



National Research and Development Centre  
for adult literacy and numeracy

# Insights

## **Skills and social practices: making common cause**

An NRDC policy paper

Alix Green and Ursula Howard



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for Adult Literacy and Numeracy

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#### **Publications**

**NRDC**

**Institute of Education**

**20 Bedford Way**

**London WC1H 0AL**

Telephone: +44 (0)20 7612 6476

Fax: +44 (0)20 7612 6671

email: [publications@nrdc.org.uk](mailto:publications@nrdc.org.uk)

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This paper has been read and critically reviewed by:

Maggie Greenwood,  
*Learning and Skills Network*  
Mary Kett, *Department of Education and Science, Ireland*  
Lyn Tett, *Moray House School of Education at the University of Edinburgh*  
John Vorhaus, *NRDC, Institute of Education, University of London*



# Introduction

When adults living in developed countries face difficulties in their working, social and family lives due to low literacy, language or numeracy (LLN) skills, we are rightly concerned. With long-established entitlements to free education and the support and protection of the state, we expect that people will leave school equipped with these 'basic skills', allowing them to continue their education or apply their skills in workplace or family settings. Yet many developed countries face a challenge in terms of adult basic skills, as was established by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) 1994–98 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). It is both an interesting and an important task to compare how different countries have responded to this challenge in terms of policy, strategy and pedagogy. What can we learn from this exercise to improve learners' experiences and achievements?

This paper examines the two key approaches for tackling low skills within the adult population, two approaches often seen as diametrically opposed. In essence, a 'social practices'-oriented policy prioritises capacity and quality, whereas a skills-driven one is focused on targets and performance (see Papen 2005, Lavender et al. 2004, Merrifield 2005). The Republic of Ireland and Scotland have both incorporated the former into their basic skills strategies, whereas England has taken the latter route. There has been intense debate within the policy, practice and research communities in recent years about how such policies impact on teaching and learning, with a focus on exposing and analysing the differences between them and gathering evidence in

support of one or the other. However welcome the new prominence of adult LLN in stakeholder conversations may be, we should surely question whether the persistence of such 'camps' is actually helpful as we think about the future of the sector – and about the learners that should be at its heart.

This paper is an attempt to get beyond this impasse, using research evidence from NRDC and other sources to identify what works best for learners. We will argue that, far from being diametrically opposed, social practices and skills-based approaches can be mutually supportive, coming together in teaching strategies, assessment and classroom relationships to help learners develop in many different aspects of their lives.

It is heartening that recent developments in Scotland, England and other countries indicate that as post-IALS policies strategies and practice develop over time, conceptually polarised approaches are moving closer together, accepting the value and role of aspects of the other. Developing and promoting assessment-based accreditation systems in a social practices-based system would be one example. In England, the confidence building associated with learning literacy and numeracy and the ability to do so with others, using approaches and materials drawn from the real world, are recognised to support a person's employability and can be correlated with progress and achievement. The strong emphasis on numeracy in England as a separate though related concern, is being taken up by exponents of social practice as a field that cannot be tackled as an issue when it is understood mainly as one of the

literacies. There is movement towards a more shared approach. But there is still much work to be done to engage the two discourses and recognise what each brings to enabling literacy, language and numeracy to transform people's life chances.

This paper aims to contribute to that process of engagement. Taking Scotland's Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland (ALNIS) strategy as an exemplar of social practices-based policymaking and approaches to learning programmes, and the English Skills for Life strategy – with its national curricula and tests – as a skills-based model, we can start to explore the apparent opposition between these two approaches. Although the Scottish and English policies provide the point of departure for our argument, this paper is not just for those national audiences. We hope that it will add to the debates that go on in other Anglophone countries, including the USA, Canada and Ireland, where these debates are live.

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## Skills versus social practices: considering English and Scottish basic skills strategies

The differences between the English and Scottish approaches are based on the underlying understandings of LLN in the two countries – and in others – and the policy drivers behind the respective strategies. Skills for Life, as its name indicates, fits very much with other government strategies to address national skills issues. It does have a social inclusion aim but has been increasingly focused on supporting the drive for a high-skilled, competitive economy, delivering the LLN and ICT that people need to allow them to develop the professional skills for sustainable, productive employment.<sup>1</sup> The ALNIS strategy has taken a different approach, embedding adult basic skills into its community regeneration policy area, part of the Development Department.

ALNIS gives a high degree of autonomy to teaching professionals within an overarching curriculum framework document, which provides guidance about how tutors can work with learners to identify, define and then address their learning goals (McAlindon 2005). A dynamic planning tool ('The Wheel') was developed, drawing on the US 'Equipped for the future' framework. The Scottish curriculum framework recognises the different domains of people's lives and their varied purposes for learning as well as the knowledge, skills and understanding needed to support those purposes.

