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**Teaching, Learning and Assessment
for Adults
Improving Foundation Skills**

Case Study: England

John Comings and John Vorhaus

Centre for Educational Research and Innovation

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TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT FOR ADULTS IMPROVING FOUNDATION SKILLS

Case Study: England

John Comings and John Vorhaus

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England's Skills for Life Strategy, launched in 2001, links nationally recognized qualifications, awarded through an examination system, to a national core curriculum that prepares adults to pass those tests. The Skills for Life programme is implemented in a range of settings, including private sector training programmes, workplaces, prisons, and voluntary community groups.

This case study describes how three different exemplary programmes have adapted the Skills for Life curriculum and other guidelines to meet individual learner needs. They include programmes in a non-profit (the Mary Ward Centre), a further education college (York College), and a local government programme (Croydon). The case study authors observed different classes (ESOL, numeracy and literacy) at each of these sites. As the case study authors describe, each programme uses different types of assessments and forms; teachers draw on their experience and training as well as their knowledge of learners to design instruction; and learners have a range of summative tests they can take to secure the same qualification.

It is important to note that England does not have a formal policy promoting formative assessment, the focus of this study. Nevertheless, there are a number of guidelines and tools available that promote formative assessment practices. The instructors in the exemplary programmes featured use individual learning plans to help define learner goals, and follow progress through regular reviews with learners. Instructors also use the individual learning plans to ensure that teaching and learning are relevant to learner needs. The case study also describes how programme leaders and staff reflect on programme performance and develop strategies for improvement at the programme level, as well.

Introduction

This case study describes England's adult basic skills education system, which grew out of reforms that began in 1999 and continue today. This system links nationally recognised qualifications, awarded through assessment tests, to a curriculum that prepares adults to pass those tests. Formative assessment is embedded in a process that helps teachers combine the demands of the national curriculum with the individual needs and aspirations of each learner. This case study describes the system in England; there are differences between the English system and basic skills provision in other parts of the United Kingdom (Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland).

Background

Before the publication of the findings from the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS),¹ adult basic skills education was not a priority of the national government. The IALS reported that the average literacy and numeracy skill level of the population of the United Kingdom was below that of Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, and the United States.

The publication of the IALS statistics brought the issue of low basic skills to the attention of the government, which formed a commission, led by Claus Moser, to investigate this issue and make suggestions on how to address it. The 1999 Moser report² led to a three-fold increase in funding for adult basic skills education in England, from GBP 137 million in 2000/2001 to GBP 420 million in 2001/2002, and then higher amounts in the following years. Funding for adult basic skills in 2005/2006 was GBP 680 million. The increase in funding was accompanied by a call for greater accountability. Since the government had employed externally set achievement targets measured by standardized tests in its effort to improve the education of children, it chose the same approach for adult basic skills education.³

In 2001, the government launched a new adult basic skills education strategy, *Skills for Life*,⁴ to address the learning needs of the adults identified by the IALS as having low literacy and numeracy skills. Skills for Life provides services to both native-born and immigrant adults. The term immigrant is used here to include those who intend to settle permanently in England and those who are temporary residents who may some day leave and are referred to as migrants.

Skills for Life is co-ordinated by the Skills for Life Strategy Unit (SfLSU) within the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). SfLSU supports Skills for Life by working with partner agencies that include the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI),

¹ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development & Statistics Canada (2000), *Literacy in the Information Age: Final Report of the International Adult Literacy Survey*, OECD, Paris.

² Moser, C. (1999), *A Fresh Start: Improving Literacy and Numeracy, Report of the Working Group*, Department of Education and Employment, London. <http://www.lifelonglearning.co.uk/mosergroup/freshsum.pdf>

³ Lavender, P., J. Derrick and B. Brooks (2004), *Testing, Testing...1,2,3: Assessment in Adult Literacy, Language and Numeracy*, NIACE, London <http://www.niace.org.uk/publications/T/Testing.asp>

⁴ DfES (2001), *Skills for Life: the National Strategy for Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy Skills*, Department for Education and Skills, London. <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/RRP/u013452/index.shtml>

the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK), the Quality Improvement Agency for Lifelong Learning (QIA), and the National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy (NRDC). LSC is a government agency that administers funding for programme services, through nine regional co-ordinators, to 150 local education authorities (LEAs), and other non-LEA organisations. ALI is a public agency that conducts formal evaluations of the educational institutions that implement Skills for Life programmes. These evaluations help programmes improve their services but are also available to the public to help them judge the quality of each programme. Like the ALI, OFSTED is also an inspectorate, with some responsibility for inspecting sixth form, tertiary, general further education and specialist colleges. Lifelong Learning UK, a sector skills council, is responsible for the professional development of all those working in libraries, archives and information services, work-based learning, higher education, further education and community learning and development. The Government established the QIA in the face of concern about arrangements for accountability and quality improvement, and to lead and support improvement across the sector. The NRDC is a consortium of universities and nongovernmental agencies, with a remit to undertake research and development in adult literacy, language and numeracy, aiming to inform policy and improve practice. In so far as this involves adult literacy, language and numeracy, the SFLSU has oversight of all activities described here - funding, research, development and inspection.

Skills for Life defines an “adult” as anyone over the age of 16 (*i.e.* no longer in compulsory education). Learners fall into two groups by age. The first group comprises 16 to 19 year olds who are served by the Key Skills⁵ component of the programme as full-time students in further education colleges, which largely serve secondary school students who do not go on to more academically-oriented sixth form colleges. Adults over the age of 19 are served by the Skills for Life component in programmes that are based in further education colleges, private sector training providers, adult and community education services, learndirect⁶ centres (an employment and training programme), workplaces, prisons, and voluntary community groups. If the focus or location of services is more appropriate, some learners under the age of 19 do study in Skills for Life programmes rather than in Key Skills programmes.

The Skills for Life strategy established five levels of English language, literacy, and numeracy skills:

⁵ <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/keyskills/>

⁶ <http://www.learndirect.co.uk/>

- Level 2 is equivalent to a GCSE (a qualification usually achieved at age 16) at grades A* to C (higher skill level).
- Level 1 is equivalent to a GCSE at grades D to G (lower skill level).
- Entry Level 3 is equivalent to the skills of school students aged 9 to 11.
- Entry Level 2 is equivalent to the skills of school students aged 7 to 9.
- Entry Level 1 is equivalent to the skills of school students aged 5 to 7.

Initially, the government's Public Sector Agreement (PSA) target, the most important government target in relation to Skills for Life, focused only on achievement at Levels 1 and 2, because analysis of the IALS data showed that adults needed this level of skill to compete for good wages in the global economy. However, for programme accountability purposes, the government decided that the PSA target would also include Entry Level 3, in the context of the policy priority of promoting progression to Level 2 and beyond. Only the first achievements at the top three levels count towards the PSA target. That is not to say that learner achievements at Entry Levels 1 and 2 are not important; achievement at this level often represents a vital stage in a learners' development, in its own right and as a step on the way to achievement at a higher level.

The IALS identified the issue of low basic skills but could not provide an estimate of how many adults fell into each of the five Skills for Life levels. To gain this information, the government undertook the 2003 Skills for Life Survey,⁷ which interviewed 8 730 randomly selected adults, aged 16 to 65, to build a national profile, based on the five levels of basic skills, of the population in England. The survey found that the 31.9 million adults in this age range in England fell into the following categories in terms of literacy and numeracy skill:

- 3% (1.1 million) had literacy skills at Entry Level 1 or below
- 2% (0.6 million) had literacy skills at Entry Level 2
- 11% (3.5 million) had literacy skills at Entry level 3
- 40% (12.6 million) had literacy skills at Level 1
- 44% (14.1 million) had literacy skills at Level 2 or above

⁷ Department for Education and Skills (2003), *The Skills for Life Survey: A National Needs and Impact Survey of Literacy, Numeracy and ICT Skills*, Department of Education and Skills, London. <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/RRP/u013476/index.shtml>

- 5% (1.7 million) had numeracy skills at Entry Level 1 or below
- 16% (5.1 million) had numeracy skills at Entry Level 2
- 25% (8.1 million) had numeracy skills at Entry Level 3
- 28% (8.8 million) had numeracy skills at Level 1
- 25% (8.1 million) had numeracy skills at Level 2 or above

Nearly half (47%) of all adults aged 16 to 65 were classified as Entry Level 3 or below in either literacy or numeracy. Only one in five (18%) adults achieved Level 2 or above for both literacy and numeracy.

