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Linking learning and everyday life: a social perspective on adult language, literacy and numeracy classes

by Roz Ivanič, Yvon Appleby, Rachel Hodge,
Karin Tusting and David Barton

Literacy Research Centre, Lancaster University
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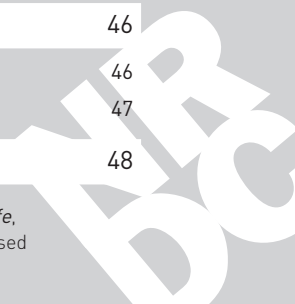
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Preface

This is one of the reports from the Adult Learners' Lives project, a major NRDC research project carried out by members of the Lancaster Literacy Research Centre. The overall aim of the project has been to develop understanding of the relationships between learners' lives and the language, literacy and numeracy learning (LLN) in which they are engaged, and to draw out the implications of these for the *Skills for Life* strategy, the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills. Starting from the perspectives of people attending LLN classes, the project focused on issues around motivation, participation, persistence and engagement. This project complements other research from the NRDC which approaches these issues with different methodologies, such as the quantitative cohort studies and the effective practice studies, and work which focuses primarily on provision itself or on the *Skills for Life* infrastructure.

The first year of the Adult Learners' Lives project concentrated on college environments. Working with teacher researchers enabled the research to be embedded in real classrooms and ensured that it had an impact on practice. In the second year of the project we worked in other sites with learners in what has been referred to by others as provision for the "hard to reach". This included a drug support and aftercare centre, a young homeless project and a domestic violence project. We also maintained contact with 53 learners who represent the longitudinal cohort of the study. Working collaboratively with practitioners in each of the sites, we explored questions of participation and engagement with learners who frequently have issues in their lives that impact upon learning.

Overall, 282 people participated in the research: 134 were students and the remainder tutors, managers and other support workers. The electronic database from the project consists of 403 files, which include 198 recorded interviews. Where we worked in depth with people in learning programmes, this ranged from carrying out several interviews over a six-month period to keeping in touch with the person and their learning for more than two years.

The project was rooted in an approach which sees LLN as social practices. They are activities which people carry out, and which relate to and are shaped by all the other activities they engage in throughout their lives, rather than just as skills or cognitive attributes which they 'have' or do not have. (See Barton et al. 2000, and Barton, 2006, for further details.) This has immediate implications for the way we approach research. We seek to observe people engaging in LLN practices, within the frame of their lives and socio-cultural contexts, and to listen to what they have to say about these practices and the meanings that they have in their lives. This broader view of LLN has been essential when trying to understand people's participation in learning in diverse settings.

People are involved in many different activities and these change over time. Different approaches to studying them reveal different facets and relationships, deepening our understanding. We have therefore combined methods of data collection, and have been developing responsive ways of gaining insights into people's meanings and experiences. These include observation, in-depth and repeated interviews, group work, photography and video. The rigour in this approach is in the richness of the data, in the level of detail and in the range of sources of data.

Throughout this research we have tried to respect the interests and agendas of all those involved and to be responsive to their concerns. We have negotiated the way the research would be carried out and what its main focus would be in each site. We have sought to find ways of working collaboratively in data collection and interpretation, and to communicate with participants about the results of the research and how they can best be disseminated. This is particularly important when working with groups which include people in positions of social disadvantage who have experienced marginalisation throughout their lives. We have done our best to represent people's voices fairly and in consultation with them; this is not an evaluation of them, nor of the programmes they are participating in.

The project has been embedded in a coherent strategy of communication and impact which aims to have a direct effect on practice. There is growing evidence that practitioners are most likely to draw upon research findings which resonate with their own experience (as summarised in Rickinson, 2005) and our own work supports this. Throughout the project we have disseminated emergent findings from our work, firstly locally, and then regionally and nationally, in formal and informal ways.

This paper needs to be understood in the context of other NRDC reports. Three reviews were important starting points: Adult ESOL pedagogy: a review of research by David Barton and Kathy Pitt (2003); Models of adult learning: a literature review by Karin Tusting and David Barton (2003); and Understanding the relationship between learning and teaching: a review of the contribution of applied linguistics by Roz Ivanič and Ming-i Lydia Tseng (2005). Another report describes some of the practitioner research: Listening to learners: practitioner research on the adult learners' lives project by Dianne Beck et al. (2004). This work links with ESOL case studies in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) – case studies of provision, learners' needs and resources: research report by Celia Roberts et al. (2004). And this report is complemented by a report on learning in different settings: Relating adults' lives and learning: issues of participation and engagement in different settings by David Barton et al. (2006). This will be followed by a report on practitioner development through involvement in research. Work is continuing with the preparation of practitioner guides based on the project, and by making the Adult Learners' Lives data available as part of the NRDC research resource.

The project has been directed by David Barton and Roz Ivanič, with full-time researchers Yvon Appleby, Rachel Hodge and Karin Tusting, and the support of a range of practitioner-researchers in different sites, including, particularly, Dianne Beck, Gill Burgess, Kath Gilbert, Russ Hudson, and Carol Woods.

Peer review

This report was read and peer reviewed by: Carol Taylor, Basic Skills Agency; Dave Baker, NRDC, Institute of Education, University of London; Nancy Gidley, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education; Majorie Hallsworth; Mid-Cheshire College; Linda Jackson, Consultant; Isabella Jobson, Adult Learning Inspectorate; Alexandra Kendall, University of Wolverhampton; Mary Rhind, Highland Adult Literacies, Scotland; Olivia Sagan, University of Luton; John Vorhaus, NRDC, Institute of Education, University of London and Carol Woods, Researcher.

1. Introduction

This report presents insights into adult language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) learning and teaching, based on in-depth research in college classes. The aim is to draw out, analyse and discuss some of the crucial aspects of what is going on in these classes - aspects which will be familiar to many, but often go unnoticed: the social elements in LLN learning and teaching. In section 2 we outline the key features of a social perspective on LLN, and of teaching and learning in section 3.

Our observations are drawn from case study work with students in a range of college-based provision in three cities in the North West of England. For the first year of the research we worked in-depth with 37 students in five classes run by three colleges. The colleges and the way we undertook the research are described in section 4. In section 5 we provide detailed case studies of provision and students from four classes, which show how factors interact in people's lives, and how widely one person's circumstances can vary from another person's. We then draw on these to illustrate points which have emerged from analysis of the whole data-set.

In sections 6 and 7, the report describes what students and teachers bring to the learning and teaching interaction. Section 6 demonstrates the range, variation and complexity of adult learners' motivations, life circumstances, strengths and expertise, making links between learners' lives and the ways they participate in classroom interactions. Section 7 shows the importance of what tutors¹ bring to the classroom - their views about learners, teaching and learning, and language, literacy and numeracy - to what goes on in the teaching and learning setting. A tension is identified for adult LLN teachers working within the *Skills for Life* strategy between two types of professionalism. On the one hand, there is their professionalism as adult educators, responding to adult learners as individuals; on the other hand, there is the new professionalism which has been introduced by the adult literacy and numeracy core curriculum (QCA 2000; DfES 2001a and b), which places responsibility on them to plan their provision in terms of itemised skills.

The report then draws out the social nature of learning and teaching events. In section 8 we identify five aspects of learning and teaching as 'social spaces'. These are: the dynamic dialogue between students' and tutors' contributions; the importance of social relationships; the negotiation of learning opportunities through the fine-tuning of elements of learning-teaching interactions such as pace, formality and structure; the role of learners as active agents in this negotiation; and the broader outcomes of attendance at *Skills for Life* provision, such as social confidence, which emerge from this negotiated process. Finally, in section 9, we identify the key implications of this work for practice, policy and training. We propose that the tension identified in section 7 might be alleviated to some extent by incorporating a fuller understanding of the social nature of LLN into professional development and into the curriculum.

¹ We use the term 'tutors' here to encompass both teachers of the whole group and individual or volunteer tutors. When we use the term 'teachers' we are referring specifically to the people responsible for the whole group.

2. Taking a social perspective on language, literacy and numeracy (LLN)

A social perspective on LLN recognises that these practices are always embedded in social contexts and purposes. This applies to LLN in everyday contexts of home, work, community, and also to LLN in educational contexts, although some practices more obviously have a purpose than others. People's everyday lives are extremely complex and varied, and the roles of languages, literacies and numeracies in them are equally complex and varied. Therefore, there are many varieties of any language, many 'literacies' and many 'numeracies', varying from context to context. For example, the ways in which language and numbers are used in a betting shop are very different from the ways they are used in a kitchen, which are very different again from reading, writing and working with numbers in educational contexts. The role of other people in the literacy/numeracy event, the interplay between spoken interaction, reading, writing and the use of numbers, the use of technology and resources such as paper, pencils and books, and the significance of speed and accuracy will all be shaped by the purposes to which they are put. Each context poses different demands, and requires different ways of communicating in words and numbers. Inevitably, the LLN classroom context is very different from the contexts of people's everyday lives, and sometimes the language, literacy and numeracy being practised in the classroom is hard to relate to other contexts. Taking a social perspective on LLN involves paying attention first and foremost to the contexts, purposes, and practices in which language, written language and numbers play a part.

It is worth pausing here to explain how viewing literacy and numeracy as sets of itemised, transferable skills differs from this social perspective. Focusing on skills narrows attention to linguistic and numerical patterns, distinctions and rules, and to 'reading', 'writing' and 'calculating' as if they were processes which are easily detachable from context. Skills such as 'Identify the main points and ideas, and predict words from context' (skill reference Rt/E3.4 in the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum, DfES 2001a, p. 15) are often taught and tested through exercises with right and wrong answers, such as comprehension questions, and often involve reading 'educational' texts chosen by the teacher, materials designer or test-maker, such as an encyclopedia extract. The ways of interacting with such a text in the classroom may be very different from the way in which someone would interact with it for real life purposes. In everyday life an encyclopedia entry is more often scanned for a particular piece of information at the moment of needing it, often collaboratively with other family members. The 'skill' of reading it thoroughly and then perhaps answering comprehension questions on it is probably education-specific. Beyond this, many of the people who come to LLN provision read entirely different texts in their everyday lives, such as the magazine *AutoTrader*, which might be read for the very specific purposes of keeping up to date with the car industry. Perhaps the inadequacy of defining LLN only as sets of skills is best summed up in a point which is fundamental to a social practice view of literacy: "We don't just 'read' and 'write': we always read and write *something*" (Barton 1991, p. 8; see also Gee 2000/2001). This point can be expanded to: We always read and write *something, for a particular purpose, in a particular way, in a particular time and place.*

The Adult Literacy and Adult Numeracy Core Curriculum documents state clearly that 'this ...curriculum provides the skills framework, the learner provides the context, and the tutor needs to bring them together in a learning programme using relevant materials at the

appropriate level, to support learners in achieving their goals' (DfES 2001a, p. 9, DfES 2001b, p. 9). To do this 'bringing together', we propose that tutors need to take as their starting-point a view of literacy and numeracy as social practices, situated in people's lives and purposes, and differing from one context to another. They need to think about LLN holistically, in order to contextualise the 'generic ... skills and knowledge elements' (DfES 2001a, p. 9; DfES 2001b, p. 8), which appear in the national standards. With a social view of LLN, tutors can ensure that their provision starts from learners' lives, and that the curriculum elements are not ends in themselves, but are encountered in the context of relevant and meaningful learning opportunities, thereby enhancing the learning of these skills and knowledge elements. For further discussion of the differences between these views of literacy, see Barton 1994, 2006, Barton and Hamilton 1998, 2000, Ivanič 2004, Papen 2005, and of numeracy, see Coben forthcoming.

Conceptualising language, literacy and numeracy as social practices helps us as researchers to understand and explain what we observed. As researchers, therefore, we paid attention to how the LLN activities we observed were socially situated in their classroom contexts, and how this compared and contrasted with what we knew of the activities of the students' current lives and imagined futures. We were also aiming to identify the views of LLN which underpinned the LLN teaching practices which we observed.

3. Taking a social perspective on teaching and learning: teaching as the creation of learning opportunities

We take a social perspective not only on LLN, but also on teaching and learning. This report draws attention to the importance of the social elements of the teaching and learning interactions we observed, which can often be overlooked, and to the relationship between these interactions and wider social contexts. We paid attention to the social characteristics both of learners' lives and of the classes they were attending, and to the social interaction between participants. In this way we were able to take account of the substantial differences between learners' lives, particularly as regards their motivations and goals. We also paid attention to the social context more broadly conceived, including the institution in which the provision was located, the practices which were typical in that context, and the policies within which that provision operated.

There is a substantial body of applied linguistics research which provides valuable insights for understanding adult LLN learning, firstly because much of it focuses on adult learning, secondly because it is concerned with the particular characteristics of language learning – 'learning to ...' rather than 'learning that ...', and thirdly because of its interest in the language of learning, often called 'classroom interaction'. There has been a move in the study of language education away from attempting to identify the most effective method of teaching towards attempting to understand the complexity of what is involved in learning. This research is summarised in Ivanič and Tseng 2005 (see also Allwright 2005, 2006; Gieve and Miller 2006, Tseng and Ivanič 2006).

The factors which have been shown to shape learning are:

- Learners' and teachers' beliefs about learning, teaching, LLN.
- Learners' and teachers' motivations, goals and intentions for the class.
- The resources learners bring with them to learning from their everyday experience.
- The nature of the curriculum and teaching materials.
- The political and institutional context which enables and constrains what can be done in class.
- The socio-cultural context for learning, including issues of inequality.

The aspects of learning-teaching events which have been shown to be significant are:

- The physical context for learning.
- The approaches to teaching.
- The nature of the social interaction in the classroom.
- The construction of identities in classroom settings.

(For further details see, for example, Allwright 2005, Burns 1999, Cazden 2001, Wenger 1998.)

