

## Adult learning in the workplace: creating formal provision with impact

Publicly funded courses in basic skills, ESOL and IT are offered in UK workplaces because the government believes they will raise productivity. We investigated the impact of such courses, tracking both learners and their workplaces over a period of years. We discovered that workplace courses can both improve skills and change people's approach to learning; but also that current policy design is highly inefficient. It is at odds with the needs of mature, self-aware learners, and with the workplace environment.

- Workplace courses successfully reach adults who do not participate in other formal learning, but fail to create any lasting infrastructure when delivered through outside initiatives. → Support for workplace learning should encourage and complement enterprises' own efforts. Learning programmes initiated by and within workplaces are the ones that survive long-term.
- Both the participants in workplace literacy courses and their organisational sponsors are motivated by a wider range of factors than the wish to improve performance at work. → The most marked benefits for individuals and organisations are in personal and/or work satisfaction.
- Adults who participate in workplace courses are somewhat more likely than their peers to continue with formal learning in later years. → Workplace learning has the potential to change individuals' 'learning trajectories' and encourage them to rethink their ambitions and capabilities.
- Workplace literacy courses produce very small average gains in performance, but participants' average performance continues to improve over a two year post-instruction period. → Current policies are inefficient, as courses are too short to have much impact. But they may stimulate learners to use their skills more, and so continue improving.
- Adults who are confident about their ability to learn are also much more confident that they will gain from workplace courses. → People with low confidence in their own ability to learn will need extra encouragement or incentives. Once involved in formal learning, they progress as fast as other learners.
- Adults who actively use literacy in their day to day lives in the workplace and beyond it are the ones who will continue to improve. → Whether the job itself facilitates the learning and use of literacy skills in the workplace appears to influence whether people increase their proficiency or lose ground.

# The research

Our project was a longitudinal one, and explored the impact on both learners and their organisations of government-funded workplace programmes designed to increase the literacy skills of employees. 567 learners were involved, and over 53 workplaces. We tested the reading and writing skills of participants at the start of their courses, and then a year and two years later. We also gathered in-depth information on all three occasions about their jobs, learning experiences, education, attitudes to work, and aspirations. At the same time, we interviewed managers, training managers and course tutors. A sub-set of sites and learners were studied and interviewed in greater depth.

The policy context was, and remains, that government sees adult education as being primarily about increasing economic productivity and responsiveness to perceived business demand. However, our research design acknowledges the complex interplay between the motivations and behaviour of active adult learners, the environment in which they learn, and the nature of their programme. It therefore looked at a variety of outcomes, as illustrated below.

## What we found

The stable workplace provision of learning opportunities results from organisations' own commitment, not from external public initiatives.

The workplace programmes we studied were all publicly funded, whether through Skills for Life (in England) or other programmes. They were successful in their intention of attracting adult

participants, most of whom had little or no recent experience of adult education or training. In some cases, the programmes were hosted by large employers which had been offering education and training to employees for a long time. But most were the result of the 'provider' – a college or private training company – contacting the employer and offering a free course, typically for 30 hours. Employers organised facilities and a few also offered partial or complete paid study time, although this too tended, when offered, to be supported through government grants.

Many courses which were agreed between employers and providers never ran because of low enrolment. Moreover, when we revisited the employers a year after the courses ended, only a small minority were offering any form of follow-up. Usually, provision had ceased because, and as soon as, enterprises were informed by providers that no further free courses were available. In about ten per cent of cases, the site no longer operated because of reorganisation or takeover. The exceptions to this pattern were organisations where a learning culture and infrastructure had developed internally before special literacy funding became available, or before providers made contact; and which outlasted the special funding.

Learners and managers alike were motivated by a large number of different factors, with improved performance or productivity low on the list

Official policy documents generally justify funding for workplace provision via benefits to the economy. However, the learners we interviewed rarely expected their courses to increase their earnings or promotion prospects. Nor did their managers express major concerns over the impact of employees' literacy skills on productivity. On the contrary, they were far more likely to support workplace courses

