

inside EVIDENCE



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.

What does enhancing younger learners' participation in education and training mean for quality improvement?

Research reviewed in this issue

p2 Including 14-16 year olds in FE colleges: How can we enhance the experience for everyone involved?

p3 Why should we be finding ways of harnessing students' home literacy practices?

p4 What strategies help engage young offenders in learning?

p5 Motivating older learners to persist and succeed

p6 How can providers become more effective at engaging employers?

p8 Getting more out of group discussion

»» Engaging 14-19 learners

What does the research evidence suggest makes a difference?

There are many myths about youngsters today - about their behaviour and attitudes towards learning. At the same time, the government wants to keep them in education and training until they're 18. The FE system clearly has a key role to play here. In this issue of *Inside Evidence*, we've tried to focus on evidence that will help us to understand in detail what helps makes a difference to learning from 14-19. We explore:

- » what lies behind getting young people on the right course, something the research highlights as key to success
- » how to make sure the activities we use really engage this group of learners
- » the particular needs of a hard-to-reach subset: young offenders
- » how to structure group discussions effectively to make sure we apply young people's inclination to chat to learning goals.

Encouraging greater employer engagement is a vital part of the UK Government's strategy for increasing the knowledge, skills and life chances of 14-19 year olds in full-time education (as well as up-skilling adult learners

to a minimum standard by 2020). With that in mind, we've included evidence about successful provider activity in this area too.

As usual, we suggest a number of activities that you might like to try in light of the research findings. You might want to log the activities you do on REfLECT (the Institute for Learning's CPD tool). You'll find the weblink for this, along with links for other web resources specifically related to some of the articles, at the end of this evidence section.

We hope you find the issue useful. Do let us know what you think and/or what you'd like us to cover in future editions.

Have your say

We'd love to know your views on 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

»» **Including 14–16 year olds in FE colleges**

How can we enhance the experience for everyone involved?

With the advent of Diplomas and the national rollout of 14–19 prospectuses, Further Education colleges are set to become increasingly involved in providing for the 14–16 age group. How will the increase in the number of 14–16 year olds affect college life and how can we meet their needs effectively? A recent study by the National Foundation of Educational Research (NFER) set out to explore the impact 14–16 year olds had on the staff and the older learners at five Further Education colleges. It also looked at how the young learners were successfully integrated into their institutions.

Contrary to what we might have expected, the researchers found that the presence of 14–16 year olds affected older learners and lecturers very little. On the whole, older learners were either unaware that there were younger students around, didn't mind or were positive about their presence. A small minority were less enthusiastic, mostly because they found the younger students to be too boisterous at times in corridors and canteens, and occasionally in lessons.

Staff felt that having 14–16 year-olds in college benefited both the students concerned and the community. The benefits included young people making more informed choices about the range of pre-16 courses, better preparation for post-16 courses and greater awareness of future career paths. Most of the staff felt that attending college had improved the self-worth and behaviour of many of the young people involved.

How was this achieved?

Crucial to the success of the 14–16 programmes in these colleges was the 'selection' process they used. But it was not a case of turning undesirable students away.

Rather, it was about ensuring that the right student was on the right course. This meant informing the young people accurately and carefully about the course content and the skills required.

The colleges worked closely with schools to achieve this. While the schools provided important information for the colleges about pupils' prior learning and aptitude, colleges provided plenty of useful information for school staff, parents and pupils about the courses on offer.

Before they were accepted on to a course at some of the colleges, the year 9 pupils were expected to complete an application form and write a letter explaining why they wanted to do their chosen course. They were also interviewed to see if they understood what would be involved and whether they were genuinely interested.

The result was that students enrolled in college courses they were interested in and for which they had an aptitude – a far cry from the 'dumping ground' for disaffected students that the colleges felt they had been in the past.

What else helped?

Lecturers with experience of teaching 14–16 students stressed that it was necessary to adapt their teaching style to the younger age group. It paid to:

- » set clear expectations and objectives
- » rotate activities
- » break down tasks into smaller chunks
- » set out clear ground rules for discipline
- » always be on time for lectures.

