inside EVIDENCE

Putting evidence into practice

Autumn 2009

LSIS LEARNING AND SKILLS IMPROVEMENT SERVICE

Inside Evidence has a new look and is now a stand-alone publication. But its focus is the same – we use research findings to highlight evidence about effective practice across the FE system. The practice can originate in work-based, college-based or adult and community learning. We hope you can put some of the findings in this issue into practice in your work with learners.

Please hand on copies to your colleagues and if you would like more or have any feedback and suggestions for further issues, please contact research@lsis.org.uk.

LSIS: working with the Institute for Learning (IfL)

Toni Fazaeli, Chief Executive of IfL

Both LSIS and IfL are committed to supporting practitioner research consistently and systematically. IfL has now teamed up with LSIS on a number of activities to support it, including *Inside Evidence* and the LSIS-IfL Research Development Fellowships (see page 12). Toni Fazaeli, IfL's chief executive confirms that the Institute is "determined to give teachers and trainers across the learning and skills sector ready access to research evidence that helps the practice of teaching, training, assessing and learning, as a benefit of being members of IfL".

Toni says, "all professionals, whether doctors, surgeons, lawyers, architects or teachers, enjoy professional status because they continually refine and develop their practice, grounded in research evidence of what works best. IfL's three strategic priorities for serving our members are to:

• provide benefits that support teaching and training practice
• raise the status of the teachers and trainers, and
• give teachers and trainers a voice to influence policy.

Please let LSIS know at research@lsis.org.uk if you would like to suggest to LSIS and IfL what their priorities should be for future research to support you and your learners. Your voice can influence research that is commissioned in the future.

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: research@lsis.org.uk

In this issue

What's the evidence?

You will find details of the evidence sources on each page. Most of the articles feature research which is carefully appraised to ensure that the findings are trustworthy, relevant and useable across different contexts. Other articles feature news, views and roundups of current research.

inside EVIDENCE

Building evidence into practice: teaching adult numeracy

Numeracy tutors often use a 'telling' style of approach that follows a common format. They:
- show learners procedures
- break down concepts into smaller parts
- demonstrate examples, and
- expect learners to work individually through worksheets.

A recent project called Maths4Life set out to explore how a group of tutors changed from the 'telling approach' to one which proved more effective and resulted in transferable learning. Transferable learning is learning that lasts and which can be used in non-routine, non-classroom situations. The aim was to help learners to use more active approaches – especially pertinent in adult numeracy lessons, where learners often view maths learning as something that's 'done to them'. The new approach, which was underpinned by eight research-based principles (see box), helped learners to:
- discuss and explain ideas
- challenge and teach one another
- create and solve each others' questions, and
- work collaboratively to share methods and results.

The 24 teachers involved in the research took part in a nine-month professional development programme, with regular meetings to:
- discuss the outcomes of classroom trials of various mathematical activities
- reflect on the underlying principles, and
- create new activities.

During the programme, the tutors modified their teaching approach and the resources they used in the light of emerging issues and findings. They also created a substantial collection of discussion-based activities that included:
- cards showing alternative representations of the same mathematical idea designed for the learners to match up, working collaboratively with others
- true/false statements for learners to discuss in groups, such as 'Max gets a 10% pay rise, Mary gets a 5% pay rise, so Max gets the bigger pay rise?' and
- comparing different problem-solving methods and/or diagnosing the causes of errors in solutions.

Three quarters of the tutors changed their general practice and became more learner-centred. Over a quarter introduced changes of a more profound nature. The tasks they created successfully helped them to facilitate collaborative small group work. They enhanced the quality of their questioning too, with activities leading naturally to tutors asking, for example, 'Is that true? Why?', 'Can you find a counterexample?', 'What is the same and what is different?', 'How do you know that this means the same as this?', and 'How could we write this in a different way?'

The research based principles underpinning the new approach

Teaching is more effective when it:	This means:
builds on the knowledge learners already have	developing formative assessment techniques to accommodate individual learning needs
exposes and discusses common misconceptions	learning activities should expose current thinking by confronting learners with inconsistencies and allow opportunities to resolve them through discussion
uses higher-order questions	asking question that promote explanation rather than recall
uses co-operative small group work	providing activities that encourage critical, constructive discussion and where group accountability is important
encourages reasoning rather than 'answer getting'	aiming for depth rather than superficial 'coverage'
uses rich collaborative tasks	creating tasks that encourage decision making, promote discussion, encourage creativity and 'what if' / 'what if not' questions
creates connections between topics	helping learners to generalise and transfer learning to other topics and contexts
uses technology	using computers and IWBs in ways that allow concepts to be presented in visual, dynamic and exciting ways to motivate learners

Take action

Could you:
- create and refine tasks with the help of colleagues that involve learners in group discussion of concepts and explanations, or
- experiment with the strategies described here with help from colleagues to help you to review and develop your own practice?