Based on these findings, the government decided to set ambitious targets for the Skills for Life programme. The government set three national targets, each in increments of 750 000. The first was 750 000 learners achieving qualifications at one of the top three levels by 2004; the second was an increase to 1.5 million by 2007, and the third was an increase to 2.25 million by 2010.

A recent report⁸ by the House of Commons' Committee of Public Accounts noted that the first target, 750 000 by 2004, was met, but it cautioned that more than half of the participants who achieved a qualification were 16 to 19 year olds. Most of these teenagers were served by the Key Skills component of the programme in full-time further education colleges. Adults were being served, but they were not the majority of participants. This case study is focused on those adults.

Programme services

Programme services are structured around the National Core Curriculum that defines the scope and sequence of the skills learners need to develop to reach each level. When learners enter a program, their skills are assessed to identify their initial level and the skills they need to progress to the next level, and tutors use this assessment to design activities that help learners reach their goals.

The Moser report supported the use of formative assessment as an element of quality improvement. Specifically, the report argued that the materials used for learning should include assessments that provide useful information to learners and tutors. However, the Skills for Life programme

⁸ Committee of Public Accounts (2005), *Skills for Life: Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy*. House of Commons, London.
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmselect/cmpubacc/792/792.pdf>

has no formal policy on formative assessment. Though formative assessment is not a formal mandate, it is a formal process within the programmes that were observed. The formative assessment process keeps tutors and learners informed of progress and provides information on how to change instruction in ways that support learning. Once learners have successfully completed learning at a target level, they can take an exam and receive certification of their accomplishment. Learners who pass one of the tests might then move on to study for the next level or, if they pass the Level 2 test, move on to an academic or vocational programme.

Curriculum

Since programme services are structured around it, the core curriculum influences initial assessment, instruction, and summative assessment. The Skills for Life programme developed a clear and coherent framework of national standards for each level and these standards formed the foundation for the national core curriculum frameworks,⁹ which set out the scope and sequence of skills that adults need to acquire in order to progress up the levels. These frameworks provide programmes with clear guidelines on how to group learners into classes and how to assess their learning needs and their progress.

Four frameworks have been published. One sets out eight milestones for adults with learning difficulties or disabilities who are not ready to study at Entry Level 1. The other three set out curriculum frameworks for adult literacy, numeracy, and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) at each of the five levels. The core curricula describe the skills needed to pass a test at each level and suggest ways to teach those skills.

The adult literacy core curriculum covers the ability to speak, listen and respond; read and comprehend, and write to communicate. Within this set of skills and knowledge, the curriculum employs a model of literacy developed for the primary and secondary school system. That model is comprised of three areas of focus:

- Text focus addresses the overall meaning of the text and the ability to read critically and flexibly and write in different styles and forms.
- Sentence focus addresses grammar and sentence structure.
- Word focus addresses individual words and their structure, spelling, and character.

⁹ http://www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/Curriculum_documents

The core curriculum document states that for instruction to be successful, it must teach these skills and knowledge within each learner’s context. To do this the document suggests that instruction should insure that:

- Learners are clear about what they are learning and what the activities they are undertaking are designed to teach.
- Learners bring the context that will be the ultimate “proving ground” for their improved skills.
- Learners are sure that the skills and knowledge that they are learning are helping them to use their literacy in the range of ways they want.

The curriculum document delineates each national standard on two pages. The two pages include:

- A statement of the national standard.
- A description of the skills and knowledge required to meet the standard set out in a list of curriculum elements.
- An example of a relevant literacy task for each curriculum element.
- An example of learning activities that could be used to develop the skills and knowledge in each curriculum element.
- Guidance on techniques and approaches that tutors could use to develop the skills and knowledge set out in the curriculum elements.

An example at Entry Level 1 is the standard: Write to communicate information to an intended audience in documents such as forms, lists, messages, notes, and records. The curriculum elements are:

- Spell correctly some personal key words and familiar words.
- Write the letters of the alphabet using upper and lower case.
- Use basic sound-symbol association to help spelling.

An example of the first element is given as: Spell some personal and familiar words correctly in writing (in lists, simple forms, or notes to family and friends). An example of a sample activity is: Use a word processor to write names, dates, and places for captions for a photograph album and print them out. The guidance for this Level describes nine specific phonics and spelling tasks such as: discriminate, blend, and spell initial consonant clusters (a list of 29 clusters are provided).

An example at Level 1 is the standard: Write to communicate information, ideas, and opinions clearly using length, format, and style appropriate to purpose and audience in documents such as forms, records,

e-mails, letters, narratives, instructions, reports, and explanations. The curriculum elements are:

- Plan and draft writing.
- Judge how much to write and the level of detail to include.
- Present information in a logical sequence using paragraphs where appropriate.
- Use language suitable for purpose and audience.

An example of the first element is given as: Plan and write a draft where the context requires careful thought. An example for a sample activity is: Plan the key points to be included in an explanation of a familiar process and draft and review for accuracy and clarity. The guidance for this level is a paragraph on writing style.

The adult numeracy core curriculum covers the ability to understand and use mathematical information, calculate and manipulate mathematical information, and interpret results and communicate mathematical information. Within this set of skills and knowledge, the curriculum employs a model of numeracy developed for the primary and secondary school system. That model is comprised of three areas of focus:

- Number includes numbers and the number system and calculations.
- Measures, shape and space includes common measures of money, time, temperature, distance, length, weight, capacity, perimeter, area and volume, and shape and position.
- Handling data includes data and statistical measures and probability.

The adult ESOL core curriculum covers the ability to speak, listen, read, and write English. Speaking ability is divided into two subsections, speak to communicate and engage in discussion. Listening ability is expanded to listen and respond. Reading ability is divided into three subsections, reading comprehension, grammar and punctuation, and vocabulary, word recognition, and phonics. Writing ability is divided into three subsections, writing composition, grammar and punctuation, and spelling and handwriting.

The adult pre-entry curriculum framework is broken into four literacy components (context for communication, speaking and listening, reading and writing) and four numeracy components (context for numbers, numbers, measures, shape and space, and handling data). The context components build the ability to encounter, respond to, and engage in communications

and numeracy. The other components are similar to those in the literacy, numeracy, and ESOL curricula.

The core curriculum sets out a plan for instruction. Initial assessment provides the tutor and learner with the information they need to make progress through the curriculum and the formative assessment measure progress toward reaching that goal.

Initial assessment

When potential learners first arrive in a programme, their skills are assessed to estimate which level class would be most appropriate for them. The DfES does not mandate or recommend particular assessment tools. Rather, it encourages programmes to use assessment tools that are appropriate for their learners. However, the DfES website lists commercially produced assessment tools, and it has made its own assessment tools available for literacy and numeracy. DfES is developing assessment tools for ESOL and dyslexia (for the pre-Entry Level 1 learners), as well. Some programmes use commercially available paper and pencil tests for this purpose, others develop their own. If potential learners have problems with the tests, an informal assessment is used.

Programmes also use the initial assessment to begin to understand the context in which potential learners make use of the skills they develop in the programme. This is done through an interview that focuses on why the learner is joining the programme, the challenges in her or his life that enhanced skills might help address, and background information that might be useful to the tutor or programme staff. In some programmes this information includes an assessment of learning styles, which focuses on whether learners usually employ visual, auditory, or kinaesthetic approaches to learning.

The initial assessment has two objectives. The first is to place learners in classes that meet their learning needs, and should help them make progress toward their learning goals. The second is to provide tutors with information that will help them link the learning objectives set out in the core curriculum to the individual life and interests of each student and develop learning activities that will be useful to all of the learners in the class.

Instruction

The core curriculum was meant to help tutors develop effective instruction that prepares their students to pass the exams for one of the

qualifications. The tutors who were interviewed said that when the national curriculum and the qualification tests were first introduced, they were resistant to them. Tutors believed that learners would not want to take exams to achieve the qualifications, and they worried that learners might be discouraged by the school-like demands of tests. The tutors also worried that the curriculum would be too restrictive to allow them to make instruction interesting and enjoyable for adults, and that this might lead to higher dropout rates.

However, after a year or two of experience many tutors changed their minds. They found that most learners are motivated to take the tests because they believe the qualifications will benefit them. One tutor, who said he originally discouraged learners from taking the tests, now encourages them to do so. Even so, tutors find that some learners need time to readjust to formal learning and build their self-confidence before exams become a motivating rather than a discouraging factor.

