

Spring 2009

# Quality improvement



The journal for  
sharing excellence  
in further education



## OUT OF THE BOX

Adapting to your  
learners' needs

## MUTUAL TRUST

Creating the learning  
environment

# What does evidence-informed practice/policy mean to you?



**ZOE SIMPSON**  
**Stoke on Trent College**

“Evidence informed practice is a powerful mechanism that can transform organisational change and impact upon and improve both policy and practice at all levels.”



**LEE DAVIES**  
**Deputy chief executive of the Institute for Learning**

“It’s about closing the loop between distant research and on the ground work.”



**DAVID JAMES**  
**Professor of Education, University of the West of England**

“Research by and with practitioners is a means to rediscover or enhance a sense of professional direction and autonomy, as well as a healthy criticality.”



**TOM MILLIGAN**  
**Deloitte consultant working on the Support for Excellence Programme**

“Evidence informed policy means making decisions based on hard evidence on what is actually happening. It is not policy based on individual interpretation.”



**ANGUS CARPENTER,**  
**Research Centre manager, City College Norwich**

“In a nutshell, it’s about providing better education and experience for all students.”



**DENISE DICKENS,**  
**Disability and mental health support coordinator, City of Bristol College**

“It’s about finding out what’s really happening and owning the change that takes place because of your findings.”

# CONTENTS

The Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) is the sector-owned body, formed from CEL and QIA, to develop excellent and sustainable further education provision across the sector. LSIS works in partnership with all parts of the sector to provide vision, leadership, clarity and high quality support; practising and enabling continuous self-improvement and capacity building.

*Quality improvement* is produced for LSIS by Wardour. No part of this publication may be copied or reproduced without permission. Every care has been taken in the preparation of this journal but LSIS cannot be held responsible for the accuracy of the information herein, or any consequence arising from it. Views expressed by contributors may not reflect those of LSIS.

This journal is printed on environmentally friendly paper and is available in large print format.

Learning and Skills Improvement Service, Friars House, Manor House Drive, Coventry CV1 2TE  
Tel: 0870 1620 632  
www.lsis.org.uk

COVER IMAGE: NICK DAWE WITH THANKS TO MEL FISHER



## 4 BULLETIN BOARD

Welcome from chief executive Roger McClure and the latest news from LSIS

## 8 THE POWER OF RESEARCH

Properly conceived research has huge benefits for practitioners and colleges alike

## 12 SHINING LIGHTS

How Beacon status can lead to pilot funding from LSIS to encourage further innovation

## inside EVIDENCE

Engaging in, and with, research: how can we use evidence to improve practice?

## 13 PEER PRESSURE?

How peer review and development can support self-regulation

## 14 A SUPPORTIVE CLIMATE

Positive beliefs and high expectations can boost your learners' abilities

## 16 RESEARCH ROOTS

How policymakers choose what research to commission

## 18 A CLEAR INSIGHT

Practitioner-led research can highlight the need for important organisational change

## 20 JOINING THE DOTS

How TLRP's research findings from across further education can inform good practice

## 22 TUNING IN TO THE LEARNER VOICE

NIACE research offers advice to help providers ensure that all learners are heard

## 23 FINAL WORD

How two providers use self-assessment to help them deliver continuous improvement

## 24 RESOURCES

Useful sources of information for further education providers



# WELCOME

Welcome to the 2009 spring edition of the LSIS *Quality improvement* journal.

This issue highlights how policymakers and practitioners in the learning and skills sector are engaging with research and evidence to improve practice. We have done this to emphasise our commitment to the use of evidence to support improvement in the learning and skills sector. We strongly believe that our support should continue to be designed around a robust evidence base.

What we have tried to do here is to bring the research landscape alive for busy practitioners and to illustrate how research can make a real difference to teaching and learning. You'll find examples from the Beacon Innovations project for instance, where practitioners from all parts of the sector, from colleges to adult and community learning and apprenticeship training, are finding new and effective ways of working.

Our Support for Excellence programme offers many insights, too. For example, it's good to see how engaging with research and evidence is breaking down competitive barriers between employers in the interests of quality training page 8. And how, with a small amount of seed funding from us, an action research programme among adult learning tutors in Bedfordshire is making a real difference to motivation and achievement see *Inside Evidence*, page 5.

Of course, we recognise that busy practitioners may not have easy access to research and evidence, so our programmes aim to offer support in lots of different ways. We engage with practitioners all the time, supporting and sponsoring practitioner researchers and working closely with partners such as the Teaching and Learning Research Programme, the National Teacher Research Panel, Ofsted and Becta. The research area on Excellence Gateway is full of information and ideas, and we are always open to new ones.

However, we see our role as much more than sharing evidence based information and practice. We are also committed to building the evidence and knowledge base and to keeping the knowledge base up to date. We use our research intelligence to identify where the gaps are and then fill them through commissioning new research and synthesising knowledge from across our diverse programmes and research projects.

We also commission reviews of existing research to draw out key evidence themes around effective practice, and *Inside Evidence* features some of the ways in which we can work with such evidence. So, for example, if you thought phonics teaching was only for children, have



Roger McClure, chief executive, LSIS

We recognise that busy practitioners may not have easy access to research and evidence, so our programmes aim to offer support in lots of different ways

a look at some new research about phonics for adults, featured in this issue of *Inside Evidence* on page 2.

I am pleased to be able to announce that the results from our 2008 perceptions survey are very encouraging. They show that there has been a growing awareness and understanding of the former QIA since it was set up in 2006. The organisation's main objective to provide support, advice and guidance to further education providers was recognised across the sector.

The survey also shows sustained levels of satisfaction with QIA's provision and clearly indicates that the new body should continue to 'focus on quality improvement' and to provide practical support and guidance/support programmes.

In the months to come, LSIS will build on this research and its own capacity for self improvement, helping the sector respond to strategic reforms; providing practical help to providers to improve their everyday work; and helping organisations deliver their own priorities. The survey and a summary can be found at [www.lsis.org.uk](http://www.lsis.org.uk)

As always, we appreciate your views and opinions on our research work. Send them to us by emailing [inside.evidence@qia.org.uk](mailto:inside.evidence@qia.org.uk).

For general feedback on LSIS programmes or on this edition of *Quality improvement*, please email [clare.burnett@lsis.org.uk](mailto:clare.burnett@lsis.org.uk)

[www.lsis.org.uk](http://www.lsis.org.uk)

# NEWS

## Research programme report

As part of LSIS's remit to foster and support leadership improvement, we have conducted extensive research on leadership practices in the learning and skills sector, developing a substantial portfolio of publications.

Copies of publications from the 2007/08 research programme are now available. These include edited volumes from the practitioner research programme, individual practitioner research reports and higher education research reports.

Copies of the reports can be obtained free of charge in the following ways: to download a PDF, go to [www.lsis.org.uk/research](http://www.lsis.org.uk/research)

Alternatively, if you would like a hard copy, please visit [www.lsis.org.uk/researchrequest](http://www.lsis.org.uk/researchrequest)

## Observer Scheme

Following successful pilots, LSIS launched its *Governance Observer Scheme* in January 2009. The scheme allows clerks, governors and chairs from further education colleges to gain experience of practice outside their own organisation by visiting another college and attending one of their board meetings. The knowledge gained from this observation can then be applied to governing board, clerking and governance issues.

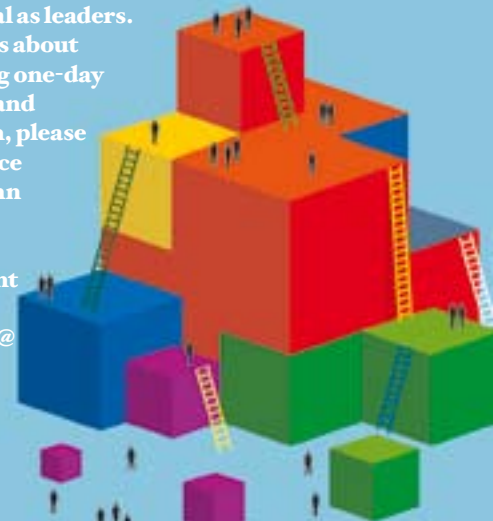
Observers say the time spent at another college is of great value, both personally and in influencing their thinking about the development of their governing board.

To find out more, email [info@fegovernance.org](mailto:info@fegovernance.org) or visit [www.fegovernance.org.uk](http://www.fegovernance.org.uk)

## Career Development Service

The Career Development Service offers information and practical guidance to individuals at all levels who want to progress their careers in the post-16 learning and skills sector and to reach their full potential as leaders.

For details about forthcoming one-day workshops and information, please contact Grace Cheng or Ann Ruthven at the Career Development Service by email at [cds@lsis.org.uk](mailto:cds@lsis.org.uk) or call 0870 060 3278.



## Adult and Community Learning Online leadership workshop – available free

The ACL leadership toolkit has been developed as an accessible resource tailored specifically to the needs of ACL providers. It enables managers and leaders to use technology effectively to enhance and support their business operations.

These workshops offer an introduction to the ACL online toolkit and are suitable for principals, aspiring and middle managers, and for those who hold a strategic or staff development role.

Register online at [www.centreforexcellence.org.uk/acl](http://www.centreforexcellence.org.uk/acl)

## Learner voice nominations open

Are you, or do you know, a leading learner, staff-student liaison officer, student governor or senior leader devoted to making the learner voice heard? Are you part of an organisation that has made great strides in developing learner voice structures or promoting religious dialogue and interfaith understanding?

These are some of the categories in the Leading the Learner Voice Awards, which celebrate the good work carried out in the sector and highlight effective practice.

You can read about the 2008 winning submissions and get your nomination pack for the 2009 awards at [www.lsis.org.uk/llva](http://www.lsis.org.uk/llva)

For more information, contact Eleanor King at [lsis.org.uk](mailto:lsis.org.uk) or phone 0870 060 3278.



## Award success for work-based learning toolkit

The LSIS WBL Leadership toolkit won the award for *Supporting institutional learning and management solutions* at the annual awards ceremony held as part of the national technology in education show, BETT.

Organised and managed by Emap, Becta and BESA, the BETT Awards recognise and celebrate excellence in ICT in education. Each year, ICT educational suppliers of all types and sizes enter the awards for the chance to win what have come to be considered as the most prestigious ICT awards in the UK education sector.

The category of *Supporting institutional learning and management solutions* looks for exemplary software, hardware, content and tools for institutional leaders and managers working in the early years, primary,

secondary or further education and skills sectors.

Judges found the WBL toolkit to be an innovative, high quality learning interface with easy to use tools. It was commended as an interface that can easily be used in other mainstream learning areas, featuring strong theoretical resources set at the right level for teachers, and allowing staff to undertake high-quality training at their own pace and in their own organisation. It was also commended for being very good value for money.

Launched in April 2006, the WBL toolkit is used by one in four independent learning providers and offers online learning and development in areas such as finance and funding, equality and diversity, quality improvement and inspection, and understanding the policy landscape.

