reasons for choosing their occupational area and (b) the extent to which the perceived levels of literacy skills required influenced their decision.

Like many others, I had a number of preconceived assumptions about Jobskills learners. These assumptions surrounded their attitude, behaviour, and their commitment to working towards genuine career goals. The general feeling was that brickies and joiners went to the trades because their choice of options was limited and the girls went into administration and childcare because it was the first step in their career ladder. So what did I learn from the research? Never make assumptions!

Noel McStay
4. Literacy and the Jobskills Learner: the perceived impact of literacy skills on aspirations and ambitions

Noel McStay

Introduction

The Link Works is part of the training division of Felix O’Hare & Co Ltd. I have worked with them for the past 11 years. The Link Works itself was set up in 1989 under the auspices of the old JTP and YTP schemes. Due to the increasingly higher demands being expected from the training organisations by the Department for Employment and Learning, The Link Works has evolved into a training organisation primarily committed to the delivery of professional & technical training through Government funded schemes such as Jobskills and New Deal. We would describe ourselves as an employer-led organisation that effectively meets the needs of local employers.

The majority of our learners are marginalised due to their personal, social, physical or educational needs and, as a consequence, face significant barriers to effective participation on the programmes. The goal of The Link Works is ‘to create an environment that will address these barriers and move the learner from a position of limited opportunity into an employed position that will enhance their outlook and quality of life for themselves and their future families’. Each learner has a different starting point, reflecting the individualised nature of the programme, but their ultimate goal is the same.

One of the biggest barriers faced by learners choosing professional and technical training is the level of literacy skills that is required to meet Government frameworks. A high percentage of learners arrive at the start of the training programme with low levels of literacy. In December 2006, the Public Accounts Committee for Northern Ireland reported that almost 50% of year 12 students do not achieve GCSE at grades A – C in English and Maths. Less than 20% of learners on my programme will have a GCSE grade C or above, or equivalent, in English. A significant percentage will not have sat GCSEs at all but rather disengaged from school based education and addressed their needs through KS4 projects with other training providers. During this time they may have worked towards entry level qualifications in literacy, with varying levels of success. These learners are then entering a programme that has been heavily criticised. In November 2005 the Public Accounts Committee, in its report on Jobskills, found that almost half of all learners who start the Jobskills programme leave early without achieving their target qualifications and without enhancing their employability. Furthermore, of those who complete the programme, only 14% go into employment. Of those who start the Access programme (Level 1), only 40% achieve the qualifications that allow them to progress to a Learnership programme (Level 2). So why has there been so little success in the Jobskills programme?

This is a complex question beyond the scope of this project but, through my research, I hope to examine the impact that literacy skills and the introduction of literacy qualifications have had on the success of the programme in terms of the learners realising their ambitions. When Jobskills was introduced, the qualifications target for a learner was solely the achievement of the
appropriate NVQ. DEL, in a reply to a question from the Public Accounts Committee, acknowledged that the introduction of compulsory targets in Key Skills has had a negative impact on overall retention. With the introduction of Key Skills came the concept of a training framework which looked at the academic and vocational development of the learner. This has placed a greater emphasis on literacy skills as an entry requirement and as a financial or performance output for the training organisation. This move towards greater academic provision has progressed further with the introduction of ‘technical certificates’ to all level 2 and level 3 training programmes. These qualifications are mandatory to the framework and involve the completion of paper-based assignments and projects to develop the underpinning knowledge in a vocational area. The practical requirements of the framework are now outweighed by the literacy and numeracy demands. This may not affect the initial participation on the programme, but can quickly become a deterrent to ongoing participation, retention and overall achievement.

Though the original Jobskills programme was not specifically a job creation programme, it has evolved into a programme designed to increase the employability of the learners and create opportunities for them to move into employment. This is now a key measure against which the performance of the training provider is assessed. ‘It has been estimated that between 65% and 70% of employment opportunities will require at least a Level 3 qualification by 2010. Only 41% of UK 25 to 28-year-olds held such qualifications in 1998. Of 19 to 21-year-olds, the figure was 43%’. (DfEE, 2000)

In the construction industry in particular, operatives have very low levels of literacy and, in fact, 17% of the workforce have no formal qualifications at all, but there is a ‘pledge’ to train all employees to Level 2 by 2010. (Leitch Report 2006 and Sector Skills Agreement for Northern Ireland 2006).

Considering the criticisms that Jobskills has faced and the challenging targets that industry has set, how can current Jobskills provision move forward to help to meet these targets? If my learners are to gain sustainable employment and help meet these targets, they will need to meet the literacy demands of their chosen qualification. Engagement and retention are the issues that concern me most, and are the reasons for my decision to undertake this research project. If learners enter a programme that they perceive to involve minimal literacy demands, then their motivation and engagement are going to wane very quickly. To counteract this, I will need to find out what makes them tick, what their long term aspirations and ambitions are (both personal and professional) and what perceived role literacy plays in these ambitions and aspirations. I can then use this in the delivery of my programmes to ensure a successful learning experience and overcome any negative preconceived barriers to participation.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the extent to which the perceived literacy demands within a professional and technical framework impact on the selection of their vocational training area and how significant the learners view the role of ‘good literacy skills’ to be in achieving their life goals. It is hoped that, through my findings, an approach will be found to improve the acceptance of literacy training for my learners on the programme and thus enhance performance in retention, achievement and progression into vocationally related employment. This approach will impact on the teaching strategies I can adopt to enhance the engagement and motivation of my learners and assist them in realising their ambitions.
Methodology

The participants

The Link Works’ main areas of training are Joinery, Bricklaying, Administration and Child Care. For the purposes of this research, these can be categorised into Construction and Non-Construction programmes, though any significant differences between occupational areas within each category will be addressed.

Construction
Joinery
Bricklaying

Non-Construction
Administration
Child Care

All the learners are taken from the different strands available in the Jobskills training programme with the majority from the Traineeship (level 2) strand. The age groups of participants will be from 16-24, though many will be in the first 6 months of their initial training programme.

Learners choosing the Construction-based programmes have generally low academic attainment. A number are drawn from programmes for those who have disengaged from school, such as EOTAS and STEPS. For the majority, literacy skills would fall into the Entry Level 2 and Entry Level 3 bands. For those choosing Non-Construction based programmes, academic performance would be higher, particularly for those on the Administration course. Literacy skills would average out around the Entry Level 3 and the Level 1 bands of the core curriculum.

Assumptions

Practitioners have many ‘theories’ by which they categorise the stereotypical Jobskills learners. Most of these are based on personal experience, rhetoric, conjecture and, to some extent, urban myth. Many of these theories concern attitude, academic ability, behaviour and commitment to working towards genuine career goals. Jobskills, in many ways, is seen as a ‘catcher net’ or a ‘last chance saloon’ for those who have fallen out of the school education system. For this to be true, you would have to assume that an academic route is the preferred direction for all, but this is not the case. For many learners, and for employers, the selection of a vocational programme at an early stage is essential in many jobs. Over the last decade, Government policy has recognised the role of vocational training in the future economic goals of industry. Ruth Kelly, Secretary of State for Education and Skills, commented at the launch of the White Paper, 14 – 19: Education and Skills, in February 2005: ‘Today’s teenagers are tomorrow’s parents, entrepreneurs, public servants and community leaders. So the stakes could not be higher. I believe that every child and every teenager has equal worth. We owe it to them to give them the chance to show what they can do, to make the most of their talents, to reach their potential’.

Government policy in recent years has led to the introduction of:

- Vocational GCSEs in September 2002 which have been designed to provide young people with the opportunity to explore vocational learning in a distinctive and innovative way; by developing knowledge and understanding of a particular vocational area through investigating and researching the ‘world of work’.
• KS4 projects where schools can link in with external training providers to deliver vocational qualifications to pupils who express an interest in a non-academic route.

The success of these programmes, including the new ‘Training for Success’ initiative, requires a major shift in the perception that vocational education is the ‘easier’ option, more suited to students of mid-to low ability. Through this paper I will test some of the assumptions that people make to see if the labels associated with Jobskills training are appropriate.

Jobskills provides a wide range of training options for learners who do not want to pursue an academic path. Some of the courses provide, on successful completion, highly paid employment opportunities and others provide employment in a sector that is lowly paid. Through assumptions 1 and 2, I will look at the criteria used by learners to select a vocational area.

**Assumptions**

1. *Learners choosing construction training are more materialistic than those choosing a non-construction vocation and it is materialism that leads to their choice of vocational training – they are ‘in it for the money’.*

2. *Learners choosing non-construction training are more concerned with life goals than those choosing a construction vocation, and this has a greater impact than the materialist benefits that lead them to choose this career path.*

Through assumptions 3 and 4, I will look at the perceived role that literacy plays in the selection of vocational areas and how this perception relates to an individual’s goals and aspirations.

**Assumptions**

3. *The perceived lack of literacy demands in construction based training programmes is an important factor for learners in their vocational decision making.*

4. *Learners will only consider literacy important in achieving a life goal, if the life goal is important to them.*

Through assumption 5, I am interested in the perceived relevance of different literacy skills in the learner’s chosen vocational area:

5. *Construction learners perceive the need for relatively low levels of reading and writing requirements as compared to higher requirements for speaking and listening skills in their vocational area. The converse is true for Non-Construction learners.*

What aspects of the role of the placement provider are important to the Jobskills learner? All Jobskills learners gain work experience with local employers while they work towards their qualifications. The employer has a critical role in the success of the learner in terms of achievement of qualifications and future employment but, through assumption 6, I will investigate the perceived input that the employer has on the learner’s success.

6. *The higher the level of employer involvement in the development of the learner in their vocational qualifications and literacy based qualifications, the stronger the commitment to the career path.*
These assumptions have been based on my experience of working with this client group over the last 11 years, during which time I have worked with them on an individual basis as an Essential Skills tutor and Mentor as well as in my role as Training Manager. In no way do they reflect my personal opinion, but rather they are drawn from my own experiences and comments made by prospective employers/placement providers, schools and member of academic institutions, the network of training providers and learners themselves.

**THE QUESTIONNAIRE**

A questionnaire was designed to gather data that would prove or disprove the 6 assumptions. The questionnaire can be seen in Appendix 1. It was administered to different cohorts within the Construction and Non-Construction categories and the number of respondents is shown below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESPONDENTS</th>
<th>CONSTRUCTION</th>
<th>NON-CONSTRUCTION</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bricklaying</td>
<td>Joinery</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The questionnaire was made up of 3 sections.

In **Section 1** there were 14 statements with regard to life goals and aspirations. Each question required 3 types of response:
- A rating on scale of 1-10 on the importance of the life goal *(10 is highest importance)*
- Was the life goal a factor in choosing the vocational area? *(YES or NO)*
- A rating scale of 1-4 of how important good literacy was to achieving the life goal *(1 is the highest importance)*

In **Section 2** there are 15 different literacy-based skills. The respondent had to assess the relevance of each skill to their chosen vocational area. The evaluation was a judgement about how often they expected to perform the skill in the workplace. It is a four-point scale with a 1 indicating that it is performed ‘Very Often’ and a 4 is for ‘Never’ performed.

In **Section 3** I looked at responses with regard to employer involvement in the training programme to investigate the level of support and assistance offered from the workplace. This workplace learning experience may be a factor in how positively or negatively the learner participates in the training programme. This part of the questionnaire is based on a four-point scale with a 1 indicating that it is performed ‘Very Often’ and a 4 is for ‘Never’ performed.

The design and wording of the questionnaire took into consideration the literacy and numeracy skills required to complete the document accurately. There was no requirement for writing of free text though the respondents were required to interpret a series of phrases.

The questionnaire was completed during day release for the learner in the vocational training setting. There was a short introduction to explain how to complete each section to ensure that the ratings allocated reflected their personal opinion. I administered it myself for all respondents and the results were then fed into a spread sheet to produce the quantitative data.
THE RESULTS

ASSUMPTIONS
1. Learners choosing construction training are more materialistic than those choosing a non-construction vocation and it is materialism that leads to their choice of vocational training - 'in it for the money'.
2. Learners choosing non-construction training are more concerned with life goals than those choosing a construction vocation and this has a greater impact than the materialist benefits that lead them to choose this career path.

The data for this was taken from the first two responses to the 14 statements in Section 1. The questions were sub-divided into those related to Material Goals and those related to Life Goals.
- Questions 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11 (Material Goal)
- Questions 2, 4, 8, 10, 12, 13, 14 (Life Goal)

A summary of the average scores in each of these divisions is shown below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MATERIAL GOAL</th>
<th>LIFE GOAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ALL RESPONDENTS</td>
<td>7.83</td>
<td>7.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONSTRUCTION</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joinery</td>
<td>8.69</td>
<td>7.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bricklaying</td>
<td>9.11</td>
<td>8.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NON-CONSTRUCTION</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>6.90</td>
<td>7.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Care</td>
<td>6.61</td>
<td>6.97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a) For ‘All Respondents’ there is little difference in the average score for Life Goals and Material Goals, though Material Goals is rated slightly higher by 0.38.

b) ‘Construction Respondents’ rate Material Goals highly with an average of 8.83 on a 10 point rating scale and a high of 9.11 for ‘Bricklaying Respondents’. These ratings are significantly higher than those for Life Goals with an average difference of 1.1 points per question. These results suggest that Construction Respondents have considerable ‘material’ aspirations.

c) For Non-Construction Respondents, they are significantly less than ‘Material’. In fact, these respondents give a higher rating to ‘Life Goals’ than to ‘Material Goals’. If you compare learners who have chosen Bricklaying to those that have chosen Child Care, there is an average difference of 2.50 points per statement.

When I analysed responses to individual statements it was interesting to see the marked difference in some of the key ‘Material’ questions.

- **Statement 5.** ‘To Always Have A Nice Car’ - Construction Respondents rated this on average 3.22 points higher than Non-Construction Respondents.
- **Statement 6.** ‘To Take Regular Foreign Holidays’ - Construction Respondents rated this on average 3.44 points higher than Non-construction Respondents.
- **Statement 7.** ‘To Enjoy A Full Social Life’ - Construction Respondents rated this on average 2.44 points higher than Non-construction Respondents.
This supports the assumption that Construction respondents are ‘in it for the money’ and for the material benefits that income from their trade can generate.

The second part of Section 1 looked at how influential the life or material goal was in the selection process when they were choosing their vocational area. Respondents had to indicate YES if the goal was a factor in their selection of their vocational area.

Again, the questions were broken down into Material Goals and Life Goals. The percentage of respondents indicating YES to the goal influencing their career choices are in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Material Goal</th>
<th>Life Goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Respondents</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction Respondents</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Construction Respondents</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Again, there is little difference when I looked at All Respondents but there was a significant difference between Construction and Non-Construction Respondents. These results clearly show that career choice is driven by ‘Material Goals’ for those choosing Construction training. This is supported by the correlation between the importance rating given to each material/life goal statement and the influence it has in career decisions.

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1**

This graph in Fig 1 shows a strong positive correlation between the 2 variables. Statistically there is a Spearman’s Rank correlation coefficient of Rs=0.90 and this confirms that, for those statements rated highly by Construction respondents, they are also indicating strongly that it is an influence in their career decisions. The converse is also true in that if it is rated lowly then it has little influence on their career choice.

What is also interesting is that this correlation is consistent within the Non-Construction respondents and, as a consequence, across all respondents. The graphs in Figures 2 and 3 show the correlations for both Non-Construction and All Respondents.
Fig 2 Within the Non-Construction respondents again there was a strong positive correlation with a greater Spearman’s Rank correlation of $rs=0.96$.

Fig 3 Across all respondents there was a strong positive correlation with a Spearman’s Rank correlation of $rs=0.94$.

What this clearly shows is that anything that is important to the learner, be it a Material Goal or a Life Goal, is an influential factor in career planning for the learner. For the majority of those learners who take Construction as their vocational choice, Material Goals are the driving force in this decision making process and, though this is important to those in non-construction strands, ‘Life Goals’ play a more significant role in choosing a career.
ASSUMPTION
3 The perceived lack of literacy demands in construction based training programmes is an important factor for learners in the vocational decision making process.
4 Learners will only consider literacy important in achieving a life goal, if the life goal is important to them.

The data for this was taken from the responses to the 14 statements in Section 1.

