

Harnessing everyday literacies for student learning at college

Literacy is a significant factor affecting retention, progression and achievement in colleges. This briefing reports on a three-year project entitled Literacies for Learning in Further Education, which explored students' vernacular literacy practices alongside those that are required of them on their college courses. While students are regularly portrayed as belonging to the 'media generation' and their literacy practices are often devalued, this project identified ways of mobilising students' everyday literacies in the college environment to enhance their learning.

- Students engage in rich and varied reading and writing in their everyday lives. This project developed a framework for identifying the complexity of their literacy practices. → Correctness of language use should not be the sole object of attention. Educators and media commentators need to value what students can do with reading and writing.
- There is often a mismatch between the literacy practices of everyday life and the workplace on the one hand, and those of college courses on the other. → The uses of reading and writing across all areas of the FE curriculum need to be fine-tuned to resonate with students' everyday and workplace literacy practices.
- All student learning is mediated by text, even in the most 'practical' subjects. Lecturers often overlook the communicative aspects of learning by focusing on social and cognitive aspects. → Lecturers need to recognise and analyse the communicative aspects of learning and demonstrating learning, and to make them more explicit and visible.
- Students often produce text, such as logbooks, assessments, essays and 'pieces of writing,' to demonstrate knowledge, understanding or capability rather than to support learning. → Students should be able to provide evidence of learning in vocational and subject areas without having to acquire special 'assessment literacies'. Qualifications in communication skills should accredit the literacies which are part of the courses themselves, particularly in vocational areas.

The research

Policy goals to increase and widen participation in post-compulsory education in the UK have resulted in a diversification of the student body and in the provision of more learning opportunities in colleges. In this context, there is strong interest in issues of access, retention and progression. One way of addressing these issues is to explore ways of integrating students' prior learning and everyday capabilities into teaching. Questions of literacy are pivotal to this integration. This was the starting point for the Literacies for Learning in Further Education (LlLFE) project.

The LlLFE project focused not on the teaching and learning of literacy skills per se, but on the reading and writing required in the learning of subject areas such as Childcare and Media Studies. It took its orienting theory from Literacy Studies (Barton 2007, Barton et al. 2000). Literacy Studies takes a social view of literacy in which there are many 'literacies' varying from one context to another. This situated view of literacy makes it essential to study who is doing what, with and for whom, how, when, where, why, with what technologies, under what conditions, and with what values, attitudes and beliefs. It involves literacy practices, not just written texts.

In order to distinguish between the literacies in which people engage for purposes of their own and reading and writing in educational contexts, the term 'vernacular literacy practices' has been used. Vernacular literacy practices are learnt through participation in the activities of which they are a part, not through instruction, drills and tests. A stream of work since the 1970s has argued that people have 'funds of knowledge' from diverse and vibrant cultural roots which are disqualified by the education system. However, the empirical exploration of this claim has lagged behind the theoretical debate. The LlLFE project contributes to this line of research by addressing how these vernacular literacy practices can be valued and validated, and also how they can be harnessed to enhance learning in educational settings.

The research process

The research engaged college practitioners directly in a research partnership to investigate the literacy capabilities and practices of their learners, the literacy demands of their curriculum subjects, and the development of appropriate 'two-way' intervention strategies. These strategies were intended to take account of literacies within and beyond the college, to support evidence-based practice in college.

The project was a collaboration between two universities and four colleges in England and Scotland. Each of the four colleges had four members of staff seconded to the project who were teachers of vocational and academic

subjects. For them, involvement in the project constituted an ongoing induction into research. The college lecturers engaged in both research actions for understanding and research actions for change.

Research actions for understanding

In the first year of the research we investigated literacy practices on 32 units of study across 11 curriculum areas to represent as wide a range of college provision as possible. One curriculum area – Childcare – was studied in each of the colleges to allow for cross-national comparison.

We studied literacy practices in breadth, reflecting on a comprehensive collection of all texts used in the teaching and learning of each unit; and in depth, selecting a single pivotal text for each individual unit, recording different participants' perceptions of its role in learning and teaching and their accounts of how they used it.

