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A question of assessment

Students in Catering and Hospitality are generally very positive about their learning experience at Lancaster and Morecambe College. But one thing that gives both the students and the tutors headaches is the log book.

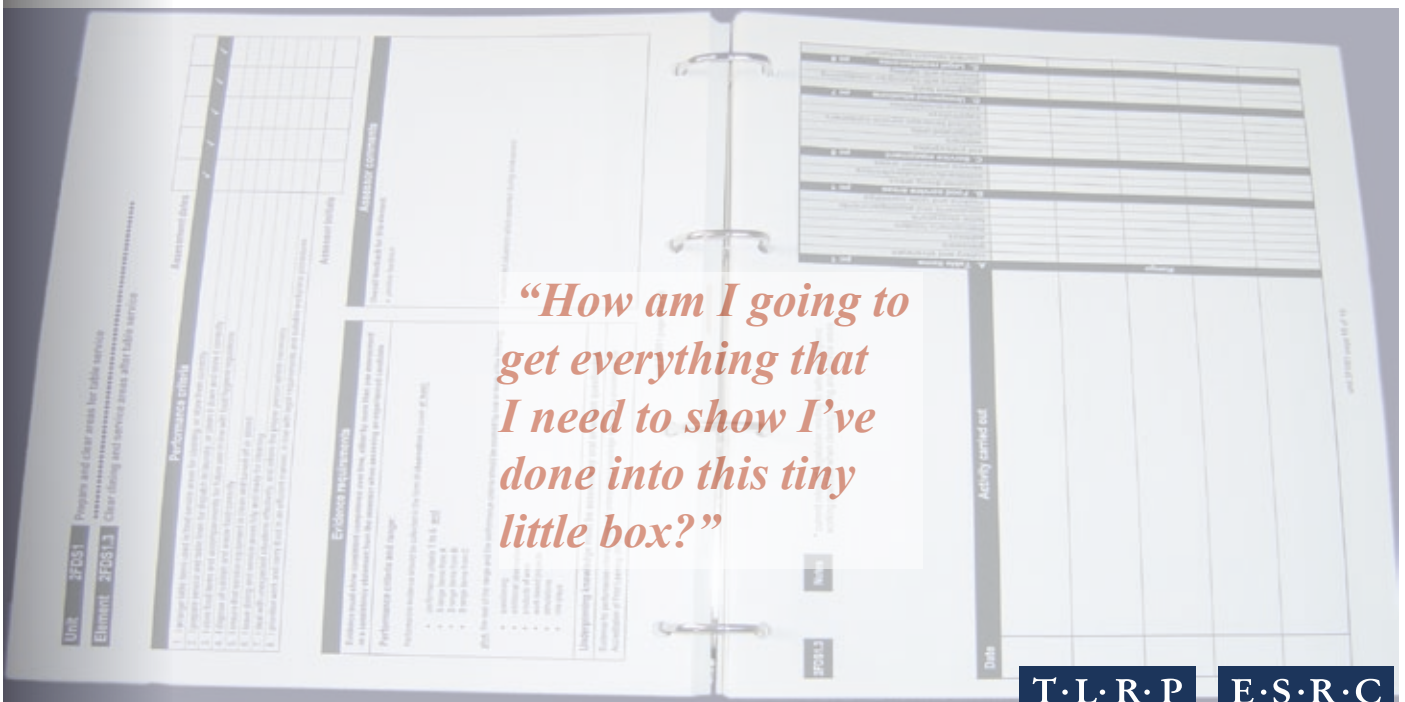
This literacy practice is nothing like the literacy practices actually required in the catering and hospitality workplace: its purpose is a bureaucratic one of keeping a record of what the student has covered.

Log books, or Unit Records, are used to record information about what students have done as part of their work in the restaurant or kitchen. This means that students write down the activities they have carried out, and their tutor ticks off the areas where the correct standards have been met. Students are also required to supply the answers to questions

Candice Satchwell

as evidence of Underpinning Knowledge. We interviewed some Catering and Hospitality students about their experiences and views of the log books they are required to complete for an NVQ2. They expressed their difficulties with the layout and the language:

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About the project

The Literacies for Learning in FE project focuses on literacy practices which enable students to succeed in learning across the curriculum. One of its major objectives is to uncover actual and potential overlaps and connections between literacy practices in students' everyday lives and the literacy demands of their courses.

The project is a collaboration between Stirling and Lancaster universities and four FE colleges. It began in January 2004 and is being funded for three years by the Economic and Social Research Council as part of its £28 million Teaching and Learning Research Programme.

More than a hundred students in four different colleges have taken part in the research across eleven curriculum areas. Childcare is the area common to all four FE colleges, and the other areas, each represented in at least one college, range from Painting and Decorating to A level Social Sciences.

