inside EVIDENCE

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Improving learners' functional skills: How can research evidence help?

ANALYSIS

In this issue of *Inside Evidence* we present the findings from research studies that help throw light on critical teaching and learning issues relating to embedding Skills for Life in the further education system.

Each of the studies deals with specific topics, yet we were struck by a theme that seems to emerge from the research, regardless of its focus. This is the importance of collaboration between:

- Skills for Life and vocational teachers
- learning support workers and tutors
- tutors and library staff in promoting reading; and
- learners themselves in making the best use of ICT for learning.

In the schools sector, there is strong research evidence of the effectiveness of collaboration and dialogue both for practitioner professional development and for student learning. While there has been less research in the further education system the emerging evidence is consistent with what we already know to be effective practice elsewhere and offers much food for thought. We hope you find this issue of *Inside Evidence* useful.

What do learners' functional skills mean for quality improvement in practice?

Research reviewed in this issue

1   Embedding functional skills on vocational courses: should plasterers be teaching maths and literacy?

2   Literacies for learning: how can we avoid swamping or spoon-feeding our students?

3   Just how valuable are learning support workers and can we improve their effectiveness further still?

4   How can we make best use of ICT for learning?

5   Why is reading for pleasure still so important?

HAVE YOUR SAY
We'd love to know your views of the articles we have produced for this issue of *Inside Evidence* and how they have informed your practice. Let us know by emailing us at: **inside.evidence@qia.org.uk**

WHAT'S THE EVIDENCE?
All the research we feature on these pages is carefully appraised using a specially designed instrument. This helps us to ensure that the findings are trustworthy, relevant and useable across different contexts. You will find details of the evidence sources on each page.

EMBEDDING FUNCTIONAL SKILLS ON VOCATIONAL COURSES

SHOULD PLASTERERS BE TEACHING MATHS AND LITERACY?

Skills for Life practitioners often argue how it makes sense to 'embed' literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) in vocational courses rather than teach them in isolation. They say learners are much more ready to improve their number skills if it is clear that this will help them succeed with their vocational studies or at work. But is there any evidence to support the argument? And is it the job of vocational teachers to teach functional skills if there is?

A study by the National Research and Development Centre (NRDC) for Adult Literacy set out to explore the impact of embedded LLN provision on learners' achievement. It also aimed to pin down what exactly the characteristics of successful embedding are. It found the benefits were impressive.

- Learners on embedded courses had better staying on rates than those on non-embedded courses. Retention was 15 per cent higher.
- Ninety-three per cent of learners with a Skills for Life need on fully embedded courses achieved a literacy/ESOL qualification, compared with only 50 per cent of those on non-embedded courses.
- Ninety-three per cent of learners on fully embedded courses also achieved a numeracy/maths qualification, compared with 70 per cent for those on non-embedded courses.

Team work is key…
But the research was not suggesting that vocational staff should teach literacy and numeracy. Far from it. Learners were twice as likely to fail their literacy or numeracy assessments when a single teacher took responsibility for both vocational and literacy, language and numeracy teaching. So, it appeared that embedding was an effective approach but not, as a rule, if it was done as a one-teacher exercise. This might come as something of a relief to vocational teachers who, understandably,

prefer to teach within their areas of expertise. In the same way, literacy and numeracy teachers would feel out of their depth if they tried to teach a vocational skill they are unfamiliar with. One teacher in the study summed up this concern well:

"You wouldn't expect a maths teacher to teach plastering … so why on earth do you expect a plasterer to teach maths?"

What was clear from the research was that embedding needs a team approach if it is to be successful. Numeracy, literacy and vocational teachers need to work together to ensure that they cater for learners' different needs. It means teachers planning together so that literacy and numeracy skills and vocational work are closely related. Some of the most successful embedding practices noted by the study flowed simply from key or basic skills practitioners being part of a vocational programme team and working out of the same base rooms.

