



## Scope of this paper

This paper is based on eight research and development projects undertaken by NRDC since its inauguration in 2002. The main focus is on the factors which motivate young people and adults to take up, persist and succeed in LLN learning.

'New Light on Literacy and Numeracy: results of the literacy and numeracy assessment in the age 34 follow-up of the 1970 Cohort Study (BC70)' (2005) The research drew on the National Child Development Study and the 1970 Cohort Study. New literacy and numeracy assessments and exercises to assess symptoms associated with dyslexia were completed as part of the 2004 surveys by all cohort members when age 34.

'Embedded teaching and learning of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL – seven case studies' (2005). The project sought to establish what is meant by embedded teaching and learning; how the vocational subjects and the LLN skills relate on such programmes and how subject teachers and LLN teachers work together.

'New ways of engaging new learners: lessons from round one of the practitioner-led research initiative' (2005) Six practitioner groups chose to address the theme from a variety of perspectives ranging across workplace, community, health, college and classroom settings and involving a variety of learners.

'Success factors in informal learning: young adults' experiences of literacy, language and numeracy' (2005) The study explored the role of informal learning and the development of LLN in young people. It focused on teaching and learning

resources, accreditation and staff training and development.

'The benefits to employers of raising workforce basic skills levels: a review of the literature' (2003) The study reviews and synthesises the existing literature on the economic and wider benefits of basic skills improvement in the workplace, focusing in particular on the benefits that accrue to employers.

"Beyond the daily application': making numeracy teaching meaningful to adult learners' (2005). This project investigated four adult numeracy classes with 80 students in total, working between entry level 1 and 2. The students attended classes on a voluntary basis, worked with very good tutors and were generally very well motivated.

'Community-focused provision in adult literacy, numeracy and language: an exploratory study' (2003) The starting point for this study was that community focused provision is under-conceptualised, under-researched and possibly insufficiently appreciated in the current policy context. The study therefore aimed to add to current understanding by searching for, and building on relevant previous research and then conducting case studies of providers in England.

'What are the motivating and demotivating factors affecting current adult numeracy students' (forthcoming) The project aims to add to current knowledge of learners and potential learners by investigating the perceptions and experiences of numeracy teaching held by adults across diverse sectors.

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## Motivation and persistence

### The impact of disadvantage on motivation, participation and persistence

- Most adults with poor literacy and numeracy skills learn to cope; unless pressed to reappraise their lives, they are unlikely to take up education provision.
- Adults who are aware of their needs are more likely to be motivated to improve their skills than those who do not.

### Understanding learners' lives to help motivate them

- Learners' motives are complex and it can take time for their awareness and understanding to form and evolve.

### Embedding LLN in vocational learning

- Well-resourced and well-taught vocational courses in which LLN learning is embedded can motivate learners, offering them both new practical skills and a professional identity.
- Teachers' motivation towards embedded learning is key to its success.

### Characteristics and behaviours that help practitioners motivate adults

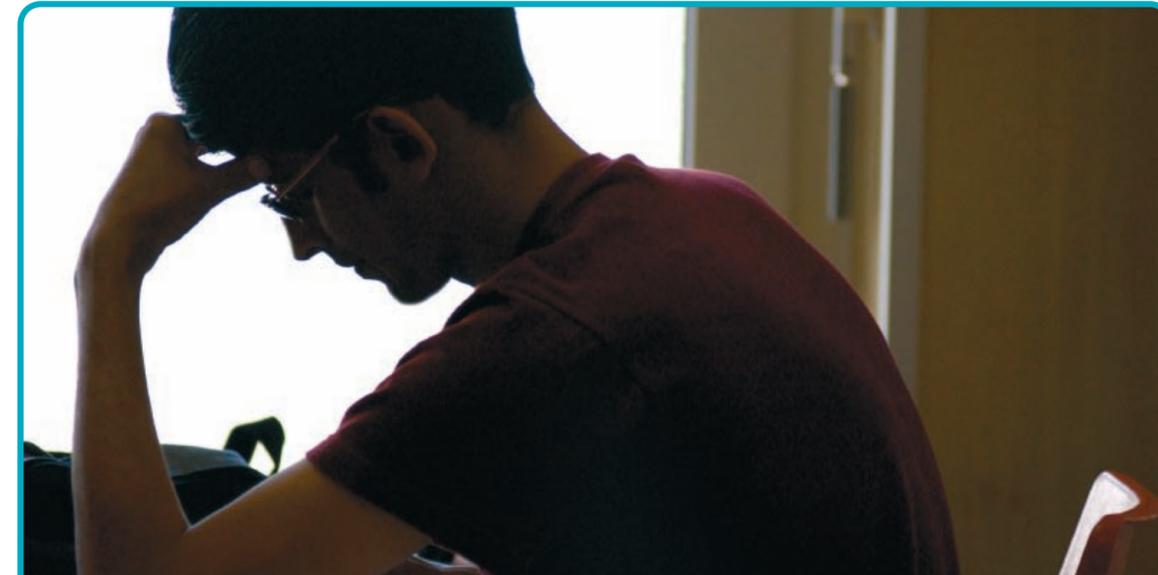
- Practitioners' characteristics and behaviours are key to helping engage, motivate and sustain LLN learners.
- Good provision roots learning in the lives and interests of learners.
- Courses need to be flexible, so learners can join at any time, get support when they can't attend and support when they return.