The tutors in this study also find the national curriculum to be useful to instruction, providing clear guidelines for what to teach in each class. A course consists of around 12 weeks of classes, usually for two to four hours a week. Typical class sizes range from 6 to 15 adults who are ideally at one level (Entry Level 2, for example) or they may be at two levels (Entry Level 1 and 2, for example) when necessary. It is intended that learners enter a class that is one level above the level estimated in the initial assessment. For example, a learner assessed at Entry Level 1 should be placed in an Entry Level 2 class. However, learners in a class may have very different needs from one another. For example, one learner could have high English speaking skills but low writing skills, while another has the opposite. In addition, a class could have learners who make slow progress because of learning difficulties as well as learners who make normal or even accelerated progress.

Since learners may be employed and have family responsibilities, they are sometimes absent from classes, arrive late, leave early, or drop out. Learners are not criticized for being late or missing classes, but they are encouraged to attend regularly and to be punctual. Tutors who were interviewed knew the reasons why their learners had stopped attending, and the reasons were usually beyond the control of the programme or its staff. For example, in one class three learners had dropped out. One had gone back to his country to take care of a sick relative, one had moved on to another course, and one was in severe pain. If attendance drops in a class, which often happens, new learners may enter a class while it is in progress. This is referred to as “open entry” classes. These new learners must be integrated into an ongoing class.

Since classes have learners with different learning needs and learners have different participation patterns, tutors must individualize instruction to some extent. They do this by using a combination of full class, small group, and individual instruction. A class might begin with an exercise for the whole class. Then the class might be broken down into small groups to work together on a learning task. The tutor then travels from one group to the next giving help or adapting the learning activity to their needs. The class might then move into an activity where each learner is working on their own and the tutor is working one-on-one with all learners or possibly only those that need extra help.

The instruction observed in the three case study programmes was a set of connected activities focused on learning objectives related to the core curriculum. However, the tutors were altering instruction to help learners who were having difficulty learning, which could be one learner or most of the class, and to connect the skills being learned to activities in the lives of the learners. The learners were not sitting in rows being taught. They were sitting around tables, sometimes listening or responding to the teacher as a whole class, sometimes working with each other in pairs or small groups, and sometimes working intensively with the teacher in a one-on-one tutoring event.

Formative assessment

Programmes draw on two published sources of advice on formative assessment. One of the two sources is a DfES publication, *Planning Learning and Recording Progress and Achievement: a Guide for Practitioners*.¹⁰ This document is a practitioner guide for good practice in planning learning, recording progress, and recording achievement for all learners in adult literacy, numeracy, and ESOL classes. It applies to all types of provision, whatever the context or style of delivery and all kinds of learners, including adults with learning difficulties and disabilities. The guide was developed by the Learning and Skills Development Agency, which has recently split into a non-departmental public agency, the Quality Improvement Agency, and a non-profit organization, the Learning and Skills Network.

The guide describes a process, involving both tutors and learners, to ensure that learning programmes meet learner needs and that learner progress and achievement are recognized. The essential features of this

¹⁰ Department for Education and Skills (2003), *Planning Learning and Recording Progress and Achievement: A Guide for Practitioners*, Department for Education and Skills, London <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/LearningInfrastructurePlanningLearning>

process are drawn from best practices developed over many years. The process is:

- Establishing a starting point
 - Get to know what the learner wants to do
 - Find out what the learner can do already
 - Relate this to the national standards
 - Discuss available options with the learner
 - Agree to the most suitable option with the learner
 - Keep a written record of the key points in this conversation
- Setting goals and targets
 - Find out more about what the learner can do
 - Agree on goals for a set timetable
 - Identify steps learners need to reach goals and set targets for these
 - Agree how achievement of learner goals will be assessed
 - Record the goals and targets on an individual learning plan (ILP)
- Planning teaching and learning activities
 - Plan learning activities and resources using learner targets, information from initial and diagnostic assessments, and the context for learning
 - Build in opportunities to check progress with the learner
 - Build in opportunities for learners to provide evidence of their achievements
 - Keep records of learner progress and achievement
 - Keep records of the learning activities and resources used.
- Reviewing progress
 - Plan time with learners to reflect on learning and progress
 - Check progress against the learner targets
 - Keep a written record
- Final assessment and review

- Build in time for a final review with the learner
- Assess learner progress and achievement against goals and targets
- Identify and acknowledge learning not planned on the ILP
- Provide a record of achievement for learners
- Retain copies of records of achievement for management and audit
- Planning the next step
 - Provide learners with information about what might be their next step
 - Provide learners with an opportunity to discuss these possibilities
 - Offer any further assessment that may be needed
 - Record decisions on progression for both learner and provider
- Setting new targets for returning learners
 - Provide an opportunity for learners to restate goals and priorities
 - Use past records of achievement and assessment to identify learners' literacy, language, and numeracy levels
 - Provide opportunities for further diagnostic assessment
 - Agree to targets
 - Record goals and targets agreed on new ILP

The other published source is *Recognizing and recording progress and achievement in non-accredited learning*,¹¹ which describes a formative assessment process developed in a project undertaken by the Learning and Skills Development Agency and the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE, a nongovernmental agency) under a grant from the Learning and Skills Council that began in 2001. The project, referred to as RARPA, piloted a process for assuring that learners were setting goals and measuring progress toward reaching them in courses that did not lead to tested certification. The pilot involved 71 providers. However, it also formed a model for formative assessment and quality assurance in the Skills for Life programme. RARPA developed a staged process of five elements:

¹¹ Greenwood, M., & P. Wilson (2004), *Recognizing and recording progress and achievement in non-accredited learning*, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, London. <http://www.niace.org.uk/projects/RARPA/Default.htm>

- Aims appropriate to an individual learner or group of learners.
- Initial assessment to establish the learner's starting point.
- Identification of appropriately challenging learning objectives (initial, renegotiated, and revised).
- Recognition and recording of progress and achievement during the programme (tutor feedback to learners, learner reflection, and progress reviews).
- End of programme learner self-assessment, tutor summative assessment, and review of overall progress and achievement.

The suggestions made in these sources are not mandated by the government. However, practitioners draw on these two sources in their efforts to design formative assessment procedures that meet the goals set out for them under the Skills for Life initiative. Those goals are learners acquiring qualifications. Individual programmes have their own tools for doing this formative assessment.

The formative assessment activities are recorded on paper forms. Some of the forms are kept in files at the programme so that tutors can refer to them and so that outside evaluators may look at them as a demonstration that formative assessment is taking place. Other forms are kept by the students. The formative assessment activities are designed to enable tutors and learners to talk about learning progress and ways that instruction or other services could help the learners succeed. Many teachers might do this anyway, but the activities encourage all teachers to engage in formative assessment on a regular basis.

These forms list the learning objectives set out in the core curriculum. Tutors are able to provide learners with regular informal feedback on how they are progressing based on the initial assessment and the level they are trying to reach. The learner is also able to follow their progress by checking off a learning objective after it has been covered in class and the learner feels confident that he or she has learned this skill.

Some of these formative assessment activities take place each class period. Learners record what they have done that day and tutors record that they have covered during the class. In addition, learners in this study participated in a formal interview twice during a course term. Early in the term, the tutor and student meet to go over the initial assessment information. Near the end of the term, they sit down again and judge progress and plan for either taking a test or moving on to another class during the next term.

Tutors find the formative assessment activities useful to them in organizing instruction and to learners in judging their progress. However, in the three programmes observed a good deal of paperwork was required, and the time spent on that paperwork, and the interactions between tutors and learners needed to fill out the paperwork, is time taken away from instruction. Over the course of their first term, learners become familiar with the formative assessment process. By the end of the term, they expect these activities to take place at the end of class and twice during the year.

One tutor said that she has some classes that meet for two hours a week and some that meet for four hours a week. However, the formative assessment process requires almost the same amount of time for both types of classes. In the two hours per week class, the time taken away from instruction is a significant amount of the total time available. The time taken away from the four hours per week class is less, as a percentage of the total. Another tutor mentioned that, in advanced classes, he could give learners something to do on their own when he was working individually with each learner on their assessment, but for entry level learners this is more difficult and for below entry level learners it is almost impossible. Both tutors thought this problem could be addressed by a combination of less paperwork, more class time, and aides available to help out in class when the tutor is involved in formative evaluation.