Pastoral support, such as contacting the students' homes if they did not arrive, was important too. But what really mattered was that lecturers were enthusiastic about the challenge of teaching the younger age group.



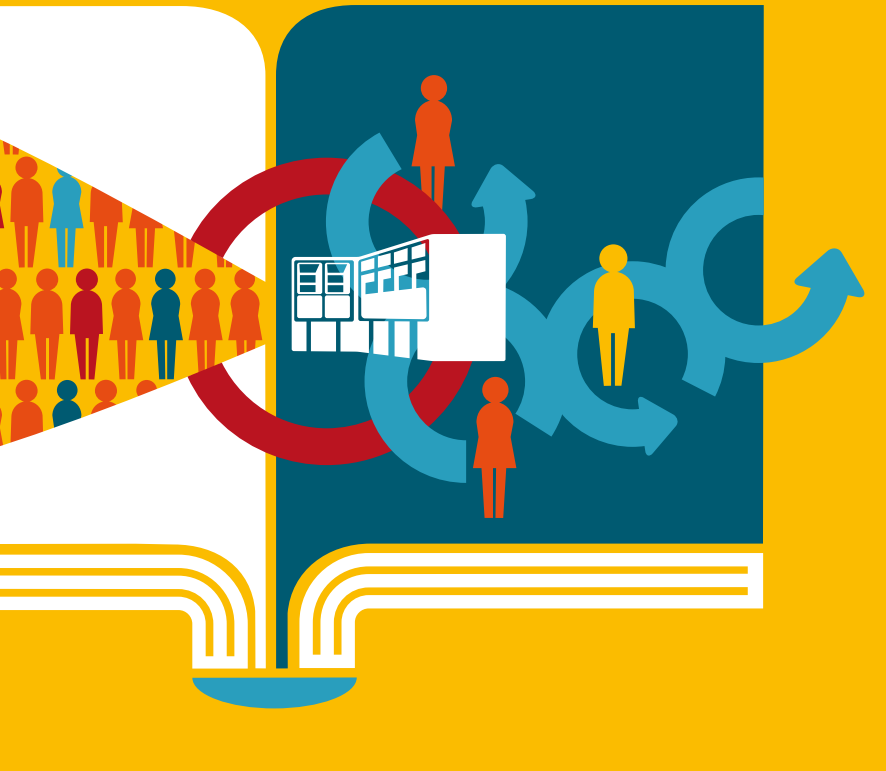
Take action

Could you:

- » get more involved in your college's efforts to inform schools, parents and pupils about the courses and their requirements by, for example, attending year 9 option evenings and running taster sessions?
- » work with a colleague on ways you could both adapt your current teaching style to the younger age group?

Evidence source

McCrone, T., Wade, P. and Golden, S. (2007). *The Impact of 14–16 Year Olds on Further Education Colleges*. Slough: NFER. www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/pdfs/downloadable/ICL.pdf



»» Literacies for learning in FE

How can 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 one research project 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 game instructions).

When they analysed the group, the researchers found a stark contrast between the literacy practices that 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. 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 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. This 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.

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

Take action

Could you:

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

»» Working with disaffected young people

What strategies help to engage them in learning?

Motivation is one of the biggest barriers to learning for disaffected young people. They often lead chaotic lifestyles, lack positive role models, have few goals or ambitions for the future, poor social and communication skills, poor literacy and numeracy skills, and see few, if any, benefits of learning. Creating an interest in learning among such students is therefore very challenging.

One college collaborated with an organisation that delivered a free learning and work advice service to marginalised people. Together they set out to devise teaching and learning strategies that would be effective with one of the most resistant learner groups - young offenders. They were aware that such learners would probably be wary of formal education and critical of structured, paper-based learning activities such as worksheets. The project facilitators decided to introduce the 17 students involved to appropriate citizenship and social skills through new and creative ways of learning that would also help them to develop literacy and numeracy skills.

How were the sessions organised?