### Motivation, numeracy and mathematics

- For some learners, the motivation to attend numeracy classes stems from the quality of engagement in learning activities, rather than its usefulness outside the classroom.

### Motivating employees in learning, through and at work

- Motivating employees to learn at work is mediated by employers.
- The provision of training by employers actually lowers the risk of workers leaving, rather than increasing it.
- Union Learning Representatives have a key role in raising participation and retention rates.



Skills for Life Quality Initiative  
RESEARCH RESOURCES

## Motivation and persistence

This is one of a series of publications produced under the LSC Skills for Life Quality Initiative to provide up-to-date summaries of research findings from the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) in each of the following areas:

- Numeracy
- Working with young adults
- Embedded teaching and learning
- Motivation and persistence
- Literacy, language, numeracy and health
- Working with young offenders
- Development through practitioner research
- Teacher education

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# Introduction

This paper summarises key messages and themes from NRDC's research and development work on motivation and persistence. Practitioners and researchers have long been aware of the affective as well as cognitive element of learning. Motivation and persistence operate in a continuum that includes, at one end, individuals' awareness of their skills' needs and the confidence required to enrol on a course, and, at the other end, a preparedness to engage in learning, to persist and succeed.

Success through learning - skilfully supported by practitioners, who invest time and sensitivity in discovering learners' reasons and motivations for learning - can create learners' confidence, thereby reinforcing learner motivation and persistence. Persistence is associated with resilience: a concept key to the *Every Child Matters* policy. Resilience describes the capability of individuals and families to cope with and withstand the often multiple disadvantages they experience in their day-to-day lives.

Individuals who experience multiple disadvantages are also those with the poorest skills levels. The pressures and exigencies of learners' lives can undermine the continuous attendance traditionally regarded as essential to improving skills levels. Learner persistence studies in the United States show that few learners achieve the attendance in a year necessary to progress a level. Motivation and persistence for such learners may mean dipping in and out of provision, actively deploying the resources available to them to develop and utilise their skills.

**The pressures and exigencies of learners' lives can undermine the continuous attendance traditionally regarded as essential to improving skills levels.**

## What the research shows

### The impact of disadvantage on motivation, participation and persistence

Multiple disadvantage and its effects may depress individual potential for achievement and weaken motivation and persistence. Encouraging participation in courses for adults at entry level 2 means acknowledging the highly disadvantaged contexts in which many such adults' lives are lived. Substantial differences in life chances, quality of life and social inclusion are evident between individuals at or below entry level 2 compared with others at higher levels of literacy and numeracy. Entry level 2 skills are associated with a lack of qualifications, poor labour market experience and prospects, poor material and financial circumstances, poor health prospects and a lack of social and political participation.

Gender differences are also marked. Men in their mid 30s with poor skills are more likely to lead a single life without children. Women with poor skills are also likely to be without a partner but are more typically parents, often with large families. Entry level performance limits full participation in mainstream adult life for a substantial minority of people. This applies not only to their own disadvantaged status in adulthood but in the extent to which their difficulties are passed on to their children. Embedding Skills for Life learning in family processes through 'family learning' can motivate parents by offering them the opportunity to help their children and to learn themselves.

A further benefit of family learning is that it can help to raise awareness among parents of their own skills needs. Those adults who acknowledge that they have skills problems are far more likely to be motivated to improve their skills than those who do not. Once awareness of having basic skills needs is triggered, interest in improvement tends to follow. It is likely that most adults with poor literacy and numeracy skills learn to cope, drawing on family and other community resources to help them sort out issues they cannot deal with unaided. This means that unless something happens that leads them to re-appraise their lives, such as having a child, facing unemployment, or a need to retrain, they are unlikely to have much incentive to take up education provision to improve their skills.