About this issue

The project is now in its third phase, in which the findings from the main research phase are being used to experiment with changes in practice which will bring the literacy demands of the courses more into harmony with the literacies in the students' everyday lives.

Several of the articles in this issue describe changes in practice which are being trialled. Members of the project team write about changes they have introduced, why they have introduced them, and how students are responding.

Other articles discuss how the work of the project can be sustained and taken up by colleagues across the FE sector.

For further information about the Literacies for Learning in FE Project or any of the articles featured in this newsletter, please contact:

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**Pictured right:
Students at
Lancaster and
Morecambe
College entering
information
in their Unit
Record books**



A question of assessment ...

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“The log book is very, very hard to understand, I think. Sometimes looking at it, it just bugs my head”

And

“I used to just write in the box what I'd done and hope it'd be okay ... 'Cos you don't want to go up like five times in a row and go like, 'I just don't get it, it's not making any sense.”

They also commented on the restrictions it created on what they could say:

“You've only got a small space to write in so you have to sit there for twenty minutes and think 'what am I going to write in this and how am I going to get everything that I need to show I've done into this tiny little box?”

Tutors, on the other hand, remarked on how much of their time was spent explaining how to fill in the log book correctly – time which could more effectively be spent teaching the content of the course.

In contrast to log books, many of the activities involved in Catering and Hospitality include texts which are designed to play a part in an interaction with someone else, such as food and wine menus, food order checks, customer comment cards, advertisements for the restaurant, or posters about upcoming events.

Students are expected to be able to explain (in the logbook it says “translate”) menus to customers

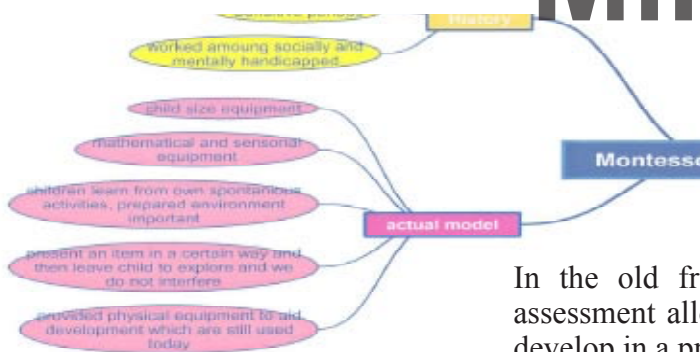
and may be asked to design any of the other texts mentioned above, for which there is a designated audience. From our observations, it appears that students cope admirably with these tasks, all of which involve engaging with precise and often complex literacy practices.

So what is it about the log book that causes problems? Well, could it be that this is the one text which is not explicitly part of an interaction with anyone else? It has no specified audience, other than an unknown assessor, and it records information after the event – hence outside of the interaction with customers or other workers to which the information relates.

So, how could the log book be made more appealing and more relevant to the students? One suggestion from students is that taking photographs or drawing pictures of their table layouts or their interactions with customers would be an alternative way of presenting the information required for their log books. This would represent a more ‘interactive’ method of assessment: as one student said “because then you get it across more”.

Educators have realised for a long time that a sense of audience is crucial for students to feel motivated. Our project is coming to realise that methods of delivery and assessment are not always based on this principle. We hope that the voices of the students and tutors involved in the research can now contribute to some changes being made.

Mind mapping in



Joyce Gaechter, the project Childcare practitioner at Perth College, introduced mind mapping in response to the emerging insights from the research carried out in the Literacies for Learning in Further Education Project (LfLFE), and in response to the demands of the new HNC Scottish framework in Childcare.

The HNC Course

An HNC is now considered to be the same level as the first year of a degree so students should be doing more independent research and self-directed study.

In the old framework, formative assessment allowed the students to develop in a process based way and

delivery was face to face with a lot of support. The new HNC has formal summative assessment instruments, which are graded. Therefore, in order to help students to become more independent learners and to give them the skills to successfully engage in this type of summative assessment a change of approach was needed from lecturers and learners.

Research findings

The initial feedback from last year's students involved in the LfLFE project indicates that students learn more effectively if they make up their own notes and that they enjoy doing this. Also, students are using

different types of technology in their literacy practices in their everyday lives. These literacy practices include manipulating colour, images and icons in creative design work and have specific purposes which are valued and often involve relating to others particularly family and their peers. If the college can link those experiences and elements of these valued literacy practices to academic work then learning should be more effective.

Mind maps as multi-modal tools

The introduction of mind mapping as a tool for learning for the HNC level childcare students encourages them to use images and colour and to design their own mind maps in a way they find relevant and useful.

New thinking, not new resources

Sandra Mulligan

At the beginning of March, Candice, Angela and I gave a short presentation to the staff within my Academy at Preston College - Maths, Science, and IT. It was the first of its kind at the College – a massive step for the Project!