The researchers created 29 discussion-based mathematical activities in collaboration with 24 tutors from 12 organisations in England as part of a 9-month CPD programme. They used an iterative cycle of design, trial, reflect and modify.

Transfer from GSCE to AS level mathematics How can it go wrong? What can we do about it?

The difficulties young people in the UK experience when transferring from pre- to post-16 mathematics are well known. A study which explored this issue highlighted an apparently simple approach that could help to reverse the trend – helping all learners to see themselves as people who can do mathematics.

The researcher argued that practices such as having minimum GCSE grade requirements for studying the subject at AS level, and well meant advice such as 'don't do it if you don't really enjoy mathematics and if you're not genuinely good at it' could be counterproductive. Certain teaching strategies plus stereotypical images of mathematics and mathematicians also reinforce the idea of natural ability – that mathematics is not for everyone. The negative impact of this view of mathematics learning is illustrated in the following story.

Maryann's story – a vignette
Within a few months of starting her AS level mathematics course, Maryann went from a lifelong love of mathematics to eagerly waiting to drop it at the end of the year. What went wrong?

During a succession of interviews, it became clear that Maryann's loss of engagement with the subject was not due to the content. In her final year of GCSE mathematics the group had fallen behind schedule and her teacher had split the class up into two: mentors and mentees. The mentors sat with the mentees and made sure they understood the work and did their homework. The mentors went to extra classes on Saturday mornings to learn the topic they would have to teach the following week. Maryann felt flattered about being chosen as a mentor and loved having to teach others. She felt she was good at it, 'everyone used to say to our teacher how I'm gonna take her job!'

But after just three weeks of the AS course, Maryann no longer felt she was good at mathematics, 'I used to be the best, I'm not being funny … I was the closest to an A* out of everyone'. Now she felt stupid. Why?

> 'I used to be the best, I'm not being funny … I was the closest to an A* out of everyone'.

Maryann commented on a different ethos in the AS level classroom. Her AS level teacher placed great emphasis on working quickly, actively encouraged competition between learners, and constantly talked about some members of the group being more 'naturally able' than others and some being 'badly prepared' by their schools. This classroom culture, very different to the collaborative GCSE one, had a negative impact on her beliefs about her own ability and confidence in mathematics. She worried about holding the others back, yet not being left behind herself. But in her GCSE class, which was similarly divided, she did not feel held back by helping others to understand. In fact, helping others was precisely what she had enjoyed about those lessons.

In this research, Maryann's experience, and those of others like her, pointed to the need to open up mathematics to more learners by reducing the emphasis on assessment. It highlighted how mathematics is many things to many people rather than an absolute body of knowledge that cannot be argued with. Such strategies, according to the researcher, may not necessarily lead to everyone wanting to carry on with mathematics, but have the potential to give learners a chance to explore what they can do with mathematics rather than find out what they can't.

Evidence source
Mendick, H. (2008) Subtracting difference: troubling transitions from GCSE to AS level mathematics. *British Educational Research Journal*, 34 (6), pp.711-732.

Altogether, the researcher interviewed 43 students from three sites: an ethnically diverse, largely working-class 11-18 comprehensive school; a large FE college situated in a deprived area and a highly academic sixth form college with an ethnically diverse but largely middle-class intake. Two students' experiences were reported in this paper.

Did you know?

72,475 The number of learners who completed A level mathematics in 2009

85% The proportion of learners who give up studying formal mathematics beyond GCSE

66% The proportion of learners in France who continue studying mathematics post-16

9% The number of A–level entries in mathematics in the UK

< 50% of those getting A and A* grades in mathematics GCSE go on to do an A level in the subject

People who do A level mathematics earn around **10% more** over a lifetime than those who don't

Evidence source:
Confederation of British Industry, News Release, August 2009

Research in view

A regular feature by Andrew Morris

Good research evidence seems to be gaining an ever higher public profile. Even TV news programmes refer to evidence from the National Institute of Clinical Excellence or the International Committee on Climate Change. In education, there is still a way to go. Adversarial contests between party spokespersons, union leaders and self-appointed gurus seem to take precedence over systematically assembled research evidence.

There are signs that the culture is gradually shifting. Sound evidence is becoming more widely available, thanks to significant past investments and the legacy of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme and the research centres funded by the DfES and DIUS.

There has also been a gradual, but sustained, improvement in the linkage between producing research evidence and using it in policy and practice. The National Educational Research Forum has been succeeded by a Strategic Forum for Research in Education (www.sfre.ac.uk/)and more recently a Coalition for Evidence-Based Education organised by the Institute of Effective Education at York University – all initiatives that bring together the diverse parties to work on developing more effective links.