We also researched the literacy practices in which four students on each of those courses participated in their everyday lives in connection with their families, domestic responsibilities, communities, leisure pursuits, travel, health, employment, and encounters with bureaucracy. A variety of visual methods were employed for collecting and identifying students' vernacular literacy practices. These methods allowed the students to take the lead in establishing which literacy practices were significant to them.

Research actions for change

In the second year the team developed and trialled small changes in practice (a term which we prefer to 'interventions') grounded in the understandings reached during the first year. Observations of changes were made and individual student interviews and focus groups were conducted as a basis for evaluating their impact.

Literacy practices in students' everyday lives

The research showed that most students participate in a multitude of literacy practices in their everyday lives, yet they often do not view or value their practices as literacy, nor make use of them when learning in college. For example, they study driving test theory in books and on CDs, book holidays online and navigate shopping websites,, keep diaries, communicate with school, read biographies of musicians, write song lyrics, and design leaflets. Those with part-time jobs fill in forms, search data bases for product details, complete records and write invoices. It was notable that in describing these practices, the students did not use the words 'reading' and 'writing', but other words such as 'design' or 'publicity'. New technologies are multiplying the possibilities for reading and writing new types of text in new ways for new purposes. This suggests that notions of individual deficit misconstrue what is involved in literacy.

We also identified a number of common characteristics of these vernacular literacy practices. They tend to be:

- purposeful to the student
- oriented to a clear audience
- generative, involving meaning-making, creativity and getting things done
- shared, i.e. interactive, participatory and collaborative
- in tune with students' values and identities
- non-linear, with varied reading paths
- specific to times and places
- multi-modal, combining symbols, pictures, colour, music
- multi-media, combining paper and electronic media
- under the students' control and self-determined in terms of activity, time and place
- varied rather than repetitive
- learned through participation

It is these characteristics that helped us to identify practices from the everyday that might be drawn upon within the learning of college courses.

Students engaged not only in vernacular literacy practices – those which arise from their own interests and concerns - but also in a wide range of bureaucratic, more formal literacy practices which are demanded by the practicalities of their lives.

Neither staff nor the students themselves perceived the literacy practices associated with everyday lives as having educational value.

Literacy practices in college

Lecturers did not always recognize the communicative aspects of teaching and learning in their own subjects. Even the most practical subjects are textually mediated. We identified four categories of literacy for learning:

- literacies for learning to be a student;
- literacies for learning particular subjects;
- literacies for assessment,
- literacies for 'doing the job' in real work environments, simulations or work placements.

The relative weight of these factors varies, but overall, literacies for assessment dominate the learning careers of students.

The range of literacy practices in colleges tended to be narrower than those in which students participate in everyday life. They are often limited to the reading of handouts, Powerpoint presentations and textbooks, the ubiquitous 'doing research on the internet', the writing of essays or reports, and the completion of worksheets. Students received mixed messages about the genres and tasks which were expected of them. For instance, the notions of an essay or a report were used in a wide variety of ways, as were tasks such as to discuss, to research or to analyse.

Our focus on literacy practices revealed an ambiguity in purpose on many vocational courses. Many aimed for both employment relevance and academic progression. These two goals involve different demands on student literacy. The reading and writing which arises in simulations of work tasks is part and parcel of doing the job, while academic progress tends to call for the writing of essays.

The research also revealed the complexity and diversity of the literacy practices in which students on lower-level courses are required to engage. While students on more academic routes and higher level courses are encultured into a specific set of literacy practices associated with developing extended reading and writing of academic texts, those on vocational and lower-level courses are often expected to engage in more diverse literacy practices, involving a wider range of genres, and requiring an understanding of the social context in which the texts they are reading and writing are situated. For example, they may be asked to produce pamphlets for parents on a Childcare course. So their literacy careers are more complex than those of students on more academic courses.

Fine-tuning literacies for learning

We developed a framework for identifying aspects of literacy on the basis of our analysis of changes in practice made by the lecturers involved in our research, (Figure 1). The framework is an analytical tool for interrogating data, and for talking explicitly about the detail of the characteristics of literacy practices. It provides researchers and practitioners with a useful way of describing and comparing literacy practices in their own work.

