

Literacies for learning



By Richard Edwards (pictured top) and Greg Mannion, Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning, Institute of Education, University of Stirling.

What makes for effective teaching? How can learner attainment be improved? What assessment practices work? These are some of the questions behind the Economic and Social Research Council's £28 million Teaching and Learning Research Programme.

What makes for effective teaching? How can learner attainment be improved? What assessment practices work? These are some of the questions behind the Economic and Social Research Council's £28 million Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) (<http://www.tlrp.org>). This Programme, now in its third phase, aims to improve the outcomes for learners of all ages in teaching and learning contexts across the UK by developing the knowledge base available to practitioners and policy makers. With the central role that FE has been given in the government's lifelong learning agenda, it is obviously crucial that some of the projects funded by the TLRP are focused on work in this sector.



This is the case with the *Literacies for Learning in Further Education (LlLFE)* project, a collaboration between two universities – Stirling and Lancaster – and four colleges – Annesland, Perth, Lancaster and Morecambe, and Preston. This project has been funded for three years from January 2004 as part of Phase 3 of the TLRP. It is one of only 12 projects to be funded from over 250 original submissions to the ESRC.

The project draws on work already done on literacy practices engaged in by people in schools, higher education and the community. However, it seeks to extend the insights gained from these studies into further education, and to focus on pedagogic interventions to support students' learning

more effectively. It builds on a pilot project, conducted by June Smith at Glenrothes College and jointly funded by the Scottish Further Education Unit and Institute of Education, University of Stirling.

Recent work on literacy has noted that there are strong links between the activities of reading and writing and the social settings in which people live, work and study. We can now say that the ways in which people use and understand reading and writing in their daily lives are dependent on different local cultures. Literacy practice is a term that has come to be used to describe the ways in which social groups and individuals are shaped by the ways in which we read and write and vice versa. The LlLFE project therefore does not focus on basic skills as such as we do not view literacy as a set of individual skills and competencies alone, but as situated in particular social contexts. Educational establishments, such as colleges, can benefit from the insights gained in this growing field of inquiry. Some of the starting points for this area of research are:

- People often make sense of life through a variety of ways of writing and reading.
- We are literate in different ways in different settings.
- Some ways of reading and writing are deemed more worthwhile, valuable and influential than others.
- Literacy practices change over time.
- Literacy practices are often learned informally.

Students engage in diverse literacy practices as the means for learning across the full range of the curriculum. As such, these practices are crucial resources for enhancing learning outcomes, access and inclusion. As students participate in courses

in different areas of the curriculum we expect their literacies will be different in different subject areas. The LlLFE project will focus on the use, refinement and diversification of literacy practices as students participate in courses in different areas of the curriculum. It will explore the literacy practices that each participant has accumulated during their life-course to date, the literacy demands of their course of study and, crucially, the potentials of the on-going developmental interaction between these literacies. In other words, we will explore the beneficial interaction between students' informal vernacular literacy practices and the formal literacies required by their college learning.

The LlLFE project will examine the diverse *literacies* that students may bring to their learning and those that their learning requires; with the diversity of practices through which positive learning outcomes are supported and developed in a range of subjects and at a range of levels. A major objective will be to uncover actual and potential overlaps and connections between these vernacular and formal literacy practices. The purpose is to identify, with colleagues working in the colleges and their students, those literacy practices that can positively mediate between the students' everyday life and their learning in the further education context.



A three-year research project of this scale is very rare, particularly in further education. Within the TLRP as

This is a large and ambitious project and the institutional and professional collaboration between further and higher education is essential in making it work.

a whole, there are about half a dozen such projects, focusing on a range of topics. In the LfLFE project a team of college and university-based researchers will first undertake a mapping of literacy practices associated with learning across a wide range of courses in each college. This will provide a context for the research and lead to the identification of the four focal curriculum areas within each college. We will be looking for some overlaps in curriculum areas to allow comparison between Scotland and England. Following this, we will examine in those curriculum areas, the relationships between the informal and formal literacies that have positive effects upon learning outcomes to a level of detail so far not attempted by research in further education. This will be used to identify and trial new directions in the ways in which the curriculum can mobilise such integrated literacy practices. This intervention will be closely evaluated in order to disseminate ways of building upon such literacies more widely across the sector.

This is a large and ambitious project and the institutional and professional collaboration between further and higher education is essential in making it work.

It is intended that the study will inform further education curriculum policy, generate

innovations in the engagement of students' literacy practices that enhance learning outcomes, and contribute to sustainable research in further education. We will be engaging in a wide variety of events to ensure colleagues on the wider field are aware of the project and of its findings. A LfLFE project website will be accessible in the near future. In the meantime, if colleagues wish to find out more or register their interest in being kept up to date on how things develop, they can contact us at r.g.edwards@stir.ac.uk or g.b.g.mannion@stir.ac.uk



Richard Edwards is Professor of Education within the Institute of Education. He is Director of the EdD programme and also teaches on the TQFE and MSc in Lifelong Learning. His research interests are in policy, lifelong learning, and identity.

Dr Greg Mannion is a lecturer within the Institute of Education, teaching mainly on the TQFE programme. His research interests include the sociological and spatial dimensions of

schooling, lifelong learning, and the emergence of learners' identities. Recent publications address issues such as school-college transition, social inclusion and adult-child relations.

Useful Links

<http://www.anniesland.ac.uk>
<http://www.esrc.ac.uk>
<http://www.external.stir.ac.uk>
<http://www.glenrothes-college.ac.uk>
<http://www.ioe.stir.ac.uk>
<http://www.lancs.ac.uk>
<http://www.lanmore.ac.uk>
<http://www.perth.ac.uk>
<http://www.preston.ac.uk/>
<http://www.sfeu.ac.uk>
<http://www.tlrp.org>

It is intended that the study will inform further education curriculum policy, generate innovations in the engagement of students' literacy practices that enhance learning outcomes, and contribute to sustainable research in further education.