These two responses to the policy challenge of low-skilled adults are susceptible to comparison and contrast, characterising the English policy as skills-driven and the Scottish model as social practices-based.

To explore this apparent contrast further, we need to consider first what social practices are and how the concept relates to adult LLN policy. The scope and focus of this paper does not allow a full exploration of this complex field, but in terms of underlying principles, we can say that social practice theory recognises the significance of what people actually *do* with LLN, with whom, where, and how – that is, not only the highly varied *contexts* in which LLN activities take place – but also the purposes behind them.

For our argument, it is important to point out that advocates of this approach contrast it with that of functional skills, which they see as presupposing the existence of a set of universal (i.e. non-context-dependent) cognitive and technical skills that people need. You can therefore be regarded as lacking the skills to function. The role of LLN provision then becomes remedial, the argument goes, with the focus on acquiring the skills that adults are deemed to need rather than those the adults themselves want for their individual purposes.

Someone taking a skills-based approach would take issue with this concept, seeing skills acquisition as more than just narrowly instrumental in nature. Policymakers in England often refer to skills as a platform or springboard, not an end in themselves but

<sup>1</sup> See the next section on p.8 for more on the concept of skill within the policy arena.



a means by which a whole range of positive outcomes can be reached. Mixing metaphors, qualifications act as a key, giving access to options in further learning, employment or the community from which people would otherwise be excluded. Skills *enable*, and are seen as part of a wider policy to promote mobility and success in the context of a competitive, knowledge-based economy.

How LLN is understood, whether from a skills or social practices perspective, will of course produce different policy drivers at both the strategic and operational levels. It will affect how curricula are structured and developed, assessment carried out and tutors trained as well as how learning is planned and directed in the classroom. But if we can arrive at a holistic approach to teaching and learning, one that draws on the merits of both concepts, will we be able to use that new understanding to develop LLN policy? This paper draws together evidence from NRDC projects and elsewhere to suggest that there is indeed a common cause to be made. It will ask: can skills acquisition support a social practice-based understanding of people's participation in LLN events, and can a social practices approach inform the development of a functional skills policy such as Skills for Life?

## The concept of skill

It is clear that the discourse driving current post-compulsory education policy in England is that of skills. The FE White Paper *Raising skills, improving life chances* (DfES 2006) talks of the sector's new 'central role in equipping young people and adults with the skills for productive, sustainable employment in a modern economy'. The Leitch review has warned that the UK must 'raise its game' in terms of skills if it is to achieve an internationally competitive future (Leitch 2006). There remains a commitment to learning for personal fulfilment, civic participation and community development (though provision is expected to shift from FE to the Adult and Community Learning and voluntary sectors) but the main policy focus is on employability and economic success.

With an explicit employment focus it would be easy to see skills as quite narrow in scope, acquiring them through learning as being merely instrumental to economic goals. Such a view of skills acquisition can only be in opposition to the social practices-based approaches that recognise the workplace as only one domain of life and that place learners' purposes at the heart of planning and delivery. But is this a valid dichotomy?

It is in practices – including workplace practices – that skills are expressed. And that expression represents more than just competence; it is the blending of knowledge, experience and aptitude. From this understanding a broader definition of 'skill' can emerge, one that recognises the underpinning, enabling role of skills and is supported by longitudinal evidence on the impact of skills levels on life chances (to be discussed in the next section). There is a depth in the concept of 'skill' that is often unrecognised and too easily dismissed. Indeed, it may be that policy often undersells the skills model by not bringing out more clearly the interplay between skills, knowledge, experience, etc. that occurs in practices.



## Improving skills for practices

Longitudinal evidence from analysis of the 1970 Birth Cohort Study indicates how low skills impact on how people engage in practices in a range of contexts and in different domains of their lives, for example, work, family and community. The NRDC report *New light on literacy and numeracy* (Bynner and Parsons 2006) revealed substantial differences in life chances, quality of life and social inclusion at or below Entry level 2 (E2). E2 skills were associated with lack of qualifications, poor labour market experience and prospects, and poor material and financial circumstances, but the effects went beyond the economic. Poor health prospects – mental and physical – and lack of social and political participation were also associated with skills at this level.