For further information about the toolkit, please visit [www.lsis.org.uk/WBLdemo.aspx](http://www.lsis.org.uk/WBLdemo.aspx)



### Attend a WBL toolkit workshop

The WBL leadership toolkit offers innovative, high-quality training that is relevant to management needs. LSIS is running workshops, at no cost to providers, designed to demonstrate the wealth of tools available to middle and senior managers for whole organisational improvement. If you would like to register for an event, please go to [www.centreforexcellence.org.uk/wblp2](http://www.centreforexcellence.org.uk/wblp2)

## The National Learner Panel celebrates third year

In October 2008, the National Learner Panel finished recruiting its third cohort of further education learners to work with government, further education organisations and other partners. The panel was established by ministers in 2006 and its aim is to ensure the voices of learners are placed at the heart of emerging policies and initiatives.

Twenty volunteers from across England went through a rigorous selection process before being appointed and will now serve on the panel for a year. Members this year include apprentices, adult and

community learners, student union representatives, work based learners and college students. The diversity of experiences and opinions that panel members bring plays a crucial part in its success.

Roger McClure, chief executive of LSIS, the sponsor body for the panel, said: "I congratulate the learners on their appointment and thank them for their commitment to help improve and develop the further education system. I look forward to working with them this year."



## More than 120 principals embark on Principals Qualifying Programme

LSIS is pleased to announce that 16 more further education principals have successfully completed the Principals Qualifying Programme PQP, with more than 120 principals embarking on the programme to date.

Sponsored by DIUS for principals of further education colleges, the programme comprises reflective and highly personalised executive leadership development. It is designed to support new and practising principals in their leadership of complex change and in shaping a new sector.

The PQP has cohorts starting in late March and November 2009. Although places cost 6,000, only 1,000 is paid by the participant's organisation, with a DIUS subsidy of 5,000 funding the rest.

Find out more by visiting [www.centreforexcellence.org.uk](http://www.centreforexcellence.org.uk) and going to 'Programmes'. To discuss the programme, contact LSIS on 0870 060 3278 or [executive@lsis.org.uk](mailto:executive@lsis.org.uk)



Andrew Morris

# Research for the L&S sector

Practitioners now have a wealth of research evidence at their fingertips

Recent years have seen unprecedented growth in research on issues relevant to the sector. In addition to the ongoing body of evaluations and research from government departments, important studies have been carried out in the Teaching and Learning Research Programme TLRP and in the many research groups that focus on issues relevant to the sector.

So, if you want to understand the effects of education on life course, the Work Based Learning Centre of the Wider Benefits of Learning can provide the evidence; if you're keen to focus on the economic value of qualifications, the Centre for the Economics of Education has the answers. Similarly, SKOPE Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance specialises in research on skills and training and LLAKES Learning and Life chances in Knowledge Economics and Societies in lifelong learning.

But if research evidence is to be used effectively, it needs to be readily accessible, searchable and intelligible. New tools are being developed for this: for example, the educational evidence portal (eep), the Teacher Training Resource Bank

(TTRB), ESRC's Society Today database and the TLRP d space. The Learning & Skills Research Network LSRN supports communication and collaboration, bringing together practitioners, academics and government agency officials.

## What makes it useful?

We need the means by which busy people can engage with research evidence. Teachers need materials grounded in evidence and to engage in producing or adapting them. Decision makers need summaries that collate evidence from multiple sources and draw out the strategic implications.

## In the L&S sector

To develop such a culture, we need to draw on resources for education generally as well as those for the sector specifically. For example, research that has been specially rewritten for use by practitioners is already available on websites such as The Research Informed Practice Site (TRIPS) and TTRB, and in publications such as LSIS *Inside Evidence* and GTCE Research of the Month. Practitioners are engaging in and with research, and some colleges have developed internal research capabilities. For examples, see the NFER working paper, *Research in Schools and Colleges*.

---

We need the means by which busy people can engage with research

---

## Considerations for the future

Recent writing on the use of evidence such as *Using Evidence*, by S Nutley, I Walters and H Davies helps us look towards the future. Resources for this need to be unlocked at local as well as national levels. Providers need to demonstrate how research pays; government needs to reflect on the nature of the R&D it funds. Perhaps some kind of compact could emerge between the two to support formative evaluation, in which a fraction of the funds spent on an intervention is used to study and inform research as it proceeds.

Continuous improvement depends on research about the specific pedagogic contexts of each subject area and on the precise strategic problems faced by governors and leadership teams. They need evidence not just for "what works" but on how to make things work more effectively in practice. To provide this, they will require greater investment in mechanisms for capturing, synthesising, distilling and communicating evidence for use by busy people, and a receptive culture to welcome it.

This seemingly tall order can be delivered given the time and will. In healthcare, the modern evidence movement began 20 years ago, yet today health researchers throughout the world assess evidence systematically as a matter of routine and national bodies provide guidance based on it for the benefit of patient and professional alike. Ten years ago, similar moves began in social care. In education, we now have resources and tools that were entirely absent only five years ago. Let us keep on arguing for, and above all demonstrating the value of, research of many kinds in improving the calibre of the services we provide for our learners.

# The power of research

Research isn't just for academics. Properly conceived, it has huge benefits for practitioners and colleges alike

Research carried out by practitioners in their own institutions has obvious benefits. It gives them a chance to step back from the day-to-day business of teaching so they can reflect on and develop their practice and base it on a solid foundation of evidence. It can enhance staff's sense of their own professionalism and help them to feel they are part of the driving force for change and growth in their institutions. Action research also counts towards the minimum of 30 hours per year of CPD that is required of tutors in the sector, and is often more effective at feeding into practice than sending staff on expensive courses.

For David James, professor of education at the University of the West of England and a specialist in the further education sector, research is central to learning and should be part of the core business of all colleges. But how do we define research? What forms can it take? And how can institutions go about developing a robust research culture?

To start with, says James, there is a need for greater clarity and understanding around what constitutes research. "People use the term very loosely. At its worst you get activities about gathering and manipulating information for the running of the college, which is a normal part of any organisation. I wouldn't really call that research."

Angus Carpenter, who manages the Research Centre at City College Norwich, agrees. "Research is new to the broader further education sector and there is still some uncertainty about the differences between scholarly activity, projects and research," he says. He also points out that if the sector is to benefit from research, it must first be able to differentiate it from other, equally useful, activities. "There's a need to home in on differences between those terms. For example, academic research is not the same as going on a course and trying to implement what you've learnt."

Carpenter's Centre acts as a portal through which staff are supported to carry out research. Since its

There's definitely a correlation between the people who are good teachers and those who are doing research



establishment in 1996, it has helped the college develop a flourishing research culture. Among its many inward and outward facing projects, it is introducing a system that supports practitioners from proposal to print. "They just need to come with a question and we will work with them to develop it into a proposal, find the funding, and support them in conducting the research," explains Carpenter. "Quality research does feed into practice if you have the right communication and reporting mechanisms and teachers are given time to incorporate it, often in the style of action research."

Charles Boisvert, a lecturer in the college's Centre for Computing and Information Systems,



**Above:** Carolyn Nye:  
City of Bristol College

**Below:** Carolyn and  
her ESOL class



was prompted to conduct some research of his own after becoming tired of giving students endless handouts showing successive versions of the same programme. Boisvert's solution was to develop eL CID (e Learning by Communicating Iterative Development), a piece of software that helps students learn about programming by allowing them to view samples of iterative development in action – something that is hard for teachers to communicate in static forms, such as on paper.

Boisvert's research involved surveying existing methods of communicating the technique. He developed eL CID by observing students working with it and exploiting the results immediately to hone the system. "There is always something that, as lecturers, we wish we understood and communicated better. I wanted to engage in research that would improve my own scholarship, develop my teaching and support my colleagues with resources," he says.

He also tracked usage statistics on a related website. "It has benefited students in lots of ways," he says. "I use the software in classes, and it has helped in presenting some computer science concepts. It also helped keep me up to date, as technology changes fast, and a small research project is often worth much more than an expensive, bought industrial development."

City of Bristol College also has a strong tradition of practitioner research, supporting staff with cash bursaries of £500 for projects. The application process takes the form of a simplified bid, which then goes to a steering committee to decide on the distribution of the awards. The college also runs an annual research conference and provides staff with opportunities to participate in externally funded and national programmes.

Matt Davis, research and development manager in the Quality Improvement Unit at the college, supports practitioners in various ways, including helping with planning and research methods, sourcing literature, and assisting with focus groups. He also bids for external funds for larger projects.

"We're democratising it – any teacher should feel that they can get involved in research if they want to," he says. "The institution's aim is to foster the sort of culture where people are enquiring and looking at things with interest. And the evaluative skills you learn when doing research are very useful for teachers. There's definitely a correlation between the people who are good teachers and those who are doing research."

Carolyn Nye, a tutor and coordinator in the college's ESOL department, used a bursary to carry out research into cultural bias in ESOL exams and explore the factors that might contribute to the different achievement rates noted in students from different cultural backgrounds. As a result, teachers

have become more aware that they need to take the backgrounds of students into account when preparing them for exams. The college is now conducting trials of two new literacy courses to see if they will bridge the gap between literacy and oral skills in some groups.

Nye, who has undertaken a number of research projects during her time at the college, says the activity has enhanced her sense of professionalism. “Research makes the years more rewarding. If I hadn’t done the research, I wouldn’t feel as if I had progressed in my career. It keeps your mind alive.”

Denise Dickens, disability and mental health support service coordinator at City of Bristol, wanted to use her bursary to find out about her colleagues’ understanding of the service and how effectively and widely it was being used. “We found that we have a long way to go to make sure that information is out there, and that every disabled student who walks through the door is able to access support if they require it,” she says. “As a result of the project, we have had some input in the induction process and increased the PR of our service.”

Dickens also found that the act of carrying out the research was, in itself, effective in raising the department’s profile and spreading good practice. “I spoke to about 80 tutors across a variety of faculties and levels. I had face to face interviews in the corridor, the toilet, and walking to the car park! Just by doing that, I got our name known so that people became more aware of what we do.”

Nevertheless, the academic connotations of the word ‘research’ can be intimidating for some practitioners. “You need to reduce the mystique,” says Dickens. “People think that only academics research things. We have to get rid of that idea and make it available to everyone. The research must be for a good reason, and not be far removed from what you’re actually doing. It informs change, and people will then go along with change because they are a part of it, rather than having it forced on them.”

Another obstacle to creating a true spirit of enquiry, says James, can be the expectation of managers that all research will achieve tangible, positive results and have a role in enhancing the public image of the college, or that it will justify existing structures. “The perspective of management is often to look at the outcomes and how much they benefit everybody, but that might not happen every time. Serious research should be about being open to changing something. It’s not well suited to keeping things as they are.”

It’s more about what you do with the less positive findings, adds Carpenter. “When things appear to have gone wrong or the findings are not what was expected, there are still lessons to be learnt, but people ignore what they perceive as negative instead of turning it around and thinking: what



“Research makes the years more rewarding. If I hadn’t done the research, I wouldn’t feel as if I had progressed in my career” *Carolyn Nye*

have we learnt and what could be done to make it work in the future?”

Ultimately, analysing findings and writing reports requires time and space. This can be a major disincentive for practitioners who are timetabled up to the hilt. “The nitty gritty work is done in the holidays and evenings. I don’t think it ever fits in with the day job,” admits Davis.

However, a key factor motivating staff to give up their time is the value placed on research by leaders and managers. Dickens, who had never undertaken a research project before, feels the interest and support of her supervisors was vital in developing her confidence, to the extent that she is now actively seeking out other research possibilities.

