Adult Learners' Lives project: setting the scene
Progress report, April 2004

David Barton, Roz Ivanic, Yvon Appleby, Rachel Hodge and Karin Tusting
With additional contributions by Ganiyu Agbaje, Dianne Beck, Gill Burgess, Gemma Davies, Kath Gilbert, Russ Hodson, Andrew Hudson, Uta Papen, Lydia Tseng, Anita Wilson and Carol Woods

Literacy Research Centre, Lancaster University
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Executive summary

This report covers activities on the Adult Learners’ Lives project from September 2002 to June 2003. It provides an overview of activities at the three case study sites, Blackburn, Lancaster and Liverpool including negotiating access to the sites and establishing the relationships for the research. Sections of the report cover the data which has been collected in the three sites and the initial data analysis. The Teacher-Researcher programme has been an essential part of the project and the process of setting up and running this is described in detail, along with initial reports of the six projects, covering Literacy, Numeracy and ESOL, which the teacher-researchers have been carrying out. In the first phases of the project we carried out focused reviews of topics which fed into and informed the research. Summaries of these reports are provided. Firstly, we surveyed the earlier ethnographies of literacy which have been carried out. Secondly, we investigated the term informal learning, which is central to our project. We also reviewed work on retention and achievement, key concepts in *Skills for Life*. For the teaching and learning part of the project we completed a review of the literature on the relation of teaching and learning. In addition, we focused on a specific social issue, the relation of literacy and health. Finally, we were also able to link up with work in prisons and carry out a small questionnaire study into ESOL provision in prisons. The report also discusses: overall themes which have arisen in the first year of the research; the approach to impact which is being taken; and future plans. Further details on specific aspects of the project are provided in the appendices, including a list of impact activities.

This is an interim report covering a wide range of initial activity. These are some of the initial findings from the research:

- Relationships matter in learning, including teacher/student and student/student relationships, also the networks of support learners are part of.
- Learning environments often offer structure and stability in learners’ lives.
- Being in control is a key motivation for learning.
- Health is often a barrier to learning, both physical and mental health.
- The need to recognise small gains in LLN and the wider benefits to the learners.
- There is a complex relationship between teaching and learning: learners don’t learn what teachers teach.
- There needs to be more interagency response to the social and learning needs of students seeking asylum.
- In ESOL classes learners often express satisfaction with their classes, but issues remain, including needing more free use of language and “bringing the outside in”.
- Involving teachers in research projects can have great impact, on the teachers’ professional development, on the culture of their work-places and on regional networks.
Section 1
The first year of the Adult Learners’ Lives project

1.1 Introduction

The NRDC Adult Learners’ Lives project started in September 2002. It is a detailed longitudinal study of learners’ lives. The aim is to understand the connections that adults make between learning and their everyday lives. The research is addressing questions about the significance of language, literacy and numeracy in the lives of adults who have difficulties, including their experience of learning programmes; it is exploring the relation between how people deal with difficulties and their classroom experiences, investigating the ways in which factors related to provision interface with factors related to the learners. In the classroom we are looking at links between teaching and learning, participation, motivation and persistence. We are interested to know what motivates and engages adult learners. Through collaborative research we aim to identify teaching and learning strategies that are more effective at encouraging and supporting adult basic skills.

The key achievements of the first phase of this longitudinal study are:

- Detailed understanding of the three research sites which provides a strong platform for the following years.
- A broad database forming the foundation for reports on the uptake of learning opportunities due later in the year.
- A set of reviews which can inform the project and this area of research more generally.
- The development of a coherent programme of teacher-research.
- A strong presence locally and regionally which can form the basis for effective impact.

1.2 Structure of this report

This report covers activities on the Adult Learners’ Lives project from September 2002 to June 2003. The next subsection, Section 1.3, provides an overview of activities. Section 2 provides background on the three case study sites. An essential first step was negotiating access to the sites and establishing the relationships for the research. This is described in Section 3, which also describes the data which was collected in the three sites and the initial data analysis. The Teacher-Researcher programme has been an essential part of the project and the process of setting up and running this has been an essential part of the study, as described in Section 4. Another starting point was four reviews which we carried out in areas salient to the project. These are summarised in Section 5. The final section discusses themes which have arisen in the first year of the research, the approach to impact which is being taken and future plans. Further details on specific aspects of the project are provided in the appendices.
1.3 Summary of activities September 2002 – June 2003

After extensive negotiation we established core sites in three contrasting cities: Lancaster, Liverpool and Blackburn. We began initial mapping of learning provision in these cities and commissioned a small demographic comparison. We organised practitioner involvement in the project including meeting with groups of practitioners in the three cities and establishing a programme of teacher-researchers. This included working out principles of teacher research. We are now working closely with two teacher-researchers based in Lancaster Adult College, two based in Liverpool Community College, one in Blackburn College and one in nearby Accrington and Rossendale College. We linked into their professional development by contributing to the research training course they received and by supporting them in their colleges. We also appointed advocates in each of the colleges to ensure good liaison and impact of our research within the colleges.

The detailed ethnographic study in the three sites began with initial mapping. In all three sites we began work on the teaching and learning aspects of the project by working with basic skills classes. As part of the initial phase we have written reviews of ethnographic studies, of motivation and persistence, of informal learning, of literacy and health, of the research on the relation of teaching and learning and have carried out a small study of ESOL provision in prisons.

The team meets weekly and we have held four half-day retreats to develop our work and a two-day retreat with the six teacher-researchers to develop the analysis. We have been involved in the planning meetings for the North West Skills for Life Research Forum and we contributed five workshops on aspects of involving practitioners in research and developing a regional research agenda to the initial North West Skills for Life Research Conference in February. We also presented five papers on evidence at the NRDC International Conference in March (Appendix 1). We presented a discussion paper at the BERA SIG on lifelong learning, also in March. We contributed a workshop to the RaPAL (Research and practice in adult literacy) Conference in June. Within the university we contributed to the launch of the Lancaster Literacy Research Centre in October, we made a presentation at a meeting of the University Council and our work has been featured in local newspapers and radio, as well as in the annual report of the university.

In February we hosted NRDC researchers from all national projects for a day devoted to methodology; through this we established links with researchers on other projects which we are pursuing. We have close links with the NRDC ESOL case study project, we developed small sub-projects on prisons and on health and we participate in the cross-centre NRDC numeracy group.

We have developed into an effective research team. David Barton has overall direction of the project. He is also responsible for the everyday life aspect of the project, for the development of the Ethnographic Resource and for links with other NRDC projects. Roz Ivanic is a co-director of the project and is responsible for the teaching and learning aspect of the work, as well as the overall co-ordination of the teacher-researchers. Yvon Appleby is responsible for the Liverpool site; she also provides an overview of all three sites, is developing the work-place aspect of the work and co-ordinates the impact and communication strategy. Rachel Hodge is responsible for the Blackburn site and for the ESOL aspects of the project, including linking with the NRDC ESOL case study. Karin Tusting is responsible for the Lancaster site and is pursuing particular interests in numeracy and in working with people with learning difficulties and disabilities. Systems of data management are being developed by Jessica Abrahams, who also organises the translation and transcription activities.
Section 2:  
The case study sites

Three sites in the North West of England were selected as case study sites for the Adult Learners' Lives research. Blackburn, Lancaster and Liverpool were chosen as different enough to each other to provide populations of different size, composition and background. Each has a distinct economic and social base and each has a individual history and identity. Lancaster was selected as a small geographically independent city with a relatively stable population. It is the smallest and least ‘deprived’ of our three case study sites. Blackburn has a higher than average ethnic minority population of South Asian origin and has felt the impact of recent refugee and asylum seekers’ dispersal policy. It is connected to the large industrial and manufacturing conurbation of the North West region. Liverpool was chosen as a large city that has experienced socio-economic decline and regeneration. The city has many different communities established throughout its history as a major seafaring port.

2.1 Blackburn

Blackburn is part of the Blackburn and Darwen Unitary Authority within the county of Lancashire. It has a long history. The original grammar school was founded in 1509 and the cathedral in 1826. The industrial revolution brought momentous changes to Blackburn. In 1750 Blackburn was little more than a village but by 1850 had become a boomtown with a tenfold increase in the population. By the end of the nineteenth century Blackburn had become the cotton weaving capital of the world. The growth of the town required the provision of new services to improve health, welfare and recreation. Many public buildings were established at that time including the Town Hall, Museum, College and the Cotton Exchange. Football was and is still a popular recreation and the morale of the town seems to fluctuate with the changing fortunes of Blackburn Rovers! During the twentieth century the textile industry went into a rapid decline causing mass unemployment, the effect of which is still felt today. During and after the Second World War many Polish and Ukrainian refugees settled. There has been, in response initially to the Government’s recruitment drives in the 1960’s for the textile and service industries, a growing population of residents of Indian and Pakistani origin. The Government’s recent dispersal policy has led to an increasing number of people seeking asylum and refugee status living in the borough, now approximately 800 people from a wide range of countries. There is a rich music and arts heritage and community arts programmes. The annual multicultural ‘Mela’ event is the largest of its kind in the region. There are 12 major parklands and the town is surrounded by beautiful Pennine countryside.

The population of the district in the 2001 census was 137,471 people [Office of National Statistics]. Within this figure there is a higher than national average number of young people under sixteen making up 25.2 per cent of the local population. Conversely there is a lower than national average number of people over 60. The Adult Learners’ Lives commissioned a demographic report ‘The Demographics of Blackburn, Lancaster and Liverpool’ [Appendix 2]. This shows the population of Blackburn with Darwen as having slightly higher than average lone parent households, higher than average health problems and a higher percentage of people who look after their home or family.

The population of Blackburn is the most multiracial of the three sites. The white population
makes up 79 per cent of the borough’s residents compared to the national average of 91.3 per cent. The largest minority ethnic groups are the Indian (10.7 per cent) and Pakistani (8.7 per cent) groups. The greatest proportion of the population are Christian, 63 per cent. But with 19.4 per cent, the borough has the third highest ranking of Muslim residents in England and Wales.

The borough has a slightly higher than national and regional average unemployment figure. By comparison these unemployment percentages are higher than Lancaster but not as high as Liverpool. The largest employment sector by far is manufacturing and Blackburn has a higher than national and regional proportion of people employed in skilled trades.

Blackburn with Darwen has retained its selective grammar school and has three independent schools. There are two FE colleges. Blackburn has a level of school performance in line with the national average. The current number of adults in the borough estimated to have basic skills needs is 15,000. It is estimated that up until 2007 221 school leavers per year will have basic skills needs. Low literacy levels in the borough are estimated at 19 per cent compared with the national average of 15 per cent and low numeracy at 16.5 per cent compared to the national average of 12 per cent. (Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council Education & Lifelong Learning Dept.)

2.2 Lancaster

Lancaster is a small city in the North West of England, part of Lancaster District within the county of Lancashire. The 2001 census revealed a population of 47,159 within the Lancaster urban area. Lancaster is generally regarded as a fairly pleasant place to live, offering a relatively high quality of life. This is borne out by the statistics on health and crime in the area. The demographic study (Appendix 2) cites Lancaster’s general Standardised Mortality Ratio (SMR) in 2000 as 103, close to the national average (100), below the regional SMR of 107 and much lower than Blackburn’s SMR of 119 and Liverpool’s of 129. Deaths from heart disease, while again slightly higher than the national average at 105, are significantly lower than Blackburn (132) and Liverpool (130) and deaths from breast cancer and prostate cancer are significantly lower than both the national average and Blackburn and Liverpool’s rates. Crime rates for violent crime, robbery, burglary and vehicle theft in Lancaster are all well below national and regional averages.

The demographic report shows that the proportion of full-time employees in Lancaster is below the national average, however, employment figures have improved since then. There is a relatively high proportion of the adult population as economically inactive students, related to its status as a university town. The demographic report shows the dominant employment sector as the service industry and percentages of people working in both health and education were higher than the regional and national averages. The percentage of professional households in Lancaster was higher than the regional or national average but the proportion of unskilled workers was also higher.

Lancaster has an ethnic distribution close to the regional average, with the feel of a fairly cosmopolitan city, for a town of its size, largely due to the international student population attracted by the nearby university. A significant proportion of ESOL provision at the Adult College is related to this, catering for partners of people studying or working at the university, people studying for IELTS tests with the aim of entering university, or with people studying or
working at the university already. Other significant groups of people from ESOL classes are people of Chinese backgrounds working in the catering business and people from Lancaster’s established small community of people of South Asian heritage.

Lancaster is split by the river Lune, which divides it into ‘North’ and ‘South’ Lancaster. Despite the generally good quality of life statistics cited above, Lancaster is a city which includes significant pockets of deprivation and unemployment, particularly in some of the North Lancaster estates. These gradually shade into the seaside town of Morecambe which has areas of very high unemployment and includes a transient population placed temporarily in the many bed-and-breakfasts in the area. Lancaster has many local people whose families have lived here or in the area for some time. The town is split up into a series of identifiable, named neighbourhoods, many of which – particularly in the poorer estates – are home to long-established family and friendship networks and communities. This close-knit local network has effects on provision in the Skills for Life area. People coming to the college for English and Maths classes cannot hope to be anonymous. One long-term volunteer in ESOL mentioned that the reason she specialised in ESOL was because she knew ‘everyone in Lancaster’ and she would therefore feel uncomfortable as a literacy tutor. This was in part because of the stigma which some still associate with literacy classes but also because she felt she would inevitably encounter people whose own and whose family histories she would know a great deal about.

There are two principal providers of basic skills in education in the area, Lancaster and Morecambe College of Further Education and Lancaster Adult College, in which the first year of the Adult Learner’s Lives research has been primarily carried out. Lancaster and Morecambe College is seen locally as catering principally for the 16–18 audience although the college does draw in students from a wider age range. Lancaster is also home to a university which offers basic skills provision through its Staff Learning Centre. The other higher education provider in the town, St Martin’s College, offers teacher training courses and other specialised vocationally oriented degrees in subjects such as nursing, occupational therapy, community and youth studies.

2.3 Liverpool

Liverpool, situated on the mouth of the River Mersey, is a vibrant city of just under half a million people – 439,470 in the 2001 Census (Office of National Statistics). It contains many diverse and multicultural communities linked to its history and identity as a flourishing and significant passenger and mercantile port. Most of the large passenger liners docked at Liverpool and the huge docklands handled a significant amount of British cargo, anything from bananas to coal. Sailors and ship workers from many countries settled over the years and developed the diverse communities that exist today. The Albert Dock, now a heritage site, is a testament to this history as Napoleonic French prisoners of war built it and today it houses the Maritime Museum with its Transatlantic Slavery display. Liverpool has been a denominationally divided city with two imposing cathedrals [Anglican and Catholic] overlooking the city and river. These religious tensions appear to have eased, although the city saw massive social unrest and riots in the 1970s, resulting in the Toxteth Riots. These were attributed to massive unemployment and the decline of the dockland communities (Lane, T. 1987 Liverpool: Gateway of Empire. Lawrence and Wishart, London).

In recent years Liverpool has seen massive urban regeneration that has included the
waterfront and dockland area. New offices, houses and community buildings have revitalised previously derelict dockland areas and areas of sub-standard housing. This has had a positive impact on the economic success, fabric and confidence of the city. This re-emerging confidence culminated in Liverpool’s successful bid to be European City of Culture in 2008. The bid was supported by Liverpool’s proud cultural assets: The Beatles, Liverpool and Everton football clubs and the Three Graces that adorn the waterfront. The city spreads out from the river and is made up of many communities that have their own distinct identities. Families live nearby and there is a local as well as city identity. People talk of going to the city, a bus ride from where they live in Huyton or Knotty Ash.

Although there is much evidence of regeneration, there are many socio-economic indicators that show Liverpool’s continuing underlying problems with higher than average unemployment rates, below average health and low educational attainment. The loss of employment in manufacturing and the docklands means that unemployment rates in Liverpool at 11.6 per cent are almost twice the national average of 5.6 per cent (for these and following figures see the demographic report, Appendix 2). Those who do work are employed in the service industry, in manufacturing, distribution and finance with a higher than average percentage of clerical and secretarial workers. Liverpool has a lower than average percentage of professional households (4.2 per cent compared to the national average of 6.0 per cent) and an above average number of partly skilled (17.1 per cent compared to the national average of 13.4 per cent) and unskilled households (7.0 per cent to the national average of 4.5 per cent). In terms of health Liverpool has a higher overall mortality rate than the national average and higher than average rates for heart disease and breast cancer. Educational attainment measured by percentage of pupils gaining five GCSEs between A–C Grade is lower than the national average, with 44.3 per cent of pupils in Liverpool achieving this level compared to 51.5 per cent nationally.

Liverpool boasts of being ‘the world in one city’ in its promotional material to support its bid to become European City of Culture 2008 (see www.liverpoolculture.com). Whilst having a 96.23 per cent white population (compared to national average of 93.81 per cent), Liverpool has proportionally higher Black and Chinese populations than the North West region as a whole. Other ethnic groups in Liverpool communities include Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and other Asian ethnicities. Liverpool, with NW partners Wirral and Blackburn, has been engaged in the DfES funded ESOL Pathfinder project to assess ESOL needs and provision responses. The ESOL Pathfinder project has been run by Liverpool Community College.