Cohort members were tested at ages 21 and 34 for literacy and numeracy, the results giving a valuable picture of correlations between improvement/deterioration in skills and life outcomes. Of note is that the improvement of low skills may have a wider and more substantial influence on quality of life at age 34 than the *deterioration of good skills across the same age period*. Skills enhancement is more likely to open up opportunities and improve self-confidence, which is reflected in the wide range of positive life outcomes associated with it. This would suggest that LLN skills are a component of engagement in practices and that Skills for Life provision has a role to play in cross-government strategies to foster social inclusion and equality of opportunity.

For men, improvement in skills was associated with increased home ownership and employment prospects as well as political interest and community participation. They were also more likely to have married and/or had children. Women experienced similar socio-economic benefits to skills enhancement and these were particularly marked for literacy improvement. Improvers were also far less likely to show symptoms of depression, express feelings of disillusionment such as lack of control over their lives or report long-term health problems.

A new study by Bynner and Parsons (forthcoming 2007)<sup>2</sup>, an in-depth investigation of those with the lowest literacy and numeracy skills (E2 and below in the English system), who form approximately 4 per cent of the population, significantly reinforces the evidence that adults in this social group suffer the greatest disadvantages, both socially and economically. Their ability to engage with literacy, numeracy and IT as social practices are thus limited by their level of skill. Mental and physical health problems are also associated particularly with this group, as is less community and social activity and participation in political processes compared with those with higher skills. They experience markedly lower levels of access to and use of IT, the internet and other activities and work skills which are becoming mainstream. These are long-term systematic social class issues, as the evidence that people pass on their educational and social disadvantage to their children is strong.

These findings suggest that skills can enable people to engage across the range of contexts in their lives and support the diversity of purposes they have. Government

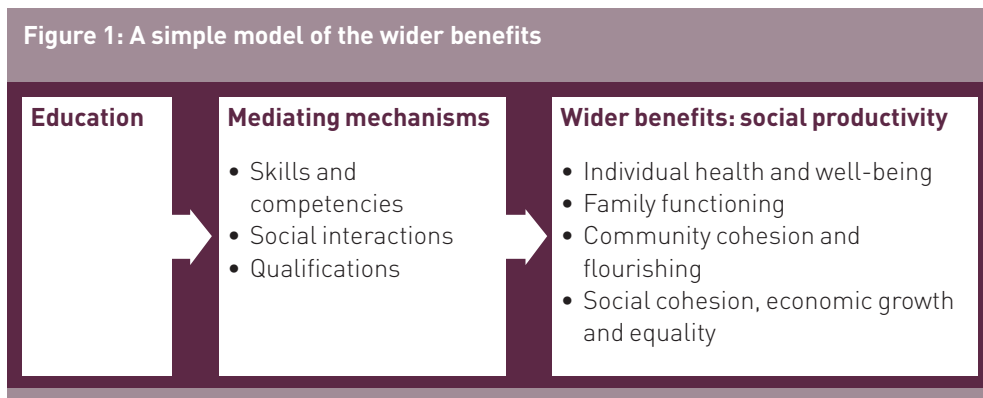
<sup>2</sup> See also Bynner (2007)

strategies to improve people’s basic skills – such as Skills for Life – can therefore be seen as part of an equality, empowerment and inclusion agenda which need not be in contradiction with the employability agenda. With major challenges remaining to reverse an apparent decline in social mobility and cohesion, the finding from the cohort study that skills improvement can deliver a positive effect on some of the social relations that condition people’s lives, is particularly significant.

This process is captured in the figure below, generated by the Centre for the Wider Benefits of Learning (2006) as part of its valuable synthesis of findings. In terms of our argument, this model is useful in that it captures in visual form one of the key relationships between skills and practices, one that has tended to be overlooked.

In the model, education is shown to support the expansion, formation and sustenance of a broad range of features of personal and social development, including qualifications and skills. These in turn act as mediating mechanisms to the development of an equivalently broad set of wider benefits, which contribute to the achievement of public policy goals across government by supporting individuals, families and communities to function and flourish.

The acquisition of these benefits has come to carry an even greater premium in a globalising world. With ever-accelerating technological development and information exchange and the major shifts in employment patterns and practices, the education system must equip children and adults with the skills, competencies and capacities to adapt to change. The Centre’s findings indicate that features of personal development such as ‘resilience, self-regulation, a positive sense of self and personal and social identity’ are important alongside academic and technical skills. Furthermore, they suggest that skills-oriented provision directly supports the development of these ‘wider benefits’, critical to individuals and to the local and national – and, indeed, international – contexts in which they live and work.



## Interrelations between skills and practices

Research in the US is providing important new evidence on the interrelations between skills and practices. The five-year Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning (LSAL) in Portland, Oregon has revealed that programme participation and self-study have positive, time-specific effects on the development of literacy practices. Literacy practices, in turn, have time-specific effects on the development of proficiency. These growth models support a broader concept of participation as *engagement in literacy development* that includes programmes, self-study and other learning activities.

