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Evaluation of the DfES materials for embedded learning

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Introduction

This evaluation looked at the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) Skills for Life Strategy Unit's (SfLSU) materials for embedded learning that were designed and produced by CfBT Education Trust. It was undertaken for NRDC at the UNESCO Centre for Comparative Education Research, School of Education, University of Nottingham. The evaluation covered all nine government regions in England and was carried out between January 2005 and March 2006.

Embedded learning is defined by the DfES as: '...the development of literacy, language and numeracy with vocational and other skills. The skills acquired provide learners with the confidence, competence and motivation necessary for them to succeed in qualifications, in life and in work.' Embedded learning has become an essential part of the SfL strategy, aiming to widen participation and help a greater number of learners improve their literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) competence whilst working towards vocational qualifications. There is strong evidence that many adult learners working for national qualifications fail to fulfil their full potential because their competence and confidence in LLN do not match their skills in other areas (Parsons and Bynner, 1999). The Skills for Life (SfL) materials for embedded learning aim to help vocational learners to develop subject and LLN confidence simultaneously.

To support and promote embedded teaching and learning, the SfLSU commissioned a consortium, led by CfBT Education Trust, to develop SfL materials for embedded learning. It was anticipated that the resources would enable closer co-operation between vocationally-based practitioners and LLN practitioners. The materials have been developed to be used as a resource, not as a course, and this is clearly outlined in the introduction of each pack (see, for example, DfES, 2005, *Materials for Embedded Learning: Horticulture*, p. 8). The materials are mapped to the Adult Core Curricula for Literacy, Numeracy and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), the Key Skills Standards and the National Occupational Standards wherever relevant. The first batch of materials for embedded learning covered Effective Communication for International Nurses, Family Health, Horticulture, Social Care and Trowel Occupations. The materials for embedded learning were published both in hard copy and electronically in September 2004 (see www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/embeddedlearning).

The evaluation

The aim of the evaluation was to consider whether the materials helped learners to develop subject and LLN confidence simultaneously. Areas considered included: the extent to which practitioners were using the materials; how, if at all, they were being adapted; the vocational relevance of the materials; their strengths and limitations; the range of learner LLN levels and any suggestions for future development.

The evaluation was conducted in two stages. It adopted a mixed methodology approach using questionnaires to gather largely quantitative data in stage one and interviews and classroom observations to gain qualitative data in stage two.

In stage one, questionnaires were distributed to a stratified sample of potential users drawing on a database of potential users who had ordered one or more of the materials. In total, 582 questionnaires were circulated by post and email to five user groups: the adult voluntary and community sector, the prison service, schools, further education colleges and private training providers. Just over a fifth of the questionnaires (124) were returned. However, of these, 60 were returned blank. When contacted by telephone, respondents offered several reasons for this, including: the organisation did not deliver embedded SfL; staff movement and relocation; the materials were not being used at that time but had been ordered with a view to developing an integrated model of delivery in the near future, or for other purposes such as a library resource. One respondent stated that they did not deliver 'off the shelf' training; a misinterpretation of 'use' by some practitioners, highlighting one of the evaluation's important findings.

Key themes arising from the analysis of the quantitative data formed the basis of the second stage of the evaluation. The qualitative data collection consisted of face-to-face and telephone interviews with SfL practitioners and co-ordinators and vocational practitioners and co-ordinators. Some used the materials, others did not. Independent classroom observations and interviews with learners on a range of literacy, numeracy and vocational courses were also conducted. Schools were omitted from stage two of the evaluation as it became clear that they were not actually providing courses but their premises were being used for delivery by the voluntary and community sector.

As the evaluation covered all the government regions of England and incorporated four of the original five provider types, it had the potential to provide a representative national sample. However, there were multiple challenges that hindered the collection of second-stage data, including the identification of a sufficient number of organisations that were willing or able to participate in the evaluation. The original research methodology was adapted to meet these challenges and 'snowballing'¹ was used to increase the sample size. It should be noted that as the participant sample was small the findings from the evaluation cannot be generalised and are only specific to this project. Further, although the findings were accurate at the time

¹ Snowballing refers to the practice of asking members of a research sample to recommend other potential interviewees.

of writing, the general picture may have since changed as the use of the materials is fluid and evolving.

In total, 38 organisations were involved in the second stage of the evaluation, with 85 practitioners and co-ordinators interviewed.

Findings and recommendations

All key findings and recommendations arise out of the data collected during the evaluation. The findings and recommendations are divided into four sections: those of importance to practitioners, both vocational and SfL; those relevant to the developers of the materials; those pertinent to provider organisations; and those relating to policy.