The fact that the college offers bursaries is also a reflection of that value. “I certainly don’t do it for the money,” says Nye, “but it serves as recognition of the hard work that you are doing.”

James points out that supporting staff to do higher degrees is also useful in promoting a research culture. “Such courses are designed as research training and a way of getting you into a community of practice. With a bit of support, people will find enormous amounts of time alongside their jobs, because there’s clearly something in it for them. And if a college is seen to support and promote this, it stands to gain a great deal.”

# CASE STUDY

One college in Cambridge gives its staff excellent opportunities to carry out research projects

Hills Road Sixth Form College in Cambridge has 1,800 students. It gets excellent A Level results and received a Grade 1 Ofsted inspection, but what marks the college out is the action research opportunities the staff have for professional development.

Funding for this research comes from the LSIS Beacon Innovations Fund. To qualify, research must fall into one of four areas: assessment and feedback, learning to learn, developing coaching ethos and student voice. One example is a project that has looked at the different types of assessment taking place in the college and analysed their effectiveness. The aim is now to spread the best examples of that practice across the college to see whether it works in new contexts. The project is also outward looking and has included visits to other educational institutions to find good practice and consider ways to apply this knowledge in their own context.

## An opportunity to reflect

Associate principal Jason Peters is a member of this research team. "It gives participants the opportunity to reflect on their own practice and gain a wider understanding of what's happening outside our own college," he says. "The staff are very enthusiastic – this kind of research can be a difficult thing for teachers to achieve, because in our jobs you have to be on site teaching lessons, and getting out and about isn't easy.

We've recognised that assessment is a hugely time consuming part of teachers' work and asked ourselves whether that time investment is having a sufficiently positive effect on students.

"In the first instance, we looked for examples of good practice throughout the college and spoke to people who were carrying out innovative developments. Secondly, we did a survey of a large percentage of our students. We asked our Year 13 students to reflect on assessment and feedback during Year 12, and Year 12 to do this on their last year at secondary school. We were particularly interested in trying to get a sense of the different experiences students arrive with; we get students from more than 20 schools and they all come with different expectations."

The LSIS funding, for which Hills Road is particularly grateful, means the project, which runs over the whole academic year, can fund bursaries for the members of staff involved. This covers their time to go out and do extra research, the management time to lead and coordinate it, and

the costs of visiting other centres. At the end of the project, the staff involved with the research will be running whole college training sessions, recommending changes to aspects of the college's curriculum and writing a final project report.

## A collaborative approach

Although the project is only open to heads of subject and heads of department, all staff have the opportunity to apply for bursaries to undertake their own manageable scale action research projects of about 15 hours. The outcomes are shared with all staff, who are then invited to provide input during discussions about the findings.

"We work in groups and there is a collaborative approach to planning the research projects and ensuring people take responsibility for tasks they feel comfortable with," says Peters.

Jonathan Sansom is an art and design curriculum director at Hills Road. A member of the curriculum development team, he has been involved with the coaching strand of the action based research.

"The focus has been to encourage people to work together on cross curricular development," he says. "We took part in an LSN funded project this summer on subject learning



Students were surveyed for the assessment project

All staff have the opportunity to apply for bursaries to undertake their own action research projects

coaching, and one of the things that came out of it was that staff were keen for us to embed the learning from that training. Our project is called 'Looking at the subject learning coach ethos', so it's not about the specific method but about the principles of being non judgmental, developing listening skills and helping people solve problems."

For Sansom, the best part of the project has been working in cross curricular groups. "People are used to working in a big college where departments can become a bit isolated, so it's really good to talk to colleagues in other work areas to discover what we share."

# A supportive climate

Positive beliefs and high expectations can boost your learners' abilities

What does effective teaching look like? At the AoC conference two years ago, Frank Coffield received tumultuous applause after making an impassioned plea for further education to refocus its strategic priorities on teaching and learning. Quality teaching and learning is at the heart of LSIS's work and much of this journal is devoted to the further education research landscape where evidence about such practice is beginning to flourish. But there is no getting away from the fact that research about teaching and learning is still thin on the ground. By contrast, developments in research in the schools sector in the past few years have led to an accumulation of evidence.

Just as the line between pre and post sixteen education is starting to blur, with far more continuity and consistency in the choices available for young people, evidence about the features of quality teaching also endures across boundaries. Research findings do, of course, need to be adapted for context, but many further education practitioners engaging with the evidence on effective pedagogy from the schools sector are reporting positive impacts both for their own practice and for their learners. The Campaign for Learning, for example, has extended its Learning to Learn project from schools to further education, involving lecturers in two colleges with research support from the Universities of Newcastle and Durham. A wider research group of colleges interested in the approach is also being established.

## Teacher beliefs

The starting point is teacher beliefs about their learners. Teacher beliefs can have a powerful

If you expect that your learners' ability to learn can improve, you are likely to be more successful

impact on learner achievement. It sounds obvious, but if you have expectations that learners can improve, you are likely to be more successful than teachers who believe that ability is fixed.

According to research, teachers with low expectations of 'low ability' learners tended to use unhelpful methods such as lots of repetition, practice and rote learning, very little discussion and closed questions. They tended to attribute lack of success to the learners and return to previously studied skills.

Teachers who believed that learners' ability could be extended tried to understand what they already knew, adjusted their teaching to address misunderstandings and persisted in trying a variety of approaches.

## Assessment for Learning

So what do effective teachers do? Gathering accurate information about what each learner knows, and then using this to adjust teaching to match their needs is at the very heart of effective teaching. One systematic review of hundreds of research papers on assessment showed that, although effective, this type of assessment was relatively rare. Types of assessment emphasising marks, comparisons with other learners or measured achievement against externally agreed standards were much more common. The review found that formative assessment led to substantial gains, especially for low attaining learners and those with learning difficulties, when teachers:

- developed their approaches to questioning,
- changed the way they marked work,
- adjusted their teaching following what they found out about their learners, and





Hmm, I see your point, but let's refer to the notes again.



- helped learners to develop self assessment skills, thereby becoming more independent.

Effective questioning was characterised by

- taking time to frame questions,
- extending silence to allow thinking time,
- expecting everyone to consider the question perhaps thorough paired work , and
- asking for explanations of answers.

The aim is one of thoughtful, continuous improvement, rather than getting it right first time. When it comes to marking, the most effective feedback makes learners think. Research found this was best achieved by making comments that identified the following:

- what had been done well,
- what still needed improvement, and
- how to make that improvement.

Learners need the opportunity to follow up comments in discussion and to redraft work. Peer assessment can be an effective starting point for helping learners understand learning goals, how to meet those goals, and in developing the detachment required for self assessment.

### Collaborative learning

There is strong research evidence that collaborative learning can effectively promote learner understanding, increase motivation to study and enhance competence and self esteem. Teachers explicitly teach learners how to listen actively, to build upon each others' points, ask exploratory questions, provide clear guidance for groups to

follow and interdependent tasks to undertake. By contrast, in group work, where learning is not collaborative, there may be no specific requirement that learners work together; they often work individually, albeit side by side, on tasks for their own ends.

The purpose of the group's task needs to be one that requires them to interact. Tasks with a visual or text based stimulus, such as photographs or newspaper articles, offering information from different viewpoints, can provoke a variety of opinions. Topics of relevance to the group, such as a local swimming pool being threatened with closure, could prompt lively debate. Learners may benefit from specific ongoing support from teachers, helping them to ask questions and be active group members. A recent literature review commissioned by LSIS showed that such structured dialogue:

- created opportunities for all learners to express their ideas increasing participation ,
- promoted thinking at a higher level,
- created a supportive context of mutual respect and regard, and
- provided opportunities for learners to practice dialogue, as well as providing guidance that enabled them to make such discussions productive.



### More information

These examples are just a taste of what research can offer. There is a lot more to find out about the evidence on teaching and learning – from developing thinking skills to approaches to literacy.

For summaries of research see <http://www.gtce.org.uk/research/romtopics/> and for an overview of some of the evidence go to [http://www.gtce.org.uk/networks/engagehome/resources/behaviour\\_for\\_learning](http://www.gtce.org.uk/networks/engagehome/resources/behaviour_for_learning)

# Shining lights

Achieving Beacon status can lead to pilot funding from LSIS to encourage further innovation

“Beacon status is recognised and enthusiastically supported by ministers, the sector, key partners and stakeholders as a mark of excellence,” says Michelle Larke, project development officer for excellence and innovation programmes at LSIS. She and her colleagues form the team responsible for programmes designed to support, develop and learn from Beacons – the highest performing organisations and individuals in the further education sector.

All organisations funded by the LSC and inspected by Ofsted are eligible to apply for Beacon status, but getting selected is tough going – only the most outstanding providers are recognised, and there is no additional financial reward for achieving the status.

But it’s a stepping stone to even greater innovation, as Beacons work in partnership with LSIS to promote excellence, share and transfer their good practice, and help address some of the issues that may exist elsewhere in the sector. Funding is available for these new collaborative activities, as well as for developing innovative ways of delivering teaching and learning, or for other forms of organisational improvement.

“Each year Beacons are invited to bid for funding for innovation pilots that will help us to achieve the aims of the National Improvement Strategy,” explains Larke. “Since responsibility for the Beacon programme transferred to QIA in 2006, then LSIS, we have commissioned 161 innovation pilots, the outcomes of which represent a significant quality improvement resource.”

Projects can benefit diverse groups in society. BMW UK achieved Beacon status in 2004 and is a pioneer of practical e-learning for motor industry technology, producing an e-learning programme, the BMW Young Academy. It is aimed at students aged 14–16 and intended to attract under-represented sectors of society to the industry, including women and people from minority ethnic groups. The programme has also attracted positive responses from organisations specialising in

training for learners with disabilities and those working with young offenders. It is even supporting learning across the world, with organisations across Europe and Asia making the most of the resources.

Encouraging women to pursue careers that they might not normally consider is the aim of Blackburne House, a social enterprise in Liverpool, providing high quality training and education aimed at transforming women’s lives.

Its Beacon funding paid for a one-year research and development post to set up and test the potential for a Young Women’s Enterprise Academy, through seminars, pilot workshops and guest speakers. The eventual goal is to create a curriculum package that blends learning and skills training with business enterprise

start up support, nurturing and developing home grown talent in vocations such as science, engineering, construction and technology.

Derwen College in Shropshire, on the other hand, works with young people who have learning difficulties, offering a residential centre providing a high quality vocational curriculum and skills for independent living.

Its project’s aims are two-fold – firstly, to help students make a successful transition to independent living; secondly, to improve the quality and performance of staff through continuing professional development, with workshops led by

professional speakers and in house experts on specific subjects. There is emphasis on increasing contact with colleagues at other local, mainstream colleges, both for peer observation and by opening provision to learners from other colleges.

As the Beacon projects are so wide-ranging, there is likely to be an example that can benefit all learning institutions, and LSIS is disseminating best practice. “As this body of good practice grows,” says Larke, “we will continue to promote the learning and outcomes from Beacons’ innovation activity on the Beacon website and the Excellence Gateway.”