To date the results have shown that respondents’ decisions about their future are significantly influenced by the goals and aspirations that they hope to achieve throughout their lives. Some of these are work-related and some life goals. If the learner rates the material or life goal as important, then it is indicated as an influential factor in the career decision making process in a significant majority of cases. By introducing the third part of Section 1, I was able to determine how the learner judged the role of literacy in achieving these goals.

Figure 4

The graph in Fig 4 shows a strong negative correlation with a Spearman’s Rank correlation coefficient of $r_s=-0.80$. This is as expected because a 10 on the importance scale is the highest rating whereas a 1 on the literacy rating is the highest importance. Therefore, from the graph, Construction respondents who rate the goal highly have indicated that good literacy skills play an important role in achieving that goal and conversely where the goal is of low importance, literacy has a limited role in the achievement of the goal.

This is a significant result. If I combine this with the results of the previous assumptions, then it is valid to infer that, though learners are choosing construction as their vocational area, based predominantly on the material outcomes that they hope that they can achieve, they recognise the role good literacy skills play in achieving the goal. This suggests that the learners are willing to face the literacy challenges in their vocational area and in the Essential Skills in order to achieve the eventual targeted outcome of a career in construction. Again these results are consistent in the non-construction respondents and therefore it applies to all respondents.
Within the Non-Construction respondents again there was a strong negative correlation with a greater Spearman’s Rank correlation of $rs=-0.78$. Across all respondents there was a strong negative correlation with a Spearman’s Rank correlation of $rs=-0.83$. This provides evidence to disprove assumption 3. Learners choosing manual construction trades are not using the literacy demands in the vocational area as selection criteria for career choice; the material benefits are the overriding ‘deal-breaker’.

I also looked at the perceived role of literacy within the breakdown of statements between Life Goals and Material Goals. The average rating for each category of question is shown opposite.
Overall, Construction respondents rate literacy of higher importance with an average rating of 1.94. They see good literacy skills as having a slightly higher impact on their material goals than on their life goals. The opposite is true for the Non-Construction respondents. Literacy has a considerably lower average rating with 2.23. They do not see it as important in achieving their material goals 2.55 but they do see it important in terms of their life goals (1.91).

Within the respondents, there is a clear gender divide. All the construction respondents are male and 92% of the non-construction respondents are female. Generally, there is also a considerable differential in the earning potential of both categories of learners, due to the nature of the sector in which they hope to develop a career, so the results seem to be reinforcing gender stereotypes associated with breadwinners and family caring roles.

**ASSUMPTION**

5 Construction learners perceive low levels of reading & writing requirements but higher levels of talking & listening skills in their vocational area.

The data for this were taken from the responses to perceived literacy skills in the learners’ industry as indicated in the literacy skills scan rating in Section 2. The skills were split into 2 categories for evaluation purposes:

a) Talking and Listening
b) Reading and Writing

The averages for groups are shown in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AVERAGE RESPONSES</th>
<th>TALKING &amp; LISTENING</th>
<th>READING &amp; WRITING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ALL RESPONDENTS</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>2.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONSTRUCTION</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>2.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NON-CONSTRUCTION</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>1.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(NB Closer to 1 means of higher importance)

Results suggest that construction respondents will perform talking and listening tasks more often than reading and writing but this is a weak result and does not prove the assumption. In Non-Construction, reading and writing are perceived to occur more often but again there is insufficient difference to be significant.

**ASSUMPTION**

6 The higher the level of employer involvement in the development of the learner in their vocational qualifications and literacy based qualifications the stronger the commitment to the career path.

The data for this was generated from Section 3 of the questionnaire. The strength of commitment to the career was determined by looking at whether or not the respondents considered their
employer to be a role model. If the learner looked at the employer as a role model then this is a strong indication that they would like to continue to develop a career in the chosen vocational area.

### AVERAGE RESPONSES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ROLE MODEL</th>
<th>Q1</th>
<th>Q2</th>
<th>Q3</th>
<th>Q4</th>
<th>Q5</th>
<th>ALL RESPONDENTS</th>
<th>CONSTRUCTION</th>
<th>NON-CONSTRUCTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>70.00%</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>3.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The responses to the individual questions clearly show that employers express little interest to the learner on their progress within their qualifications. The lowest level of interest is in Q2, with an average of 3.00 for All Respondents and it is slightly worse for construction learners. Q2 concerns the learner’s literacy development and of the 50 respondents, 21 (63%) have indicated that their employer ‘Never’ comments on the importance of literacy qualifications.

The interesting result is that a high percentage of the respondents, even though their employers are not showing a sufficient level of interest in their qualifications, are indicating that their employer is a good role model. This result provides evidence to disprove the assumption.

Why are employers being seen as role models even though they are not interested in the off-the-job training that the learner is receiving? This can be viewed in a number of ways but I feel that, through the placement, the learner is receiving on-the-job training where the employer is being viewed as supportive and the learner is establishing sound working relationships in the workplace. The learner has developed the knowledge of a successful business and can see how being in an employed position enhances the quality of life of the employees. This gives the learner a goal to work towards and, as a consequence, the employer is being viewed positively as a role model.

### Conclusions

The aim of the research project was to provide findings that would influence an approach to improve the acceptance of literacy training on Government funded programmes and thus enhance performance in retention, achievement and progression into vocationally related employment.

A key outcome of this project is support for the contextualisation of an Essential Skills programme. The results clearly show a divide between Construction and Non-Construction learners and consequently, due to the client groups, a male and female divide. Learners choosing construction programmes are not influenced by the need for literacy but recognise the importance of literacy in achieving their goals. These learners are motivated by the financial benefits of the training in the vocational area and clearly, if we can relate the financial benefits to literacy, it will increase its acceptance to the learner. It is obvious how the learner can make money from the trade, but where is the additional ‘income’ from developing good literacy skills? By ensuring that the development of literacy skills adds value to their career development and can be viewed in financial terms, the learner may engage in the training programme. This is critical at the induction stage for the learner where the benefits can be clearly outlined, but it must then be reinforced in the teaching strategy where the lesson must, where possible, be contextualised to the vocational area.

This finding concurs with the findings from the NRDC research paper on embedded teaching and learning in its statement that ‘The way in which teachers, both vocational and LLN specialists, introduce LLN is crucial to the attitudes of learners towards them, particularly amongst low
achieving young adults. It is particularly important to constantly promote LLN to learners as relevant to the workplace and as essential to their vocational training and future employment. Learners come to value LLN when they recognise that it is integral to learning the job they aspire to'. (NRDC, 2005)

For Non-Construction learners, both material and life goals are important. These learners do not realise the earning potential that comes with success in their vocational area and, realistically, good literacy skills are important to future career development and enhanced salaries. They acknowledge the personal development that comes with the programme, in terms of life goals, but greater acceptance will come with recognition of the material benefits. The benefits can again be stressed at the induction stage but the teaching strategy is likely to be successful if it contextualises the lessons and resources to both vocationally related areas and to life skills development. This supports the findings of the Sectoral Skills Councils when it advocates promotion of contextualised training materials for Essential Skills: 'The fact that Essential Skills training is not relevant to the occupation being taught disillusions young people who are more practically gifted, leading to new entrant retention issues'. (Sector Skills, 2006) This also concurs with both ETI and LSDA who advocate the contextualisation of resources to primarily vocational areas and to a lesser extent, life skills.

The strong correlation between ‘good literacy skills’ and the achievement of life/material goals across all learners indicates that the involvement of the learners in the development of the teaching programme may help to engage them in the lessons. The learners can then identify what is important to them and they can see if this is going to be addressed in the lessons. They will see their own investment being recognised and will be able to engage effectively.

Employers are major stakeholders in the Jobskills training programme. They provide waged and unwaged placements for the learners to apply the skills that they develop on day release to real working situations. The combination of qualifications and experience provides the learner with skills that will enhance their employment prospects. The research shows that employers, in the main, show little or no interest in what happens in day release. These results are consistent for Construction and Non-Construction learners but, for a significant majority of respondents, the employers are seen as a good role model. Therefore, is employer engagement in the learning process for qualifications as important as providing a placement where learners will be allowed to experience working life? The Leitch Report (2006) recommends increased employer engagement in the skills development of their employees and ETI promote employer engagement as essential for the learner. This research, however, suggests that it is the opportunities that the employer provides which are important rather than their direct involvement in the training programme. This research suggests that selection of an appropriate placement provider at the outset will be a significant factor in the retention and achievement of the learner.

If the placement will provide:
- An appropriate range of duties
- Chances for employment
- Time to undertake off-the-job qualifications
- Effective lines of communication with the Training Provider,

then this is sufficient. The employer must concentrate on their business and if they cannot invest time on discussing the details of the learner’s qualifications, does this mean they are not a suitable placement provider? From the learner, the results show that the answer to this is ‘no’,
because the learners can differentiate between their training course and their working life. They can see how they both run parallel and assist in their personal career development but they also realise that they are interdependent. This finding contradicts Leitch’s proposal for increased employer engagement and investment in skills and this is not having a negative impact on learner aspirations to pursue a career in their chosen field. The change is likely to come when the learner moves from an unwaged to a waged position and becomes a cost-factor in the profitability of the company. At this point, investment in skills development may be of greater importance than when the employee was but a trainee.

It is also interesting to note that if work placement is an important feature of the training programme then, following the review of Jobskills and the introduction of the new Training for Success programme, DEL have removed the opportunity to experience working life for the majority of learners. Work experience can only be obtained through waged employment and this can only take place if the learner can show the potential to achieve the targeted Essential Skills within the Level 2 Apprenticeship Framework. Learners who present with low levels of literacy and/or numeracy will be prevented from obtaining work experience, but rather they will enter a strand on the ‘Addressing Barriers to Employment’. My research has raised concerns for me about the future negative effects that the removal of placement opportunities will have on participation and retention on the Training for Success programme. I feel that work placement should be available to all participants on the programme, but I would agree with the advantages of waged employment in terms of the employer investment in the learner. Unwaged placement should be available for those who cannot find employment at the start of the programme but they should be encouraged to move into a waged position as soon as possible. This should be a performance measure for the training provider.

Future research

This research has provided me with some very interesting results which I can use to improve not only my own delivery and practice but also the subsequent achievements of my learners. There have, however, been areas in which, if I was doing it again, I would make changes:

• I started off with six assumptions but, in retrospect, I feel I was trying to cover too much. I feel I could have gone into each assumption in more depth and, in order to do them justice, many of them would require a piece of research in their own right.

• In the data capture questionnaire I am satisfied that reliability of data generated to analyse goals and aspirations with career choice and goals and aspirations with good literacy skills. I feel that conclusions in relation to career choice and good literacy skills are less clear and inferences have to be made from other data. The questionnaire could be adjusted to make this data more explicit and reliable.

My findings are a true reflection of the views of learners within my own organisation and they have raised some other possible research areas within the Jobskills programme:

• The results show a clear gender divide and I have questioned why our female learners seem to choose a vocational area, knowing that it is not going to provide them with the earning potential to meet their materialistic goals. We offer a narrow range of vocational training areas that attract female learners but it would be very interesting to find out if, by widening the sample of occupational areas, the results would remain consistent with these findings. Even with the limited occupational areas that we offer, it would be interesting to see how better careers advice would help the learners realise the potential in terms of career development within their chosen occupational area.
I would also like to investigate further the role of the employer – what benefit does the employer provide to a young school leaver? Is it the practical experience he/she is providing that is of primary importance or is it simply to experience, at first hand, working life and the benefits that this generates? What makes an employer a good placement provider for a Jobskills learner? Again, this is an important issue but I seem to have come up with more questions than answers.

Finally, this survey produces strong results for the Jobskills client group involved in the research but how reliably will it translate to other professional and technical training programmes or academic programmes.
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My research has helped me understand the importance of making a strong link between my literacy classes and the personal and life goals of my learners. If learners can see how the development of literacy skills adds value to their career development, their engagement and motivation is likely to be more positive.

My research was a positive learning experience for me and I would certainly encourage any tutor to undertake a research project. We can all learn as much from our learners as they can learn from us.

Noel McStay
# APPENDIX 1
## EXTRACTS FROM JOBSKILLS SURVEY
### SECTION 1 MOTIVATION & PERCEPTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How important are the statements below to you in terms of achieving your life goals. 10 means very important and 1 means not important at all.</th>
<th>Is this life goal a factor in why you have chosen your training area?</th>
<th>Rate how important good literacy is in achieving your goal? (Circle one rating only)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very Important</td>
<td>Of Little Importance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To have sufficient money for your needs</td>
<td>YES □ NO □</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be independent</td>
<td>YES □ NO □</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be in paid employment throughout my working life</td>
<td>YES □ NO □</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be a good example for my children</td>
<td>YES □ NO □</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To always have a nice car</td>
<td>YES □ NO □</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To take regular foreign holidays</td>
<td>YES □ NO □</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To enjoy a full social life</td>
<td>YES □ NO □</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To have my opinion heard in discussions</td>
<td>YES □ NO □</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To own my home</td>
<td>YES □ NO □</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be able to use the internet for everyday activities</td>
<td>YES □ NO □</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To have savings</td>
<td>YES □ NO □</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To read &amp; respond to letters and other correspondence</td>
<td>YES □ NO □</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To handle own bills and personal finances</td>
<td>YES □ NO □</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be involved in the local community</td>
<td>YES □ NO □</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SECTION 2 VOCATIONAL LITERACY SKILLS

When you are qualified – for each of the items listed below, say how often you think you will carry out this activity as part of your job?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Very Often</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Occasionally</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Read/Write Letters</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read/Write E-Mails</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do a presentation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct a Meeting</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read/Write Instructions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use a telephone</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss work issues with colleagues</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read safety instructions and signs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write reports using ICT</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow a written plan or written instructions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use the internet</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deal with complaints from clients</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take part in meetings</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow verbal instructions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Produce a handwritten document</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SECTION 3 EMPLOYER INVOLVEMENT/SUPPORT

During your training you are placed or employed with an employer who provides you with the opportunity to gain your qualifications. Using the scale below rate how often they get involved with the statements listed here.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How often does your employer........</th>
<th>Very Often</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Occasionally</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ask about the work you have done on your day release</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment on the importance of achieving your qualifications in literacy.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment on the importance of achieving your NVQ.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk about your job/career prospects with the company</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss the progress you are making in your work duties</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do you see your employer as a role model for the work related goals that you hope to achieve?

YES □   NO □
I came to Essential Skills in 2003 after a friend asked me to volunteer with a group of Essential Skills learners. I thought that I would ‘give it a go’ and before long decided to seek advice from EGSA as to how I would become an Essential Skills tutor. Initially I worked towards the City & Guilds 9295 in Adult Learner Support before securing a place on the Literacy Certificate at Queen’s. I have now completed the Literacy Certificate and Diploma and am currently working towards the Numeracy Certificate. Who knew that I would end up here? Now I wonder how I would do anything else!

I work as a literacy and numeracy tutor for SRC and for WEA, with various adult groups both in community settings and at the college. The learners are groups of adults aged 16 to 70 years, who have returned to learning, and young adults who are continuing their learning in the Training for Success Programme. I enjoy meeting the learners and feel privileged to watch them progress in their learning. Carrying out my research has taught me to assume nothing about my approach to teaching and learning in Essential Skills. Every day I am learning more about my practice. I expect every lesson to be different and have learned to welcome the unexpected. I know the value of reflecting on practice. While we base our teaching on proven methods we must remain prepared to improvise and adapt lessons to suit the needs of learners and in order to overcome any barriers.

Amanda McCausland
5. An investigation into the role of talk and learning in developing learner writing skills: implications for curriculum design

Amanda McCausland

Introduction

The writing process is a source of anxiety to many learners who will often say, ‘I don’t know what to write’, and many express the preference of ‘doing it at home’ in order to put off writing. Even with the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum (2001), it is a difficult balancing act for tutors to meet the learning needs of a range of learners in a group. Curriculum construction and lesson design are important issues in maximising the learning potential of a group of learners so that they do not become disillusioned.

Developing writing skills is important to learners and for many it is the motivation for attending a class. An improved ability to produce a written text may have an impact on a learner’s self-esteem. As an adult literacy tutor I realise that many adults are reluctant to write ‘officially’ because they fear exposing their lack of skills and having judgements made upon them, by for example prospective employers or even their child’s schoolteacher. It is certain that improved literacy skills can empower an individual through many aspects of their adult life.