Learners interviewed during the study said they had a good idea of how they were progressing and did not complain about the paperwork. However, one tutor did report that a learner had told her, “I like it better when you teach us.” So, some learners are probably finding the formative assessment activities to be a distraction from the limited time they have for learning, while others find it useful or at least interesting.

Presently, the Skills for Life Strategy Unit is updating the programme level component that brings new learners into services, assesses their goals and needs, monitors their progress, and seeks their insights into how to improve services. This improved model is referred to as The Learning Journey. The Learning Journey is composed of seven stages:

- **Signposting and referral** is when individuals are given information on where they can find further information, advice, guidance, or learning provision and when they are transferred to a source of more in-depth information, advice, guidance, related services, or learning provision.
- **Skills check** is a quick (around ten minutes) screening process that is used to check the literacy, language, or numeracy skills of an

individual. This process identifies learners who might benefit from more in-depth assessment.

- **Initial assessment** is an in-depth process that measures the individual's writing, reading, numeracy, and language skills against the levels in the national standards. This process helps place learners in classes that are at the right level for them.
- **Diagnostic assessment** identifies a learner's strengths and weaknesses and highlights any skill gaps. This process helps structure a learner's individual learning plan.
- **Individual learning plans** are the outcome of the initial and diagnostic assessments. They set out each individual learner's plan to learn, a timetable for learning, ways of learning, and resources required.
- **Formative assessment** helps both learners and tutors to review progress and is a central part of the learning process.

Another new initiative is the Improving Formative Assessment (IFA) project, undertaken by NRDC, the Universities of Exeter and Brighton, NIACE, and the Learning and Skills Network. The project is evaluating whether and how the principles of formative assessment developed in the school system could be adapted to suit the post-compulsory education system, including Skills for Life. The project began in 2005 and is scheduled for completion in 2007. It examines how changes to tutors' formative assessment practices affect learner motivation, autonomy, and achievement in programmes for basic skills, citizenship, personal education, and vocational education. The project also identifies indicators of successful formative assessment in different contexts, factors that help and hinder changes in tutor assessment practices in different contexts, ways to amend assessment systems and qualifications in order to promote formative assessment, and guidance for staff development and initial tutor education programmes.

In addition, the Strategy Unit has begun looking at computer-based assessment with a contract to Alpha Plus, an educational consulting firm. The Alpha Plus project has found that Web and computer-based assessments have two benefits:

- They have the capacity to provide immediate results and a growing capacity to provide immediate and useful feedback to tutors and learners.
- They have the capacity to support not only traditional tests, but also portfolio-based and activity-based assessments.

At this time, e-assessment, as online assessment is called, is simply replicating the paper assessment procedures, but this technology offers possibilities that would be difficult without technology. Specifically, the boundary between formative and summative assessment could be broken so that both are drawing on the same assessment tools. In addition, e-assessment could use technology to make tests more relevant and interesting through the use of graphics, video, audio, voice recognition, and simulations.

Formative assessment activities are developed by each programme, but all programmes appear to draw from the same sources. The new national initiative may lead to more standardization in formative assessment. This standardization is possible, in part, because all of the programmes are following the same curriculum.

Summative assessment

Learners demonstrate that they have achieved one of the five Levels by taking tests¹² from one of several providers, including the City and Guilds, Edexcel, LCCI Examinations Board, National Open College Network, Northern Council for Further Education, Open College of the Northwest, and the Oxford, Cambridge and Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts (RSA) Exams. The tests are administered and scored by the institutions that developed them. Reading is assessed by either paper or computer-based tests. Writing is assessed by tests but also through portfolios of learner work proctored by tutors and judged by evaluators from one of the testing organizations. English language learners demonstrate their listening and speaking ability through structured dialogues assessed by a trained evaluator, either in-person or by audio tape.

The LSC advises Skills for Life providers that the proportion of learners studying for a national qualification should be as high as possible (preferably 80% or more). This could be any national qualification from Entry Level 1 to Level 2. However, Entry Level 1 and Entry Level 2 qualification does not count toward the PSA target. The learners who are not studying for a national qualification are those who are preparing to enter a class that will help them reach an Entry Level 1 qualification, a group that includes immigrants who are beginning to learn English and adults whose skills are low, sometimes as a result of learning disabilities. This category also includes many adults who are not interested in taking a test to gain a

¹² <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/LearningInfrastructureAccreditation>

qualification. Adults are encouraged to take the tests but are not required to do so.

As far as the PSA target is concerned, each learner can be counted as achieving a nationally recognized qualification at Entry Level 3, Level 1 or Level 2 only once in their lifetime. Any further achievements by the same learner do not count towards the PSA target, no matter what those further achievements are or when they occur. So, for example, if a learner moves from Entry Level 2 to Entry Level 3 one year, he or she counts towards the PSA target on this occasion but not again, even if in the next year she or he goes on to pass the Level 1 test. The reason for the “count once in a lifetime” stipulation is that the PSA target is strictly defined in terms of individuals. When the government announces it has helped 750 000 learners, it wants it understood that it has helped 750 000 different individuals.

Programme improvement

Each programme is subject to annual self assessment. Since the programme is usually part of a larger institution, the self assessment takes place as a component of the larger institutional self assessment. Self-assessment is conducted in the context of external inspections carried out in four year cycles by the Adult Learning Inspectorate. Both the internal self evaluation and the external inspection look at the same data and focus on the same issues. The initial self assessment is designed to identify programme strengths and weaknesses, and these are subsequently corroborated (or not) at the time of inspection. Both evaluations make recommendations for improvement, and institutions achieving the highest grades are subject to less intensive inspection in future years.

The external inspection includes an examination of dropout, attendance, and achievement data as seen against national averages. The self assessments look at targets for these measures set by the programme. Much of the assessment is taken up with the quality of the teaching and learning, the management and administration of the programme, and the programmes’ support to learners, particularly those who are disabled or disadvantaged in other ways. The sources of data for these components are classroom observations and interviews with learners and staff. During self assessment, tutors sometimes observe each other. In most cases, both observer and observed report this to be a positive learning experience that is a form of professional development for both.

In some cases tutors have access to professional development held within the programme and the institution that houses the programme. Some of this professional development takes place during regular professional

development days, during which tutors and staff may have an opportunity to choose what they want to participate in, may have to participate in specific workshops, or may be able to do some of both.

Case studies

The following three case studies describe how the existing system looks in programmes and classes. Three adult basic skills programmes were the subjects of the case studies. One is in the heart of London; one is in the city of York (300 kilometers north of London), and one is in the London Borough of Croydon (15 kilometers south of the centre of London). These three sites were picked as exemplary programmes by the England-based author. The choice of these three programmes was based, in part, on the personal experience of the author, but his selection was checked with others who have a wide experience of programmes in England. The choice also was influenced by a desire to have a range of different types of programmes and to have programmes that could be visited within a limited time period.

All of the programmes provided inspections reports from the last visit of teams from the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI). All three ALI reports were positive. Both instruction and management received positive rating on the ALI scale, usually receiving one of the top two grades. Programme leaders suggested two reasons why their programmes were able to achieve and maintain a level of instruction that would lead to selection as an exemplary programme. The first was the quality of their teachers, and the second was their staff's regular reflection focused on programme improvement.

Since these were all exemplary programmes, we asked the Heads of Department at each of the 3 sites about the factors that most support good teaching and learning. Whilst there was not a consensus, there was broad agreement that each of the following were important, and in roughly this order:

- Well qualified, committed and enthusiastic tutors; staff with substantial hours who are willing to attend meetings, training and to generally 'go the extra mile'.
- Regular feedback and reviews of learner progress.
- Opportunities for continuing professional development.
- Good resources, including e-learning resources; activities and resources of interest and relevance to the learner.

The influence of these factors on good teaching and learning will depend in part on the value each learner places on them. However, respondents agreed that well qualified, committed and enthusiastic tutors help motivate and stimulate learners, inspiring them to do their very best and helping them to overcome often long held barriers to learning and personal success. Regular feedback and reviews of learner progress are also extremely important, for this is how learners will know whether they are heading in the right direction. Constructive feedback is also invaluable at points when learners are beginning to struggle, not only for the direct assistance that the tutor is able to provide but also because constructive on-going assessment promotes learners' motivation and persistence. Formative assessment also provides an opportunity for the tutors themselves to receive feedback on the teaching and learning process, identifying changes that need to be made.