The implication of these findings for future research is that it should pay attention to these factors affecting learning, and to these aspects of learning-teaching events. In our research on LLN classrooms, therefore, we have used participant observation, recordings of classroom interaction and interviews with learners and teachers to provide as full an account as possible of these factors.

Recognising the sort of complexity outlined here, applied linguists concerned with language teaching have proposed that, rather than seeking to identify 'what works' in teaching, it is more useful to seek to understand the process of learning in a more nuanced way. This is because the findings from substantial research in the 1960s and 70s on different methods of language teaching were inconclusive, with the main finding being that differences between individual teachers and learners were more salient than the methods or techniques used. They suggested that it is useful to conceptualise teaching as 'the creation of learning opportunities', from which different learners will benefit in different ways (for further discussion, see Allwright and Bailey 1991, Crabbe 2003). This conceptualisation of teaching emphasises the active role of learners in setting their own agenda, participating in class and engaging in learning opportunities on their own terms. The implication for research is that we need to deepen our understanding of learning and teaching from the perspective of learners.

Research has also found that participating in a class can lead to a range of different types of outcome, although the actual benefits may not be discernible until some time after the class has finished. Types of outcome which have been identified are:

- Learning of 'content'.
- Learning how to learn.
- Learning about language.
- Learning about social relations.
- The reconstruction of social identities.
- Wider benefits of learning, such as increased confidence and a greater sense of autonomy.

(For further details see, for example, Eldred 2002, Eldred et al. 2004, Green and Dixon 1993, Overton 2001, Schuller et al. 2004 and Vorhaus 2001.)

The theory and research outlined here points to the complexity of learning, and the multiplicity of factors which need to be taken into account when trying to understand what is going on in educational environments. We found that this way of conceptualising the relationship between learning and teaching was a productive starting point for our research on adult LLN learning. In the Adult Learners' Lives project we have focused our attention on what is happening in the classroom from the learners' perspectives, in order better to understand what might constitute learning opportunities for them. Although our findings are based on very specific cases, they are intended to provide insights into the sorts of links that can be made between learning and everyday life for any learner in any class.

4. Researching adults learning in college classes

In this report we focus on instances of relatively formal provision for adults. By 'relatively formal' we mean that they are classes which are offered in college settings, rather than other contexts. These were:

- A maths class at a DISC (Drop-In Study Centre) in Liverpool.
- A spelling class at a different DISC in Liverpool.
- An entry level 3 ESOL class in Blackburn College.
- A mixed entry level 1 – level 1 spelling class at Lancaster Adult College.
- A mixed entry level 1 - entry level 3 English class at Lancaster Adult College.

(This class is not included in the case studies presented in section 3, but data from it are included later in the report.)

Each of these classes was studied by one of the research team. We gained an in-depth understanding of the regular patterns and practices of each class, and recorded one session for more detailed analysis (referred to below as the 'focal session'). In Blackburn and Lancaster, the research involved frequent participation in the class, where possible attending every week in order to understand the routines and activities of the class as an insider. We kept records of what happened in these sessions in detailed field notes, written within 24 hours of the visit. In the two classes in Liverpool, the students, tutor and researcher collaborated in the production of a video over a four-week period to record a session as a focus for discussion.

We studied not only the characteristics of each of these forms of provision but also how it is experienced by a selection of participants in it, spanning 37 learners overall. We asked learners about their intentions, their perceptions of what was happening, their perceptions of what they gained, and how these factors related to their everyday lives. We juxtaposed the learners' perceptions with our own observations of the classes, and with teachers' accounts of what they were doing in the classes, and why. In each class, at least four learners were selected for more detailed interviews about what they had learned, both from the class in general, and from the focal session. We recorded the perspectives of the class tutors through interviews, field-notes, and taped peer-discussions. Some of the class tutors were co-researchers with us on the Adult Learners' Lives project, conducting their own research (as described in the report of their own research projects: *Listening to Learners: Practitioner research on the Adult Learners' Lives Project*, Beck et al. 2004), as well as working in partnership with us on documenting these classes.

A major feature of the research was its collaborative nature. The researchers negotiated relationships with tutors and students, accommodating the research to their priorities and preferences. The researchers visited the classes frequently over a full college year, building up research relationships over time. This allowed the researchers and class members to get to know each other very well, to trust each other, and to feel comfortable about what they wanted to disclose to each other. These features of our research methodology - developing relationships, negotiation, respect and trust - are factors which, in our view, were essential for us to gain an understanding of the more subtle personal and social aspects of learning-teaching relationships.

The data collected in this way was analysed in a three-stage process. First, each researcher individually interpreted the data for their classes, annotating it for emerging themes. Each case showed how adult LLN learning is shaped by the characteristics of the specific social context, and how it differs from person to person, depending on the life histories, beliefs, motivations and resources which they bring with them to the same learning-teaching event. The case studies produced as a result of this work reveal the complexity of factors of which adult LLN teachers need to be aware and to which they need to be responsive - four of these are presented in section 3 of this report, to give a flavour of this complexity. The case studies were shared across the team, and themes identified collectively were then used as categories for a second round of analysis. The team then generated a set of provisional findings from the analysis, and these were checked against the data in order to see how far they were supported by the individual cases, and to identify specific details to exemplify each. This process led to the refinement of the findings, and the headings which we use in the main body of this paper.

The overarching message emerging from our research is the value of a greater understanding of learners and their lives outside the classroom for fine-tuning adult LLN pedagogy². In the sections below we introduce the issues underlying this message through brief descriptions of some of the focal sessions, followed by profiles of six individual students. We then identify the key insights emerging from these situated studies, focusing on those which are relevant across two or more contexts. These situated understandings arising from our research are likely to resonate with other contexts, maybe differing somewhat in detail or implications, but nevertheless worthy of consideration by practitioners and researchers, adapting them to the particularities of their work. We have presented these findings under discrete headings, but in reality these factors are intertwined. In many places what we observed was the complex interplay of factors which we list here; we will discuss some of these interactions among our findings as we proceed.

² Throughout the report we use the word 'pedagogy' as the term in common use to encompass principles of education. However, the origin of the word implies 'the education of children', and much of what we present in this report concerns principles of education which are specific to the teaching of adults rather than children. The term 'andragogy' meaning 'the education of adults' is sometimes used to capture this distinction (see, for example, Robinson 1994), and many of the methods of teaching and learning presented here are in keeping with what Robinson calls 'an andragogical approach'.

5. Adults learning in four classes

We have chosen four case studies to present in this paper. Between them they represent the range of themes which we have drawn out of the dataset as a whole. For each case study, we describe the teaching and learning interaction in the class, and present a profile of an individual student. These case studies and profiles draw out what learners bring with them to their classes, their motivations for attending, how each person is unique, and their perspectives on the learning-teaching event in which they are engaged. They have been chosen to be as diverse as possible, with different types of class being studied: literacy, English, spelling, maths, and English for speakers of other languages; different types of provision: drop-in centre, class set up according to level, and one-to-one tuition with volunteer tutors; different cities, different genders, and different life circumstances. In the profiles, we describe people's backgrounds, their motivations for attending provision and the way they participated in teaching and learning interactions in the class, drawing out perceptions of and strategies for learning. The profiles show how factors interact in people's lives, and how widely one set of circumstances can vary from another.

5.1 The Liverpool maths class

Liverpool Community College delivers a large programme of adult learning through a mixture of city sites and local Drop In Study Centres (DISCs). The city sites are large new purpose-built buildings, offering a wide range of courses and facilities for adult learners. The DISCs are located within communities, making adult learning accessible and responsive to local needs. The maths group we studied is held as a two-hour session in the DISC in Redbrick Community College, an old Victorian building in the heart of the dockland area of Liverpool. The DISC room is situated on the second floor. It contains an office, two teaching spaces, filing cabinets and teaching resources. At first glance it seems cramped and noisy but it is a space that students clearly feel very comfortable in. They move around with confidence and a sense of ownership.

At the time of the research Kay³, the tutor, had a drop-in maths session on Wednesday between 10 am and 12 noon. Students ranged between entry level 1 and level 2 and worked on worksheet material at the level appropriate to them, which they chose in consultation with Kay. As the session was a 'drop in' students were free to attend when they wanted. Generally everyone attended the whole session from beginning to end, taking a collective coffee break halfway through. Students sat around a group of tables in the middle section of the room, surrounded by filing cabinets with an old CD player on top, which often played classical music softly in the background. There were maths artefacts in the space including posters showing multiplication tables, number posters, sets of scales and tape measures. At the other end of the room a small group studying English used to meet at the same time.

³ Pseudonyms have been used for learners and tutors to ensure the anonymity of participants in the research. Where possible, participants were asked to select their own pseudonyms.

Focal session

The session took place on 2 April 2003, and was video recorded. Five students participated: Jason, Katrina, Sarah, Ella and Vicky. Kay greeted each person individually as they arrived and checked that they knew what they were going to do. They chatted about 'public' information like other study, work and their children as individuals entered. The group helped to arrange the video camera, which Yvon, the researcher, operated, and then continued with their usual lesson structure. Kay prepared the tables and set out materials whilst the students collected their worksheets and learning plan folders.

The students appeared at first sight to be working individually on their own curriculum-referenced worksheets. Jason was working at entry level 3 / level 1 with fractions, Katrina on entry level 1/2 multiplication, Sarah on level 1 area and measurement, Ella on level 1 averages and Vicky on statistical analysis for her GCSE psychology coursework. They were using calculators, tape measures, pencils, pens, notebooks, worksheets and folders, recording their learning by keeping a learning plan in their own file. There was a high level of engagement with the worksheet and task. What was not so obvious at first sight was that Kay had contextualised these worksheet tasks in terms of each student's own wider interests, and in terms of the meanings and uses of number which had emerged when she had asked such questions as: 'Why do you want to work on area?'

The room was hot and noisy with the phone continually ringing and the admin worker responding to the calls. The English class also generated a continual low hum and there was noise from other parts of the building. But everyone in the maths group concentrated on their worksheet, ignoring all the noise. While students focused on their worksheets, Kay moved around the room, guiding, demonstrating and helping students to achieve the tasks on the worksheet. Her manner was quiet, respectful, calm, responsive and reassuring. She stood, knelt, bent, smiled a lot and laughed. She predominantly interacted with students on an individual basis, either responding to student requests or circulating. When circulating, she stood by the student and waited to be shown the work. She marked, or showed calculations in pencil and discussed follow-on topics or worksheets with each person. When responding to a request for help, Kay spent several minutes looking at the worksheet and discussing the difficulty. Through dialogue, she demonstrated how the answer was calculated, using her hands and arms to show size, proportion or area. The student either recalculated with her there or showed they could manage on their own.

The lesson worked on shared but individual enterprise. Students looked at each other, talked to each other and engaged socially, negotiating roles of provider or recipient of knowledge and understanding. Sarah used a tape measure for her worksheet on measurement and in between measuring the desk, a cup and her hand she mimed measuring her waist and her bust. The group, including Kay, joined in a light-hearted discussion about measuring their bodies. Katrina and Jason discussed what part of the head should be measured for a head measurement. After social interactions like this, individuals returned to work on their worksheets whilst Kay continued moving around the room.

Student profile: Jason

Background

Jason is 31 years old. He is single and lives on his own in a flat but has close contact with his mum nearby who is housebound. He describes 'going off the rails' sometimes and at these times doesn't always manage to get to college. Jason stopped going to school at 12 years old, spending his time hanging about the docks and riding the Mersey Ferry. He learned enough skills on building sites to earn a living as a scaffolder and later unloading containers at the docks. A serious hit-and-run road accident left Jason unemployed and with depression.

Motivations for coming to the class

Jason explained how he views learning maths now:

I'm hoping to learn, when you say like maths, I'm hoping to get qualifications or something out of maths. Like when I went to school I was in the first year, I sort of went but (pause) when you look at maths now I want to learn something.

He described wanting to learn to overcome general feelings about being scared of maths and also particular skills he identified as fractions, subtraction and addition.

Jason did link maths, if not fractions, to everyday life:

Yes, because you see objects every day don't you? On buildings, or you'll see even on the road, you know plaques like circles with name plates with numbers on or road marking, like 30 miles an hour, that's a number.

He appreciated the learning about measuring that was occurring and thought this was useful for buying a shirt or for clothes. He also thought knowing numbers would help him with his voluntary work in the tenants' association, for example in using numbers on the phone or sending a fax. Jason said that he understood money, in terms of how much he had in his pocket and what things cost in the shop. It was the link between the abstract concept of fractions and the everyday concept of dividing that he was learning and Kay was teaching him.

Jason felt that he was learning many new skills and knowledge that interconnected for him. He felt that Kay's teaching was different from his previous negative school experience and he was excited and now enjoyed the whole process of learning:

As I say we were having a good laugh and a joke about everything in maths. Maths now, as I explained it, I never went to school, but maths now, it's just like teaching, that's what it is the teacher's learning us and I'm learning. I'm probably learning faster. As I say it's just getting involved in everything. Same as when I go to college for computers, that's another useful thing you know. Take maths, that's probably like the keyboard, it's got all numbers and then looking up the internet. And with English as well, because I'm learning English as well, that comes up the same as on a computer.

Participation in learning

In the focal session, Kay responded to Jason's learning agenda and placed it within the curriculum framework for entry level three. She reported in her pre-session notes that Jason planned to continue with fractions both cancelling down and making a fraction in a context, possibly using a short group questionnaire. Her post-session comments recorded that Jason cancelled fractions confidently but was not quite sure about fractions in context and he therefore needed more practical examples.

Jason explained that he felt he learned best on his own, even when in a group setting. He described the videoed session as successful in these terms:

Well, I thought the class was good 'cos everyone was doing their own individual work, I tend to stay on me own in a small, well by myself in me own project. I was doing fractions.