The exact elements of the framework are less important than the principle that there are a finite set of elements which constitute literacy events and literacy practices, each of which can be configured in an indefinite number of ways. Any change in the way one aspect of literacy is configured changes the nature of the literacy practice.

Lecturers were able to fine-tune the reading and writing on their courses in relation to one or more of the dimensions shown in Figure 1 so that they would resonate more with students' practices and preferences. This allowed them to help students learn and demonstrate their learning. Changes in practice which incorporated characteristics of students' everyday literacy activities increased their engagement, recall and confidence.

Tutors often felt themselves constrained to use existing assessments, which seemed to limit the possibilities for such changes. Often the most beneficial change would have been to change the assessment requirement itself. Many college staff at various levels were hesitant to do this because of the exigencies of moderation, or because they felt that it was not within their power.

Major implications

The research has implications for four overlapping areas of practice:

- literacy aspects of the design of college curricula and qualifications;
- the provision of support for literacy development;
- teacher education and continuing professional development; and
- practitioner research.

The project was distinctive in that the study of its implications was built into the design of the research. College lecturers were active participants in the initial research, and on the basis of the understandings it produced, they designed changes in their practice aimed at improving students' learning. This provides a good model for practitioner research, with understanding preceding change.

Many of the assumptions made about literacy and college students are misplaced and need to be reframed by both policy makers and professionals. In particular, there is a common view that the literacy requirements of more vocational courses are of a lower and less complex order than those needed for more academically-oriented study. Our research showed that this view is misguided. In addition, the assumption that students' performance on literacy tests is a complete representation of their capabilities needs to be replaced by an understanding of literacy as a social practice, and of the complexity and diversity of literacy practices in students' everyday lives.

Literacies for learning are currently driven to a large extent by the washback effect from assessment regimes. Awarding bodies need to reconsider the reading and writing which is required for their qualifications, and to ensure that they are not demanding unnecessary assessment literacies.

The framework we developed and the list of students' preferences in their vernacular literacy practices allows teachers and researchers to start from one of the questions in the framework, and then use the elements in the same line to expand on

it. So asking what is involved in a literacy practice can cover at least the following three more detailed questions:

- What is the content of the texts? What topics and issues are being written or read about, what is the meaning or the message?
- What language (or languages, in a multilingual text) and script, what genres, what conventions of style and design (for example layout, font and colour) are being drawn upon?
- What semiotic modes (spoken language, written language, visual, material or animation) are employed, in what ways, using what technologies and associated media, tools, materials and physical resources, ranging from computers, note books and textbooks to glitter pens?

Lecturers can use an understanding of literacy as a set of social practices to fine-tune their pedagogy. They can make small changes in practice which aim to make reading and writing on courses more resonant with students' vernacular literacy practices, make the students more aware of the reading and writing in their everyday lives which could act as resources for their learning, make the communicative aspects of learning more explicit and visible, and make the reading and writing on courses more relevant to learning.

Changes in practice depend on lecturers' own professional expertise and preferences. A change in practice for one lecturer might be an established practice for another. Changes in practice are not necessarily innovative, but could still be new to the staff and students involved. This suggests the need for greater sharing of practice both within and across curriculum areas. Curriculum policy should also encourage a culture of experimentation in pedagogic practices.

While this project focused on colleges, many of the findings have implications for other parts of the education system and the framework is one that can be drawn upon in any pedagogical context.

	<i>What?</i>	<i>Why?</i>	<i>Who?</i>
	Aspects of a literacy event or practice		
	content	purposes	audiences
<i>Under what conditions?</i>	languages, genres, styles, designs	flexibility and constraints	roles, identities and values
<i>How?</i>	modes and technologies	actions and processes	participation

Figure 1: A framework for analysing literacy practices

Further information

A book entitled *Improving Learning in College: rethinking literacies across the curriculum* is due to appear in the TLRP Improving Learning series, published by Routledge. The book draws on the work of this project in Scotland and England, and of the Bilingual Literacies for Learning in FE project in Wales.

A DVD and accompanying booklet, entitled *Literacies for Learning in Further Education: making reading and writing practices across the curriculum more useful for learning*, has been developed by Simon Pardoe of PublicSpace, and is available from www.publicspace.org.uk. It has been designed as a resource for teacher education and Continuing Professional Development.

