



**Literacies
for
Learning
in
Further
Education
research project**



Clear messages are emerging from data as project enters Phase 3

Painting a positive picture

The project team has been collecting data about the literacy practices on college courses and in students' lives.

We have been finding that there is lots of reading and writing involved in learning, even on very practical vocational courses such as Painting and Decorating. We have also revealed just how much Further Education college students read and write in their leisure activities, their religion, their domestic business, dealing with bureaucracy, and communicating with friends and family.



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On Dave Brown's NVQ Level 1 and Level 2 at Preston College, the students encounter the sorts of texts that are actually part of the job for which they are preparing. For example, they need to be able to interpret manufacturers' instructions, read detailed job specifications, find out information about products on the internet, interpret health and safety law, put in orders over the internet, and write estimates for customers. In addition, there is a lot of reading and writing involved in the course itself, such as keeping a diary, following instructions for course assessments, reading and making notes on key terminology for the trade, portfolio building, and understanding the multiple choice exam paper.



In all four colleges involved in the research, two in England and two in Scotland, across eleven curriculum areas, we have been finding out about the complex and varied reading and writing in the lives of over one hundred students, from Foundation Level to Degree Level. The college lecturers who are involved in the research, and even the students themselves, have been surprised to discover the breadth and depth of the reading and writing in people's everyday lives.

'I just can't believe how much they do at home. Before becoming involved in this project, I thought most of them (students) maybe skimmed through a magazine occasionally or texted their friends, but no more than that'.

(Martin, a practitioner researcher on the LfLFE project)

Students who at first thought of themselves as 'no good at reading' find that they do far more than they thought. For

example, Carol is researching her family tree as part of a project at her local church, which involves a wide range of activities from interpreting historical documents to downloading and using genealogy software. Eve has a two year old son. She collects records of his development, has read books on pregnancy, childbirth and childrearing and deals with council tax information and Child Tax Credit, consulting her Mum or her boyfriend when necessary. Nadine is so interested in horoscopes that she is able to critically evaluate different ones in different newspapers. Arfan is using a CD-ROM to prepare for his driving test. Bryn plays computer games for two to three hours each evening, which involve following detailed instructions, typing details into the interactive site, and keeping extensive handwritten notes on his alter-ego.

Bilingual Literacies for Learning in FE

DWYIEITHRWYDD, LLYTHRENNEDD A DYSGU MEWN ADDYSG BELLACH

This research project in Wales is a 'sister' project to the *Literacies for Learning in Further Education* project.

It is one of four funded under the 'Extension to Wales' of the ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme.

The project began in May 2005 and will be carried out over a two year period, in close research partnership with Coleg Meirion-Dwyfor in North Wales. This college is the leading provider of bilingual and Welsh-medium education in the Further Education (F.E.) sector in Wales and it is based on three sites: in Dolgellau, Pwllheli and Glynllifon.

The people involved in the project

The *Bilingual Literacies for Learning project* is being coordinated by Marilyn Martin-Jones (School of Education, University of Birmingham), in close collaboration with Roz Ivanič (Literacy Research Centre, Lancaster University) and Daniel Chandler (Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies, University of Wales Aberystwyth). Buddug Griffith, the former Bilingual Coordinator at



Clockwise from above: Marilyn Martin-Jones, Daniel Chandler and Buddug Griffith

By Marilyn Martin-Jones

Coleg Meirion - Dwyfor, has been appointed as the main project researcher. The college-based researchers are specialists in three main curriculum areas: Beryl Davies (Welsh as a First



Coleg Meirion Dwyfor and its Principal Ian Rees

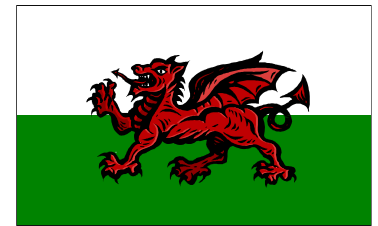


Language and as a Second Language); Margaret Lewis (Child Care) and Anwen Williams (Agriculture). Dr Ian Rees, the College Principal has welcomed the development of this research partnership.

Project aims

The aims of the project are broadly similar to those of LfLFE.