The presentation included the wide range of reading and writing students are involved in, how the data was collected amongst the students and also the ideas of 'resonance' and 'dissonance'.

I was really pleased that the meeting was so well attended. Most of the staff had not heard of the LfLFE Project before and news of the research was well received. Many staff commented that it was a new perspective and this knowledge would be useful to their future teaching strategies. Examples of quotes from the staff are:

'Useful and thought provoking'

'The session helped me to climb inside the minds of 16-19 year old students and understand more about their use and perception of language and it has encouraged me to re-evaluate instructions given with assignments.'

'Education is all about communication. I found that the presentation gave several ideas on communication that have assisted me in my teaching, enabling me to get difficult concepts across to my students.'

Below: Sandra Mulligan with science students



I feel that the staff now have a greater awareness of the language that they use with the students.

The presentation has whetted people's appetite for more. In addition, the staff realise that the messages coming from the research are actually something that they can work with, i.e. it just needs new thinking as opposed to lots of new resources.

As a Programme Co-ordinator within Science, I will shortly be delivering my own staff development sessions with a view to improving teaching and learning. These sessions will build on the ideas emerging from the Standards Unit but I will also definitely include strands from the LfLFE Project. My intention is to build on my own innovations as a CBR plus the contents of our presentation to my Academy – I will continue to 'spread the word'.

Kate Miller
and Joyce Gaechter

Mind maps involve students in processes of transformation, as they reorganise information onto their maps, and translation of information from one mode to another, as they incorporate semiotically meaningful images, icons and colours into their maps. It was found that collaboratively producing the maps and discussing the process and their content with peers was an important aspect of the learning process. According to Kress (2003), design is the foundation of learning. It makes not only communicating and representing but also learning into dynamic active processes far removed from static acquisition.

Mind mapping is one way that students can draw on the multimodal elements of their most valued literacy practices from other domains of their lives for a formal educational purpose.

Mind maps as flexible tools

Mind mapping was originally introduced as a tool for taking notes which would allow students to take ownership of their notes and help the cognitive process of understanding the material. As the students started working with mind maps it became evident that they were useful in a number of different ways in relation to studying their curriculum area; they were also useful in the other domains of students' lives as mediating tools for work and leisure activities.

The students interviewed about this intervention reported successfully using mind maps as intended, for note taking and as an assessment tool, but they also discovered that they were useful for understanding how they learn. Lecturers have found that as a result of this innovation students have engaged in a more analytical process in relation to the curriculum.

Reference

Kress, G. (2003), *Literacy in the New Media Age*, London: Routledge.

Striking a chord making coursework and curricula more resonant with students' everyday lives

Greg Mannion and
Ronnie Goodman

Have you ever read something that 'struck a chord' with you?

Through LfLFE, we now have many examples of how, for a given student on a given course, some aspects of what they read and write in their everyday lives seems to strike a chord with them in relation to their coursework. We have met music students who read biographies of famous artists, childcare students who read magazines about health issues, and catering students who try out and file away recipes at home, and multi-media students who use a range of related



software and digital technologies at home. We suggest that 'chords are being struck' here in many different ways. Currently, we are exploring how the term 'resonance', a concept drawn from the field of music to describe when two objects are vibrating in sympathy, can usefully be applied to these experiences.

We suggest that literacy resonance between college, home or workplace contexts is brought about through different aspects of the process of reading, writing and communicating.

For one student it may be that the topic is what is important – in other words what is being read or written about is what makes it resonant. So if the topic of a book being read at home is similar to the topic of a course, we can say there is topic resonance across these contexts.

For another student, the medium being used is what is critical. For someone else, it can be that the audiences of the texts they produce connect across home, college and workplace domains.

These diverse ways in which resonance can be experienced exist along different wavelengths. These include (and this is not an exhaustive list): resonance of topic, resonance of genre, resonance of audience, resonance of purpose, and resonance of medium.

There is now no question in our minds that educators would do well to consider students' everyday literacies as a valuable resource base when designing courses. Perhaps we should begin by 'listening in' to the different wavelengths of students' own purposeful reading and writing practices. Then educators can begin to adjust the wavelengths of tasks which involve reading and writing in order to make them resonant for students.

Transforming literacies on Childcare courses



College-Based Researcher Joanne Knowles who works at Preston College says that ideas from the LfLFE project are starting to manifest themselves in her teaching. Joanne is a Childcare tutor who has been researching two units, one at English level 2 and one at level 3. She described how her understanding about students' literacy practices is now "travelling" to the rest of her teaching.

For example, it emerged in Phase 2 of the research that students did not understand the meanings of some words which might be critical to their understanding of the course.

She also realised that students often used the internet to find things out in their everyday lives. So, when she introduced a new topic this year – 'Equality, Diversity and Rights' – she went to the first lesson armed with dictionaries and laptops, so they could choose whether they looked up the words using a book or a website. The students immediately took ownership of this task, with the result that one student told the others: "Look on dictionary.com."