The embedded team approach also enabled an effective model of continuing professional development: two-way mentoring. Vocational practitioners could receive literacy, numeracy or ICT mentoring from key and basic skills colleagues and Skills for Life staff could be supported by their vocational colleagues to enhance their vocational knowledge and experience. But more important than the method of working was that staff had made, and were seen to have made, the commitment to work together.
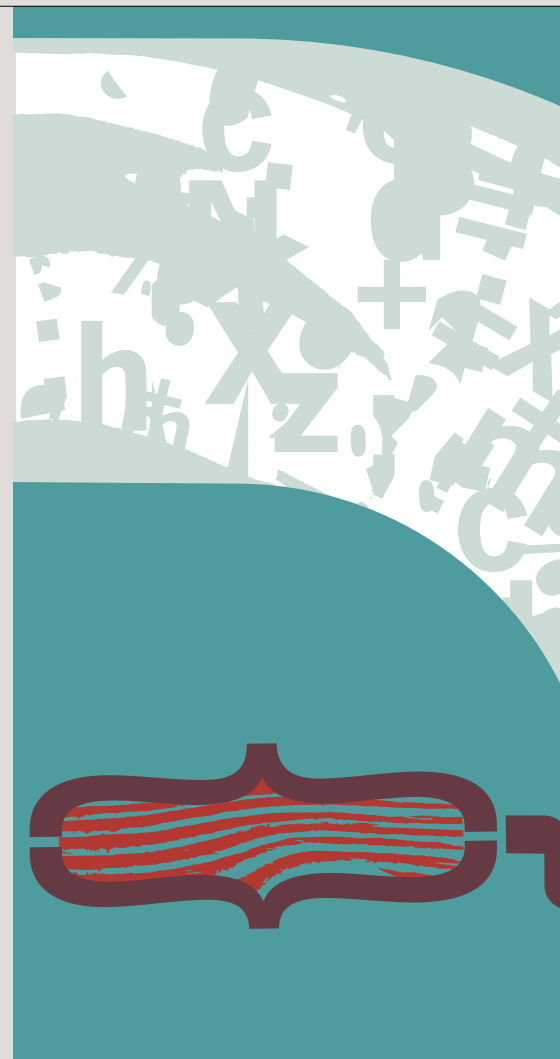
Evidence source
Casey, H. et al (2006) "You wouldn't expect a maths teacher to teach plastering…" Embedding literacy, language and numeracy in post-16 vocational programmes – the impact on learning and achievement. NRDC: www.nrdc.org.uk/uploads/documents/doc_3188.pdf

✂ TAKE ACTION

Could you:
- ■ work closely with your colleagues to help learners make an explicit link between LLN learning and the vocational subject they are studying?
- ■ support your colleagues to see the value, in terms of learner retention and achievement, of embedding key and basic skills in vocational programmes, perhaps by showing them the research evidence about the positive effects?

LITERACIES FOR LEARNING

HOW CAN WE AVOID SWAMPING OR SPOON-FEEDING OUR STUDENTS?

According to a recent study, it seems everyone is aware of the danger of swamping students with too much to read. Interviews with both staff and students revealed, for example, how neither anticipated that students would read the large amount of induction materials they are routinely given at the start of their courses – materials designed to help them understand processes and procedures and identify sources of help. Tutors felt that students may not be able to navigate such large amounts of text and students said that they didn't read the documents because they were unclear how they were useful or relevant and because they didn't like the tone, style and language used.

To help students, subject tutors said that they tried to simplify their teaching and assessment documents, although they considered this approach unsatisfactory 'spoon-feeding'. But simplified handouts often tended towards presenting students with a bulleted text, which had the effect of decontextualising the material being presented – sometimes to the extent that the content of the document lost substantive meaning. The researchers found that students as a result rarely engaged with extended texts, thereby limiting possible attainment. So is there a better approach?

During the final phase of their research, the researchers found a number of innovative approaches being developed. In the course of developing these interventions, tutors often adopted tactics that seem very familiar – but what was different about them was the way in which the interventions were understood, discussed with students and viewed by tutors.

One approach involved using mind-maps as a way of developing the note-taking skills of students. What was different and novel about it was the extent to which tutors offered this device to students in a variety of forms, leaving it up to the student to decide which was best. The tutors introduced the technique as a practice that students might adopt to assist their understanding and which would help their personal development. They took a view that was genuinely empowering and student-centred in that it gave the students real choice and control over how they used (or didn't use) the technique. Importantly, the approach began with the tutor valuing the students' existing practices or preferred ways of learning. Students were then encouraged to translate the technique into forms that made sense in the context of their own practices and learning.

Evidence source
Edwards, R. & Smith, J. (2005) Swamping and Spoonfeeding: literacies for learning in Further Education, Journal of Vocational Education and Training, 57 (1) pp. 47 – 60. Available at: www.tlrp.org/dspace/retrieve/1306/Swamping+and+Spoonfeeding.doc

HOW WOULD YOU DO THINGS DIFFERENTLY?

You might like to discuss with your colleagues different ways of responding to this scenario.

During a construction exercise, students were presented with a detailed set of instructions and drawings to work from. The instructions were given in fairly dense blocks of text and included many technical terms. Almost immediately, one student commented that the instructions were 'boring'. While the students completed the task, the tutor had to step in from time to time to explain aspects of it and help translate some technical terminology. The tutor reminded students they had been given a glossary of terms at the beginning of the course and asked them to return after the class to make sure they understood them. One student complained that the proper terms were rarely used at his work placement. At the end of the class, the tutor reminded all students that they would have to sit a written test in a few weeks' time and that it was important they read over the handouts. But at the end of the session, the tutor found more than half the handouts had been left behind.