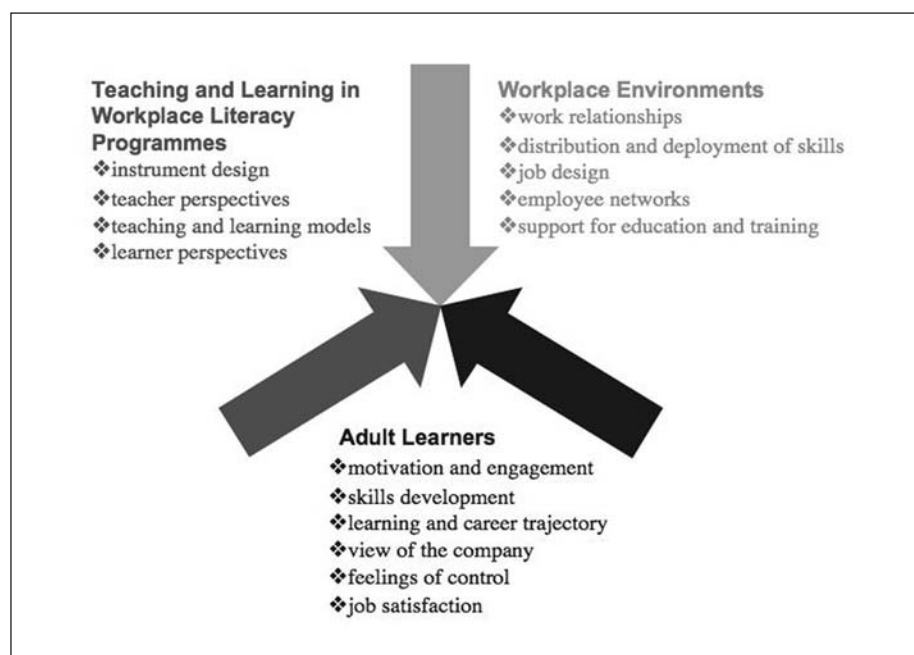
as a way of improving staff morale, or offering general development. When asked, in the final follow-up, what they would most like to learn in the future, learners' favoured responses were either 'educational' – a foreign language, general writing, painting, IT skills - or courses that would help them to start a totally new job or career. The one major exception to this picture is the desire of both learners and managers for non-native English (ESOL) workers to improve their English for immediate job-related as well as more general reasons.

**Employees at a manufacturing company explained why they enrolled: 'I did this course for general interest, general knowledge and to improve myself.' (MP: fork lift driver)**  
**'Since I've left school I'm just manual, I'm just making stuff... there's nothing really lengthy that I have to write anymore, and I like to write but I just don't get the chance to.' (TR: machine operator)**

The courses we studied typically offered 30 hours of tuition, after which learners had no further free workplace entitlement. We examined whether this very brief period has the hoped-for impact on skills, and whether it changed participants' 'learning trajectories'. Did they, in the following years, show a greater tendency to undertake further learning than comparable employees across the country (as recorded by the Labour Force Survey)?

Our data suggest that there was a small positive increase in participants' later involvement in formal learning compared to what would have otherwise been expected. This may indicate that learners were encouraged by their experiences to undertake subsequent courses. Our direct measures of reading performance a year and two years after the course also showed a very small average gain in performance on each occasion as compared to a year before. Many individual learners showed quite big and unstable changes, including some marked deteriorations, suggesting 'regression to the mean', which in turn is indicative of performance which is not very stable. However, on average native English speakers showed a very small improvement which did not reach conventional statistical significance levels, while ESOL learners averaged a considerably larger and statistically significant one. The maintenance of improvement over two years may indicate that learners continued to use and thereby improve their literacy skills. But for ESOL learners it may simply reflect longer periods spent in an English-speaking environment.

**Phil Callow at Thorpton Local Authority remarked that his 30 hours course 'did make me aware of my shortcomings. But you can't run an English course for adults in one week... You're not going to learn to spell in a week.'**



## The importance of confidence and engagement

We used the detailed 'Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory' to measure how people felt about themselves as learners. The results confirm the importance of attitude and self-image. People who already felt engaged with learning and reported a desire to go more deeply into things are more confident as workers, more ready to suggest new ideas, and have a wider circle of workplace friends and acquaintances, and higher expectations of what they will get from a course. Conversely, those who feel little confidence in their own ability to learn are less likely to volunteer ideas or feel valued by their employer. Once on a course, 'fragile' learners do as well as their colleagues, but may be less likely to sign up in the first place. For all types of learner, by far the most frequently reported outcome was a general increase in personal confidence, with two thirds reporting that they are more confident at work than before.

**Arain Singh Sandhu at STS Systems told us: 'It gives you more confidence because you are aware of how words are put together. It helps you get to know your colleagues better – you see their personal side'**

## Use it or lose it

Very few of the learners we studied had major job changes in the years immediately after their workplace course. Nor did they expect to. That helps to explain why, especially for native English speakers, gains were rather modest, even though satisfaction levels with the courses were high. As our in-depth interviews underline and as other studies, including TLRP research, have highlighted, real gains come with practice and with application. (See also the TLRP Project Learning as Work: Teaching and Learning Processes in the Contemporary Work Organisation, <http://www.tlrp.org/proj/phase111/felstead.htm>). Unless people's jobs demand and encourage literacy, the effects of workplace interventions are likely to be small and short-lived. Conversely, among our in-depth sample, it was the learners who used their literacy skills actively, in and out of the workplace, who showed consistent gains.

**Roger Taylor at STS Systems wanted to consolidate what he had learned and commented to us on the drawbacks of his job: 'I've never been particularly good at the English side of things. I feel like I'd like to improve it but I don't find it necessary in what I do. I don't do an awful lot of writing...'**

## Major implications

The driving force behind both 'Skills for Life' and the general government strategy for adult education is the belief that there is a severe 'skills deficit' in many UK firms, and that this can be addressed by highly prescriptive interventions. Our findings suggest otherwise. The majority of learners report that they cope adequately at work using their existing literacy and numeracy skills. This is consistent with other large-scale surveys; but what is particularly important about our research is that their employers agree.