Without such awareness, the take-up of courses among those who need them most will remain difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Motivating learners' interest and developing curricula that best match their needs and help turn round their life chances remains a major policy and research challenge.

Clear indications are emerging of virtuous (and vicious) circles in which literacy or numeracy enhancement (or loss) plays a crucial

part. Skills enhancement is more likely to open up opportunities and improve self confidence, which is reflected in the wide range of positive life outcomes associated with it. Understanding the socio-economic and relational context in which learners are located and how it is changing is crucial to understanding how to meet their learning needs.

The pressures and exigencies of learners' lives can undermine the continuous attendance traditionally regarded as essential to improving their skills levels. Learner persistence studies in the United States suggest that learners should attend between 100 to 150 hours a year in order to progress one level within the American General Education Diploma (GED). That could imply that approximately 150-200 hours attendance is required of adult learners seeking to improve by one level within the Skills for Life qualifications framework. Motivation and persistence for such learners may mean dipping in and out of provision, deploying the resources available to them to develop and utilise their skills. Impact for such learners might be better evaluated in terms of shorter-term changes in literacy and numeracy practices or by longer-term changes in literacy proficiency.

### Understanding learners' lives helps practitioners motivate them

Detailed qualitative accounts of learners' lives – their identity, background and circumstances - can provide rich evidence for explaining of learners' motivation, preferences and trajectories. Learning is inextricably linked to individuals' identities. Students' biographical contexts and experiences can be the most important resources they bring to learning. It is therefore critical for teachers to get to know their learners as well as possible. Learners' motives are generally complex and multiple and it can take time for their awareness and understanding to form and evolve. These understandings can resource and inform future learning.

Learners may report changes in their identities as a result of learning. Increase in confidence is the most commonly reported effect. This may have wider situational benefits at an individual or community level, resulting in greater independence and autonomy and the development of cultural capital. An increase in confidence can impact on learners' levels of attainment, their attitudes to learning, their aspirations and their general social interactions. Research carried out by practitioners with socially excluded people suggests that a level of confidence is needed to participate in learning. Confidence can be both a pre-condition and a by-product of learning.

Meaningful participation in learning can bring a new sense of purpose, participation and of belonging to a community, social, intellectual and/or professional. It also has the power to change who people think they are. Despite being constrained by surrounding structures, such as social class, people are capable of developing new dispositions to learning and new aspirations. The reverse is also true: because individual agency and the scope for change always occur in surrounding structures, these can both enable and constrain action.

### Embedding LLN in vocational learning

Well-resourced and well-taught vocational courses in which LLN learning is embedded can motivate learners, offering them both new practical skills and professional identities. For young people, this identity often contrasts to their former experience as 'school pupils'. Teachers are both teachers and mentors. Learners are both 'doing things' and understanding the culture of their chosen jobs – the behaviour, values and ways of communicating - for example as joiners or as childcare workers. Learners are socialised into both vocational skills and the LLN they require to be a competent member of the group.

Vocational teachers tend to have a natural legitimacy in the eyes of learners. They represent the role to which the learner aspires. The LLN teacher may lack this immediate legitimacy because their role is one of supporting and enabling. Adult learners, who need help developing their English language or rediscovering skills learned long ago at school, are more likely than younger learners to recognise the value of their LLN teachers to their aspirations.

A defining characteristic of embedded provision is that the processes of LLN learning and organisation have been re-designed to fit the vocational aspirations and objectives of learners on particular programmes. There has to be a degree of flexibility provided throughout the course to enable this to happen. The approach is strongly learner-centred.

LLN learning often takes place when the speaking, listening, reading, writing or calculating is directly linked to a practical task. This is particularly obvious in observations of numeracy learning.

There are many practical tasks in construction and engineering which cannot be undertaken without calculation, measurement and estimation as integral parts of the process. It is reasonable to surmise that extra help with these processes feels more useful to a mathematical learner when she or he is engaged on a task than when in a classroom and at a separate time.

Teacher motivation towards embedded learning is key to its success. Successful teams take time to work and plan together and are willing to learn from one another. Vocational teachers are willing to try to understand the importance of LLN for their learners and modify their classroom organisation and practice to reflect this. The LLN teachers are willing to learn about the vocational area and how to provide effective LLN support for learners in terms of both teaching approaches and content.