Liverpool City Council’s Lifelong Learning service offers over 1,000 courses for adults in eighty centres, which include college venues and community settings (learninliverpool.co.uk). There are several independent and training organisations that offer basic skills in their programme for example Blackburne House which is a women’s technology and education centre and Local Solutions, a former Community Voluntary Service (CVS), which links basic skills to New Deal provision. In addition there are organisations that embed basic skills in support of vocational training, for example Merseyside Accredited Childcare Training and Assessment Centre (MACTAC). One of the biggest providers of adult education is Liverpool Community College serving over 27,000 students with over 1,000 staff. The college, now more than ten years old (having been amalgamated from four existing colleges in 1991), has a national reputation in student support. It has achieved high inspection marks and promotes student support on its linked website. On a dedicated website for Chinese students it states: ‘The government judged this college to have one of the best student support systems in the country’ (www.chinalink.org.uk/livCCollege.html).
The majority of basic skills delivery in Liverpool Community College is organised through the Drop In Study Centres (DISCS). The college has 21 Community Learning Centres, including 15 DISCS, which are situated within the college’s own sites or are attached to externally funded provision which include community centres, libraries and church halls. The DISCS provide a range of support and classes for maths, spelling, IT and ESOL. They are multipurpose teaching and activity rooms that offer simultaneous support for learners wanting help with maths, English or IT within the same teaching room. The Community Learning Centres and DISCS are located in areas where learners have previously had little adult education services. Liverpool has many large pre-war estates that lack community or learning amenities and bus fares to the city are expensive enough to be discouraging to people on low incomes. The Community Learning Centres and DISCs provide local learning, including basic skills, in these areas of Liverpool and Merseyside.

Section 3:  
Research reports and emerging themes from the three main sites

In this section we describe in more detail the different college sites in which we have been working. We outline the issues that were raised in the process of gaining access to each research site and then describe the sites in more detail and the way research has been carried out in each. We describe the range of data that has been collected in each site. We give examples of the data analysis which we are beginning to carry out and flag up issues which are emerging from the research so far in each site; these are significant themes which we will address in more depth as the project develops.

3.1 Access

The first task for the researchers was to negotiate access to the college sites. The process of access was similar in each site. Initial contacts had been made by David Barton and Kathryn James before the start of the project, during which time the three colleges expressed interest in being involved. Between October and December 2002, the researchers each made direct contact with the colleges and engaged in a process of negotiating access to classes for the Adult Learners’ Lives research in general and recruitment of practitioners to the teacher-researcher fellowship programme. This was a process which raised different issues, some relating to the particularities of each setting involved, others which were more general.

We were in fact asking for a major commitment from the colleges. We were asking for long-term access to a range of classes; we wanted to work with different levels of management, including managers and practitioners; and we were wanting to recruit existing staff as teacher-researchers.

In all three of the sites, management and staff were experiencing pressures relating to the changes associated with the Skills for Life strategy. Many staff were already committed to engaging in curriculum training and other training events and managers were reluctant to release valuable, experienced members of staff for the one day a week Teacher-Researcher programme.
We were also unsure about whether to approach the colleges at the levels of principals, basic skills managers, line managers or directly through individual practitioners. We discovered very quickly that we were far from the only researchers negotiating access with colleges. All three of the colleges with whom we worked were engaged with other research projects either going on at the same time or having recently finished, most related to Skills for Life, including Pathfinder projects, NRDC projects and LSDA projects. Enthusiasm for participation in research was therefore tempered by a wariness of being ‘researched to death’ and a diminishing pool of available staff and classes to work with.

However, there were also things which facilitated access. All the colleges expressed interest both in the topic of the Adult Learners’ Lives research and in our research approach, appreciating the sensitivity of an ethnographic approach and the links we were aiming to make between research and practice. Where there were existing good relationships between the research team and the college we were able to build on these in gaining access. For instance, some of the colleges had already participated in Lancaster-based research; in others, researchers had existing links from their previous experience as practitioners. Finally, in all three of the sites it was the interest that was shown in the research by particular individuals which enabled us to circumvent the other obstacles. We built on this by having one individual at management level in each site who had expressed interest in and support for, the research as our ‘advocate’, assisting with teacher-researcher recruitment and discussing the shape and framework of the research with them. We have kept the advocates informed about what has been happening in the project through occasional meetings and updates throughout the year and have incorporated their feedback into project development plans.

Once teacher-researchers had been recruited most communication happened between them and the researchers direct, with teacher-researchers also facilitating access to other classes and practitioners. When these relationships had been built up, the process of access became much smoother. In interviews, several teachers have said that they particularly appreciate the approach taken in the Adult Learners’ Lives research, which has encouraged them to co-operate with the research. They felt that the presence of the researcher in classes over a long period of time, the slow building-up of relationships of trust with learners, the situating interview work within other more ethnographic forms of data collection and the positioning of the learner at the heart of everything we are doing were all aspects of the research that made it more acceptable to them than a more detached approach would have been. They were therefore happy to facilitate access to classes and to students. Teachers have also said that being engaged with the research has made them more aware of students’ lives outside the classroom, and that this has proved to be of benefit to their practice. We would hope that these positive relationships that we have built up this year will facilitate the development of the project over the coming months.

### 3.2 Site reports

After gaining access, the three full-time researchers spent most of the first year of the project working in the different research sites. In this section we describe the college sites, the way we have each worked in them and the sorts of data which the research has generated.
3.2.1 Blackburn College

As well as developing an overview of the college, Rachel has been working mainly with students seeking asylum and refugee status attending Entry 1 (E1) and Entry 3 (E3) levels of the National Curriculum ESOL classes at Blackburn College within the context of an ESOL case study which she has worked on in collaboration with Kathy Pitt. In the autumn of 2002 the NRDC commissioned five ESOL case studies to run from January to July 2003. At the same time, during discussions about a possible focus for the Adult Learners’ Lives research, ESOL teachers at Blackburn College raised issues they had been concerned about for some time around the particular needs of students seeking asylum and refugee status and the role of educational provision in providing support. The Adult Learners’ Lives team therefore decided that the ESOL case study would provide a useful framework for carrying out Adult Learners’ Lives research which related to this particular group of learners. Adults seeking asylum and refugee status currently make up the large majority of the ESOL student body in Blackburn. They come from a wide range of countries including Afghanistan, Rwanda, Iraq, Congo, Colombia and Angola. This is a fairly recent development related to Home Office dispersal policy.

In the period between October 2002 and December 2003 Rachel made regular visits to the faculty of Curriculum Studies and the Basic Skills department in order to share information about the Adult Learners’ Lives project. Issues of access for carrying out the research were discussed, and current issues for the department were identified, such as which classes to work in. Rachel also helped to facilitate recruitment of a teacher-researcher for the Teacher-Researcher programme. Since January 2003 she has been visiting first E1 and from mid February also E3 on a regular basis carrying out participant observation in classes and interviewing students. The main research questions focused on students’ perceptions of their learning experiences and the link between learning and social issues which concern them as recent in-comers to the town.

ESOL provision – E1 and E3

Students are mainly recruited at the beginning of the academic year but there is a ‘roll-on, roll-off’ facility when there are vacant places in the class. There is often a waiting list. Students are given an assessment on arrival and placed in a class at the appropriate level. Classes follow a systematic modular syllabus based on the National ESOL Curriculum. For E1 there are seven core modules and for E3 six modules, each based on a different topic. For each module the syllabus is organised into the four skill areas as used in the core curriculum and the curriculum reference numbers for each component skill are stated. Teachers are encouraged to supplement this by responding to the particular needs of students in their groups. Functions, grammar and phonics are taught systematically within the topic areas. Assessment is rigorous; it consists of assignments carried out in ‘test’ conditions which are added to a portfolio of evidence of skills in speaking, listening, reading and writing. Students gain full achievement at Level 1 by completing the work and reaching the required standards in all four skills. They have individual tutorials each term to review their learning targets and progress. They keep their own record books which contain induction checklist, timetable, student agreement, targets for each module, and record sheets for daily work, individual reviews and the final review. E1 students study ‘full time’ which means 15 hours a week, Monday to Friday from 9 am – 12 pm. E3 students study eight hours a week, Monday to Thursday 9 am – 11 am.

E1 class

There are about 12 students in the E1 class, who come from Angola, Rwanda, Congo, Afghanistan, Hong Kong, Bangladesh, Colombia and Iraq. This is a mainly young group, most
being between the ages of 18 and 25, with two students of 30+ and one 50+ student from Hong Kong (who is not an asylum seeker). Attendance levels are very high and if anybody needs to miss a class they normally phone the teacher. There is a very strong class culture of commitment to full attendance, punctuality, keeping to task, strong peer support, cooperation and friendship in the learning environment. The students are very highly motivated to learn English and seem to make rapid progress on this fast-track programme. The students typically come from countries with very traditional schooling and perhaps that is why they seem to be very comfortable with a learning environment which is very much teacher led with a great deal of language input and whole class drill work. Classes are carefully pre-planned by the teacher rather than negotiated and there is very little diversion from this plan. The teacher teaches from the front using a white board and the students sit in a horseshoe arrangement. The students sometimes work in small groups or pairs but this is also very much teacher directed. Students seem to respond very positively to a very prescriptive, systematic approach to language teaching and if they lose concentration it seems to be more related to personal issues than to the learning tasks.

This is a very supportive learning environment. The teacher is very empathetic and responsive to individual learning needs within this pre-planned framework and students are very supportive of each other. They draw on their individual learning strategies and resources such as their linguistic repertoire particularly in individual and group work. Learning materials are mainly drawn from ESOL textbooks such as ‘Headway’ and no use of ‘real’ materials was observed. Students’ spoken language production is mainly through drills and controlled practice in groups. Listening practice is from ESOL tapes and from the teacher, reading is from text book materials and writing is mainly on worksheets. There is very little spontaneous ‘free’ speaking and writing. Every Tuesday there is an IT class when students work at individual computers. Here there was some negotiation. The teacher intended to use this session to work through ESOL software but she changed it to respond to students’ expressed needs to also learn to surf the internet and write emails.

Most of the students have recently come through very traumatic experiences in their home countries and in travelling to Britain. Despite demonstrating high motivation to learn English and a wealth of resources for surviving and building a new life here, they are living with a high degree of uncertainty and worry about their families and their future. Social issues related to this E1 group impact heavily on the learning environment; these include doctor’s appointments, child care needs, meeting lawyers (mostly in London), travel claims, need for information/directions, need for resources such as furniture, benefits cut off on losing appeal, worries related to status and depression. Every day Rachel spent there, one or more of these issues affected students’ attendance and concentration and it often involved the teacher in providing some support such as making phone calls to other services, offices and agencies.

**E3 class**

In the E3 class, the student profile is different to E1 in that only one third of the students are seeking asylum (mainly young, both male and female, from Angola, Iraq and Lithuania) and two thirds are young women of South Asian heritage. Teaching style and materials are similar to E1 but there is no IT class. The main difference is that the asylum seeker/refugee students seem to have developed their own coping strategies more than the E1 students (probably because they have lived here longer, or have a higher level of former education, or both) and the South Asian heritage students live in strong well-established communities, so perhaps this is why social issues do not appear to impact on the learning environment very much. Attendance levels are high but not quite as high as E1. The students do not seem to be
dependent on the teacher’s support and encouragement for ‘out of class’ issues. The teacher expects the students to take full responsibility for their own attendance and study. The learning group is cohesive and co-operative but the students are not as closely supportive as in the E1 class where the learning group is also a very strong social group in college, as well as outside college to some degree.

Research approach and activities
Rachel has been working within a qualitative/ethnographic, multi method, collaborative approach carrying out observations of classes as a participant observer and audio-recording some of these, taking fieldnotes of classes and meetings with teachers, interviewing students, collecting learning materials and facilitating a photography project in which students took photos representing their feelings about living in Blackburn.

Working with the teachers
Regular, paid meetings with the E1 and E3 teachers were central to a negotiated research process. We built up relationships of mutual trust and respect for our different expertise. Rather than Rachel explaining the methodology, this allowed us to discuss methodology and make joint decisions about issues around what research activities to carry out and how, the roles of the researcher in the setting, interpretation of data and how to acknowledge students’ time and co-operation in the research. Taking account of their agendas, preferences, experience and expertise in this way enhanced the quality of the activities, the relationships of all involved and the richness of the data and its analysis and interpretation.

Working with the students
Allowing time was the key to working successfully with students: time to build up rapport, by going to a few classes before carrying out any audio-recording or interviews; putting their time agendas before ours; taking time to give information and explain the study; and allowing time for proper negotiation about the content of activities and interviews, such as discussing which language to use. Relationships with students were shaped by valuing them and trying to lessen distance; by acting as a ‘participant observer’, rather than purely as an ‘observer’; by Rachel telling them about herself when asked; by involving them as co-researchers in the photography project and in the collection of documents; by valuing their co-operation with a gift (as suggested by the teacher); by negotiating with them and offering choice where possible; and by withdrawing gently and gradually at the end of the study while still visiting occasionally and keeping some email contact.

What were the benefits of collaboration?
All participants – students, teacher, interpreters and researchers – said that they enjoyed being involved in the research. The principle of ‘quality of life’ was followed and achieved in this research encounter. We were all learners and experts, sharing reciprocal skills, experiences and opportunities. For example, Wendy invited Rachel to meetings and set up a focal group discussion with other teachers. Both she and Doug gave creative suggestions related to activities, shared relevant paperwork and acted as ‘research and consultant’ advocates with the students and the management. This was invaluable in terms of access, relationships, data generation and understandings.

3.2.2 Lancaster Adult College

Over the past year, Karin has conducted ethnographic research in the Skills for Life department of the Adult College in Lancaster. The Adult College is a relatively small
institution and the pattern of activities is very different from that found in Blackburn’s large FE college setting. Students attend classes on a weekly basis, some attending only one class, some two or three and a few attending several different classes; but there are no full-time students or teachers. Some students also attend courses at the college outside the *Skills for Life* department, such as pottery and creative writing. Some also attend classes at other colleges, particularly some of the ESOL students. For others, one class a week is enough; this is especially the case for some of the students with health difficulties.

All of the *Skills for Life* provision in the college is done on a ‘roll-on, roll-off’ basis, although the paperwork is organised on a term-by-term model and the roll-on, roll-off policy is often debated. In ESOL, there is quite a high turnover of students, with a constant stream of students coming in for initial interview to be placed in classes and a similar stream leaving for a variety of reasons. The population in the literacy and numeracy classes is more stable, with some students having attended classes for many years, although here too there is also a steady turnover of students coming and going. The students who leave do so for a variety of reasons: some leave having completed a particular certificate or a term’s work; others because they have reached a point where they have achieved what they wanted to in coming to class, whether or not this is externally accredited; others find that a particular class no longer suits them, either for social reasons or in subject matter; and for many people external factors such as illness, work or family commitments lead to them leaving either for a while or permanently. Other students come to basic skills classes and move on very quickly to pre-GCSE and GCSE classes or to vocational classes at the Adult College or elsewhere. But for some of the longer-term students coming to college has been a stable point in their lives for some years. However, there is an increasing pressure now to move people on and demonstrate progression and there is debate within the college as to the educational value of students staying long-term in one class without moving on’.

A great deal of paperwork is required from staff and students and at particular moments in time – such as at the start and end of term – the paperwork can seem to take over. At the start of term students fill out enrolment or re-enrolment forms, for both the college and the County Council. At the beginning of each term students work with tutors and/or volunteers to write out a new Individual Learning Plan (ILP), which includes space for a general aim and for a small set of specific learning goals. Once the student has filled these in, the goals are then cross-referenced to the curriculum by the tutors. The ILPs are drawn on in planning each student’s work and in planning the group sessions to cater to the needs of as many students as possible. Each tutor fills in a standardised session plan’ for each lesson. At the end of each session, a ‘work done’ sheet is filled in which includes spaces for what work has been done, for any comments the student has about it (with prompts such as ‘this was easy/hard, I feel confident in … /I want to do some more work in …’) and for future work or homework. This work done sheet is then used by the tutors to fill in another form which tracks what work each student has completed in each session. At the end of each term, the ILP and work done sheets are used as the basis for a review of what has been done over the course of the term and how the students and tutors feel about it. Given that some students are only in college for two hours a week, dealing with the paperwork can take up a significant proportion of their learning time.

In all of the classes, a great deal of effort is put into setting the classroom up as a friendly place. Relationships between students and teachers are informal and teachers are addressed by their first name (although some students found this difficult – one saying I would have been beaten at school if I had called the teacher Lesley!). Many students said in interview
they had been surprised at how friendly the college was as an environment and that they had been afraid before coming that people would be ‘snobby’ or ‘snotty’. Supportive relationships are built up between students in classes too, although once in a while there are inevitable tensions, particularly when people have very different ways of interacting socially. However, in general, the college prides itself on being an accessible and friendly place.

Classes attended
Karin has attended four classes on a more or less weekly basis: an ESOL workshop on a Monday morning, a Tuesday afternoon English class, a Wednesday evening spelling class and a Friday morning maths class. She has also visited some other classes for observation and has participated in other activities in the college, such as a Writing Day and some Skills for Life tutors’ meetings.

Tuesday English and Wednesday Spelling classes
Teaching in literacy classes has recently been re-organised. It used to run largely on a workshop basis, with classes consisting mainly of individual tuition supported by volunteers working one-to-one with students and tutors who had an overview of what was going on in each class. With the introduction of Skills for Life, tutors have been encouraged at curriculum training events to incorporate group work into their practice. The English and maths classes that Karin participated in included time for individual and group work.

The typical pattern for both the Tuesday English class and the Wednesday spelling class was as follows. Both of these classes were team taught, with two tutors running the class, supported by a number of volunteer tutors. At the start of the session, students would arrive, take out their folders from the box for that class and would decide on their individual work for that session, in conjunction with a tutor or a volunteer tutor; or they might continue with work from a previous class. For the first hour of the session the class would work as a workshop, with tutors circulating to check students’ work. Then there would be a break and most students would go up to the Gallery, the college coffee bar, for a drink and a chat; classes normally sat together around large round tables. The final hour of the class would normally be a group session, prepared between the two tutors running that class. Topics for this were decided on a half-termly or termly basis, largely by looking at individual student’s learning plans and finding topics which would address the needs of all, or most, of the students. While most students would participate in the group session, some preferred to continue with their individual work.