At the same time new tools have been developing apace to bring research evidence closer to potential audiences. The *Educational Evidence Portal* (www.eep.ac.uk), the LSIS research website (www.excellencegateway.org.uk/research), *Inside Evidence* and the IfL's *REfLECT* are examples of this. In a sense these developments simply reflect a wider global trend – in health care, environmental action and science policy for example – towards greater public engagement by professionals, service users, and lobby groups.

So the commitment to a participative, sector-led approach from LSIS is timely and welcome. For research it implies a broader agenda, to include not only government-related initiatives and matters of academic interest, but also issues that confront people working at the front line. A secure base of accessible, relevant evidence to inform practice and decision-making would mark a huge step forward in educational improvement. However, to expect sound and relevant evidence to be to hand, as and when it is called for, is a huge "ask". There is a long way to go to make sure it is produced and organised for practical use on an adequate scale.

An important aspect of the change needed will be getting the voice of practice heard in the agenda and budget-setting for research. Another will be blending practitioners' knowledge of context with rigorous research so that practice can be developed effectively. An interesting description of one attempt to do this is given in the study on integrating research-based principles into the work of numeracy teachers (see page 2).

There are many ways in which practitioners engage in or with research – through higher degree study, collaborative research projects or smaller-scale action-research (see example from one practitioner on page 5). The sector can justifiably pride itself on the tradition of practitioner-based research schemes developed in recent years, from the LSDA regionally based research scheme through the NRDC practitioner research initiative to the Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL) practitioner research scheme. LSIS is continuing this tradition by funding a fifth year of the leadership scheme and also introducing the new Research Development Fellowships (see back page).

Applying its own medicine, LSIS decided wisely to research action-research before launching into it. The study, undertaken very recently by Ecotec, showed that the action research approach is widely acknowledged as relevant and useful and, although its definition is somewhat open and imprecise, there seems to be a reasonable consensus about its nature and benefits. It is defined in the report as:

> **'research undertaken by a practitioner or group of practitioners, involving some form of enquiry into, or reflecting on, their actual practice, and involving some form of personal professional development as a key outcome which often also links to institutional development or the wider accumulation of public knowledge and understanding'.**

It is seen as providing both knowledge that may be useful to individuals, communities and institutions, and high quality professional development experiences for the people involved. The study points to the importance of various kinds of support: local institutional managers backing the work, participants being briefed and trained at the outset and receiving ongoing support from experienced researchers. Collaboration is seen to be beneficial. The aspects that need strengthening are associated with impact – funding and support is needed to improve reporting and utilisation of the research outcomes and a searchable database is needed to enable studies to be located and downloaded. Fortunately the new LSIS research area on the Excellence Gateway has the potential to support this.

The willingness of LSIS to back action-research, study its strengths and weaknesses and plan to make its outputs accessible to the sector is a huge step forward. It seems to me that the sector is marking out an approach to research suited to its distinctive needs, building on, but not mimicking, the traditions of higher education and government-led research.

Andrew Morris in an independent consultant writing here in his own capacity.

Practitioner-led action research: assessment for learning in practice

Sam Alvarez, an accounting and business studies tutor at Sussex Downs College in Eastbourne recognised that while her AS accounting learners were skilled in learning and applying theories, they were not so strong in their analytic and evaluation skills. She set out to improve her learners' grades by testing out assessment for learning techniques, investigating those that were effective in supporting and developing learning. She focused on four areas of practice that promote assessment for learning, including studying model answers and mark schemes; formulating assessment criteria collaboratively with learners; self- and peer-assessment and structured dialogue. By the end of the twelve-week period the impact was clear, both in terms of her learners' enthusiastic comments about using AfL techniques, and in improved grades in their assessed work, with one learner leaping from an E grade to grade A.

Having support was important

When Sam first started her research, she found the support that she received from both her colleagues and external specialists extremely valuable. She originally felt quite overwhelmed due to the amount of information that she was collecting, but with help was able to see how the data could be used effectively. She also found it a great help that Sussex Downs College was in the process of implementing a new CPD strategy at the time that used an action-research based approach. A result of this is that the college has an online professional development site which focuses entirely on practitioner research within the college, that all tutors can access (this includes further details of Sam's study, including video clips and the tools that she used). Sam's research has clearly given her and her colleagues the motivation and enthusiasm to continue connecting evidence with practice. This is evident in their future plans to roll out her findings across other subjects and sites by using a collaborative approach with five other teachers to discover the value of the research on a larger scale.

The benefits of doing research

Sam believes her research will benefit both practitioners and learners. "The learners will be better equipped to make the most of their learning and become more independent learners in the future; practitioners will be encouraged to work more with individual

learners". She hopes this will encourage the learners to take more responsibility for their learning, which will in turn allow tutors to focus more on individual learners and their capabilities. Sam felt that giving learners the opportunity to voice their opinions about the way that they learn and giving them more responsibility was a large part of the study's success. She found that this approach also increased her learners' motivation, with some saying that hers was the *'only subject where I haven't missed a lesson'*. "The learners were pleased to be treated as individuals and involved in the way they were being taught – the classes who were not involved only seemed annoyed not to be!"