A message for policy would be that supporting literacy and numeracy practices supports proficiency. Finding ways to encourage literacy and numeracy practices and integrate them into more flexible provision to adult learners may be the cornerstone of a strategy to raise LLN levels in a sustainable way. There is now an acknowledgement by policymakers that many adults face barriers to participation and an interest in addressing them. The development of a flexible approach must be part of the response, allowing for breaks in class attendance to handle the many demands of adult life, such as childcare or work commitments. Leitch's call for a demand-led system provides impetus for change, but much remains to be done to ensure adults can access the right learning for them, at the right time.

Critical to the emergence of this concept of a flexible offer combining practices and more formal provision is LSAL's evidence on self-study. Self-study was shown to be prevalent amongst adults of all literacy levels as a mode of basic skills development, engaged in by those who participate in provision and those who do not. Self-study appears to act as a bridge between periods of programme participation and to facilitate persistence.

The broad mode of participation suggested by LSAL brings together social practice and skills approaches. On the one hand, it recognises that learning involves learners actively deploying resources as well as programmes delivering services. On the other, it indicates that basic skills programmes appear to have the most direct and immediate impact on literacy practices, underlining the role of skills enhancement as a facilitator of literacy activities.

In NRDC's Practitioner-led Research Initiative (Hamilton et al. 2007), a project run in collaboration with local library staff, uncovered further evidence on this interaction between literacy practices and skills development. A focus on reading for pleasure boosted motivation and emotional development over the course of the programme but it also, crucially, supported the enhancement of knowledge and skills. The association of enjoyment and pleasure, and of self-motivated literacy practices with successful learning, is a key finding for the future of basic skills strategies, whatever their fundamental policy drivers might be.

## Skills as purpose

The social practices approach recognises the importance of learners' motivations, goals and purposes; proponents argue that every literacy task is done for a reason and in specific contexts, hence the challenge to concepts of universal sets of literacy skills. While the contention that actions can always be explained by reasons is contested, the wider issue of motivation is central to debates on adult learning.

NRDC research is uncovering layers of complexity in how learner motivation is understood, suggesting that a skills-focused approach is often congruent with a social practices-based concern to model learning around learners' personal aims, purposes and desired practices.

### **Beyond the daily application: numeracy skills, knowledge and practices**

A recent study of adult numeracy learners (Swain et al. 2005) concurred with the social practices approach in concluding that teaching becomes meaningful when it relates to an individual's purposes in learning. But it also found that meaningfulness was a feature of the *quality of an individual's engagement* with learning; purpose in learning can be totally removed from learners' everyday experiences and contexts, and can be focused on knowledge and skills. Thus pure or abstract problems, or areas of mathematics such as algebra, which involve problem-solving on a theoretical rather than practical, context-dependent level, can be very meaningful in terms of the interest and engagement they arouse. Indeed, the project found that the type of maths the adults requested was usually mainstream school mathematics rather than some form of vocational, applied or utilitarian mathematics specifically linked to aspects of their daily lives.

The three main motivations for learning were: to prove that they have the ability to study and succeed in a subject that they see as being a signifier of intelligence; to help their children; and for understanding, engagement and enjoyment. Skills and knowledge acquisition can be intrinsic to learners' purposes and envisaged as enhancing many different contexts and relations in their lives.

### **Vocational learning: skills in context**

A further dimension of this argument concerns vocational learning, where employment in a chosen occupation acts as a powerful motivator; work on improving LLN skills is seen as supporting learners' ambitions and purposes rather than exposing deficiency. NRDC research on disaffected young people in custody and the community (Hurry et al. 2005) found that preparation for employment – which would allow the young people to become financially independent – was perceived as directly relevant to their stage of life. A key task for the practitioner would be to work with learners to explore the centrality of LLN skills to their goal of getting a job; barriers to engagement in LLN can be overcome as learners come to identify gaining certain skills with their envisaged future practices in the workplace.

'Embedding' LLN is a delivery model for vocational learning that integrates LLN learning with learners' primary learning goals, i.e. vocational skills and qualifications. To be most effective, the LLN teacher needs the opportunity to support learners at the time of the practical task, linking the speaking, listening, reading, writing or calculating directly to that practical activity. NRDC research on embedding teaching and learning (Casey et al. 2006) has tracked almost 2,000 learners on 79 Level 1 and 2 vocational courses across five vocational study areas. Courses were categorised on a four-point scale according to the extent to which LLN was integrated into the delivery of the vocational content. The project found 93 per cent of literacy learners gained key skills qualifications on fully-embedded courses, compared with only 50 per cent where literacy was taught in a separate and unconnected way (numeracy: 93 per cent and 69 per cent). Fully-embedded courses also had better retention rates; 78 per cent of learners completed their studies, while only 63 per cent of those on non-embedded courses did so. Again, this is about linking the acquisition of skills to learners' purposes and envisaged practices.