Our research confirms the appetite for learning among many adults who have not found it possible to attend conventional classes. It also underlines the importance of a far wider range of factors than the wish to improve job performance; boosting confidence, helping children with their homework, pursuing interests outside work.

Managers, meanwhile, were also motivated largely by factors other than the desire to plug skill gaps or improve productivity. The main impulse was to strengthen the psychological contract between employer and employee. They believed the courses improved staff confidence and morale, but reported very few examples of direct impact in narrowly economic terms. Their unwillingness to continue further literacy training at full cost after the expiry of their free entitlement tends to confirm that government policy makers were mistaken in expecting immediate and major effects on productivity.

A major implication of our findings is that policy-makers should be more realistic about the motivations and benefits involved. It makes far more sense to see workplace provision as citizens' entitlements which may have multiple benefits, over a long period of time, than as an immediate productivity-enhancing intervention. The need for a longer time-scale is underlined

by the reality of the modern workplace. Our follow-up visits highlighted how often and how fast enterprises close, relocate, and reorganise; and the difficulties faced by small and medium enterprises in releasing employees for learning. In that environment, highly prescriptive programmes are neither cost-effective nor sustainable.

Even more striking is the fact that only those organisations which had moved to supporting workplace learning, of their own accord, before 'Skills for Life' funding arrived, were still actively engaged two years after that funding ended. Catapulting provision into companies using outside providers who are funded on the basis of places and qualifications delivered is no way to establish long-term learning opportunities and cultures.

It is also clear that if employees attend literacy courses while continuing to engage in day-to-day tasks which have little or no literacy content, then their jobs are unlikely to sustain, let alone increase, any gains in literacy skills.

The difference made by challenge and practice is well illustrated by one of our research sites, a weapons manufacturing company. In our in-depth sample, the learner whose literacy had improved most substantially had been promoted after the course as part of a broader organisational shift and now used a wider range of literacy skills. Other learners who continued to engage in the same working routines, which entailed minimal use of literacy, made little or no progress in their literacy. For employers and employees, our research underlines the need for follow-up support, not just the 'magic bullet' of a short workplace course.

## Further information

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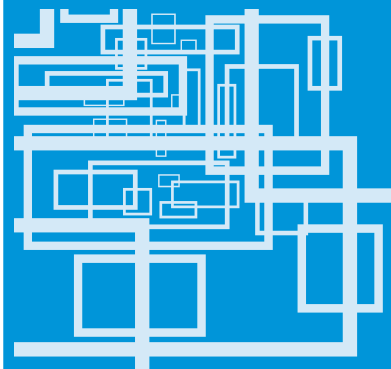
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## The warrant

The project has been co-funded and supported by the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC). The project has used a 'mixed methods' approach, examining issues and hypotheses from a number of different perspectives to determine whether the results are mutually consistent and supportive. Findings (which have involved 567 learners, training and line managers from 53 workplaces and 36 tutors as well as around 50 other key informants) have been related, at all stages of the work, both to the theoretical literature (economics, psychology, sociology and management) and to large social surveys which provide a comparator group for our findings. For example, a matched Labour Force Survey data set was used to analyse changes in participation in learning. Questions on attitudes to employment were formulated so that results could be compared with the large nationally representative sample of employees surveyed in successive versions of the Workplace Employee Relations Survey (WERS). Data on qualifications and work histories have used categories and coding frames which allow direct comparisons with analyses of the Birth Cohort studies. All of these provide baseline data on topics such as satisfaction with employers, the likelihood of undertaking learning in adult life, and returns to learning, providing a robust point of comparison against which to interpret our own findings on the experiences, skills and learning trajectories of workplace basic skill learners.

## 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.

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**TLRP Directors' Team**  
Professor Andrew Pollard | London  
Professor Richard Noss | London  
Professor Miriam David | London  
Professor Alan Brown | Warwick  
Professor Mary James | London

**TLRP Programme Office**  
Sarah Douglas | [sarah.douglas@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:sarah.douglas@ioe.ac.uk)  
James O'Toole | [j.o'toole@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:j.o'toole@ioe.ac.uk)  
[tlrp@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:tlrp@ioe.ac.uk)

**TLRP**  
Institute of Education  
University of London  
20 Bedford Way  
London WC1H 0AL  
UK

Tel +44 (0)20 7911 5577



### Project website:

<http://www.ioe.ac.uk/tlrp/workplaceskills/>

### Project contacts:

**Professor Alison Wolf**  
Email: [alison.wolf@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:alison.wolf@kcl.ac.uk)  
Tel: (+44) 20 7848 3724  
Department of Management  
King's College London  
Franklin-Wilkins Building  
Stamford Street  
London SE1 9NH

### Project team:

Alison Wolf, Karen Evans, Liam Aspin, Andrew Jenkins, Edmund Waite, Kat Ananiadou (2004-06), Jay Derrick (2004-06), Sue Southwood (2004-07)

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