Practitioners

- 1 Participants welcomed the materials as a valuable and timely resource. The majority of practitioners were using the materials predominantly for ideas and inspiration in conjunction with other materials rather than as a full course. They provided practitioners with the opportunity to present information to learners in different ways. Most practitioners used, or planned to use, the materials as and when they felt it appropriate for their learners by incorporating them into their schemes of work. Some had used the materials to provide a course structure.
- 2 There was evidence of confusion amongst practitioners between the perceived and actual use of the materials. Many practitioners were adamant they were not using the materials, or were not using them sufficiently to allow them to participate in the evaluation. They were 'dipping in and out' of the materials rather than using them from start to finish as a full course, which appeared to be how practitioners interpreted 'use'. The confusion over use is illustrated by the following comment from a practitioner: 'We are "dipping" into the resources and using them within our Skills for Life classes as a literacy/numeracy resource. Slightly different use than what they were designed for but useful for learners within this area.' However, classroom observations and interviews revealed that practitioners were using the materials extensively, but not exclusively, in conjunction with a wide range of other resources.
- 3 The main reasons given by practitioners not using the materials included: their level was felt to be too high for their learners; lack of time to become familiar with the materials; waiting for an opportunity to deliver embedded learning (for instance, some were waiting for suitable courses to run or for the results of diagnostic assessments identifying learners with SfL needs on vocational courses); and an unwillingness, by some practitioners, to trial new materials.
- 4 However, the evaluation provided evidence that the materials were being used across a wide range of learner levels and types as well as by training providers. Although the materials are broadly designed for learners working at or towards Levels 1 to 2, practitioners were using them from Pre-entry Level to Level 3.

- 5 Practitioners interviewed said the materials were easy to adapt. They reported 'cutting and pasting' learner pages to break down information and 'mixing and matching' the materials with other resources. However, researchers found that practitioners were not adapting the materials significantly. Classroom observations showed that most practitioners had only one set of materials and they often lifted materials directly from the resource pack and photocopied them for use by learners. Practitioners valued the generic nature of the materials and were using them across a range of vocational sectors.
- 6 Time was found to be a major theme throughout the evaluation. Practitioners identified the conflict between the desire to use the materials and the need for time to become familiar with them. Equally, they reported that having access to such high quality and relevant materials was a huge time-saver as it was not necessary for them to develop their own resources.
- 7 Evidence from the evaluation found that practitioners were predominantly using the learner pages, referred to as 'worksheets'. Practitioners suggested that learners preferred paper-based exercises. They cited both the lack of access by both practitioners and learners to suitable computer or internet resources, and low levels of practitioner skill and confidence in using ICT resources, as reasons for not using the electronic and audio components of the materials. This was a key issue for practitioners supporting learners away from their institutional home base.
- 8 Practitioners reported that the materials did cover much of the sector for which they were designed. However, they offered several suggestions for additions to the materials. Examples included: an over-arching user guide, an index system or glossary, improvement in audio materials to include voiceovers for lower-level learners and the use of regional accents.
- 9 Practitioners interviewed felt it was too early to say if the materials were having a positive effect on learning. However, they offered anecdotal evidence of an increase in learner motivation and retention since the materials were introduced. Practitioners felt learners were engaging more in classroom discussions in response to the contextualised nature of the materials. Practitioners also confirmed that the materials provided a focus for literacy and numeracy learning and encouraged students to take more responsibility for their own progress.

Developers of the materials

- 12 Practitioners liked many aspects of the materials, including: their contextualisation of LLN, adaptability, the referencing and mapping system, clarity and the overall professional design. They also appreciated having free access to the materials in 'hard copy' and electronic formats.
- 13 Respondents also reported that the materials had some drawbacks. Practitioners stated that their bulkiness made them difficult to navigate and also to transport from one teaching location to another; photocopying the colour learner pages into black and white also resulted in a loss of clarity.
- 14 A major concern voiced by practitioners interviewed was that materials should remain up-to-date, both professionally and aesthetically. Many practitioners were concerned that the images and particularly vocationally-specific legislation would become quickly outdated. The research team suggest this could be achieved by replacing individual pages within packs as and when necessary or by using ICT, for example email or mobile telephone alerts, to inform practitioners when new inserts are available.

Provider organisations

- 15 Many providers were using the materials as a successful marketing device, particularly with employers, to secure contracts for workplace delivery.
- 16 The evidence suggests there needs to be greater cross-departmental sharing of resources and improved communication between SfL and vocational departments to ensure the maximum benefits from the materials for embedded learning.
- 17 The use of the materials could usefully be promoted through vocational pathways as well as through SfL departments. This might be achieved through, for example, staff training events, a strategy already in use at some of the organisations visited.

Policy

- 18 The evidence from the evaluation identified three distinct categories of embedded teaching: delivery by an individual practitioner, collaborative planning between SfL and vocational practitioners, and fully integrated team-teaching. The majority of teaching sessions were being delivered by one practitioner; there was little evidence of team-teaching as co-ordinators did not see this as an economically viable option. However, there was evidence that SfL and vocational practitioners were working collaboratively in lesson planning to ensure linkages between learners' literacy and numeracy learning and their vocational pathways. This model provided a viable alternative to team-teaching in the more traditional format, allowing embedded learning to take place.
- 19 The evidence from the study suggests ICT to be a major issue in the area of embedded learning delivery. Frequently practitioners and learners reported having limited or no access to computers on which to run the CD-Roms or access the web portal. For example, some practitioners were using their cars as offices; in prisons access was strictly limited or prohibited. Even where practitioners did have full access they frequently reported that they were not sufficiently confident using ICT as an interactive teaching tool. If ICT is to be used as a vehicle for supporting embedded delivery, practitioners would require further support and training.

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Parsons, S. and Bynner, J. (1999) *Literacy, Leaving School and Jobs*. London: The Basic Skills Agency

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