

Literacy – Fundamental to Economic Development

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SUMMARY

This paper reflects on experiences in foundation learning through open and distance learning (ODL), in order to encourage similar developments where there is no strong structure for learning. The philosophy and innovative delivery model are explored, with both the positive and negative results and learnings gained from experience, and the effect of improved literacy within broader based foundation skills on both the individual and their employers. Also shown is the economic development and empowerment one programme engendered amongst many of its graduates, and plans for the future of ODL adult literacy and numeracy education in New Zealand (NZ).

The flexibility and scalability of the delivery model means that similar literacy programmes can feasibly be deployed across many societies, and not just in NZ.

BACKGROUND

New Zealand policy has increasingly acknowledged the importance of literacy to economic development since the early 1990s. Community based initiatives for adult literacy learning, begun in the 1980s, slowly gained momentum, and NZ participation in the 1996 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), sponsored by the OECD, was pivotal to the development of government policy for adult literacy and numeracy. This showed that approximately a fifth of the population were operating at the lowest level of literacy and numeracy, and in total over a third of the population were at the lowest two levels. As a result, government policy since the late 1990s has increasingly seen adult literacy, numeracy and language (LNL) learning being promoted within both the workforce and the general population.

By 2001, the NZ government was acknowledging the crucial role improved levels of literacy play in both individuals' and the national economic development; "High levels of adult literacy are critical for the transformation and modernisation of the New Zealand economy, and the transition to a knowledge society" (Ministry of Education, 2001, p4). By 2006, adult literacy was part of government's tertiary education policy; "Adult foundation skills, especially literacy, numeracy and language, remain a priority. A lack of literacy, numeracy and language skills in the workforce impedes productivity and will, in the long run, impede economic growth. People with increased literacy, numeracy and language skills will generally have improved employment options and are able to adapt to changes in their employment environment." (Ministry of Education, 2006, p22)

LITERACY AND ODL DELIVERY PHILOSOPHY

The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand (OP) has integrated LNL into a government-funded 12-month generic work and life skills programme, as well as providing a specific literacy and numeracy qualification. The delivery philosophy for these programmes acknowledges the need for person-to-person support for literacy and foundation learners.

Integrated literacy

A foundation skills programme (FSP) combines communications skills, personal discipline and development, relationship skills, teamwork abilities and basic numeracy and computing skills with work skills. Successful learners attain both an Open Polytechnic certificate and a standards based national qualification for those entering or re-entering the workforce. LNL is integrated into this programme although explicit literacy teaching only occurs as part of support for a few of the standards assessments.

With the experience of the FSP, and greater exposure to best practice teaching of literacy and numeracy, a specific foundation level LNL certificate has been developed.

Delivery support – a key element

Both programmes are primarily print based with workbooks, information booklets and video resources, supported by a coach who regularly contacts learners to mentor, support and assess. The delivery model also encompasses knowledgeable contact centre staff, to motivate and support students in their general progress through the programme and put them into immediate contact with the coach for specific teaching points. A student support coordinator for those with special needs provides additional one-on-one phone support and materials for students with physical, intellectual or learning disabilities.

The coach is crucial to the learning achieved, enabling ODL to be much more accessible to those who need such a programme. Learner feedback and evaluation comments repeatedly stress the value of their coach, the supportive nature of this contact and the fact that they would not have completed the programme without their coach. Much more than the traditional role of a distance learning tutor, the coach develops the equivalent of individual learning plans with each student, visits them in their home or at a convenient location, contacts them by email and phone. They are available to answer questions regarding course content and assessment, motivate and encourage, as well as supplying both formative and summative assessment feedback.

A learner's own words of appreciation – "My coach was very encouraging, and really supportive, gave great insight to the course" (Student A comment).