In the individual work time students worked on a variety of different things depending on their level and aspirations. Some of these were common to many students. For instance, many of the entry level students were working through a series of Dolch word worksheets. A Spelling Support programme was used, based on a worksheet framework on which students recorded new words one week, learned them using the look-cover-write-check method, were tested on them the following week and were asked to use them in dictation the week after that. A series of photocopied punctuation exercises were drawn on, often relating to apostrophes which were a theme in both classes during the time Karin was attending them.

Some students had come with specific requests for functional work relating to their everyday lives, such as form-filling or booking holidays. These students worked both using worksheets for practice and using real examples of forms and official documentation which they filled in during the class with a tutor’s feedback.
In addition to this more structured work, these classes also gave students the opportunity to engage in broader writing activities. Many students engaged in writing different types of letters or personal writing. One student in the Tuesday English class used it primarily as a time to produce a ‘page of writing’, personal writing on a wide variety of topics, which was then used as the basis for working on spelling, paragraphing and punctuation. Another was working on a local history project, relating the history of Lancaster using old photographs and writing text captions for them. Other students were working on creative writing around themes which they were interested in. A woman in the Wednesday evening spelling class brought her personal letters and emails to class for checking and editing and also wrote colourful accounts of meaningful events in her life such as going to a rock concert.

The Tuesday afternoon English class was a very popular one, with at some points up to 15 students attending, plus a number of volunteer tutors. The Wednesday evening spelling class attracted smaller numbers of students, with a maximum of seven or eight learners. However it also attracted higher numbers of volunteer tutors, and at times there would be more tutors than students in the class. This contributed to a lively, chatty atmosphere. The two classes had a slightly different feel to them. The pace of the Wednesday class was faster, in general. It attracted a constituency primarily of people who were working or who had been working. The Tuesday afternoon class included several people with learning difficulties and/or mental health issues who were not employed. Students in both classes were at a variety of levels, from pre-entry to Entry 3. In both classes the age range was very broad, from students in their late teens and early 20s through to people of retirement age.

**Friday Maths class**
The pattern of the Friday maths class varied from week to week, sometimes being primarily group work, sometimes individual work. This was taught by a single tutor and was a smaller group of up to six students, most working at levels up to entry level 3. Again, all students had an individual learning plan and the tutor planned activities for the classes relating to this. Most students in the class identified themselves as having learning difficulties and it is possible that the class remained small because it was perceived by other potential students as catering primarily for this constituency.

**Monday ESOL workshop**
The Monday ESOL workshop was a purely workshop format, with students on separate tables working either alone or with volunteer tutors. There were two tutors directing the workshop activities, one of whom specialised in dealing with students preparing for their IELTS test. Karin worked principally with the students of the other tutor, Gill Burgess, one of the ALL teacher-researchers. Gill had an overview of what each student was working on, which in this class was entirely driven by the student’s individual learning plan. Students might be working on reading, writing, speaking or listening and this might relate to almost any topic area. Within this structure, different volunteers in the workshop had different levels of autonomy. Some of the more experienced volunteers planned their student’s work almost entirely, while other pairings were provided with work by Gill each week.

This was another busy class which attracted up to 12 or 13 students some weeks. Given the focus on individual work, at times this could become quite difficult to manage. It attracted a variety of different types of students, including au pairs from different countries in Europe who were looking to improve their English while they were here, spouses and partners of people in Lancaster temporarily to study or work at the university, occasionally people who were themselves studying or working at the university but wanted to work on another aspect
of their English, people of Chinese origin primarily working in local restaurants and takeaways, people of South Asian heritage from Lancaster’s small, established South Asian community and people who had come to England to work and/or to marry. There were few refugees or asylum seekers in these classes.

Research activities
In the classes, Karin has acted as a participant observer, with the agreement being that she was there to observe, to get to know people and to act as a ‘spare body’ if there was anything helpful that she could do. In the event, in most of the classes it was found most helpful for Karin to act almost as a spare volunteer tutor, working principally on a one-to-one basis supporting several learners over a period of time. Detailed participant-observation based fieldnotes were written up as soon as possible after each class attended. This ongoing presence in the classes allowed her to build up good friendly relationships with teachers and students.

Karin was initially introduced to each class as being from the university and doing research work relating to the classes. After being in the classes for a couple of months, she gave a more detailed presentation during the group session explaining the aims of the project and inviting learners to participate in interviews if they so desired. The presentation was supported by an information leaflet which was designed in conjunction with teacher-researchers to be accessible to learners. These presentations were followed by group discussions about the reasons why people had come to college and what sorts of things they had got out of the experience, which proved enlightening for researcher, teachers and students.

Following the presentation, a number of interviews were carried out with learners relating to the meaning of learning in their lives. Some of these learners have been identified for more detailed longitudinal work. In addition, some learning events – both one-to-one work with volunteers and group sessions – were audio-recorded in the English and spelling classes. This has generated a large corpus of data, related to students’ learning experiences in provision (fieldnotes and recordings) and students’ lives more generally (fieldnotes and interviews).

3.2.3 Liverpool Community College

The first step in the Liverpool site was to find out about the range of basic skills provision in the city. This initial mapping meant visiting several providers, including community and training organisations, meeting practitioners at training events and gathering information via web sites. Contact was made with the basic skills manager at Liverpool Community College, which had been agreed as the site for the pedagogic research in the first phase of the Adult Learners’ Lives research. The two teacher-researchers attached to the Adult Learners’ Lives project, through the Teacher-Researcher Fellowship Programme, teach at Liverpool Community College and the college agreed to support them in this collaborative research partnership.

Liverpool Community College delivers most of its basic skills in drop-in study centres (DISCs). These multipurpose flexible teaching rooms, often delivering several areas of learning support at the same time (maths, English and Information Technology/Computing [ITC]), have been designed to respond locally to individual learning needs. Students can drop in for additional support if they are taking other courses or they can follow a programme of work.
Programmes of work can be delivered either as a course for a group of people or individually through self-directed study supported by worksheets. In some cases both types of learning are offered. Subject specialist tutors do the initial individual assessment and guidance procedures at the DISC in private interview rooms. These procedures have been developed by the basic skills management team within the college and are supported across all the college DISCs. There is a whole college basic skills approach with regular basic skills manager meetings and a faculty internal review and assessment quality procedure. Each DISC has computers available for discrete ITC learning which also provide additional learning resources for maths, English and ESOL.

As the DISCs provide for a range of learners within different communities Yvon located her research in two so that she could observe different DISCs, different tutors and different subjects being delivered. It was decided in collaboration with the basic skills manager to focus the Adult Learners’ Lives research in Rotunda DISC in Kirkdale and Dovecot DISC in Dovecot. These represent different learning environments and local populations. Rotunda Community College is an independent community college serving the area of Kirkdale, which is a mile or so out of the city centre near Bootle. It is a dockland area that shows evidence of extensive regeneration and rebuilding alongside large areas of industrial decay and neglect. The college itself is housed in several Victorian buildings that form a rabbit warren of stairs and rooms on different levels. It is due to be replaced by a new purpose-built building in the near future. Dovecot DISC is housed in the newly refurbished library at Dovecot. Dovecot is on the outer edges of the city near to Knotty Ash and is a mixture of old council housing and new build. It is an area where people use local facilities because transport to the city centre is expensive and time-consuming. The small shopping centre which houses the library is currently being regenerated with new community facilities being added and existing ones modernised. The DISC is a modern purpose-designed room, set within the library, with a suite of computers and new furnishing creating a modern learning environment. Yvon joined the maths drop-in session at Rotunda on Wednesday mornings where teacher-researcher Kath Gilbert taught, and a spelling group at Dovecot DISC on Thursday morning with teacher-researcher Dianne Beck.

**Classes attended**

**Maths drop-in, Rotunda**

The maths drop-in at Rotunda is delivered in a large room that has an administrative office at one end and an English class at the other end. It is a noisy and hot environment with the sound of phones ringing and being answered at one end and students talking in the English group at the other. Because of the layout of the building there is also continual background noise from other classes and people on the staircase.

The maths drop-in session is delivered to a small group of between six and eight learners at different levels who vary in age and in the maths that they are learning. There is one male in his mid 30s and the rest are female. The oldest student is in her mid 50s and the youngest is 19. The students gave two main reasons for attending the class: to improve their own chance of employment (either indirectly or directly) and to help give them confidence and the ability to help their children or grandchildren with maths. The youngest student is working at E1 level and came because she had difficulties telling her left from right and also in telling the time, causing her problems with her child care training. She was supported in attending the drop-in sessions by her placement officer in the training organisation nearby, where she is completing an NVQ in child care. Another student was receiving study support for GCSE maths and statistics in other GCSE coursework and was expected to achieve a grade A or B.
She was a single parent with two small children and explained that although it was very difficult to find time to study, her motivation was to improve their material circumstances by being able to buy a house and have a foreign holiday ‘for the kids’. She also wanted to provide a model of educational success for her children to aspire to. The male student described his motivation for attending as twofold: to provide structure in his day as an unemployed person and to make himself employable again. He had had a serious road accident several years ago that left him with depression and anxiety as well as physical injuries that prevented him from doing the heavy work he had previously done.

Attendance at the drop-in session varies from week to week although there were four or five regular students coming to this session. The tone of the drop-in is welcoming and informal. Students are greeted by the tutors and other members of the group when they arrive before settling to work individually. There is no ‘official’ start to the session, each student arrives, gets their work out of the file drawer and individually discusses the content of their learning with the tutor. By using individual learning plans and records (some of which the students complete themselves) the tutor is aware of progress made from the week before and discussion identifies what the student wants to concentrate on in that particular session. Each student works individually on a worksheet in the area of study that they have requested. Topics that were being studied included multiplication (two and three times tables), measurement (including conversion from inches to centimetres), fractions (including conversion to percentages) and ratios. All college materials and worksheets have been mapped to the core curriculum. The tutor spends time with each student, moving around the table and responds to requests for help or clarification. The drop-in caters for students attending for specific skills support who attend for a term or two and also for those who attend over a longer period of time relearning many maths basic skills not acquired in school.

Spelling, Dovecot

The spelling class at Dovecot DISC is being delivered in response to student requests for spelling, punctuation and grammar. The session is delivered at one end of the DISC, which is a large modern purpose-built room within Dovecot library. There is an ITC drop-in session delivered at the same time as the spelling session in the top half of the room on the 20 computers that are housed there.

The students in the spelling session vary in age from late 20s to almost 70. In the group of ten regular attendees two are men. One student who works part time described his motivation for coming as being social as well as to improve his spelling skills, something he had always found difficult. A female student in her early 40s, who had been off work for nearly two years with depression, described her motivation for attending as wanting to improve her skills and self-confidence in order to be able to find work again. Another female student in her late 20s, who lived with severe depression, described her motivation for attending as giving structure in an otherwise empty day and as a way of improving her self-confidence. The oldest learner, who was nearing 70 and who had been deaf all her life, described her motivation as discovering a love of learning. She had missed a lot of early education because of her deafness and a subsequent large family had prevented later study. One other learner, who in her mid 30s had never managed to hold down a full-time job, also described the social aspects of learning and the importance of learning English to be able to help her with maths, which she was also studying. The students range from working at E1 to L1 and L2 in the core curriculum.

During sessions the tutor, Dianne, used the flipchart at the front of the group to explain and
demonstrate to the whole group. Students were also invited to contribute to the discussion and tasks, adding material to the flipchart themselves. The atmosphere was friendly and informal; students arrived and were greeted by the tutor and other group members before sitting and waiting for the start. The tutor started the session by recapping the work done the week before, including homework and checking levels of understanding. The session was conducted using the flipchart and worksheets, using a mixture of group and individually focused work. Students discussed their homework or other writing done individually with the tutor either in the session or as it closed.

Research activities
Conducting ethnographic research ‘at a distance’ (making the regular 100 miles round trip from Lancaster to Liverpool) has meant finding ways of working that have relied less on using systematic observation of these two classes and more on developing collaborative working. This development included video recording a teaching session in each of the two focal learning environments. Initially Yvon attended both classes over many weeks getting to know the classrooms, the students and other staff in the DISCs. This was done by informally talking to students and recording classroom interaction in fieldnotes. In building up a collaborative framework Yvon worked closely with the two teacher-researchers Kath and Dianne who provided access into the classroom, additional information and support. Reciprocally Yvon provided support for Dianne and Kath’s individual research that was developed as part of the ALL project and for the Diploma module that was part of the Teacher-Researcher Fellowship Programme at Lancaster University. In addition to weekly attendance at the focal classes at Rotunda and Dovecot DISC additional planning meetings were held with Kath, Dianne and Yvon at Collquit DISC in the city centre where they both also taught.

Some of the questions that we addressed in the focal classrooms generally in this first pedagogic phase of the Adult Learners’ Lives project were about teaching and learning: questioning what the relationship is between them and links to everyday learning. As the site-specific research developed it presented an opportunity to compare teaching and learning in two similar but different classes in Liverpool. In the maths class Kath used a mainly individually negotiated style of teaching using worksheets based upon learners’ stated needs and individually tailored responses. An experienced tutor, Kath voiced concerns that she did not do enough group teaching in the maths drop-in and the group lacked cohesion. We acknowledged that group teaching is one of the measures of a successful class, as outlined in the Common Inspection Framework used by the ALI Inspectorate. The spelling class, in contrast, used a lot of group teaching with front of class delivery on the flipchart supplemented by small paired and group tasks. Although individual learners were consulted about their progress, the group tackled the tasks, which Dianne had prepared mainly as a whole class activity with breakaways using worksheets. These were often done in pairs unless a student requested to work on their own. The group was consulted about the subject matter of the next course, whether it should be punctuation or grammar; once the decision had been made students assumed the tutor would make the decision about the style and pace of delivery. Dianne, as a relatively new basic skills tutor, questioned whether individuals had enough support and choice within this style of delivery.

As the research developed both Kath and Dianne agreed to be videoed teaching a session of their own class to provide detailed classroom data for the project and also to help them reflect on their own teaching practice as part of their professional development. Both expressed considerable reservations about their own performance but were determined to overcome this and contribute to the Adult Learners’ Lives project. Together it was possible to
work out a time-scale for working with the students to discuss videoing, getting students involved in the videoing, interviewing the students before and after the video, watching the video with the students and discussing their reaction and watching the video with Kath and Dianne and recording their observations and comments. This process of negotiation across two focal classes was started in February 2003, the video was recorded in early April and the cycle completed in May 2003. In each of the two focal classes Yvon discussed being videoed with the class explaining what would be happening and that the tutor (Kath or Dianne) would also be videoed. Students asked questions and were interested in the research.

In the following session [one week later] the video camera was taken into each of the two classes for the class to ‘play’ with and to decide on seating arrangements to capture the best recording of the session. In the Dovecot spelling class this was particularly important as two students were happy to take part in the class but did not wish to be recorded. This was satisfactorily negotiated in the class with one student being positioned out of shot and the other agreeing to operate the camera. The students in both classes agreed to be interviewed briefly before the video to audio-record what they hoped to learn in the session being videoed and also after the session to record what they felt they had learned. It was agreed by them that they would be happy for Yvon to have photocopies of the work done in that session for analysis. In both cases a selection of students were interviewed both before and after the videoed session [four at Rotunda, five at Dovecot], with interviews focusing on student learning aspirations/expectations and teaching delivery.

The video was also shown to the students. Comments from both groups watching were very positive about the content and they felt it reflected their learning environments accurately. Comment from watching the video included how much fun the class looked and what a friendly informal feel it had. This contrasted with the tutors’ perceptions and self-critical comments about how slow the lesson had gone and how many interventions they had made.

A great deal of additional material was generated from the videoed session of the two focal classes. This included: the mini-interviews before and after the session; copies of work generated by both students and tutors; taped video footage of the session; tutor profiles of the students; tutor pre-session plan and post-session evaluation; and audio-recording of students’ and tutors’ comments and analysis of the video recording. This material provides a rich multilayered source of information of the learning and teaching occurring in these focal sessions, providing different but complementary inside-out/outside-in views. Early analysis of the focal classroom, as a site of learning and teaching, has concentrated on using grounded theoretical approaches to see what is emerging from the data (see section 3.4.3, below). It will be possible to look at the relationship between what the learners learn and what the teachers teach, both through observation of the ‘learning event’ and through the words and reflections of all the participants.

### 3.3 The overall database

A list of all the data that has been collected in each of the different settings can be found in Appendix 3. Each site has generated a different sort of data, because the work that has been done in each place has been different, in response to the particular characteristics of each site, the logistical issues involved and the constraints and opportunities within which the project was operating.
3.3.1 Blackburn

Rachel has worked primarily in two ESOL classes, mainly with refugees and asylum seekers, because this part of the Adult Learners' Lives project was contributing to the NRDC series of ESOL case studies. Therefore her data is very focused on these two classes, consisting of classroom observations and participant-observation fieldnotes, interviews with learners and photographs and documents provided by learners about their needs and perceptions. She has not worked directly with the teacher-researcher fellows in Blackburn or in Accrington in data collection, although she has met with them on a regular basis to discuss the development of their own projects.

3.3.2 Lancaster

Karin's work was the most straightforward logistically speaking, since the research site was very close both to the university where the Centre is based and also to her own home. She was therefore able to take a broader ethnographic approach of 'just being around' the college over the year as a whole, taking ongoing fieldnotes relating to all the interactions she was involved in, getting to know learners slowly and informally and only later on supplementing this data with recorded interviews and recordings of classroom interaction. This built up relationships of trust and mutual support which enabled students to be open with her about their lives, challenges, hopes and aspirations.