The video recording showed that Jason interacted in the measuring episode enjoying the fun, some of which was directed at him as the only male. Observation notes recorded that Jason interacted socially with others in the group who responded in a friendly and interested way. The social interaction, as well as the maths skills, was part of Jason's sense of what he was learning and of his increase in confidence:

My confidence now has gone up. I used to be a very shy person. I wouldn't do nothing, I used to hide away in one corner and now you meet everyone.

5.2 The Liverpool spelling class

The spelling class was held as a two-hour session at Deepside DISC, housed in two rooms within the newly-refurbished Deepside library. Deepside is situated on the outskirts of Liverpool's city centre, about four miles out. The area is made up of mainly post-war corporation housing, new build and regeneration projects. Access to the library is both hidden and unattractive, with litter and rubbish in the alleyway leading to its entrance. In contrast the library itself is new, warm and inviting with a bank of computers and many posters in the entrance.

The main DISC room is a large newly-furbished purpose-built teaching and learning space. It has a bank of about 20 computers at one end of the room where the IT tutor teaches a range of courses. This is always busy, with students working on their own with the support of the tutor. The middle section has the reception desk and file cabinets. The end section has tables grouped together to make a large space for about a dozen students. In this space there is a white board, flip chart and both numeracy and literacy artefacts including scales, multiplication table posters, dictionaries and files. The student filing cabinets are on one side of this space with the tea and coffee and photocopier on the other side.

The spelling class was held on Thursday morning between 9.30 and 11.30 am. It catered for students with different knowledge and confidence levels of English and spelling. Debbie, the tutor, taught the class at one end of the room with the IT course running at the other end, against a backdrop of a ringing telephone and people dropping in for information.

The focal session

The group worked collaboratively on videoing a focal session of the spelling class on 3 April 2003. Debbie welcomed each student individually as they entered and asked about homework, discussing any additional writing they had done, and asking about jobs, children and families. As the group settled people chatted to each other while getting out folders, worksheets, pens, paper and dictionaries. Eight people attended, sitting to accommodate Tommy and Susan, two hearing-impaired students, who sat at the front.

Debbie worked mainly from the flipchart, which was at one end of the table and the focal point

of the class, writing key words and phrases that she talked about and demonstrated. Her delivery was to the whole group, encouraging participation and involvement without putting anyone on the spot. Although clearly in charge, standing at the front using the flipchart, Debbie also came across as a warm human being who readily shared her passion for her subject and for the student's own subjectivities and understandings. She skillfully engaged with the group in a performance mode, keeping their attention through the use of jokes, interjections and responses to comments that they made. By referring to her own, sometimes negative, experiences of learning she created a space where students were encouraged not to be fearful of learning new things, or of making mistakes.

The lesson started by recapping the previous lesson on prefixes, checking for understanding and any homework generated from it. She gave examples of a root word 'willing', the prefixes 'un' that made a new word 'unwilling', and asked students to give examples to show their own understanding. Then she demonstrated suffixes on the flip chart, explaining that 'pre' meant before and 'suffix' after. She wrote common examples on the flip chart, using a column to show the root word, the suffix being added, and the new word it made, and encouraged students to come up and add answers to the tasks she had set. Students then worked on worksheets, either individually or in pairs, filling in beginning and ends of words from memory or by using a dictionary.

As the students became more confident, recognising words that they knew and being able to identify suffixes and prefixes, they related this to a general awareness of language and how it was made up. They were interested in the Greek and Roman roots of the English language. Tommy, Elizabeth and Susan were enthusiastic, relating this knowledge to doing crosswords. Responding to this enthusiasm, Debbie departed from her prepared material to talk about grammar. Most of the students found this confusing: a step too far. Debbie's post-lesson evaluation made reference to this in a critical self-reflection about the difficulty of the materials she used and going too far for the students' understanding. Debbie recovered by explaining that grammar was something that they could do another class on, but they should concentrate on suffixes and prefixes for the time being. She discussed the possibility of a future class on grammar and both Tommy and Susan registered an interest, saying they hadn't really understood what they had just done but would like to learn.

As the class came to an end Debbie asked who would like a worksheet to practise suffixes at home. Most in the group wanted one. She also asked who would like ten words to write a story for homework. Tommy was very enthusiastic and Debbie read out ten words that those who wanted to wrote down.

Student profile: Susan

Background

Susan is 69 years old, a widow who lives alone. She has six children and is a grandmother and great-grandmother with many family members living nearby. She has been attending the class to improve her spelling. She described going through her primary schooling without her deafness being picked up. This affected her confidence and skills in English. This was made worse as her schooling was interrupted by the war when she was evacuated to Chester. Although she says she was a shy and naïve child she describes herself now as being more confident. Susan talked about her limited writing practice when bringing up her six children:

I never put pen to paper, I'd be seeing to their needs and they were hardly ever off school so any little note I wrote was they were off sick, that's it no more words and sign it. Then I'd sign me family allowance book once a week and then I'd sign me pension.

Motivations

Susan joined the spelling class after she had joined the IT course at the DISC and found she struggled with spelling. She had been given a computer by the family and wanted to know how to use it, keeping up with her grandchildren and helping with their homework. Susan described her motivation for coming as:

I hope to learn a lot of my spelling because when I joined the ICT I realised I couldn't spell the shortest word, it had all gone out of my head.

By joining the class Susan had widened her understanding and appreciation of English language. When Yvon asked in the pre-class interview if she knew what she was going to do she replied:

No, because we were doing the prefixes, which I enjoy. I think English is fascinating and it's a subject that you can go on and on with. The more you find out about it the more interesting it becomes. I think that's the way learning should be, isn't it?

Susan spoke a lot about finding pleasure, enjoyment and fun in learning about language and spelling. Although she enjoyed the social aspect of the group this was not always easy because of her hearing impairment. The video showed how she would engage with both Debbie and other members of the class when she could hear, but would work on her worksheet on suffixes when she could not. She described enjoying the challenge of learning, of acquiring new skills both through her own enquiry and through instruction. She saw her quest for the truth and understanding as potentially difficult:

... I've got to have the truth and I need to be told a bit. I'm a bit of nuisance really.

Susan showed through her classroom interactions and her worksheets that she acquired knowledge and understanding about suffixes – something she enjoyed. She also felt this was useful to her:

Well actually you know I can grasp, I can see the difference when I've done the word and added on the end, so it's making the word a bit longer. So, it's enabling me to spell a bit better.

Her positive relationship with Debbie was important to Susan in providing what she described as a 'nurturing environment' for this learning to take place.

Participation in learning

Debbie showed in her student profile that she was aware of the reflective nature of Susan's learning and how although she came to learn a specific skill (spelling) her interest and learning had broadened out. She described small notes that Susan wrote in her homework to Debbie indicating her learning: 'I didn't think I understood this but I know I do now.' This showed it was important for Susan to understand her own learning progress and not simply to be measured externally.

5.3 Blackburn entry level 3 ESOL class

The entry level 3 ESOL class started in September 2002. It was held four times a week, on Monday – Thursday 9am – 11am, following the ESOL national curriculum in a modular scheme. The classes are held in a large, pleasantly refurbished, grand Victorian building adjacent to the main college campus in the centre of town. In addition to ESOL, there are ‘mainstream’ courses with a wide student mix, which creates a lively atmosphere. The class is held in a spacious, high-ceilinged room. Students work on tables arranged in a horseshoe facing the teacher’s table with a blackboard behind and an OHP to the side. There is a photocopier in the room which is used by other teachers who come and go just before the lesson starts.

There are up to 12 students in the class, which the teacher, Duncan, sees as falling into two distinct social groups. There is an ‘urgent’ group, made up of students seeking asylum from a wide range of countries, who live with a sense of uncertainty and not belonging, and are desperate to learn English in order to quickly build up a life here. And there is a ‘non-urgent’ group of young South Asian women who live in a stable extended-family-and-community situation. Though some of this group would like to seek paid employment, there is not a desperation about this in terms of survival in society.

The class work together, all following the same learning activities which are decided by the teacher and are teacher-directed. It is a fairly formal but relaxed and friendly learning environment. Students are mainly focused on the learning tasks with minimal ‘off task’ interaction, except at the beginning and end of lessons.

Typically the two-hour session begins by the teacher explaining to the whole group which main grammar points will be covered in the session and carrying out introductory activities with the whole group which are teacher-directed using materials from the main source textbook, ‘Headway’. The rest of the session is a combination of pair work or small group work, with some individual work (on a common exercise) and whole-group feedback, working on exercises related to the grammar points being learned, which are photocopied from the textbook. Each of the four skills – speaking, listening, writing and reading – is practised in some way related to the task. The lesson concludes with a review of what has been learned in the session, which the teacher writes up on the board and the students copy on to their record sheets.

Focal class

The focal lesson on 27 March 2003 ran from 9am – 11am and was based on the ESOL textbook ‘Headway’ – Entry 3 Unit 12: Verb Patterns, which had a magazine feature story as the central text. There were 10 students, from a range of countries: Nusrat (Pakistan), Stevan (Angola), Tara (India), Aiad (Iraq), Martina (Angola), Nusrat (Pakistan), Sameena (Pakistan), Abdul (Iraq), Sumi (Pakistan) and Soraya (Iran).

Duncan signalled the start of the class by greeting students once most had arrived. He rearranged their seating arrangements, asking students he perceived as ‘stronger’ to sit with weaker students and pairing students of different linguistic backgrounds together. He explained that the main purpose of the lesson was ‘to look at some grammar’, and that he wanted to start with some reading, but that there would be a chance to speak more later.

He gave out the magazine feature story cut up into pieces and asked students, in pairs, to read the pieces and then put them in the correct order. The students were very engaged and there

was a buzz of 'on task' conversation. Sameena and Abdul and another pair completed the task easily; other students found it more difficult. Then Duncan gave the students a photocopy of the complete text and asked them check their text ordering. He then asked students what type of text it was. Abdul answered: 'report....something that really happened'. Others were answering at the same time and Duncan did not hear his answer. After this discussion, Duncan read through the feature story, with little expression, seeming to use the text more as a vehicle for learning vocabulary and grammar structures rather than as an interesting story in its own right. He stopped frequently to elicit meanings of words he thought might be unfamiliar to the students, allowing them to help each other.

Then came two comprehension exercises: a whole group exercise involving a complicated process of folding the worksheet into thirds, which Duncan carefully explained, followed by pair work. Duncan moved around the room from group to group, sometimes perching on the table or crouching down near a student, checking that they were managing the task, encouraging them by asking them questions to help them get to the answer, and rarely providing them with an answer. Student interactions were almost all on-task and there was concentrated engagement with the exercise. Duncan asked different students to feed back answers from the comprehension exercise to the whole group. He continually gave praise and encouragement for correct answers, and handled incorrect answers in a positive and sensitive way, sometimes referring them to the other students for them to decide.

The next activity was a whole-group session on a range of verb patterns. Duncan explained each of these in turn and elicited examples from the students, continually asking questions to check that they understood. He elicited the meaning of the word 'pattern' from the students, referring to patterns on their clothes. He then elicited examples for the other verb patterns from them on the board, using different colour pens to highlight different structures. Then he asked the students to read the text individually and to tell the group when they had identified an example of the first verb pattern. He asked them to complete the exercise in pairs, and check with their partner if they wanted to. Sameena and Abdul were paired up, and although Sameena repeatedly asked Abdul for answers, which he gave correctly, she appeared not to accept these (even though she was a very pleasant and cooperative student). She continued to struggle to find the right answers on her own, using a range of colours to highlight the different patterns. As a result Abdul was not able to check and confirm that he was right, until finally he asked Duncan a question which brought him over.

Duncan asked students to prepare for homework by looking at a worksheet. He gave examples illustrating the exercises related to familiar situations at college, and drew cartoons on the board. Finally, he asked the students to review what they had learned in the lesson. They shouted out various answers such as 'new words', 'about let and make', 'infinitive and -ing form', 'about adventure Tony in jungle', 'about adjective infinitives'. Finally, Duncan wrote on the board 'verb patterns', and students wrote this on their record sheets.

Student profile: Abdul

Background

Abdul from Iraq came with his wife and two children to Britain one year ago. He is in his late 40s and worked as an agronomist. He is highly motivated to learn English so that he can gain employment. He feels that this goal is 'not in my control' as he is waiting for the Home Office. He would really like to continue his Agriculture studies at university but in the meantime he is willing to take any job. These days he feels he is doing very little. He spends his spare time

reading newspapers, books and the dictionary to try to keep learning, watching coverage of the Iraq war/situation on TV, taking the children to the park and town centre and helping them with their science and maths homework. He also attends the BBC Learning Centre in town most days where he is learning, with some tutor support, to use a computer. He says he has little opportunity to talk to English-speaking people outside the class so feels he does not get enough practice.

Motivations for coming to the class

Abdul has a higher level of literacy than speaking skills and can, for example, read and understand letters he receives from the Home Office. He says that his main reason for coming to the ESOL class is because he has difficulty in speaking English and understanding different accents. He says he wants to learn how to 'speak very quickly [fluently] and correctly'. He has both a global and local perspective which reflects the uncertainty about his future:

The main reason [I come] I think English is an international language. Everywhere you go if you speak English, you can manage your affairs...if I want to stay in England I should learn English, for everyday life.

He feels unsure of his progress saying: 'I don't feel it' and 'I am not fully confident at speaking', but at the same time says: 'I haven't any problems'. Though this seems contradictory perhaps he is indicating that he has enough English to 'get by' in everyday life but at the same time needs to keep positive and keep his dignity despite the challenges. The way he describes how the focal class went also suggests this. He said that the class was 'not very difficult' and that 'if I understand the language, I can order the story'. Rachel's observations show that in fact this was very difficult for him. Duncan's perception is that Abdul, as a mature, well-educated person who has little status in his new situation, possibly needs to show that he is intellectually equal to the challenge of learning English even if he cannot speak it so well.