The four-hour classroom-based sessions alternated between visual, auditory and kinaesthetic (involving physical activity) learning activities, each lasting no more than ten minutes. Each session also had at least two set breaks. This had the effect of breaking up the amount of time for which the young people had to concentrate.

The style of material and the topics covered were also designed to help the students concentrate. Activities included:

» using money as a hook to engage the students in numeracy work, such as written exercises on budgeting skills and effective

weekly food shopping

» reading books on crime and individual criminals' case studies to unpick the myths behind gang culture (not as glamorous as many young people imagine) while enhancing the students' literacy skills.

During each session, the project facilitators used a purpose-made spinning wheel device of foamex plastic (for health and safety) to determine which student went first or answered a question. The spinning wheel forced the students to get up off their chairs and become actively involved in the session.

What impact did the new approaches have on the students?

The programme helped many of the students become engaged in both learning and self-development. One student obtained his first valid reference for a place on a vehicle mechanics course - a step towards his stated goal of working in the motor trade. The students variously commented how it was "good to do something different", how they "enjoyed the chance to win or take a chance" and how the programme helped them "think about what I am doing with my life".

Perhaps surprisingly, although the students readily engaged with the material, they did not relate the experience to literacy and numeracy learning. When the learners were asked to provide feedback on what they had learned that day, they reported on factual details, such as how to open a bank account, but not on spelling personal information correctly.

Sadly, the programme was not successful for all students. Some - primarily those who continued to involve themselves with petty crime and social disorder offences - struggled to make regular attendance, which affected their progress.

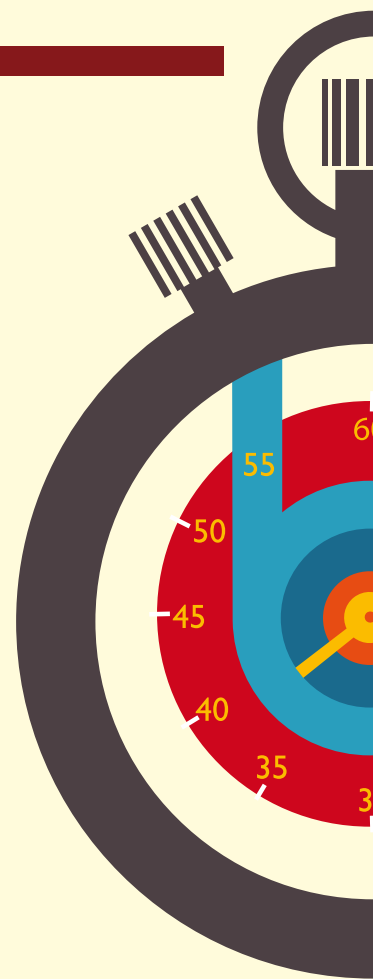
Evidence source

Addison, E. & Bucklee, A. (2007) *Spectrum: working to engage young offenders*. NRDC 2007. www.nrdc.org.uk/download.asp?f=3600&e=pdf

Take action

Could you:

- » collaborate with colleagues to devise a variety of ten-minute activities that are relevant to struggling learners' particular areas of interest while enhancing core skills that would promote the group's engagement?
- » plan to use a mix of brief visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learning activities to maintain your students' concentration levels?
- » adapt your current teaching style to the younger age group?



»» **Learner persistence**

How can we help motivate learners to persist and succeed?

We all know that motivation is a vital ingredient for success. But what can we do to support older learners' motivation towards achieving their goals? To find out, four tutors working with learners on adult literacy and numeracy courses in college and in the workplace carried out their own small-scale research enquiries. They found the key was to explore with learners their motivations and aspirations, then match teaching to the needs and motivations of the learners as individuals and as a group.

A focus on the learners' point of view

Sometimes this involved responding to specific interests and preferences, or worries the learners had about the course and life in general. For example, the tutor working with a group of armed-forces learners was aware of potential resistance from this group because it was a mandatory programme and some of the learners had negative prior experiences of learning. She began the first formal session by inviting the learners to write down any positive or negative thoughts they had, so that she could take them into account and help the learners recognise, as the course progressed, how they were overcoming their obstacles.