‘If you can’t write an observation, you can’t pass your child care course. If you can’t write a supervisor’s report, you can’t get promoted.’ Klein, C. Millar, R.R (1990) p7.

Research Aims

This research aimed to determine if a small group of learners can support each other through interaction, discussion and joint negotiation of a stimulus material in order to complete a writing task. In addition, I wished to establish if negotiation with other learners helps the individual to develop and produce a written text of the same genre and to find out if ‘talk’ promotes learning, and specifically that it helps learners develop their writing skills. My belief is that talk has a role in learning and improving writing skills and that subsequently, implications for curriculum and lesson design exist. I have based my research on the action research cycle described by Carr and Kemmis (1986) so that the research findings prompt reflective discourse.

The Participants

Data for this research were collected in a community setting where the class has been running for a three-hour weekly session since February 2006. The provider runs classes in rural areas as Literacy and Essential Skills through IT, and through its Community Skills Programme. There are three men in the group. They are from a rural area, and are each involved in a community group within the local area. In this respect the learners have known each other for many years and are very comfortable with each other. All are over 40 years old. Each learner says that he wants to improve and update his literacy skills primarily for personal satisfaction. One learner relates how
he left school before taking exams in order to start employment in the building trade. He feels that he particularly wants to achieve accreditation at this stage in his life. One learner is retired and reports that he mainly enjoys the social aspect of the class and that he wants to learn just to see if he can. All of the learners are working towards accreditation at Level 1.

Methodology

The basis for the research methodology is an examination of the role of talk in learning and writing in order to establish if discussion has an effect on learner writing, so highlighting implications for curriculum and lesson design. In the context of a small group and an informal community setting, learners who share similar interests engaged in a discussion to enable them to write a text. The fact that the learners aspired to gain accreditation in Literacy and Essential Skills would infer implications for curriculum and lesson design.

There is a great diversity of learning goals even within a small group, and finding common aims and objectives is often difficult. For this reason a graph was used as a stimulus material and to give the learners something specific to talk about. The learners were asked for permission for recordings to be made of the discussion and were assured that their privacy would be respected by their names not being used in any part of the final research paper. The learners were informed of the nature of the research and each learner was asked to provide signed consent for his participation. The learners asked that copies of their actual writing would not be included in the paper.

The action research proceeded as follows:

1. The learners were given a copy of a graph.
2. Each learner was asked to write about the graph, having five minutes to complete the task.
3. The learners were then asked to discuss their interpretation of the graph as a group, and had five to ten minutes for the discussion. The discussion was taped for transcription purposes.
4. Each learner was asked to write about the graph again in the light of the discussion and given the same amount of time as in the first instance.
5. The written text was collected for analysis.

The research focused on how learners in the group helped each other through discussion and on the sharing of ideas, compared to working alone. This comparison was made in order to confirm the role of talk in learning. Written text produced when the learner worked alone was compared to the text produced by the learner after group interaction and discussion of the stimulus material. A questionnaire was used to relate the experience of each learner of the discussion and of the writing tasks.

A recording of the discussion was necessary to allow an analysis of the language used and the types of interactions that took place. This method matched the aim of the research because it allowed a comparison between the types of discourse used by a learner in completing the writing tasks. Observation notes provided evidence of the kind of co-operation between the participants, how they responded to one another’s requests for help and if they responded positively towards the contribution made by another learner through discourse and body language.
The research questions have been analysed using a qualitative approach and the investigation describes the type of discourse rather than evaluating the performance of the participants. To help ensure the quality of discourse, a small and unobtrusive tape recorder was used.

The framework for analysing the evidence was based on the texts produced by the individual learner. A comparison of the texts written prior to the discussion and those written after joint negotiation and discussion was made. The text was assessed as follows:

- Organization of the text
- Describing the data
- Making comparisons between data
- Drawing conclusions and explaining the trends

**Literature Review**

A literature review focusing on discussion and writing in the classroom shows that Fralick (1990) researched ways of using writing to promote student discussion with undergraduate and graduate classes. I agree with Fralick (1990) that there is a wealth of material focusing on how writing promotes discussion and in particular in the Primary School classroom. Fralick (1990) quotes Rowe (1986) in summing up why group discussion is so important.

'It is in talking about what we have done and observed and in arguing about what we make our experiences, that ideas multiply.' [online]

The link between thinking, talking and writing is made by Bruffee (1984) P640, and is relevant to this research.

'We can think because we can talk, and we think in ways we have learned to talk. If thought is internalised public and social talk, then writing of all kinds is internalised talk made public and social again. If thought is internalised conversation, then writing is internalised conversation re-externalised. We converse; we internalise conversation as thought; and then by writing, we re-immers the conversation in its external social medium.'

The literature review also introduces the idea of talk as an influence on curriculum and lesson design. ‘The theoretical and pedagogical developments in writing instruction over the last fifteen years have made fostering effective classroom discussions a crucial teaching skill. The overriding metaphor in composition studies and writing textbooks has become that of helping students to ‘join the conversation.’ We have based any number of collaborative learning activities upon students’ ability to talk to one another freely and effectively.’ Barton et al (no date) [online].

Swann (1994) Pp 26-48 raises issues of an ethical nature in the study of spoken language in naturalistic settings. Swann’s article offers a practical introduction to the use of talk as a focus for research in educational settings and a guide for example to making audio recordings and transcribing talk. I followed these recommendations in my use of an unobtrusive tape recorder during the research process.
Motivation for This Research Paper

Review of the literature showed a need for this investigation because it is relevant to adult learners in the area of Essential Skills. I have heard it said, both by my peers and by my mentor, that Essential Skills learners 'can all talk!' During one of my classes a learner commented that she had not known what to write, 'Until we talked about it.' Together these comments focused my attention on the role of talk in learning and that discussion develops writing. I note the importance of speaking and listening skills; this is confirmed by their presence in the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum (2001). My motivation has been to generate findings that are relevant to the adult learners that I am involved with in Literacy and Essential Skills, and ultimately to help me to improve and develop my own practice, by establishing implications for curriculum and lesson design. Furthermore, I hope that my findings and recommendations might be useful to other practitioners in Essential Skills.

Findings

Analysis of the Written Text:

Organization of the text

• All learners produced texts that were written in sentences and in paragraphs. This was expected as the learners in this investigation are working towards accreditation at Level 1.
• Two learners made a general introductory statement about the graph in first text and all of the learners made general introductory statements about the graph in the second text.
• Each of the learner’s second text showed improved cohesion and related the data to personal opinion.
• The type of discourse used in the second text reflected the structure of the discussion and included some sequencing of events from the data that was not apparent in the first text.

Describing the Data

• One learner did not identify the stimulus material as a graph in his first text, but did so in his second text.
• All learners made some description of the data in the first text but in the second text this was made more specific and related to their own opinion. For example, related to the learner’s personal interests and how the data may or may not reflect these. Learner 2 said, ‘In my age group 25 – 40, I found it quite surprising that sport only was interesting in 10% of that age group.’
• Two learners described the data and explained the circumstances that might justify it.
• Two learners who had not previously described the graph as ‘a tower graph,’ used this description in the second text. This was clearly taken from the vocabulary of Learner 1 during the discussion.

Making Comparisons between Data

• All the learners made some comparisons between the data in their first text.
• One learner made comparisons and some explanation of trends in the first text.
• All the learners made comparisons between the data again in the second text but the comparison became more objective.
• There was some explaining of trends in the second text that was not evident in the first text.
Drawing Conclusions and Explaining the Trends

In the second text each learner gave some conclusion, for example Learner 2 said that the figures proved to be quite accurate’ because time was a ‘key factor’ and related it to the age group of the data.

The Influence of the Discussion

The discussion affected the inclusion of subjective responses to the second text, for example one learner described interests such as travel, relating this to most of the age groups in the data. This is evidence of the transfer of ideas from the discussion and shown in the transcript. Further evidence of this in each learner’s text was that they each described the data related to sport, whereas they had not included it in the first text.

The vocabulary used in the second text changed and showed emerging trends such as the description of the graph as a ‘Tower Graph.’ This terminology was used initially by Learner 1 and then by the other two learners in their second text.

Observation Notes and Learner Feedback

I did not take part in the discussion and remained an observer throughout. I noticed that one learner in particular was more reserved than usual and assumed that he was a little apprehensive because the discussion was being taped. He responded in the questionnaire that he had felt ‘a bit shy and reserved’ during the discussion. One learner seemed to question another learner in particular and at one point each seemed to be quite frustrated that the discussion was not moving on. At times, a couple of the learners seemed to flounder in the discussion. One learner commented afterwards that the discussion could have been more orderly.

During the second writing task in particular the learners were keen to get on with the task. They were supportive of each other and there was some co-operation between them. They were patient and reassuring towards each other but at one point learner 2 asked ‘What about your age group - is it true for you?’ and was told by learner 3 that he had ‘put him off his work!’ The discussion was clearly at an end.

Every learner said that they enjoyed the discussion but all wanted to do the writing task again.

Learners wanted to use both texts as a rough draft for a final piece. None of the learners planned their writing, but this may not have been realistic in the given time.

The Questionnaire

Some learner responses to the questionnaire are given below:

What was your initial response when given the task?
- Slight shock.
- Study the graph.
- I wanted to do it right.
How did you feel during the first writing task?
• It was difficult to know how to start.
• I didn’t know what to do.
• I felt anxious – was I reading the graph properly?

How did you feel during the second writing task?
• More at ease.
• Felt more confident writing on more personal issues.
• Felt more confident.

Did your feelings change? Why?
• Yes, I felt there was more to write about.

Did you enjoy taking part in the discussion?
• I felt a bit shy and reserved.

Did the discussion help you to complete the second task?
• All responded ‘Yes.’

What have you learned about the writing process during this research task?
• It’s a bit easier after discussion.
• In the first task, I concentrated on statistics.

Please write any other comments about the writing process below:
• Need more time to consider content.
• The writing got easier.

Please write any other comments about the discussion below:
• You need to discuss it, to get overall ideas.
• The discussion brought new ideas.

How do you feel about discussion during ‘normal’ classes and do you think that discussion about a subject helps when you are given a particular writing task?
• It helps bring on board what you missed – what you might change about your tasks.

Discussion of Findings

The learners asked that copies of their actual writing would not be included in the paper and made comments such as ‘You’ll never read my writing.’ Handwriting must also be an issue in learner’s anxiety about writing officially. I teach literacy through IT and while learners complete a handwritten draft before word processing, it is true for the learners in all the classes that they prefer to hand in a word processed copy for marking. This has implications for the classroom where no IT facilities are available, and raises concerns over handwriting not being taught or becoming a dying skill.

On comparison of each of the learner’s texts, I noted that the language that they each used was influenced by the discussion, this being proved in the second piece as a transfer of language from the discussion. Learner 2 commented in his second text that ‘The discussion brought out a dull and boring set of graphs to a more enlightened subject. It brought home what everyone was thinking.’ This confirms that talk has a role in learning and developing writing.
My choice of stimulus material was deliberately ‘dull and boring’ so that it was just enough to prompt effective discussion rather than prompt a purely descriptive piece of writing. This may have been the case with a photograph. I had used a ‘Discussion Worksheet’ with this group a few weeks previously and which incorporated an interesting photograph. On this occasion I set and led the discussion and the learners also had instructions to refer to. On comparing the effectiveness of the two discussions, I believe that the tutor needs to lead the discussion; my observations during the research confirm this. It would also be useful for the tutor to make notes on the board during the discussion, which could then be used by the learners as an aid to planning writing.

The value of a tutor-led discussion has been confirmed through the research process - because I did not lead the discussion. My behaviour in this respect was one of experimentation but has shown the value of leading the discussion to ensure that it is effective. The tutor should at least be prepared to step in at some point to maintain the direction of the discussion. The learners in the group said that they expected this.

In the past, I have worked with learners who had mental health problems. It seems significant that in this context, some learners were very quiet and found it difficult to take part in discussion, and as Barton et al (no date) put it, to ‘join the conversation.’ Yet they always said that they enjoyed class discussion. This implies that when a learner is quiet in nature, it does not necessarily mean that in terms of talk having a role in learning, their disposition represents a barrier to learning. During the discussion for this research paper I observed that a learner was not as talkative as usual. However, his second written text showed the same type of changes and level of improvement as the other learners who readily voiced their opinions during the discussion. Given both of these observations, I think that the value of discussion should not be underestimated.

While some learners or writers have to ‘see’ what they think, then perhaps some need to ‘hear’ what they think. This research has confirmed that talk has a role in learning, in developing learner writing skills, and has shown a link to ‘hearing’ how to think. Given the importance of considering and accommodating learning styles, I assume that talk must have a role in achieving this. If some learners have to ‘hear’ what they think, it makes the recommendation for discussion during the lesson, in order to improve the learner writing, and may be especially true where the learner exhibits a spiky profile. I have commented earlier that learners ‘can all talk’ and suggest that this strength should be capitalised through discussion in order to optimise the learning potential for individuals.

The learner who stated that he felt ‘slight shock’ when given the writing task has forced me to link my findings to initial assessment and in particular to free writing. I have used free writing alongside initial assessment tasks. Quality in this writing task for assessment is often very difficult to achieve, even in terms of the learner producing a sustained piece of writing for assessment purposes. This writing task may be improved by a thoughtfully set discussion and by making the learner feel less anxious when asked to produce writing. The experience of conducting this research will inform my approach to teaching, by providing a template for lesson planning, and it will encourage creativity in my approach to teaching and learning.

From the learner’s perspective, I have confirmed that discussion makes writing easier and helps the learner feel less anxious about the process. While this may not be new information, it supports the concept of my research paper and will affirm the role of discussion in my teaching
practice. During observations of experienced practitioners, I have witnessed the role of talk in learning and developing learner writing. My mentor is skilled at setting the scene for writing in quite a theatrical and creative manner. This is through giving a descriptive narrative, followed by a discussion and then setting a free writing task. The learners thoroughly enjoy the learning experience.

Fralick (1990) used writing to promote discussion, which requires a degree of creativity in order to set the discussion. In the same way, using discussion to promote learning and in particular learner writing skills, involves creativity in curriculum and lesson design. I have found this to be true in my practice. The Adult Literacy Core Curriculum (2001) is useful but is not prescriptive and I believe that tutors need to be creative in developing creative methods for learning. Each learner and each group of learners is unique, so a ‘one size fits all’ approach does not work. The design of a curriculum or a community learning programme must be creative itself, and incorporate creative lesson planning. However, in realistic terms and with the demands of practice, this goal seems very challenging. Given these limitations, it would be practical to say that discussion should be incorporated in lesson planning as part of Speaking and Listening exercises and in particular when the objective is to produce learner writing. The stimulus material for discussion may be a quote, a photograph, a graph or audio or video recording for example. Creativity on the part of the tutor is essential.

**Conclusion**

Learner writing is supported by interaction and discussion from other people. While talking doesn’t equal learning, it does generate thought. Discussion generates ideas, a great deal of thought, promotes sustained writing and indeed a more developed vocabulary. The use of talk as a teaching strategy towards the objective of improving writing is clear, and affords the opportunity of continued learning and improvement for the learner.

The recommendations made through the discussion of my findings in this research have a potential application in the context of Essential Skills teaching. The research has made me focus on what I do in class and how I plan lessons. This has also been accentuated because the curriculum or the programme for learning as suggested by the organisation for the groups of learners that I teach, has not always appealed to them. I have learned, too, the importance of guiding a discussion and for the tutor to make notes on the board to encourage and help learners when they come to plan their writing. The use of a ‘Discussion Worksheet’ to develop discussion is very helpful. I would also recommend that the tutor, and perhaps the learners, summarise the discussion before starting the writing task.

This research has been a small scale study but I feel that there is room for further research into the role of talk in learning and perhaps in particular with regard to learning styles. My experience and reflections from this research will inform my approach to teaching and hopefully make some recommendations for curriculum and lesson design for other practitioners in Essential Skills. Above all, it is important to remain open to different approaches and perspectives on teaching and learning because of the nature of literacy as a moving target, and because Essential Skills learners have diverse interests and backgrounds.
Participating in practitioner research is an important tool in learning how to teach. Every lesson may include a ‘mini’ action research project so that we are continually improving what we do and so reflecting on practice becomes instinctive. Reading action research by other practitioners provides a snapshot of their practice and arms us with ideas and approaches for scenarios in our own practice.