When Rachel asked Abdul what he liked best about the lesson he said that he is 'interested in grammar'. It is clear that as well as the intellectual enjoyment he experienced, he perceives the usefulness of this kind of lesson as giving him more underpinning knowledge of English which will enable him to make correct grammatical choices when speaking: 'learning about...how arrange words in a sentence'.

Participation in learning

Abdul comes to the class with a strong educational background, knowledge about and interest in the English language. He likes working in groups, he says, for both learning and friendship. He likes Duncan's teaching style saying that it is 'more detailed and higher level' and that there are 'high expectations here of students', which he sees as positive. He likes the way Duncan 'asks first before telling answers' and he that he 'learns by Duncan's explanations'. Abdul has a high meta-language awareness and a particular interest in and enjoyment of grammar which he demonstrates by the frequent questions he asks in class, for example referring to the subtext of the feature headline '500 kilos plus and four metres long', he said: 'Excuse me .. in this we haven't verb .. what does this mean?.. I understand. It's possible to have sentence without verb?' Duncan explains that this is allowed in journalistic style. Abdul does acknowledge that 'grammar is not everything'. He is a very quiet, unassuming man and sometimes seems to 'disappear' within the group. Duncan failed to hear Abdul's correct answers on several occasions during the focal lesson. This happened in moments of high engagement when several students are speaking at once. Abdul is one of only two men in the class and at times seems to be 'submerged' by both the gender imbalance and his quiet personality. On the other hand it is

clear that despite this he feels well supported in class and completely free to ask questions and contribute whenever he wants to: '[it doesn't matter] how much I ask questions, they don't worry about my questions...they explain me in detail'.

Abdul found the article studied in the focal class 'interesting ...because adventure'. He explained, and the researcher observed, some of his learning strategies in this lesson and more generally: he makes up his own examples of the structure they are learning and checks with Duncan whether it is right; he writes down words he doesn't know; he makes links with words he has read outside. For example, he linked '500 kilos plus' from the text to 'Jobcentre Plus' which he had seen in the town centre, asking Rachel what this meant. He learns with other students in group work, both checking and asking at the same time, for example (about how to order the story correctly): 'I think it's this one, which one is?' He showed Rachel how he read the cut-up text to put in order, reading the last line first, possibly linked to the way he reads Arabic. Duncan, who has worked in Saudi Arabia, commented that he forms letters and lines of letters 'in a Middle Eastern style with a right to left perspective'.

Abdul did suggest some factors that impeded his learning such as 'sometimes no time in class'. As Duncan told Rachel, Abdul learns more slowly than most in the class, but he employs strategies such as frequently asking and checking with Duncan and other students and working on things at home. On more than one occasion Abdul seemed to know the correct answer but was not able to articulate an answer before Duncan turned from him to ask another student. Working with a very strong student can be an impediment for him, as well as a support. He said of the 're-ordering the text' task with Sameena: 'she didn't let me do anything'.

Student profile: Sameena

Background

Sameena from Pakistan came to England 10 years ago to get married, when she was 16 years old. She has two young children and her husband has a jewellery business. She finished her secondary schooling in Pakistan and after coming to Britain she attended a community-based ESOL class. Her studies were interrupted when she was caring for small children, then three years ago she again attended a community class, joining entry level 2 at college last year and entry level 3 this year. She felt she lost ground with the interruption and had to 'catch up' on previous learning. When she re-entered education she also attended a First Step childcare course, that she found very demanding as it was not tailored for ESOL learners. She is a very confident learner and has a very positive experience of both schooling and ESOL learning. She said she felt confident coming to classes in Britain because her teacher 'spoke my language' and also gave her support with her childcare course.

Motivations for coming to the class

Sameena is highly motivated to learn English: 'I need practice...desperately I want to do job'. Learning English has already made a big difference to her life. Her relationship with her husband seems to be central to her feelings about this. He has encouraged her and Sameena's new-found social confidence has brought them happiness and a closer relationship: 'Big thing this one, my husband is happy, I am happy! ...' Sameena speaks of her husband passing on many jobs requiring English to her which he used to do himself. She is very assertive and confident in using English outside the class: 'I ring them, I ask for information...I don't want every time my husband's help, I want to do by myself.' She has not allowed the negativity of some in the community to undermine her, though this has caused her some embarrassment

when they say: 'You *still* going to college?'. Their perception that she knows enough: 'You can understand and make yourself understand [understood]', is very different from her husband's: 'No, you go, you in future speak good English', and her own perception: 'I said I want to a job or anything in the futures and this English is not enough ... takes many years, I said it's a different language a lot of grammar in there.' On the other hand she feels a sense of progress and achievement in that she can now socialise with her husband's friends: '... not worried about make mistakes. I'm realise not a big deal if I don't know English.' Still her main goal is to learn enough English to be able to continue her childcare studies and get a job. She feels she needs practice and does not get it much at home and feels that the two-hour class does not give her enough either.

Sameena is learning patterns of language that she sees as a crucial framework for learning to speak English. 'I like grammar, is very big thing to speak good English.' She explains to me that this is useful outside because if, for example, she uses the present tense correctly, people understand what she wants to say. As she explained above, she is also experiencing the pleasure of intellectual challenge and gaining confidence both socially and as a learner.

Participation in learning

Sameena enjoys the ESOL class and sees it as a social as well as learning group. She has good friends there from her own community and likes to meet people from other countries. She especially likes grammar and 'word patterns'. Sameena said of the article they read that it was a 'nice story'. She finds Duncan's style of teaching helps her to learn: 'When he learn me I remember...he doesn't answer straight away, he is try to make me think and very like it use my brain'. In reference to her confusion on a grammar point of when to use 'ask' or 'tell', which other students pointed out to her, she showed her confidence and assertiveness in learning: 'I'm not shy, oh I'm wrong and leave it, I always ask him why...'. She suggests that her level of comfort and confidence again stems from Duncan's style of teaching and communicating with her: 'He never said "no" [something we also observed about how he deals with incorrect answers], always he answers very friendly, easily'. She explains to me the benefits of group work: 'I speak a lot with her ... I ask meaning'. As Duncan said, we observed that she is a very cooperative and pleasant student. She worked in a pair with Abdul and gently helped Abdul find the answers in the whole group feedback as he is quite slow. But at the same time, her confidence and higher level of skills did cause an impediment to him in the re-ordering exercise.

Sameena clearly articulates how she learned from the focal text 'depending on the task' - reading 'main points quickly but if questions I am reading slowly'; finding answers by locating key words she already understands, such as finding the word 'wear' then working out the answer to the question: 'What did the guide make him wear and why?'. Her previous learning also helped her to order the story as she had read this particular story in another class and had awareness of layout, knowing that bold type indicates a heading. She says that it is necessary to read all the bits first before starting to order: 'If we didn't read ... then decide is hard'. Some other students did not employ these strategies or have the layout awareness that Sameena had and so struggled more with the task. She uses a highlighter so that she can quickly find the answer in the whole group feedback. She mentions how she came to understand a difficult grammar rule on choice and obligation - the use of 'let' and 'make': 'I was confused...then I use brain...I did lots of time again and again one thing ... I like this style.' She seems to suggest a combination of thinking and practice to achieve learning. She mentions Duncan's 'acting' and drawing as aids to understanding words and word patterns in this lesson, such as the cartoons of happy and sad faces he drew to illustrate the difference between 'choice' and 'obligation'. In

talking around how she did the grammar exercise in class, she said 'doing it herself' is the best way for her to learn: 'I don't want to copy another person ... do on my own ... then check together.' She says that changing partners is important as there is the temptation to use a shared language with some students. She again shows how strongly she takes charge of her own learning. If she does not understand something at home she asks her husband or underlines it and the next day asks Duncan, but that does not go far enough for her: 'But I want to put in sentence, in *my* sentence.' Similarly she likes to use the dictionary herself so 'I understand meaning', and to her little daughter who wants to help her she says, 'No, I want to do my own!'

5.4 Lancaster (entry level 1 - level 1) spelling class

The Adult College in Lancaster is a community college dedicated to adult education. *Skills for Life* is one of the college's principal programme areas. It also offers a wide range of general adult education activities. The Wednesday evening spelling class took place in the 'Skills for Life Centre', a large purpose-built classroom which had been opened at the start of that academic year and was still relatively new, well-presented and well-equipped. It was lined with shelves and pigeon-holes full of literacy and numeracy resources, with a bank of new computers around the walls. It was a two-hour class with a short coffee break in between. The first hour consisted of people working either individually or with a volunteer tutor on work specific to their individual learning plan. The second hour was a tutor-led group session. For this paper, we will focus on describing two one-to-one sessions with volunteers from the Wednesday evening spelling class, which contrast with the tutor-led sessions in classes described above.

The Wednesday evening entry level 1 – level 1 spelling class is an established class which has been held at the same time for several years. Most of the students in this class are working people and there is a majority of men. The class has two components, group work led by the class tutors, and individual work by students alone or with volunteer tutors. Group work sometimes focuses on specific spelling patterns ('ai' words for instance) but often involves more general work, such as reading the college newsletter together and picking out spellings and grammar points. In individual work time, students focus on work that has been prepared for them by tutors or volunteers on the basis of their Individual Learning Plans (ILPs). Many students are working towards an Open College spelling certificate and have particular things to cover, such as knowledge of specific word patterns. Most also use an ongoing 'spelling support programme' which involves recording new words one week, working out strategies to spell them and practising them doing 'look, cover, write, check', being tested on them the next, and using them in dictation two weeks later. The analysis below will focus on two students' participation in one-to-one sessions with their volunteer tutors.

Jack and Hannah

Background

Jack is a dairy farmer who runs a large farm in the local area. He has been attending this class for five years, having arrived as an entry level learner, and has been working with the same volunteer, Hannah, for much of that time. Hannah is a retired teacher. She takes most of the responsibility for planning out Jack's individual work, based on the individual learning plan that they work through together, although the class tutors keep a check on what is being covered.

Focal session

The focal session took place on 7 May 2003. It began with general chat. Jack had had travellers

staying on his land without permission, a recurrent problem for him, and was discussing the Tony Martin case. The session 'proper' began when Hannah explained to Jack what she had planned for them to do in the session.

The lesson started with practice of a sample of 'Dolch words'⁴ and some social sight vocabulary reading. These are things which Jack and Hannah practise regularly together. They started off by filling in the date at the top of the piece of paper, leading to a discussion of Jack's activities that day. He had been artificially inseminating cows, and explained that his computer provides the date automatically when the cow number is punched in. Hannah then tested him on a sample of Dolch words, reading them out first alone and then in sentences, and occasionally linking them with real things that have been happening (e.g. 'Saw – you saw the gypsies on your land'). When Jack made a spelling mistake, Hannah hinted with phrases like 'just nearly' and Jack self-corrected. They also teased each other; they have been working together for several years now and have developed a joshing, friendly relationship. Social sight vocabulary was then tested with Jack reading out a number of common social words – way in, exit, etc. – which he did quickly and with assurance as if this is something he had done many times before.

They then moved on to a worksheet exercise about prefixes and suffixes, which Hannah had prepared, in which he was asked to select from a choice of prefixes and suffixes to add to words on the sheet (e.g. 'happy' – add 'un' to make it 'unhappy'). Jack worked quietly writing these down for a long time with Hannah saying nothing. When he had finished, he read them out to her, and when they were both satisfied that he had them right Hannah asked Jack to put them in his file under the appropriate curriculum reference. While doing this, they came across a list of months, which they had decided not to practise writing because Jack never uses them in real life. Hannah quickly tested his reading knowledge of them by asking him to read them out, which again he did confidently and quickly.

They then moved on to doing an activity which Hannah had prepared to practise map-reading. She had brought in a map of Lancaster. First she asked him whether he ever comes in to Lancaster. It turned out that he does not; there is no point in coming to the Lancaster auction any more, since dairy cows at the end of their life are now bought at a fixed price by the Government. They talked through what the map represented and then Hannah asked Jack to point out where he went to school, teasing him gently, when she found it was in a prestigious area of town, that she did not realise he was 'posh'.

After working with the map, they went on to practising some words from Jack's own everyday life which they had worked on many times before. Hannah promised him that this would be the last time they did it. She removed one word, 'concentrates', from the list they had used before, having discovered that this is a word he never actually has to write. She asked him to test himself on the words using the 'look, cover, write, check' method. Looking at the words prompted more discussion about his farming work; for instance, talking about whether he still grows maize or not. Once Jack had tested himself, Hannah asked him to check through that he was 'comfortable' with them all. She then read out some sentences they had worked on before, using unusual words, and asked him to write them down, checking the spellings as he did so.

The next activity was to look at a paper Hannah had brought in: a notice that the council had sent her about some works that were to happen at the end of her road. This time Jack teased her, about living at the 'posh end'. There was a punctuation mistake throughout the leaflet –

⁴ 'Dolch words' refers to a list of the most common words in the English language, which is widely used in entry level classes.

'it's' for 'its' – and Hannah asked Jack to find it, chatting to the other people in the classroom as he looked for it.

Finally, Hannah asked Jack to write five sentences on the computer, using the words from his everyday life that he had been practising. He called Hannah over once in a while for assistance, but for the most part worked independently on this. When he had completed some sentences Hannah checked them with him and talked through how to correct a misspelt word before he continued working. The last time she went over to check they had a conversation about how the silaging works.

At the end of class Jack and Hannah filled in his 'work done' sheet together. They referred to Hannah's lesson notes to do this, and Hannah prompted Jack as to what to write. They talked about whether he would attend in July, which depended on the silaging, and briefly discussed the activities that had happened in the group session, Hannah drawing attention to the progress Jack has made in the past year.