## Social practices and work

The Skills for Life strategy sits amongst a set of policies that are pursuing the twin goals of economic success and social inclusion. In recent policy documents, such as the FE White Paper (DfES 2006), the Skills for Life strategy has become the key driver as educational and economic policies come into greater alignment. Sustainable, productive employment is the end goal, enhanced LLN skills the means. This view finds support from employers, with the CBI reporting the urgent need for action to address serious deficits in functional skills in the workforce (CBI 2006).

Written communication including legible handwriting, communicating information orally, understanding written instructions, and correct grammar and spelling are the areas of literacy most in need of improvement. In numeracy, employers are calling for the ability to do simple mental arithmetic without a calculator and to interpret data, for competence in percentages and for calculating proportions.

Improving skills for employment may not obviously appear to serve social practices, but, as our cohort study research has shown, employment outcomes sit alongside other socio-economic returns to skills enhancement (see 'Improving skills for practices' section on pp.9-10), including participation in political and community life. The workplace itself is a social context in which people work with and alongside others. Employment can also be a core purpose, for example, for the disaffected young people discussed previously. And, of course, the skills that are gained in the pursuit of employment or promotion can be applied in other domains of people's lives, such as helping children with homework, managing the household, holding an office in a club or society or pursuing further learning. Even where employment is not a core aim, learners often associate working with purpose, dignity and independence. A study of Skills for

Life learners' experience of work (Barton et al. forthcoming 2007) found that people had a clear sense of what they considered a 'good job', though there were differences of opinion between learners. Some learners had avoided such 'good jobs' where they anticipated facing difficulty. The improvement of LLN skills can therefore open up the opportunity not only for employment in general, but specifically for the kind of employment that enhances self-worth and personal dignity.

Furthermore, the policy agenda is focusing more on responding to the needs of learners rather than inviting them to attend provision in which the curriculum and strategies are already set. 'Personalisation' policy, set out in the FE White Paper (DfES 2006), also supports a social practices view, aiming as it does to focus on designing learning which is tailored carefully to individual, employment or community needs, reflecting the literacy and numeracy practices and skills needed in real-life contexts. And in 2007, in the policy discourse of the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), there is a new and stronger focus on community cohesion and reaching the multiply disadvantaged, with a stronger place for social inclusion alongside employability. With these shifts, there is recognition that progression, a central plank of policy, is not always linear in an upward direction for adults and that people learn, use and improve their learning in non-linear ways, formally and informally, to meet multiple life purposes.

### **Workplace learning**

Although workplace learning clearly links in to government strategies to improve employability, NRDC research is also able to point to ways in which it also serves the social inclusion agenda.

Initial findings from NRDC's major ongoing study of workplace basic skills training suggest that such provision attracts learners who would not usually attend more formal, often college-based, literacy and numeracy courses, including men (a ratio of around 3:2 male to female participants) and older learners. LLN provision in the workplace can therefore be seen as supportive not just of economic goals, but social aspirations to widen participation and access as well.

### **Employability**

There is a dearth of evidence on what skills people actually need for different occupations. 'Spiky profiles' of different LLN component skills are likely to offer a more accurate picture, rather than a blanket Level 1 or 2; for example, in numeracy, a hairdresser will need a higher level of skill in handling proportion and measurement than in interpreting data. Establishing an evidence base on the specific skills mixes required – including whether the mix is different for adults than for young people – is an important task for the future, which would help inform the development of the new functional skills and vocational qualification routes.

Government policy is coming to recognise, however, that employability is about more than LLN. A range of aptitudes – such as speaking and listening, decision-making, team-working and problem-solving – are demanded by a modern labour market in which people move between employers and sectors during their careers. Affective and attitudinal factors – confidence, a positive outlook, determination – are also critical, and employers repeatedly advocate them. North of the border, this is enshrined in the official definition of literacies, consciously drawing on social practices theory: ‘the ability to read, write and use numeracy, to handle information, to express ideas and opinions, to make decisions and solve problems, as family members, workers, citizens and lifelong learners’ (ALNIS 2001).