**Above:** BMW apprentices at BMW Group Academy UK, a newly opened £17 million training facility near Reading

Beacon status is recognised and highly supported by ministers as a mark of excellence

# Peer pressure?

Far from being about intervention, peer review and development supports self-regulation

Peer Review and Development PRD isn't an intervention tool to be used when a provider is found to be 'inadequate' at inspection," says Linda Wilson, programme director of *Support for Excellence* at LSIS. "The programme as a whole aims to support providers to improve their self assessment and build capacity for self improvement. A key focus has been to consider how Peer Review and Development can support the move towards the further education system becoming self regulating.

"Peer group partners support each other to reflect on their ways of working and consider how they might improve," says Wilson. "It's all about building a relationship between organisations."

The 750 organisations that are part of the *Support for Excellence* programme form small groups to carry out the PRD process. "It's important for providers to choose partners who are relevant to them and to be able to take the time to build relationships based

on trust," says Wilson. "PRD should be used to develop a culture of continuous improvement within organisations so that they do not find themselves in the position of being judged to be under performing. I believe PRD can contribute to the elimination of under performance across the sector over time. All providers can benefit from being involved in PRD but it is not a quick fix."

One aim is to measure the impact PRD activity is having on the quality of provision of the member organisations. "Questions we want the programme to answer are: 'How can we ensure that current PRD groups are sustainable in the long term?' and 'How can PRD support the sector in becoming self regulating?'" says Wilson.

Her colleague Tom

Milligan from Deloitte supports the PRD work of the Merseyside Hairdressing Forum, a network of companies in the area working together in an increasingly competitive environment to improve what they do.

"At the start there were a few issues, such as commercial sensitivities or companies being based very close to each other, so obviously they were in competition," says Milligan, "but they realised that if they didn't work together, they could potentially suffer more."

With between four and eight in each group, companies meet to carry out reviews and provide feedback. Groups support each other to identify the best ways to monitor and improve the

## How can PRD support the sector in becoming self-regulating?

achievement of learners, including working on peer observation and assessment a new and tricky process for many of them. They also carry out reviews of each other's operations and systems and provide feedback on what they have observed and alternatives to their current procedures.

Groups involved in the PRD process have also occasionally collaborated on larger events the Forum as a whole hosted the Capital of Coiffure in October 2008, showcasing the creativity and skills of the area's hairdressing apprentices.

Now in the second year of a two year programme, *Support for Excellence* has expanded, with a total of 165 groups participating, comprising the 750 organisations. Milligan thinks this is partly because the groups themselves lead the process with a little guidance.

"Many organisations like the *Support for Excellence* programme as it is not too prescriptive and allows groups flexibility in determining direction," he explains. Organisations within the group are advised to agree on at least one common theme they're looking out for during the review process. In many groups, the host organisation plays a fundamental part, providing information to help the reviewers and enhancing the collaborative process.

**Below:** The Capital of Coiffure event held in Liverpool, co-ordinated by members of the Merseyside Hairdressing Forum



# Research roots

It is a common misconception that policymakers operate in a vacuum. We asked how they choose what research to commission to support policy

**Philippa Cordingley, chief executive, Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education (CUREE)**

Practitioners often feel that policies are remote from the business of teaching and learning, but research and evidence can help bring the two together. Policy makers are putting in place a range of measures for using practitioners' views to shape research, and using research to discover practitioners' views about policy.

In recent years, for example, the accumulation of systematic reviews of research, including in depth evaluations of policy initiatives, has resulted in some key messages from classrooms and workshops influencing policy. CUREE's own reviews of research into continuing professional development CPD have

highlighted the benefits for learners, as well as for teachers, of sustained and structured work based CPD. These findings helped persuade policy makers to increase funding for CPD, especially for coaching and collaborative action research, as well as encouraging teachers to take it seriously.

Then there are the clear messages from large scale empirical research programmes: researchers are finding out more and more about the fine detail of what makes for effective teaching and learning approaches, assessment strategies, using learner voice, structuring dialogue and group activities, and designing engaging curricula that maximise learning. QCA, for example, has commissioned a substantial range of

research to help build the evidence base for its curriculum reforms.

But the most important way of connecting practice, policy and research is using teachers' own inquiry aims and questions more systematically. In 2002 Michael Huberman argued for systematic analysis of teachers' and tutors' own research aims and questions to inform the research and policy agendas. Exploring evidence that will help practitioners understand what is working for whom is an important aspect of professional practice. The policy, research and research funding communities would directly benefit from taking practitioner research aims seriously and might discover a much more active interest in the results at the same time.

**Lee Davies, deputy chief executive of the Institute for Learning, the professional body for teachers, trainers, tutors, student teachers and assessors in the further education and skills sector**

When policymakers commission, the research tends to be motivated by initiatives launching across the sector or rooted in the knowledge of stakeholders and sometimes those motivations aren't rooted enough in the interests of practitioners. Added to that is the fact that research motivation changes over

time. So, at the moment, we are coming out of a period where research was influenced by things like funding and self-assessment. Now we're seeing more of a focus on the concept of the individual.

At the other end of the scale, practitioner research doesn't always connect with policy at a macro level. Instead, what tends to happen is that practitioners encounter research for the first time when they get hooked into study. Their research focuses on policy and how it affects them, but there is no effective mechanism for it to be fed back.

As a result it can just sit on a dusty shelf as another dissertation.

Consequently, as practitioners are currently undertaking huge amounts of research into the 14-19 agenda and diplomas, we want to develop a repository for that information. This would give us an insight into future research priorities.

Small scale practitioner research is important as it locks teachers into the plan-teach-measure loop. But they don't always see it as research and making them aware that reflective practice is important research is crucial.

**Yvonne Hillier, professor of education in the University of Brighton Education Research Centre and co-ordinator of the London and South East Region Learning and Skills Research Network (LSRN)**

There's a great assumption that practitioners are actively doing research. Testing something out on a Monday morning with learners actually creates a lot of useful knowledge, but often it doesn't go anywhere. Few think to publish

their findings. The LSRN is trying to address this within the learning and skills sector, as is the Education Evidence Portal [www.eep.ac.uk](http://www.eep.ac.uk), which collates a wide range of research and can be drawn upon to ask bigger questions.

# Diplomas 14-19

## TEACHING POLICY MAKERS CONSULTATION

### AGENDA

### Local communities

### Self assessment CONSULTATION

**Julia Bennett is acting head of the Strategy and Development Unit at the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA)**

A lot of policy work that local councils do is based on research – understanding of local communities is key. Whether through consultation or engagement events or hard data, the more they know the audience, the better the service.

For us, research must be driven by local people's experience, consulting them and

building on existing research. Survey work isn't always the best route as people can get survey fatigue if overlapping questions are asked. It's also vital to ensure corporate coordination in consultation and to ensure that the information is used as widely as possible.

There is a lot of action research that IDeA and other national bodies or councils commission. A good example of this is the *Trust* project, which Demos the independent think tank and research

institute is currently conducting, looking at how local government can develop more trusting relationships through focus groups and interviews.

Another example is the Local Wellbeing Project, a scheme from IDeA, the London School of Economics and the Young Foundation, looking at ways to increase happiness. Three councils are drawing on research around the theory of wellbeing, which is being fed back into councils and wider interest groups.

**Sandra Nutley is professor of public management at University of Edinburgh Business School and director of the Research Unit for Research Utilisation (RURU). RURU studies research use and provides a resource for all those interested in using it to improve public policy and services**

There has been extensive debate in education, health care, criminal justice and social care around the importance of using evidence to shape policy and practice. Each has seen significant investment in developing a relevant research base and facilitating its use.

However, the dominant model of research use envisages individual policy makers and practitioners consciously seeking out and keeping up to date with research, which is often not a practical proposition. Conversely, the potential roles that research may play at the organisational and systems levels remain

relatively unexplored.

We need to move beyond this individual centred approach and capture what using research might mean within wider organisations and systems, and for groups and communities as well.

In a review of activities designed to promote research use in UK social care on behalf of SCIE, we identified three broad ways of thinking about and developing research informed practice (Walter et al., 2004). These different approaches are encapsulated in three models:

- the research based practitioner model, where research use is the responsibility of individual practitioners;
- the embedded research model, where research use is achieved by embedding research in the systems, procedures and tools of service delivery; thus it is service managers and practice development staff who play a key role;
- the organisational excellence model, where the key to successful research use

lies in the leadership and management of service delivery organisations and the way in which they collaborate with researchers to learn and improve.

These models were developed to capture what was happening on the ground to promote research use in UK social care. Specific initiatives do not always reflect a clear distinction between the models, but they are nevertheless helpful in teasing out some of the key differences in approach.

Although the models were developed to capture what was happening to promote research use in social care, our cross-sector work suggests that they also resonate with much of what is happening to promote research use in the education sector.

Walter I, Nutley SM, Percy Smith J, McNeish D and Frost S (2004) *Improving the use of research in social care* <http://tinyurl.com/c62loh>, Knowledge Review 7. Social Care Institute for Excellence/ Policy Press [www.scie.org.uk](http://www.scie.org.uk), [www.ruru.ac.uk](http://www.ruru.ac.uk)

# A clear insight

Conducting your own research can highlight the need for important organisational change

Undertaking research while holding down a full time position can seem daunting. A stint asking questions, collating results and disseminating findings may seem an unrealistic prospect for further education leaders. Or is it?

The former Centre for Excellence in Leadership CEL ran a successful research programme for three years, allocating half of its budget to higher education and half to practitioner led research in the further education sector. It was overwhelmed by the number of proposals from leaders keen to improve their organisation. National research director David Collinson explains it can be hard work but the impact the research has on individuals, the organisation and the wider community can be dramatic.

“The research was practitioner led, coming from the voices of people who were in the thick of things, so it was given more credibility,” he says. “Many people are driven by the desire to improve things and they produce action oriented research.”

Collinson says there is plenty of practical support available for researchers aside from the CEL grant, including two workshops that explain how to embark upon and present research. There is also the chance this year to attend the first national practitioner leadership research conference to discuss how to ensure the findings make an impact. Grants are not only given to further education leaders but also to any practitioner who puts together a strong and timely proposal.

## All needs considered

Zoe Simpson, a learning support assistant at Stoke on Trent College, undertook research into disability awareness training. She says: “The research stemmed from the Students with Disabilities group. The college had some previous research that looked at the learner voice and the group had been heavily involved. Disability awareness kept cropping up, so I thought it would be useful to find out exactly how we were doing in the area.”

The question at the heart of Simpson’s research was whether the college’s staff needed mandatory disability awareness training. This was followed up by considering whether this training needed to be mandatory or voluntary for learners too.

“Our answer to the first question was a resounding ‘yes’. By using a combined approach of semi structured and closed



questionnaires, one to one interviews and focus groups with a range of users, we discovered a lack of awareness among the entire college population about the issues. People didn’t feel confident when encountering students with disabilities and said they were often unsure of which terminology to use.”

Simpson admits that the college’s leaders were initially reluctant to engage with the research, but believes this is because they “thought it was going to focus on the negative”. When she explained how the research would be used to improve policy, they gave it their support.

Simpson met with the Students with Disabilities group, the college’s Equality and Diversity committee and college leaders to discuss how to move the project forward.

Once all the findings were collated, the college’s various committees and working groups lost no time putting their recommendations into action. Disability awareness training became mandatory for all staff and a voluntary training scheme was set up for learners. Simpson, the learning support team and the Students with Disabilities Group joined senior management



in becoming involved in plans for the redevelopment of the college too. The research has also been used as a professional development tool for staff, forming part of away day training, and has been uploaded to the college intranet so staff are able to view all of the findings.