The idea of carrying out action research can be quite overwhelming. It is important to consider what you see as important themes in your practice. The title is very important and should mirror your own interests and context. Discuss the significance of the project with another practitioner and then decide if it is an important area to investigate. Most of all, you must see implications for your practice and then it will naturally be of interest to others. The best advice is ‘Don’t Panic!’ Start writing as a way of making sense of the issues that you will explore. This will lead you to develop a sense of the scale and scope of your research and so you will not become overwhelmed.

Amanda McCausland
I came to Essential Skills through a longstanding interest in language and literacy issues. My degree in linguistic science concentrated on both core theoretical aspects of linguistics, and on aspects of the interaction of language and social factors. I felt that I could use my knowledge to help others improve their literacy skills. I am not actually teaching essential skills at the moment. I work as a Learning Adviser for the Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA). In terms of Essential Skills, my role involves raising Essential Skills awareness with clients who do not have Level 2 English or maths qualifications and encouraging them to make use of our Essential Skills referral and support service. I provide confidential, impartial information and advice on a range of learning opportunities to help adults improve their literacy and numeracy skills, referral to their chosen provider, and follow-up contact to make sure that the referral process is appropriate to the client’s needs. My experience as an Essential Skills tutor enables me to explain to clients what Essential Skills classes are like, answer any questions they may have and alleviate any worries they may have about joining a class.

Louise Kelly
6. Tutor Responses to Learners’ Errors when Reading Aloud

Louise Kelly

Introduction

This paper provides a discourse analysis of repair in the adult literacy classroom. It uses Conversation Analysis (CA) to examine tutors’ responses to linguistic errors made by learners when reading aloud. It also steps outside the boundaries of CA to investigate the social motivations of tutor responses to learners’ errors.

As literacy tutors, we encounter different types of errors from our learners that that may need some form of correction. For example, we know that there are errors that impair communication, errors that have a stigmatizing effect and errors that are produced very frequently. Each of these three can cause considerable difficulty for the learner. During our lessons there are often points in the course of a conversation where breakdown occurs, and we have to perform interactional work to repair this breakdown. How do we go about accomplishing this?

Previous linguistic research in the area of conversational repair suggests that adults generally prefer to repair their own errors without prompting. Research on repair in classroom interactions (adult-child) suggests that students prefer to repair their own errors after prompting from the teacher. So, what happens when the student is an adult? Is there still a preference for self-initiated self-correction, or does this shift to other-initiated self-correction? Does something completely different occur in this particular context? This is what I want to find out.

Background

When a participant in conversation has difficulty understanding something another has said, or difficulty hearing what was said, or figures what the other said might be wrong, inaccurate or perhaps inapposite, then he or she may -but need not- take steps to rectify that difficulty by initiating its repair (Drew 1997:69). In the 50s and 60s all errors in spoken language were considered bad and always in need of correction (Brooks, 1964). During the 70s and early 80s a more relaxed approach was encouraged which recommended no direct error correction at all. In recent years, linguists have taken a more balanced view when considering whether errors in spoken language should be corrected. Most believe that a sensitive approach to the development of increased accuracy can improve the learner’s proficiency in the language i.e. we should not correct every error made but we should not avoid correcting altogether.

CA is the study of talk in interaction. It generally attempts to describe the orderliness, structure and sequential patterns of interaction. ‘Repair’ in conversation refers to the fixing of a piece of talk, either in the course of its production or in subsequent turns (minimal units of conversational action). Reparative sequences begin with a ‘trouble source’ turn. When trouble sources occur, repair is first ‘initiated’. This means roughly that the trouble-source is located and is recognised as being repairable. Then, the trouble source is repaired. Repair may be initiated by self or other, and ‘done’ by self or other as well. Repair, or more technically a repair trajectory, is therefore an overall ternary sequence comprising ‘trouble source’ + ‘initiation’ + ‘correction’.
Schegloff et al. (1977) introduce four principal means by which self- and other-correction may be performed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turn</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Single turn</td>
<td>Trouble source + initiation + correction</td>
<td>Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Single turn</td>
<td>Trouble source Initiation/Correction</td>
<td>Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Turn transition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. First turn</td>
<td>Trouble source</td>
<td>Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Next turn</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Third turn</td>
<td>Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4a First turn</td>
<td>Trouble source Initiation/Correction</td>
<td>Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Next turn</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4b First turn</td>
<td>Trouble source Initiation</td>
<td>Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Next turn</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Third turn</td>
<td>Self</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(taken from McHoul, 1990)

The first three are possible means by which self-initiation and self-correction are done, and the fourth type is the single means by which other-initiation may be done, divided into two subtypes, (a) where other-initiation yields other-correction, and (b) where other-initiation yields self-correction.

In CA the term ‘preference’ is not used in its ordinary sense relating to psychological motivations or desires but rather as a technical means of referring to ‘sequence and turn organisational features of conversation’ (Schegloff et al. 1977:362) When speakers have a choice between two conversational actions, one will typically be considered more usual, more normal, than the other. Utterances are designed in such a way that they ‘prefer’ or favour a given type of response. This is known as ‘preference’.

Schegloff et al. (1977) argue that there is a preference for self-initiated self-correction in adult conversation, and Rogers (1978) suggests that the preference for self-correction increases with age. We might therefore think that there will be a preference for self-initiated self-correction in the adult literacy classroom because all our learners are adults. However, Schegloff et al. (1977) point out that there may be an exception to the preference for self-correction ‘...the exception is most apparent in the domain of adult-child interaction, in particular parent-child interaction; but it may well be more generally relevant to not-yet-competent in some domain without respect to age. There, other correction seems to be not as infrequent, and appears to be one vehicle for socialisation. If that is so, then it appears that other-correction is not so much an alternative to self-correction in general, but rather a device for dealing with those who are still learning or being taught to operate with a system which requires, for its routine operation, that they be adequate self-monitors and self-correctors as a condition of competence. It is, in that sense, only a transitional usage, whose supercession by self-correction is continuously awaited’ (1977:380-381)

I am interested in finding out if this exception applies to repair in the adult literacy classroom.

However, we know that classroom discourse is not the same as natural conversation as interaction is constrained by context. Studies on repair in classroom interactions generally focus on primary school or secondary school classrooms. They focus on adult-child interactions in an instructional setting. McHoul (1990) looks at the organisation of repair in classroom discourse and finds that the main repair trajectory in the classroom is the type 4b according to Schegloff et
al.’s (1977) schema i.e. other-initiated self-correction. McHoul suggests that this may be attributed to the fact that this trajectory (i) pertains to the procedure of ‘cluing’, in which teachers attempt to lead students to the correct answer by small steps, (ii) it can be seen to ‘recycle’ which ties into classroom expansion sequences in general, (iii) this recycling of the trajectory produces a distinctive ‘withholding’ phenomena. McHoul points out that the conversational convention of restricting repair to a maximum length of three turns is sometimes altered in classroom talk, and proposes a pattern such as this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turn</th>
<th>Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>Trouble source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>Other-initiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>Reaffirmation (failed correction?) = New trouble source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>Other-reinitiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth</td>
<td>Self-correction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth</td>
<td>Comment, acceptance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(McHoul 1990:387)

In short, what McHoul concludes is that both students and teachers are involved in same-turn self-correction, but next-turn other-initiation is the prerogative of teachers and third-turn self-correction is the prerogative of students. Teachers seem to show students where their talk is in need of correction, not how the correction should be made. Drew (in French and MacLure, 1981) also looks at adults’ corrections of children’s mistakes in an instructional context. He looks at various techniques that adults use to try to get the child to correct a suspected error, such as designing their turns as possible hearing or understanding checks with Pardon? or What?, pointing back to the word that was misread (non-verbal), repeating the incorrect item, or explicitly rejecting the proffered version without supplying a correction. Drew shows how in each case recipients design their turn so as to withhold the correction in the turn immediately subsequent to that in which the error is being located, so that the first speaker may self-correct. Drew also points out that when recipients do correct the first speaker their corrections are built to display their dispreferred status. In the following example, the correction is not done with overt negation of L’s position. M avoids such forms as ‘No he’s not he’s saying...’.

(R and L are children)

R: Ma: ↓ =
L: =He’s sayin mamee in’t ’ee ↑
M:Uhuh
(5.0)
R: Dadada:: ↑
L: He’s saying mummy ↑
(1.2)
M:He was (.) I think he’s sayin dada now (French and MacLure, 1981:251)

This brief exploration of the literature shows that there is a noticeable gap concerning repair in adult-adult classroom discourse. It suggests that adults prefer self-initiated self-repair but that there is a preference for other-initiated self-repair in classroom discourse. What about adult learners in the classroom? Can we assume that they, like children, prefer other-initiated self-repair? As adult literacy tutors, we aim to establish a non-intimidating and relaxed atmosphere...
and tend to encourage informal oral communication from our learners. If we promote an environment that is less classroom-like and more casual should we expect our learners’ conversations to be more naturalistic? Should there to be a preference for self-initiated self-repair? This motivates my research question.

If I find that a preference for a particular type of repair emerges from my investigation it would give me a better idea as to how I should respond to learners’ errors. For example, if I find that learners generally prefer other-initiated self-repair I would know focus on using and developing strategies to tactfully point out that an error has occurred that would give the learner a chance to self-repair. If I find that learners prefer self-initiated self-repair I would have to think about how I can encourage learners to spot their own mistakes so that they can self-repair. If I find that learners prefer other-repair, I would think about how I could encourage them to become independent learners and to take responsibility for their own learning.

**Methodology**

I used a small battery-operated cassette recorder with a built-in tape recorder to record seven learners reading aloud with their tutors on a one-to-one basis. Four of the recordings were of another tutor listening to her learners read; three of the recordings were of my own learners reading aloud to me. The purpose of the research was explained all participants and they gave their consent to participate in the recordings. Learners were given a choice of texts to choose from. The texts supplied were carefully selected so that learners would find them challenging. This was to increase the possibility that linguistic errors would occur during the recordings so that the subsequent tutor responses could be studied. For each recording, only the tutor and the learner doing the reading were present.

The talk was transcribed for closer analysis. The transcriptions were first reviewed to extract all sequences involving trouble sources. Turns left incomplete due to word search were also included. The discourse practices or surface forms in the turns immediately following the trouble sources were then examined in detail to search for regularities. For each instance of each practice, the analysis then involved determining the conversational action that was being performed by that utterance or turn.
## TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS: FIGURE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[</td>
<td>A: quite a while B: [ yea</td>
<td>Left brackets indicate the point at which a current speaker’s talk is overlapped by another’s talk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>=</td>
<td>A: that I’m aware = B: yeah A: = of. would you confirm that?</td>
<td>Equal signs, one at the end of a line and one at the beginning, indicate no gap between the end of one turn and the beginning of the next by the same speaker.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4.0)</td>
<td>yes (1.0) yeah</td>
<td>Numbers in parentheses indicate elapsed time in silence in seconds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(.)</td>
<td>to get (.) treatment</td>
<td>A dot in parentheses indicates a tiny gap, a micropause.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORD</td>
<td>i’ve got ENOUGH TO WORRY ABOUT</td>
<td>Capitals indicate especially loud sounds relative to the surrounding talk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(     )</td>
<td>future risks and ( ) and life ( )</td>
<td>Empty parentheses indicate the transcriber’s inability to hear what was said.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(word)</td>
<td>would you see (there) anything positive</td>
<td>Parenthesized words are possible hearings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(( )))</td>
<td>confirm that (continues))</td>
<td>Double parentheses enclose comments interpolated by the researcher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;&gt;</td>
<td>&gt;so that's it&lt;</td>
<td>Angled brackets show talk that is noticeably faster than the surrounding talk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>what do you think?</td>
<td>A question mark indicates rising intonation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results

Types of errors

Upon analysing the transcriptions, I decided to divide the trouble sources into two groups: lexical errors and minor errors. Lexical errors occur at word level including where the learner uses the wrong word as in,

C: pausing only to brush his teeth and making people >reduced< ((redundant)) or whatever

has trouble tackling a word as in,

G: tra (1.0) tra (2.0) dit (1.0) tradit?

is clearly uncertain about a word and hazards a guess as in,

E: =klimanjaro rising out of the cloud (1.0) i also through? (2.0)
T: thought

or cannot locate a word at all to convey their intended meaning as in

F: he said (1.0) and that doctor (.) there (1.0) why (1.0) what do he (.) know about (2.0)
T: seafaring=

Minor errors include instances where what the learner says may not be entirely correct, but the tutor is still able make an accurate interpretation of what the learner means. These are typically very slight errors arising from pronunciation errors as in

A: ron (2.0) grim (.) maced=

or from minor grammatical errors as in

F: and mates dropping round with (2.0) yellow jack and the (1.0) blessing (.) blessed land a (1.0)

There are 83 trouble sources in the data. 65 (78.3%) of these are lexical errors and 18 (21.7%) are minor errors.

Initiation

The next step was to find out who initiates repair of the linguistic errors. Of the 83 problem sources, 50 (60.2%) repair initiations were made by the learner. 46 of these were in response to lexical errors and 4 were in response to minor errors. Learners initiated repair in the following ways.

(1) By telling the tutor they didn’t know a word, or asking for help as in

E: =hotch (.) potch (.) of images? of big game and (.) savannah? and (1.0) what’s that word?
(2) By signalling that they are having difficulty with a word by using ‘uh’ or ‘em’, or by a pause, or by both in combination.

C: I know a man who denies the that jetlag exists (.) he regularly flies halfway across the world (.) marches off the plane after a twenty seven hour flight goes straight into the (2.0) auckland office (4.0)
T: pausing=

(3) By means of a word stretch (syllable elongation) followed by a brief pause or rising intonation.
E: thought of fa (1.0) mines fa (.) mines?= 

(4) By guessing. This is signalled by a word with rising intonation and is sometimes followed by a pause.
D: =opening perform of a show perform (.) ance of a show that would last a dr dreary? restless?= T: =close (1.0) dreary(.) relentless (1.0) good

(5) By recognising their own error and immediately attempting to correct it
D: =though the telephone is a perfectly useful (1.0) useless (.) in indicator of most human (1.0) =

**Strategies used by learners to initiate repair**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Used word stretch + pause or rising intonation</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guessed (word + rising intonation + pause)</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognised own error and immediately attempted to correct it</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used ‘uh’, ‘em’, a pause or both in combination</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admitted they didn’t know a word or asked for help</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Examination of the transcriptions reveals that the tutors did not make any repair initiations at all. Other-initiation did not occur in this data. There is clearly a preference for self-initiation in the adult literacy classroom.
Responses to Errors

The range of practices employed were found to implement one of a small set of conversational actions in relation to the trouble source. Each response to an error was classed as performing one of the following actions: Self-repair, Accept, Repair, Accept + Repair.

Self-repair

This refers to self-correction. Instances where learners correct their own errors as in:

E: =and he ended up in the (1.0) world bank (1.0) he became quite (2.0) senior (.) that (.) there I mean (1.0) and could have spent his

and

D: =the martin (2.0) martha penk she was waiting for a shrimp? (.) oh shrimp (.) ish? girl=
T: [martha ]great

Accept

This type of action in response to a learner’s error involves accepting and incorporating it into the interaction without any indication of a linguistic problem having occurred. The tutor lets the problem pass so that it does not obstruct the flow of the learner’s reading. Jefferson (1984:200) notes that the token mm hm exhibits what she calls passive recipiency, i.e. it ‘proposes that the co-participant is still in the midst of some course of talk, and shall go on talking.’ Schegloff (1982) proposes that, in addition to this continuer function, tokens such as uh huh, mm, etc, are used to pass an opportunity to initiate a repair. One device for accomplishing this is an acknowledgement marker, such as ‘uh huh’ with falling intonation as in the following example.

A: he’s now accusing me of dripping tea (.) on his photo of pin (. )lope (Penelope))
T: [uh huh

Inasmuch as tokens such as these operate to pass an opportunity to initiate a repair, Schegloff suggests that they betoken the absence of problems and, therefore, they are seen as signalling understanding of the prior talk.

The tutor might also decide to ignore the linguistic problem and choose to let the learner continue reading as if no error has occurred. The tutor fails to initiate repair when an error occurs.