The *Bilingual Literacies for Learning in Further Education* project is distinctive in two ways: in its focus on the **bilingual** nature of the literacy experiences of F.E. students and, at the same time, on the wider language policy context in which these experiences are embedded.



Positive feedback

A workshop was held recently with researchers from Anniesland and Perth Colleges in Scotland.

This was the first opportunity CBRs have had to discuss ideas emerging from across different vocational areas.

The main aim of the workshop was to discuss how to relate project data back into the FE environment. One group worked on a plan for an event to improve teaching practice by mov-

ing from a deficit model of literacy to a social practices one. Both students' and tutors' literacy practices came under the microscope, and as a result some positive ideas about how to run in-college workshops were developed.

The second group addressed the need for a wide range of organisations to be informed about the kinds of things which were emerging from the project. In Scotland the Further Education Unit and the Scottish Qualifications Authority have already invited the project to

keep them up to date.

They also designed workshops for their colleagues in their own departments, based on case studies from their own work on the project.

Both approaches will be proposed to staff development officers in the colleges with a view to running the workshops on in-service days early next year.

Furthering their education

Already changes are taking place in classrooms across the colleges.

Catering students have long bemoaned having to fill in log-books and struggle with the jargon of written assignments.

Now Sarah Wilcock, tutor and LfLFE researcher, has made a real effort to change students' experience of assessment in the Level 1 Introduction to Hospitality course. Our interviews with students last year indicated their preferences for short activities yielding instant results, as shown by their use of texting, surfing the internet, and reading magazines rather than books. In response to this, Sarah's new workbook is based on the principle of using accessible language and including only necessary information, using a variety of fonts, colours and images.

Research students last year remarked on the lack of colour in their log books, which was seen to consist of "identical sheets". One student said: "Every time you turn a page it just looks the same." Sarah has taken

them up on their suggestion of using different coloured sheets for each section, to introduce variety and to make it clear when each part of the course is completed.

Candice Satchwell

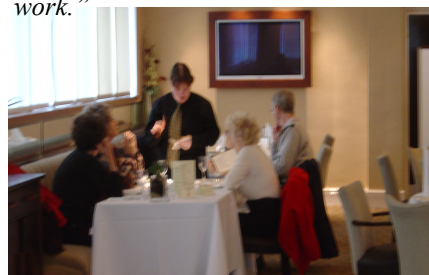
Catering students in particular tend to see themselves as practical people, interested in creating and designing – from new dishes to varied table layouts to different ways of presenting menus or publicity for the restaurant. As a caterer in the workplace they are unlikely ever to be required to write a 1000 word document. More relevant therefore is an assignment which allows students the choice of drawing pictures or creating posters to convey their information. Sarah feels that this innovation should allow students to demonstrate their full potential, which has been stifled by assignment tasks in the past, as well as providing them with access to genuinely useful literacy practices for the work place.



Researchers meet to discuss progress in Carlisle

The changes should be beneficial for tutors too. By simplifying the literacy demands of the tasks and designing them so that they are largely self-explanatory – not to mention more interesting for the students – it is to be hoped that everyone's time can be spent more efficiently. The LfLFE project data suggests that students are more likely to succeed when they can identify with what they are doing, see it as relevant to their own lives – present or future, and take ownership of their work. A summarising comment from Sarah, justifying her rewriting of the new workbook, is:

"I'm hoping there'll be less asking Sarah, and more taking ownership of their own work."



Left: Catering and hospitality students serve the public in Lancaster and Morecambe College's award winning restaurant, Coulson's.

Border literacies

Managing a research project across two countries can sometimes be a tricky business, but where there's a will, there's a way.

One solution has been to meet in Border country, roughly half way between Stirling and Lancaster universities. Pictured above are researchers from north and south during a meeting in Carlisle last January where both universities and all four FE colleges were represented.

One year on ...

The challenges and rewards of being a college-based researcher

For most of the college-based researchers (CBRs) on the LfLFE project, this was the first foray into carrying out research of this scale. None had previously been involved in ethnographic research.

During his presentation at the SERA conference in 2004 one of the college co-ordinators described his journey as *'energising and stimulating as well as time-consuming and frustrating'*.