During the research last year, Joanne found that the students enjoyed writing on the whiteboard, but also found that this could be intimidating for some. So, as an innovation this year,

Joanne gave each student a whiteboard pen and invited them to come to the board to make their contributions to class discussion.

A similar innovation was to give students post-it notes for them to come to the front and make their contributions by sticking their notes on to the board. Both of these activities allowed the students to engage with the topic and to interact with one another while also maintaining some degree of anonymity: because so many students were going to the board at the same time, it was not clear who had written what. Hence the students were acting both as individuals and as part of a bigger group - able to say what they wanted, while still feeling safe.

Joanne recognises that she herself does not read texts unless there is an explicit purpose – so why should students be any different? Indeed, the research has shown that when students are involved in literacy

practices in their everyday lives, there is always a clear purpose to what they are doing – whether they are playing a game, communicating with others, or finding out information. Joanne therefore links all the reading she gives to students to a specific purpose which they will value themselves, which might be to help with an assignment, or to help deal with a problem when working with children.

Joanne has also been involved in spreading the word about the research. She has made a presentation to a group of teacher trainees at Preston College, and has contributed to a Workshop on Innovative Teaching Practices for her own Academy. She says: "I think it's improved my teaching because I'm thinking about it more. Reading for a purpose is a major factor for students' learning,

so the whole research thing has improved me professionally."

Joanne is continuing to collect data on her teaching, and her students are providing us with useful information regarding how the delivery of Childcare courses can be made even better.



Swimming against the tide



Taking - and maintaining - a different perspective on literacy

From the outset it was clear that the researchers participating in the LfLFE project faced a number of new challenges.

College-based researchers had to take on board what was - for them - a very different idea of the nature and purpose of research. For most of us working in FE, the kind of research that we are familiar with is quantitative in nature and we have trouble in taking seriously research that does not involve checklists, questionnaires, percentages, graphs and numbers! Trying to get used to the idea that research could be carried out quite differently and still be rigorous and meaningful was not easy.

However, there were more difficulties to be faced. Although a lot of research is carried out on FE, and many staff employed in the FE sector do get involved in research, it is still the case that research plays a very different role in the FE sector from its role in the HE sector. There are many points of difference, but perhaps the most important issue is that careers - for the most part - are not based upon research work: there is no financial incentive to make research a priority. It does not figure in contracts or play a part in the determination of departmental financing. In short although many involved in FE recognise the importance of research in education, that does not carry through to any institutional structures or priorities.

‘...research plays a very different role in the FE sector from its role in the HE sector.’

This means that there is no ‘research space’ in FE - as there is in HE; no real community of research, no platform

upon which to engage in discussion about research; no systems in place which support it as an activity. Some steps have been taken to try to address that problem and organisations such as the Scottish Further Education Unit are trying to change that situation. However in the absence of established priorities about research, other priorities that are established will and must matter more. The pressing needs to deliver courses and get students through to achieve awards, maintaining good results are the priorities that lecturers in FE have to face each and every day. For departments the need to put lecturers in front of classes and juggle timetables to ensure that staff hours are utilised effectively must be the priority.



Jim Carmichael is the College Based Research Coordinator for the Project at Anniesland College, Glasgow

Involving FE staff as researchers places them in a context where the priorities of the research clash with the priorities of the department and of the institution as a whole. There is a need for a different understanding of the role research could and should play in the FE sector.

FE practitioners during the life of the project are being given the opportunity to participate in a research space.

The project created a mini-research environment, with the constant interchange of ideas and revisiting of difficult issues and the chance to

discuss how education works. As one tutor put it quite succinctly

‘the project gave us (FE practitioners) the space to talk about teaching and learning in ways that would not normally be possible. The usual demands of timetables and teaching and administration could be set aside in order to talk and write and discuss ideas about the process, it gave us time to reflect in a genuine way about our practice.’

So for a time we have this space, this connection between practitioners in research and HE staff and researchers, that made it possible to have a dialogue about our work that is usually very difficult to achieve. The research also involved challenging ideas, it required us to take a very different view about literacy, one that ran counter to well-established usage which also demanded a lot of interaction and discussion.

The question remains as to how well we will fare once this short-lived ‘research space’ is no longer available to us. In the absence of such a web of interaction, is it not all-too-likely that the dominant paradigm, the main current of priorities and the language associated with that mainstream view of research and of literacy will reassert themselves?

We can hope that the practitioners involved in the research are able to become subversive, are able to challenge the norms and help contribute to a shift in the debate, a development in the language systems within which we work.

If we practitioner-researchers can ‘swim against the tide’, then it might just be possible to contribute towards a change in the dominant culture.