The relationship between the vocational and the LLN areas is a dynamic one, changing over the period of a course. This means the relationship between the vocational and the LLN teachers needs to be a flexible one, with recognition of respective priorities at any one time on the course. These issues have implications for staff development. Teachers, like learners, may also benefit from situated/apprenticeship learning. Staff need time to work developmentally as a team, including extended opportunities for informal learning and learning from one another.

### Characteristics and behaviours that help practitioners engage, motivate and sustain adults in learning

Practitioners' characteristics and behaviours are key to helping engage, motivate and sustain LLN learners. Personal qualities in teachers such as informality, empathy and patience are as important as technical competence. For some learners, forming a supportive relationship is a pre-requisite for learning. Once a learners' motivation and confidence are established, learners are better able to sustain and persist in their learning.

Providers with a community focus translate their values into practical approaches to foster motivation. Such providers are keen to root learning in the lives and interests of learners. Their holistic concern with learners extends to the way learning is provided, with tutors adapting learning plans to meet learners' requirements and encouraging them to develop at their own pace.

Courses are flexible and learners need to be able to join at any time, get support for 'self-study' when they cannot attend or when they return after a time away. Work with groups who are homeless, or have substance or alcohol difficulties especially need to have this quality. Such providers tend to be 'canny with the money', finding ways in which to continue to engage in developmental, innovative and risky activity with partners able to engage the hardest to reach. Multi-agency approaches support vulnerable groups of learners.

### Motivation, numeracy and mathematics

Learners' motivations for attending numeracy or maths classes vary and often overlap. For some there are intrinsic motivations: they attend classes in order to prove something to themselves and also to significant others e.g. partners or children. Having 'failed' at school they want to demonstrate that they have the requisite intellectual capacity and can stay the course and succeed. Mathematics is seen as a signifier of intelligence and they want to enter and participate in what they see as being an esoteric and privileged practice. They want to understand mathematical systems, principles and underlying relationships.

Others have more instrumental motivations. They want to learn in order to be able to tackle financial transactions more effectively or to assist with specific everyday activities, which they seek to carry out themselves without relying on others. Although able to get by, achieving a higher level of competence enables such learners to function more confidently and effectively and to participate more fully in the world. The majority of learners at Levels 1 and 2 report that their primary reason for learning is to obtain a specific qualification that will increase their employment options.

Numeracy teaching generally becomes more meaningful to students when it is related to their own purposes and needs and when they can see an intrinsic reason for learning. Accordingly, the meaningfulness of numeracy teaching for an individual is linked to the individual's motivation. Although desirable for teachers to relate their teaching to students' situational contexts and their everyday numeracy and literacy practices, tailoring content to students' contexts can sometimes conflict with requirements to deliver whole class teaching.

For some learners, the motivation to attend numeracy classes subsists in the quality of engagement they experience with the activity. It is this that makes mathematics seem real and meaningful, rather than its usefulness and application outside the classroom. Pure or abstract problems or areas of mathematics, such as algebra, can be very real in terms of the interest and commitment they engender in learners.

### Motivating employees in learning, through and at work

Motivating employees in learning through and at work is best mediated by the employer. Recent work with employers and employees highlights the importance of the manager's role in facilitating or blocking learning opportunities for employees. Although this can be mitigated by working sensitively and creatively with employers and employees to develop learning models that are motivating and fit their needs. Some managers perceive tensions between their operational and training roles. Time spent on learning support could affect their ability to meet deadlines. Healthcare assistant learners are especially vulnerable to organisational cultural and working conditions, although learning participation increased their confidence and skills in reading and writing at work and home.

There is a scarcity of studies on the effects of basic skills training in the workplace. Far more evidence is available on training in general and its benefits for employers and employees more generally. There is robust evidence that poor numeracy and

literacy skills have adverse effects on the earnings and employment prospects of individuals. Although this might suggest that improvements in basic skills leads to an improvement in earnings, there is little direct evidence of such results.

Evidence suggests that the provision of training by employers actually lowers the risk of workers leaving, rather than increasing it. It may be that the provision of training actually helps to improve the motivation of the workforce. Private and public sector employees who had received five days or more training in the preceding twelve months were more committed to their organisations, than those who had not. However no such evidence currently exists to link these findings to the provision of basic skills.

Union Learning Representatives have a key role in raising participation and retention rates. Literacy, numeracy and ESOL courses are more likely to be successful if trade unions are actively involved in companies and organisations where these are present. Union Learning Representatives play an important in the process of learner recruitment and retention once a course has started. They are trusted by company employees, and are well placed to resolve emerging difficulties with the organisation of training courses.