NRDC research on provision for young adults found that oracy received substantially less attention than literacy and numeracy (McNeil and Dixon 2005).<sup>3</sup> This is just one of a number of NRDC research projects which, together with a recently completed DfES Offenders Learning and Skills Unit project (Hurry et al. 2006), point to the importance of speaking and listening as skills in their own right, and as a means to improving confidence and participation in social and political life.

The development of generic skills can be particularly important for students with learning difficulties and disabilities (SLDD), offering them the opportunity for ‘horizontal progression’ (in contrast to the ‘vertical progression’ implicit in Level 2 or 3 vocational programmes). NRDC’s case studies of embedded provision included a horticulture course for learners with SLDD, in which all the lessons were underpinned by speaking and listening skills (Roberts et al. 2005). Recognising the value of oral skills to learners’ life objectives is an important aspect of promoting inclusivity in the Skills for Life domain as part of a wider social justice agenda.

## Social practices and teaching and learning

Social practices thinking is at the heart of the Scottish ALNIS strategy, placing the learner at the centre of a collaborative process in which teaching and learning is negotiated to ensure it responds to individual needs. There is consistent evidence emerging from NRDC research that would support such a model of learning, not only on the grounds of social practices but also because it can encourage learner progress and achievement in skills acquisition (see sub-sections below).

A theme that runs through this NRDC research is that matching learning activities to learners’ interests, values and purposes is an effective teaching strategy. And this message comes through from work with very different learner groups, including those seen as ‘hard-to-reach’ (Hamilton et al. 2007). Classroom practices should be social practices, and this also applies to the pursuit of skills development.

It should further be recognised that effective teachers are engaged in managing those practices in the classroom and in doing so are calling upon a set of distinct and

<sup>3</sup> See also Brooks et al. (2001).



important *skills*: relationship-building, facilitating groups, dealing with emotion and being able to see things from another's perspective, amongst others. While we all acquire them in varying forms as part of our social practices, the adult LLN classroom brings particular demands on these 'social skills'; there is a case for investigating how initial teacher training (ITT) and continuing professional development (CPD) can enable tutors to develop the appropriate social skills to be able to create relationships and environments conducive to learning.

NRDC is now able to say a lot about 'what works', across themes such as classroom relationships, individual and group work, assessment, and learner motivation, that should make a strong case for dialogue between the social practices and skills 'camps'.

### **Informality and classroom relationships**

The importance of teacher qualities – 'social skills' such as having good understanding of adult learners' lives, their needs and aspirations, and being able to create positive classroom relationships – has emerged in NRDC work across LLN domains and settings. This message has come through from practitioners and researchers but also the learners themselves. Learners interviewed as part of the study on making numeracy teaching meaningful highlighted a range of attributes and aptitudes an effective teacher should have (Swain et al. 2005). Subject knowledge and pedagogical skills, such as breaking work down, recapping and giving feedback, were recognised as important. However, a list of 'qualities' also emerged, to do with creating a comfortable, non-threatening and mutually respectful environment, understanding students' backgrounds and motivations and encouraging discussion, both with the teacher and with each other.

One important classroom social skill is the ability to work with what people already know, taking teacher understanding of learners' backgrounds one stage further. Moll et al. (1992) have come up with the concept of 'funds of knowledge' – 'historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being'. They identify great potential utility for a model of classroom instruction that reflects the exchanges, networks and relations that allow communities to adapt to changing social and economic circumstances, and survive and thrive.

Such instruction would build on what 'funds of knowledge' students bring to the classroom rather than on the skills they lack; teacher-learner relationships would be based on reciprocity rather than delivery. This thinking can inform the continuing development of adult LLN pedagogy, allowing learners' own resources to support their progress in skills acquisition.

These findings have implications for teacher education and professional development. We need to consider what the characteristics of ITT, learning environments and teaching practices are that promote positive relationships and social interaction, and how an appropriate balance can be achieved between subject and pedagogic expertise and the positive teacher 'qualities' discussed above.

### **Talk is work**

As mentioned above, discussion is valued by LLN learners; 'talk is work', a finding from an NRDC ESOL project, neatly encapsulates the value of classroom interactions (Roberts et al. 2004). NRDC can now contribute important new quantitative and qualitative evidence from its major suite of projects on effective practice to the debate around this issue.

Being able to express yourself clearly and fluently is a skill that supports engagement in social practices, as well as one that is essential in the workplace. Yet the Effective Practice Study in reading found very little evidence of teaching strategies that would recognise and encourage fluency, such as reading aloud; in many classrooms, silent reading was the predominant form of reading, but not followed by discussion or feedback (Brooks et al. 2007).