LEARNING SUPPORT WORKERS

JUST HOW VALUABLE ARE THEY AND CAN WE IMPROVE THEIR EFFECTIVENESS FURTHER STILL?

Increasingly, the further education system has recognised how learning support workers (LSWs) can enhance the inclusion and success of a range of learners, not just those who have designated learning difficulties or disabilities.

There is much anecdotal evidence to suggest that LSWs' work is highly valued by both providers and learners but few studies have explored the nature of their effectiveness or how it might be improved. A study published by the Learning and Skills Network (LSN) aimed to fill the gap. It noted how learning support leads to many benefits for learners related to access, retention and achievement.

Views of the precise benefits of LSWs varied. While teachers saw support for the tutor and personal attention to learners' needs as the main benefits, LSWs emphasised the gains in learners' achievement and confidence. Learners stressed their improved confidence, as well as seeing the importance to themselves of the personal attention and support they received.

The nature of the support given by LSWs depended of course on the circumstances of the learner and on their specific needs. A wide range of strategies was adopted by the LSWs in the study, including note-taking for the learner, time management activities (for example, encouraging learners to plan their week), study and examination skills, organisational skills, referral to specialist agencies (for example, to assist with housing or financial problems), assistance with the use of library resources, setting and supervising practical tasks, helping with personal care and just being there, to listen and encourage.

Most of those interviewed for the study did not wish to see any changes to learning support provision. But there was a persistent theme across the participants here too, relating to the LSWs' professional status (or lack of such status). Appropriate training, permanent contracts, clearer roles and boundaries, greater recognition and better resources for their work were all mentioned in the interviews. The study also identified better communication and team-working as ways of improving their work. The researchers suggested that procedures such as tutors planning and preparing sessions in consultation with the LSW would help with this. They also argued that such procedures may help LSWs feel more highly valued too.

The use of learning support is just one of many factors that can have a positive influence on learning. This doesn't in any way deny its value, but it does suggest that it needs to be looked at holistically in relation to other factors that contribute to learner success. The researchers argued that LSWs should not be seen simply as a panacea for particular types of learners or used to make up for over-worked staff, but as an important additional area of support, which is decided on after proper assessment of an individual's learning requirements.

Evidence source

Robson, J., Bailey, B. & Mendick, H. (2006) An investigation into the roles of learning support workers in the learning and skills sector. Research report available at: www.lsneducation.org.uk/pubs/pages/062568.aspx

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TAKE ACTION

Could you create opportunities:
- for planning sessions together with LSWs?
- for offering more formal recognition of the role and contribution of LSWs in describing their role and its link with yours?

83%
OF LSWs WERE WOMEN

30
THE AVERAGE NUMBER OF LSWs EMPLOYED BY FE COLLEGES

21.5
AVERAGE HOURS WORKED PER WEEK BY LSWs

10
THE AVERAGE NUMBER OF LSWs EMPLOYED BY WBL & ACL PROVIDERS

ESOL AND ICT

HOW CAN DEVELOPING ICT SKILLS BENEFIT ESOL LEARNING?

It is often argued that ICT is a powerful means of raising levels of adult literacy and numeracy. It is also claimed that learners who use ICT for functional skills can double the value of their study time by acquiring two sets of skills at the same time. But is their any evidence to support these claims? A study carried out for the National Research and Development Centre (NRDC) for Adult Literacy aimed to find out. It also set out to identify effective ways of supporting the learning of other Skills for Life, at the same time as identifying effective ways of learning ICT skills.

The learners involved in this study improved in almost all cases in both literacy/ESOL skills and ICT skills, often to a statistically significant degree. But there were some differences between groups of learners. Age was a significant factor, with older learners making the least progress in ESOL skills. In terms of ICT skills and confidence, older men (though not women) made most progress. The study noted how learners who started out with lower ICT confidence were less likely to attend frequently and more likely to drop out. This highlighted the issue that, while ICT-based teaching can be very successful for many learners, some, for example those with low ICT confidence, will be much less able to take advantage of the approach.

Individualised and collaborative working
The study found that classes where learners spent more time working individually tended to show better gains in ICT skills (although not ICT confidence) than those classes where more time was spent working in small groups. But collaboration was frequently observed to be effective too. What made the difference was whether collaborative work was due to the need to share technology or whether

tutors had developed tasks requiring learners to work together. The latter was more successful than the former. When technology was simply shared, one person sometimes dominated its use, which undermined the usefulness of collaborative work for developing the learners' skills.