Sam found that conducting her own research was far more beneficial than she had originally thought it would be, "by doing the research yourself, the findings directly apply to your practice and setting". The improvements in her learners' work was evident by the fact that their grades were the best the college has ever had, and she hopes that her research will show how assessment can form a much more natural part of teachers' planning, and help to develop learners skills for life after education.

Sam with Ria Henderson and Yi Ka Tang from Sussex Downs College.

Sam's inquiry work was supported by the laboratory sites project run by CUREE on behalf of LSIS. Laboratory sites activity helps practitioners develop approaches reported in *Inside Evidence* and try out evidence-based resources. Sam found reports of research findings from Inside Evidence helped inspire her work. Details about the laboratory sites and a fuller summary of Sam's work will be published shortly on LSIS's research website.

Professor Frank Coffield

Making teaching and learning our first priority

Frank Coffield has long been a champion of teaching and learning, producing in his time, many seminal and influential texts. Last year's 'Just suppose teaching and learning became the first priority', for example, written primarily for managers with responsibility for planning CPD courses and initial training caused quite a stir in the post-16 sector. In it, Coffield called for teaching and learning to be restored as the common focus for all of us who work in post-16 education and training and highlighted the need to question our current practices and assumptions. Just in case you missed it, here's a reminder of some of the things he wrote in this landmark pamphlet…

Coffield started by suggesting that for many of us, learning means nothing more than the transmission and assimilation of knowledge and skills, such as when a learner is taught and learns that 'hablaba' in Spanish means 'I was speaking'. He argues that this implicit understanding is inadequate, preferring to see learning as 'significant changes in capability, understanding, knowledge, practices, attitudes or values by individuals, groups, organisation or society'. He also prefers not to view learning in isolation from teaching. He argues that they're not separate activities, but intertwined elements of a double sided, interactive process, which transforms both tutor and learner.

In fact interaction is key. Later in the pamphlet, Coffield argues that tutors need to engage in dialogue with their learners and goes on to suggest that dialogue with learners is likely to lead on to discussion among tutors about different approaches to teaching. He provides some helpful starting points, such as the suggestion to draw up ten questions to ask learners about their learning (for example 'What do/don't you enjoy learning?' and 'What helps/prevents you learn?') or jotting down a definition of the learning we like and/or use in our work.

An area of teaching and learning that is likely to produce a lively discussion amongst learners and colleagues alike, is learning styles. But Coffield warns that we need to be careful to move away from a narrow preoccupation with learning styles to conceptions of learning, learning strategies and the purposes of learning. Coffield is well known for co-authoring a damning report of learning styles in 2004 (which we featured in the first issue of *Inside Evidence*).

Yet five years on, he says many of us 'have fallen prey to a non-scientific movement (I almost wrote 'disease') which goes by the acronym of VAKT' (Visual, Auditory, Kinaesthetic or Tactile learners). He says again, 'put simply, it doesn't work … there is **no** scientific justification for teaching and learning strategies based on VAKT and tutors should **stop** using learning style instruments based on them. There is **no** theory of VAKT from which to draw **any** implications for practice. [In the words of Monty Python] It should be a dead parrot. It should have ceased to function'. (Emphases as in original).

Take action

In order to stimulate discussion about effective teaching and learning and make it a first priority, could you:

- get together with colleagues and learners to define the teaching and learning approaches you like and use in your institution
- draw up with your colleagues questions to ask learners about their learning and/or think about the implications of your questions for your teaching
- ask yourself how you learn and then consider how you would arrange things if you were a learner where you work, or
- investigate and discuss Coffield's findings about learning styles in more detail, by reading his 2004 and/or 2008 publications available on the LSN website – see evidence source.

Evidence source
Coffield, F. (2008) *Just suppose teaching and learning became the first priority*. Learning and Skills Network www.LSNeducation.org.uk

Coffield's suggestions and arguments were based not only on his own 42 years experience in education as a teacher and researcher, but were rooted in 'the most appropriate, the most up-to-date and the best conducted research in this country and abroad'.

Listening to learners: effective tutors and ways of working

Another study by Frank Coffield (see facing page) found that the learners had important messages to convey to tutors and the teaching community.

When Coffield asked learners from two colleges to describe a good tutor and a good lesson, he found they had a clear image of the professional qualities they wanted to see. For them a 'good tutor':

- was punctual, prepared and organised
- was reliable and trustworthy
- was helpful and encouraging
- checked that all learners understood before moving on
- provided clear explanations and used a variety of methods
- marked work appropriately and on time, and
- cared for all learners and respected their views.

A good tutor was also someone who 'helps you and others who have problems at home as well as at college' and 'someone who notices when something is wrong with their learners'.