A: =ron on (2.0) interfering (interrupting) peer (.) cy (Percy)) again (4.0)
A: they headed down to breakfast where mr (. ) weasley (. ) was reading the front page of the daily

Repair

Repair refers to other-correction: instances where the tutor corrects the learners’ errors.

E: and evil (civil) wars and (. ) pot (.) belled half naked children staring at the (. ) camera =
T: [potbellied
and

A: =and mrs weasley was telling (2.0)
T: hermione=

Accept + Repair

This type of action is involves the tutor accepting the error and incorporating it into the interaction as if no error has occurred, but also providing a correction. In these examples we see the tutor repeating the learners’ utterances but with the correct pronunciation in the first example and with the correct word in the second. It appears that the tutor is using their turn to show approval and to encourage the continuation of reading.

A: =persuading a (.). dis (.). grunt
T: [disgruntled yes

and

G: browsing the web for >gardens< instead=
T: =browsing the web for gadgets instead (1.0) great

and

G: lu (1.0) red=
T: =lured (.). good=

Responses to linguistic errors
We can see that for minor errors there is a preference for Accept responses. 12 out of 18 minor errors were accepted. For lexical errors, there is a preference for Repair responses. The tutor repaired 40 out of 65 lexical errors. I will now attempt to explain the functions these discourse strategies fulfil – the social motivations for the preferences discovered.

**Discourse Strategies and Social Motivations**

So what makes the tutor decide on which type of response to use? One possible explanation is tied to Goffman’s (1967) notion of interactional ‘face’. He claims that everyone is concerned, to some extent, with how others perceive them. We act socially, striving to maintain the identity we create for others to see. This identity, or public self-image, is what we project when we interact socially. Brown \nd Levinson (1987:62) describe face as the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself or herself, consisting of two related aspects: **positive face**: the desire to be liked, appreciated, approved, etc. and **negative face**: the desire not to be imposed upon, intruded, or otherwise put upon. They use the concept of face to explain politeness. To them, politeness is universal, resulting from people’s face needs. People are typically caught between the wants to achieve their own goals and the desire to avoid infringing on their partners’ face. They make a distinction between positive politeness and negative politeness. Positive politeness addresses positive face concerns, often by showing pro-social concern for the other’s face. Negative politeness addresses negative face concerns, often by acknowledging the other’s face is threatened. Anytime a person threatens another person’s face, the first person commits a face-threatening act (FTA). Goffman (1967:15) describes two basic kinds of face work: the avoidance process and the corrective process. Brown & Levinson (1987) build on this and identify five categories of face-work strategies that may be employed in order to minimise the potential social and personal harm that may arise from a FTA. These strategies are summarised in the table below. Brown & Levinson suggest that strategy selection is based on three situational factors: (i) the social distance between the speaker and the hearer, (ii) the degree of power the speaker has over the hearer, and (iii) the degree of imposition the FTA represents.

**Face threatening acts (FTAs)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>lesser</th>
<th>do the FTA</th>
<th>greater</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Estimation of risk of face loss</td>
<td>do the FTA</td>
<td>Estimation of risk of face loss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lesser</td>
<td>do the FTA</td>
<td>greater</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. without redressive action, boldly with redressive action
2. positive politeness
3. negative politeness
4. off record (be vague and ambiguous)
5. don’t do the FTA

Hamilton (1988) argues that responses to impaired discourse have to negotiate the tension between two competing interactional goals: the maintenance of face and the clarity of the information communicated. She suggests that face and coherence and be considered as two extremes of a single continuum and that discourse strategies are located somewhere along the continuum depending on whether the strategy is tended to reverse the linguistic or social consequences of the communicative failure. Reviewing Goffman’s (1967) dichotomy of discourse strategies correction and avoidance, Hamilton suggests that corrective strategies are directed at the coherence end of the continuum and avoidance strategies at the face end. I wish to look at the tutor responses to learners’ errors in the context of what Hamilton calls the ‘tightrope walking between face and coherence’. Whereas in adult conversations the maintenance of face is generally favoured over coherence, adult-child classroom discourse display a clear preference for coherence over face. What happens in essential skills classrooms where the conversational participants have conflicting preferences for face and coherence? Perhaps tutor responses are directed somewhere in the centre of Hamilton’s face-coherence continuum?

**Social Motivations – Initiation**

Other-initiation does not occur at all in the data. I believe that this is because other-initiation runs contrary to the face wants of the learner. Other initiation would threaten the learners negative face wants by indicating (potentially) that the tutor does not intend to avoid impeding the learner’s freedom of action. If the tutor performed other-initiation, they would be putting pressure on the learner to try to self-correct. Tutors do not want to put learners on the spot. Other-initiation would also threaten learners’ positive face wants by indicating (potentially) that the tutor does not care about the learners feelings, wants etc. – that in some respect they don’t want the learner’s wants. It would indicate that the tutor has a negative evaluation of some aspect of the learner’s positive face. Expressions of disapproval, criticism, complaints, contradictions or disagreements threaten a learner’s positive face. It seems to be the case that tutors estimate that the risk of face loss is too great and decide to avoid doing the FTA altogether. This is clearly fits in at the avoidance end of Hamilton’s continuum. It is interesting because other-initiation is routine in adult-child classroom discourse. I suspect that this has to do with the degree of power the speaker has over the hearer. In ‘normal’ classroom situations students are subordinate to the teacher, and this is made clear by the cycle of talk which mandates that they will participate in strict accordance with the pattern established by the teacher - namely the type 4b repair trajectory according to Schegloff et al.’s (1977) schema i.e. other-initiated self-correction. As far as other-initiation goes, essential skills tutors seem to focus on the social implications of the communication structure as opposed to the communication system of the social institution of education.

**Social Motivations - Accept**

Accept responses are also avoidance-orientated. The tutor avoids offending the learner at all with a FTA. 12 out of the total 25 Accept responses occur after minor errors, where what the learner says may not be entirely correct, but the tutor is still able make an accurate interpretation of what the learner means. 10 of these were pronunciation errors and 2 were minor grammatical errors. In these cases it seems that the tutor does not want to commit a FTA by initiating repair of an item that is relatively negligible in terms of the interaction. Interestingly, the tutors accept 4 lexical errors where the wrong word is used. Upon first glance it may seem strange that a tutor should overlook lexical errors when listening to a learner read, but further analysis reveals that in these cases the errors may have been perceived as minor errors by the tutor.
A: =ron on (2.0) interfering ((interrupting)) peercy again (4.0)
A: they headed down to breakfast where mr (. ) weasley (. ) was reading the front page of the daily

In this example the word interfering is used instead of interrupting. Upon re-listening to the recording, I think the main reason the tutor accepted this error is because they regarded it as a pronunciation error. I think the tutor decided to err on the side of caution and avoid correcting this in case it was a minor error as opposed to a lexical error, especially since the learner made an attempt at the word after pausing for two seconds.

C: =pausing only to brush his teeth and making people >reducted< ((redundant)) or whatever super macho no human weakness job (. ) it is he does (1.0) I want to sue this man as far as I (. )

Similarly, in this example the word reducted was used instead of redundant. The word was said considerably faster than surrounding speech. The tutor may have perceived this as a pronunciation error, or have missed this error completely as the word was said so quickly. A similar case also arises in the next example where the word hearty used by the learner sounds very similar to the correct word heartily.

F: =cursing the doctor in a >fierce< voice (1.0) feeble voice but hearty ((heartily))=
T: [feeble

In this next example, the learner makes two lexical errors in the same utterance. Before the tutor gets the chance to correct the first error, the learner makes another. I believe the tutor thought the learner might have been going to self-correct the first error at the first micropause, but when it became apparent they were attempting to tackle the word potbellied instead, the tutor decided to focus on correcting the most recent error.

E: and evil ((civil)) wars and (. ) pot (. ) belled half naked children staring at the (. ) camera =
T: [potbellied

The other 9 Accept responses were provided when a learner made an attempt at a word and got it correct or almost correct as in
E: =sunk in hope (. ) less (1.0) ness=
T: =excellent=

B: ... (1.0) waiting anborn (. ) em (. ) famar ((Faramir)) this is hard this is a harder matter than it seems (. ) what have you to say now frodo why

In short, Accept responses serve to give learners the benefit of the doubt. They are used to avoid committing unnecessary FTAs. They are directed at the face end of Hamilton’s face-coherence continuum.

Social Motivations – Accept + Repair

Of the 8 Accept + Repair occurrences in the data, 6 were in response to lexical errors and 2 in response to minor errors. This clever discourse strategy avoids committing a FTA and at the same time employs positive politeness to create a positive relationship with the learner. It appears that the tutor is using their turn to show approval and to encourage the continuation of reading while at
the same time incorporating a repair. This strategy respects a person’s need to be liked and understood. It articulates an awareness of the other person’s values, which fulfills the person’s desire to be accepted, while at the same time managing to correct the error. It is interesting because it does not map easily onto Hamilton’s continuum. As a repair is provided in these responses, we might expect it to fit in at the coherence end of the continuum. However, this strategy has an overriding concern with face. I would be reluctant to place it halfway along the continuum as it clearly facilitates the accomplishment of both interactional goals.

**Social Motivations – Repair**

There are 40 repairs in the data and they all occur in response to lexical errors. 17 occur in response to a word search by the learner, 13 occur when a learner used a wrong word, 4 when learners ask for help, 4 when they use word stretch with a pause or rising intonation, 1 where a word is omitted, and 1 where a learner makes an incorrect guess at a word. Avoiding FTAs is not always practical, especially when listening to learners read aloud. Repair is an inherently face-threatening act since disagreeing with someone threatens that person’s positive face, and imposing a correction on someone threatens their negative face.

Schegloff et al. (1977) argue that when other-corrections are done, they are frequently modulated or downgraded in form to reduce the impact of the FTA. They mention several forms of modulation including the use of uncertainty markers, various types of question formats and the masking of other-corrections as jokes. What is interesting about the repairs in the data is that there are no occurrences of modulated repair. When a learner uses a wrong word, other-repair is done with no redressive action, as in the following examples:

D: =pushing twenty two lost (0.5) down there (1.0) she had a red overcoat? and cream snow boots (1.0) putting her weight on their >eggs< like an ice skater (1.0) she seems to wander?=  
T: [edges =waver=  
E: entire (3.0) career? in washington going up the (.) ladder (3.0) there but he became restless and one day he >added< that there was a (2.0) post (2.0) available? (1.0) to spend two years=  
T: [announced [uh huh  
F: fourpenny (2.0) for yourself and now you see mate im pretty low and >designed< by all and  
T: [deserted

Referring back to Brown & Levinson’s (1987) politeness strategies we might say that repairs by the tutor are done baldly-on-record. This is worthy of note because it is generally agreed that bald-on-record strategies can shock the person to whom you are speaking, embarrass them, or make them feel uncomfortable. Repair is presented clearly and directly enough to indicate that the tutor is not worried about retribution from the addressee. At first glance, this may seem strange as we know that we do not want to make our learners feel uncomfortable. However, this type of strategy is commonly found with people who know each other very well, and are very comfortable in their environment, such as close friends and family. The tutor can claim that other things are more important than face, or that the act is not a FTA at all. It is as if there is an understanding between the tutor and the learner that face-saving rituals may be dispensed with in the interests of literacy-learning. The learner knows that it is in their interest. It shows that the tutor trusts the learner to accept the repair without taking offence and it means that they can avoid the danger of being misunderstood. The predominant sentiment here is one of implied solidarity and intimacy.
Tutor responses to learner’s word search difficulties result in the collaborative productions -shared construction of utterances. When a learner produces an incomplete utterance, the tutor offers a completion. Ferrara (1992:225) describes joint productions as ‘a cooperative conversational style’ Sacks (1995) sees the main contribution of collaborative productions to discourse as social. For him, the syntactic possibility of constructing a sentence together is at the same time a possibility for collaboratively constructing a social unit. Ferrara (1992:218) looks at joint productions in therapeutic discourse and differentiates four categories of collaboratives: ‘utterance extensions’ are additions to an already complete construction. According to Ferrara, they are motivated by a ‘respect for the truthfulness of utterances’ in the second speaker.

C: circadian rhythms naturally (0.5) ive investigated all the jetlag cures (.) stay away from the jar on the plane (0.5) drink plenty of water (.) do a little exercise (1.0) get on to local time patterns immad (0.5) immed (.) latey and most importantly walk (.) around in the sunlight as soon as you arrive at your (1.5) destination=
T: =faraway destination=
C: =as soon as you arrive at your faraway destination

‘Predictable utterance completions’ are those in which the second speaker anticipates how the first speaker’s utterance might continue. Here we see the tutor predicting that the learner will have trouble with the word noggin and supplying the word before the learner can stumble on it.

F: deserted (3.0) and jim youll bring me one=
T: =noggin=
F: =noggin of rum (1.0) now wont you matey?=

‘Helpful utterance completions’ are incomings from recipients who wish to assist the current speaker in a word search. This is the most common type of repair found in the data. When the tutor detects that a learner has some difficulty in accessing an item in the mental lexicon they often supply the missing vocabulary item but make no further contribution. Learners often signal acceptance with the use of repetition.

C: =thrall to sleep (.) im grand if I get my habibal ((habitual)) sixteen hours a night but if anything happens to interfere with that (.) I am all over the place (0.5) I am a (1.0)
T: martyr=
C: =martyr to my (2.0)
T: circadian

‘Invited utterance completions’ are discourse strategies used by first speakers to prompt their recipients to supply what they themselves cannot provide. In the following examples, the learners ask the tutor for help, and the tutor provides the assistance required.

E: either (1.0) but it was what was in my mind (1.0) my husband was an (3.0) don’t know
T: economist=

D: =apple towards the river (1.0) pam went to her own door (.) opened it (.) worried her chapped lips with a finger (1.0) closed it away again (1.0) the cold was just too ex (0.5) whats that? (1.0)
T: extreme=
Through joint productions we see the tutor and the learner operating as if they are a single speaker. Coates (1997) argues that ‘operating as a single speaker is a powerful way of doing friendship’ (pg253). Similarly, Ferrara (1992:212) suggests that ‘joint productions may be one linguistic expression of empathy...it is possible that joint productions are not only a signal of empathy, but a means of creating empathy or the appearance of it’. As with Accept + Repair, Repair does not map easily onto Hamilton’s continuum, as it is clear that the practices used to carry out repair also reflect an overriding concern with face and social relationships.

Conclusion

This research reveals that there is a strong preference for self-initiation of repair in the adult literacy classroom. It shows that there is a preference for minor errors to be accepted and a preference for other-correction when lexical errors occur in the adult literacy classroom. This supports Schegloff et al.’s (1977) idea that other-correction may be more common in interactions where the participants are ‘not-yet-competent in some domain without respect to age’. However, it completely disagrees with previous research on repair in classroom situations (McHoul & Drew) which propose that there is a preference for other-initiated self-repair in instructional settings. This is because the social relationship between the tutor and the learner takes precedence over the informativeness of the interaction. Returning to Hamilton’s (1998) suggestion that face and coherence are two extremes of a single continuum, we can see that the findings here do not support such a continuum. Accept and Accept + Repair are avoidance orientated actions with face as the foremost objective. However, when we turn to Repair, which we would expect to find at the coherence end of the continuum, we see that the practices used to perform repair have a prevailing concern with face and social relationships. In the case of the adult literacy classroom, it is unrealistic to treat face and coherence as two extremes of a single continuum. They are clearly two completely separate interactional goals. In summary, Essential Skills tutors focus on the social implications of the communication structure as opposed to the communication system of the social institution of education.
References

I feel that practitioner research is excellent for our own professional development as tutors. It can lead us to new skills, new understandings, insights into practices, and opportunities to engage differently with our learners. Practitioner research encourages us to develop a deeper understanding of our work and can help us improve our future practices.

Having carried out practitioner research myself, I feel that I am more likely to take notice of, and value, research carried out by other tutors.

I found practitioner research to be a very positive experience and one that I would definitely recommend to other tutors. I think it is important to choose a topic that both interests and challenges you - this will keep you motivated and ensure the process is enjoyable.

Louise Kelly
In Sept 2002 I was delighted to have the opportunity to teach Keyskills Communications, in a part-time capacity, to students attending full time vocational courses at Upper Bann Institute (now incorporated in the new Sothern Regional College). The college environment was completely new to me and I remember clearly how nervous I was on my first day back at school.