In some cases, the tutors adapted the learning and teaching styles to address wider lifestyle issues for groups of learners. For example, a group of shift workers reported that a key demotivating factor for them was that they were often tired after completing a long shift before coming to their class. The tutor therefore aimed to provide very relaxed sessions, supported by more games and discussion sessions than she would usually do, to keep learners alert and engaged.

Specific teaching strategies help

Motivation was also enhanced through formative assessment. Regular, targeted feedback helped learners to relate their learning to their immediate goal (for example, obtaining a qualification) and their long-term aims. The key features for success were to include a clear acknowledgement of progress made, identify a manageable area

for improvement and provide guidelines on how that improvement should be made.

Resources that were designed to appeal to learners' kinaesthetic and visual modes of learning were helpful too. In one successful lesson, the learners folded cut-out words to show the contraction, held together with a clothes peg on which a big apostrophe was drawn. Computers were found to be useful for two main reasons. Firstly, they were motivating in their own right. Learners wanted to get to grips with computers, either as part of a general desire to get up to date with their skills or achieve specific tasks such as writing emails. They also found that devices such as spell-checks and the 'delete' key were reassuring safety nets that protected them from feeling embarrassed by their mistakes.

Interestingly, taking part in the research was motivating too. Learners liked the idea that others might benefit from finding out about their experience. It enabled more consultation than usual and made the learners aware that they were not alone; that people were working to find ways to help them and learners like them. Crucially, the research showed how no single standard technique or method will necessarily work for all learners. What is important is that tutors are able to identify and use the teaching and learning methods that are most appropriate for their learners.

Take action

Could you:

- » find out more about the aspirations and motivations of learners on your courses?
- » act on this knowledge by providing sessions specifically tailored to your learners' needs?
- » investigate particular teaching techniques and practices, such as formative assessment, that you can use to help learners reach their goals?
- » let your learners know that they are part of your research?

Evidence source

Kenwright, H. et al (2007) *Learner-centred practice: meeting the goals and motivation of learners on Skills for Life programmes*. NRDC. www.nrdc.org.uk/download.asp?f=3603&e=pdf

» Engaging employers effectively

New research: how can providers become more effective?

In issue 3 of *Inside Evidence*, we reported on research that highlighted employers' expectations and offered some principles for effective practice. In this issue, we look at a report commissioned by QIA (now LSIS) that explored what the principles look like in practice. The report gathered together five case study examples of good practice in employer responsiveness, relating the providers' practices to the research findings.

The case study providers included two general FE colleges; a sixth form college that, unusually, also had NVQ provision for employed adults in the Social Care sector; an employer-owned, work-based learning provider; and a specialist in business development. Successful provider activity included:

- » raising the profile and extent of employer-facing work in their institutions
- » providing training matched to employers' business needs
- » providing reliable communication channels with employers
- » helping minimise costs for employers
- » delivering training in a flexible way.

How did the providers raise the profile of employer-facing work?

Several of the providers had developed their organisational structures in ways they believed would promote more effective employer engagement. At one of the general FE colleges, a central team had been responsible for meeting training needs including apprenticeships, but in 2002 responsibility was shifted to the college departments. Making this change helped to emphasise that employer-facing work was a core function of all areas of the college.

The employer focus was reinforced at the college by a restructuring of departments on the basis of nine business sectors rather than subject coverage. This enabled the college to provide flexible training based on employers' requirements. A central 'Employer Engagement Team' was created, with responsibility for promoting and co-ordinating this employer-facing activity, but not for its management or

delivery. Another college underwent similar developments, with dedicated staff for liaison and marketing, but drawing delivery staff from the college departments. Employer engagement featured prominently in both colleges' strategic plans.

How did the providers match training to the business needs of employers?