At the CRLL conference in 2005, another co-ordinator wrote:

'Practitioner research is one way to provide the cultural immersion required by ethnographic research and the price tag that comes with that strength is one of time'.

Both of these comments came from the coordinators who worked on the project two days a week. If fitting in the workload into two days proved a problem for the co-ordinators, then it was an even bigger problem for the CBRs who had only three hours a week to contribute. Another problem reported by many of the CBRs was lack of

WHAT CBRs DID :

- * attend college team meetings and meetings at the university;
- * attend a residential;
- * collect student data from eight students using interview-based techniques focussed on a visual stimulus of either an icon map, a clock or photographs from a disposable camera;
- * run focus groups;
- * write up summaries from these interviews with students;
- * record these interviews;
- * ensure the recordings were coded and sent for transcription;
- * read transcripts and check for accuracy;
- * collect texts used in the classroom;
- * keep a reflective diary;
- * read selected journal articles to keep abreast of the concepts and methods used within the project;
- * attend conferences and contribute

June Smith

support from within their departments. One of the biggest problems was that some of their colleagues saw the project time as 'time off'. The CBRs were keen to participate but often found that their enthusiasm was not matched by other staff in their department.

One of the CBRs wrote,

'For colleges and for departments, research can seem no more than a diversion, a 'pet project' and an indulgence that is tolerated as long as it does not interfere with the 'real work'.'

For one member of staff, the lack of support manifested itself when her/his line manager checked s/he was not using college time for project work.

However the CBRs' experience has not been entirely negative. Most of them were given time to attend meetings outside the college. Two colleges are even supporting staff by paying part of their fees to attend a conference in America.

A year down the road, all of the CBRs say that being involved in the project has had a positive effect on their teaching practices. One of the CBRs said:

'I have always thought I had taken a student-centred approach to my work but this is the first time I have really listened to what my students think about the texts I use and the assessment demands within the classroom. I am going to use some of the research techniques we practised as part of my everyday teaching.'

They all feel more comfortable with the concepts and methodologies used in the project. They have moved away from early ideas that they would be blamed or found wanting. One CBR wrote in his reflective diary:

'No matter what is said in FE about reflection and support there is a perception that in practice we operate on the basis that if there is a problem then someone is at fault. It has been hard to accept that this research is not about finding fault'.

Despite the challenges and barriers, most of the CBRs have continued into the second year of the project. All of them feel they have learned a lot about the process of research and their students. They are keen to embed what they have learned and engage in more reflection, writing and dissemination.

Welcome to Tracey



We would like to say a big welcome to Tracey Kennedy of Lancaster & Morecambe College Library. Tracey has stepped in for Phase 3 of the project as College Based Research Co-ordinator.

Talking to the QCA

The Project was asked to contribute to the 14 – 19 Education and Skills debate this summer. Roz Ivanič presented some tentative recommendations for both education in general and specifically for communications teaching, based on the work of the project so far.

- ♦ Teacher trainers, policy-makers, curriculum developers and teachers of all specialised learning lines and core subjects for the 14 – 19 age range need to recognise how literacies mediate learning and the demonstration of learning.
- ♦ Specialist teachers of communication need to be trained to understand the nature and complexity of texts, of ways of using literacy in real life contexts, and of the ways in which literacy is learned through participation in purposeful activities.
- ♦ The ways in which students read, write and learn through reading and writing and learn to read and write in their out-of-college lives need to be taken into account in designing the whole curriculum and the means of assessment for all curriculum areas.
- ♦ The demands made by the specialist texts and literacy practices of each curriculum area need to be recognised, and specialist teachers of communication need to work in partnership with subject specialists at all levels to ensure that literacies are enhancing rather than hindering learning.
- ♦ The demonstration of learning in curriculum areas should be designed in such a way that it does not make unnecessary additional literacy demands of students.
- ♦ Communication should be taught, learned and assessed in the context of purposeful use.
- ♦ The demonstration of communicative competence should be rethought so that it accredits actual uses of literacy in context, rather than the ability to answer test questions (as currently in Skills for Life tests) or the ability to complete specially designed communication assignments (as currently in Key Skills portfolios).
- ♦ Curriculum areas should be seen as sites for contextualised literacy development and assessment, particularly when they are linked to workplaces and other aspects of everyday life.