Motivations for coming to the class

Jack has been a successful farmer and businessman for many years, and was not impeded in this at all by his reading and writing capabilities. Where paperwork was necessary for the farm, his wife assisted him. So coming to class was not so much about opening up new opportunities for him in his everyday life as about addressing something which had been an issue in his life for a long time, as an 'extra' activity. He was spurred on to come to the class when his father saw an advert for the classes up in the local doctor's surgery; this came shortly after his son had said something about him not being able to read and write which he said had 'annoyed' him.

In interviews Jack told us how the learning he does in class has had some impact on his everyday life. He feels he is getting benefits from coming. His reading and writing have both improved significantly. The main difference for him is that he used to feel pressured when writing in front of someone, and would rush and make a mess of it. Now, he finds he has the confidence to calm down and slow down even when someone is watching, and this helps him not to make mistakes.

Though his wife deals with most of the paperwork related to the farm, if something comes up when she is not there Jack deals with it himself. Hannah tries to ensure that at least some of the activities use words which will be useful to him in everyday life, which is why they practise the farm words towards the end. However they have found that in fact much of the business Jack transacts at the farm is done over the telephone, or ticking boxes in forms, so he doesn't actually need to know how to write down many of the words they have worked on together. As Hannah learns more about the writing Jack needs to do in everyday life she tailors his work to it. This is why, for instance, they have not continued to test his spelling of 'concentrates'. Jack says the classes have helped his confidence in dealing with farm paperwork.

Other things he now feels more confident about include going out driving with a map and being able to find his way to new places, though he always used to and still does sit down with a map to plan his journey by writing down junction numbers. He also reads more at home and particularly on holiday than he used to; the practice of reading for pleasure is something new, that he has developed through coming to class.

The class has also given him more confidence in general terms. He initially expected the class to be full of teenagers and was surprised to find a group of people of varying ages, many

around his own age, which gave him a feeling of being less 'different' than he had previously expected. There are social benefits associated with attending class, giving him the opportunity to socialise with people outside the farming world. This became particularly significant during the foot-and-mouth crisis in 2001, when Jack had to remain completely isolated from the rest of the farming community.

Participation in learning

The session is made up of short chunks of relatively discrete word-focused tasks, with few links made between them. This means that Jack's participation in the session involves engagement in a wide range of different learning opportunities, including writing dates, Dolch words, social sight vocabulary, prefixes and suffixes, months of the year, map reading, and 'farm words', among others. He also engaged in a variety of strategies to support his learning, including 'look, cover, write, check', keeping track of where he was on a task using check marks, checking accuracy of his own spelling by developing a 'feel' for the words, using a word processor and keyboard, and organising papers in filing folders. Volunteer and student share knowledge of 'the routine', with shared understandings of what tasks consist of as a result of having engaged in similar activities for some time. There is little explicit explanation of tasks which are referred to simply by shorthand labels which both understand: 'your Dolch words', 'your social sight', 'your farm words'.

The focal session is characterised by constant praise and reinforcement. Each time Jack gets something right Hannah makes a point of praising him. This constant focus on his success and progress has helped him to reshape his understanding of himself as a successful learner, which has contributed to the development of his confidence in his ability described above.

There is also a constant interweaving of on-task talk and off-task talk, which is usually about what is going on in Jack and Hannah's lives. They share talk about memories and experiences, both memories of what has happened in previous sessions and memories about life beyond the classes. This is a deliberate strategy on Hannah's part, who sees this provision of social support as being part of her role as a volunteer, and it plays an important part in the social benefits that Jack reports gaining from the classes.

He is also positioned as being an expert, particularly in some of the off-task conversations, as he explains to Hannah some of the 'insider knowledge' he has about how farming works that he is bringing to the session. It is an article of faith of the tutors of this class, Grace and Margaret, that all of their students are an 'expert' in something and they make deliberate efforts to find out what their students have expertise in and to draw this out during the classes, to make sure they are not positioned simply as 'basic skills learners' but as fully rounded adults.

Alfonso and Diana

Background

Alfonso is from the Dominican Republic. He married an Englishwoman who was there on holiday, and they had two children. The family came over to England three years before this focal session. He had been working with Diana, his volunteer tutor, for a few months. At the time of this recording she had been volunteering at the college for about a year and a half, training first as a literacy volunteer tutor and now engaged in ESOL volunteer training. They are good friends and talk a lot about what is going on in each others' life, but this normally takes place during social time; in class time, they focus very much on the topic covered in the session. Diana takes most of the responsibility for planning out Alfonso's one-to-one work on the basis

of his individual learning plan, though the class teachers keep a check on what they are doing.

Focal session

The focal session took place on 4 June 2003. The session began with Diana checking through Alfonso's 'work-done' sheet to see when he last came and what was covered. She then told him about her plans for the session.

He had taken home a book about Winston Churchill from the library to read, so they began by talking about what he had learned from reading that. Diana suggested Alfonso pick a section to read so that she could check his pronunciation. He read aloud from the book for some time, and Diana corrected his pronunciation whenever he made an error. Where there was a cultural reference that she thought he might not understand, or where he asked what something meant, Diana explained it. This reading aloud took up the major part of the recorded session.

Once he had finished reading the book aloud, and Diana had checked whether he enjoyed it or not, they moved on to writing his individual learning plan. This happened very quickly and was largely directed by Diana, suggesting goals for the plan on the basis of what she already knew about Alfonso's goals for learning.

Diana had prepared exercises from a pronunciation book with associated tapes: *Ship or Sheep*. They had the book available in class but Alfonso had the tapes at home. They worked through a written exercise together practising different pronunciations of 'c'. They then started another pronunciation exercise but Diana decided the tapes were necessary for this one so curtailed it.

They worked through another exercise where he had to distinguish between similar sounds (such as 'mouth' and 'mouse'). After a quick check where Alfonso read aloud the ordinal numbers in sequence, they played a game involving questions about the positioning of horses in a race, to practise his use of ordinal numbers. Finally they both went over to the library to select another book for him to read at home.

Motivations for coming to the class

Alfonso is very keen to learn and develop in general terms. He is motivated to get as many certificates and qualifications as he can, and enjoys spending time learning and studying. When he first came to England, he and his wife had both planned to work part-time and look after their two children part-time. However it proved easier for his wife to find work and he ended up being at home full-time with the children. He was not happy in this situation. He likes to be active, and found it difficult being in the house all the time. It was also hard for him to learn English and develop social networks. Eventually he and his wife decided on a trial separation, which is when he began living on his own, working and studying and meeting new people. He now works five days a week. When he is not at work, he is studying. He does a chef's course at the local further education college one day a week, after which he spends a couple of hours in the learning centre there where he has been doing learndirect courses. On Tuesday evenings he takes driving lessons, on Wednesdays he attends the spelling class, and on Thursdays comes to a maths class.

Alfonso first found out about the adult College courses from the newspaper. Initially he came enquiring about ESOL classes and wasn't sure about what he called adult basic education, but he has enjoyed the spelling classes and learned a lot. The spelling classes were seen as appropriate for him because while his spoken English is quite good, he has learned it all by speaking and listening and so does not know how to spell words. He also wants to work on his

pronunciation, and feels that learning how to spell words will help with that. He enjoys coming to classes, both because he is very, very keen on learning, and because he gets to meet new people and chat to them.

Given Alfonso's high levels of motivation regarding any sort of learning, the first and most significant impact of his learning on his everyday life is that simply engaging in the process and in the classes improves his quality of life. He is also very motivated to improve his spoken English and pronunciation and sees the focus on spelling in this class as helping him with that. Again it is hard to say which specific aspects of this particular interaction are useful to him in his everyday life, but he finds any sort of learning positive and useful.

Participation in learning

The main task, reading the Winston Churchill text, is worked on for a long time, and takes up the majority of the time of the session. This is a longer activity than most of those observed taking place during the one-to-one sessions. The reading of the book is used for multiple teaching purposes, including to practise punctuation, to provide examples of spelling words, and to develop Alfonso's cultural knowledge. Diana is keen to help him integrate in British society and tries to select tasks for him that will both help him in the subject-specific things he wants to work on, such as pronunciation, and inform him about British culture and history (she is an historian by training).

Repetition of words is used as a tool for ensuring correct pronunciation, and Diana makes sure that the pronunciation of every word is correct before moving on to the next. Whenever a pronunciation error is encountered there is a common pattern. First Diana corrects the pronunciation, and Alfonso repeats. Then, when Diana is happy with his pronunciation she explains the meaning. She seems to assess, through prosody or other non-verbal cues, when only a pronunciation correction is needed and when the word's meaning should be explained too.

The principal subject-specific learning opportunities for Alfonso here are to practise and correct the pronunciation of the various words encountered while reading the Churchill book aloud. Embedded in this is explanation of the meaning of the words he does not know, and some review of spelling rules and patterns, such as the silent 'e' rule. The pronunciation exercises later give him the opportunity to practise different pronunciations of the letter 'c', different ways of spelling the sound /k/, and the th/s sound distinction, as well as the pronunciation of some difficult words like 'ocean'. He also practises reading ordinal numbers aloud, and listening comprehension of ordinal numbers, including their use in question forms.

In addition to subject-specific learning opportunities, Alfonso and Diana discuss strategies for learning new words, including writing lists of new vocabulary. They also engage in educational practices, including reading aloud and filling in an individual learning plan. There is very little conversation in this session about Alfonso's everyday life. Both volunteer tutor and student remain focused on the different tasks that are being worked on. Nevertheless, relationships of trust and friendliness are demonstrated between them, and a lot of laughter and joking is woven around the task-focused interaction. There is also not the same level of ongoing reassurance and praise seen in other volunteer-student sessions that have been recorded. Instead, there is explicit acknowledgement several times of what Alfonso has learned, through summarising and through Diana picking out and highlighting particularly significant difficult points he has mastered.

6. What adult learners bring to their LLN classes

In this section we draw on the detailed accounts of individuals above and on our research with all 37 students studied in this part of the project to discuss three main issues. The most significant of these is adult learners' varied motivations for attending LLN provision. We also summarise how adult learners differ in terms of their life histories and current life circumstances, and indicate the nature of the strengths, experience and varied expertise adult learners bring with them to their classes. This and the previous section show how varied the lives of adult LLN learners are, even those who are attending the same classes. The point of emphasising the complexity and diversity of what people bring to their classes is to illustrate what tutors need to take into account in order to fulfil the challenge of the *Skills for Life* strategy to contextualise the curriculum and fine-tune their teaching to their learners.

6.1 Motivations for attending LLN classes

The *Skills for Life* Strategy makes a strong connection between learning, qualifications and employability. One tutor said: 'Gone is the sense that you can come to college because you enjoy it. Even in the non-vocational courses there is constant pressure for progression, progression.' Qualifications and employment are the main goals for many learners, especially those for whom English is an additional language. Alfonso is a 'classic' example of someone seeking to develop language skills and gain qualifications in order to get better work and settle in the country: a motivation more common for ESOL than literacy and numeracy learning. All the students seeking asylum in the Blackburn entry level 3 ESOL class had similar motivations to Alfonso. Abdul and Sameena both had clear ideas about what they wanted to do in the future. Abdul, like other recently arrived students, was very unsure of the learning route and the possible options, which suggests that there is a gap in addressing these students' learning needs as a whole – he was learning English but not getting the information and advice he needed in order to move towards his goal as quickly as possible⁵.

However, motivations could not always be tied into gaining qualifications and increasing their employability. Susan said at 69 she would not work again; Cheri, one of the students in the Liverpool maths class, doubted whether she would be able to hold down a job because she has been diagnosed and is currently being treated for bi-polar disorder; and Jason aspired to find work but thought he would probably do voluntary work for a while. Jack had a well-established job that he was happy with and good at, which was not affected by his reading and writing capabilities. He did not come to class for reasons related to work, but to boost his own confidence and to address something which has been an issue in his life for a long time.

We found that the students have many other motivations related to their everyday lives⁶. Some of the learners are going to classes for general interest, some as a way of managing mental health issues, some for skills in non-paid voluntary work, and only some to help with employment. For some the motivation was to become confident in things that they had failed in at school, or had missed through non-attendance. These sorts of 'educational' motivation included individual small goals (like learning how to spell correctly a commonly misspelled

⁵ One outcome of the research was that new strategies were put in place by the ESOL Department at Blackburn College to provide ESOL students with information about mainstream college courses.

⁶ This finding corroborates findings in other NRDC research: Baxter, M. et al. (2006, forthcoming), and Davies, P. (2005).

word) or big goals, like Cheri's to achieve GCSE maths. Several of the Lancaster students' motivations related to increasing their confidence in everyday life, rather than seeking to develop their employability, for reasons partly related to mental health problems they were dealing with. Reasons for coming to class included supporting/enabling others as well as helping oneself - Susan to help her grandchildren, and Jason to help people who belonged to the tenants' association he worked for. One tutor pointed out the significance of age differences in learners' differing motivations.

Many learners held several types of motivation simultaneously - their own long/short term individual ones, including things like confidence, as well as external ones including learning fractions or completing a national test, getting a certificate or doing another course.

Learners' motivations often change over time. One tutor pointed out that people often say their reason for coming to class is because they have specific difficulties with spelling, because this is something visible and self-diagnosable, but that they don't know enough about the structure of language to say: 'My sentence structure is poor.' Once they start coming to class, broader issues and motivations emerge and they identify other motivations. One student said: 'I don't know what I need to know because I don't know what there is to know.' Sameena set out with mainly educational motivations but an unexpected outcome for her has been the effect her learning has had on her already happy relationship with her husband. They now share a broader range of activities such as watching films in English or with English subtitles and socialising together with English-speaking friends with whom previously only her husband communicated. Her motivations for learning English, are now, as a result, social as well as educational.