3.3.3 Liverpool

Yvon's work has been much more closely tied in with the teacher-researchers in Liverpool. Because of the logistical difficulties involved in carrying out fieldwork at a distance, particularly given the organisation of Liverpool Community College basic skills provision into drop-in study centres across the city, she has been forced to take a more focused approach, working directly with the teacher-researchers. She has worked in detail with one of each of Kath and Dianne's groups, interviewing learners repeatedly and video-recording classroom interactions, taking a very collaborative approach which directly involved teacher-researchers and learners in the data collection process.

While this approach to data collection has generated different types of data in the different sites, taking this varied approach was appropriate in terms of some of the basic principles of the Adult Learners' Lives project: being responsive to the setting and allowing the research to evolve. Many of the differences between the datasets were for the most part imposed by the setting. For instance, Yvon was able to video classes because learners were enthusiastic about being video-recorded and it was something that teachers were also willing to try, whereas this was not a possibility for either Karin or Rachel as the teachers they were working with felt that video-recording would be too intrusive. Other differences emerged as a result of different working relationships with teacher-researchers, often being due to logistical factors. However, these differences in the dataset existed for a purpose: they enabled each of us to address, in the best way possible given the particular circumstances in which we were each placed, the central questions of the project about the relationships between people's learning and people's lives. The different elements of the Adult Learners' Lives project may have different datasets, but they are all addressing ultimately similar questions and comparing similar issues.
This diagram was first produced in the early weeks of the project, based on the team’s discussions around the initial research proposal. It has been further refined over the course of this year. It summarises the broad research aims, questions and interests which we are pursuing in the Adult Learners’ Lives project.

3.4 Data analysis

This year has been principally focused on gaining access and data collection, so analysis is at an early stage. Rachel’s work is the most developed since analysis of much of the Blackburn data has been completed, in conjunction with Kathy Pitt, for the ESOL case study work.

This section begins with a summary of the principal themes that have emerged from that. The section moves on to include examples of the analyses that Karin and Yvon have been working on. They have been working within a different timeframe and are currently in the first stages of data analysis.

3.4.1 Data analysis – Blackburn – students’ needs and the E1 class

This analysis focuses on E1 students’ learning and social needs and the constraints on meeting these needs as expressed by them and as they impact on their learning experience, reflecting the research questions of the ESOL case study. It outlines the different needs students have expressed: for learning, friends, integration, security, control over their actions, work, counselling, etc. It addresses the possibilities that exist for students to meet those needs, by drawing on their own inner resources such as motivation to learn and individual strategies, on informal networks and peer support and on external resources such as college, church and material resources. The various constraints students experience are described.
These include inner constraints such as trauma and health issues and external constraints related to the experience of living in Blackburn, lack of access to networks, lack of legal and language support, racism and lack of infrastructure and interagency response. The ESOL class is described in terms of how it meets students’ needs – offering haven, structure, peer support, sensitivity, use of L1, humour and IT – and what students bring in. We also address those areas where needs are not being met, particularly in the need for a bridge between learners’ lives inside and outside the class. Finally we raise issues related to ESOL provision and institutional frameworks: the teacher’s needs for professional support in carrying the load, the need for pastoral care, thinking through progression, the lack of response which has been experienced to staff recommendations and the problems associated with student services not being trained to assist.

What do students say about their needs?

All the learners focused on in this study had been sent to Blackburn because of the government dispersal policy, not because they had people that they knew in the area. In addition, they all had very little fluency in English. Therefore, all, on arrival, shared needs for housing, health registration, benefits, opportunities to meet and make friends and for ESOL provision. All these learners expressed a desire to integrate into the communities they were now living in and saw the need for English to do this:

- **F.** When you know the language it’s much easier to integrate yourself.
- **C.** Because without English you can’t do anything, how are you going to integrate into the society?
- **P.** We wanted to learn how to live here.

In addition, although not all wanted to talk about their lives before coming to England, it is clear that many have been through traumatic experiences and needed support with emotional and health issues.

- **L.** There were problems in my country, so, so with that, that caused me some problems, yes. With the troubles there are in my country.
- **F.** To see my parents is maybe something that hurts a lot.
- **C.** My mind isn’t very good to play football … (there are) some thoughts in my mind.

Another aspect of the traumatic experiences of these students is the lack of control over their lives that led to them becoming asylum seekers, or that results from the condition of being a seeker of asylum or a refugee. This lack of opportunity to act for themselves, or make their own decisions, is voiced in various ways:

- **C.** I didn’t come here because I wanted to, I was transferred by the Home Office.
- **F.** He took us to Morocco – at that point we were at a loss, we were in his hands.
- **F.** The fact is that you need and it’s not possible, and you can’t stay like this, you need to get something to make – to earn your own living, because expecting others to give it to you … that’s not good.
This lack of control is coupled with a need to feel secure physically, mentally and emotionally and a desire for some structure in their lives. It also contributes to a strong motivation to learn English in order to be able to move towards independence. Students seized on every opportunity to act and take initiative where they could, despite their present and past restrictions. Some of the students gave voice to this need to be positive as follows:

**P.** Everyday we said thanks God because we can stay here. How many people can’t?

**E.** [interviewer] and how do you feel being here in Blackburn?

**F.** How can I feel? I am feeling the best possible.

It is important to note that the needs of these students are always changing rather than static, and this change in need can be seen in their interviews when we asked them to think back to when they arrived:

**J.** Now I can speak, I can speak English and I have many friends speak.

**O.** Before me, very very shy, not, never ever I can talking with anyone because the English, eh my English not good, some very very little, little bit, now some little good I need something go to the market and shop and eh, anyone understand me, what do you say what do you want, now very good speaking, I, me very very happy about it.

**M.** Last week I found job – part-time job – cleaning a bakery.

How are students’ expressed needs being met?
One of the most striking characteristics of this particular group of learners is their enthusiastic and dedicated approach to the learning of English. Their attendance level at the daily three-hour class was very high and they worked hard both in and out of the class. Here are some of the comments of their teacher W.:

They’ve been very, very motivated [-] eager to learn and want to fit in.

They’re just so responsive to everything – they bring so much to the lesson.

In their interviews we asked them to talk about their learning and these are some of the strategies they talked about:

**F.** [TV] helps a lot ... the more I watch ... and sometimes the coin drops, many times something that wasn’t clear in the lesson, you saw that word but it wasn’t clear, then you hear the word again on TV and then you understand the meaning.

**L.** I make an effort to read English, to know ... sometimes I go to Darwen library.

**M.** Homework is very good as well, anyway I do. If [the teacher] gives us, I will do. If doesn’t give us anything, I will do.

Students come with resources for learning such as their experience of formal schooling and other languages which they draw on to aid their own and their peers’ learning of English. This
positive attitude, coupled with the informal networks that they have built up on arriving in this
town in order to meet their needs for friendship, for emotional support and for social
activities, are strong coping strategies. One African learner, for example, when asked what
helped her get used to life in Blackburn, replied:

L. If we see friends I have the time to talk, to tell them things, we tell each other things.

She named these friends as Congolese, Rwandan and Tanzanian. Another student told the
class about his need, at times, to be with a friend from the same background:

F. Sometimes I'm sit my home, there no place to go, I think oh I have my friend, yeah I
go to my friend, I talk to him – my friend is same my count[ry] I talk to everything of my
country.

Having the opportunity to meet with people from similar cultural or linguistic backgrounds
can help these learners through the difficulties of settling into a new location and language.
The absence of such people is noted by a Colombian learner talking about her first
experiences in Blackburn:

P. But they [Spanish speakers] coming a few months ago. But before we, just, we, Latin
people here. Anybody [nobody] speak Spanish. We don’t speak English.

This is a learner who experienced severe relationship problems in her first few months and
needed medical support for depression both for herself and for her young son, although she
has since built up friendships with her classmates. These friendships and contacts are also
important for the learners to help them survive officialdom, negotiate the minefields of
seeking leave to remain and get to know what facilities they can access in Blackburn:

F. I met her [a Brazilian woman who sometimes interprets for Portuguese speakers]
through another Angolan guy that was already living here when I arrived.

C. When I notice that he [the lawyer] can’t understand me because it’s very difficult, I
call a friend.

M. My friend he can speak Urdu and he talk with my neighbour, and sometime he help
us. He was from Pakistan and he speak Urdu with him, and he explain to him, and he
help me ring. I have cousin in Cardiff as well.

The learners strongly support each other with their learning of English, even though they may
not be close friends with people from the same country, living in the same house.

Outside of the class it seems to be church communities that provide the most opportunity for
the learners [at least, for those who come from church backgrounds themselves] to meet and
socialise with local people, so meeting their needs for integration. It was striking that no
other outlets were mentioned. Several learners specifically talk about attending different
churches and sometimes being given support to attend:

L. Sometimes they come to pick me up from the house, as well, to go [to church], I
don’t have transport, sometimes.
**C. Every other Friday I am going to a meeting in D, a church.**

For these learners, church attendance may be enabling them to address their spiritual needs, but they also provide further learning opportunities as one learner explains:

**F. There we have the opportunity to exchange opinions, at the church it’s very good because we have there a youth group that gives you the opportunity.**

On arriving in Blackburn the immediate needs of these students for housing and practical orientation were perceived to have been met by all but one student:

**C. It has everything that you can have in a house they support us.**

**M. You can go ask for house if you need any furniture for house, if you need any help for your money, they help you, they tell you Post Office.**

The material needs of these students, therefore, were seen to be met. These houses become places of both refuge and withdrawal as the students attempt to cope with their new lives.

*Constraints students face in meeting their expressed needs*

Although the students’ material needs were met, we found a complete lack of interagency support for their mental health, social and legal support needs as they arrived in Blackburn. As we have seen in the first section, all of these students have gone through traumatic experiences and most were living in constant anxiety about their families back in the countries they had left, their applications for asylum and refugee status and their future prospects:

**F. I am back home I am very tired, and go bed, I think for my life, you know – I think of everything for my life, I think of father, my mother, my brother and everything because long time I don’t see my mother or father – twenty-five years I not see my mother, yeah ...**

**P. But I really worry about my family, they live in Israel very poorly – my sister now a little better but my mom ...**

This insecurity and anxiety impact on their learning:

**Fl. I cannot think about anything. I cannot learn English, I am always thinking, thinking.**

During class observations Rachel noted several times a student’s strong mood swings and appearance of depression. One student, a former boy soldier in Angola, has severe problems:

**W. said that when visitors have come previously he has stared them out for quite a long time and has pretended he cannot read and write. I am glad she has told me this because C. takes one look at me, stops dead in his tracks frozen to the spot just inside the door and gives me a very long hostile stare and his body seems very tense and quivering. He looks very fearful and very wary and very ready to take some action if necessary. (Fieldnotes 7 March 2003.)**

The ESOL teacher and their friends give support but there is no counselling provided which
could assist the ESOL teacher to meet their needs. Only one student has managed to access support for her own and her son’s emotional and mental problems. On her arrival in Blackburn P. went through a lot of difficulties with her partner, who eventually left her and her children:

*I had problems, big problems with myself, with depression, with all my life.*

Through the visits of the health visitor to the family she was introduced to support through the women’s centre and her son is now receiving psychiatric support, part of which is his mother’s membership of a weekly parent group run by the local hospital. She is also the only student to have gained significant access to English-speaking networks; partly through this support system and partly because she now has a relationship with a local resident:

*It’s a friend. He help me a lot. English friend. Yes, he is important – yes, material things for the home and to communication with me.*

Gender, ethnicity and being a parent play a role here in both access to support and language learning. P. is the only South American student in the group and the only student to have achieved any kind of integration. Her spoken English is noticeably more fluent than that of her classmates. Having young children does give these students more opportunities to meet expert English speakers.

There is no systematic or formal support for these students to integrate into local communities, nor are they given access to any kind of activity set up to meet their social needs. All the students talked of not having anything to do after their ESOL class and during college holidays:

*F. We wake up in the morning and we don’t know where to go, sometimes we spend the whole day at home.*

*C. There is nothing for the time being, we can’t do anything.*

*F. I couldn’t really. Once a week maybe to discothèque – I don’t like the disco, just when I go to disco, and then I forget everything.*

This lack of any social provision reinforces their sense of isolation, a situation that is compounded by the fact that Blackburn is a small town which has not previously experienced a diverse mix of peoples, even though a large proportion of its population is of Asian heritage. The African students in particular have experienced racism:

*L. There was one day, I was on the telephone in the phone box, I saw English people, they saw me and they started to say “BLACK, BLACK”.*

*F. Black people have started coming here very recently – we walked in the streets and they looked at us in a way that we didn’t know what to say – everybody looked, they were scared.*

*F. Sometimes you didn’t feel like going out in the streets ... because when you just think that you will go out and people will look at you.*
As you can see from the last quote from F., this negative attention, when in public areas, sometimes leads these students to withdraw. This withdrawal, resulting both from a lack of opportunity for social activities and from racist reactions, serves to increase their anxieties and insecurity.

These students also receive no support in Blackburn for the legal processes they have to go through. Only one student, P., has a local solicitor. All the others have solicitors in either London or Dover, and have to manage their affairs through phone calls and occasional bus trips for appointments to see them. There is no language support, either:

F. *If you are lucky to find an interpreter, but I didn’t have this luck here with my lawyer, I had to take someone with me who could speak English.*

These needs to phone, answer letters from the Home Office, pick up vouchers, sign at the police station and go and travel to see their solicitors are the main reasons, apart from ill health, that the students’ attendance in class is interrupted. In addition, they often turn to the teacher W. for help, to make a phone call or discuss a letter, as she is the only support they have:

M. *She is very kind. If you ask any help, if you tell her I have to ring somebody I don’t understand how to speak, she help you.*

W. never refuses these requests for help, but they do place an extra burden on her:

*At the end of the lesson there’s always something to deal with, and even at other times, coming to the staff room to ask for this done or that done.*

We wish to record that very sadly, Faisullah, a 19-year-old student from Afghanistan with whom we had been working, took his own life on 4 July, the last day of term. Earlier the same week W. had talked to Rachel about each of her students as individual learners. The following extract written from Rachel’s fieldnotes (1 July) records what W. said about Faisullah.

_Faisullah learns from everything – all stimuli. He learns a lot on his own – he listens in the street, to the radio, TV. He asks about what he has heard and he reads a lot on his own – news on the internet, newspapers, magazines. He has a very good ear. His biggest problem is spelling. The speed at which his other language skills have developed highlights the fact that his spelling development has not kept pace. He has had periods of serious depression and paranoia. He is quite convinced that his repatriation to Afghanistan is imminent and he’s terrified as his family have already fled to Iran and are living as illegal immigrants there. It doesn’t help that he seems to have less status than the others even and has to sign in at the police station every two weeks. He can’t stay out of Blackburn for more than five days at a time. After the Christmas holidays he went backwards in his language development and the drugs he was taking for sleeplessness made it impossible for him to concentrate. He was constantly tired and lost the ground he made. He needed a lot of support at that time and it really affected his health. He kept getting infections and abscesses and he looked really tired and unhealthy. He sometimes used to panic and go home in the middle of lessons. I rang him and talked to him and M. (an Afghan classmate) and I finally...*_
convinced him to come and he snapped out of it. He almost had a relapse when a lot of Afghans were being repatriated but he got over that and is now blossoming. He’s very sensitive and artistic – a skilled craftsman – a stonemason. We once had a lesson about favourite places and he described his favourite place where those huge Buddhist statues were that the Taliban destroyed and he said it made him feel really sad. He wants to get into the building trade eventually. He’ll move on to E3.

Summary of analysis
Despite these constraints the three-hour daily language class is a rich and supportive learning environment which builds on the informal support systems and desire to learn that these students bring to it. Some of the elements that contribute towards this positive classroom culture are:

- **The teacher’s relationship with the students.** W. seems to strike the balance between structure, discipline, support and friendship which she thinks the students need, responding to each student as an adult. All the students appear without exception to respond very positively to W.’s teaching and facilitation of the learning group.

- **Students’ support for each other.** Strong peer social and learning support is an integral feature of this classroom culture, encouraged by the teacher.

- **Resources students bring into the class.** Peer support is offered particularly by students drawing on their own linguistic resources and shared knowledge of different languages including English. Although the classroom space is often a multilingual one, the overriding shared motivation of these students is to learn English and linguistic resources are used mainly to this end. Humour is a common feature in student interactions, often taking place in activities such as mechanical drills, making these more meaningful and enjoyable through play, with the teacher often joining in.

- **Barriers to learning.** The class observations revealed that at any one time one or more students were visibly struggling with physical and mental health problems. Class observations also showed that there is very little use of strategies to bring the ‘outside’ into the class and for the spontaneous free use and practice of available spoken and written English.

**ESOL provision/institutional frameworks**
It is clear that the E1 teacher is acting as ESOL teacher, social worker and counsellor with very little institutional support, which inevitably takes its toll. Interviews with the teacher and students clearly signal the need for the college to act on suggestions staff have been making related to the needs of these students. ESOL staff would like to see the college playing a wider role such as providing social space and activities and providing counselling for progression, training and job-seeking by properly trained counsellors in the college Student Services, who understand the particular needs and issues associated with students seeking asylum and refugee status. The college could also play a role in more interagency joined-up thinking and support for this group of students.
**Future plans**
During the next year Rachel will move out from the college context into basic skills provision in the community. She hopes to begin by working with some learners who are involved in a basic skills initiative with Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery as well as following up contacts already made with other providers. As part of the longitudinal study, Rachel will be continuing to work with a small number of the students seeking asylum that she has already interviewed. She will follow their learning journeys, both formal and informal and study their uses of language, literacy and numeracy in everyday contexts outside the class.

As a final glimpse of the students’ lives the next page shows photos taken by some of the students.
Lisette is an E1 ESOL student from Rwanda who came to Britain in July 2002 and who is seeking asylum in the UK. As part of the research she and other students took photos to represent their feelings about living and being students in Blackburn. (These photos are reproduced with the permission of the participants. Copyright Lancaster Literacy Research Centre).