When it came to describing a good lesson some new themes emerged, including that:

- the lesson was structured, varied, lively and engaging
- everyone was treated equally and contributed, and
- there was mutual respect and a friendly, workman-like atmosphere where 'students don't leave feeling confused or secretly in need of help, too afraid to ask'.

Consistently, learners wanted to be more active and involved. They wanted 'practical work' rather than just copying and writing down notes: 'It's hard to concentrate on something for an hour without any kind of interaction other than copying down notes [which] can be incredibly boring'. Their suggestions included role play, quizzes, films, video clips, discussion (especially on controversial subjects) opportunities to move around the classroom and group work.

Coffield also invited learners to complete a learning log for three weeks. Their diary entries made reference to 'well-delivered lessons' with detailed explanations of the marking criteria. They also appreciated specific help from 1:1 sessions. They noted, too, the characteristics of good tutors detailed earlier. One learner for example, was pleased when one of her tutors changed her teaching methods in the late afternoon to accommodate tired learners who had been in class all morning.

Take action

Could you:

- consult your learners about what makes a good learner, a good tutor and a good lesson to open up a discussion about teaching and learning with them, or
- do more to engage learners in active learning, using group work, discussions, learning games and role play?

Evidence source
Coffield, F. (2009) *All you ever wanted to know about learning and teaching but were too cool to ask*. Learning and Skills Network www.LSNeducation.org.uk

Twenty-four 16-18 year old students from two FE colleges (one in London; the other in the north) on academic, vocational and foundation courses gave email descriptions of a good student, tutor and lesson as well as completing learning logs.

How did Coffield's learners provide data for this study?

Coffield asked the learners to keep a learning log for three weeks to explore and make sense of their experiences of teaching and learning. He suggested that they decide on a specific time for making the entries, such as every evening as soon as they had come home from college. The learning log could include:

- the successes they felt they were having, the difficulties they had run into and where they needed help
- questions they needed to ask their tutor
- risks they were prepared to take with their learning

- the strengths and weaknesses of any work placement they may have done
- notes and comments on the texts they were reading or ideas about how they would tackle their next assignment
- what they found challenging and how they were going to respond to the challenge, and
- their ideas about how learning and teaching could be improved.

Coffield advised the learners to make the learning log useful to them rather than treating it as just another exercise, but that there was no need to disclose their innermost secrets. They were to think of their learning log as a set of comments they would be happy to share with a close friend they trusted.

Work-related learning

What do learners see as the benefits?

As we showed on the previous page, gathering learners' views can provide insights into how we might engage them in learning more effectively. One study explored learners' perspectives on the benefits of their work-related learning (WRL) programmes. The study explored the key levers as well as the barriers to securing the benefits. Fifty Year 10 and 11 learners from three comprehensive schools and one FE college were consulted. What did they say?

The benefits
The learners said that they felt bored with formal schooling by KS4, but accessing a different curriculum for part of the week at a college helped them re-engage with learning. Learners found BTEC qualifications, incorporating both the practical and academic study of subjects, were more 'user-friendly' and gave them a 'head start'. They had also gained in confidence.

The levers
The study found six areas that helped re-engage learners and secured the benefits of WRL:

- **regime** – the college regime was seen as being fairer and friendlier than school
- **teaching style** – congeniality, humour and mutual respect were all factors that made for effective teaching in the learners' eyes
- **interest** – particularly the opportunity to make a fresh start and to learn practical skills that were, they felt, relevant to real world contexts
- **qualifications** – the course had a direct link to job choices and they thought the WRL qualifications would give them more choice post-16
- **time** – learners appreciated the generous allocation of time on the WRL course, yet sessions appeared to go quickly. Most learners also felt they managed their in-school time better than before, and
- **facilities** – all learners enjoyed the workshops, kitchen and salons. Together with professional equipment and small teaching groups these made the WRL experience very attractive.

The barriers
The researcher found several potential barriers to securing the potential benefits of WRL. Travel was an issue, particularly for those in rural areas. Some only managed to attend because their parents took them or paid their bus fares.

Timetabling was also an issue because the learners often had less time to complete GCSE coursework and sometimes missed lessons, particularly in core subjects. Some learners expressed a fear of falling behind their peers because of the amount of time they spent at college.

How might you gather your own learner voice data?

Transcripts of interviews with learners can be difficult to analyse. Disaffected and marginalised learners, who provide an important perspective, can also be the most difficult to consult. This study succeeded in overcoming both problems by making use of an innovative form of group interview that involved using an 'Ishikawa' or fishbone tool.