Learners often had to overcome considerable difficulties in order to attend, and displayed a high degree of commitment once they had done so. In spite of what often appeared to be quite bad conditions for learning - noisy or badly furnished classrooms, inconvenient locations or unsocial hours - the learners sustained their initial motivation to come to class, and participated actively when they were there. This suggests that, if the learning environment is good, it can ameliorate the effects of a poor physical environment.

6.2 Life histories and current circumstances

There were differences not just between, say, the ESOL class and the spelling class, where differences in the aims of the class itself would be likely to attract different learners, but also within each class. Differences are not just attributable to obvious characteristics such as country of origin or entry placement score, but were much more individual, dependent on the personal characteristics and life opportunities of each person. It was not just a question of a 'spiky profile' of current capabilities (a 'spiky profile' represents the profile of a learner whose achievements include unexpected high and low levels, which by no means always correlate with expected levels of difficulty). Other physical, material, social and affective aspects of people's lives were equally relevant to this diversity, particularly their sense of independence, feelings of fear or willingness to take risks, and the extent to which they felt affected by negative prior educational experiences. Differences between people include those related to mental health issues, physical disabilities and complicated home circumstances. People vary in their concentration span, and in their comfort with working independently or in groups. The complexity and diversity of these individual circumstances showed the difficulty of attempting to tailor provision to particular groups: even within a narrowly defined group, individual differences are likely to be greater than similarities.

There is a marked difference between many ESOL students, particularly refugees and asylum seekers, and other literacy and numeracy students. This group have, on the whole, higher levels of self-esteem related to learning, having had, in many cases, positive life experiences of education. Compared with other learners, this group are experiencing downward mobility. Many are well qualified or have high academic potential, and even 'fast tracking' will not lead to jobs of the financial and social status they had or could expect in the countries they came from.

6.3 Strengths, experience and varied expertise of adult learners

Adult learners not only face difficulties in their lives but also bring a wide variety of capabilities, resources and strengths to their classes. In the entry level 1 – level 1 spelling class in Lancaster, tutors made a point of establishing that all students are 'experts' in something, and the tutor knew enough about the students' everyday lives to know what each person is expert in. For example, Hannah selected Jack's words to practise according to his expertise in farming, and often discussed his everyday life during the session. She adapted their activities according to his feedback on whether or not they reflect things he is doing in everyday life.

7. Tutors' contributions to the learning-teaching event

We observed tutors in their interaction with students in the classroom: how they responded to them, and how they adapted the curriculum to their needs. We talked with them about their teaching, what led them to certain decisions, what they were pleased with and what troubled them. We identified key factors which they were bringing with them to their practice: responsiveness to learners as individuals, and the views of LLN underlying their practice. We also became aware of tensions between two types of professionalism which they brought to their work. We discuss these in the following sections.

7.1 Responsiveness to learners as individuals

We observed many tutors listening closely to what learners were saying, both out loud and between the lines, seeing learners 'in 3D', as complex individuals with a past, a present and a future, and responding to them as such. We observed tutors working to sustain the motivation which brought students to the class, and to find new challenges which would maintain their motivation. Many teachers knew not only about the difficulties they faced but also about their cultural resources, dispositions, propensities, capabilities, strengths, and the expertise they have in their everyday life. They often referred to these factors and based their teaching on them. Learners would bring things in or discuss things they had seen which the tutor might be interested in. The tutors also discussed things from their own lives, sometimes connected to the learners' interests and experiences, and by doing so established a symmetry in the teacher-learner relationship.

The more tutors knew about the personal circumstances and styles of each individual, the more they were able to fine-tune their teaching to them, adjusting both the content of an activity and their management of the interaction to give the learners maximum opportunities for learning. For example, in the Blackburn ESOL class the teacher, Duncan, adapted his style of wit to suit students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Duncan's understanding of Abdul's prior education, of his experience as a learner and his existing knowledge of English (stronger literacy than oral skills) allowed him to set the right level of learning challenge and support to address Abdul's learning needs. Duncan's awareness of social dynamics, such as cultural and religious differences between Muslim students from the South Asian community and students seeking asylum from other countries, was important in helping him to foster a cooperative learning environment of mutual peer support.

In the Liverpool maths class, Kay worked with one of the students, Katrina, to understand the relevance of learning her multiplication tables in relation to the work that she wanted to do and the difficulties that she was experiencing. The meaning of 'times tables' was translated into concrete experiences, for example, measuring baby bottles and nappy changing timetables and shopping. Although Katrina was studying at NVQ level 2 her maths needs were at entry level 1/2. The way that Kay bridged the gap with concrete and everyday task-based understanding did not threaten Katrina's other subject knowledge. Things like shopping were a baseline of everyday activities that Katrina already knew about and was proficient in. Kay also worked with Jason's expressed fear about maths. Although he was working consistently well at entry level 3 and level 1 Kay understood the need to work on his

confidence as well as the skills involved. Again she located much of the understanding for learning (motivation) in his concrete skills experience with the tenants' association - it therefore made sense to him and he wanted to learn to be better at what he did there.

Teaching was most engaging when learning activities were chosen or adapted to learners' individual goals, personal interests or immediate lives. In very large classes there may come a point where it seems that numbers are too many for tutors to fine-tune their teaching to each individual. But responsiveness to learners as individuals is more a frame of mind than a form of classroom organisation. It is students' sense that the teaching is focused on them rather than on coverage of content which makes a difference.

In some of the classes we observed, however, the class activities did not seem to be directly linked to learners' goals. This resulted mainly from the teacher's efforts to follow the *Skills for Life* framework, being guided by the curriculum specifications, assessment targets, and level descriptors. This often led them to concentrate their efforts on explicit attention to formal aspects of language or literacy.

These examples show that tutors' responsiveness to adults' unique circumstances and preferences is a crucial resource in LLN classes. Researching their own practice seemed to heighten tutors' awareness of the importance of listening to learners and thinking about them as people with lives beyond the classroom as well as within it.

7.2 Views of the nature of LLN

As has been noted in previous theory and research (see Ivanič and Tseng 2005, Roz Ivanič 2004), participants in learning-teaching events bring with them conscious or subconscious beliefs about the nature of learning and teaching, and about the nature of LLN. We observed learning and teaching practices which appeared to be based on a variety of views about the nature of LLN, and recorded similarly varied views in our interviews with teachers and learners. Even though most lessons appeared to be relaxed and sociable, our observations suggested that LLN were frequently being treated as skills isolated from social practices. Many of the activities learners were undertaking involved a focus on linguistic form or abstract numerical calculations, often based around worksheets. In spite of many learners' goals being formulated in terms of social purposes for speaking, reading, writing and calculating, there was comparatively little attention in some classes to the practical use of LLN to get things done.

A view of LLN as technical skills manifested itself in the high premium on 'correctness' which was evident in many situations. Correctness was emphasised and reinforced as a central value in many different ways across the different contexts, possibly to the detriment of other values such as expressiveness, fluency, speed, effectiveness for purpose, communicativeness, sociality. It manifests itself in activities which focus on form rather than meaning, in a building-block approach whereby a learner cannot move on until a prior stage has been achieved, in repetition and insistence on accuracy. This could lead to a limited view of what counts as success, or progress. This emphasis on correctness is linked to a view of literacy and numeracy as competence, and a focus on the formal set procedures of numerical calculations, rather than understanding literacies and numeracies as social practices which are concerned with meanings and use.

For example, the Lancaster spelling class, while responsive to students' needs, showed

(particularly in the group work) a predominantly skills-oriented understanding of language and literacy from both learners and teachers, with a predominant focus on correctness. Teachers in group work broke tasks down into simple steps, repeating the same point several times, the goal clearly being for learners to achieve correctness. Texts were used as examples of relevant points, rather than for content. In one-to-one sessions Hannah selected small decontextualised tasks for Jack to practise: Dolch words, spelling tests, prefixes and suffixes. The main focus of the text Diana and Alfonso worked with was correctness of pronunciation; although broader 'cultural knowledge' was drawn out of it as well, this is more incidental to the interaction. Decontextualised pronunciation exercises were also used.

There was a strong grammar focus in the entry level 3 ESOL class in Blackburn. The tutor said that ESOL teachers feel that the ESOL assessment criteria demand a fairly hierarchical step-by-step approach to covering the curriculum. Abdul, Sameena and other students all mention the importance for them of producing 'correct' English which is clearly a main motivation for attending the class⁷. However, their goal to learn, as soon as possible, to speak English fluently enough to join other courses and seek employment does not seem to be sufficiently addressed by this hierarchical approach and suggests the need for opportunities to practise more free, spontaneous use of English. The materials used in the class are mainly textbook-based and there is very little time and support for the development of specific materials and resources which would help these students to gain information and knowledge about the cultures of the society they are living in. However, the predominantly textbook-based materials are mediated by the respectful and sensitive inter-personal approach of the teacher, as described in section 7.2 below.

It is not clear why teachers are privileging correctness (of, for example, spelling, grammar, letter formation, punctuation, apostrophe use) over fluency or fitness for purpose. It may be because it is what they themselves believe in, because of the influence of the curriculum, because this is what students say they want, because of demands made by employers and teachers of other courses, and/or because of the washback effect of assessment criteria. One tutor said that the curriculum and auditing requirements have significantly influenced this, saying that they used to focus more on the uses of literacy in everyday life 'pre-curriculum'. Another emphasised multiple pressure from the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), the Skills for Life Strategy Unit (SfLSU), formerly known as the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit (ABSSU)), and 'the Government' to show 'progression, progression, progression': always learning new things, never time to consolidate. A volunteer tutor who was a retired teacher found the core curriculum 'very unfriendly' and hard to work with. However, an experienced tutor thought that it was not the curriculum itself but people's interpretations of it that are preventing them from treating LLN as social practices and making their teaching relevant to real-life situations, perhaps under the influence of what they perceive to be institutional and inspection expectations. This evidence suggests that there is a need for further research on the effects of the new curriculum on practice, and perhaps further training of teachers about ways in which the curriculum can be integrated into a pedagogy which focuses on LLN as practices fulfilling social purposes.

We did not observe many activities which involved continuous writing⁸, which was significant considering that, in the country as a whole, many people's motivations for attending included

7 This parallels a provisional finding from the NRDC research on *Effective Approaches to the Teaching and Learning of Writing*, in which it was noticed that correctness and emphasis on sub-skills was a priority for learners.

8 A consequence of working to a national curriculum for literacy which has also been observed in primary schools since the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy.

the wish to improve their writing. In the spelling classes we observed, there was frequent writing, but this was usually of individual words or notes about spelling. Activities which did involve continuous writing were mainly exercises to practise the use of a formal feature, rather than writing for meaning or purpose. This implied a view of literacy as knowledge about the linguistic rules and patterns of written language, rather than as creative self-expression, or purposeful communication of content. However, we did observe writing by some students working with volunteers during the 'individual work' part of a class in which students wrote on topics of their own choice, mainly exploring issues which were central to their own life and identity. In one case this continuous writing was only included at the student's insistence, and then only as a 'reward' for completing what was considered to be 'real work' – that is, a worksheet that practised formal features of written language.

A view of language, literacy and numeracy as social practices, embedded in everyday purposeful activities, was evident when tutors chose or adapted learning activities to relate to learners' individual goals, personal interests or immediate lives. In doing so they were fulfilling the *Skills for Life* Strategy recommendation that 'each individual learner's ... own set of priorities and requirements ... must be the starting point of their learning programme development' (DfES 2001a, p. 9, DfES 2001b, p. 8). The learner's context, aims, everyday informal knowledge and approaches to learning are often hard to mesh with the LLN knowledge and skills which are codified in the *Skills for Life* core curriculum. Tutors were sometimes able to translate between these different 'knowledges', contextualising curriculum content to make sure that learners get what they want whilst satisfying the institutional requirements to 'deliver' the curriculum. This process of translation required listening to the learner as a whole (as a 'three-dimensional person') and making pragmatic decisions. At best, tutors were taking account of everything they knew about learners' lives in order to help them to engage with LLN learning. For example, in the numeracy drop-in and in some one-to-one sessions the tutors encouraged and discussed engaging in language, literacy and / or numeracy practices for social purposes associated with the class itself or in everyday life. Individual tutors sometimes followed a student-initiated topic rather than sticking to a planned activity. In the Liverpool maths class, Kay often started from the students' own images and understandings of numerical ideas, rather than trying to redirect them towards her own understandings. Students appeared to be most engaged when tutors sought the relevance of what they were teaching to the learners' everyday lives, but this was often in passing, rather than a central part of the curriculum.

Tutors may have developed these views of the nature of language, literacy and numeracy, and of how they are learned, through their training, through their education before becoming LLN professionals, through their independent reading, through years of experience, through a personal commitment to a particular view of LLN, or some combination of these. For some tutors, there seemed to be a coherent and deep-seated philosophy underpinning their practice. Others appeared not to have such a well-established teaching philosophy, which could lead them to experience as yet unresolved contradictions in their practice.

7.3 Tensions between two types of professionalism

Our research showed that tutors bring two types of professionalism to their work. Firstly, as adult educators, many tutors bring the sort of responsiveness to learners as individuals which we described above, often informed by an understanding of and commitment to social justice issues. Many tutors saw their capacity to listen to learners in order to fine-tune their teaching to make it relevant to people's lives as a crucial factor in their professional identity: a 'responsive professionalism'.