“I never knew the impact the research would have or even if it would make an impact at all,” Simpson explains. “Sometimes research can be carried out, written up and left on a shelf, but it is ongoing here and it has had an effect on the whole college at every level.”

The research has also bound the college together. “The process of research can connect people. Those with disabilities feel that their views have been listened to and that they are on an equal footing with college leaders. Instead of feeling like a minority group, they are part of the college community.”

### **Flexibility is key**

One of the other projects funded by CEL was conducted by Highlands College in Jersey. Peter Hubert, head of faculty

of art, IT and media, explored leadership contrasts in employer engagement. It was prompted by the creation of Skills Jersey, an employer led body that advises the Skills Executive on the skills needed on the island.

“With the introduction of Skills Jersey, it was clear that, as the only further education college, we had to respond quickly to announcements,” explains Hubert. “It was a good time to look at how different areas of the college engaged with employers.”

Hubert looked at four key areas: hairdressing, construction and engineering (C&E), financial services and IT. The first

---

“This project actually helped us have a better understanding of how our leadership works”

---

two subject areas had well established relationships with employers but differed in how well these were working. However, the other two were new to employer engagement activities and were initiating step changes through the introduction of foundation degrees.

Employer engagement in all areas was led by different staff members, ranging from lecturers to the principal. Once these leadership structures had been assessed, the subject areas could look at how these could be modified. This included introducing engagement opportunities like breakfast briefings, meetings with industry bodies and, where appropriate as in the financial services sector), the principal modelling strategic leadership to get the ball rolling quicker.

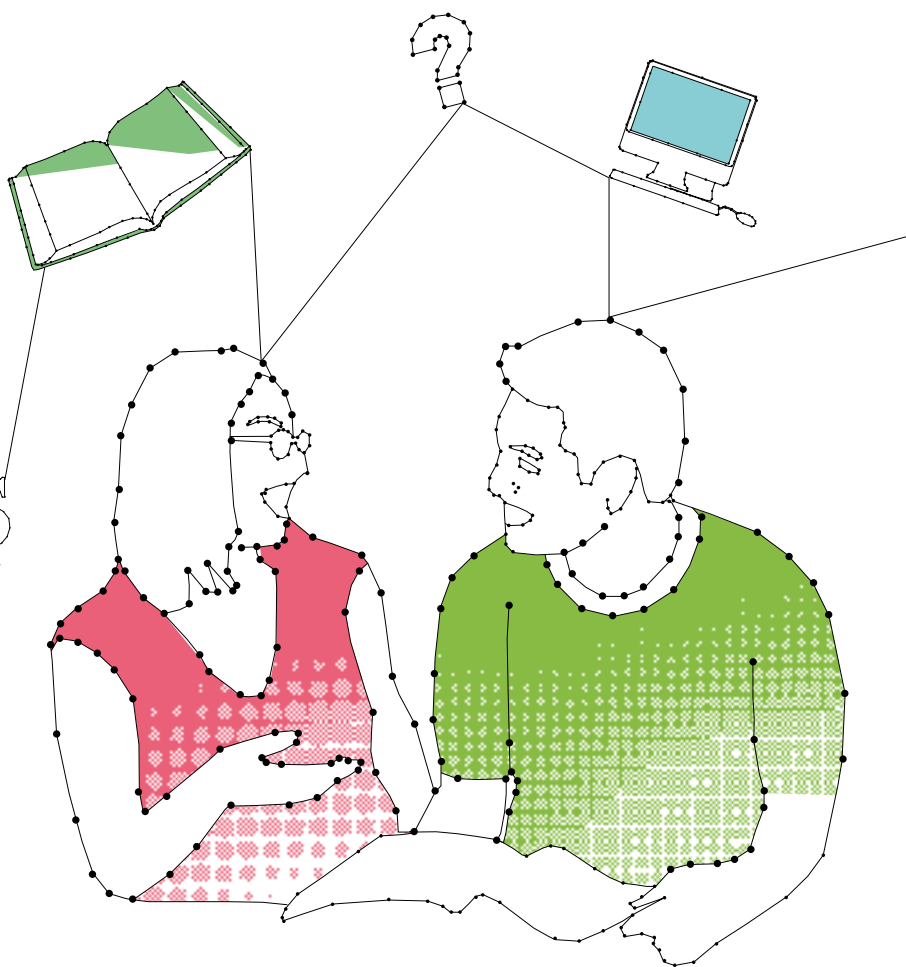
“The approaches were about appropriateness for the sector,” says Hubert. “We discovered that our leadership was quite distributed so we needed to be able to adjust to circumstances letting other people have the opportunity to lead is key.”

Hubert believes the research really made a difference. “This project was the middle one of three research projects on leadership and the key thing is that it actually helped us have a better understanding of how our leadership works. It has changed our way of working with the wider community,” he says.

“It enabled us to look at what we do and what is making it work. If major changes are likely to happen, which was the case with our college, you need the time to undertake that sort of exercise and use it to make things better; otherwise you keep on making the same mistakes.”

# Joining the dots

How TLRP's research findings from across further education can inform good practice



The Teaching and Learning Research Project TLRP, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council ESRC, started from the premise that research focusing on teaching and learning is of particular value to practitioners. What's more, teachers and learners were able to ensure that the issues and concerns of their daily practice were investigated by joining the teams of academic researchers in their enquiries.

Researchers explored a range of practical teaching and learning issues. One of the many themes emerging from the projects was the importance of relationships and the effort practitioners made to build up and sustain these relationships, for example by introducing peer assessment learners assessing each others' work or encouraging learners to discuss their everyday literacy experiences.

Most of us would put the strength of relationships near the top of the list of factors supporting learning in an organisation. It is one of those things that is hard to quantify unlike days attended or assignments handed in, but is something that we know makes a significant difference to the quality of what we can deliver for our learners. The TLRP project found that the tutor learner relationship is "the most important link in the whole process of further education".

The outcomes of the multi year projects are now

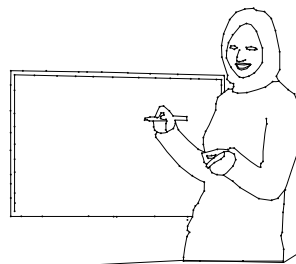
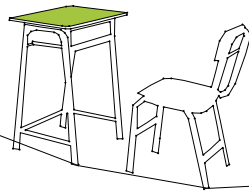
The tutor-learner relationship is "the most important link in the process of further education"

available on the TLRP website. They are summarised in the commentary, *Challenge and change in further education*, or accessible in more detailed papers on the project website: [www.tlrp.org/proj/Further.html](http://www.tlrp.org/proj/Further.html)

For busy practitioners, TLRP, supported by LSIS, also commissioned a series of 100 'research tasters', which introduce evidence from the projects together with tools for teachers and suggestions for practitioner enquiry. Tutors can use these to try out new insights in their own contexts and develop them further by involving their learners in reviewing learning practices.

The examples offered here illustrate ways of creating a safe learning environment. They also show how peer assessment can be used by practitioners to reflect on how they currently assess learners and how they might go about developing assessment techniques. Both emphasise the importance of relationship-building and offer practical guidance on how teachers can take steps to attend to this.

The tasters have been tailored for the diverse range of practitioners in the learning and skills sector. You can find tasters on many different topics designed for general further education, work-based learning, adult learning, 14-19 year-olds and offender learning audiences at: [www.tlrp.org/ls](http://www.tlrp.org/ls)



**Find out more from the TLRP project about learning and working in further education in Wales at: [www.furthereducationresearch.org/](http://www.furthereducationresearch.org/)**

### How can we ensure learners feel 'safe' in the learning environment?

#### Independent evidence

Interview data suggests that many classroom practices are the result of further education teachers anticipating and weighing up how they think their learners will respond to the different teaching and learning strategies, or the way they set up or organise the learning setting. For example, one teacher showed how he avoided exposing the vulnerability of those with poor numeracy skills:

"I have learners who don't know their three times table or can't tell the time and things like that. My style is to build the relationship and their trust up. It definitely pays off in terms of their being safe in maths."

#### Your evidence and reflections

Relationship-building skills are something we often develop and deploy without thinking much about it. Early in our career, they may also seem of secondary importance in comparison with teaching skills. Think about a particular group you are teaching, and consider the ways in which you build trusting relationships with learners. To what extent do you:

- engage in informal conversation with your learners?
- make yourself vulnerable by engaging in learning that is new for you as well as for your learners, or by allowing them to lead learning in an area of their expertise (e.g. use of software)?
- arrange meetings/activities beyond the learning environment?

- joke with learners?
- provide emotional support when a learner is anxious or upset?

#### Putting the evidence to work

Now you have begun to think about your relationships with your own learners, you may like to think of ways of developing these skills. It may be an idea to observe how a colleague interacts with their own learners.

Consistently high retention of learners may be an indication of a member of staff who is good at building relationships, so opting to observe a colleague who achieves this may be particularly beneficial. You can make the observation of mutual benefit by feeding back to the colleague what you noted during the session.

### How can we ensure all learners are comfortable with self-assessment and peer-assessment?

#### Independent evidence

Self-assessment and peer-assessment should be central elements of all learning situations. This may need to be introduced with particular awareness of possible cultural hesitance on the part of some learners to taking a more active and participatory role in learning. There may be different views on what should be the role of the teacher in class.

#### Your evidence and reflections

You can gauge your learners' expectations of who marks their work and why by getting their feedback on how they feel about marking their own work. For the next piece of work that you would normally take in to mark yourself, ask your learners to grade and comment on their work themselves. By providing the learners with the marking criteria, you will give them a framework by which they can do this. Once they have done this, ask them:

- how valuable it was for them to mark their own work
- what they had learned from doing this
- what the difference would have been if you had marked it for them.

The ensuing discussion should provide you with a clear idea of the range of attitudes learners bring to the lesson, to their role as learners and your role as a teacher.

#### Putting the evidence to work

Use the learners' comments as a starting point for building up the case for their carrying out more self-assessment and peer-assessment. This could include arguments with regard to:

- the time benefits of the whole group being involved in assessment
- learners needing to think more deeply about why they do things the way they do
- learners developing the language to think and talk about their learning
- learners developing critical awareness and skills in communicating critical comment in a positive and productive way.

If your learners' comments indicate that getting them to assess each other's work might be too big a step, you can help them get used to the idea by asking them in pairs to mark examples of good, bad and excellent work.

You might find these in assessors' packs from examining bodies, for example. Learners could then give each other feedback as if the work had been their own.

Find out more about self-assessment and peer-assessment in: Ecclestone, K (2008), *Improving formative assessment in vocational education and adult literacy and numeracy programmes* – a report for the QIA and the National Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy.

You can find an overview of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) Further Education projects at: <http://tinyurl.com/d544oa>

Assessment for learning is featured in issues 1 and 3 of *Inside Evidence*, which are available on the LSIS website at: [www.qia.org.uk/qia\\_journal.htm](http://www.qia.org.uk/qia_journal.htm)

# Tuning in to the learner voice

NIACE research offers advice to help providers ensure that all learners are heard

Many further education providers are targeting specific areas as part of their quality improvement plans. Academic research can offer a good source of evidence-based suggestions and advice, yet few of us readily think to turn to research for answers. Last year, for instance, the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education NIACE and the Learning and Skills Network LSN were commissioned by LSIS to produce a review of evidence on improvement in further education. The result is a research report with a difference.