The following is a selection of short articles written for practitioners:

Miller, K. and Gaechter, J. (2006) 'Thinking about learning the curriculum in different ways.' *Broadcast* 72, pp. 20-21. Available online at <http://www.sfeu.ac.uk/broadcast/>

Smith, J. (2005): 'Mobilising everyday literacy practices within the curricula.' *Journal of Vocational Education and Training* Volume 57, Number 3, 2005 pp. 319-334.

Satchwell, C. (2007): 'Keeping it real...' *The Leader (Journal of the Association of School and College Leaders)* Issue 21, pp. 28 - 30. A shorter version is available online at <http://www.leadermagazine.co.uk/>

These are two papers about the research for an academic readership:

Ivanic, R., Edwards, R., Satchwell, C., and Smith, J. (2007) 'Possibilities for pedagogy in Further Education: harnessing the abundance of literacy', *British Educational Research Journal*, 33, 5: 703-721.

Satchwell, C. and Ivanic, R. (2009) 'The textual mediation of learning in Further Education', in R. Edwards, G. Biesta and M. Thorpe (eds) *Rethinking Contexts for Learning and Teaching: communities, activities and networks*, London: Routledge.

Texts referred to in this briefing are:

Barton, D. (1994; 2nd edn 2007) *Literacy: an introduction to the ecology of written language*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Barton, D., Hamilton, M. and Ivanic, R. (eds) (2000) *Situated Literacies: reading and writing in context*, London: Routledge.

Project website:

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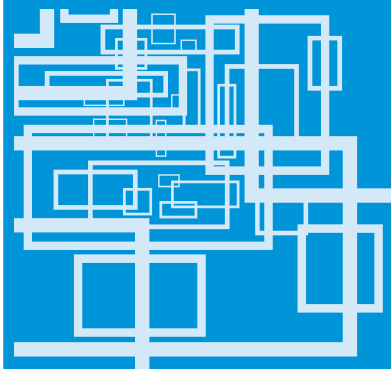
The warrant

The validity of the research was established by involving college lecturers as partners in the research team, and by consulting education managers and policy-makers from the outset. 16 college lecturers were centrally involved in the research for two years, and some for longer, sharing in the decision-making and checking the emerging insights against their intuitions and experience. The research team liaised regularly with senior management staff in the four colleges which acted as research sites, particularly through a senior member of staff who was appointed as Advocate for the project. In this way the relevance of the research to practice was established and fine-tuned throughout the duration of the project. Senior policy-makers and other leaders in the field were members of the project Advisory Group, steering the development of the research.

32 units of study were studied in depth, covering 11 curriculum areas in four colleges, two in Scotland and two in England. The research was a multi-method study, employing mainly qualitative methods of data collection in different ways for different purposes. The findings are grounded in a very substantial and varied data set, and many of them are triangulated across data sets. Large and robust as this data-set may be, we do not presume to generalise from it. The theoretical underpinning of the research is that literacies and pedagogies are specific to their contexts. However, we believe that the range of our findings and the diversity of their sources allow inferences to be drawn from them which can be applied with suitable recontextualisation in other educational settings.

The warrant was further strengthened by an analytical strategy based on interaction between vertical and horizontal slicing of the data set producing detailed case studies and constant comparison across cases.

Teaching and Learning Research Programme



TLRP involves some 90 research teams with contributions from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Work began in 2000 and the Technology Enhanced Learning phase will continue to 2012.

Learning: TLRP's overarching aim is to improve outcomes for learners of all ages in teaching and learning contexts across the UK.

Outcomes: TLRP studies a broad range of learning outcomes, including the acquisition of skill, understanding, knowledge and qualifications and the development of attitudes, values and identities relevant to a learning society.

Lifecourse: TLRP supports projects and related activities at many ages and stages in education, training and lifelong learning.

Enrichment: TLRP commits to user engagement at all stages of research. It promotes research across disciplines, methodologies and sectors, and supports national and international co-operation.

Expertise: TLRP works to enhance capacity for all forms of research on teaching and learning, and for research informed policy and practice.

Improvement: TLRP develops the knowledge base on teaching and learning and policy and practice in the UK.

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