Respondents agreed that activities and resources that are of interest and relevance to the learner help engage the learner, maintaining motivation and supporting the natural learning process. Finally, there was general agreement that levels of funding and frequent redefining of priorities are the factors that most threaten good Skills for Life teaching and learning, together with an increasing administrative burden.

Due to the national character of the system, initial assessment, instruction, formative assessment, and summative assessment look similar in all three. However, they are not exactly the same. Each programme uses different types of assessments and forms; teachers draw on their experience and training as well as their knowledge of their learners to design instruction that works best in their context; and learners have a range of summative tests they can take to secure the same qualification. In addition, different types of institutions (non-profit, further education college, and local government programmes) are the subject of these case studies and different types of classes (ESOL, numeracy, and adult literacy) were observed at each site.

Mary Ward Centre¹³

Background

Mary Ward, a best-selling novelist, founded a Settlement to provide social and educational activities for “ordinary” people 115 years ago. The Settlement provided classes that helped people improve their skills and

¹³ <http://www.marywardcentre.ac.uk>

knowledge, but it also provided opportunities for them to pursue interests in music, chess, and debating, as well as form self-help clubs of people with something in common, such as mothers of toddlers. The Settlement also provided services for children, including the first after school and vacation programmes and the first school for physically handicapped children in England. In addition, the Settlement provided legal services.

The Settlement evolved into the Mary Ward Centre and was initially funded by a foundation set up by its founder, but it is now supported by fee paying learners and by government funding for learners who are part of the Skills for Life programme. The Centre still provides legal services, is still the home of clubs for people who share a common interest, and still helps children. However, most of its efforts are now focused on providing educational services for adults.

The Centre is housed in rented space that consists of two connected four-storey Georgian buildings on a corner in Bloomsbury, not far from Russell Square and the British Museum. Along with classrooms, a reception area, and offices for staff, the Centre has a vegetarian Café open to the public on the ground floor. The front of the building has large windows looking onto Queen Square, and the classrooms on that side of the building are filled with light and have a fantastic view. The Centre is usually filled with people eating, talking, studying, or going up and down the two staircases. Over 7 000 adults take part in one of the Centre's classes each year.

The Centre is governed by a Council of Management. All learners and staff are members of the Centre and have the opportunity of electing representatives to be governors on the Council. They also have a vote at the Centre's annual general meeting. The Centre is directed by a principal. Among other duties, the principal works with a quality assurance committee drawn from governors, staff, and learners. This process identifies areas that could benefit from attention. This committee prepares an annual report on the quality of the centre's services and its attention to equality of opportunity for the disabled and those disadvantaged in other ways. This process serves as a self-evaluation by the institution of its services and leads to plans to address weaknesses and problems identified by the evaluation. The Centre is also evaluated by the Adult Learning Inspectorate.

Along with Skills for Life courses, the Centre offers basic courses in computing and more advanced courses focused on specific applications such as Excel, Web design, and programming. Language courses include Sign, Cantonese, French, Hindi, Sanskrit, Italian, Spanish and Turkish. The Centre also has courses on health, personal development, social and liberal studies, communications, music and dance, and arts and crafts. Some courses are

free and some require a fee, but discounted rates are available for some learners. All of the Skills for Life courses are free of charge. In addition to the Centre, Skills for Life classes are offered at three community locations, two community centres, and a primary school.

Skills for Life Programme

Approximately 580 learners (equating to 2 131 enrolments) started Skills for Life courses in the 2004/5 term. Over 80% completed their courses. Courses are run on 12-week terms, with three terms during a year. Only two staff members in the Skills for Life area are full-time. The other 14 tutors are all part-time, though their hourly wage is high for similar posts in London. Tutors are provided with one hour of paid preparation for each three hours of teaching and are provided with an additional eight hours of pay per course for paperwork.

The Centre offers Skills for Life courses for adult literacy, for English speakers, and ESOL for immigrants, at all five levels. They also offer beginning literacy courses for immigrants who do not have strong literacy skills in their first language or whose literacy skills are in a non-Latin script to prepare them to enter a regular ESOL class that requires the ability to decode the English script. For adults who have been out of school for a long time or whose study skills are weak, the Centre offers a course that helps prepare them for further study. For those who need on-going support in the regular courses, a study support workshop is available.

In addition to the core Skills for Life curriculum, learners who have special needs can enrol in additional courses. The Centre has courses on communication at work that focus on writing memos, reports, and other work-related communications and courses on pronunciation, fluency in conversation, and writing for ESOL learners. ESOL learners can also study in an advanced reading course and at three levels of literacy and computing. In the event that other courses at the Centre might help Skills for Life learners, they are offered those courses at no cost.

Assessment

When Skills for Life learners come to register at the Centre, they are helped to fill out a Referral Form that records the learner's ambitions and learning goals, employment, computer skills and access, health and mobility issues, and any other relevant information. The form also records basic information about the learner, educational background and need for childcare. Each learner's reading and writing skills are assessed, as well as speaking and listening skills for ESOL learners. If learners have weak skills

or low self-efficacy around these skills, the evaluation can be informal, and the registration staff has developed the skills to make accurate informal evaluations and to set nervous potential learners at ease. This form is the first part of the learner's ILP.

Once learners are assigned to a class, the tutor helps each learner fill out an Initial Tutorial Record. The record identifies, in detail, the learner's ambitions in life, in education, in the skill they are studying (ESOL or literacy), and the learning priorities for this class. This part of the ILP also confirms the levels of the four skills as assessed at the short initial interview. The specific learning goals referenced to the national curriculum for the class level are also listed in the ILP, with spaces to record the projected date of achievement and for the tutor to verify that the goal has been reached and when. The ILP provides the tutor with clear direction on how to help each learner and the class meet the goals set out for them in the national curriculum, and to contextualize that instruction around the ambitions and objectives of each learner.

Once learners have accomplished a significant amount of learning, equivalent to one full term, they meet with their tutor to fill out a second Initial Tutorial Record. This record asks the learners to identify what they have learned and how it has had an impact in their lives, what they think of the course and how they would change it, what they would like to learn next, and what additional benefits in their lives they have gained from participation in learning. The tutor also provides an assessment of the learner's progress on this record. At the end of the year, a Final Tutorial Record, similar to the second Initial Tutorial Record, is completed by the tutor and learner.

At the filling out of each form, the learner and tutor have a chance to formally assess the learner's needs and make changes in instruction that may help the learner succeed at a greater rate or keep their motivation high. The ILP also provides a framework for the tutor to provide informal feedback at any time during the year. The usual, "good job, you are making progress" becomes "good job, you are close to completing a specific goal".

The Centre has instituted two innovations in this process of forms. The first is to bring in interpreters for immigrants whose English is too poor to discuss the ILP with a tutor. An ESOL class at the Centre could have learners who speak 10 different languages, some of them uncommon African or Asian languages. The Centre has been able to find interpreters for all of the languages, even bringing an interpreter in from Brighton, several hours by train from London. The other innovation is to shrink the forms down from the full A4 size to a much smaller size and put them in a convenient ring binder for learners. This way, each learner can have her or

his own record of achievement. The Centre is required to keep these forms on file, but Centre staff feels that it is better to have these forms in the hands of the learners. This experiment began this year, and so far it appears to be workable.

At the end of the year, learners who are ready are encouraged to take an exam provided by the University of Cambridge. An example is the Entry Level 1 ESOL reading certificate. The first section of the test asks learners to read three simple texts related to renting a flat. This is followed by five questions that ask the learner to either check a box next to the correct answer or to provide simple information from the text. Fifteen minutes is provided for this section of the test. Two other sections are similar but slightly more difficult. The total test time is 50 minutes.

Once a year, tutors are observed by their supervisor, who fills out a “Class Visit: Record and Evaluation” form. The form describes the class and evaluates 19 elements of practice along a 5 point scale of outstanding, good, satisfactory, less than satisfactory, and not evidenced. The 19 elements are: subject competence, lesson planning and preparation, use of classroom facilities and equipment, attention to study skills, attention to individual learning needs including equal opportunities issues, appropriate range of teaching methods, pitching of level and pace of class, communications skills, listening skills, fostering of productive working relationships, developing an enjoyable learning experience for learners, motivation and maintenance of learners’ learning, effective support given to learners, opportunities for learner participation, incorporation of learners’ knowledge and experience, opportunities for learners to evaluate the lesson, feedback and dialogue on learner progress, assessment of learning, meeting of stated class objectives. The form also has sections on the supervisor’s comments on “good practice to be shared” and areas for “development for the tutor and department”.