Having gained some experience and with imminent curriculum changes, the natural route for my personal progression in the area of teaching literacy was to undertake a specialist qualification. I successfully completed the Certificate in Teaching and Management of Literacy and Essential Skills at Queen’s University in June 2006 and in June 2007 I achieved the Diploma course.

Louise O’Sullivan
7. Exploring peer learning as an effective tool for teaching and motivating literacy students in the context of Essential Skills in Further and Higher Education (16 to 19 year olds)

Louise O’Sullivan

This research is an exploration into the effects of collaborative peer activities on learning and motivation in Essential Skills classes.

‘We cannot hold a torch to light another’s path without brightening our own.’

(Ben Sweetland www.thinkexist.com/quotes/ben_sweetland/)

Introduction

The adage proclaiming that ‘a tradesman is only as good as his tools’ rings true. Of course, it is not only the tools that craft and shape a final product, but the skill and know-how of the craftsman. However, the best tools offer the most positive results under the guidance of those that know their powers. This image applies also to the tools of education; one powerful and versatile tool is peer learning.

Motivation for this Research

My teaching practice now has a five year track, during which time I have observed learners in the classroom situation. Furthermore, in my capacity as a mature student over the course of the last five years, I have been engaged in learning both in classroom situations and through direct study programmes. This first hand knowledge has enabled me to compare participative learning alongside peers with the experiences of learning in their absence.

Reflection on my teaching practice and on my own learning experiences led to the realisation that the impact of peer learning is significant.

In my current context I see evidence that learners lack literacy skills, yet they also lack the motivation to improve them. This quandary was the prompt for my research; I wondered if structured peer learning activities could be used in my Essential Skills classes to enhance learners’ motivation and develop students’ literacy skills.
Research Aims

The aim of this research is to examine how peer learning activities impact on the learning experiences in Essential Skills classes for 16 – 19 year old learners, in the context of Further Education.

The research has two main components. Firstly, to gain feedback on learners’ perceptions of peer learning and secondly to determine whether or not collaborated activities affect learners’ motivation and skills in the area of literacy.

One specific aim is to reveal the strengths as well as the weaknesses of specific peer learning activities within the learning context peculiar to my current Essential Skills classes.

The Participants

This research was carried out in the context of my teaching practice. Two separate groups took part in this research - the details below provide a brief profile of the participants:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group (A)</th>
<th>Group (B)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Context:</td>
<td>Further &amp; Higher Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational Area:</td>
<td>Beauty Therapy (full-time course)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number in Group:</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability Range (Literacy)</td>
<td>Target Level; Entry Level 3 to Level 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
<td>All female, aged 16-19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All learners have demonstrated high intrinsic levels of motivation towards their vocational area of study; vocational tasks, assessments and practices are often the subject of learners’ informal discourse. However, learners do not share the same high level of motivation towards literacy and often ask about the relevance of Essential Skills classes. Quoting one student, ‘I really don’t see the point in this... It’s just like English... What’s this got to do with Beauty Therapy?’

A few students from group A have displayed extremely low levels of motivation for literacy; in general their behaviour in class is often difficult to manage and they distract more willing learners. Overall, attendance for both groups is fairly good, largely due to extrinsic motivational factors such as strict disciplinary procedures.

Interestingly, all learners expressed a keen interest and willingness to participate in this research.

Methodology

A variety of research techniques (such as primary, secondary, quantitative and qualitative research) were applied in an attempt to achieve triangulation.

Secondary Research

The secondary research was carried out first. This research involved a review of literature surrounding the topic of peer learning. Faced with a vast array of potentially relevant material, I asked my course tutor (QUB Diploma) to draw on her knowledge of the subject and recommend some authors. A range of resources were used including publications on the subject by renowned experts in the field of education as well as information and documents sourced via the internet.
The rationale for the secondary research was to gain a basic understanding of the subject of peer and collaborated learning, to explore issues arising from previous research and to illuminate my studies with the views and perspectives of experts in this field.

**Primary Research**

(a) Focus Group Discussion - The starting point for primary research was a focus group discussion. A focus group discussion was carried out for each group (group A and group B). The discussions were recorded.

The rationale behind this was to explore the different ways learners thought they learned from each other, and how they valued this type of learning. More precisely, one aim of the discussion was to provide qualitative data to help determine (i) the scope of peer learning within the classroom setting and (ii) the impact of peer learning activities on learners’ motivation.

(b) Literacy Activities - The next stage of the primary research required the learners to participate in two activities. Careful consideration was given to the tasks prescribed and how they were to be administered.

The tasks (see appendix 2 and 3) for the research were purposefully selected. They required learners to apply literacy skills which had previously been taught in class. Completed tasks could then be assessed objectively by the tutor and learning outcomes could be measured. On completion of each task, every learner was asked to fill in a short questionnaire to evaluate their experience in terms of motivation and learning (the questionnaire was designed to gather information in a format that could be easily used for quantitative research analysis purposes. See appendix 3).

Task 1 was themed on the use of the apostrophe (which had been covered in class the previous week). The task was relatively straightforward and involved completing an online test. I wanted the first task to be one which required less complex cognitive skills as this eased the learners into the research programme. The time allocated for this task was 10 minutes.

Task 2 was designed to engage the learners in a higher level of cognition. Learners were required to read a letter of complaint from a dissatisfied customer and provide answers to four pre-set questions. The answers to two of the questions could only be either correct or incorrect, and two answers required the learners to express a view or opinion. The time allocated for this task was 20 minutes.

The tasks were administered as follows:

- Group A (Beauty Therapists) was split into two sub-groups, A1 and group A2. In terms of ability, I aimed to achieve a fair balance of learners in each sub-group.
- Each sub-group was given Task 1.
- Participants in sub-group A1 were asked to carry out the activity ‘on their own’ while the participants in sub-group A2 were asked to work in two groups of three.
- At the end of Task 1 all learners completed a short evaluation and their work was assessed by the tutor.
- Task 2 was prescribed in the same way, except participants in sub-group A1 were asked to carry out the task in small groups of three or four, while participants in sub-group A2 were asked to ‘work on their own’. This ensured that all learners participated in both a peer collaborated and a non-peer collaborated task.
- This pattern was repeated with Group B (Hairdressers).
The rationale for this primary research was to produce learning outcomes which could be assessed and measured and provide a basis upon which each learner could evaluate and compare the learning experience.

There are weaknesses in this methodology. For example: inequities between the sub groups exist, such as learner ability and knowledge of subject, motivation, and personality differences etc; the low numbers in Group B could only provide restricted feedback; the groups may not be representative of Essential Skills learners, and so on. While the methodology is not full-proof, I believe it provides a fair framework upon which to base the research.

Secondary Research (Literature Review) Findings

Over the last three decades there has been much research in the field of active and co-operative learning. The traditional approach to teaching, where most of the class time is spent with the tutor delivering a lecture and the learners watching and listening has repeatedly been found inferior to instruction that involves active and co-operative learning (R M Felder & R Brent, 2003).

Peer Learning – What is it?

According to Christudason (2007, pg 2), ‘Peer-learning is a form of co-operative learning that enhances the value of student to student interaction and results in various advantageous outcomes.’ The Professor further points out that to realise the benefits of peer learning teachers must provide intellectual scaffolding. Thus teachers must raise questions and issues that prompt learners towards more sophisticated levels of thinking. In addition, collaborative processes must be devised to get all group members to participate meaningfully.

Christudason (2007) explains that many strategies exist to facilitate peer learning. Examples include critique sessions, role-play, debates, case studies etc., alongside more complex strategies such as Buzz Groups, Affinity Groups, Solution and Critic Groups and Teach-Write-Discuss techniques.

Theories Old and New

From a Vygotskian perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), learning is socially constructed during interaction and activity with others. Research on peer learning (A O’Donnell, 2006; Webb & Palincsar, 1996) has shown that the interaction between and among the learners in a group influences the cognitive activity that is occurring, and it is cognitive activity that accounts for the learning that takes place.

Studies report that peer learning promotes greater conceptual and procedural gains for students, accommodates a broad range of learning styles, results in greater enjoyment of the task, and encourages a stronger persistence in learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1993).

Cooper (2002, pg 1) agrees that peer learning does hold promise in all these areas, however she warns that peer learning ‘is not a panacea, and positive results are not automatic.’ Cooper stresses that peer learning is one of many essential elements required to produce a successful outcome. Her view is shared by Hoadley et al (1995) who point out that deliberate attention to supporting structures (such as classroom environment, the stance of the teacher, the choice of...
task and dialogue) and sensible application amplifies the power and precision of peer learning as a tool.

**Structured Interaction is Pre-Requisite**

Different types of interaction facilitate different kinds of learning (Felder & Brent, 2003). Less complex strategies are normally sufficient for more straightforward tasks such as learning factual material and group interaction that merely consists of requesting and providing information may be sufficient. In contrast, for high level complex learning to take place, the thinking and interaction within the group must also be of a high cognitive level, characterised by the exchange of ideas, information, perspectives, attitudes and opinions (Felder & Brent, 2003).

Research (Pressley, Symons, McDaniel et al, 1988) has shown that this thought-provoking interaction usually does not occur spontaneously. Without teacher intervention students working in groups do not elaborate on material or ask many thought-provoking questions during discussion. This raises the question of how to structure peer learning so that more thoughtful interaction can be promoted.

**The PAL Project**

Many educational institutions currently promote instructional methods which involve peer learning. One arrangement of student to student support which is currently in place and is regarded to be successful is the PAL (Peer Assisted Learning) system. The PAL Project is spearheaded by Bournemouth University, and PAL practitioners operate in the UK and abroad. It is aimed at Higher and Further Education and information is easily accessible on a designated website (http://www.peerlearning.ac.uk).

Not only does the project provide a model for peer-learning it also recommends techniques, activities and it provides detailed descriptions of what happens in PAL sessions. One suggestion which particularly interested me was to use a second year student to orchestrate a discussion with new first year students. While restrictions on resources and time prevent me from applying this strategy to my research, this is something I would consider incorporating into my practice next year. This goes some way to show that this research has acted as a catalyst for change.

The findings from this literature review impacted greatly on the design and structure of the tasks used for the primary research as explained in the Discussion.

**Primary Research – Findings**

**Focus Group Discussion**

Pre-set questions were used to prompt discussion. All learners participated well and there was a good flow to this discussion, which took part in the presence of the tutor. The discussion was recorded and minutes were taken. Some of the salient points arising from the focus group discussion are summarized below:

- All learners felt that they have been supported by their peers in previous learning experiences.
- Learners recognised that activities can be structured to encourage peer learning.
• Peer learning seemed more apparent in their vocational area than in Essential Skills. Learners identified activities such as observing their peers carry out beauty or hairdressing techniques as a peer learning activity. They realised that observation of their peers carrying out techniques correct and incorrectly enhanced their own learning. One learner said, ‘I can learn from the mistakes made by others when the tutor tells her she is doing it wrong and explains why.’
• Most learners agreed that even when activities are not heavily orchestrated, they still learn from peers. For example, by asking their peers questions about the subject or task in hand or learning from questions posed to the tutor or discussions arising in class.
• Learners recognised weaknesses in some peer learning strategies. Examples cited by learners include: ‘I hate being stuck in a group with someone I don’t get on with.’; ‘Sometimes I’m distracted and talk about other things with my friends instead of getting on with it.’; ‘I can get on better when I work on my own.’; and, ‘sometimes a few in the group do all the hard work but everyone gets credit, even when some didn’t work hard’. With reference to peer assessment one learner said, ‘how would another student know if my work was good or not?’ Another said, ‘I get really embarrassed when someone marks my work and I’ve got loads of questions wrong.’
• The issues arising and views aired were similar for both groups.

Primary Research - Findings

Literacy Tasks
The completed tasks were assessed, learner evaluations were analysed for both groups A and B and the following conclusions were drawn from the results:

• The success rate (in terms of quality of work and correct answers) was significantly higher in the peer collaborated activities than the non-peer collaborated activities, for both groups.
• Task 2 (letter theme) achieved a better success rate than task 1 (theme) in both peer and non-peer collaborated activities.
• Without exception, all learners evaluated the peer collaborated tasks as more enjoyable than the non peer collaborated tasks.
• Both Task 1 and Task 2 received similar ratings in terms of enjoyment by the learners.
• The number of students who completed the task was greater in the peer-collaborated activities than in the non-peer collaborated activities.
• Most, but not all, learners in the peer-collaborated activities completed the task with a good success rate.
• Most, but not all learners in the non-peer collaborared activity completed the task, but with a lower success rate than the peer-collaborated activity.
• Marginally more learners in the non-peer collaborared task did not complete the activity, than in the peer collaborared task.
• Learners felt they gained more confidence in the literacy skill tested through the peer collaborated activity than they did with the non peer collaborared activity.
(These are considered in greater detail in the Discussion)

Other Relevant Observations and Learner Feedback

On each occasion learners who participated in the non-peer collaborared task completed the activity in a much shorter time than the other group, yet the quality of work was poorer than that submitted by the group working on the peer collaborared task.
All learners appeared keen to know how they had performed in the tasks, even those that did not complete the activities.

On furnishing the results of their work, some learners who participated in the peer collaborated activities elicited a discussion with their peers about where they had gone wrong. This did not happen when the results were furnished to the learners who took part in the non-peer collaborative activities.

Discussion

The Focus Group Discussion proved to have positive aspects other than airing the views of the learners; it made them aware of the importance of peer learning in the classroom and put them at ease with the research programme. My capacity as observer and recorder probably impinged on the discussion to some extent, and this is a drawback associated with this type of research.

Although I was under the impression that I had made adequate plans, one unanticipated problem arose with regard to management of the primary research tasks. The literature review revealed that peer learning in its true sense needs tutor intervention. This meant that I had to be present and involved with the sub-group of learners undertaking the peer-collaborated task. The other sub-group who were undertaking the task as a non-peer collaborated activity would no doubt have been distracted by the noise and possibly influenced by what they heard if they were to carry out the task in the same room.

With limited resources, the only solution was to accommodate the two sub groups in different rooms. One group was sent to library while the other was in the usual classroom environment. A crucial element of the research was to have one group complete the tasks ‘on their own’. Often, in the absence of tutor supervision some collaboration goes on, and since the groups were not supervised by a tutor when they carried out the non-peer collaborated activity, it is impossible to say whether or not they completed the tasks entirely on their own. On hindsight, this problem could have been overcome if the activities had been organised to take place on two different days.

The findings indicated that learners’ cognitive skills were engaged at a higher level when they worked alongside peers. The work produced by the learners for task 2 (which demanded a higher level of thinking) was of a much superior quality to that produced by the students who carried out the task on their own; the answers contained evidence of broader thinking and more depth of understanding in contrast to the narrow and sometimes monosyllabic response of the other group.

As facilitator, I had a major role to play in the peer collaborated activities. The activity was structured and I intervened regularly to keep the learners on track and to spark ideas and discussion. As an observer I could see that when students engaged in discussion and bounced ideas off each other they were learning, not only in the subject area of the task in hand (i.e., dealing with dissatisfied customers), but also in the area of speaking and listening and cognition. There was situated learning in a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Group dynamics are important. One particular learner whose behaviour in class is often challenging did have problems focusing during the peer group activity. This affected the response of that particular group, which was weaker (in terms of quality of work) when compared to other groups. This highlights one major drawback of assessing structured peer activities; where a group response is required, learning is assessed on the group response rather than the individual learner.
Even though many learners had voiced concerns about working in groups, and some had said that they preferred working alone (refer to Focus Group Discussion) it was interesting to note that all learners rated the peer collaborated activities as more enjoyable and more were motivated to complete the tasks. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1968) recognises that a sense of belonging and affiliation to a group is a strong motivator. Furthermore, the majority of learners sensed a purpose for carrying out the activities (i.e., for research purposes), and this had a positive effect on learners’ motivation which may not be normally present in the classroom environment.

Conclusion

The concept of peer learning is not new. Indeed, the benefits of it are widely recognised in the field of academia. However, simply putting learners in groups and telling them to work together is not peer learning. Teachers play a vital role (Cooper, 2002) and must consciously orchestrate the learning exercise; only then will learners engage in and reap the benefits of collaborative learning.