All that's needed is flip chart paper marked out with a fishbone like the one pictured and some marker pens for the learners. The problem, question or issue to be investigated is recorded in the triangular shaped head of the fish. During the course of the group interviews, major factors that learners consider as problems are placed at the end of each line (bone) by either the researcher or learners and other factors that contributed to the major factors are plotted along the bone.
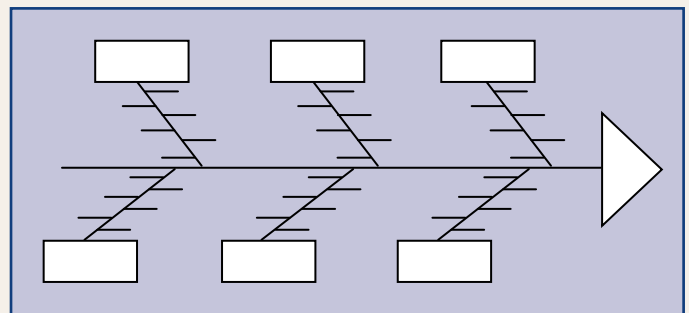
In this study, the researcher used three 'fish bones' to collect data around three questions:
- why are some placements better than others?
- why does having time out of school help with school work?
- what are you learning on the programme?

The researcher then analysed the composite fish bones in terms of the benefits of WRL, the levers that can secure these benefits, and the barriers that needed to be overcome.

If you try this fishbone technique yourself, we'd love to hear how you got on.

Take action

Could you:
- ask someone to observe a session to analyse the classroom climate you create (in terms of congeniality, humour and mutual respect)
- investigate the funding that is available in your area for travel to the WRL programme, or
- gather your own learner voice data?

National Improvement and the 14-19 Agenda:

the importance of structured collaboration between providers

In order to establish what existing research had to say about improvement in the sector, in 2007 QIA commissioned a review of evidence underpinning the key themes of the National Improvement Strategy (NIS). The resulting catalogues of research and other evidence, continuously updated, form the bedrock of LSIS's approach to its improvement support for the sector. The evidence is based on research, policy or policy-related documents and materials produced since 2000. Each catalogue covers an individual aspect of the sector's work – including meeting employers' needs, reviewing performance and managing improvement, workforce development, curriculum delivery, self-improvement and success rates, disparities and progression issues for different learner groups. We will be reporting on some of this evidence in successive issues of *Inside Evidence*.

For this issue we have looked at some of the evidence in the catalogue covering the 14-19 agenda in FE. We found collaboration and partnership to be a key issue in effective delivery for learners.

Why is good partnership working so important and how can it be achieved?

The review found a number of consistent messages about partnership working. Collaborative partnerships were most successful when they built effectively on previous experience and drew on the individual specialisms of the partners involved. Best practice also involved schools, colleges and work-based learning providers liaising effectively with the local Connexions service as well as with one another. Together they provided career awareness events, discussions and taster days to help young people make well-informed choices about their futures. Working collaboratively with Connexions and support services also helped raise the aspirations of young people and helped them secure opportunities for progression.

Effective collaboration between schools and colleges also enhanced the range of curriculum available. Timetables provided common options slots so that learners from different schools could access off-site provision which did not cut across their other subjects. Joint staff training sessions between schools, colleges and training providers helped staff from colleges and other external providers learn from school how best to work with 14-16 year olds. Other strategies that helped to address retention and raise standards included a more structured and 'selective' process in which:

- schools took on a 'shepherding role' in directing learners to suitable courses
- learners' applications were accompanied by a report from school
- colleges carried out interviews with individual learners to address their commitment
- college staff attended Year 9 option evenings and provided taster days as part of the application process, and
- learners were allocated to courses based on entry criteria and a learning agreement which was signed by the learner and the parent/guardian.

It was important that tutors were involved in planning provision with other providers from the start, to ensure they had a clear understanding of what was going to be delivered and how it could be used to support learning in school. Clear reporting and communication channels between schools and providers helped to ensure that individual learner progress was closely monitored and any problems dealt with immediately and consistently.

Collaboration with employers was important too. The NIS found that good links with employers both enhanced the curriculum and enabled young people to develop and apply generic work skills, and to develop specific vocational skills. Working with employers appeared to be most effective when they:

- were represented on the partnership steering group
- helped to draw up a service level agreement identifying the role and responsibilities of all partners
- provided a team of dedicated training mentors to work with learners on work placements
- provided sponsorship for resources, materials, training and recreational facilities
- were guided as to appropriate learning activities and experiences in the workplace, and
- were involved in the recruitment and selection of young apprentices.

Take action

Could you do more to ensure:

- all providers are involved at the provision planning stage
- young people work closely with careers advisers to ensure that they are given personalised advice and guidance, or
- efficient and functional channels of communication about individual learners are established?

Evidence source
National Improvement Strategy Theme 5, The 14-19 agenda
www.excellencegateway.org.uk/research

The researchers produced catalogues of themed research relevant to the post-16 FE system in England. Materials from other sectors and countries were not included. All materials selected 'had to have been subject to quality assurance'.

Developing employability skills – 'the employability challenge'

Following a large-scale survey and a review of research, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) has reported on evidence which could be useful as providers continue to try and meet the challenge of better equipping learners for employment in the current economic environment.