Each tutor also prepares a course report for each term. The report lists the number of learners who dropped out during the term and their reasons for leaving, success at reaching the goals of the ILPs for each learner on a five-level scale, a list of the other outcomes of participation, and the course evaluation by learners. A copy of the attendance record and a tutor response on how they might alter the course the next time based on the input from the learners.

Instruction

Classrooms have small tables that can be put together in a horseshoe shape or in several groups of two tables. This arrangement facilitates the tutors’ work with individuals or small groups of learners. Tutors use a

combination of direct instruction or structured activities to the whole class along with individual or small group tutoring. Classes include humour by the tutors and the learners, and classes appear to be co-operative groups of people who enjoy learning together. Tutors appear unfazed by learners who come late, even if they come in half-way through the class, though tutors encourage punctual behaviour.

When most of the learners are successfully learning the material, tutors keep moving through the national curriculum yet provide learners who are weak with additional attention and suggestions on how to practise what they have learned. When the material proves difficult to most learners, the tutor slows down the pace and tries several different ways to teach the content.

Tutors provide lots of positive feedback. Along with such positive words as good, great, and fantastic, tutors point out that learners could not do something earlier in the term but now can. Feedback on where a learner needs to put their effort is never negative, and usually the vagaries of the English language are blamed not the learner.

When the class ends, the learners usually leave talking to each other. Some stay around to ask the tutor for extra help. If the help needed is significant, the tutor sends learners down to registration to find out about a course or workshop that might provide the help they need. Learners are also referred to the small library in the Centre that has materials learners can use for extra work and computers that can provide reinforcement through learning programmes or educational websites.

The classes are positive adult experiences. The relationship between tutors and learners is one of equals, not of student and teacher. Tutors know a lot about each learner, and discussion about life outside class is common. Both learners and tutors make jokes, usually in the form of self-deprecating humour. Some learners seem to be friends, or at least acquaintances, who sit next to each other and share parts of their lives as well as help each other learn. Informal peer teaching is common. In smaller classes, learners sometimes pass around candy or cookies.

A typical ESOL class at the Centre begins with the tutor asking learners to talk a bit about what they learned during the last class meeting. Homework or ILP forms might be turned in or passed back, and then the day's lesson is explained both in terms of the learning objectives and the activities. Instruction looks different depending on the level of the learners. Three ESOL classes were observed.

In an Entry Level 1 class, the small tables are arranged in three groups so that learners can more easily work in small groups and the tutor can move from group to group. The seven learners who are attending this day are all

from different countries and three continents. They range in age from early twenties to almost 80. Four learners are absent.

The learners find it difficult to speak, since they are at the lowest level. The tutor is teaching a lesson on giving and understanding directions. He is also focusing on prepositions. He begins by asking the learners questions that require them to use the prepositions. This is material they have covered in previous lessons. He involves the whole class in exercises that make the prepositions clear and then gives them an individual task so that he can go to each learner and work with them directly.

He then presents the words and grammar on directions that the class will work on that day, acting out much of it. Then learners are given simple maps and directions to see if they can follow them. Then they are asked to give directions to the tutor, using one of the landmarks on the map. The tutor then gives the learners an assignment to do with the material and he moves between learners to give them individual help.

The lesson seems difficult for the learners, and so the tutor places pieces of coloured paper on the floor that marks the streets on the map. He walks along the floor using the vocabulary and grammar. He then engages the learners again in questions and answers on directions, and then asks them to work on another individual exercise. During this time he asks a learner who is having a difficult time to stand up to walk with him along the map he has made on the floor. Since he speaks Spanish, he uses some Spanish with this learner to help her.

Teaching Entry Level 1 learners is an exhausting task. The tutor must do a lot of talking, and instruction moves along in small, constantly changing, bites. The tutor must act out a lot of what he says to give the learners a crutch to help them understand. He often has to pull words out of learners.

In an Entry Level 3 class, the small tables are arranged in a large square with an open area in the middle. The fifteen learners are from many different countries. The age range is much narrower with most learners in their twenties and thirties. They still find speaking English difficult but have enough skill to engage in conversation. The tutor talks much less in this class and does not have to act out unfamiliar words. Drawing out words from learners is easier.

The tutor organizes the day's instruction around a series of short videos from a television show that follows two women who look for and then buy a house that needs to be refurbished. The two women and their husbands do the work to fix up the house and then sell it at a profit. This lesson started in the last class and will continue in the next one.

The tutor shows one short segment of the video and then asks the learners to talk about what they saw. As the learners begin to speak, the tutor identifies specific words that the class is learning, along with the prefix “re”, which comes up a lot in words such as reinstall, refinish, and remodel. She also reinforces a specific set of grammatical constructions the class is learning. Then she gives the learners an assignment and asks them to talk with each other in English to complete the task. The tutor moves from small group to small group asking questions and giving individual instruction. Once the task is complete, she goes around the room asking different learners to speak to the whole group, and she continues to identify the new vocabulary words as they come up in the conversation. She also asks learners specific questions that require them to use the vocabulary and the constructions they are learning.

The tutor continues the class in this fashion, moving back to the video and then returning to large group, small group, individual, and then large group interactions. As the time of the class moves on, the list of vocabulary, particularly the list of “re” words grows. The class is interested in the video because the subject matter is engaging for them. Most learners may not have the funds to take on a similar project. But they may have friends who are involved in this kind of work, and they all hope someday to own property. They seem eager to engage in the conversation, even though their language is still limited.

Another class is focused on Level 1 writing. The group of six learners sits around a U-shaped grouping of the small tables. Learners range in age from twenties to maybe forties, and again they are from many countries. These learners have higher oral language skills, and so they can converse in English but have weak writing skills. The tutor has chosen English words that began as slang but are now part of common usage for this day’s work. She explains the words, which include cheapskate, bloodbath, and windfall. She asks each learner to think of a sentence that uses the new words and gives them additional examples.

The tutor becomes aware that the learners do not understand these words. She asks the whole class to focus on the definitions again. She works with them as a whole group. She then sets them a short, 60 word, writing task. The class discusses the task and develops ideas and then begins. She asks them to be sure to include three of the idioms. As the learners are writing, she goes around and works with each one. She looks at their work and asks them some questions, gives them advice and explains aspects of the task they are having difficulty with. When they are done, several learners are asked to read their pieces. The mistakes are used as an opportunity to teach a specific writing skill to the whole class.

At this level, much of the oral English is between learners as well as between tutor and learners. Learners help each other and help late learners get moving on the exercises the class is working on.

York College¹⁴

Background

Though York College only came into existence in 1999, it is a merger between the York College of Further and Higher Education and the York Sixth Form College. The merger builds on the experience of the two partners that goes back to the 1820s. Until 2004 the college operated out of the two campuses, which were 400 metres apart. In the 2004/2005 academic year, the two colleges were brought together on one site. The college has embarked on a GBP 60 million building programme scheduled to open in September 2007. York College is a general further education college that has a learner body of 12 000.

Most of the college's learners are in the 16 to 19 year-old range, either studying to complete their A levels or a variety of vocational programmes, over 3 000 of whom are full time learners. The college also has a significant Work Based Learning (WBL) programme with learners working towards the completion of a Foundation or Advanced Modern Apprenticeship. In addition, the college has a large number of part-time adult courses, despite recent cuts in funding for adult provision by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), the body responsible for funding post-16 year-old educational provision in England and Wales. Though some learners do go on to study at a university, most are seeking to improve their employment prospects. York provides a full range of courses, including science and mathematics, engineering, business, ICT, hospitality, travel, health, social care, visual and performing arts, humanities, English, foreign languages, and literacy and numeracy.

Skills for Life Programme

This case study focuses on adults in the Skills for Life classes, most of whom are over the age or 19. The classes are held both at the college campus, which is 4 kilometres outside the city centre, and at four places in and around the city centre. Some Skills for Life instruction also takes place at worksites. Around 600 adults participate in Skills for Life courses;

¹⁴ www.yorkcollege.ac.uk/index.html

retention is high, and most learners achieve success, either meeting their own goals or achieving a nationally recognize qualification.