Peer learning is not a panacea. There are many variables at play during the formation of a learning experience; group dynamics, teacher-student relationship, learning environment, motivation and previous experiences of learners etc., all have important roles. However, in my view this research has confirmed that structured peer learning activities are undoubtedly a powerful tool which when applied sensibly can be used as part of a programme to develop literacy skills and motivate learners. To this end, the subject of peer learning is a field worthy of investigation by the Essential Skills tutor. As McDermott (in Murphy 1999:17) puts it: ‘Learning does not belong to individual persons, but to the various conversations of which they are a part.’

References


The Diploma course opened my eyes to the benefits of practitioner research. I learned a lot from my own research on the topic of peer learning, but I also learned much from the research of my fellow students on a wide variety of topics. While it is impossible to recite all that I have learned, I can say that knowledge from research has impacted on my teaching strategies in the classroom – hopefully for the benefit of the learners.

Learners are my source of motivation and I continue to enjoy teaching Essential Skills part-time in the same college. Practitioner research is enlightening and I believe that it can only serve to enhance the teaching and learning of Essential Skills.

Louise O’Sullivan
I work at Clanrye Employment & Training Services in the Foundation Department, which caters for a group of around 30 young people with Learning Difficulties. I deliver a range of vocational programmes including Horticulture, IT and Painting & Decorating, as well as Essential Skills and Personal Development. My interest in the therapeutic benefits and educational opportunities offered by the horticultural setting inspired my research.

George Moffett
8. A case study of the benefits of using horticulture as a medium for delivering Essential Skills to young people with learning disabilities

George Moffett

Introduction

The use of horticulture as an activity for those on the margins of society has a long and successful tradition stretching back to Victorian times. Social and therapeutic horticulture, as it is now termed by its practitioners, is used by those working with people with mental health problems, physical disabilities, prisoners, victims of abuse/torture, ethnic minorities and, in my own context, those with learning disabilities. Research has shown that individuals from such groups benefit from horticultural activities and this has resulted in increased self esteem and self confidence, a sense of well being and fulfilment, development of social skills and interaction, and a greater sense of independence.

As part of my role as a tutor in a Training Organisation in the County Down area, I deliver a Horticultural programme to a group of young people with learning disabilities. Involvement in a Horticultural programme can, in the case of those with learning disability, develop and improve physical skills such as hand-eye coordination, manual dexterity, and the use of tools. It can also develop personal qualities such as patience, concentration and creativity as well as interpersonal skills such as teamwork, speaking, listening and following instructions. I also deliver Essential Skills to these young adults and have become aware of the overlap between the vocational activities in the garden, and the classroom based work in Essential Skills sessions. I have also become aware of the contrast in motivation and performance of learners in the two settings – the young people look forward to and are fully engaged in their horticultural sessions but are often difficult to motivate and uninterested in their Essential Skills classes. Research has shown that integration of literacy and numeracy into vocational learning can be very effective. The Skills for Life Quality Initiative paper on Motivation and Persistence states that ‘well-resourced and well-taught vocational courses in which LLN learning is embedded can motivate learners, offering them new practical skills and professional identity.’

Within my own context I have begun to explore the literacy and numeracy learning that takes place in the Horticulture sessions that I deliver. Planting beetroot seeds, for example, involves the following literacy and numeracy activities:

- Reading the instructions on the packet
- Following written and verbal instructions
- Measuring depth and space between seeds correctly using a straight line
- Labelling the crop
- Recording the time and date of sowing
Given the support offered by current research for embedded learning and given my own observations of the increased motivation and performance of the learners in the horticultural setting I decided to undertake some research myself into the benefits and advantages of using the horticultural context for embedding literacy and numeracy skills using evidence gathered from three young adults with learning disabilities.

**Literature Review**

In 1812 Benjamin Rush, an American doctor, published his work *Medical Inquiries upon Diseases of the Mind*. In his book Rush observed that:

*It has been remarked that the maniacs of the male sex in all hospitals, who assist in cutting wood, making fires, and digging in the garden...often recover*.

This is the first known reference to the therapeutic benefits of horticulture and although much of Rush’s work was later discredited, it is significant in that it marks a starting point in the search for a scientific explanation of the occurrence and provided inspiration for those who followed him.

Colson (1944) was perhaps the next significant author on the subject. Colson published *The Rehabilitation of the Injured* in 1944 which referred to the beneficial effects of horticultural activities on those who had suffered physical injuries – he listed specific gardening activities which developed movement in particular joints. Colson included those with learning disabilities and mental health problems in his work. O’Reilly and Handforth (1955) undertook a study of fourteen women patients with mental health problems in an institution and published their findings in the American Journal of Psychiatry. They found that:

*Of the fourteen patients who participated in our pilot project, only one has failed to show a striking degree of improvement. The other thirteen are still mentally ill, but in relinquishing their positions of isolation, they have become better adapted to the hospital environment* (O’Reilly and Handforth, 1955)

Roger Ulrich, an environmental psychologist, contributed to the field in 1984 when he published an article in Science which described the beneficial effects of patients being able to observe trees and gardens from their window. Such patients required fewer drugs and had a more positive attitude to their recovery. Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) developed this notion further and claimed that viewing and engaging with nature stimulated involuntary attention. This theory became known as ‘Attention Restoration Theory’.

At present Joe Sempik and Jo Aldridge from Loughborough are the most prolific researchers in the field of social and therapeutic horticulture. These researchers have led a study of over eight hundred gardening projects across the UK and published their findings. In a paper published in 2002 Sempik and Aldridge reported that almost half of the eight hundred participating projects were for adults with learning disabilities. In their findings they noted that:

*The reported benefits of social and therapeutic horticulture include increased self esteem and self confidence, the development of horticultural, social and work skills, literacy and numeracy skills, an increased sense of well being and the opportunity for social interaction and the development of independence.* (Social & Therapeutic Horticulture: evidence and messages from research Dec 2002)
Methodology

This paper takes the form of a small-scale case study involving three young learners with learning disabilities. The BERA Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2004) are clear in specifying the responsibilities of a researcher working with such individuals:

‘In the case of participants whose age, intellectual capability or other vulnerable circumstance may limit the extent to which they can be expected to understand or agree voluntarily to undertake their role, researchers must fully explore alternative ways in which they can be enabled to make authentic responses. In such circumstances, researchers must also seek the collaboration and approval of those who act in guardianship’.

Given the vulnerable nature of the participants (being both young and having a learning disability), I began by ensuring that I had the full permission of the organisation, the learners and their parents/guardians before proceeding with my investigation. Permission was granted from the organisation through the Training Manager who was briefed on the proposed project. I then met with the proposed participants and explained my plans to them. Once I had their permission I then wrote to their parent/guardian enclosing a permission slip to be signed and returned. In each case the permission slip was returned with consent to proceed.

Later in this paper I have described each of the participants’ individual learning disabilities. However, when considering my methodology for successfully obtaining results and findings it was necessary to identify and consider the difficulties common to all of the participants before planning. I identified the following significant common characteristics of learning disability that had to be considered and/or accommodated:

- Poor memory and recall
- Poor oral and written communication skills
- Poor concentration
- Potentially vulnerable to manipulation

As well as the nature of the learners, the subject matter of the research also had to be considered when drawing up a methodology. Most horticultural activity takes place between the months of March and October. Due to time constraints the research for this paper was undertaken during the months of January and February when there is little or no outdoor horticultural activity.

Having discussed the project with my two experienced colleagues in the department I decided on the following methodology. Firstly, the participants visited our garden and had a walk around the various areas to stimulate their interest and recall. Comments made by participants during this visit were recorded and included in the findings. We then returned to our department base room and watched a video that we had made as part of our ASDAN Horticulture programme in summer 2006. Again, comments made by the participants during the viewing of the video were recorded and included in the findings. Finally we spent some time in a facilitated group discussion which was audio taped and later transcribed. I facilitated the discussion by encouraging the learners to help me make some plans for the forthcoming gardening season and followed up comments by participants with open questions to encourage further discussion and by asking a small number of closed questions for clarification.
The Participants

In selecting participants for the research project I used two initial criteria. Potential participants had to:
1. Be a current member of the Foundation Department (and therefore have a learning disability)
2. Have completed the ASDAN Towards Independence Horticulture Programme

Once potential participants had been identified using these initial criteria, some were excluded due to timetable and work placement demands. Four potential participants remained and all agreed to be involved in the project. Unfortunately, soon after agreeing to be involved, one of the four participants left the department for personal reasons. The study therefore involved three participants whose details I have outlined below (names changed to protect identity).

Gemma

Gemma came to the Foundation Department from the local Special School at the age of nineteen approximately two years ago. She has a Severe Learning Disability as well as a physical disability. Her learning disability means that she has poor concentration and memory. Gemma is only able to process single step instructions and is unable to work independently. She can display inappropriate and immature behaviour and can be very moody at times. This means that Gemma often finds group work in the classroom a very challenging experience. Her physical disability has affected both her gross and fine motor skills. Despite her disability, Gemma has secured and retained a one day work placement in a local shop during her time in the organisation. Gemma’s literacy and numeracy are extremely limited. She is following the Adult Pre Entry Curriculum. Gemma can spell and write her own first name but is unable to produce any free writing. Her spoken language is good but she has limited understanding of the concept of turn taking. Gemma’s numeracy skills are also very limited. She can count to ten with support but cannot undertake any sort of calculation.

Brendan

Brendan came to the Foundation Department from the Learning Support Unit of a local Secondary School at the age of sixteen nearly three years ago. He has a Moderate Learning Disability. Brendan has poor communication skills and has difficulty making himself understood in conversation. He has difficulty in following multi step instructions and often has difficulty in recalling information. Brendan lacks motivation and can be a disruptive element in a group. He lacks confidence and has very low self esteem. Nevertheless, Brendan has gained valuable work experience during his three years in the department and currently holds down a two day work placement in a local business. Brendan successfully attained Entry Level 1 Essential Skills in Literacy and Numeracy in August 2006.

Joyce

Joyce came to the Foundation Department from the Learning Support Unit of a local Secondary School at the age of sixteen at the same time as Brendan. She has a Moderate Learning Disability. When Joyce joined the department, she was very moody, stubborn and difficult to engage in conversation as well as being constantly anxious. She sometimes refused to participate in activities and was difficult to motivate. Over the past three years Joyce has matured into an independent young woman who is keen to share the skills and knowledge she has learned with
her peers. She now holds down a three day work placement in a busy retail store. Joyce successfully attained Entry Level 3 Essential Skills in Literacy and Numeracy in August 2006.

Findings

Given the nature of the participants and the methodology used the findings from this case study could be described as naturalistic – I relied solely on observation of the participants as they reflected on their horticultural experiences as well as a transcription of their taped interviews. The results fall into three categories: (i) Freedom and Independence, (ii) Kinaesthetic learning, (iii) Teamwork, Social and Interpersonal skills.

(i) Freedom and Independence

Each of the participants observed during the taped interview said that one of the things they liked best about the Horticultural sessions was the freedom it allowed them. Gemma, the least able of the participants said that the gardening programme gave her ‘more freedom and a bit of air round you’. Brendan stated that ‘it’s better than being stuck in school’. When asked why this was he said that ‘You don’t have to be quiet!’. Joyce agreed with Brendan on this point and elaborated by saying ‘And you can move around and stuff’. My observations of the participants on the visit to the garden prior to the interviews provided further evidence of increased independence in such a setting. Gemma, who is usually reluctant to leave the tutor’s side, set off with the other two participants up the path to the garden without hesitation.

From the observations made by the participants it can be seen that they associate being in an outdoor environment as an escape from the restrictions imposed by an indoor classroom environment, even though they are working and learning in the garden. Gemma’s comment about the air suggests that she appreciates the positive benefits of fresh air and the sense of well being that accompany it (although unable to articulate it).

Kaplan (1995) refers to the feeling of escaping implied in the participants’ comments and notes that: Being away, at least in principle, frees one from mental activity that requires directed attention support to keep going…a change in the direction of one’s gaze, or even an old environment viewed in a new way can provide the necessary conceptual shift.

Given the characteristics of learning disability such as poor concentration and recall which affect the participants in the study, it is clear that use of the outdoor classroom in a horticultural setting can be a positive environment in which to learn. Such an environment fits the requirements recommended by the SFLQI paper on Working with Young Adults which states that ‘young adults are far more confident exploring learning, and their futures, in spaces where they feel relaxed and in control. Confidence is also increased where they have a sense of ownership of their environment.’

(ii) Kinaesthetic Learning

In their observations of the Horticultural sessions each of the participants made reference to the kinaesthetic element of the activities they were involved in. Indeed, when asked what they liked most about the gardening it was ‘doing stuff’ that they continually made reference to. Joyce was able to recall a large number of different activities that she had been involved in such as sowing seeds, weeding, planting bulbs, pruning shrubs, digging and raking. Furthermore, when encouraged to elaborate on the bulb planting activity, she was able to break the activity down into sequenced steps...
and talk appropriately at length about this experience. When asked why she enjoyed such activities she observed, ‘Somebody shows you what to do and then you get a go yourself’. At this point Brendan agreed with Joyce and added ‘it’s, like, doing stuff for ourselves’. Brendan’s comment reflects both the preference for and appreciation of kinaesthetic activity and learning, as well as the feeling of independence in undertaking the tasks himself. Gemma was unable to volunteer any comments at this point but when we talked back through the activities undertaken for the making of the video she talked enthusiastically about what she had enjoyed. Gemma particularly liked watering the seeds once they had been sown. I suspect that she remembered this activity because she had watered most of the learners’ feet as well as the seeds and it had been fun for everyone!

Joyce had been responsible during late spring for sowing carrot seeds and was particularly proud of the results. It was clear from her animated description that she had enjoyed planting what she referred to as ‘wee tiny seeds’ only to see them grow into ‘big, massive carrots’. It was also clear that she had learnt a great deal through this kinaesthetic activity. She was able to describe how she had made a straight drill to sow the seeds in and had maintained the crop throughout the year til it was ready to harvest. She added ‘I didn’t know before they grow under the ground!’ All three participants agreed that the highlight of this activity was bringing the carrots back to the department to show off to their peers and staff and then cook and eat them as part of the Cookery for Life session. Brendan characteristically added ‘But I don’t like carrots!’

(iii) Teamwork, Social and Interpersonal Skills

When talking about their experiences at the garden the participants all made reference to the social opportunities this environment afforded them. Brendan, in particular, enjoyed this aspect of the work and commented that ‘You get to meet people when you’re working outside’ and ‘You get to know people better’. These comments are significant for a young man with a learning disability who has previously been identified as having social and communicative difficulties. Normally Brendan is withdrawn and reserved in a learning environment and I considered his comments about this aspect of the horticultural setting particularly significant given his behaviour in the traditional classroom. Gemma too enthused about working with others. She said ‘I love helping x open the gate and cleaning the tools’. Joyce agreed with the others about enjoying working with others – she said that she had made new friends at the garden. When I asked Joyce why she thought this was, she said she thought it was because she was able to talk as she worked. She also observed that ‘You’re not always working with the same person’ and this provided the opportunity to develop her interpersonal skills.

Sempik, Aldridge and Becker (2003) acknowledged the significance of the social element of horticultural work thus:

It represents one of the opportunities to develop new social contacts and activities or extend established networks. The projects also offer clients the chance to mix with new acquaintances with whom they share common interests and who often have the same or similar health problems or vulnerabilities.

The opportunity to socialise while learning clearly appealed to the participants. Increased social interaction through working together can only have beneficial outcomes. Smith and Aldous (1994) noted in their horticultural study that the social element of the activity resulted in ‘feelings of value and worth in that they considered themselves more desirable than before as individuals’. The resulting increase in self esteem and self confidence is likely to have a positive effect on any learning which takes place.
Reflection and Conclusion

Once I had clarified my research proposal, I realised that the most challenging aspect of the study would be the collection of evidence from the participants – a traditional methodology was not appropriate given the learning disabilities of the young people involved. I investigated other projects with participants with similar needs and spoke to colleagues for advice before finalising my methodology. On reflection, although the methodology I used obtained the necessary results, I felt that the participants were not totally at ease with the taped interviews at the end of the process. If undertaking further research with similar participants I would take the time to explore further alternative methodologies, perhaps using creative activities.