Lisette with fellow ESOL students who come from a wide range of countries and linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The class is an important social space as well as a learning environment, the students offering each other much needed friendship and support. Their teacher is continually offering social and learning support related to their status as asylum seekers.

Lisette spends a great deal of time in her room as she has little money to go out and she feels safe and secure at home. She does various personal, as well as college related, reading and writing activities. She says she also spends a lot of time thinking and worrying about her situation as an asylum seeker and about her future.
3.4.2 Data analysis, Lancaster – the individual learner

The research work in Lancaster has focused on long-term ethnographic participant-observation, building up relationships with students over time. To illustrate the sorts of understandings which are emerging from working in this way, we present here an initial analysis of all the data that has been collected so far relating to one particular student, D. We first describe D. and her experiences of learning and then move on to address the benefits she experiences in coming to classes, the things that help her with her learning and the things which make her learning more difficult. Finally, we summarise the themes that are emerging from this work.

About D.

D. is a woman in her late 30s who lives independently in a rented flat. She is assisted in everyday life by a group of carers from a local network which supports adults with learning disabilities. She lives in a small town near Lancaster, where she was born and grew up. Her parents ran a grocer’s shop in the town and her grandmother ran a pub, so she is well-known and has lots of personal contacts in the local area. She does not work at the moment. She has a boyfriend who she sees about once a week and her family are very important to her. She has been coming to college since September 2002, attending the Tuesday afternoon English and the Friday morning Maths classes.

Karin has worked with D. one-to-one in both the English and the Maths classes over the course of the year. D. has so far participated in two research interviews, one held in college relating to what learning has meant in terms of her everyday life and one held at her flat, in which she asked to talk about her family. This second interview also addressed her everyday literacy practices and the influence of the learning she had been doing at college. She also agreed to have a one-to-one session with her regular volunteer in the English class recorded. She is happy to continue to participate in the project longer-term and often expresses positive interest in being involved. Karin and D. have built up a good friendly relationship over the course of the year.

D. used to live in a mobile home with her mum, but moved into a flat after her mum died a couple of years ago. Losing her mum, who used to be her principal carer, was a difficult experience for her and dealing with this has shaped much of her life since. When she first arrived at the flat where she now lives she was very distressed and cried ‘all the time’. She had had insufficient support in the mobile home after her mum’s death, having a bad experience particularly with an unreliable carer who used to turn up late. The network which supports her now meets her needs much better. Carers come in daily to assist with shopping, cooking and everyday needs and stay overnight four nights a week as D. prefers to have company, although she is learning to spend more time alone and getting better at it. She takes care of a lot of her own daily chores, such as doing the washing and vacuuming the house, sometimes with help from carers. A poster is put up in the kitchen each day by one of the carers, to remind D. and her carers about what is planned for the day, in words and images.

It was the manager of her support network who first suggested D. might like to try attending the Adult College. She was initially very reluctant and suffered a panic attack before her initial interview. She had already had some negative experiences of education. D. attended the Further Education college in Lancaster briefly at the age of 18, after having left school at 15, but she found the experience difficult and unpleasant and this put her off formal education for
some time. She said that the things she did at the FE college were *boring*, that they only did 'cooking ... went out ... things that I thought it was boring'. There were also practical difficulties. She had to make two bus journeys on her own to get to and from college, which was both personally challenging for her and expensive for her mother. She has health problems which can make long flights of stairs difficult, but was told she was not allowed to use the lifts at the FE college. So she did not attend classes there for long. She has also attended computer courses at Preston College but did not enjoy the experience. In general she does not report her prior educational experiences positively, saying that `at the other school we didn’t learn much' and that she remembered doing only:

> boring things ... We didn’t do much really, only morning service and went to watch programmes about this, that and the other. ... Didn’t learn, not a lot.

However, she enjoys coming to the classes at the Adult College. She attends both of her classes on her own without carers and participates in both individual and group work. She is sociable and friendly and enjoys chatting and joking with tutors, volunteers and other students. Her skills, abilities and confidence have developed significantly in the time she has been attending classes.

**Benefits D. experiences from attending classes**

There are significant social benefits associated with D.’s attendance at classes. When we talked about the difference that coming to classes has made in her life, she said without hesitation that it has changed:

> the way I feel ... it’s made me happier, made me better, not sad ... I don’t cry any more.

She said that she was a mess’ after her mother died, but that coming to college has made me more happier ... I’m not down, not sad any more.’ She finds that:

> It’s the way to get it out of my mind, working ... It’s better than staying at the new flat and crying all the time. ... It takes it off my mind. A bit, not a lot though, but it does help with you and J. [volunteer tutor], making me laugh. You both make me laugh.

When asked what she gets out of coming to classes, her first response was:

> Fun, laughter ... interrupting, like M. [another student who had been particularly rowdy that day]. Things like that. It’s just good to come. Instead of staying in the flat, being lonely on my own, I thought I’d come here to college.

In the second interview she said that:

> English, I love that, we have a laugh and a joke, you see.

D.’s gains in self-confidence and self-esteem were visible in the way she interacted with other students. Karin did not attend the classes until late October, by which time D. was coming into classes on her own, but the teacher-researcher in the class reported that when she first attended in September 2002, she could not come to class alone and was accompanied by one of her carers. In October and November she was participating in the group work portion of class in a cautious way; fieldnotes record comments like D. spotted rhymes – quietly, or record her spelling out words with a lot of support from the tutor. A few months later, she
was one of the most willing and vocal participants in group work and even contributed to managing other students’ behaviour. For instance fieldnotes from 29 April 2003 record:

**P.** [male student] *was excited and talking a lot, it was starting to make P. [female student] uncomfortable, she was frowning and making slightly unhappy noises, so D. said his name sharply several times to try and make him be quiet.*

Later in the same class she spontaneously entertained the students by doing Basil Fawlty impressions at an appropriate moment: *Sibyl – no!* She will also joke with tutors:

20 May 03: *D. behaves as if she is very happy and confident in class now. While L. [one of the class tutors] was checking over some work, there was a loud call from around the corner where D. was working with J.: L.! I can’t read your writing!*’

One of D.’s care workers told us that both the care team and D.’s family have also seen a big change in her since she has been coming to college. She is happier, more confident and a lot more assertive than she has ever been before. Her body image has changed, she is confident enough to wear trousers now which she was previously not willing to do. (D. makes a real effort with her appearance, she often buys new clothes and looks very well turned-out.) The carer said that the initial aim of D.’s college attendance had been to expand her network of connections so that she was less reliant on the carers in different situations and that it has worked very well.

These social benefits have been accompanied by subject-specific learning gains. Having worked with D. throughout the year, Karin was able to see progress in a number of areas. Her handwriting became clearer and her knowledge of how to spell different words improved. She became much more confident in using the computer, both in using the keyboard and the mouse. For instance on 20 June 2003 we did a diagnostic assessment in the Maths class using the computer, and fieldnotes report that:

*D. is now quite at ease with using the mouse and clicked away happily.*

This was a new skill which she acquired over the course of the year. She reported in her first interview that:

*I do money better and I do my writing better than I did.*

By the end of the year, she was writing letters to her carers with support and writing short stories based on picture stimuli. She has also started going to the library with one of her carers and getting books out and she enjoys reading books, especially animal stories. If one of the carers brings a newspaper in she will always look at that, and enjoys looking at catalogues and magazines. One of her carers says [2nd interview] that she is now able to read out telephone numbers over the phone accurately and confidently and that this is a skill which has definitely improved since D. has been attending college. She also enjoys writing Easter cards, Christmas cards and birthday cards to friends and relatives. All of this is significant progress for her.

*Things that help D. with her learning*

D. says that the main thing that has made this possible for her is the help that she has
received, particularly working one-to-one with a regular volunteer in the English class and with Karin in the maths class. She said that her principal concern before she came to college was ‘getting no-one to help me’. She finds maths more difficult than English and is very clear that she will only continue with the maths classes next year if she can be confident that one-to-one support will be available to her. However, she is quite pro-active about getting the help that she needs. At the beginning of the year, she was not enjoying the maths class, in which she was working without a regular volunteer tutor. After Karin’s first research visit to the Tuesday afternoon English class, D. approached her and asked if Karin could also come along and work with her in the maths class.

She is also very clear about the things that she likes working with. For instance, she uses plastic money to support her sums work in the maths class and whenever Karin or the class tutor suggested she try without the money, she would say, ‘No, I use money.’ Towards the end of the year she was gradually starting to do more sums without the mediation of the coins, but only when she was ready to do so herself. She enjoys working more when she is able to select activities and meditational tools in this way and can sometimes become frustrated if her needs are not listened to.

It is also important to her that the class is a safe environment in which she can progress without experiencing too much pressure.

**K.** So do you think that it really was starting to come to college that made the big difference for you?

**D.** Yeah. With a bit of talking, a bit of listening, a bit of confidence. Not pushing me but just … just said, go try it and see if you like it or not.

**Things that make learning difficult for D.**

Several factors have been identified that can make learning difficult for D. The most important thing is for her to have someone available to work with her and where this is not possible she can become frustrated or feel stuck.

Another thing which she finds difficult is being in a noisy environment with lots of interruptions. Having people around her who are noisy or who interrupt make it hard for her to concentrate on her work:

**K.** What sorts of things do you not like doing?

**D.** Mmm – not being interrupted … I hate that because you don’t get on, do you?

From fieldnotes:

11 Feb 03: D. is thinking of dropping out of the Maths class on a Friday, partly because she finds it hard and partly because she finds it difficult to work in a group with R. [another student], who she finds ‘rude’.

7 Mar 03: D. finds it very difficult to concentrate when M. is working with her, as he is very noisy.
A major difficulty D. experiences is that she often has to miss classes for health-related reasons. Notes on this are spread throughout the year’s fieldnotes:

3 Dec 02: D. has been ill, she collapsed last night and looked very tired. She is seeing the doctor on Thursday.

10 Dec 02: D. had seen the doctor since she collapsed the day before class last week, and her blood pressure was slightly high, so the collapse could have been a combination of that and of having been very tired. She was going to get the results of some more tests today. She still looks tired, she had very dark circles under her eyes.

31 Jan 03: D. has been ill, her cold lasted for a long time, she still has a sore neck and had a temperature last Friday which is why she didn’t come to last week’s Maths class.

18 Feb 03: D. said that she was ill last Friday with deafness and chest pains so hadn’t made it to class.

11 Mar 03: D. is still not well and is very tired. She said that she had had diarrhoea three times that day and isn’t sleeping – the circles under her eyes were very, very dark today. She is seeing the doctor again on Monday at 2 for a check-up.

20 May 03: D. was ill yesterday, and said she was sick all day – she had very dark circles under her eyes – and didn’t feel like coming to college today.

As well as suffering illness, D. has had a number of accidents which have affected her health during the year. She fell and hurt her ankle in spring and her arm in summer:

6 Jun 03: D. had hurt her arm and was in pain. ... She slipped in the kitchen and banged her arm and her head ... She is in pain now and thinks she may need to go and see a doctor next week if it doesn’t sort itself out. Her ankle is still bad, too.

20 Jun 03: D.’s ankle is playing up again, she is waiting for an appointment at the hospital. She was also rubbing her arm where she fell.

She also has a heart condition which requires monitoring and has had eye operations in the past.

Finally, D. is still dealing with the grief associated with losing her mother and there are times such as important anniversaries when she finds it difficult to concentrate for this reason:

17 Dec 02: D. said she was a bit tired today and feeling a bit sad, because it was exactly a year since she had moved into her flat today.

28 Mar 03: Today was a difficult day for D. as it was her mum’s birthday, so she was thinking about her a lot.
Emerging themes
Many of the themes which are emerging from the work that has been done with D. have also emerged from work with others in the Adult College.

- **The importance of support being available** which is appropriate to the learner’s needs.
- **The importance of the learner having control** over learning activities and over the environment.
- **The importance of the learning environment as a safe space**, in which friendly and trusting relationships are built up, which make it possible to integrate subject-specific learning with discussion of broader life issues.
- **Health issues** as a principal barrier to learning.
- **The very significant individual and social benefits** emerging from this learning which do not necessarily relate to testable achievement.

Future plans
In the next few months, we will be working through the data which has been collected relating to other learners in a similar fashion, pulling out the emerging themes and patterns which are relevant to understanding the relationships between people’s literacy, numeracy and ESOL learning and their lives as a whole.

Over the next year, Karin plans to carry out similar ethnographic work moving out into the community provision that exists in Lancaster. Most of this is offered through the Adult College which will facilitate access, since this provision involves many of the same teachers, and teachers who have been involved with the research so far have given positive feedback about the impact of having a researcher in the class and the benefits which this has offered for teachers and students. She will also continue to work with a smaller number of the learners she has got to know this year, as a basis for the longitudinal element of the project. Ten of these students have been identified as being potential ‘longitudinal people’, and will be followed up with regular formal and informal interviews and visits throughout the life of the project. These are also the people with whom more in-depth work about their everyday literacy and numeracy activities will be carried out.

3.4.3 Data analysis, Liverpool – the focal classroom

First analysis in Liverpool has concentrated on looking in depth at one focal classroom, a drop-in Maths workshop, so that emerging themes can be compared and contrasted across both, looking for differences and aspects of synergy between them.

Concentration and engagement
The Rotunda maths group video shows clearly that in spite of the very poor learning environment (it was noisy, hot and ‘old fashioned’) the students displayed enormous concentration and attention to task. This was not simply a ‘video effect’ as this was also recorded in observational fieldnotes on other days. Students were engaged in their worksheet and were able to communicate with each other, both individually and as a group, then return to their own learning.
Pace and support
The issue of pace and not getting lost in lessons, was significant as each of the four students in their pre-video interview had described themselves as having been very shy at school, where they had been left behind as they were unable to ask for help when needed. The students in their pre-video interviews all described the maths drop-in as friendly and informal, an atmosphere that supported their learning. They also all described being motivated to learn particular skills, some connected to employability and some to coping with everyday life, which strengthened their feelings of individual self-worth. The video analysis showed how these two things co-existed in the maths drop-in where there was social activity and group interaction alongside focused individual work, with students being able to move easily from one to the other. K., the 19 year-old learner, described this:

*Sometimes I can work better on me own. When I’m on me own I can concentrate more and get more done, but like sometimes if you’re with a mate you tend to talk, and I work as well as go to a mate if it’s in a different part. And then I work sometimes with Kath [tutor] as well. When Kath’s helping me I feel, ‘Oh I can do it now ’cos she’s showed me step by step’. It’s just different, like you come in and if you oh like you’re like don’t fancy doing maths or like I want to work on me own and don’t want to talk, or I want to gab to someone ’cos I don’t want to do maths. Or, I’ve got a hangover so you want to talk to your friends like after. But if you come in and you think you want to do it you want to work as a team or get Kath to come and help you.*

The friendly, informal, noisy atmosphere, with continual interruptions and a calm supportive figure, may mirror everyday learning at home rather than formal learning in college settings; it may therefore be known and comfortable. For many learners noise, lack of private space and interruption is part of their everyday experience in family settings. For these learners this learning environment clearly worked as they were motivated and engaged in their individual learning tasks and in their immediate learning community.

Negotiation of learning
Another theme to emerge from the first analysis, particularly in the video, was the level of negotiation between student and tutor. This was a constant and multilayered dialogue built on trust and recognition of teaching and learning roles that also related to everyday lives. There were clear expectations of the tutor and of the students, in negotiating what was to be learnt. K. identifies this above and in her comment:

*Kath comes up to you after you’ve done like this week and she says, ‘What would you like to work on?’ So I thought, well I’ve done me times, me like times on the clock. I’ve done me left and me right. So me adds and take aways – thought well I’m not that good on me times so I’ll do that instead of like doing me clock again because then I’m going over the same thing again. I get bored of it and I start thinking, oh I won’t learn.*

J., the male student in the drop-in, also describes a similar process:

*Say for two to three weeks you might like spend time on a like different ... so you might do addition say for three weeks and then she might say, ‘Oh you’re getting better at that,’ then she’ll move you up to the next level, like subtraction. And then when you can do that and then say multiplication again. Say for a couple of weeks at that, then say fractions or whatever you feel. Like your confidence is there and you know yourself, in your head, as well that you’ve got the ability to do it. And then she’ll move us.*
Links to everyday life
Links to the everyday were made both in the teaching material used and in the interaction between tutor and students. The pre- and post-video interviews showed that the students were able to relate what they were learning in the material to their everyday lives. Examples of learning gains were given as learning about weighing helping with personal use of scales, of number recognition helping with computer keyboard use, of timekeeping and record-keeping improving at work and also of being able to understand temperature ranges when booking a holiday. There were moments of teaching and learning that moved from clear tutor–student role negotiation to more informal learning. In one moment the learners and the tutor responded in patterns more linked to everyday gender behaviour, breaking some of the patterns of previous interaction. A student-led example of this was the ‘measuring episode’ where a tape measure was used to measure objects in the classroom, including parts of the body. Instead of asserting authority simply as a tutor in the ensuing hilarity Kath responded as a person with warmth and humour. She and the learner, who was standing, laughed standing close and giggled. It would have been hard for an outsider to identify who was the learner and who was the tutor. This episode suggested that the negotiation was two-way, where roles moved between formal and informal teaching and learning roles and where links to everyday life behaviour could occur.

Emerging themes
Emerging themes from this first analysis of the focal classroom focusing on learning and teaching include:

- **Negotiation between learning and teaching based upon response to individual learning motivation.** This included previous life experiences and future plans and aspirations.

- **Learning engagement linked to everyday life in learning materials and learning progression.** Learners linked their engagement to the relevance of skills learned to their lives, including future employability and monitored their progress.