One of the city sites is at Future Prospects, York's leading learning and work advice centre. Future Prospects is located a short walk from the rail station in the old section of this beautiful city. The buildings in this part of town are well maintained and the streets are filled with people walking around or in the many shops and restaurants. One door to Future Prospects looks like just another entrance to office space above the ground floor shops. The other door to Future Prospects is through a shop front on the ground floor that houses an information centre, staffed by advice and guidance workers, where members of the general public can obtain information on all the training and educational opportunities available within the city and the region.

Future Prospects offers services to people who are looking for work or looking to improve their labour market prospects. The classrooms and the computer learning centre are on the top two floors. During class hours, learners are working on computers, learning in class, or taking breaks outside or in the small kitchen. Other people are coming in to talk with Future Prospects staff to plan out a better future, which often involves Skills for Life classes. Because it is connected to York College, learners at Future Prospects are able to take advantage of all of the College's facilities. Future Prospects also has a number of outreach workers who work directly with clients and learners out in the community. The outreach workers are a vital link for the College, particularly in relation to the recruitment of new Skills for Life learners and the development of its community provision.

As an expression of the work oriented nature of the programme, many of the Skills for Life classes have names such as English in the Workplace and Math in the Workplace. The classes at Future Prospects start at the pre-entry level of literacy and numeracy and continue up to Level 2. However, the outreach to new learners offers a broader picture of learning that describes these classes as an opportunity to gain confidence, build on life experience, learn and work alongside other adults, develop study and research skills, and enjoy developing personal interest and abilities.

Along with Skills for Life courses, Future Prospects offers courses that focus on learning through information technology, spelling, financial literacy, interviewing, memory, and budgeting. In addition, a learner entering the Skills for Life programme can receive assistance on gaining or improving employment or choosing additional vocational or academic training.

One innovation at York College is its college-wide strategic plan for Skills for Life that covers the 2004 to 2007 period. This strategic plan sets

out detailed objectives with a list of priorities for each objective. The objectives focus on learners, the provision of instruction, partnerships with the wider community, financial health, human resources, other resources, and quality. The strategic plan identifies outcomes, success criteria, timescale, and the person responsible. Regular review of achievement of the plan is recorded as well. This plan is meant to improve the quality of the college's services and expand them to serve more adults.

Another innovation is the use of research projects as an institutional development tool in an effort that began in October 2005 and will end in October 2006. The College is developing a strategy for teaching literacy and numeracy through financial literacy. The project is based on materials produced by the Basic Skills Strategy Unit at DfES, but the process is being developed with input from learners and tutors. The strategies include both workshops and ways to add financial literacy to existing formal and informal learning activities.

A new initiative, just in its first months, focuses on young offenders who are studying at Future Prospects as part of their mandatory training programmes. The goal of the project is to explore ways to provide education that inspires the young offenders to learn, and builds on their motivation to do so. As with the financial literacy project, learners and tutors will be full partners in the development process.

Assessment

York College also employs a set of forms to support its formative evaluation system. The system begins with an Assessment Feedback Sheet and a Basic Skills Initial Assessment Profile that record initial assessment scores and form the basis for selecting a class and building an ILP for the learner. An ILP form sets out the start date, the accreditation goal and the expected time to reach that goal for the learner. The ILP also sets out learning objectives with a reference to the core curricula, an estimate of the hours needed to reach each goal and the date the goal is achieved. The form also sets out the long term aims of the learner and a review date to reflect on the ILP and revise it.

While learners are in a class, a Review form is filled out that provides an opportunity to list the learner achievements in relation to the ILP, how the learner feels about this pace of progress, the other achievements of participating in the class, and ways in which the newly acquired skills are being used outside class. For each class, learners record the work done and any comments on what they have learnt, what they want to improve on, and how they feel about the class on a Learners Record of Work. The form also has a space for recording what the learner feels he or she needs to work on

next. At the end of the class, an end of course review form is filled out by each learner. This form records what the learner feels he or she has learned, any accreditation that was secured, achievements in relation to the ILP, and next steps. The form also records the attendance rate of the learner.

Instruction

Instruction usually takes place in weekly 2 hour classes, though some are longer and more intensive. The average class size is around 9 and attendance is around 85%. Tutors use a combination of large and small group teaching and one-to-one tutorials. A Level 1 and 2 numeracy class was observed.

The classroom looks like a long meeting room in an office. Several small tables have been put together to form one large table. This day, five learners are in attendance. They are all people born in the U.K., in or between the age of twenty and forty. They act like a group that has been working together for a while and seem to know a lot about each other. The tutor is a substitute today, though she is also a numeracy and literacy tutor in the programme.

The instruction begins with congratulations for one of the learners who just passed her Level 1 test. She seems embarrassed by the attention and mentions that it is just the first step and she now has to go on to the Level 2 test. She complains about distracter information put into questions and the use of mathematical vocabulary such as the word “quotient.” She feels this is not fair, and this opinion is shared by the group.

The tutor begins the class by tacking up problem sheets on the corkboard walls around the room. Next to each problem sheet, the tutor has tacked an envelope. She gives each learner a pile of small cards with the four mathematical process signs on them. She asks learners to go around the room and read the problems and make a decision on which card to drop into the envelopes.

When everyone is finished, the tutor looks in each envelope to see if there are any mistaken cards in them. When there is one, she asks whose it is. The learner is then asked why he or she chose that function. This serves as an opportunity to teach the whole class how to make this decision when reading a problem. After this exercise is completed, the tutor passes out copies of the problem sheets and asks each person to solve the problems. The tutor goes from learner to learner helping them with anything they find difficult and asking them to explain the decisions they are making as they solve the problems. The tutor gives positive feedback as part of most interactions.

After about an hour, the class takes a break and goes downstairs to the small kitchen to make coffee and tea for each other. They sit around the small room and talk about their lives and the class with each other and the tutor. An outsider might find it difficult to identify the tutor.

The class returns to its classroom and begins again to work on problems with the tutor going around the room to help each of them individually. When a learner reports on his or her answer, the tutor asks for an explanation of how the answer was derived. After the explanation, the tutor explains that there are several ways to arrive at an answer and describes other options. At the end of the class, the tutor makes sure everyone fills out their class form.

Croydon¹⁵

Background

Croydon is a Borough of London, around 15 kilometres south of the Centre of the city. This Borough has a large number of immigrants and has one of the most concentrated immigrant populations among London boroughs. The Borough supports the Continuing Education and Training Services (CETS) through the Croydon Education Authority. CETS provides a wide range of courses that include vocational, personal development, computing, languages, art, dance, and health and fitness, as well as basic skills. These courses are provided in nine centres around the borough. Over 17 000 adults take part in more than 2 200 courses each year.

Skills for Life Programme

Around 670 learners are enrolled in Skills for Life courses, which take place in the centres and in several community locations. Along with classes that focus on English literacy and numeracy, learners can take advantage of flexible on-line learning, support with writing CVs, information on careers, courses focused on computers and the Internet, and on-line business and management courses. Learners can book the use of computer at CETS centres for both learning and for access to the Web and email.

CETS recently began a pilot programme at worksites around the Borough as well. This programme is providing up to 30 hours of skills training for 30-40 adults each year who are seeking to pass national tests in adult literacy and numeracy at Levels 1 and 2. The overall retention rate is

¹⁵ www.cets.co.uk

74%. In 2004/2005, about 25% of learners took a test for an external accreditation and over 80% passed their test.

CETS also has a range of Family Learning projects in collaboration with schools, community centres, and family centres. These projects offer classes for parents, extra classes for children, and joint sessions for parents and children. These classes usually provide free childcare and allow parents to begin learning and often move on to CETS courses.

The Thornton Health CETS Centre is located in a modern office building across the street from a commuter train station. The area is a commercial district with shops and restaurants, though behind it is residential housing. The centre is open Monday through Saturday and stays open to 21:00 four days a week. The centre offers courses at Entry Level 1, 2, and 3 as well as Level 1 and 2. In addition they offer courses that provide dyslexia support, and courses that employ computer and Internet learning. The centre allows learners to enter classes at any time during the term, but the centre also offers an English Workshop for learners who come later in the term, to avoid too much disruption. These workshops are multilevel and help learners make progress while they wait for the beginning of the next term.

Assessment

New learners are interviewed to answer their questions, explain the programme, and fill out an Assessment Interview Form. The form records information about the learner, the reasons they are trying to improve their basic skills, and the support services they might need. New learners are assessed with written tests that place them in a level. During the induction period of the English and maths department, new learners take a learning styles quiz that identifies auditory, visual and kinaesthetic learning styles. The findings from the quiz are explained to the new learner and approaches to learning that might be more successful for them are suggested. Tutors report that this information is useful for deciding how to teach the whole class and which learners might need support with a different learning style. Learners also find this useful as a way to begin thinking about how they are going to be successful at learning.