Accessible via the LSIS Excellence Gateway, this review provides easy access to a wealth of research evidence organised conveniently under 10 themes. An overview for each theme plus short summaries of the research makes it easy to locate what is particularly relevant or interesting in relation to issues around practice.

Links are given to the original research for those who want to find out more, while information about the policy background helps to put the research findings in context.

A quick browse of the studies summarised in the learner voice section reveals how providers across the sector have been committed to gathering and using learner views as a core element of their quality improvement processes. But the effectiveness with which they have gone about gathering learner views has varied considerably.

The studies highlight why it is important to use flexible and appropriate approaches, especially for groups of learners whose voices might not be heard using traditional methods, such as those

with mental health or learning difficulties. It also highlights the fact that providers do not have procedures in place that ensure all learners' voices are heard, such as early leavers and under 16s. So the review shows some pitfalls to avoid.

The review offers suggestions for ways forward too. While providers felt that self completion questionnaires offered a high degree of reliability, learners preferred approaches that involved direct communication. Approaches such as learner forums and focus groups were found to be highly effective ways of gathering learners' views. The studies in the report also demonstrate the importance of showing learners how their feedback has been used and to what effect. And if it isn't possible to act on learner feedback, it is important to let learners know this and why.

Still on the theme of learner voice, some of the studies elsewhere in the review show just how helpful such data can be. When one provider used

If it isn't possible to act on learner feedback, it is vital to let learners know why

learner voice to explore the reasons for the variable completion and achievement rates among its learners, one of the findings was that learners felt they had to ask for help and that some – especially men – were less willing to do so than others. For some minority ethnic learners, written and spoken English skills were a barrier. They suggested a number of courses of action, such as language support, guidance about course choice and use of different teaching and assessment strategies.

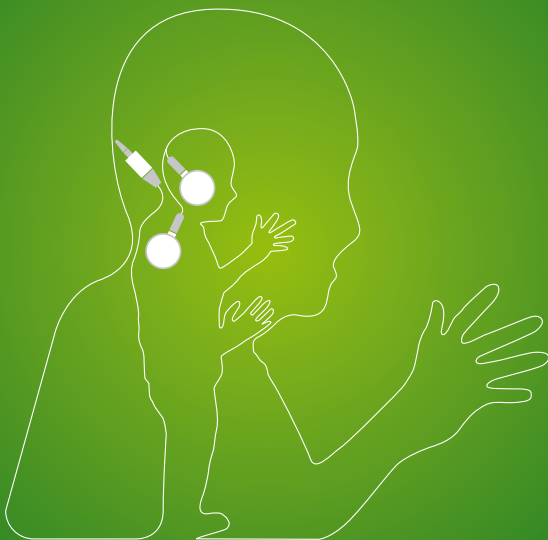
The findings of another study challenged the assumption that unemployed adult learners are motivated primarily by qualifications and employment opportunities. Many learners actually saw employment as a longer term goal and were more aware of the wider benefits of learning than is commonly thought.

The review shows that research has a lot to offer practitioners in terms of quality improvement. Themes include meeting employer needs, Skills for Life, issues around progression, workforce development, the 14–19 agenda and many more.

## More information

To find out what other advice this research review has to offer, go to: [www.qia.org.uk/aboutus/is](http://www.qia.org.uk/aboutus/is)

For specific advice on learner voice tools, try the Learner Representative Toolkit at: <http://tinyurl.com/bs2oed>



# The examined life

How two providers use self-assessment to help them deliver continuous improvement

While self assessment is a well established part of the further education sector's quality cycle, current policy developments suggest that now is an opportune time for providers to review their processes. A policy guide exists and an *LSIS Practitioner guide to self assessment* will be available in May. We asked two providers how they use self assessment to drive what the new National Improvement Strategy calls the 'restless search for improvement'.

'Embedding' and 'ownership' are concepts that arise frequently when providers talk about self assessment, but they aren't things that happen overnight. The schemes manager at National Grid, Will Large, described how their quality improvement process has evolved within the UK Learning and Development section of the business. Their *Self Assessment Report SAR* has become 'a line in the sand', an important benchmark and a drawing together of evidence from a number of company documents, like those on equality and diversity and health and safety. The self assessment process is seen as an essential 'building block' to success and is now used in higher level programmes where it is not a contractual requirement.

At West Cheshire College, staff, learners, parents and employers are all involved in the process of producing a scorecard that reflects the headings used in the LSC's Framework for Excellence but broadens the content. It's a flexible model that can

Providers prefer to borrow the best elements from a number of approaches

incorporate emerging priorities and developments that are important for the college. Learner representatives are involved in grading the college's responsiveness. Ian Rimmington, assistant principal, Quality and Performance, describes this as "a brave thing to do, because we're giving the students the responsibility and the opportunity to contribute directly to our self assessment report".

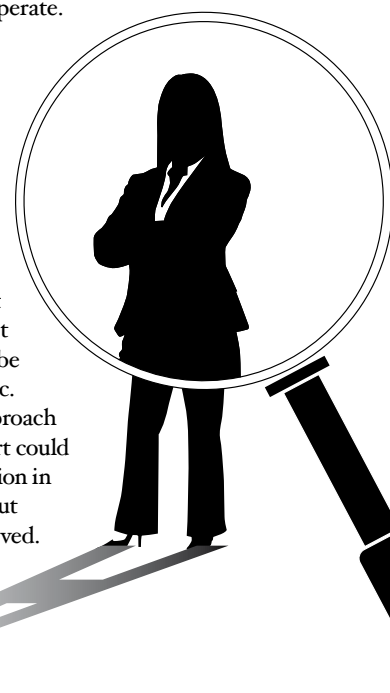
One rapidly developing aspect of self assessment processes is the increasing use of external validation for the judgments made in the SAR. The LSIS Support for Excellence programme currently

facilitates 163 Peer Review and Development PRD groups, involving 750 organisations. West Cheshire College is involved in one such group, which helps with validation of self assessment grades but also looks at common priorities with a view to sharing effective practice. National Grid uses a consultant to act as a 'critical friend' and challenge the judgments made in SARs, as well as giving advice on improvement where it is needed.

Is there one standard model of self assessment that promotes continuous improvement? Providers think not, preferring to borrow the best elements from a number of approaches. Will Large sums up the importance of having something suited to the organisation's mission in the phrase 'internal value'. At West Cheshire, support available online through portals like the Excellence Gateway [www.lsis.org.uk](http://www.lsis.org.uk) is valued as a "window to see what others are up to and ... what models they are using". The scorecard approach has helped to ensure that "business planning and self assessment are now one single process".

What would people like to change about the self assessment process? West Cheshire College values the ability to apply its own weightings to certain elements so that the scorecard is balanced for the particular context in which they operate. National Grid would prefer a light touch approach to self assessment, without the requirement for a yearly report and integration with the LSC Annual Review, "to continue improving by our own self assessment activities". In addition, providers would value some formal feedback on what they produce.

Finally, we asked what providers thought the future was for self assessment in a self regulating sector. If it became part of the regulation framework, there might be a danger of it becoming overly bureaucratic. Others saw it as critical to a risk based approach to regulation, so that improvement support could be targeted where it was needed. A reduction in bureaucracy would always be welcomed, but with necessary checks and balances preserved. Whatever happens, it's clear that self assessment is a vital element in delivering continuous improvement in the sector.



# RESOURCES

## Excellence Gateway

[www.excellencegateway.org.uk](http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk)

Access high-quality resources and information, inspire innovation and share best practice with other practitioners at the QIA's Excellence Gateway. You can also find out about LSIS's support programme, including Support for Excellence and Diploma Support.

### LSIS Practitioner leadership research projects

<http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/leadership/cel/research/practitioner-research-1/>

CEL's research and development programme, led by Professor David Collinson at Lancaster University's School of Management, is examining all the key issues in the Government's white papers, including the Success for All Strategy and the 14- 19 Agenda.

### The Research Centre, City College Norwich

[www.theresearchcentre.co.uk](http://www.theresearchcentre.co.uk)

The Research Centre supports practitioner-led research at City College Norwich (find out more about some of the projects by turning to page 8).

### The Educational Evidence Portal (EEP)

<http://www.eep.ac.uk/DNN2/>

Finding the evidence you need – when you need it – can be quite challenging. To solve this problem, a wide range of bodies, including NFER, the LSC, Becta and the TLRP, have come together to create a central research library. Evidence-based practice – at the click of a mouse.

### Learning and Skills Network (LSN)

<http://www.lsneducation.org.uk/research/index.aspx>

As part of its mission to support education and training, the Learning and Skills Network undertakes research for policy makers, leaders and practitioners. You can also search the LSN's extensive publications database, covering everything from how-to guides to blue skies thinking.

### The Learning and Skills Research Network (LSRN)

<http://www.theresearchcentre.co.uk/LSRNW/index.htm>

A network of people involved in producing and making use of research in the learning and skills sector. Want to get involved in doing some research yourself, but don't know where to start? The Learning and Skills Research Network is a good place to start, with information about events and conferences and a welcoming atmosphere for those new to research.

### Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning

<http://www.learningbenefits.net/Index.htm>

This research centre is funded by DCSF and conducts research that informs policy and deepens our understanding of the ways in which learning can benefit individuals and society.

### Teaching and Learning Research Programme

<http://www.tlrp.org/>

For anyone concerned with improving the quality of learning, TLRP's research findings have been trialled by practitioners and are 'ready for action' in everyday work. The Practitioner Applications section provides practical examples for schoolteachers to put to immediate use in classrooms and the commentaries use the findings of projects and other research to address major contemporary issues.

### National Teachers' Research Panel

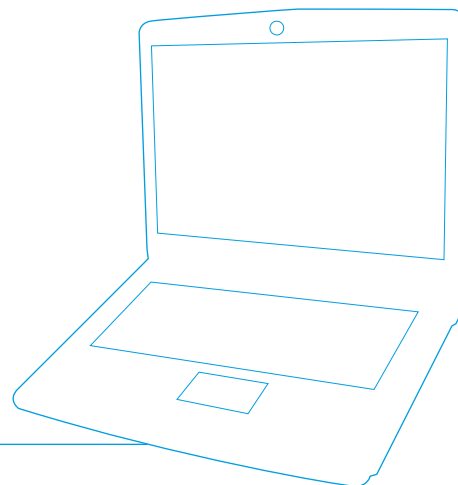
<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp/>

The NTRP is an independent group of practising teachers who work to encourage and raise the profile of practitioner-based research and ensure that research in education takes account of the teacher perspective.

### National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy

<http://www.nrdc.org.uk/>

The NRDC is a specialist research centre conducting research and development projects to improve literacy, numeracy, language and related skills and knowledge.



# ie **inside** EVIDENCE

## Evidence based quality improvement

### Research reviewed in this issue

**P2** Is teaching phonics as helpful for adults as children?

**P3** Should we or shouldn't we ask adult learners to read out loud?

**P4** Enhancing learning for ESOL students

**P5** Voting sticks: a gimmick or a real tool

for teaching and learning?