- **Social aspect of learning and the importance of a learning community.** This was expressed as a relationship between individual achievement and group support; learning was a shared but individual enterprise.

- **Adult learning preferences: relationship to skills acquisition and subject content.** The desire to work individually and at their own pace was linked to previous experiences of learning ‘failure’ at school. Uses of learning and teaching methods including self-directed learning, individual demonstration and instruction provided a range of learning supports.

- **The tutor and her role.** Although the classroom was an informal atmosphere there was trust that the tutor would help to achieve learning identified by the learner.

- **The learner as an active agent.** The learner shared some individual responsibility for outlining and monitoring their learning.

Future plans
As the analysis develops, these and other emerging themes will also be looked at in relation to the spelling class at Dovecote. Insights into motivation and engagement from these focal classrooms will be supported through the longitudinal aspect of the study by repeatedly interviewing these learners in other contexts of their lives.
In addition to the focal classroom study, eight learners were identified from these classes to participate in the Adult Learners’ Lives project as longitudinal participants. They will be interviewed over the next two years, establishing links between everyday lives and learning in greater detail. Introductory interviews have been carried out with all eight, and second interviews have been carried out with five of these learners. From autumn 2003 onwards, Yvon will be following up links which have been made with a domestic violence support group and a tenants’ association, to pursue the Adult Learners’ Lives research in community settings.

Section 4:
The Teacher-Researcher Fellowship Programme

This one-year programme started in January 2003. It was aimed at experienced ABE practitioners, in full-time or substantial part-time posts, with a first degree or equivalent in a relevant area. The programme aimed to ensure an active role for practitioners in the developing programme of the research of the National Research and Development Centre, and to build capacity for organisations to carry out research and reflective practice in the field of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL. The involvement of teacher-researchers ensured that the work done is relevant, geared to the needs of adult learners and that its value is recognised by teachers.

Six teacher-researchers were recruited from within institutions which are research sites for the Adult Learners’ Lives project –

- The Adult College Lancaster – 2.
- Liverpool Community College – 2.
- Blackburn College – 1.
- Accrington and Rossendale College – 1.

Teacher-researchers have been supported by one day per week fellowships (approx. £6000 per year) lasting one year, paid direct to colleges for full-time teachers to release them from work and paid directly to the teachers in part-time employment. In addition, research expenses such as travel and fieldwork costs have been covered by the project. Fees for enrolment on one research training module were also paid.

The scheme has enabled practitioners involved to take time out of teaching to learn ways of doing research, to design and carry out a piece of research in a supportive environment with the Adult Learners’ Lives research team and to feed back their work to colleagues in their work-place. In this way the six practitioners have taken an active role in the developing programme of the research of the National Research and Development Centre through the Adult Learners’ Lives project, helping to build capacity for their institutions to carry out research and reflective practice in the field of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL.
In addition to carrying out their own studies, the teacher-researchers have been working with groups of learners, conducting interviews and observations in collaboration with the Adult Learners' Lives project researchers. They are involved in the interpretation and analysis of Adult Learners' Lives data and are contributing to the dissemination of findings of the research project as a whole. They have had important contributions to make in decision-making at each stage of the research process: aims, methodology, data collection, interpretation and dissemination. The involvement of teacher-researchers has ensured that the work done has been relevant and geared to the needs of adult learners.

4.1 The process of setting up the Teacher-Researcher Fellowship Programme

October – January 2003

- Regular meetings (5/6) of the Adult Learners' Lives team, national evaluator and diploma module leader to plan all aspects of the programme and to link the research practice module with needs of the Adult Learners’ Lives project.

November and December 2002

- Contact and discussions with basic skills managers (Advocates) at Adult Learners' Lives research sites (colleges).

- Advocates advertised Teacher-Researcher Fellowship Programme to staff and sought agreement from college management.

- Adult Learners' Lives researchers at each site had informal discussions with interested teachers.

- Formal agreement made with each college.

As mentioned in Section 3.1, recruitment to the Teacher-Researcher programme was more difficult than we had imagined it would be. Staff were already committed to work and managers were reluctant to release experienced staff to the programme. Changes to the qualifications framework at the time also meant that staff were unclear whether the fellowship fitted in to the new framework and pressures to gain level 4 qualifications took priority for most people.

December 2002 and January 2003

- Informal interviews of applicants took place.

Mid-January 2003

- Introduction day – Teacher-Researcher Fellowship Programme and Research Practice Diploma module.

- Partnership working agreements signed with the six teacher-researchers.
Teacher-Researcher Fellowship activities

- Attended an introduction day.
- Participated in regular meetings of the group at the Literacy Research Centre.
- Participated in a residential seminar for teacher-researchers.
- Completed a credit-bearing module on action-research/reflective practice.
- Designed a personal development plan and discussed this at intervals with their research mentor.
- Kept a research/learning diary during the year.
- Disseminated their experience to colleagues within the organisation in which they work. This will feed into the national seminar at which they will disseminate their experiences and findings to other practitioners at the year end.

Support from teacher-researcher affiliated colleges

In order to embed the work of the teacher-researchers the colleges involved have:

- Made available adequate resources to the teacher-researchers to carry out their work (e.g. protection of release time, provision of consumables, computer access).
- Taken an active interest in the research project being carried out in the organisation through regular meetings with the teacher-researchers and full-time researchers, supporting them through participation in decision-making and helping to facilitate dissemination of findings.

Support from the university and Adult Learners’ Lives project

The university has acted as a resource and information centre, meeting place and source of research expertise, by:

- Providing mentoring support, including virtual and face-to-face group meetings, individual tutorials.
- Providing project supervision for research secondment.
- Providing training in research methods.
- Providing meeting/study space and access to computer facilities.
- Providing library access.
- Organising a dissemination event in conjunction with other host universities around the country.
- Giving professional development advice on registering for higher degrees, diplomas and research degrees offered by higher education institutions represented in the consortium.
4.2 The teacher-researchers’ projects

The teacher-researchers have been carrying out individual projects within the framework of the Adult Learners’ Lives project. Each project has been designed by the teacher-researchers to research issues arising out of and directly relevant to their own practice, but at the same time to contribute to the overarching research aims of the Adult Learners’ Lives project by studying language, numeracy and ESOL in learners lives, and/or language, numeracy and ESOL learning opportunities.

**Dianne Beck** is studying the literacy practices and literacy needs of members of a domestic violence support group. She is a participant observer in this group and is collecting data through observation and interviews with the founder of the group, survivors and volunteers. She is also collecting and analysing documents and texts associated with the work of the group.

**Gill Burgess** is studying the way in which women learning English cope with issues relating to childbirth and the care of small children and the ESOL demands of these aspects of their lives. She is interested in their informal opportunities for the acquisition of spoken English. She is interviewing five women with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and people in the community who interact with these women and provide support for them. She intends also to observe and record episodes of interaction in these informal settings which provide ESOL learning opportunities.

**Kath Gilbert** is studying the numeracy histories, numeracy practices and informal methods of learning numeracy of students she teaches. She has interviewed students who are approaching Level One Numeracy, in order to get closer to their own starting points and contexts. She has also designed a questionnaire to be circulated more widely in the centre where she works, investigating people’s attitudes to maths, practical strategies for coping and preferred methods of undertaking different types of calculation.

**Russ Hodson** is studying the role of referral agencies in learners’ take-up of provision and how the services of referral agencies might be improved in order to better respond to learners’ needs. He is interviewing learners, tutors, partners in the referral process and others associated with the work of referral agencies and is developing a questionnaire to distribute more widely on the basis of his findings from interviews.

**Andrew Hudson** is studying the numeracy practices of his students, who come from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. He is interested in their uses of numeracy in everyday life, their perceptions of maths and numeracy, the way classroom numeracy translates into everyday life, and vice versa. He is investigating these through individual interviews, encouraging students to collect numeracy artefacts from their lives and teaching sessions exploring the transference of understanding between the abstract and the concrete and vice versa.

**Carol Woods** is studying the barriers to learning which students have encountered before joining adult language, numeracy and ESOL classes later in life. She is particularly interested in those barriers which are not so easy to identify or resolve by practical provision: for instance, lack of child care can be solved by providing crèche facilities, but low self-esteem is more difficult to identify and resolve. She has interviewed four people who joined classes much later in life to discover what caused them not to seek classes before and what they hope to gain from them now.
More details of these projects are included in the teacher-researchers’ interim reports at the end of this section.

The ‘Reflective research and evaluation for professional practice’ module of the Diploma in effective practice in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL
The teacher-researchers were six of a group of 18 adult language, numeracy and ESOL practitioners taking a research methods module provided through Lancaster University. It involved an induction day followed by five units of distance learning work. For each unit, the participants read extracts from articles, mainly about research methodology, took part in a ‘posted’ (asynchronous) online discussion and in a ‘live’ (synchronous) discussion on set topics. The teacher-researchers formed a separate live discussion group led by Roz Ivani, who also acted as their academic mentor. She was able to provide connections and continuity between their work on the diploma and other aspects of the fellowship. The diploma took a significant amount of the teacher-researchers’ time, focus and energy in the first six months of the fellowship, but now that they are completing their assignments it is giving way to other aspects of their work as teacher-researchers.

Academic mentoring
After the end of the diploma distance learning activities, Roz Ivanic established a fortnightly live discussion between the six teacher-researchers and her as academic mentor which was no longer driven by diploma activities. This is providing a way for them to keep in touch with each other and to have a chance to discuss their work together regularly. This is especially important now that the Adult Learners’ Lives researchers are to some extent withdrawing from the research sites associated with the teacher-researchers in order to concentrate on analysis and to set up new research contacts to start in September. In addition, most of the teacher-researchers also send a monthly ‘reflection’ to Roz on what they have been doing and thinking as teacher-researchers during that month.

Teacher-researchers’ residential: 6 – 7 July 2003
This event created a strong sense of unity and common purpose for the Adult Learners’ Lives team. It made a big contribution to the Adult Learners’ Lives project as a whole, helping all those of us there to establish focus, to identify key themes and ideas, to develop a common approach to analysis, to develop policy on ethical issues and communication strategy and to see new directions for the future.

4.3 Interim reports from each of the six teacher-researchers

Dianne Beck

Background
I have only been teaching since September 2001 and viewed the partnership with Lancaster University as something of an acceleration in my development as a practitioner.

Diploma
I feel relatively inexperienced as a teacher. The emphasis in the diploma module at Lancaster is on researching practice to inform and share good practice. This has helped me enormously in making me analyse my relationships with the students, the subject, the college and the curriculum. In a way, I am being forced to think all of the time, nothing is too small for scrutiny, no policy too big it can’t be analysed or changed.
Involvement with the Adult Learners Lives project
I was very protective about the students who would be interviewed, taped and videoed for the Adult Learners Lives’ project conducted by Lancaster. The guarantees of confidentiality and the care taken to put the students at ease has enhanced them – they feel proud to be part of a national research project but, more importantly, have gained self-respect because they have been listened to and not taken for granted. They have been pleased, as the consumer, to be asked for their input on what and how they want to learn, rather than having it imposed upon them.

(For my own part, being videoed is about as pleasant as being observed but just as informing.)

Individual research project
One of my students had founded a domestic violence support group and was attending a business English session to learn how to present the project in a professional way, verbally and in writing. She asked me to become involved in what was then the steering group.

As the Adult Learners’ Lives project is also committed to research marginalised areas, such as domestic violence, my involvement with this project offered a unique opportunity for insights into the links between education and domestic violence and what marginalised individuals and groups, such as this, want or need from education.

Since becoming involved with the project, I have been trained, along with the other volunteers, in setting up a company and registering it with Companies House and the Charities Commission. I have learnt a lot about community enterprises and how to fund them and have been involved in team-building with the volunteers. I have also been elected Company Secretary and Chairperson. It has been necessary to spend as much time as possible with the group to make fieldnotes and gather data and documentation to enrich the research.

In addition to the fieldnotes and documentation I am collecting, I have taped interviews with the founder of the group, with a volunteer and with a survivor. (Six tapes in all.) The first interviews were loosely structured, the second pick up on emergent themes from the first. The third set of interviews will be with the volunteers who have been involved in training for the management of community enterprises, their comments on the training and their reasons for involvement.

Conducting and taping interviews on such a painful subject has been quite harrowing for the interviewees and interviewer alike. However, the tapes and research will not only be useful for the Adult Learners’ Lives project in Lancaster, they will also be used in the educational projects the domestic violence company is now forming. A short course in recognising and dealing with domestic violence is being prepared for college for the autumn term.

The interviewees have found relaying their experiences and thoughts cathartic – so if nothing else comes of this research, it has made some individuals feel a little better about their lives.
Gill Burgess

My research is about ESOL women learners and their lives, in particular women who have had to cope with issues relating to childbirth and the care of small children. I am trying to find out how ESOL women build up involvement in social networks and if/how this has provided informal opportunities for their acquisition of spoken English as well as support in accessing services and information.

In terms of practical outcomes for my college I am looking for ways to support the learning of spoken English for this group of women who find attending formal classes difficult.

I’m looking at two areas:

1. The women’s own accounts of their experiences of moving to the UK and having and bringing up children alongside their learning of spoken English.

2. The nature of interactions between ESOL women and native speakers in an informal community setting, specifically within a parent and toddler group and the learning opportunities these might provide.

At the moment I am in the process of collecting data for (1) from five women from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Egypt, Mexico, S. Korea, China, India). They are all current or former learners from my ESOL classes. I have so far used semi-structured recorded interviews with four of the women (the fifth interview is planned for next week). I’ve broadly transcribed three of the interviews and begun some preliminary analysis. I’m looking for any emerging themes and also at the language the women use to describe themselves, their roles and their experiences of coping and learning.

Some ideas which are emerging from the data I have analysed so far are:

- The importance of feelings and attitudes in getting involved and accessing support and learning opportunities.
- Balancing individual fulfilment against responsibilities as wife and mother.
- Effect of prior learning experiences.
- The role of the church and related community groups.
- How having children can help women access groups in the community through commonality of experience but make access to formal learning opportunities more difficult because of child care issues.
- Literacy skills supporting oral skills as a coping strategy.

In the autumn I am planning to approach (2) by:

- Interviewing some of the native speakers involved in the community groups identified by the learners about their perceptions relating to ESOL women.
- Observing, recording and analysing episodes of interaction at a parent and toddler group.

I’m also thinking about designing a written questionnaire to use with a wider sample of women at the college based on my findings from (1).
Since January this year, Dianne Beck and I have been involved in small research projects funded by Lancaster University. Part of the work has been based on looking at teaching and learning, with Yvon, the research worker, videoing classes and talking with students. The other part consists of following up individual themes, in literacy in Diane’s case and in numeracy for me.

I felt it could be interesting to look more closely at how people use maths and how they cope in everyday life, which links back to their past experiences and feelings about maths. I think that we all try to get closer to students’ own starting points and contexts, rather than relying on the curriculum entirely, but as numeracy tutors we often tend to have a more external view of students’ lives compared with English tutors. So I’ve taped a series of interviews with a mixture of students and workers in the Rotunda, where I’m based, to find out more about their individual maths histories. The interviews (about an hour long) are semi-structured, so based loosely on some questions, but quite informal. Because the sample was too small to be representative of anything in any way, I’ve restricted it to people who I think are around or approaching Level One, in a very general way. The questions attempted to cover the early experiences in school and perhaps work, peoples’ feelings about these and also their current experiences, strategies and attitudes.

The results have been really interesting and have helped to give me a much greater perspective – like the difference between a two-dimensional image and 3-D. At the moment I’m trying out a short questionnaire based on attitudes to maths and the practical strategies people have for coping and I am aiming to use it for anyone in the centre, rather than maths students alone. I don’t anticipate any particular conclusions and the intention is mainly to collect more information on numeracy practices by extending the scope. I hope it will add another perspective to the interviews, a degree of triangulation perhaps. It has a different basis too, in that I am not personally involved, since I neither know the students nor ask the questions.

I’m not sure whether any of this could be of use to maths practitioners – we obviously don’t have time to go round interviewing all our students! However, I hope that some ideas may eventually emerge that we can use. For example, I wonder whether the use of questionnaires could be helpful as part of our practice, stimulating discussion with students and giving a more rounded picture, to supplement what we learn from initial interview and reviews. I’m confident that the staff in the Literacy Research Centre in Lancaster are very serious about using student centred research to affect policies in the long run – are qualifications and curricula necessarily relevant to all students’ needs, for example? I’m hoping next term that it will be possible for me to work on maths for ESOL students and look at different language uses and assumptions.
Russ Hodson

The role of referral agencies in basic skills provision in Stacksteads and the implications for basic skills learners.

Aims

- Investigate how the learners’ journeys have progressed to date and to evaluate the role of local referral agencies in this process.
- Compare/contrast learners’ experiences.
- Evaluate the collaborative approach of ARC and the referral agencies and how this impacts on learners’ experiences.

Data collection

- Classroom observation [fieldwork].
- Semi-structured individual interviews with learners.
- Interviews with key informants – partners, tutors.
- Photos.
- Questionnaires.

Progress update

- Classroom observations with two tutors have taken place.
- Interviews have taken place with two learners and the lead tutor.

Next steps

- Interview[s] with chief partners.
- Follow-up interviews with two students identified above.
- Identification of contact number/address for Learner 1.
- Interviews with a number of key partners.
- Development of questionnaire.
- Distribution of questionnaire.
- Collation of answers.