The following is from a deaf student, who had support from our special needs coordinator as well as her coach throughout her programme. "It made a huge difference having a coach to support, encourage and motivate me. As the course progressed, I found some of the work difficult. ... I decided it was just too hard and pushed [it] away, but that didn't happen for long, as either yourself [support coordinator] would text me 'how's it going?' or [my coach] would text to remind me she was coming soon to visit. Having being able to talk through the hard stuff with her it didn't seem hard after all. I was able to get a clearer understanding and finish the required work. That was awesome." (Student B comment)

This supports the findings of researchers in the field of foundation learning; "Tutors should make listening to learners, and gaining knowledge of learners' lives, motivations, interests and capabilities, the cornerstone of their pedagogy" (Ivanic et al, 2006, p8).

Multi medial support

As an ODL institution, the OP faced additional challenges in introducing the foundation skills of literacy and numeracy into its programme portfolio, as there is still very little research internationally on teaching literacy through ODL. What is available emphasises the importance of e-learning and interactive participation for learners, with ODL programmes in literacy usually online (for example, the *Move On* and *Move On Up* programmes in the UK).

OP foundation learning programmes are not primarily online, but use online communication and forum access as a means of peer support, coach support and assignment submission, rather than teaching. This is intentional, as there are still learners who do not have immediate access to online facilities and whose learning would be hindered if the teaching were primarily via a medium where they had to continually log on at a local library or community centre. Learning materials are therefore a combination of quality print-based workbooks, booklets and third-party pamphlets, alongside DVD and CD reinforcement.

DVD (or video) portrayals of discussion classes and concepts covered in the print materials make the course more accessible to those learners whose main learning style is visual, as

well as providing auditory support for the written materials. The variety of activities in the workbooks, and suggested on the DVD, help kinaesthetic learners.

The newer LNL programme has specific audio and visual DVD reinforcement of the literacy strategies covered in the print-based material. It is well understood that traditional print-based ODL will not work for students whose very needs are the improvement of their reading ability. Alongside the audio visual support and the teaching support of the coach, learners are also encouraged to access some of the high quality international websites for practice in the skills they are gaining, but no learner will be disadvantaged in the programme through lack of immediate online access.

Learner-centric and flexible programmes and materials

All materials, support, assessment and processes are flexible and responsive to individual learner needs. As well as the one-on-one coach support, all activities and formative and summative assessment exercises reflect the programme developers' awareness of accelerated learning techniques and the importance of meeting the learner's own requirements.

The majority of programme content is contextualised for the target market, with workforce, caring or community based scenarios throughout. It is thus easily adaptable and scalable. Where practical, authentic assessment is encouraged – for example, in the literacy “form filling tasks” learners are asked to provide real applications they need to fill in. However, sometimes a well developed artificial scenario is preferable to an authentic assessment, when the literacy demands of the latter are far in excess of the foundation level literacy learner.

Recent research suggests that [adults] are most motivated when their learning involves drawing on past experience, when learning is located in the context of their own lives, when it is applied to real problems and when they have choice and control over what they learn (OECD, 2004). An ongoing New Zealand project looking at literacy needs within employment has identified the wider 'literacy needs' of the workforce as plus teamwork, time management, communications skills and computer skills. It identifies the importance of “lifelong learning in functional and multiple literacies both before and within employment.” (Sligo et al, 2006, p11)

Marketing – hitting the right target

Usually, the OP markets its brand and suite of programmes to generally motivated individuals who have already recognised their need of specific skills or qualifications for either employment or personal circumstances and do not want to attend a contact institution. It was recognised that the foundation programmes needed a totally different approach to appeal to the demographic and type of student being aimed at. Therefore, programme-specific marketing is targeted at learners who are not aware that they need to study, who need to be motivated to study through the marketing. A number of strategies have been developed to date, the most successful being to use actual students (rather than actors) reporting the transformational outcomes they have achieved on the FSP.

The target market for the FSP is adult New Zealanders with little or no secondary school qualifications and minimal tertiary education exposure. Specifically, unemployed and low income workers gain entry level qualifications to improve their employability and their productivity in the workforce.