Secondly, tutors bring training in the content of the *Skills for Life* core curriculum, and professional knowledge of the requirements of the Strategy. These requirements include delivering the core curriculum, meeting targets in terms of recruitment, retention and achievement, and administering the specified forms of assessment. This aspect of tutors' professionalism involves the ability to fulfil their institution's commitments through adherence to procedures and completion of the associated paperwork. While on the one hand this 'new professionalism' was helping tutors to make their teaching more systematic than it was before, on the other hand some tutors were finding it crowded out the 'responsive professionalism' which had previously been the cornerstone of their practice. The way in which the core curriculum is presented in terms of itemised skills, knowledge and understanding is also, we suggest, making it more difficult for tutors to conceptualise LLN as social practices.

We found that tutors were often faced with a tension between these two types of professionalism. Often the requirements of the curriculum and institutional constraints made it difficult for them to put students' individual interests and motivations at the centre of their teaching. For example, they experienced a tension between the requirement to teach to the test, and serving the needs of students who wanted to work on their writing. Similarly, individual learners' interests and wishes were often in tension with the demands of the real world – people's need to gain measurable skills if they are to find employment and more self-respect, and Government's wish to see an economic benefit resulting from the expenditure of taxpayers' money.

8. Learning-teaching events as social spaces

8.1 A dynamic dialogue between students' and tutors' contributions

Our research shows that learning opportunities emerge from dialogue between what students bring to classes and what their tutors bring. This dialogue evolves and changes over time, as tutors listen to students' accounts of their purposes, their desires, their lives and their perspectives on learning. There is an ongoing, deepening dynamic between these different contributions to the classroom, facilitated by the 'responsive-to-learners' type of professionalism we identified in the previous section. It is dependent on time to talk, and time to listen.

In this section we discuss four key aspects of this dynamic, all of which underline the social nature of learning-teaching events. Firstly, in the section entitled *The importance of social relationships*, we discuss the types of social relationship which both facilitate the development of dialogue and emerge from it. Secondly, in the section entitled *The negotiation of learning opportunities*, we discuss the aspects of learning-teaching events which need to be negotiated as part of this dialogue. Thirdly, in the section entitled *Learners as active agents in their own learning*, we discuss learners' own agency in these processes. Finally, in the section entitled *The broader outcomes from attending Skills for Life provision* we mention some of the wider, social benefits of participation in classes which students gained in addition to knowledge, skills and qualifications.

8.2 Importance of social relationships

A major part of providing successful learning opportunities was creating a supportive atmosphere – a 'safe space' for people, many of whom had had negative experiences of LLN learning at school. Students responded positively to opportunities to engage with one another socially. Being treated with respect and equality as adults was, for many, in stark contrast to their perception of how they had been treated at school. Teachers paid a great deal of attention to establishing, sustaining and supporting relationships of warmth and trust in the classroom, and learners appeared to be relaxed and happy and enjoying class. Having an adult relationship with a tutor was important in overcoming the sense of inferiority experienced by those previously labelled 'unsuccessful learners'. Many talked about enjoying coming to class because of all the friendly people. This relationship encouraged wider benefits of learning beyond curriculum knowledge and the achievement of qualifications. In this section we discuss in more detail issues which will resonate with the experience of the majority of teachers: the ways in which personal relationships in the classes we observed made students feel better about themselves and contributed to their engagement and participation in LLN learning.

Personal relationships were crucial to engaging people in LLN learning, and hence to the successful implementation of the *Skills for Life* Strategy. We cannot emphasise strongly enough how important we found this factor in the dynamics of the LLN classrooms we studied. Nor can we ignore how important a factor it was to students, who in interviews consistently privileged these social relationships as being crucial for successful learning. For this reason, we are devoting a section of this report to this factor.

Social aspects of learning were viewed by both learners and tutors as fundamental to the provision of learning opportunities. One teacher commented that some people come to class whose greatest need cannot be defined in terms of literacy skills, but in terms of social factors such as making relationships with people, and that lack of opportunity for social relationships can impede learning. Teachers paid close attention to social aspects by, for example, the way they introduced a new student to the class. Personal relationships were valued, supported and acknowledged in all classes, albeit in different ways. For example, in the Liverpool spelling class the personal relationships were important for Susan, who valued being treated as a proper person by a teacher - not looked down on by them. For Cheri the good relationship she had with her teacher enabled her to attend whilst managing her bipolar disorder. She was quite categorical that without this relationship she would have dropped out. In the Wednesday one-to-one tuition in Lancaster, the relationships between Jack and Hannah, and Diana and Alfonso, were warm, friendly and well-established. Hannah and Diana both drew on their understandings coming out of their friendships with their students to guide what they did in class.

The building of such relationships depended to a large extent on respect and trust between learners and teachers, the teacher's commitment and professionalism, and the teacher's authenticity of response as a person. There was a big spectrum as to what this meant, ranging from a more conventional, structured personal style to a more physical and emotional one. Duncan took a fairly formal, teacher-directed approach but had a relaxed and friendly relationship with the students as equals, as educated adults. Abdul and Sameena and others interviewed said that they respected and trusted him as a teacher, as they felt they were learning and progressing well. They mentioned his consistency and fairness and his high expectations of them, expecting them to learn as much as they could for themselves, facilitating rather than spoon-feeding them, which gave them confidence. Duncan treated them as individuals even though he was taking a 'whole-class' teaching approach, taking account of their individual needs and personalities, such as always taking time to respond to Abdul's frequent detailed questions about grammar. In the maths class in Liverpool the nature of the social relationship was vital for Jason and Katrina - both had received support from others to get to the point where they could attend college to build this relationship. A pre-relationship building process (telling them it would be friendly with a tutor who would treat them as an adult) had taken place through Katrina's placement officer and Jason's support at the tenants' association. The relationship itself was not the first step in the process. What these had in common was the sense that they cared personally about their students' success and well-being. This mattered as much as the nature of the curriculum, the physical characteristics of the environment and resources, or the teaching approach adopted.

The classroom acted as an arena for the social construction of the identities of students and tutors. Furniture layout, body language, tone of voice, form of address, organisation of groups, and the structure of activities all position people having particular identities. Learners can be positioned as competent adults, as 'experts', as learners, or as people with a deficit. We noticed many examples of tutors re-positioning learners as experts in their jobs or in some aspect of what they did in their everyday lives. This was part of seeing learners as people with other aspects to their identity in addition to being a member of the class. In some activities, however, learners were positioned as people with 'difficulties' or 'problems' - usually not overtly, but implicitly, by the choice of examples, by the illustrations, or by the tone of instructions on worksheets. In many instances we observed, the tutors tried to counter any negative positioning inherent in materials or learning tasks by the way they directed the activity. Class participants were positioned and positioned themselves in different ways, often

shifting positioning within one class. As we will discuss further in section 7.5, a changed sense of their own identity is one of the outcomes which participants might take away from learning-teaching events. The ways in which classroom interaction and other factors in the learning-teaching event position learners are therefore important considerations for teachers.

The classes we observed could be described as 'learning communities' in which the participants had built up shared understandings of what it means to be a member of the community, of how to participate, of what tasks consist of, of what counts as the beginning and end of a class, of the routines and rituals associated with class time. A class culture of peer friendship, support, a joint endeavour to learn and common learning goals provides a relaxed, positive learning environment. Such 'learning communities' were established as a result of having engaged in similar activities for some time, through trust, fun and commitment by tutors and learners. A learning community is transitory (the life of a class), and is also linked to the local community where the class is situated. Relationships had an impact on sustaining the learning community as well as supporting the individuals of which it consisted⁹.

We identified a distinction between developing individual confidence, and developing 'social confidence'. Social confidence is associated with, but not the same as, individual confidence: it concerns not just a person's confidence in what s/he can do (for example 'I can achieve level 1 maths'), but who s/he is and who s/he can be in relation to others. It was encouraged in listening to one another talk about learning, talking about home life and things which mattered, and sharing things that were affecting learning. Whether the method of learning was individual, paired or group, learning to be socially confident was valued highly by students. This is particularly relevant to most ESOL students. They generally have a high level of self-esteem in relation to their educational achievement, but low social confidence because of their lack of English language capability and their positioning in society.

Classes all maintained a serious intent, but, within this, learning was conducted in relaxed, friendly and enjoyable ways. There was lots of humour, laughter and play: the students found learning fun. This is an important factor in countering previous negative experiences of learning as embarrassing and painful. In the Lancaster class there was a marked use of humour to deconstruct teacher authority. There were jokes about social conventions and teacher authority which served to shift positioning and break down unequal power relations between tutors and students. Learning activities were sometimes akin to play, especially those which emerged spontaneously.

The importance of personal relationships was apparent also in the amount of praise, encouragement and minimising of error evident in the classes. Tutors provided a lot of encouragement to learners to participate in class, to try things, and to see their progress positively. However, there was no associated cost for choosing not to participate or take risks. Most tutors responded to student contributions with praise and reinforcement for everything successful, or even nearly successful. Some tutors' responses were exclusively positive. Even in a situation where the student made an error, the way many tutors responded to it was to avoid reference to the error, to comment on something which was nearly right, thereby building up the learners' trust that they would not be exposed to failure.

⁹ This notion of a class becoming a 'learning community' has much in common with the concept of a 'community of practice' as developed by Lave and Wenger 1991 and Wenger 1998 [see also Barton and Tusting 2005]. In the classes we observed, however, learning something was usually the primary objective of the activities in which people participated, whereas the concept of 'communities of practice' refers to participation in purposeful activities in which learning is a more incidental outcome.

Tutors were on the whole tolerant of off-task discussion in English or in other languages, seeing it as a way in which students can gain confidence, can make links between their lives outside class and what they are learning, and can participate as 'experts'. In the Liverpool classes, we noticed that tutors used social talk, talk about the everyday, talk about themselves as bridging between formal and informal elements of lessons. Sometimes this is tutor-led, as in Debbie's admission that she had 'messed the lesson up' by getting 'carried away', and sometimes it was student-led as in Sarah's measuring episode. Humour, jokes, mimicry and play-acting were also mechanisms for moving between one and the other.

By contrast, we observed that lack of attention to social factors may impede learning. Instances we observed of social factors which had potential to impede learning included personality clashes, gender imbalances, and the dominance of confident, vocal students over quieter ones. One tutor commented that team teaching can help to avert personality clashes between teachers and students. Some students appeared to be denied learning opportunities by being in a minority group in a class, or just by being shy or reserved in their style of participation. These sorts of difficulties may be hard to address, but tutors found that being aware of them helped.

8.3 Negotiation of learning opportunities

Within the sort of supportive environment described above, learners and teachers can collaborate in order to maximise learning opportunities for everyone concerned. This involves making decisions about content, methods, style, formality, structure, pace, tone, materials and activities of the classroom. The tutor's task is to negotiate these in interaction with all concerned, to fine-tune them according to the individuals involved, to be flexible and responsive to ongoing changes in configurations of purposes and preferences, and – as we emphasise in the following section – to be responsive to the learners' own agency in these processes. We saw many examples of these sorts of negotiations, some of which we include here.

Teaching which maximised the availability of learning opportunities seemed to develop in negotiation between learners and teachers: it was not only carefully planned, but was also responsive – both to individuals and to the group as a whole – and emergent from the ongoing interaction. This involved collaboration, dialogue and flexibility around the content, method and mode of delivery. Pre-planned schemes of work are often recommended as good practice, but the flexibility to respond dynamically to learners' changing needs and interests is also essential. Teachers were frequently adapting their plans in order to accommodate the particular circumstances of learners' lives, for example by being flexible about timekeeping and ensuring that the scheduling of classes was responsive to students' needs.

We observed tutors adjusting their teaching out of sensitivity to mental health difficulties, stepping tasks down to give students opportunities to succeed, using different means to get across the same points, checking student understanding in different ways, and using constant repetition and review. Gauging the appropriate amount of support without stepping the task down so much that students are no longer challenged is a difficult balance. We observed tutors making fine-grained decisions to ensure they did not scaffold students so much that they are no longer learning anything new. For example, at the times when Duncan elicited Abdul's contributions in the group and answered his questions on grammar this could be seen as a successful provision of learning opportunities. When Abdul and Sameena were left floundering without the necessary support in the pair work the learning was not so successful. When

Duncan spent a long time trying to help another student understand a point in the whole group feedback, it may have been a learning opportunity for her but those who already understood may have felt held back, which two of the students suggested sometimes happens in this group. The balance between challenge and support was largely achieved by the tutors we observed, but there were moments when it appeared students might have been able to respond had they been given a little more time before the task was broken down.

We observed many instances of tutors moving skilfully between formality and informality, structure and flexibility, interweaving personal and task-based talk, fine-tuning their individual or group interactions according to the reactions of students. Formality and informality are often intertwined¹⁰. We noticed that in quite informal settings (such as a relaxed, friendly atmosphere at a small table) the nature of the work could be formal (such as worksheets about language forms or abstract numerical operations)¹¹. For example, in the entry level 1 – 3 English class in Lancaster, structured worksheets were used during the one-to-one part of the session, which had an informal, conversational atmosphere. In the Blackburn ESOL class, Duncan took a formal approach to teaching grammar using an ESOL textbook, closely controlling the learning activities. At the same time, his good sense of humour and appreciation of his students and their enjoyment and engagement with the tasks created a ‘buzz’ and a relaxed, informal atmosphere. Students were chatting freely, either in English or in their shared languages whilst doing the learning tasks.

Formal, structured teaching methods and materials were not straightforwardly positive or negative features of these classes. Some students found a degree of formality reassuring, giving them a sense of order, structure, purpose, challenge and achievement. Formality can provide security and familiarity: this is what many learners expect of classes. Many ESOL students had thrived and achieved well in their own countries going through very formal systems of schooling. However, structure could become counter-productive if it squeezed out individual responsiveness and links to worlds beyond the classroom. Formal procedures and ground rules were reminiscent of the school practices which some students associated with previous fear and failure.