Once the initial assessment is complete, new learners are helped to prepare an individual learning plan. The ILP contains the learner's long-term goals, goals for the class, preferred learning styles, and interests that might help the tutor contextualize learning. The form also has sections for learners and tutors to review progress, identify enrichment programmes that might support learning, and record attendance, punctuality, contribution in class and completion of homework.

Once this initial process is complete, learners receive an Induction Programme List so that they can tick off that they have completed all the preparation steps as well as had their questions answered, such as the location of the toilets, when the class starts and ends, and the expectations for homework, attendance, and punctuality.

Each learner's ILP is reviewed using a review checklist that asks learners to describe what they can now do that they could not do at the beginning of the term, examples of how they have used these skills outside of class, the impact of those new skills, and what they feel they need to learn next. This review includes a discussion of a Record of Programme progress form that records accomplishments, both by self assessment and tutor assessment, during the term. If learners drop out during the term, they are contacted and asked to provide a reason for their dropout.

Tutors fill out a lesson plan for each session. At the end of the term, the tutor also fills out a feedback summary that records the learners' evaluation of the course and the Centre and its facilities, and summarizes any comments made by learners on their evaluation forms. The form also asks tutors to reflect on their teaching, specifically their strengths, areas of development to be taken and when, and any other centre related issues.

Instruction

Instruction takes place in rooms that look like school classrooms, with a bank of windows along one side and a white board at the front of the room. However, the chairs are not arranged in rows. Each class has a number of small tables that can be put together in different configurations.

In an entry level 1 class, three of the six learners are in attendance. They sit around a big table, made up of small tables, with the tutor at one end. Two of the learners were born in the U.K. and one is an immigrant from Africa. They are probably all in their thirties. These learners have limited basic skills, but probably not for the same reason. The learner from Africa may have had little or no education in his home country. One of the other learners appears to have learning disabilities, and another may have emotional issues that are a barrier to learning. Their skills are quite different as well. One appears to have severe difficulties, one appears to have low but not severely low skills, and one appears to be able to read but has poor writing and communication skills.

All are interested in improving their skills to either become employed or improve their income. Improving their basic skills may be part of the solution to their employment problems, but they would probably need other types of support to be successful at work or a better job. The tutor weaves

their employment interests into the curriculum and engages the learners in conversation throughout the class in areas of the learner's interest, not just work but sports, movies, and the novel one of the learners is reading. Positive feedback and humour are common.

The class starts with a review of homework and an explanation of the day's lesson. The tutor then moves on to a connected series of group and individual exercises that focus on listening and reading comprehension, reading fluency, and writing. The exercises start with preparation by the tutor who reads four questions about the information in a short paragraph. The paragraph is then read to the learners twice. The learners are asked to answer the questions based on what they heard. After this oral exercise, the learners are asked to repeat it with the written text and questions and to write down their answers. Learners are given an opportunity to both read the passage and answer the questions out loud.

Each learner has a folder of forms, classroom work, and homework. These are referred to several times during the class. At the end of the class, each learner fills out their record of progress and the tutor asks for feedback about the lesson. The learners are also given advice on how to practice and improve their skills between this class and the next.

In a Level 1 class, seven learners, six women and one man, sit in small groups around three tables, each made from four smaller tables. Two of the learners were born in the U.K. and the rest are immigrants from several different countries. The age range is more toward the older range, with several learners old enough to have adult children. The tutor is assisted by a volunteer who provides one-to-one support to learners and also leads some activities.

The volunteer is a man who was able to retire early. He began volunteering for altruistic reasons, but he had always been interested in teaching. He has pursued training to be a tutor and now teaches part-time, but he still volunteers, both to help learners and to learn by working with a much more experienced tutor.

The tutor is engaging the learners in a process approach to writing. This approach models the way most skilled writers write. The approach employs a set of steps that allow the learner to plan, draft, revise, and complete a piece of writing. Today the learners are working on spelling and vocabulary, proof reading and correcting an insurance form, and compound sentences.

The class begins with the tutor setting out the objectives for the day and providing an overview of the class. The learners are then asked to form pairs to work on last week's vocabulary words. The tutor then explains a form, which is projected on a white board. The form is for reporting personal

property claims to an insurance company. After everyone seems comfortable with the form, the tutor asks each person to pick a claim. They then begin to work on the form. The learners are put back into pairs to proofread and correct the forms together. Then while the tutor begins talking individually with each learner about their ILPs, the volunteer leads the rest of the class in an exercise about compound sentences.

At the end of the class, the tutor leads the class in a review of the compound sentences listed on the board. The learners are asked to fill out their record of progress and are given advice on how to practice what they have learned.

Strengths and weaknesses of the formative assessment activities

The strength of the formative assessment activities observed in England is that they reflect a core curriculum, which is built on set of national standards. This allows formative assessment activities to focus on small increments of learning that are part of a logical scope and sequence of objectives. Of course, every curriculum has weaknesses, but tutors do find this one useful in developing lesson plans. The curriculum provides learners both clear goals (the level tests) and an indication of progress (meeting the curriculum objectives). Tutors are able to bring their own experience and training to the learning process that leads to meeting the curriculum objectives, and if their class or individual learners complete the objectives early, the tutor knows what to move on to next. Learners are able to move from one class to another or from one programme to another, without having to start all over again with a new curriculum.

The weakness of the formative assessment activities observed in England is the amount of time taken up in recording the process, time taken away from instruction. The formative assessment procedures are probably supportive of learning. However, if a class meets two hours per week for 12 weeks and a learner misses two classes, the total time-on-task is only 20 hours. Even an hour taken out of this time could affect learning. Each formative assessment task, therefore, should be justified by evidence that it is supportive to learning. The time required of tutors outside of class by formative assessment activities, and the writing up of these activities, takes away from their preparation for instruction. This time, too, should be justified by its impact on learning.

Policy environment

The Skills for Life strategy is part of a larger government programme to “reduce the number of adults in England with literacy and numeracy difficulties to the levels of our main international competitors – that is from one in five adults to one in ten or better.”¹⁶ Skills for Life operates in parallel with three related national strategies that are managed by other parts of the DfES:

- *Success for All* is designed to develop high-quality, responsive learning in colleges, work-based learning providers, adult and community learning providers, prisons, probation and sixth form schools. It contributes to the government’s Public Service Agreement targets, in particular to reducing the number of adults without a Level 2 qualification (the level reached by 16 year olds completing compulsory education) and to improving adult basic skills.
- *The Skills Strategy* (21st Century Skills) is designed to enable employers to find skilled workers to support their business, individuals to acquire skills for employment and personal fulfilment, and to raise the skills of young people and adults. It provides free training in workplace basic skills and, from 2006/2007, will establish a national entitlement to free tuition for a first full Level 2 qualification. The government has recently produced a White Paper, *Getting on in business, getting on at work*.
- *14–19 Education and Skills* is designed to tackle low post-16 participation, ensure that every young person has a sound grounding in the basics of English and maths and the skills they need for employment; provide better vocational routes which equip young people with the knowledge and skills they need for further learning and employment; and re-engage the disaffected.

Other national initiatives focus on improving the education of children in order to lower the number of young adults who leave compulsory education with low basic skills, and also provide for a multi-agency response to needs that include learning, health and well-being. These initiatives, also running in parallel with Skills for Life, include:

¹⁶ DfES (2001), *Skills for Life: the National Strategy for Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy Skills*, Department for Education and Skills, London, page 9. <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/RRP/u013452/index.shtml>

- *Every Child Matters* aimed at children and young people, from birth to 19; *Youth Matters* is a related initiative.
- *Excellence and Enjoyment* aimed at children aged 5-11 who are in primary school.
- *The Secondary National Strategy for School Improvement* aimed at children aged 11-16 who are in secondary school.

This comprehensive policy approach is aimed at giving every child and adult living in England an opportunity to reach at least Level 2 skills, with credentials that document those skills, Level 2 being regarded as a platform for progression to Level 3. The twin policy goals remain a society that is both socially inclusive and economically competitive. If the policy is successful in improving the quality of instruction at every level and expanding opportunities for adults, and if this effort is sustained over the next five or ten years, a future IALS assessment might report a much lower population of adults at the lower levels of literacy and numeracy.