Indeed, individual working – often combined with whole-class instruction – dominated in the literacy and numeracy classes observed during fieldwork. The analysis of learner progress revealed some interesting findings around individual, pair and group work. Learners in the Effective Practice Study in reading who spent more time working in pairs made better progress, as did learners who spent less time working alone. However, the two most frequent patterns of classroom activity observed were whole-class opening section followed by individual practice, and all individual work. In the Effective Practice Study in numeracy, the strongest negative correlations with attainment included a large proportion of individual work (Coben et al. 2007).

A tentative message from the research would be that it is personalisation, rather than individualisation, that works in many cases: that is, learning that is tailored to individual needs, but does not rely on individuals working alone. The incorporation of discussion and interaction between learners – the social aspects of learning – into teaching strategies would appear to contribute to success and is not precluded by a personalised approach. The importance of the social aspects of learning is also evident in the workplace, where informal interaction with colleagues can be the main route for acquiring workplace skills (Barton et al. forthcoming 2007).

There is certainly scope for constructive debate between social practices and skills on how to develop provision that supports progression and achievement in a way that addresses learners' purposes and interests.

### **Assessment**

Under a skills-oriented system such as Skills for Life, the focus is on summative assessment, a final test to determine success or failure at designated levels in a national standards framework. This approach is often criticised on a number of fronts: for not capturing the full range of learner capability; for not placing trust in professional judgement to assess progress; for being intimidating and demotivating for learners. Assessment *of* learning is contrasted with assessment *for* learning, formative

assessment, which positively supports learning on an ongoing basis through ‘dollops of feedback’; it is an approach that focuses on the learner as an agent rather than the recipient of service delivery.

Formative assessment also has an important role in supporting the development of autonomy and motivation, which can have a positive impact on low-achieving and vulnerable learners. In a practitioner-led project at a centre for young homeless people, researchers identified what they termed a ‘ping-pong effect’ amongst clients, where progress made led to greater confidence and a more positive self-image and therefore a greater willingness to engage in further learning (Hamilton et al. 2007). This is an important finding, especially in terms of making an offer to vulnerable groups for whom a more formal programme of study may not be appropriate at first. For such learners, it is vital to be able to recognise and communicate the recognition of small improvements in both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ skills.

In these regards, formative assessment fits in with social practice thinking, but evidence also suggests it is highly effective in terms of learner achievement. Effect sizes from school-based research indicate that formative assessment can improve grades significantly (Black and Wiliam 1998). In the adult domain, NRDC projects have found formative assessment to have a positive impact, particularly – though not exclusively – with younger cohorts, disaffected young adults and young offenders.

The move towards a learner-centred approach to assessment need not imply the rejection of summative assessment, including tests. Three aspects of test-based assessment need to be explored here: the concept of testing; how testing is approached and handled; and the nature of the test itself i.e. what is being tested and how.

With regard to the concept of testing, we have already noted that many learners value the acquisition of skills as fitting in with their own ambitions and purposes – and they similarly value the accreditation that comes with summative assessment: a badge of achievement. Indeed, the word ‘test’ can have positive connotations, in the sense of ‘prove’, and proving ability in a subject in which they had previously been seen and seen themselves as ‘failures’ is a powerful motivator for many learners. It also ‘mainstreams’ the experience of literacy learners as capable of engaging in assessment regimes that are accepted hurdles and rites of passage for the majority. Social practices models that seek to exempt learners from a common, if difficult, element of learning and achievement are often criticised as operating with condescension and double standards, as perpetuating exclusion.

The approach is critical. NRDC research on informal learning with young people suggests that learners can be willing to participate in programmes with summative assessment if the *process or approach* to the assessment is right; learners need to ‘own’ the decision to work towards accreditation (McNeil and Dixon 2005). Summative assessment can also be used formatively; NRDC’s study of Skills for Life learners found teachers discussing the test with learners as a way of helping them decide what to do next with their learning (Appleby et al. forthcoming). Far from focusing on deficit, skills

assessment can inform a learner-centred approach to planning learning, progression and achievement.

In terms of content and method, testing need not be about the recall of chunks of knowledge from an externally determined curriculum under controlled conditions, as in an exam; it is possible to test *practices*. Definite outputs emerge from LLN activities – a letter written, a cheque filled in and bill paid, a conversation conducted and information elicited, all of which can be assessed. The LSAL in Portland gathers data on the frequency of 14 practices, from reading street maps to doing financial maths, writing a diary and using a computer at home. Such a scheme captures a wider range of capabilities than can a multiple-choice examination on its own, and reflects the activities that the skills will enable and support in real life.