The LNL programme is targeted at a similar market. In addition, the Pasifika community (New Zealand residents and citizens originally from the Pacific Islands) is a focus of niche marketing. New Zealand has large Cook Islands, Samoan and Tongan communities, and for many of the smaller Pacific Islands there are more Islanders resident in New Zealand than domiciled back 'home'. The past two generations have seen many Pacific people move from a rural-based subsistence lifestyle in the Islands to an urban-based cash economy in New Zealand and other English-speaking countries, with Auckland accommodating the largest urban population of Pasifika in the world. Pasifika need diverse foundation skills education in a range of contexts – pre-employment, employment and community settings (Gibbs, 2008).

THE RESULTS AND LEARNINGS FROM THE PROGRAMME

Student Outcomes

The learner outcomes from the FSP are far wider than simply attainment of the two qualifications. Benefits to worker productivity and family and community participation and relationships through increased confidence and self-esteem are huge, documented from individual students, community workers and employers.

“I would like to continue with my studying with The Open Polytechnic.... My dream is to open my own business and run it from home. Since doing the course, this dream has been set out in detail and it could become a reality.” (Student C comment)

Completion and retention rates compare very favourably with NZ national rates for similar level programmes:

OP Retention and Completion - FSP	NZ Ministry of Education Retention and Completion Statistics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2007 FSP completion rate (Level 1 certificates) – 40% and 31% respectively for the OP and national certificates, both in 12 months 2007 FSP retention rate (Level 1 certificate) – 72% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2002-2006 Completion rates for Level 1-3 certificates – 19% after 1 year 36% within 5 year time frame 2002-2006 Retention rates for Level 1-3 certificates – 42%

Table 1: FSP completion and retention compared to NZ Ministry of Education rates

Independent research shows positive employment and studying outcomes of the FSP. The following indicate the change from prior to FSP study to completion of FSP study:

- 65% of those looking for work, in work upon completion
- 26% of those not studying full-time, starting another ODL programme on completion
- 23% of those not studying part-time, starting another ODL programme on completion
- 38% of those unemployed or on a benefit, working after completion.

“Thank you for the course. I have gone on to train to become a Counsellor.” (Student D comment)

This research also found:

- 82% of those who do not complete the programme find it beneficial and go on to recommend it to others
- of those who reached the last third of the programme, 56% staircased to higher study, and many improved their employment situation, either through entering the workforce, or through increasing part-time to full-time hours.

Anecdotally, a number also improved their employment prospects with an existing employer, although there are no hard statistics around this.

What has been learnt

The nature of continuous improvement is to always do better, and new programme developments have built on experiences to date. In the future, increased flexibility in both sequence of study and length of study will be offered, as the 12-month study time proved too short for some and too long for others. Expanding the variety of coach contact scenarios, and offering the option to be part of a peer support learning group meeting in a convenient and non-threatening environment are also planned. Clarity of assessment and greater integration of learning and assessment are responses to both the Pasifika marketing and to student and coach feedback to date.

The aim of all these changes is to improve the learner experience.

The Pasifika community, in particular, has indicated that they need a literacy and numeracy programme which is flexible and related to both the strong sense of community and family within Pasifika and to the requirements of the workplace. Currently in NZ Pasifika are under represented in literacy programmes, which is of concern as they are more likely to be at IALS Levels 1 and 2 (Benseman & Sutton, 2007). Building on research and practice at Auckland University, it is intended to provide a safe study environment in various Pasifika community centres where learners can drop-in, study, talk to peers about their studies, meet their coach and generally be supported in a familiar environment (Sauni, 2006). The three 'critical micro-components' for Pasifika success identified by Sauni are being addressed, through ensuring clarity of assignment (both written and via the coach), moving towards intensive support through the community centres, and providing the scene for social interaction geared towards supporting Pasifika success (Sauni, 2006).