Emerging issues/conclusions

- Lack of joint-planning/cohesion in Stacksteads regeneration area.
- Lack of shared goals amongst partners.
- Very different experiences of quality of referral agencies.
- Lack of follow-up by local agencies.
- Very different prior learning experiences of student group.
- Widening participation strategies clashing with funding pressures.
- Possibility of LSC funding project to deal with issues raised above.
Aims
The general aim of the research is to find out something about the numeracy practices of my students beyond the classroom in their everyday lives. I put together the following key questions:

1. What are the numeracy practices used by students in everyday (including work) life?
2. What are the students’ perceptions of maths and numeracy?
3. How is classroom learning translated into everyday numeracy practices?
4. How are numeracy practices translated into formal classroom learning?
5. What evidence is there of numeracy, as a cultural phenomenon?

Methods
Through regular meetings and discussions with my mentor I formulated my approach. Approach is the best descriptor of my activity; I was trying to feel my way into the work without too many set methods or views. Nevertheless, it was evident that I would mostly likely be involved in:

- Individual interviews with students.
- Helping students record their numeracy practices. Photographs would be helpful.
- Helping students collect numeracy artefacts from their lives.
- Teaching sessions exploring the transference of understanding between the abstract and the concrete and vice versa. The bridge between numeracy and maths.

Data
I have currently completed five interviews between 20 and 30 minutes long.

Semi-structured interviews are used, these ensure focus using a checklist of key questions. These questions are intended to be a stimulus to discussion around certain topics. The questions need not be answered directly, allowing the interviewee scope to lead the discussion into areas pertinent to themselves. I formulated the following questions and used them as a written checklist to focus the interview:

- What do the words numeracy and/or maths mean to you?
- When do you use your maths skills?
- What difficulties do you have in everyday life with maths?
- How have you used your maths skills in a job or in your job hunting? What difficulties have you had?

All students have agreed to further interviews if needed to increase the depth of my understanding after my initial analysis of the transcriptions.
Barriers to Learning

This research into barriers to learning is an attempt to justify courses which are non-accredited. The fashionable drive to accredit all learning via documentary evidence and quantifiable data appears to ignore, or dismiss, learning that adds quality or value to life but which is non-quantifiable.

All of my working life has been spent with non-achievers, all met within different professions but at any age, either sex, the non-achievement has been, for the main part, because of personal difficulties in that individuals have low self-esteem, lack confidence and are unable to approach the means to progression.

Progression should not have to demand ‘testing’: progression could be simple things such as writing their own greetings cards, shopping more effectively, understanding the paying of bills, whatever. I think it is difficult for us to really understand how much these seemingly basic skills can impact on someone’s whole outlook on life if they can be set as targets and reached.

Recognised barriers to learning include: lack of child care, work/family commitments, recognised learning difficulties, long-term illness etc. Those categories are easy to quantify and categorise for statistics and there is currently attention paid to addressing those barriers.

The removal of physical barriers, for certain potential students, will ensure courses of education can be pursued.

There are measurable outcomes against inputting of resources in those cases. That makes funding viable but, how to measure the inputting of resources in the cases of students who have non-quantifiable barriers?

The current emphasis of funding related to accreditation suggests teachers will be entering into a ‘payment by results’ arena at the same point. This will ensure that students who need Skills for Life courses may be deprived of access simply because many basic tasks within the Skills for Life remit are non-accredited.

Examples of some students’ life-enriching experiences that cannot be accredited:

- I don’t lie in bed all day now, I’m not going back to that.
- We can shop better, we can read the labels on the tins.
- I can say, I can’t read if someone points something out, without feeling the shame I used to feel.
- I’ve got my passport now, I can go on holiday.
- I nit [sic] my Christmas cards on my own.
- I can read where buses go, I don’t need to ask now.
Section 5:
Initial reports and reviews of research

In the first phases of the project we carried out focused reviews of five topics which fed into and informed the research. We surveyed the earlier ethnographies of literacy which have been carried out. This report, A review of ethnography and literacy, is by Rachel Hodge. We also investigated the term ‘informal learning’, which is central to our project. This report, A review of theories of informal learning, is by Karin Tusting. We also reviewed work on retention and achievement, key concepts in Skills for Life. This report, A focused review on retention and achievement, is by Yvon Appleby. For the teaching and learning part of the project we have just completed a review of the literature on the relation of teaching and learning. This report, a review of how learning is accomplished in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL educational settings, is by Lydia Tseng and Roz Ivanic. Here we provide summaries of the reports. Each of the full reports will also be made available as a separate report.

In addition, we focused on a specific social issue, the relation of literacy and health. A short report, Literacy and health by Uta Papen, was produced. This has been developed with additional funding from Lancaster University and will be published in due course. An initial report is provided in Appendix 4.

We were also able to link up with work in prisons. Anita Wilson carried out a small questionnaire study into ESOL provision in prisons. An initial report of this work is provided in Appendix 5 and a full report will be made available in October 2003.

A further report was written as a result of our experiences when we first went into the research sites in the first few months of the project. Everywhere we encountered managers and practitioners overwhelmed by the pace of change. This was affecting the research and it is also affecting the implementation of the Skills for Life strategy. We produced a short report on these issues written by Yvon Appleby, Rachel Hodge, Roz Ivanic, Karin Tusting and David Barton with input from a local basic skills group. This report is in Appendix 6, and it was considered at an NRDC meeting in January 2003.

The Department of Geography at Lancaster University was commissioned to provide a demographic profile of the three research sites, Blackburn, Lancaster and Liverpool. This was carried out by Gemma Davies and Ganiyu Agbaje and has been referred to already in an earlier section of this report and appears in Appendix 2.

5.1 Summary: A review of ethnography and literacy

Synopsis
This focused review discusses eight studies selected to represent the most recent body of work on ethnography of literacy. Ethnography starts by describing, in detail, the particular. It also connects the particular to a larger context of patterned practices showing how specific people and processes are related to their social and historical context. Ethnographers of literacy in these eight studies are concerned with the lives of people at the margins of mainstream dominant culture. They bring significant insights into the diverse worlds and lives of different people making examples of everyday literacy intelligible within the theoretical
framework they have adopted. Each of these studies broadens and extends our understanding of social meanings related to literacy practices in different contexts and taken together they provide a very powerful analysis of the link between literacies in specific contexts, broader social practices and people’s values and meanings related to literacy.

**Key Points**

- **Insight into literacy practices of different communities.** There is a significant earlier body of literature to which these studies contribute to providing insight into literacy practices in different communities. Studies from a sociolinguistic and education perspective examine how adults and children in working class communities learn and use language and literacy. Other studies refer to literacy practices of children at home and school, literacy within families and of children’s non-formal literacies in and out of school. Other studies focus on the literacy practices of adults including the uses of literacy in minority bilingual communities. Different literacy practices include the significance of networks and experiences of literacy practices at work.

- **Literacy as social practice.** All these ethnographic studies share a theory of literacy as social practice. These diverse studies illustrate the fact that there is not a single literacy but many different literacies. They are primarily concerned with documenting the vernacular ‘everyday’ literacies which exist and with exploring their relationship to more dominant literacies and discourses. The studies reveal how literacy practices of people from linguistic minority groups are rooted in specific historical processes: a post-colonial order, international labour migration, movement of refugees, minority rights movements or in global social and political changes.

- **Theories of learning.** Any theory of literacy implies a theory of learning. These ethnographies show the importance of understanding the nature of informal and vernacular learning strategies and the nature of situated cognition. Theories of local social relations are drawn on, such as the notion of community and of networks to describe how people relate within social groups and how this impacts their literacy practice. The link between social theory and theories of language and discourse is discussed examining the way in which literacy, language and communication is produced including the way that this is embedded in institutions or settings which are linked with other wider, social, political and cultural processes.

- **Methodological insights.** Ethnographic studies of literacies can describe and share underpinning methodological approaches. Some studies make their methodology explicit in order that it might be evaluated by others and encourage further development. It often uses a multi-method approach drawing on a variety of research techniques. This can include collaborative research methods.

**Implications**

These ethnographies show the kind of detailed evidence which provides a firm basis for revisiting policy and practice in literacy provision which will take more account of learners’ perspectives and contributes greatly to provision being made more relevant and effective. They highlight the power of ethnography to reveal, bring insights and critically interpret the links between literacy, learning and everyday life that help us to shape policy and practice which is more inclusive and relevant to people’s aspirations and needs, posing questions which can be asked in other localities and contexts.
5.2 Summary: A review of theories of informal learning

Synopsis
While ‘informal learning’ is a commonly used term there is no general agreement as to its meaning. This review addresses the variety of definitions of this term used by different researchers and theorists in the field.

Key points
The review identifies four different characteristics which have been drawn on to distinguish between formal and informal learning.

- **Institutional setting.** This relates to whether learning takes place within or outside a formal educational institution, frequently the key criterion used in making the distinction between formal and informal learning. There is often an elision between the element of setting and the other elements identified below. However, it is not necessarily the case that learning which takes place outside a formal institutional setting is unplanned, unaccredited, or non-hierarchical and informal in style.

- **Incidental learning.** This definition relates to learning which is unplanned, as opposed to learning in which some form of curricular content has been prepared in advance. This distinction is often made by theorists of workplace learning in particular. Unplanned learning arises from learners bringing their own lives and concerns into their learning experiences, so it can be of direct benefit in addressing their current issues. It can therefore be seen as something to be encouraged, in contrast to the idea that it is the teacher’s role to plan or control all the learning that is happening in the classroom.

- **Formal accreditation.** The third indicator used to distinguish between formal and informal learning is whether learning is formally accredited, or not, in some way. This has become particularly significant in the UK in recent years when all funding for adult education became tied to accreditation, arising from changes in the Further Education Funding Council policy in the mid 1990s. But research in this field suggests that there is no necessary correlation between accreditation and the other elements of formality or informality.

- **Interactive Styles.** Another significant characteristic used by some to define a difference between ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ learning relates to the style of interaction adopted in the learning situation and the effect of this on the relative formality or informality of the teacher-student relationship.

Implications
Informal learning is a hybrid concept. Account needs to be taken of how this term is used in speaking and writing about ‘informal learning’, since the meanings of this term can vary so much. It is therefore useful to specify clearly exactly which of the elements above are being referred to when talking about ‘informal learning’, rather than leaving the definition implicit. This review will inform the Adult Learners’ Lives project by suggesting potential avenues for investigation in terms of specifying the different formal and informal elements of learning in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL and of being able to identify the ways these interact in a variety of learning situations.
5.3 Summary: A focused review of retention and achievement

Synopsis
Retention and achievement, retaining students and ensuring that they gain a qualification, is a primary concern for most education providers. In post-16 education, where attendance is not compulsory, issues of retention and achievement become especially significant. It is possible to discern changes over the last two decades in the significance and meaning of retention and achievement for both the student and the educational provider. This review looks at the work of the Further Education Development Agency (FEDA) and the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) in the area of retention and achievement. This body of work illustrates how retention and achievement became recognised as ‘an issue’. It also shows how the perceived cause of low attendance and poor achievement changed from being simply blamed on external factors (i.e. poorly motivated students from poor backgrounds) to the quality of educational provision being offered to students. The impact of this has been the many quality initiatives and staff development programmes in FE provision.

Key points
- Early concern with high drop out and non-completion rates. Early work into retention and achievement was prompted by high non-completion in vocational courses in the 1970s. The issue became more widely visible in the early 1990s when successive government reports (particularly 1992/3) showed high drop out rates across the whole FE sector creating widespread concern. It became apparent that although still affecting vocational courses retention and achievement was a widespread and national issue affecting all college provision. Moreover, after incorporation colleges and other FE providers were not just rewarded for student numbers, but were also financially penalised for losing students or for students not achieving qualifications.

- The students’ experience of learning. The most significant finding of the research in motivation and retention was that non-completion wasn’t simply linked to external factors but was actually linked to student experience of college. It became an internal issue about the quality of the educational experience that colleges were offering. The work found that the quality of the student learning experience was the most significant factor in completion rates. In summary they found that: completion is less affected by demography than experience at college; drop out factors included wrong course, timetabling, quality of teaching and support and teaching relationships; the significance of student sociability; information support and management systems had an impact; local and context specific action research improved quality and attention should be paid to socio-economic factors affecting students. These findings changed the focus from ‘blame out there’ to a critical view of the college itself and changed the focus to the learner and their learning experience, thus highlighting issues of pedagogy and of the social aspects of teaching and learning.

- Change generation. This body of work shows how the FE college sector has been ‘turned around’ using the key axis of retention and achievement. Most of the quality measures in the FE sector, including advice, guidance, student support, reporting and monitoring progress, stem from concerns over retention and achievement. The recognition that sociability is an important aspect of learning has impacted upon student experience of learning as the focus has changed to the learner and notionally, at least, put them at the centre of delivery.

- Socio-economic factors and learning. The various papers and reports in this body of work suggest socio-economic factors are not as significant, or central, as was previously assumed.
by educators and policy makers. This provides the framework for a critical dialogue in this important area.

**Implications**

NRDC, along with other agencies involved in basic skills, is beginning to use the term ‘engagement’. International material on motivation, persistence and engagement can extend thinking around motivation and persistence. Engagement offers potential for thinking about adult learning as it focuses on the learner’s perspective. It can drive questions such as: why and how is the learner engaged and with what? What makes for successful engagement and what is disengagement? Motivation and persistence can be aspects of engagement but potentially lack the active aspect of agency that engagement could bring. These concerns can be seen as a precursor to issues around retention and achievement in formal learning environments.

**5.4 Summary: A review of how learning is accomplished in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL educational settings**

This review summarises research on learning in relation to teaching. There has been little study on the relationship between teaching and learning in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL educational settings (hereafter adult LNE); however, the English Language Teaching (ELT) field has taken up this topic for research in terms of their particular concerns. One of the overriding aims of the review is to evaluate insights obtained in the field of ELT to seek for their applicability in adult language, numeracy and ESOL and thereby indicate fruitful areas for future research and practice.

**Findings**

Four major sets of factors contributing to learning are proposed: beliefs and intentions of participants, resources available for learning, policy context and socio-cultural climate. Theory and research suggests that learning is not shaped by one single factor but a combination of them emerging differently in different contexts. In reviewing research on classroom interaction, we particularly focus on those theories and studies relevant to consequences for learning. The concept of learning opportunities is used in the literature to take account of the dialectic interaction between teaching intervention and individual learning, resulting in variation in learning from one learner to another in any given learning context. Another key concept in the literature is engagement, referring to the nature of learners’ involvement in different aspects of classroom life and its consequences for their uptake of learning opportunities.

**Implications**

Some implications are drawn in the conclusion. The complexity of the learning-teaching relationship implies that there is no one-to-one correspondence between what is taught and what is learnt. There is little value in looking for generalisations about relationships between teaching methods and learning outcomes; it is more useful to examine how learning opportunities and possible outcomes emerge in context. Reflection on the interplay between factors contributing to learning, classroom interaction and possible accomplishment of learning is critical for understanding how learning is accomplished.
Section 6: The broader context

6.1 First themes across the research

Individual themes come out of the specific pieces of research: each of the reviews contributes to our understanding of adult learners; then the research in each of the sites provides rich data which is being analysed; in addition the six teacher-researchers are in the middle of projects which develop from their practice. Although the research is at an early stage we can identify some strong themes across this range of data which are likely to prove significant in our understanding of learners’ lives. The themes overlap and interact.

Firstly, there is a cluster of issues around relationships when learning and the importance of social aspects of learning. Support is important in terms of students deciding to come to classes; feelings of being supported and operating in a safe environment are essential for motivation. Within the classes across our data we have identified some of the ways in which teachers are often meeting social needs. This is a complex issue: teachers have differing perspectives on supporting social needs and there are often differences between their stated views and their actions within the class. Peer support is also often cited within the classroom context and we wish to pursue the appropriateness of ideas of classes as communities of practice and describe how these relationships support learning. The classes provide a structure and stability in people’s everyday lives.

Issues of affect, emotions or feelings arise repeatedly and we wish to understand more about how they impact on learning. Part of this is how insecurity and anxiety impact on learning. This is true for the ESOL students we are studying, how issues of trauma and depression can be important and with other students, where issues of family violence have arisen. These can all create barriers to learning.

Being in control is a repeated theme. Learners often talk of being in control, or not being in control. This is often related to content and views are expressed about things being or not being appropriate. Engagement in learning seems to be closely linked to perceived relevance. We also see ways in which students take active responsibility for learning.

We identify repeated conflicts over terminology. Teachers go back and forth between different discourses when discussing issues of teaching and learning; they often comment on terms and dispute terms; this is true of basic terms such as ‘teacher’, ‘student’, ‘learner’. This seems particularly strong at a time of rapid change in the profession. We also see this in terms such as ‘motivation’, ‘persistence’, ‘retention’, ‘dropout’, ‘engagement’, where there is a cluster of terms around a concept, none of them quite adequate. The basic term ‘motivation’ seems to be used in some quite different ways. We will explore the discourse here and aim to understand this more. Several of the terms, such as ‘retention’, are terms used from the perspective of the college, in that only the college talks of ‘retention’, a student wouldn’t use this word. We are interested in identifying the terms and discourses which the students use, in order to get their perspective on these issues and in particular to identify terms where students are seen as actors or agents, rather than as passive recipients. We believe it will be valuable to rethink how this whole area is conceptualised.
Throughout the history of adult basic education, confidence has been one of the most often quoted terms in relation to what learners gain from classes. It is in our data from learners and it is reported in the research literature. We want to examine this in more detail, examining different types and sources of confidence, seeing how it relates to reflection, autonomy and identity. In particular we distinguish confidence for enabling learning from confidence in its own right. This is an area where there may be differences across literacy, numeracy and ESOL; we are also interested in identifying how confidence issues are distinct in basic skills classes, when compared to other areas of adult education.

The significance of health as a barrier to learning came up in our reviews and in our data in all sites. Issues of health need to include mental health, which is sometimes included in discussions of health and sometimes is ignored.