From my work with Gemma, Brendan and Joyce. I discovered that the horticultural setting provided them with a unique learning environment in which they felt free from the restrictions of the classroom. They were able to engage in practical tasks as part of their learning and get their hands dirty, quite literally. These learning experiences were proven to be effective by the very fact that the participants could recall them without prompting. It was, however, the overall holistic benefits provided by the garden environment that was most significant to me in the evidence gathered. Each of the participants, despite poor communicative skills, conveyed that the horticultural setting made them feel more independent and free to mix in an informal setting. They were able to make friends and have fun while learning at the same time. The resulting surge in confidence and self esteem can only have a positive effect on the learning experience.
References


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Skills for Life Quality Initiative paper on Working with Young Adults (2005)

*Social & Therapeutic Horticulture: evidence and messages from research* Evidence Issue 6 (Centre for Child & Family Research) (Dec 2002)
Research gives the practitioner the benefit of stepping back from their work and looking at it critically and reflectively - I learnt a lot about the benefits of my work on the learners as well as picking up ideas for developing and improving my practice. I believe that young learners in particular are motivated by the vocational environment and that this provides the opportunity to deliver Essential Skills learning most effectively.

George Moffett
I came to Essential Skills five years ago as a volunteer adult literacy tutor. I completed the City & Guilds 9295 and the QUB Level 4 Certificate and Diploma.

I am currently working with adult learners in the Limavady community. I deliver E/Skills Literacy to New Deal participants and Confidence to Work participants through Roe Valley Community Education Forum. I also have a class of ESOL learners at North West Regional College.

Margaret Rankin
9. The impact of literacy classes: a case study

Margaret Rankin

Introduction

Since the implementation of the government’s ‘Skills for life’ document in 2002, we have seen a noticeable increase in the number of adults returning to learning. The funding from Europe for Northern Ireland has enabled many communities to develop their own programmes, community houses and support groups. Many more people are aware of ‘Lifelong Learning’ and it is being provided in more diverse settings and locations.

Aim

This research was designed to give me an insight into what motivates adults to return to learning. Whilst teaching Essential Skills literacy this year I have been very aware of the motivation issues and changes in the motivation of my learners. I wanted to know how they feel about their past and present learning and what (in learning) was important to them. I was particularly interested in whether or not the learners felt that they had changed since attending literacy class and if so, in what way. The feedback from the learners will allow me to understand future groups and facilitate them in a better way. The research will examine the effect that attending literacy class has on learners.

Literature review

The International Adult Literacy Survey (1996) indicated that 24% of people aged between 16 and 65 years of age were at the lowest level of literacy attainment. (In Northern Ireland). The ‘Skills for Life’ publication has had a powerful impact on adults in the Limavady area. All learners on the courses are aware of and think highly of the ‘Gremlins ad’. Participation in learning is becoming more accepted and the continuing trend in communities is that when children attend nursery school, mothers begin to attend community classes.

The Essential Skills for Living Strategy was to provide opportunities for ‘socially disadvantaged people and groups to improve their qualifications and basic skills and increase their employability.’ p20 (2.1.2) Social inclusion and community regeneration are improved by creating learning opportunities in supportive environments for these communities. We endeavour to do this and one of the key points that this research highlighted was the need for mothers to assist their children with schoolwork. The study by the National Foundation to Educational Research suggests that parents with limited skills have little involvement in children’s schooling, but ‘being able to help their own children is a strong motivating factor for adults who return to learn.’ Literacy today Issue 22 (website). McGivney (2000) cited in Haggart (2000) p11 found that ‘Parents wanting to support their children in learning may also be motivated to undertake learning for their own benefit.’
Context

The research was carried out with 14 adult learners who attend my classes, both evening essential skills classes at Limavady College and the community essential classes held in the Roe Valley Education Forum and Keady House. They range in age from 23 – 45 and the majority left school with few, if any, qualifications. Learners have been attending classes since September 2005.

Methodology

A questionnaire was used to gain information from a wide range of learners. The questions asked learners to rate how they felt about various aspects of themselves before and after classes on a score from 0 to 5. Please find a copy of the questionnaire in Appendix A. All learners were offered the opportunity to complete a questionnaire and had space to add their comments.

Two learners were interviewed to ascertain whether or not the questionnaire gave an accurate picture. These in depth interviews also provided added information into their past schooling and literacy practices.

Preparation

From the beginning of the classes I had talked to my learners about my experiences of the Diploma course and they were not surprised when I discussed this paper with them. I was wary about asking my learners to carry out taped interviews with me (I was concerned at their confidence level); however, after discussing the paper with them, they all willingly agreed to get involved.

All learners were assured of confidentiality and I generated an information sheet, detailing what I was doing and why which all learners received and signed. A consent sheet was signed to allow me to use information that they provided. It was vital that I gained their permission in writing before starting the survey and they had the opportunity to allow or not allow me to use their personal details in the paper. After the survey was complete I would interview two of the learners.

Design of questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to gain as much information as possible from the students and I tried to make it as ‘user friendly’ as possible. I piloted the initial questionnaire with a small group of students who were very willing to give me feedback on it - suggestions on the layout and response method. This proved to be a more worthwhile experience than I had anticipated. As a result of their feedback, the questionnaire was changed, method of answering changed and some additional questions added. I found their help invaluable. This resulted in all learners receiving an easy-to-read, easy-to-complete and comprehensive questionnaire.

Response rate

The response rate was 100%. I was concerned about asking the learners to complete a questionnaire that asked for their feelings but anonymity was ensured and all learners were very enthusiastic about helping me and having an opportunity to put their feelings on paper. They appreciated the fact that someone was interested and willing to use their experiences.
The breakdown of my learners meant that only two males completed the survey. I was unsure what difference this would make, if any, but their completed surveys show that their responses were very similar to the female responses.

**Responses to questionnaire**

Questionnaires were completed before sitting the CCEA Desktop Tasks or Entry Level papers. I felt that this would give me a better picture about how the learners felt about literacy classes without the success of a achieving a qualification. I will discuss the results by analysing each question and will draw conclusions where relevant.

Part of the questionnaire was designed to gain an idea of what learners felt was important about literacy classes.

**What was important to you in the literacy course?**

0 not important – 5 very important

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<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community support (receiving support from my community)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family support</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The course was free</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support of the group (peer support)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tutor support</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approachable tutors</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classes are not like school</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was able to prove something to myself</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To gain a qualification</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To re-enter education</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutor / Student relationship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results also show that relationships are extremely important to adult learners. Wanting to gain a qualification was equally important to the desire that classes should be different from school. As both of these are important to learners I feel that this emphasizes the importance for Essential Skills tutors to gain specific qualifications, which differ from those in mainstream education.
Self-esteem – 13 out of the 14 questioned put their self-esteem, before starting literacy classes in the bottom half of the scale. This changed to all learners placing their self-esteem in the top half of the scale, and all showed an increase.

Confidence – Before class, none of the learners surveyed felt that their confidence level would have been in the bottom of the scale, however after attending class none felt their confidence level was in the bottom. Eight out of the 14 learners felt that their confidence was in the top. In fact one learner actually felt hers went from the bottom to the top of the scale.
Enjoyment of reading & writing - all of the learners showed an increase in their enjoyment of reading and writing.
Participation in literacy activities with children - not all learners had children, but 10 out of the 11 who did were in the top half of the scale after classes compared with only 4 out of the 11 before classes. This is an area where I feel my questionnaire could have been more specific and asked learners if they had children and if so what kind of literacy activities did they do with their children.

Attending other classes - before the classes 8 out of the 14 had no interest in attending any other classes but this had changed to all having some interest in other classes and 7 out of the 14 definitely interested in other classes, e.g. I.T, numeracy and Art classes. This reflects the increase in their motivation to continue with their own education.
The learners’ views about Limavady College tutors also changed; although I was their main tutor, learners have had contact with both Level 4 QUB Certificate students on placement and other Essential Skills Tutors in the college. Before commencing classes with Limavady College there was mixed opinion but afterwards there was a clear shift as 11 out of the 14 placed their opinion in the highest position and all rated them in the top half of the scale.

Thoughts on their ability to achieve – the initial results were mixed (although majority in the lower bands) and afterwards all learners placing their opinion in the top 50%. Of the learners surveyed, felt that their ability to achieve had increased from the bottom to the top of the scale after attending class.

All of the learners felt that they had gained new skills and would recommend the course to others.
Interviews

I decided to carry out case studies of two of my learners, chosen because they were the two who were most comfortable about providing taped interviews. All learners were happy to put their views anonymously on paper but most were reluctant to speak on tape. The research is qualitative, subjective and small scale. I expected to find that all my learners would have increased self-esteem and I felt that the mixture of research methods would allow me to explore this further.

Interview Methodology

I asked two learners to carry out short taped interviews and asked them a selection of questions about their experiences and thoughts of learning literacy. Please find a copy of the questions in Appendix B. All learners were offered the opportunity to complete a questionnaire and had space to add their comments.

Learner A

This woman is aged between 35 and 45 and is a mother of two children. She has been married for 19 years. Both her children (one boy and one girl) attend one of the local primary schools. She is an Entry Level 3 learner progressing towards Level 1, and is tutored in a community group setting of 6 learners. She is a fun loving, lively person who has gelled well with the group and she is highly motivated. She is a housewife and her main reason for returning to education was to gain qualifications in the hope of securing employment, as well as helping ‘my children with English at school.’

Learner A recalls being bullied at primary school and, ‘didn’t like spelling – didn’t like primary school at all.’ Her feelings about secondary school were very different and she describes this as ‘loved it’ because she made new friends. She feels that at school the ‘work was just threw at you and you had to get on with it yourself’ She is very angry about the fact that at school nothing was explained to her.

When she first came to class, this learner was very quiet and reserved. She was reluctant to get involved in much written work, but as the group developed she has become confident and chatty. She is happy to share her views with the group and freely question for understanding. She says that she really enjoys learning now. One of her greatest rewards has been the ability able to segment words and use phonics, as her son has difficulties with his speech and she can now help him. Her daughter now asks her mother to work on schoolwork with her, whilst in the past she would not have. She gets great satisfaction from being able to help with her children’s schoolwork and her daughter, in particular, likes the fact that learner A can now work with her because they are, ‘at the same level.’ Their relationship has developed now that learner A understands what she is doing. In her own words learner A thinks, ‘coming to class has improved me…and helped the wains.’

Learner B

Learner B is a married woman, aged between 20 and 40 years old, who has two children, a 6-year-old boy and a 9-year-old girl. Both children attend the local primary school. She used to work in the local lingerie factory before leaving work to raise her family, which is something that she places a lot of value on and is very proud of. She sees this as ‘essential’.
The learner attends class in a local community house, learning in a group of between 6 and 8 others women, all from the same community. She is Level 1 progressing to Level 2.

Her first memory of literacy was reading ‘The Three Little Pigs’ at primary school. She recalls not enjoying reading as a child because her parents had little time to spend reading with her. She also made a point of saying that taking time with her own children is something that she views as essential.

Learner B felt that she never really enjoyed school, however like Learner A, she also found secondary school more enjoyable than primary – describing it as, ‘more bearable.’ She felt that there was a lot of pressure and that she really didn’t understand what was happening or going on at school.

When I asked her about the adult class, her tone and facial expression changed. She would recommend the class to others and repeatedly said, ‘Definitely’. She felt that her maturity and understanding enabled her to appreciate the learning more. She says that, ‘it wasn’t that I didn’t want to learn when I was at school I would have but I found it too much pressure.’ She told me that she has much more confidence now and specified the fact that she is better at helping her children with their schoolwork. She then said something to me that I found extremely revealing; she said, ‘I think if you are a stay at home mum you lose confidence anyway but I think whenever you get out to a class like this and you start getting your self-esteem back it helps you it helps you in more than one way and I would recommend it to anyone.’ She stated that her generation of people in Limavady went straight from school into factory work, (it was considered the thing that you did, to leave school and get a job in the factory), and so for them she says that this is ‘the way to go’. She describes being in control of her own learning as ‘far better’.

Discussion and Conclusion

‘Some writers (McGivney, 1999, Sargant, 2000, Eraut, 1998) have identified that confidence building is a pre-requisite to effective learning and that progression is likely to be impeded by a lack of confidence.’ www.ltu.mmu.ac.uk/ltia/issue5/artess.shtml

‘It is probably true to say that the need for self-esteem is the most important need we have in our kind of society.’ Lawrence (2000) p5

The questionnaire and interviews were completed before any of the learners had achieved a formal qualification; therefore I believe that this research supports the view that growth of a learner’s confidence is an important outcome of attending classes. All learners who completed the questionnaire and interviews clearly expressed the importance they place on relationships within the literacy classes. This supports the NRDC Research Report on Community Focused provision in adult literacy, numeracy and language which asserted: ‘This quality – people skills was identified as – being vital for both development workers and tutors.’ and that, ‘people skills, while unrecognised, were most important in community settings.’ p20

It is possible that the increase in self-esteem and confidence which learners experience could have developed in areas other than this learning environment, but the interviews reveal that learners gained a good deal from being able to help with their children’s schoolwork and their understanding of this; this could only come from literacy classes. One learner also stated that their children wanted to do homework with the parent who was attending literacy class – this in itself would give the parent an increase in confidence.
This research has led me to ask more questions about Essential Skills. Is there a difference between community learning and mainstream FE College learning? Does the social aspect of the group affect learning and retention? Does the community based setting encourage retention of learners? Do the current funding policies allow Essential Skills provision in the Community enough flexibility? This research has proved to be interesting and extremely motivating for me as a tutor – perhaps there are qualities in community provision that require particular skills. The learners appear to be extremely appreciative of the time and energy that is spent by a tutor developing their self-esteem and making them feel valued.

In conclusion, I will quote from the learners themselves:

‘I feel I am more comfortable with the adult classes than I was with the student classes. It’s more informal and has a better atmosphere.’

‘Great – keep them coming.’

[my child] ‘Always says mummy come you now and do my homework before daddy comes.’

‘I would recommend it to anyone.’

‘You are not made to feel stupid as you may have felt before you started the classes because of low self-esteem.’
I have learnt much from my research - in particular what my learners felt was important in Literacy classes and how valuable their voices are. Practitioner research provides us with valuable resources. Reading other practitioners’ research has provided me with a great insight into many areas of Essential Skills teaching. Research is rewarding and gives us a knowledge base about adult learners that comes directly from the classes themselves.

Learners are keen to be involved and I found that the learners were happy to be part of something that enabled them to have their say.

Margaret Rankin
Last words: Reflections on practitioner research, engagement and learning

Being able to engage our learners is absolutely vital. Without it we are not teaching, interacting with or developing the necessary skills for our learners. We must find ways to relate to, stimulate and motivate each learner that enters our teaching environment. If practitioner research can allow us to identify aspects of learning or allow us to improve in our teaching, then it is definitely an extremely important part of any teaching course and a process that should be undertaken within each of our teaching contexts. Tutors should welcome the opportunity and set aside any anxieties or concerns they have about embarking on the process. As with all things in life, you only get out of it what you put in. The reward, in my case, was a greater understanding of the ways in which my learners engaged in the learning process and also of methods for developing my teaching style to facilitate their learning.

Kim McAnespie

I think the reason I enjoyed the research was because I chose a topic that was very relevant to me and to my learners at the time. It was also a very manageable topic to deal with.

I think the two main tips I would give any tutor would be:
- start your research as early as you possibly can
- choose a topic that is relevant to you and your teaching situation.

Pamela McDowell
Motivating and engaging learners is the magic key which is sometimes elusive. I think that enthusiasm is infectious, and if the tutor does not have it then the learners cannot be expected to be enthused either. Adult literacy must be learner-centred as it is their show and not the tutor’s performance. Tune in to the learners and empathise or else they tune out.

Suzanne Martin

Motivation is the key to learning. I feel that knowing the individual and the group in order to cater for their interests and desires for learning is central to allowing them to engage in learning. This will then make the selection and design of resources and themes straightforward. As tutors we must answer many demands but I feel that it is important to remind learners that it is their job to turn information into knowledge. In my practice I feel that I support learning but I remind learners that they must take responsibility for their own learning. Given this reassurance they seem ready to take ownership, perhaps because they have already taken a mighty step in attending a class in the first place.

Amanda McCausland
I believe that practitioner research is never to be underestimated as it is as broad as the practitioner’s imagination. There will always be new areas to investigate in the dynamics of the adult literacy classroom and each class will throw up different aspects which the tutor will want to research depending on her own background, experience and personality. The possibilities for research are endless.

Suzanne Martin
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