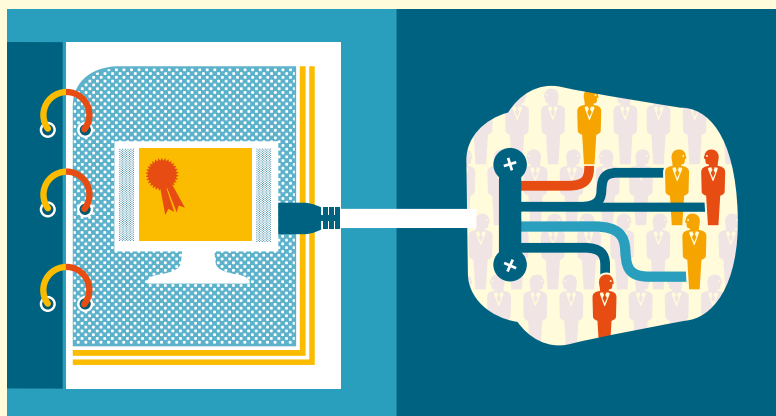
Rather than simply promoting their training programmes, three of the providers emphasised the benefits to the employer's business performance. One provider had carried out research into this and claimed an increase of 17 per cent in profitability per individual who had undertaken training with them, compared with individuals who had not. But training that was not aimed directly at increasing profitability was also highly relevant to some businesses. For example, the social care NVQ provision offered by one provider helped businesses in the sector to conform with a legal requirement for certain levels of qualification among staff. Without them, the businesses could have been prevented from operating.

How did the providers provide reliable communication channels?

The importance of regular and reliable contact with employers was recognised by all the case study providers. One allocated key account managers to employer clients and all departments had a named staff member responsible for employer-facing work. Another provider's social care NVQ provision team used their close links with local employers through various groups and networks, and with their Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), for much of its market

Evidence source

Walker, E., Calvert, N., Fletcher, M., Hughes, M., Shirley, T. & Subramanian, M. (2008) *Effective Practice in Employer Engagement*. Commissioned by QIA: <http://excellence.qia.org.uk/docref.aspx?o=162332>



information. Here, the CoVE manager visited all major clients at least once a month to discuss their needs.

Both of the general FE colleges used a central electronic database to log details of all contacts with employers. The data, which was available to all departments, could be sorted in a variety of ways to facilitate analysis and marketing. For example, in one of the colleges it was used to identify employers who might be interested in training programmes for Digital TV installers. Fifty digital installers were enrolled in an NVQ2 within three months as a result of a targeted mailshot and follow-up calls.

How did the providers help minimise costs to employers?

All the case study providers supplied some training to employers at the full economic cost. But most of their employer facing work involved some form of public subsidy and the providers were adept in finding ways to attract subsidy to minimise the cost to employers. One provider clearly saw its role as to 'educate the market' about the costs of training and the availability of support from public funds. Creating a central 'Employer Engagement Team' was an important step in making sure employers could benefit from this aspect of the college's expertise.

But this provider was also concerned that its expertise in accessing subsidies could hide the true cost of training from employers, who might then object to increases in the level of fees if funding streams dried up. The provider's pricing policy therefore emphasised transparency so that employers understood how the fee was determined and the difference between the actual cost of the provision and the fee that was charged.

How did the providers achieve flexible delivery of the training?

All offered considerable flexibility in where, when and how their training was delivered, for at least part of their provision. Training was delivered on the employer's premises or at an alternative agreed venue. It occurred on any day of the week and at any time of day, including on night shifts. The mode of delivery offered ranged from traditional 'classroom' teaching to individualised distance learning - for example, the whole of one provider's NVQ social care provision was delivered using distance learning packs supported by regular visits from a

tutor/assessor. A 'learning at work' week was developed by another provider for one employer, consisting of bite-size chunks of learning; for example, on the use of specific computer packages.

Was there any room for improvement?

Although the case study providers were successful, the researchers thought there was still room for improvement. They highlighted several aspects of employer engagement they felt the providers needed to work on. These included:

- » drawing their non-apprenticeship employer facing work into a rigorous quality assurance system. Only one provider made employer facing work (almost all NVQ delivery) an integral part of its quality assurance procedures. Other providers included their apprenticeship provision in their overall self-assessment and quality assurance systems, but did not apply similar procedures, such as observation of learning sessions, to the rest of their employer-facing work
- » developing ways to adequately meet the training requirements of small and medium-sized employers (SMEs). None of the providers claimed to be successful with SMEs. Most encouraged informal networking through, for example, regular business lunches. The college providers delivered some training through self-learning programmes, which they thought were particularly appropriate for SMEs.