That is not to argue that more formal testing does not have a significant role; undergoing testing helps to develop the generative skills, such as being able to concentrate, prepare, work under pressure, etc., that are called upon in life and work. Both types of testing have their strengths, in the particular way they challenge the learner and in the blend of knowledge and skills they evidence. Perhaps the next task for assessment development is how to combine these creatively to offer a menu of assessment options, spoken and written, teacher- and peer-led, portfolio and exam, formative and summative, that will best support learning.

To do summative assessment, including testing, effectively and fit in with learners' purposes, assessment regimes need to reflect the practices in which their skills will be applied and expressed. An example would be writing. We know that writing is a skill that is increasingly in demand. It is hard to imagine any job that does not require the generation of text, whether in the form of emails, notes, messages or reports. Deborah Brandt's work on the changes in the American workplace is uncovering the commercial premium on 'scribal skills' in the twenty-first century, a period she terms one of 'mass writing', being the second phase of the mass literacy age that began in the late nineteenth century (Brandt 2006).<sup>4</sup> Of course, we also need to communicate in writing, both formally and informally in our social, family and community lives. So a written task, related to common writing practices, would be valuable in making the assessment of literacy meaningful, and enabling it to support progression.

<sup>4</sup> See also Vincent (2000).

## Conclusion: social practices and policy

As this paper has argued, using research evidence, there is good reason for constructive interaction between social practices and skills-led approaches. And this is an urgent matter as adult basic skills assume a new prominence in the policy world. The Leitch review identified basic skills as critical to the drive to create a highly skilled, productive and competitive workforce for the future (Leitch 2006) and the Government's response, *World Class Skills*, takes up Leitch's challenge with new targets to 2020 (DIUS 2007). The continued development of the 14- to 19-year-old agenda will also involve a strong LLN component, following the recognition in the White Paper that 'functional skills' are the essential platform for progression to further learning and into employment (DfES 2006). The Commission on Integration and Cohesion produced its final report in June of this year, the Commission's creation itself an indication of the level of concern around how to foster cultural and social cohesion and community well-being (Commission on Integration and Cohesion 2007). Our research has shown how low skills affect social and political participation, relationships, health and many other areas of people's lives. So here also, LLN must play a key role.

Personalisation is perhaps the theme that can cut across these policy areas and through ideological boundaries. It is a theme that embraces the concept of the 'whole learner', an individual who has his or her own needs and aims, to which both teaching provision and pastoral support should be tailored. It takes the focus away from theory and restores it to practice, to improving outcomes, opportunities and experiences for learners. 'Capabilities' would be another way of expressing this focus on the individual, building on Amartya Sen's concept, which emphasises capability as human beings' exercise of practical choice to function in important ways if they so wish (Sen 1995). In terms of adult learning, the term 'capabilities' is able to capture the way in which people as agents deploy many different forms of knowledge, skills and competencies in their lives in interconnected ways.

Another key theme, which is bringing different schools of thought in policy, research and practice, is the concept of 'persistence'. This idea focuses on what approaches best help learners to persist with learning and make real and lasting progress – enabling them to engage in literacy, numeracy and language as social practices in every context in which they want to communicate. The overt focus on the learner, rather than on the provider or the programme's 'retention' rates, is a symbol of how every approach, whether theory, policy or practice, needs to be pluralistic, flexible and responsive if it is to start with learners' real, diverse and complex needs and not what others think is best for them. Understanding those needs is a research priority.

We know from research that skills matter. We also know that they enable social practices and that supporting practices in turn leads to proficiency. In good classrooms – in England and in Scotland – both are developed. There is far more common cause across the apparent policy divide than is often recognised. The

question is: *how* to learn from each other. Building consensus and changing mindsets are major challenges, but better faced than running the risk of complacency that often goes with a sense of occupying the moral high ground or claiming to speak for learners.

There is a dialogue to be had on where policy goes from here; for example, how can it provide a learning framework to best foster the confidence and 'soft' skills that benefit learners in their lives and ambitions but are also what employment and enterprise are looking for? How can learners be best supported to persist and achieve? Policymakers cannot succeed alone in this endeavour, they require input on what people need: what kind of learning would support learners' lives and be useful to them and to their communities? How are these needs shifting and changing?

The time for that dialogue, for making common cause, is now.

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## Notes





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

**NRDC**

**Institute of Education  
University of London  
20 Bedford Way  
London WC1H 0AL  
Telephone: +44 (0)20 7612 6476  
Fax: +44 (0)20 7612 6671  
email: [info@nrdc.org.uk](mailto:info@nrdc.org.uk)  
website: [www.nrdc.org.uk](http://www.nrdc.org.uk)**

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