**P6** How can we help increase our learners' chances of getting a job?

**P7** Why is showing our students that we care about them so important?

**P8** How do young people view their experience of learning in FE?

## Engaging in, and with, research How can we use evidence to improve practice?

**T**he Spring 2009 issue of the *Quality Improvement Journal* focuses on how and why practitioners and policymakers engage with research evidence. The raison d'être of *Inside Evidence* is to explore how research findings could make an impact on learner outcomes in the future.

In this issue, we explore the key areas of literacy, numeracy and ICT, drawing on 'academic' research as well as a range of studies carried out by further education teachers in their own classrooms. We also found evidence from our research about what exactly employers expect from prospective employees.

When selecting research for this issue, we were struck by the number of times the business of relationship-building with learners cropped up. It seems it's something

in which we have a track record of doing well. We explore the evidence for what makes this work from the perspective of:

- learners (looking specifically at 14-16 year olds)
- a psychologist and counsellor in this area – Carl Rogers.

This is the first time we have included an item on a theorist. Is it helpful? Would you welcome other theorists in future issues?

As usual, we suggest a number of activities that you might like to try in the light of the research findings. Our aim is to select activities that are useful, whether you are researching or just want to try out evidence-informed strategies. If you do try them out, please write to us so that we can feature examples of practice in the journal or Excellence Gateway.

### What's the evidence?

The research featured on these pages is carefully appraised using a specially designed instrument. This helps us to ensure that the findings are trustworthy, relevant and can be used in different contexts.

## Literacy

### Is teaching phonics as helpful for adults as it is for children?

**T**here has been considerable interest in phonics at primary level following the evidence about systematic phonics instruction. But how phonics might be implemented effectively with adults, or whether it's even an appropriate method for adults, has so far received little attention. All this could be about to change.

A practitioners' guide to phonics teaching with adults was published late last year as a result of a research project involving nine teachers carried out by the National Research and Development Centre (NRDC). After just one term of using a systematic phonics approach, the researchers found that:

- the learners (mainly Entry 1-3) had made significant progress in reading comprehension and spelling skills
- the learners' confidence improved in a range of language and literacy tasks.

Phonics was popular with learners and teachers alike, with eight of the nine teachers saying they would definitely continue to use the strategy with their learners. So how did they do it?

The teachers first attended four days of training that included the basics of English phonetics (the sounds we use and the way we say the sounds) and phonology (the system of sounds in language, how they are organised and what patterns there are). The teachers were encouraged to base their phonics teaching on the DCSF scheme Letters and Sounds. Having the theoretical knowledge gave the teachers the confidence to adapt resources and materials, and to deal with learners' questions.

When introducing phonics to their classes, the teachers were careful to celebrate the fact that their learners, as adults, were already knowledgeable and to maintain a distinction for the learners between approaches for adults and children. In one class, after the teacher had explained that they would be working on phonics over the coming term, a learner said she had talked to her daughter and knew that

phonics was used in schools to help children read. The teacher explained that they would not be doing phonics in the same way and that they would use phonics to learn things they had not already learned.

The teachers' starting points depended on the level that they felt their learners had reached. They

### How phonics might be implemented effectively with adults, or whether it's even an appropriate method, has so far received little attention

followed a clear, planned structure. With hindsight, the teachers often wished they had taken smaller steps in the first session. Because they were frightened of boring their learners, they had moved on quickly when what the learners had really needed was lots of repetition.

Using a good range of resources and fun activities was fundamental. As there is currently a lack of phonics materials aimed at adults, the teachers often designed their own, based on ideas from Letters and Sounds. These included games such as bingo, where the learners were given a grid of Consonant/Vowel/Consonant (CVC) words (pin, sat etc) and the teacher called out words that the learners had to identify and cross off.

The evidence from this study suggests that teaching phonics can be as useful for adults as it is for children. There is no need to exclude a phonics approach just because it is being advocated for children and/or it appears to have been ineffective as a method during a learner's school days. Overall, there was a high level of enjoyment, with only two learners describing phonics as "babyish" – a result that testifies to the teachers' creative adaptation of methods and resources.

#### Evidence source

Burton, M., Davey, J., Lewis, M., Ritchie, L. & Brooks, G. (2008)

Practitioner Guide: 'Improving reading: phonics and fluency'. NRDC: <http://tinyurl.com/de3urb>

#### Take action

- Could you familiarise yourself with the underpinning knowledge base surrounding phonetics and phonology?
- Could you work with colleagues to create phonics resources appropriate for adult learners that you all could share?



## Oracy

### Should we ask adult learners to read out loud?

**M**any of us tend to avoid asking adult learners to read out loud for fear of putting them under too much pressure or embarrassing them. But according to research published by the National Research and Development Centre (NRDC), our worries may be unfounded. The research showed that when teachers worked to develop their learners' oral reading fluency (rapid, accurate, expressive reading to one or more people), their learners came to enjoy reading out loud. Most learners became more confident at reading and made significant gains in reading comprehension in a relatively short space of time.

The project teachers (a pilot of six followed by a group of eight teachers of adult literacy) were given training in teaching oral reading fluency and asked to use the demonstrated approaches with their classes over one term. Several approaches were variations of 'paired reading', whereby the learner read in unison with a teacher or assistant. The pair started by reading the text together until the reader signalled that s/he was happy to read alone. When the learner got stuck on a word, the teacher or assistant quickly supplied it. This approach aimed to take the pressure off the learners by allowing them to decide if and when they wanted to read alone and not leaving them to struggle over words.

One variation was 'choral reading', whereby all learners read the text aloud at the same time – again taking the pressure off individuals. The teachers saw this approach as providing "a safe way for learners to practise and make mistakes without everyone else knowing". Another variation was when two readers read aloud to each other. This technique didn't just benefit the tutee – the tutor's confidence was boosted too. The approach was also used successfully as a way of coaxing very reluctant learners to read when other methods seemed to have failed.

Other methods used included 'repeated reading', whereby the same text was read again and again over a few weeks (while being careful not to flog a text to death) and 'modelled' (echo) reading, whereby the teacher read out a short phrase and the learner repeated it. This last approach provided a good opportunity for the teacher also to model expression (signalling comprehension) and discuss alternative interpretations with the class. One teacher asked her learners to think about where the emphasis should be placed in the following two lines from a poem:

The teachers all thought  
That he couldn't be taught

She read the two lines several times emphasising different words each time (such as "couldn't" and "taught") and asked the learners how they felt it changed the meaning of the whole phrase.

'Performance reading', which involved preparing for or rehearsing a performance to other learners from other groups, involved a mix of the methods described earlier. Contrary to what the teachers expected, more than half of the learners said that they found reading to a group no more of a problem than reading to one other person.

The 40 level 1 and 2 learners (who ranged in age from 16 to 60) taught using these approaches made significant gains in reading comprehension, equivalent to about half a level in the National Qualifications Framework in just five or six sessions. Such was their enthusiasm for the approaches used that three-quarters of them wanted to continue learning in this way.

#### Evidence sources

Burton, M. (2007) 'Oral reading fluency in adults'. NRDC: <http://tinyurl.com/ak3oub>

Burton, M. et al. (2008) Practitioner Guide: 'Improving reading: Phonics and fluency'. NRDC: <http://tinyurl.com/de3urb>

#### Take action

- Could you try out a selection of the approaches described with your learners and see which are the most successful?
- Could you use these approaches to support other learning activities?

## Action and reflection

### How can we improve outcomes for ESOL learners?

**I**ncreasingly, teachers are seeking to develop their teaching through a cycle of self-reflection, change of practice and re-evaluation. This process, often called action research, is illustrated practically in this issue of the Journal. On this and the facing page, we showcase a selection of action research projects supported by the National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics (NCETM), the National Research and Development Centre (NRDC) for adult literacy and numeracy and the National Teacher Research Panel (NTRP).

Choosing a focus for an action research project very much depends on your interests and the context in which you work. How to enhance the learning for ESOL learners was the central problem for two of the projects we have selected. The problem for the first of these projects was twofold. On the one hand, numeracy tutors were saying they felt inadequately equipped to deal with the ESOL learners in their classes; on the other, ESOL managers were aware of ESOL learners who needed numeracy skills but who were reluctant to enrol in mainstream adult numeracy classes.

With the help of the Adult Learning Service, the ESOL and numeracy tutors worked collaboratively to explore the underlying issues. They planned and set up two new ten-week numeracy courses for ESOL learners. Both courses were run by a numeracy tutor, but with the support of an ESOL tutor. The ESOL

Choosing a focus for an action research project very much depends on your interests and the context in which you work

tutors gave the numeracy tutors written feedback on every lesson using a specially designed feedback form. This identified whether a particular activity was successful with some or all of the learners, any barriers or sources of confusion, possible reasons for the confusion and suggestions for change.

In one activity, learners were asked to round off random numbers that the tutor had written on the board to the nearest ten, hundred or thousand. The ESOL tutor commented that the ESOL learners were confused between 'round' meaning 'circle' and meaning 'next to'. The ESOL tutor suggested that it was important to have discussions with learners first about the meanings of words, introduce other words with similar meanings (such as roughly) and give an example, such as rounding off prices when shopping. The next step for the numeracy tutors will be to put all they have learned into practice with a new 'preparing for maths' class for ESOL learners and three new 'maths for ESOL learners' courses, and then to monitor how they get on.

Another group of teachers were concerned about how they could best help ESOL learners participate more fully in conversations. The teachers began their action research by reflecting as a group on what happened in ESOL-speaking classrooms, discussing what kind of topics seemed to produce the most learner talk. They reflected, for example, on how contrived dialogues, such as between a market stall holder and a customer, did not seem to work as well as real situations. A tutor telling her class she was starting on a diet (again!) produced a good discussion, including lots of advice, which developed into a deeper debate around weight loss.

Next, the team moved on to analysing data from their own classrooms. They set up speaking activities for two to three weeks and reflected (in writing) on what happened. The team recorded and transcribed parts of those lessons in which speaking took place to help them with planning subsequent lessons. Back in the classroom, they carried out their plans, recorded and transcribed their lessons, and later discussed the transcriptions with the rest of the team.

#### Evidence sources

Molloy, C. (2008) 'Professional development needs of numeracy tutors to enable them to teach ESOL learners'. NCETM: <http://tinyurl.com/bst6f9>

Cooke, M. & Roberts, C. (2007), 'Reflection and action in ESOL classrooms'. NRDC: <http://tinyurl.com/cqvw6>

#### Take action

- Could you record (sound or video) part of one of your sessions to review later, either on your own or working with a colleague? Remember that for research you need data – which doesn't necessarily mean numbers.





## Information Technology

### Can voting sticks enhance teaching and learning?

**V**oting sticks, like those used to 'ask the audience' in the TV programme *Who wants to be a millionaire?*, seem to be the latest classroom gadget. Innovative teachers have been quick to see their potential for engaging learners in activities and for assessing their learning. A number of teachers have also started to explore their benefits through carrying out small-scale research projects.

Voting technology had never been used as an e-learning tool in Adult and Community Learning (ACL) in Bedfordshire. But voting sticks had been used by senior management at conferences to involve the tutors in identifying the goals of the service. They had provoked a great deal of interest. Many tutors saw them as a good way of generating discussion and interaction with their classes and engaging some of the more disengaged learners. One tutor saw potential in using them as a painless, paperless way to carry out first night inductions, while another thought they might be a good way of carrying out initial assessments to gauge the entry skills level of learners at the beginning of a course.