For their research, the Commission took employability skills to be those that everyone needs to apply the specific knowledge and technical skills their particular workplace requires. They are:

- a positive approach – being ready to participate, make suggestions, accept new ideas and constructive criticism, and take responsibility for outcomes
- three functional skills – the ability to use numbers, language and ICT effectively (the ability to calculate, write clearly, operate a computer and use the telephone and other technology to communicate), and
- four personal skills – self management (punctuality, fitting dress and behaviour, asking for help where necessary), thinking and solving problems (analysing situations and developing solutions), working with others, and communicating and understanding the business (understanding how individual jobs fit into the organisation as a whole and recognising the needs of stakeholders, including customers and service holders).

The UK commission reached the conclusion that developing employability skills entailed:

- work experience – preferably work placements, but otherwise classroom experiences that simulate the complexity, ambiguity, unpredictability and consequences of success and failure present in the workplace
- opportunities for reflection and integration – learners looking at learning experiences with feedback from staff, peers and employers, and being prepared to put what they have learned into action in other situations, and
- experiential, active learning – using skills rather than simply acquiring knowledge, having an emphasis on trial and error and a clear focus on the pay off for the learner in employment and progression.

One group of trainees, for example, were helped to develop their employability skills through taking part in a 'Dragon's Den' activity: It tested all the things they had learned during the week, including team working, communication and an understanding of what employers need and want. The competitive element of the activity gave these trainees little choice but to behave in a professional way.

This is not rocket science. The problem, according to the UK commission, is that these approaches are not used widely enough. Furthermore, many of the barriers to developing employability skills were not only to do with teaching and learning, but concern employer engagement. The Commission's survey found that what helped to get employers on board included:

- determining which employers have jobs in areas where the provider has expertise and to which learners can and will aspire,
- developing a business case which details how the employer will benefit from participation
- involving the employer in the programme, for example through doing some of the training and/or providing mentoring and contributing to the design of the course and/or providing materials for it.

UKCES Case study: Developing business awareness alongside vocational skills

A construction training course was observed, with learners working towards a BTEC Introductory Diploma in Construction. The course comprised a mixture of industry specific skills and personal skills. The learners were working on a personal effectiveness unit, focusing on their aspirations, how they would describe themselves professionally, and a personal action plan to help secure employment. The tutor used group and individual discussion as well as written materials to challenge their thinking by asking for evidence, and supported each learner to develop a clearer picture of themselves as well as an action plan. The tutor gave positive encouragement to an individual who felt his age was against him – turning this into an opportunity to express how much experience and skills the person had developed. Work placements enabled the learners to hear directly from a site manager why the skills they were developing were critical to working in industry.

Take action

Could you:

- consider how to further develop your learners' employability skills together with subject knowledge, for example by providing more hands-on learning, and opportunities for reflection, such as learning logs, or
- do more to promote employer engagement, by for example, making a business case to employers about how they could contribute to the programmes you run and the benefits of participating?

Evidence source
UK Commission for Employment and Skills (2009) *The Employability Challenge*: www.ukces.org.uk/

The commission explored international research on employability skills and surveyed over 200 organisations, including FE colleges and adult trainer providers. Twenty of these organisations participated in case studies, chosen because they had distinctive qualities and/or a strong reputation.

AfL

Assessment for learning: capturing the spirit or following it to the letter?

The researchers in this study set out to analyse how far tutors of adult literacy and numeracy classes (working in a college and an adult education centre) were able to capture the spirit of Assessment for Learning (AfL) and promote deep engagement with both subject content and learning processes. Research in schools has shown that the same assessment for learning activities can lead to very different kinds of learning. Whilst school teachers working in the spirit of AfL encourage learners to become more independent, critical learners, others only use AfL activities to transmit knowledge and skills.

The three college tutors followed by the researchers had a natural empathy for the spirit of AfL approaches. During the project the tutors worked on the AfL approaches of questioning and oral feedback. They aimed to reduce the amount they talked in lessons, encourage more engagement and promote learner independence. They felt that carrying out research inquiries could help them to improve their practice. One tutor reflected: 'before I would ask a question that was really wide and general and then we'd go totally off, digress, because I'd left the question too open [now] I would think … how could I have rephrased this question and I would … jot a note down, so that I could think about it after the class'.

The tutors' approach stemmed from the belief that whatever the learners' starting points, they had the ability to progress. They made addressing learners' needs and interests a priority over following a predetermined scheme of work. All three tutors organised collaborative working and peer and self-assessment activities to great effect. Learners in one of the groups were observed to spontaneously check and mark each other's work.

'Before I would ask a question that was really wide and general and then we'd go totally off, digress, because I'd left the question too open'

They had developed the habit of looking at each other's work and commenting on it, and making suggestions for improvements.

