

# ‘We are losing students because we are not accessing the skills they have got’

*Students who struggle with literacy in educational settings are often highly literate in other domains of life. A team of researchers, led by PROFESSOR ROZ IVANIČ and drawn from universities and colleges in England and Scotland, aims to show how these practices can be drawn upon to meet the literacy demands of further education*

College student David struggles with reading and writing. Hesitant when it comes to IT, he lacks both the confidence and the concentration to do well.

Yet, out of college, a passionate interest in cars prompts him to read widely, devouring motor manuals and magazines, searching the Internet to satisfy his interest. ‘It’s amazing,’ says David’s tutor, ‘He always seems to struggle with IT or with anything that we give him. None of the tasks, no matter how small, does he ever actually complete, even though we break the task down as far as we can. But if I ask him to find anything out about cars, he can instantly find numerous websites and dig out the smallest detail, even though in class he struggles putting little emails together.’ Angela Brzeski, tutor at Preston College and researcher on the Literacies for Learning in Further Education project, says that stories such as David’s are not unusual. Project Director Roz Ivanič, of Lancaster University’s Literacy Research Centre, argues that many failing students engage in ‘literacy practices’ in other areas of life, in their domestic, community and leisure activities, which could, potentially, be exploited in meeting the literacy demands of their courses. The interface ‘between inside and outside college’, between informal vernacular practices and those entailed in more formal institutional settings, is the focus of her team’s work.

The project – a three-year collaboration involving two universities, Stirling (where it is directed by Richard Edwards) and Lancaster, and four colleges, Anniesland (in Glasgow), Perth, Preston and Lancaster and Morecambe – will investigate what Ivanič

terms ‘the literacy practices of students in their everyday lives, practices which aren’t obvious when you meet them in the classroom’. Once that data is analysed, the researchers will compare and contrast those

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practices with the demands for reading and writing made by the courses they are studying on and by whatever work or further study the course is preparing them for. Though much broader in scope, the project builds on a pilot, conducted by June Smith –

now researcher at Stirling – at Glenrothes College and jointly funded by the Scottish Further Education Unit and the Institute of Education, University of Stirling. Like other projects funded by the Economic and Social Research Council as part of its £27 million Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), Literacies for Learning in Further Education will aim to improve actual outcomes for the students, looking at how literacy practices used outside colleges can help students be more successful on their college courses, designing and testing the impact of curriculum developments in targeted areas.

The ultimate aim is to mobilise and develop the vernacular literacy capabilities of college students like David who, evidently, have little difficulty with the literacy practices in some areas of their lives, yet who struggle to make the grade in the classroom. David’s case, says project researcher Zoe Fowler, suggests that ‘something has badly broken down’ in our efforts to reach such students. ‘David began in FE by taking a motorcar maintenance course, which, one would assume, would be ideal for him. Yet he dropped out of the course very quickly. Somehow, he couldn’t bring the literacy practice he is involved in outside of his learning to bear on that course. He’s now taking a different course, but whilst he is successful in following his hobby, he is still not being particularly successful on his course. The project is about working out why that is happening and how colleges can develop new ways of enabling students like that to be both retained for the length of the course and also to be successful within the course. That is so important. We are losing students like that purely by not being able to access

the skills they have got, by not even being aware of those skills.'

### 'Literacy practices'

The team's interest in 'literacy practices' is not, Ivanič points out, an interest in 'basic' or 'simple technical literacy skills', but in 'the literacy that is involved in studying subjects across the curriculum in further education'. 'It means recognising that the way you use literacy and what you do with literacy differs from one context to another,' she says. 'The term "literacy practices" carries the idea that literacies are different from place to place and that the context in which literacy is used greatly affects what the literacy is like, and this affects the texts, it affects the media in which the texts come, it affects the visual characteristics of texts, the material characteristics of texts and all the social interaction that goes on around texts. All those things differ enormously according to people's purposes, what they are trying to do with written language, through reading and writing.' 'It's also a question of value,' says Fowler, 'of which sorts of literacy practices are being valued and by whom they are being valued. It might well be that within our research we will find that the college values quite different literacy practices to those that the student values in what they are doing. We want to explore those different values systems.'