Tutors wanting to take part in this action research project first attended a training session provided by the company supplying the voting sticks. They then supported each other in using the voting sticks in a variety of ways, such as maths quizzes and multiple choice questions for listening comprehensions. One

project involved using voting sticks for induction to a Skills for Life class. The tutor created a PowerPoint presentation that gave all the information required for induction, and held a quiz at the end of the presentation to check that learners were informed of their rights and responsibilities.

The learners felt that the presentation gave structure to the induction and that the quiz allowed them to answer honestly. All the learners stressed the fun element and said that they liked the fact that the replies were anonymous (although the tutor was able to identify learners). From the tutor's point of view, it provided an easy way to get feedback from all learners, even those who would normally not want to give their opinion in front of the class, and it brought a fun element to a serious part of the course.

Elsewhere, a group of family learning tutors were keen to explore the value of voting technology for formative assessment. Prior to their project, the tutors tended to carry out paper-based assessments, but they had noticed that as soon as they started on the paper-based assessments, their learners' attitudes changed because of their poor literacy skills and previous negative experiences of tests.

Knowing the importance of ongoing assessment and not wanting to disengage their learners, they decided to try out voting sticks on a course where the aim was for parents/carers to learn how they could support their children with schoolwork.

Voting sticks were used at the beginning and end of each session. After each question, the learners were shown the class results on a graph and the correct answer was highlighted. This led to learners chatting, laughing and sometimes asking questions themselves, making the assessment process more relaxed and positive. The instant results, together with the tutors' observations of the learners as they answered the questions, helped the tutors to tailor the course to the learners' needs more easily – for example, when most of them answered a question incorrectly, the tutors revisited the topic.

The team is continuing with the project and evaluating the benefits as they do so. Clearly providers thinking of following suit would need to appraise the potential benefits for their own contexts.

#### Evidence sources

Sollenberger, G. & Mortimer, S. (2008), 'Does using voting sticks enhance teaching and learning?' NTRP: <http://tinyurl.com/dyfpsa>

Betts, S. & Kambouri, M. (2007) 'Using voting technology for assessment'. NRDC: <http://tinyurl.com/dbvuzr>

#### Take action

- Does your organisation have the resources for this type of technology? Could you investigate what's on offer from suppliers and think about ways in which it might be used to enhance teaching and learning, motivation and achievement?

## Employability skills

How can we help increase our learners' chances of getting a job?

**W**e're all keen to help our learners become 'work ready'. Yet a survey conducted by the Learning and Skills Network (LSN) found that most employers lamented the lack of employable staff. Nearly 36 per cent of the 1,137 employers surveyed said they had not been able to find school or college leavers with the necessary skills to work in their businesses when recruiting in the last 12 months, and a further 49.6 per cent of employers were only able to do so 'sometimes'.

So what exactly are employers looking for? Knowing the answer may be especially pertinent now that the economic downturn is starting to bite.

Employers said they wanted not only good literacy and numeracy skills but also enthusiasm, commitment and timekeeping. While employers did not expect to be able to recruit a 'finished article' straight from school, half of the employers said that lack of any one of these 'big four' employability skills would prevent them from offering someone a job.

There were also a number of sector- or business-specific skills that employers wanted their employees to develop within the first five years of employment – that is, within the workplace. These included team-working, business awareness, personal presentation and problem-solving. But what was most important to employers was that prospective employees already had the 'big four' employability skills.

There are lots of resources, research and advice available about the effective development of literacy and numeracy – see the articles about teaching phonics and enhancing mathematics teaching for ESOL learners in this issue, for example. Less guidance, however, exists about how we can best develop the 'soft skills' connected with enthusiasm, commitment and timekeeping.



### Evidence source

Lanning, J., Martin, R. & Villeneuve-Smith, F. (2008) 'Employability skills examined. Ten key messages from LSN's quest to understand employability skills'. Learning & Skills Network: [www.lsneducation.org.uk](http://www.lsneducation.org.uk)

The good news is that there is a wide range of projects currently taking place aimed at enhancing the chances of young people gaining employment from which we'll be able to learn. The LSN researchers, along with the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCSE), are researching best practice in the teaching and assessment of employability skills with a view to publishing a guide that will include case study examples.

Meanwhile, you'll find the materials on Key Skills and Skills for Life delivery on the Excellence Gateway website a useful starting point. You may also find it helpful to begin debating with your colleagues some of the questions around developing the personal soft skills that employers desire. What is the role of the personal tutor as opposed to the practitioner in the classroom or workshop? Where are these attributes best embedded in the main programme of study and when is more discrete delivery most appropriate?

The LSN researchers were keen to point out that good and effective teaching (including experiential learning, with learners reflecting on the lessons learned from their experience, then testing that learning in new situations) was the key ingredient for the successful delivery of any set of knowledge or skills. They suggested that this approach was likely to be effective in developing employability skills too.

### Take action

- Could you use group work around a 'project' to develop your students' project and time management skills?
- Could you explore the relative roles of the personal tutor and classroom/ workshop practitioner in helping to develop 'soft skills'?

## Classroom climate

### Why is showing learners that we care about them so important?

“**R**elations between tutors and students lie at the heart of successful further education ... They are crucial to the success of further education in helping disadvantaged, underachieving and excluded people of all ages to develop their often fractured identities as learners.” This was the conclusion reached by the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), distilled from the findings of 18 major research projects in further education. On the back page, we explore students’ views on how further education teachers create effective relationships. Here, we examine the ingredients of good teacher-student relationships by revisiting the work of someone widely recognised as an expert in this area – the psychologist and counsellor Carl Rogers (1902-1987).

Rogers believed the basis of successful relationships for both counselling and teaching is accepting students and showing empathy. Teachers who cared in this way about their learners:

- fully accepted the fear and hesitation of the student as s/he approached a new problem and rejoiced in his/her satisfaction when s/he managed to achieve something
- accepted a student’s occasional apathy as well as his/her efforts to achieve major goals
- acknowledged students’ personal feelings that both promoted and disturbed learning, such as distrust or even hatred of authority, and lack of self-confidence.

In return, teachers gained their students’ respect because they showed they were able to talk to the students at their level. When they felt understood from their own point of view, students felt deeply appreciative. Rogers said: “If any teacher set [him/]herself the task of endeavouring to make one acceptant, empathetic response per day to a student’s demonstrated or verbalised feeling, I believe [s]he would discover the potency of this kind of understanding.”

In his extensive work with students in distress, Rogers noticed that if he tried to understand them, and trusted them as essentially competent people, then the students began to:

- develop clearer and deeper self-insight
- look for ways to resolve their distress
- solve some of their problems for themselves.

He found that when he started to use the same approach with classes of students, his classrooms

became more exciting places of learning; it completely changed the interaction and classroom climate.

The students started to tell him their feelings, ask questions and even challenge him at times. Classes like these helped students become more interested

## Relations between tutors and students lie at the heart of successful further education

and independent learners.

But we don’t just have to take Rogers’ word for it. The third edition of his book on the subject, *Freedom to Learn*, presented the findings of a variety of independent research studies, which showed how, when teachers provided the kind of emotionally supportive climate Rogers described, students learned more, enjoyed lessons more and attended more often. They were also more creative and more capable of problem-solving, showed more spontaneity, initiative and independence. Several studies showed that teachers who provided high levels of empathy and care of this level were also characterised by a cluster of other positive behaviours, including:

- more discussion with students
- more use of student ideas in the teachers’ interactions with them
- more smiling with students.

In return, there was:

- more student talk
- more student problem-solving
- more asking of questions
- more involvement in learning
- more physical movement
- higher levels of cognition
- greater creativity
- more eye contact with the teacher.

### Evidence sources

TLRP: ‘Challenge and change in further education’: <http://tinyurl.com/d544oa>

Rogers, C. & Freiberg, J.H. (3rd edition 1994) *Freedom to Learn*. New York: Merrill

### Take action

- Could you deliberately try to show empathy more often and more actively, especially to apathetic or challenging students?
- Could you ask someone to observe a session to analyse the number of empathetic responses and their impact on the learning climate?

## 14–16 year olds in further education

“It’s better than school. You get treated with respect”

**S**chool-aged learners are enrolled at further education colleges in the belief that it will give them a different and potentially more successful experience, both in terms of attainment and progression. It is usually assumed that in contrast to the academic programmes followed at school, the courses they follow will be ‘practical’ as they are closely linked to an occupational area such as hairdressing, engineering or construction. In reality, vocational education requires theory-based study as well as practical skills. What, then, do young people make of the experience?

According to a study carried out with 130 Year 10 and 11 learners from 13 secondary schools, all of whom spent part of the week (usually half or one day) on a vocational course at a college, the biggest difference they noticed was the kind of relationship they had with staff: “It’s better than school. You get treated with respect.” “It makes you feel grown up.”

They felt a greater sense of trust – “You are allowed to use welding tools on your own ... like an adult” – and greater freedom in making choices, such as who to sit with, or being able to talk as long as it wasn’t disruptive. They appreciated the tone of communication of further education staff – “At school, if you have done something wrong they shout at you – at college you just have a little chat to sort it out” – and their humour: “You can have a laugh with them”

The effect of relating to the 14–16 year old learners in the same way as adults was, in many cases, greater confidence, self-worth and therefore motivation to

learn. So, the vocational learning experienced by these learners was not only effective in the sense of equipping them with the skills for a job, but also in bringing about affective changes, such as personal growth and confidence.

While the different relationships the 14–16 year olds experienced appeared to be the bedrock, the different approach taken by further education tutors to teaching and learning mattered too. The young people spoke of feeling less pressure: being in smaller groups, being able to pace themselves in a task and being able to move around was important to them.

Other positive aspects of the further education approach to teaching and learning included group work, achievable tasks, one-to-one support, tutors making sure learners understood the task and access to a wider range of equipment. Those who had struggled in school to control their behaviour responded to efforts to relate to them as responsible individuals and to talk through their difficulties.

The feedback wasn’t all good, of course. Some of the young people had believed that there would be no ‘theory’ and were disappointed to find they still had to do writing, although some tolerated it as necessary.

Some didn’t like the college environment – rooms were sometimes seen as cold and dirty. A small minority found the college experience no better, or worse, than school, complaining of harsh tutors, boring and repetitive work and an unwelcoming environment.

### Evidence source

Lumby, J. (2007), ‘14 to 16 year olds in further education colleges: lessons for learning and leadership’. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training* 59 (1) pp.1–18

## INSIDE TRACK

### Resources

Research tasters, specially designed to support further education practitioners in carrying out their own evidence-informed enquiries into aspects of their professional practice, are available from: [www.tlrp.org/ls](http://www.tlrp.org/ls)

### Case studies

The National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics made the first round of grants available for action research projects in the further education sector in 2007. You can download reports of these projects from: [www.ncetm.org.uk](http://www.ncetm.org.uk)

### Advice

You’ll find helpful advice and downloadable resources for conducting practitioner research on the Becta website: <http://partners.becta.org.uk> You’ll also find case studies related to the ICT test bed evaluation carried out in all phases, including further education.

**HAVE YOUR SAY** We’d love to know your views on the articles we have produced for this issue and how they have informed your practice. Let us know by emailing us at: [inside.evidence@qia.org.uk](mailto:inside.evidence@qia.org.uk)