Educating the market about the costs of training is a key part of the role

Take action

Could you:

- » routinely log all contacts with clients or potential clients in a way that is helpful to the whole organisation and use this information proactively in marketing?
- » have systems that can determine the needs of individual local employers?
- » cultivate connections with the LSC and SSCs etc to be fully informed about current and upcoming funding streams?
- » employ some staff on contracts that allow flexibility in working hours, holiday times etc and staff who can assume more than one role?
- » bring all your employer-facing work under the umbrella of the main quality assurance arrangements of the organisation?
- » provide the facilities and support for SMEs to network with each other and develop self-learning programmes appropriate for the needs of SMEs?

»» Learning through dialogue

How can we enable purposeful talk in the classroom?

If we are not careful, students' discussions can progress actively but aimlessly, with students actually learning very little. So how can we stop this happening? One study explored in great detail one effective tutor's guidance for student discussion. The tutor had decided to use poetry as a basis for developing her foreign language learners' understanding of another culture. Although the discussion involved learners of French, the strategies the tutor used to structure the discussion are applicable to any context.

To begin with, the tutor gave the students copies of a poem written in French, a bilingual glossary of useful terms and a sheet with three questions for discussion. She then guided the 30-minute discussion by directing the students' attention to the most important features of the poem to deepen their response to it. She did this through questioning and asking for information, and providing feedback that was phrased positively. But she refrained from commenting directly on the poem herself. In particular, the tutor:

- » made sure that all students were included
- » drew out, and helped students to draw out, their ideas where necessary
- » helped the students link their personal experiences and prior knowledge to the discussion
- » made sure that students' contributions were connected and built upon each other through challenging or extending previous contributions.

TUTOR: Let's look at the third question ... how did this poem make you feel?

STUDENT 1: It makes me feel uneasy.

TUTOR: Why is that?

STUDENT 1: It's a question, so you are left to make the answer yourself ...

STUDENT 2: ... It's intriguing. You want to read it once more and understand where she came from.

TUTOR: OK, so you think it makes you want to understand where she's coming from? And you [looking at another student], how do you feel?

STUDENT 3: It ... makes me feel like I don't know that much about the Ivory Coast ... I wish she [the poet] was talking more about her memories, so we could know more ...

TUTOR: So you're saying it makes you want to learn more about the Ivory Coast? It makes you want to investigate further?

TUTOR: [Gesturing toward students on the other side of the room]. What do you think?

When students discussed the poem in small groups without the tutor's guidance, they merely discussed surface level features of it. They tended to focus on translating the poem and associated understanding the poem with being able to translate all the words. But by structuring the discussion, the tutor was able to steer the students away from talking about surface level features and encourage them to reflect on the poem's meaning. Interpreting the poem together also helped them make connections between the culture of another country and their own knowledge, perspectives and experiences.

Evidence source

Kenwright, H. et al (2007) *Learner-centred practice: meeting the goals and motivation of learners on Skills for Life programmes*. NRDC. www.nrdc.org.uk/download.asp?f=3603&e=pdf

»» INSIDE TRACK

Learner persistence

Find out more about supporting learner persistence, progression and achievement (PPA) at www.stickwithit.org.uk. The website gives details of LSIS's PPA project and also provides an extensive range of resources.

Literacies for learning

More information about the TLRP *literacies for learning* project can be found on the project website: www.lancs.ac.uk/lfife/index.htm. The website also contains CPD workshop materials and suggestions for carrying out research with your own students.

Keeping a record of your CPD activity

If you would like to use REfLECT to record your CPD activities, you'll find information about how to do this at www.ifl.ac.uk/services/docs/682/IFL_Reflect_Overview.ppt. It will help you to create ePortfolios for the purposes of appraisal and accreditation etc.