BENEFITS OF LITERACY IMPROVEMENT TO A NATION

Analysis of the cost benefits of the FSP programme carried out by independent researchers identified that for every \$1.00 spent on student funding by government, the FSP offered some \$4.20 in net benefits to society and the economy, whilst a degree course offers some \$2.08 (Castalia Strategic Advisors, 2005). This benefit is compounded by the fact that the FSP is a 12-month programme and a degree lasts three years.

Castalia go on to comment, 'With growing levels of education in advanced economies, there is a danger of stigmatisation and economic and social isolation for those with low or no educational qualifications.' (Castalia Strategic Advisors, 2005, p2) This highlights the two-fold nature of literacy improvement's affect on development – for both an individual and their society's economy.

Nationally, in 1995, those at the bottom of the literacy scale in New Zealand comprised 66% of the short-term unemployed and 85% of the long term unemployed. (Statistics, NZ, 2003) Recognising this, the NZ government firmly places LNL within its priorities. At the same time, the government have established a new initiative, "Upskilling the Workforce", to support businesses and their employees to build foundation skills of reading, writing, maths skills, problem solving and communicating well in the workplace (Benseman and Sutton, 2007).

Previously, research by Workbase, The National Centre for Workplace Literacy and Language, indicated that NZ employers do not always recognise the scope and range of literacy skills inherent in their workers' jobs, and many do not make the link between reading, writing or numeracy skills and problems such as wastage and re-work (Workbase, 2006). The joint literacy and employer initiative in Wanganui echoed this, and also confirmed the need for foundation skills education amongst the workforce in companies of all sizes (Sligo et al, 2006). Industry Training Organisations (ITOs) have also reported that many employers are not aware of the links between literacy, job performance and productivity. (ITOs are employer-driven, New Zealand's overarching industry sector education bodies, funded by government and industry sectors.) Since 2000, ITOs have increasingly helped companies identify LNL issues and set up literacy programmes.

One employer who proposed that the FSP be incorporated into his organisation's job-specific training did so as a result of the productivity and attitudinal improvements he saw from employees who had completed the programme independently. He commented, "As an employer, I have provided such study [similar to the FSP] for my employees and have seen amazing results of confidence and positive attitude changes. These certificates provide a positive and re-enforcement of confidence, self-esteem and maturity not only for the betterment of the individual but for society as a whole."

As noted under student outcomes, learners' progress from unemployment to full- and part-time work from the start of their studies to completing the programme is a good indication of their personal economic development. Those who progress to further levels of study will also undoubtedly improve their and their families' economic circumstances long term.

CONCLUSION

Learners have been provided with an innovative ODL programme that has increased their employability, their self-esteem and their literacy and numeracy skills.

A great deal has been learnt since the first student enrolled in the FSP; that the following are critical to the success of delivering literacy and foundation skills through ODL:

- mentoring from a qualified and empathetic coach to assist foundation learners to achieve
- holistic student support, from the moment of initial marketing through student administration processes via a knowledgeable voice at the end of the phone
- accessible and contextualised learning materials.

Opportunities presented to upskill OP staff with the latest developments in literacy, numeracy and language teaching and learning have been embraced.

There are a significant number of successful learners (10,000+ graduates over three-and-half years) who are now contributing more positively to the NZ economy, their families and their communities than before they started their FSP studies.

New developments are in hand to address specifically the literacy needs of the lowest level respondents to the IALS survey. These will continue to provide flexible, learner-centric programmes and contextualised relevance.

Finally, it is important to understand that quality ODL provision for LNL learning has the potential to revolutionise learner experience and economic opportunity wherever lack of these foundation skills prevents full economic and social participation in society.

The flexibility and scalability of the delivery model means that similarly designed and delivered literacy programmes are feasible across many societies, and not just for the New Zealand population who have been identified by the IALS survey as needing literacy education.

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