The first stage of the project, which

began in January 2004, has been spent working closely with colleges, interviewing staff and students and collecting and photographing written materials, to document literacy demands within FE and to decide on priority curriculum areas. Phase Two, which begins this month, will involve detailed research in 16 subject areas (four in each college) on the literacy demands of courses at two different levels in each area, and on the everyday literacy demands of four students on each of those courses. More than 100 students across the four colleges will document the literacy activities they are involved in outside college, from reading timetables to texting or chatting on-line. 'We will be working with more members of staff at the colleges – four altogether,' says Ivanič, 'Each of those is going to select four students in a relatively high-level course and four students in a relatively low-level course within their subject area and they are going to do as much research as they can with their students, depending on the circumstances. They will interview those students and possibly also go with them outside the college into some aspect of their lives outside college, some place where they work or some place where they hang out, to get a sense of what life is like for them and what the literacy activities are in those other parts of their lives.'

'It's a way of seeing what students can do,' says Fowler, 'People can do all kinds of things that they are not aware of. And I think

it's very exciting if, as researchers, we can go out into people's workplaces, see people's hobbies. It could be such a boost to someone's confidence to have someone come along and say "wait a minute, you're doing this with literacy, you're doing that with literacy, you're doing all these things", things that, perhaps, a person hasn't been aware of. So, hopefully, the individuals will benefit from being involved in this research, as well as us benefiting from being with them. It's potentially very exciting.'

'Once we have investigated the different types of literacy practice,' says Ivanič, 'We are going to look at how one can help the other, particularly how literacy practices from outside colleges can help with students being successful on their college courses.' From September 2005 the college-based and university-based researchers will collaborate to design curriculum developments in the selected areas, based on the findings from Phase Two. The impact of these innovations will then be assessed and compared to earlier student outcomes, to see 'what helps and what doesn't help to improve the experience of learners'.

### 'Not just about theorising'

The researchers will work with 'a broad definition of what counts as a successful outcome from a learning opportunity'. This, says Fowler, will involve thinking of success not just in terms of qualifications and stu-





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dent retention, but in terms of students' own notions of success. 'Retention and achievement in terms of qualifications are obviously policy priorities,' she says, 'but we are also interested in students' perspectives on their own success. That is what has motivated me to get involved in the project, the idea that we could really make a difference. It's not just about theorising, we're out working with the colleges to make a difference to the way students learn.

'What is particularly exciting is that we are working directly with the teachers, so these innovations, these initiatives are coming from the teachers' own practice, through our collaboration with them, so the initiatives evolve through the research and then are trialled through Phase Three of the research, rather than coming from a purely theoretical or policy basis.' Collaboration between college and university researchers is, Ivanič says, something to which the Lancaster Literacy Research Centre has been committed for 20 years. 'One of our key aims is to develop methods of working in partnership between college-based researchers and researchers in university, integrating professional expertise, both from professional educators and professional researchers. It's been a priority for many years, but only in the last two years have we been able to get the funding to do it in a proper way, by properly funding second-

ments for practitioners to be involved in research. If you don't properly fund it it is just lip service.'

The team felt it was important for practitioners to have a hand not only in the collection of data and arrangement of interviews, but also in the shaping of the goals and the overall design of the project. They will also play a leading role in the on-going process of dissemination, planned for every stage of the project. This, Ivanič says, will help ensure that, as the project narrows its focus to a limited range of curriculum areas, contact is maintained with interested practitioners and other staff throughout the colleges. 'We are very committed to feeding back understandings that are coming from our case study areas and keeping up the contact with people across the whole college and, through workshops, doing all we can to engage staff from other areas to see how they can apply what we are finding out in our case study areas to their own areas. The links across the college at this stage are very important for making it matter.'

'It makes us a more responsive project,' says Fowler, 'I think we are more aware of college priorities, practitioners' priorities. It's a way of ensuring that our findings are better digested. If you only disseminated at one point in time there would be a very limited take up of those findings. If it's more gradual, you can have much richer appro-

priation. And it will make the findings more influential to practice if it is done over a period of time. College teachers are very busy. You could have the most fantastic findings but if you deliver them in June when people are seeing external verifiers and completing log books, nobody has the energy to take on board what's happened.'

Although academics such as Jim Gee have written about students' literacy practices in technological settings, around computers and computer games, and reflected on the possible relationships between those practices and other literacies, there is little empirical evidence backing up what this work implies. Some studies on literacy practices have been conducted in schools and in higher education, but no one, thus far, has attempted to extend these insights into further education. 'Academics like Gee are theorising about what it might be like,' says Ivanič, 'There is an assumption that the richness of people's literacy practices in their ordinary lives ought not to be left behind when they cross the door into an institutional setting. But there isn't research to look into how that might work, certainly not in further education. And that is what our project is about. We're trying to provide empirical evidence for things which have been suggested or implied by other research, other theories of literacy.'