

# Inside Evidence

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## Issue 5

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### **Literacies for learning in FE**

#### **How could we harness students' home literacy practices?**

Many of us assume that vocational students' unwillingness to undertake written college assignments reflects a general dislike of reading and writing of any kind. But a project in the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) found that such students choose to engage in a great many literacy practices every day (they write diaries, emails, blogs and read magazines, web pages and computer games instructions etc). Why do students prefer the literacy activities they engage in at home to those offered in college?

When they analysed them, the researchers found a stark contrast between the literacy practices which students choose to engage in out of college and those required for college course assignments. For example, students' writing out of college is often collaborative, self-determined, non-linear and creative, making use of multimedia and involving a variety of different modes (symbols, pictures, colour and/or sound). But for college tasks, students are often expected to work alone, produce text in a linear format, rewrite and present information they have been given previously, to standard format and in a specified number of words.

#### **Do college assignments *have to be like this*?**

The research showed how tutors could harness their students' home literacies by making small, but significant changes to assignments which helped the students to succeed with their college courses. For example, students on a BTEC National Diploma in Travel and Tourism course were required to write a series of three reports about tourist destinations. Although the content of the course was specified by the awarding body, it was possible for

material to be presented in different ways. The students said they preferred visual and active work and preferred talking to writing, so the tutors offered the students the choice between producing a PowerPoint, an exhibition or a report.

### **How did changing the nature of the assignments affect the students?**

Doing a presentation or exhibition resonated with students' preferred, home literacy practices because they were multimedia, collaborative, creative, non-linear, and determined by their own choice. They also provided a real audience, focus and purpose for their work. The exhibition for example, was open to other members of staff and their students at a specified time and date. Sitting or standing by their own exhibition also gave the students a real sense of ownership of their work, and their attention to this audience was evident in the beautifully presented leaflets and posters they produced.

For the presentation, although the students had said they did not like writing extended texts, they still produced slides full of text and wrote scripts or copious notes for themselves. When writing became part and parcel of an activity with which the students identified and which they saw had a clear purpose, they found the writing less onerous. All the students said they preferred producing a PowerPoint to writing an essay – they saw it as 'more visual' and 'less boring'. Importantly, not only were the activities nearer to the students' preferred literacy practices, they were also nearer to the types of literacy practices that would be required in their future careers.

#### **Take action**

Could you:

- explore with your students the kind of literacy practices they do in their every day lives to make both you and your students more aware of their existing literacy skills?
- consider ways you could make the literacy demands of your courses more like the students' everyday literacy practices, to improve their experiences of, and success with learning?

#### **Evidence source**

Ivanic, R et al (2007) Possibilities in further education: harnessing the abundance of literacy  
*British Educational Research Journal* 33 (5) pp. 703-721