Classes and one-to-one tuition sessions varied in pace and nature of activities. Some spent a long time over a single point, repeating and checking until everyone appeared to understand it. Some used many different activities to present and reinforce the same content. On the other hand, a single activity often had multiple uses and multiple outcomes, either for the class as a whole, or for an individual learner. These different or additional learning opportunities were often driven by tutors’ ingenuity in adapting or extending activities to suit individual and emerging needs and possibilities, but also by the students’ own motivations for attending.

8.4 Learners as active agents in their own learning

Our observation has shown that many learners reinterpret what they encounter in classrooms to create learning opportunities for themselves. Whatever the nature of the provision, they work actively to ‘make something of it’ according to their own agenda, and to take ownership of their own learning experiences. This may be a characteristic which is specific to adult learning as compared with child learning. Most of the students we observed had strong views about

¹⁰ The way in which aspects of in/formality are often intertwined is a key theme in the LSDA literature review on formal and informal learning (Colley et al. 2003). For discussion of different definitions of formal and informal learning, see Tusting 2003.

¹¹ This can be interpreted in terms of Bernstein’s concepts of classification and framing (Bernstein 1996): the curriculum content was strongly classified, but by being mediated informally, it was weakly framed.

their learning: about what their goals were, and how these would best be met. However, some students did not display the same degree of agency and might have benefited from having their own role as agent discussed and encouraged. Recognising the possibility of learners taking a more active part in shaping learning-teaching events presents a challenge to views of teaching as the transmission of knowledge with teachers taking responsibility for planning what will be learnt.

In the Liverpool Drop-In maths class the learners were supported to choose the topic area and worksheet that they wanted to work on. For example, Sarah wanted to learn 'area' as she wanted to know how to measure for a bedroom carpet, or the amount of wood for an alcove shelf. In the interview she said that her dad always did this and she wanted to learn. Jason said he wanted to do fractions because he found them hard, so he wanted to be able to do them. He chose the level of worksheet (he could do a 'harder' or 'easier' one depending on his confidence level). He decided the pace and called Kay when he wanted to check or move on. Katrina, in discussion with Kay, said she wanted to learn the basics like 'times tables' - as she knew these were important and she could not do them. She said this would help her with her money and with her job. Her pace was very slow and she had to keep asking Kay for help, but in all her interviews and observations she displayed an enormous sense of being an active agent. She felt that she would succeed if she tried hard enough - she did not seem to be daunted by her lack of skill as she worked up to entry level 1.

Students have the ultimate option of attending or not attending, attending but tuning out, or attending and engaging in the event. Participation and engagement, therefore, are crucial factors within students' control, and a crucial aim for tutors is to encourage and facilitate them. We observed that engagement was most apparent when tasks were personally meaningful to students, in the sense that they could see the relevance of the task to their own lives, and when they were exercising choice and control over what they do. However, we observed a surprisingly high level of engagement even in tasks for which the rationale was not immediately apparent: good learning can happen in what on the surface look like bad conditions. For example, in the Liverpool Drop-In maths class students worked assiduously on worksheets - not what some may see as an engaging activity - because of the way they were framed and mediated by the tutor, Kay, and because of their trust in her. These adult learners seemed to have a high degree of tolerance for uncertainty as to the ultimate purpose of activities. Even when there was considerable mismatch between the class activities and the students' motivations to attend we observed high levels of engagement, especially when the motivation was very urgent, as in the case of asylum seekers and refugees.

We observed students participating in discussion about what and how they were learning, being involved in democratic decision-making about how courses were run, and negotiating their own pace. Many learners were active in understanding how they are learning, taking ownership and making choices. Some tutors also encouraged critique from their learners, further boosting learners' sense of agency and control. Students taking control of their own learning through dialogue in this way depends on tutors taking account of the wider perspective of students' lives and capabilities beyond the classroom, and recognising the importance of social relationships in the class, as discussed above.

In the Liverpool Drop-In spelling class Susan developed a relationship with Debbie that supported her learning outside the class. She often wrote little notes in her homework for Debbie telling her how she felt about learning, for example: 'That was hard and I didn't understand but I think I do now'. She often stayed behind to talk to Debbie about what she was

reading or writing, or her delight in learning about language¹². Tommy took an active role in developing his interest in creative writing, writing more than required and discussing this with Debbie. He decided from this positive experience to sign up for a creative writing course following the spelling class. Tommy linked this experience of learning with other learning experiences in his everyday life where he got books out of the library to teach himself about astronomy, photography or sea fishing. Cheri also took the initiative in developing a relationship with Debbie that supported her learning - with this support she explored writing poetry, which she brought for Debbie to see. Debbie also used this space to discuss her progress in her maths course - so it was about learning more generally. Elizabeth explained that by using the 'look, cover, write, check' method that she had learned in class she was practising words herself - she was constructing her own methods for learning outside the classroom. Sameena, Abdul and most of the other students responded to the strongly teacher-directed learning environment of the Blackburn ESOL class by taking charge of their own learning within the framework offered, through their contributions in whole-group and pair work, their questions to each other and to Duncan and the use of their individual learning strategies.

We gathered evidence of learners gaining benefits which went beyond what the teacher had intended or planned. For example, what the students learned in the Blackburn ESOL class went way beyond the main aims of the lessons for learning new grammatical structures that seemed to be the major focus. What they were ostensibly learning was a grammatical framework or scaffolding that can underpin learning to speak English, but they were also developing reading, writing, speaking and listening skills in the process. In the focal lesson Duncan used the central text as a 'vehicle' for learning grammar rather than to be read as an interesting story. He purposely read it with little expression directing their focus to concentrate on learning new words and verb patterns. Despite this, Abdul, Sameena and other students said they liked the article because they found the story 'interesting because I like people', 'adventure', 'nice'. It was through their *own* reading for the comprehension exercise that they came to appreciate the story. The lesson was around a written text but there was as much speaking as reading, though this was mainly focused on comprehension and grammar related to the text. In the end-of-lesson review, although Duncan wrote on the board and the students recorded on their sheets 'verb patterns', the students identified other learning such as "we did [comprehension] exercises about [what] happens", "describing text", and "new words".

A particular arena in which students could take control was the pacing of their work. Many of the students, particularly in Kay's class, reported liking worksheets, as they gave them control over the pace they worked at. Using worksheets enabled learners in the maths class to talk and then return to task. This was felt to be distinctly different from a school regime of learning. In many classes the students responded to worksheets and ILPs positively - they felt some sense of ownership and involvement in choosing their pace of learning and in their progress, especially when these were used more flexibly and personally than just as a 'record of work done', and when the ILPs were used to facilitate discussion about the individual learner, not just to collect data about 'students'. The type of teaching, whether individual or group, seemed to matter less than the students feeling they were learning at their own pace and could participate in discussion about how they were learning.

¹² As with so much good practice in adult LLN provision, Debbie gave up her own time for such meetings, but this was beyond the call of duty under the current funding arrangements. The value to the student of this sort of out-of-class engagement should be recognised by time for it being built into *Skills for Life* tutors' contracts

8.5 Broader outcomes from attending *Skills for Life* classes

'Content' learning is privileged by curricula, but it is inextricably bound up with other types of learning: learning how to learn, learning about language, learning about social relations, the reconstruction of social identities, and wider benefits of learning such as increases in confidence and physical and psychological well-being. In the classes we observed, these other forms of learning were in evidence, and emerged as essential factors in the success of the classes. Curriculum targets were by no means always considered to be the most important outcome, except in relation to gaining employment. For example, in both the Liverpool DISC classes the learners explained that gaining confidence, managing their health, meeting other people, learning things they did not know and making up for skills not learned at school were more important than achieving curriculum targets.

An important outcome of participation in LLN education is an increase in 'social confidence', as described in section 8.2. This is not only to do with demonstrating competence, which might be done in isolation, but more a change in self-perception, a conscious awareness of competence, and a sense of confidence in interacting with others (for further discussion of the wider benefits of participation in educational provision see, for example, Eldred 2002, Eldred et al. 2004, Vorhaus 2001, Schuller et al. 2004). Tutors seemed to be aware of the value of their classes in building social confidence, and many of the things we observed them doing or saying were indirectly contributing to this. For example, Jack in the Lancaster spelling class learnt that he is not 'different' and that there are other people of a similar age to him who have similar learning needs; this was very important in terms of changing his self-image and boosting his confidence.

We observed many instances of students learning about how to benefit from attending classes. For example, in all the Lancaster classes observed, including others not reported here, learners are not only learning content, but learning about classroom practices by participating in them, such as patterns of interaction in groups, and classroom rituals (filling in 'Work Done sheets', etc.).

Students often came to classes with one goal, but gained something more, different or unexpected. As we pointed out in the section on 'motivation', Sameena's initial motivations were educational, and the positive effect her learning had on her relationship with her husband was unexpected. They now share a broader range of activities such as watching films in English or with English subtitles and socialising together with English-speaking friends that previously only her husband communicated with. Her motivations for learning English are now, as a result, social as well as educational. Abdul and Sameena were learning not only English language but also about a new learning culture in a new country. They were learning about this society and about the wider world from their teacher, their peers and to some extent through learning materials, though a broader range including 'real' and locally contextualised materials/resources would have made this even more effective. Sameena and other female South Asian ESOL students were learning to learn with male learners, not a norm associated with their cultural background and previous educational experience. In Lancaster, a student came to a spelling class to work on form-filling so she could apply for a passport. She got the passport, took her first holiday abroad, and enjoyed it so much that she stopped coming to class because she was too busy working at a second job in order to earn money to pay for more holidays. This is an example of the direct economic benefit of attending classes. It had a huge impact on the learner's life, but not measurable in terms of standard achievement targets/passing tests and would show up on college records as a 'drop-out'.

9. Conclusion

In this research we have studied learning-teaching events from the perspective of learners and learning. Following the example of much applied linguistics research, we have not been looking for direct relationships between teaching method and learning outcomes. Rather, we have been seeking to understand learning, and to identify ways in which tutors facilitate the creation of learning opportunities. We have recognised the importance of what participants bring into classes, particularly their life experiences and purposes for learning. We have observed not only the teaching methods and tasks, but also the physical and social environment of the classes. We worked with teachers who are all totally committed to their students and their work, and identified factors which helped them to serve their students' interests. The research has shown the value of tutors understanding learners and their lives outside the classroom for fine-tuning adult LLN pedagogy, of recognising the diversity and complexity of the social life of the classroom, and of responding flexibly to this. The involvement of tutors as teacher-researchers in this research has shown the value of developing and supporting reflective practitioners so that they can take an exploratory approach to practice.

Finally we summarise the key issues emerging from the research which have been discussed in detail above, and propose implications for policy and practice.

9.1 Key issues emerging from the research

- Every learning-teaching context is different, and calls forth responses from teachers which are specific both to the context and to the individual learners.
- Learning is the product of a dynamic dialogue between what learners bring and what teachers bring to the learning-teaching event.
- Teachers experience a tension between two types of professionalism: on the one hand meeting institutional demands and on the other hand responding to learners' aims, interests and lives.
- The way in which the core curriculum is presented in terms of itemised skills, knowledge and understanding may make it more difficult for tutors to conceptualise LLN as social practices, and hence to bring the learner's context and the skills framework together.
- Providing successful learning opportunities is not just a question of implementing particular methods or following general guidance as to 'what works', but also of understanding and responding to the complex interplay of factors in learning-teaching events.
- The nurturing of good personal relationships is an essential factor in successful teaching. Being treated with respect and equality as adults had a positive impact on learners' motivation, perseverance in coming to classes, and perception of being successful in and beyond the classroom.
- People learn LLN both inside and outside the classroom.
- Listening to learners requires time, recognition and resources.
- Teachers need time and support to embrace innovation and change.

9.2 Implications for practice, policy and professional development

- Tutors need to take as their starting-point a view of literacy and numeracy as social practices, situated in people's lives and purposes, and differing from one context to another. They need to think about LLN holistically, in order to contextualise the skills which are itemised in the national standards.
- Tutors should make listening to learners, and gaining knowledge of learners' lives, motivations, interests and capabilities, the cornerstone of their pedagogy, as recommended in the section of the Adult Literacy and Adult Numeracy Core Curriculum documents on *The learner's context* (DfES 2001a, p.9; DfES 2001b, pp. 8 - 9). In this way adults' LLN learning needs can be met and evidenced in the context of relevant and meaningful learning opportunities.
- Tutors need to be aware of a wide range of methods and receive guidance on fine-tuning methods to contexts and individuals.
- Pedagogy should be responsive and flexible; not prescribed by too restrictive a curriculum, nor constrained by rigid targets and assessment procedures.
The funding of provision should take account of the time needed for responsiveness to students' lives, for the creation of social spaces that are conducive to learning, and for fulfilling the demands of the curriculum.
- Tutors should be rewarded for reflecting on their practice, and for openness and exploration in response to new contexts and new students.
- The core curriculum should place more emphasis on responsiveness to learners, and less on coverage of itemised skills.
- Success should be defined in relation to learners' lives.
- Those who put funding policies into practice should make it quite clear to all concerned that funding is not tied solely to the achievement of qualifications.
- New practitioners need the opportunity to develop awareness and understanding of issues of culture, poverty, power and social justice, and how these affect learning.
- LLN tutor training needs to include specific guidance on how to gain knowledge about adult learners' lives and capabilities, how to be responsive to what learners bring to learning, how to contextualise the *Skills for Life* curriculum, and how to reflect on their own practice.

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This report shows how an understanding of language, literacy and numeracy as social practices can help tutors to understand and respond to learners' needs. It analyses and provides detailed examples of what adult learners bring with them to their adult classes, illustrates how tutors contribute to these classes, and investigates the social nature of learning-teaching events. It is based on the research of the Adult Learners' Lives project in colleges in Liverpool, Blackburn and Lancaster.

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