Encouraging independent learning
Teaching strategies that aimed to increase independent learning led to gains in both ICT skills and confidence. Encouraging learner independence gave teachers more time to get to know their learners, adapt their teaching to their learners' needs and manage classroom activities. The most effective teaching strategy for ESOL was 'Extending', where tutors built on or added to material they had introduced previously or added to a comment made by a learner. Teaching activities associated with improvements in ICT skills were discussing, instructing, listening and modelling (showing the learner how to do something using the actual technology or an interactive whiteboard).

Evidence source
Mellar, H. et al (2007) Effective teaching and learning using ICT (NRDC).
www.nrdc.org.uk/publications_details.asp?ID=87

HOW WAS ICT USED?

WebQuests – students were encouraged to experiment with computers and the Internet and to turn to other students for help before the teacher. There was less paper-based teaching and students were motivated by a need to improve language skills.

M-learning – using handheld computers with mobile phone and camera functionality to send text, images and sounds from various locations to a website, which learners edited themselves, thus working on both their ICT and language skills.

Digital video – using a digital video camera to create films. The interviews the learners carried out for the videoing were an important aspect of the work because they had to understand and respond to the answers of interviewees.

TAKE ACTION

Could you:
■ work together with colleagues to develop ICT tasks designed to develop language skills and require learners to work collaboratively together?
■ encourage independent learning, for example through expecting students to experiment with the technology and turn to each other for help before coming to you?

READING FOR PLEASURE

WHY IS IT STILL SO IMPORTANT?

The current emphasis on showing learner progression by meeting the requirements of the National Literacy tests at Level 1 and Level 2 means that many Skills for Life Literacy tutors can feel tempted to 'teach to the tests'. But simply helping learners to pass exams means that enjoyable aspects of literacy learning, such as reading for pleasure, can be ignored.

If reading for pleasure is to have a greater emphasis in the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum, we need evidence of how it enhances teaching and learning as well as how it contributes to the government's targets for learner achievement. One project provided an opportunity for tutors and learners to include reading for pleasure in

their literacy classes and reflect on the benefits.

The tutors liaised with library staff who visited the literacy classes and used resources from the Vital Link* online reading toolkit (such as Quick Reads and five-minute books) to encourage learners to find books of interest, identify their reading preferences and feel confident about expressing an opinion of the books they had read. The library staff and tutors used games and discussions to introduce learners to the books.

Tutors supported learners through the first chapter of the book, discussing the language, characters, plot and what might happen next. Speaking and listening activities enabled learners to share their views and consider different attitudes and values. An important

aspect of the project was that staff always gave learners the freedom to not finish a book if they didn't like it. (Initially, many learners thought that if they began to read a book and then lost interest, it was a reflection on their reading and intellectual abilities rather than their personal interests and skills of the author in engaging the reader). In the event, all the learners finished reading the books they had chosen.

At focus group meetings, learners expressed their delight at being able to finish reading a book. They became confident in giving their opinions and identifying how their literacy skills had improved. They could discuss how a story was structured and how an author maintained the interest of the reader. Many learners described how they had started to read more and how they had

persuaded friends and family members to read Quick Reads. Learners also said that they felt more confident about their skills and abilities generally – a view supported by their tutor's evaluations of individual learners. The functional literacy skills they believed had improved through the project included:

- reading more confidently
- taking part in discussions
- improved vocabulary
- better spelling
- ability to express themselves in writing, and
- writing summaries and book reviews.

TAKE ACTION

Could you:
■ work closely with the library services in your area to weave reading for pleasure into your literacy classes?
■ evaluate (via a questionnaire and/or focus group discussion, for example) what benefits your learners feel they gain from a focus on reading for pleasure?

Evidence source
Oakey, S. (2007) Practitioners leading research – Weaving reading for pleasure into the skills for life adult literacy curriculum: www.nrdc.org.uk/publications_details.asp?ID=94

INSIDE TRACK

NATIONAL YEAR OF READING 2008

*Find out more about the Vital Link Online toolkit at: www.literacytrust.org.uk/vitallink/toolkitpractitioners.html You'll find other reading resources, including a WikiREADia, at: www.yearofreading.org.uk

EFFECTIVE PRACTICE SKILLS FOR LIFE REPORTS

NRDC has published a series of reports that look at effective practice in writing, numeracy, ICT and ESOL, as well as reading. These are available at: www.nrdc.org.uk/content.asp?CategoryID=1101

PRACTITIONER-LED RESEARCH

A number of studies into other areas as well as reading, such as numeracy and offender learning, have been carried out by practitioners. All the case studies are available from the NRDC website at: www.nrdc.org.uk/content.asp?CategoryID=512