On the face of it, the learning cultures of the three other tutors working in an adult education centre were very similar to the three college tutors. Good personal relationships between tutor and learners and between the learners were important to them, as was continued dialogue between the learners and between the tutor and learners. But the content of their interactions varied greatly: sometimes it was concerned with questions about how to learn more effectively (for example through talking to others), but often it was simply concerned with subject knowledge (such as the correct used of apostrophes or ways of calculating percentages) or about assessment (such as the assessment criteria of one of the national tests).

Although all three of the adult education centre tutors increased the amount of group activity during the project, individual working predominated. Barriers to the use of more challenging approaches such as group discussion included the tutors' concern about not undermining their learners' confidence. As with the college tutors, these tutors had an intuitive affinity with some AfL principles and practices, but they did not always translate them into effective approaches in the 'spirit' of AfL. For instance, although they offered more group work activities in response to the learners, they saw it primarily as a superficial change to their existing practices rather than a fundamental change in approach.

Evidence source
Derrick, J., Gawn, J., & Ecclestone, K. (2009) Evaluating the 'spirit' and 'letter' of formative assessment in the learning cultures of part-time adult literacy and numeracy classes. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 13 (2), pp. 173-184.

The researchers observed and talked to three tutors working at a college in a medium-sized London Borough and three tutors who worked in an adult education centre in a small Midland town. All six tutors were part-time and taught adult numeracy and literacy.

Take action

Would you find it helpful to:
- investigate how you might improve the AfL techniques you use in your classroom? You could, for example, record a lesson, transcribe some of your interactions and reflect on how you could have promoted deeper engagement through the kind of questions you asked and feedback you gave, or
- conduct a classroom inquiry to help you to develop AfL practices that lead to independent learning and reflect on what you have learned? (You may find the article on page 5 a useful starting point).

inside EVIDENCE

New horizons of research and practice:

The LSIS-IfL Research Development Fellowships

All too often, studies of practitioner research in the learning and skills sector describe how practitioners struggle to improve practice without access to, or support from critical evidence produced by the research community. Other studies show how highly motivated and talented teachers and potentially good researchers find it difficult and often impossible to see their research through to a successful conclusion, either through loss of confidence or feelings of isolation. Andrew Morris (Spring 2009) emphasised how teachers need materials grounded in research evidence and how they need to be supported and encouraged to adapt them in the contexts of their practice. At the same time he noted that decision makers need summaries that collate evidence from different sources in order to draw out strategic conclusions. Continuous improvement in teaching, learning and research turns around all three operating in a productive dynamic.

Now, twenty Research Development Fellowships have been created to bring practitioners, academics and government agency officials from across England together in projects which will combine the day to day concerns of practitioners with strategic priorities for the sector. Their design is based on LSIS's research-based framework for supporting practitioner research which will be published shortly on the LSIS website. These Fellowships will build on the work of organisations such as CEL and QIA (now LSIS) and complement projects such as those run by the Institute for Learning (IfL) and the Campaign for Learning. The Fellowships have been designed in collaboration with the Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training at the University of Sunderland (SUNCETT). Their aim is to promote and sustain a research culture and ways of working which will bring about long term and effective improvements in teaching and learning across the sector as well as an opportunity for personal and professional development for the individuals involved. An update on the successful projects and their progress will be included in future editions of *Inside Evidence*.

Inside Track

Employability Challenge case studies

www.ukces.org.uk/tags/employability/
employability-challenge-case-studies

This document is intended to accompany The Employability Challenge reported on page 10. The report was based on the contributions of over 200 organisations active in developing the employability skills of individuals. Twenty of these organisations participated in these case studies.

The GTC's 'Research for Teachers' resource

www.gtce.org.uk/teachers/rft/

The GTC's Research for Teachers resource consists of summaries of research reports on a variety of themes covered in this issue, including learning how to learn through assessment for learning, learner consultation and collaborative group work in mathematics. Most of the studies were conducted in schools, but many of the summaries, such as these, are relevant to the post-16 sector too.

The Maths 4 Life project

www.ncetm.org.uk/resources/8848

'Thinking Through Mathematics' materials to support the professional development of teachers of adult numeracy (see page 2) are available from this website. You can also read a review of the resource and join the Subject Learning Coaches networks to further explore the active teaching and learning approaches of 'Thinking Through Mathematics'.

Excellence Gateway – Research portal

www.excellencegateway.org.uk/research

The Research section of the Excellence Gateway, not only allows you access to previous issues of *Inside Evidence*, but a number of other valuable resources including a link to the Educational Evidence Portal (EEP), and a list of organisations working with LSIS, with links straight to their research. You also have the opportunity to get involved in discussion forums, or collaborative workrooms where you can work and share documents with colleagues in a secure environment, whilst the 'latest research' and 'news' sections offer up-to-date information on key research and important news items to be aware of, such as upcoming grants.