Issues which arise around assessing learning and which come from both our data and our reviews include how to acknowledge small gains, as well as issues of identifying, naming and valuing the wider benefits of learning. The tension of recognising language, literacy and numeracy outcomes alongside other outcomes is a repeated theme.

Within the teaching and learning part of the research, we repeatedly return to the idea that there is no single factor or factors which cause learning, rather learning is situated and contingent. These ideas need developing more and we are focusing on articulating a model of learning appropriate to adult language, literacy and numeracy.

Obviously these themes will develop as analysis continues. Appendix 7 contains further themes generated at the retreat in July where the full team, including the teacher-researchers, discussed emerging themes from the different forms of data.

6.2 Methodological developments

One of our concerns has been to reflect upon qualitative methodology and its usefulness in contributing evidence appropriate to practice and policy. These issues were taken up in the papers we presented at the NRDC International Conference, described in Appendix 1. In terms of the specific methodology, we began largely from the approach described in the Local Literacies research [Barton & Hamilton (1998) chapter four: Routledge] as our approach to methodology for the everyday lives part of the project, complemented by methods common in classroom research. Already we can identify ways in which the work on the Adult Learners’ Lives project is developing beyond these in terms of methodology. Very briefly, firstly, we are extending notions of collaborative research in our work; secondly, by working in three distinct sites, the work is comparative throughout; thirdly, we are developing notions of teachers as researchers and involving teachers in all aspects of research; fourthly, we are integrating data of distinct sorts in systematic ways; finally, we are reconceptualising methodology to make impact central, impact both on practice and on policy. We wish to explore in more depth how ethnographic research can contribute to policy, the strengths and limitations of such research and how it can complement and challenge other data. We see these as exciting developments for the research and its impact.
6.3 The involvement of practitioners

The current Teacher-Researcher Fellowship Programme will come to an end in December 2003. Although the six teacher-researchers will no longer be funded by NRDC, we are confident that they will continue to bring their experience as teacher-researchers to their work as practitioners and this will continue to benefit their institutions. They will maintain informal links with NRDC and the Adult Learners’ Lives project, and develop their career paths in individual ways.

The Adult Learners’ Lives project will greatly benefit from continued involvement of practitioners and, while we enjoy working with the current cohort, we recognise the advantages to the field of involving a new cohort in the coming year. While the fellowship programme we have operated this year has been very successful and has, we believe, greatly benefited the teacher-researchers, it has been very costly for the Adult Learners’ Lives research team, both financially (the fellows’ enrolment on a research training module, academic mentoring, and the residential) and in terms of time (running the programme, the support given by the Adult Learners’ Lives researchers, time spent by the teacher-researchers on training-related activities). We therefore plan to develop a different model of practitioner research partnership to integrate with the coming year’s research activities; this will be developed in conjunction with the evaluation of teacher-researchers being undertaken by NRDC.

6.4 The impact of the project

Concerns about the lack of effect of research on policy and practice have been raised across social science and educational research. There is interest in rethinking the impact which research can have. In Britain the ESRC and the LSDA have been central in promoting discussion of new ways of conceptualising research impact. At the Lancaster Literacy Research Centre this fits in with a longstanding interest in the relation of research and practice in adult literacy. The aim is to overcome the perceived gaps between the research world, the teaching world and the policy world, broadening out from narrow notions of dissemination as something which happens just at the end of the research process.

In the Adult Learners’ Lives project, rather than talking of dissemination, with its connotations of a one-way process, we prefer to talk of impact. This is a richer and more complex notion. We are working within four principles of impact:

- **Consider impact at all stages of research.** Impact depends upon building up relations with other stakeholders from the beginning. Within established relations, research can then have an effect.

- **Address multiple audiences.** The needs of policy makers and practitioners may well be different and there are many other stakeholders. It is important to build up different ways of communicating with these different groups.

- **Impact is dialogic.** The relationship between researchers and other stakeholders is two-way and can develop as a dialogue; the research gains from good relations with stakeholders as much as the other way round.
impact is more than findings. The impact of research can take many forms, including changing the discourse, changing the ways in which issues are talked about.

Thinking through impact has been an important aspect of the first year of the Adult Learners’ Lives project. We have built up relations locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. A particular focus has been the teacher-researcher programme and we have shifted from seeing the impact as primarily being on the individual teacher, to seeing the impact as being equally on the whole college. Appendix 8 lists the forms of impact we have been involved in and includes ways of impacting upon the college at all levels, including the other teachers in the institutions and the effects on the learners in the colleges. Regionally we have been central in developing the North West Skills for Life Research Forum and have participated in its activities. Nationally we have been involved in a range of NRDC activities and we are writing papers addressed to different audiences. We have arranged a national advisory group for the project; this will support impact. We have begun an international dialogue with researchers in North America, Europe and Australia and in March 2003 Roz Ivani visited NCSALL colleagues at Rutgers University, reported in Appendix 9. The six papers on the nature of evidence which we contributed to NRDC international conference also discuss issues of communication and impact. Abstracts of these papers are listed in Appendix 1.

6.5 The work-place strand of the ALL project

A key part of the Adult Learners’ Lives project is the strand relating people’s literacy, numeracy and language learning to their work-place experiences and practices. In thinking about how to approach this strand, we started with an idea that we might include an ethnography of a single workplace to give insight into the particular literacy, numeracy and learning practices involved in the work environment. However, further discussion of this idea revealed a number of problems for the project in this approach. First of all, ‘the work-place’ is not a singular entity. Work in contemporary society is very varied and any single workplace that we looked at could give only a very partial understanding of questions around literacy, learning and the work-place in general. Secondly, taking this approach and making ‘the work-place’ central to the ethnography would be taking a different perspective from the rest of the Adult Learners’ Lives project, which places the individual learner at the centre of what we do. Thirdly, given the constraints on all our time and resources and our existing fieldwork commitments, this significant element could end up in danger of becoming a cursory ‘bolt-on’ to the project.

On thinking about this further, we realised that there was a better approach that we could take. The solution we developed was to situate this element of the project within the same frame as the rest of the Adult Learners’ Lives work, that is to say, by taking the individual adult learner as the starting point. So we have been collaborating with our existing research participants in talking about and coming to understand their own work histories and practices, including their experiences of work-place learning. This has enabled a focus on the work-place to become an embedded and integrated part of the Adult Learners’ Lives study, as a strand of inquiry across all of the research sites and with all the adult learners.

Taking this perspective has opened up a wide range of possibilities for research. Karin Tusting has encountered people with a variety of work experiences in Lancaster, including people working in farming, running a chip shop and a pub, bricklaying, teaching, in office work, in care work and in workshops. In Liverpool Yvon Appleby has interviewed a caretaker, a nursery
nurse, people looking for work, those who are too ill to work and those who work part time. The students seeking asylum in Blackburn where Rachel Hodge has been researching this year have a wealth of interesting and different experiences, relating to both their work histories in the country of their first language and their current situations of working (or trying to find work) in the country of their second language.

By embedding work and work-place learning in the research we are maintaining our focus on the learners themselves. In addition to talking with people about their work experiences and histories, we will be focusing on a smaller number of learners, accompanying them from the classroom into their everyday lives and also into work (or their attempts to get it). This gives us an integrated way of viewing the learners and of incorporating work-place into their lives and into the study as a whole. It is allowing us to explore the meaning of work in people’s lives more generally, by combining attention to the work-place with the other elements of people’s lives that we are addressing, including life histories, everyday practices and family relationships. It is challenging reductionist and deficient models of adult learners, by shifting our attention to the existing skills and aspirations demonstrated by many of the learners we are encountering.

### 6.6 Immediate plans

In September 2003 work on the three sites will broaden out to include data from community-based provision in addition to the college provision. We have specific plans at each site for moving to community provision. We will maintain links with the colleges through the focal learners. In both parts of the study, the everyday life part and the teaching and learning part, we will collect further data on language, literacy and numeracy and continue analysis in order to prepare the reports due in the next year. In addition we will contribute to the evaluation of the teacher-researcher programme and develop models for practitioner involvement based on the experience of the Adult Learners’ Lives project. The programme of impact will continue, especially through the North West *Skills for Life* Research Forum; we are planning a seminar on offenders in November 2003, and there will be a regional impact conference, as a precursor to a national conference in the following year. The initial work on literacy and health has led to a separate project directed by Uta Papen; this starts in October 2003. In order to support other researchers the Lancaster Literacy Research Centre is planning a research summer school in July 2004. Lancaster is also hosting the 2004 RaPAL (Research and practice in adult literacy) conference and we will contribute to both events.

We have set up an advisory group for the Adult Learners’ Lives project covering people and organisations with a wide range of interests in the field of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL. This initial report of the project will be discussed at a meeting of the advisory group in the autumn, as a way of providing feedback on our work so far and influencing the future direction of the project.
Appendix 1
Abstracts of papers on evidence, presented at NRDC International Conference, Nottingham March 2002

What counts as evidence in an ethnographic approach to research in language, literacy and numeracy.
David Barton, Karin Tusting, Rachel Hodge, Uta Papen, Yvon Appleby, Mary Hamilton and Samantha Parsons.

Introduction

This double session is concerned with the sorts of data produced by ethnographic research, the range of questions it can address, and how such approaches can contribute to the work of NRDC. David Barton introduces the topic by discussing what is meant by evidence and outlining what ethnographic studies of literacy have offered so far. Karin Tusting introduces the NRDC Adult Learners’ Lives project, locating it in the need for multiple sources of evidence. Rachel Hodge looks in detail at a particular methodology, that of using photographs as evidence. The next two papers take a broader look. Uta Papen examines how ethnography can inform policy, while Yvon Appleby discusses the significance of involving practitioners in the research process. Finally Mary Hamilton and Samantha Parsons discuss issues which have arisen when they have brought together qualitative and quantitative approaches.

The methodological turn
David Barton

Qualitative methodologies have developed in the past two decades with an array of courses, books and handbooks. This has had a great impact on research in language, literacy and numeracy, including重新thinking the relation of research and practice. These developments can be seen as part of methodological debates within the social sciences, but they are also part of a broader societal questioning of academic knowledge, of professionalism and of certainty in the contemporary world. As part of this broader debate, users of research in many fields have become more demanding. Policy makers and practitioners in particular have been raising questions about the relevance of research, the nature of evidence and the certainty of claims. In educational research in the US and in Britain, calls have been made for rigour, for systematicity and for evidence of what works.

In this paper I will provide a short overview of the current debates around evidence based policy and practice in educational research; I argue that qualitative educational research can and should enter these debates; that ethnographic research can offer a great deal to understanding what counts as evidence, what is rigorous and what is systematic. I will review recent ethnographic studies of literacy, showing what they offer to policy and practice. First of all this body of research exposes myths about literacy and it provides scepticism about oversimplistic claims; it offers new ways of talking about literacy and provides new framings for
the field of language, literacy and numeracy. This approach to research also provides information about learners’ lives, learners’ needs and learners’ motivations which is essential to successful policy and practice.

Why we need multiple sources of evidence
Karin Tusting

The answer to the question ‘what counts as evidence’ logically follows from your model of what the world is like and how best you can develop understandings of it. If you understand social reality as being generated by the actions of a small set of laws which play out in the same way in all settings, it makes sense to try to understand, explain and predict what is going on by using instruments such as large-scale surveys of randomised samples of the population, or double-blind experimental trials, to locate and describe the actions of such universal laws across different contexts. However, another way of looking at it is to see the events of the social world as being emergent in unpredictable ways from the multitude of different causal mechanisms which interrelate in every local interaction. From this position, in order to develop an understanding of what is going on in any given context, it becomes necessary to amass and analyse evidence which addresses the detail of those interactions. Ethnographic research draws evidence about this detailed interaction from observation of and participation in the events and relationships of everyday life, seeking to develop insight into how these mechanisms are interrelating in a particular local context. In order to develop such an understanding, it is necessary to draw on multiple sources of evidence, developing insights as the research evolves and testing these insights against evidence gathered and analysed in many different ways.

This in-depth understanding is what we are seeking to develop in the Adult Learners’ Lives project. The paper goes on to describe the wide variety of sources of evidence on which we will be drawing to build up understandings of the interplay between people’s learning and the wider context of their lives as a whole. These sources include (but are not limited to) participant observation both within and outside the classroom, non-participant classroom observation, interviews with learners and tutors, collaborative work with practitioners, photographs, videoed data, the collection of texts and other multimodal artefacts, learning diaries and logs. This body of data lends itself to a variety of forms of qualitative analysis, and requires a great deal of synthesis work to produce a rich and complex picture.

Of course, this involves an intensive use of resources – in terms of people, ideas, and time. However, our contention is that if we are to develop better understandings of learners’ lives, needs and motivations, it is necessary to generate a full understanding of the interplay of factors involved through using such a multi-method approach.

Using photographs as evidence in literacy research
Rachel Hodge

Photographs, film and other images are now widely used in different fields of Social Science research – Educational Research, Media Studies, Anthropology, Sociology and Socio-Linguistics. To introduce this paper I will give a brief background to the use of photography in qualitative/ethnographic and collaborative literacy research. Photographs produced collaboratively combine the intentions and agendas of both researchers and informants.
Photographs are not just tools for obtaining knowledge, they can be used in interviews or conversations as a reference point, where participants can produce and represent their knowledge, self-identities, experiences and emotions (Pink 2001). Photographs are not simply visual records of reality but are representations or visual metaphors to be interpreted in terms of different understandings of reality. Both Pink and Rose (2001) among others, argue the importance of this kind of explicit ‘critical visual methodology’ which sees photography as a social practice, takes images seriously and thinks about the visual in terms of the cultural significance, social practices and power relations in which it is embedded.

Using photographs taken and analysed collaboratively with informants in a range of literacy research contexts, I will illustrate ways in which photographs can provide significant and valid qualitative/ethnographic data and I will show how photographic data can be interpreted, supported by other data in literacy research. I will discuss critical issues related to this methodology and summarise the benefits and uses of photography as a research tool in literacy research which is addressing the realities, needs and aspirations of learners.

How can ethnography inform policy?
Uta Papen

In recent years, there has been much discussion around the potential of ethnography to inform policy. Crucial to this debate is the question of what evidence ethnography can provide and how valid, reliable and useful this is. Two fields of research where this is extensively discussed are social development (see for example Spiegel, Watson and Wilkinson 1999, Gardner and Lewis 1996) and literacy (Prinsloo and Breier 1996, Rogers et al. 1999, Robinson-Pant 2001). In both fields, ethnography is heralded as being able to provide the kind of detailed, contextualised information, which can help policy to become more responsive to its beneficiaries.

The purpose of this paper is to review some of the debates surrounding the relationship of ethnography to policy and to assess their relevance for the Skills for Life strategy and the work of NRDC. Ethnography has been particularly significant for literacy research, enhancing our understanding of the essential role of reading and writing in people’s everyday lives (see for example Street 1993 and 2001, Barton and Hamilton 1998). The paper will argue that on the basis of ethnographic accounts of learners’ lives a fuller picture of their literacy- and numeracy-related needs and aspirations can be compiled. The same kind of approach can be applied to studying learners’ experiences with the forms of provision set up by Skills for Life, the aim being to feed these results back into the evolving policy. Ethnography here has a crucial role to play in the processes of policy formulation, implementation and monitoring/evaluation. Furthermore, as a research method that harnesses the active collaboration of its research subjects, ethnography is ideally placed to support a participative approach to policy (Yeatman 1998), which engages the skills and creativity of all those involved in making it happen.

Practitioner involvement: a good idea but does it mess up the evidence?
Yvon Appleby

Research is a highly contested terrain where there are many competing ideas and approaches about the position of research, the researcher and the researched in relation to knowledge
generation and the status of evidence. The evidence generated by ethnography as ‘situated research’ is definitely and positively affected by participation and collaboration, particularly where the participants are practitioners. Rather than being something to be guarded against, protecting the evidence from contamination, practitioner participation and collaboration can be incorporated to produce relevant research and useful evidence.

I will look at the use of ethnography in the Adult Learners’ Lives project where participation and collaboration are central concepts within the research. This will show what employing ethnography as ‘situated research’ means and the type of ‘evidence’ that is generated. The Adult Learners’ Lives project is working with six teacher-researcher fellows who are practitioners and participants; they are actively engaged in developing the research at many levels. An exploration of the relationship between this research and practice will allow an exploration of the different types of evidence that our research will produce and the different audiences that it may be useful to.

**Culture shock: challenges of linking qualitative and quantitative evidence within research**  
Mary Hamilton and Samantha Parsons

The idea of linking qualitative and quantitative research evidence is an aim of many current projects. There are a number of ways in which such links might be made within different research designs. In the Changing Faces project we have entered into one version of such a collaboration, where life history interviews are being conducted with a carefully chosen sample of existing members of the National Child Development Survey cohort. The study is a collaboration between different institutions. Researchers working on the project have a range of research skills, training and backgrounds encompassing both qualitative and quantitative methods.

The Changing Faces strategy has presented unpredicted challenges to the research team. Some of these challenges are specific to the procedures and characteristics associated with the data sets we are using. However, the issues raised by our experience are of much broader interest. They can be seen as emerging from the meeting of different research cultures and traditions with their associated expertise and assumptions. Life history interviews entail close and in-depth encounters between researchers and interviewees. They generate qualitative data in the form of biographical narrative accounts. Longitudinal survey research, on the other hand, is carried out by a team of market research interviewers using a highly structured questionnaire. This generates large-scale, quantitative databases analysed by researchers with statistical expertise who have not been involved in the data collection phase.

This presentation will discuss the following issues [1] research skills, training and approaches to data collection; [2] relationships between researchers and researched during data collection and analysis; [3] assumptions about and approaches to ethical issues, such as anonymity, consent and feeding back research findings to participants. A discussion of our practical experiences so far will move forward understanding of what it means to link qualitative and quantitative approaches to evidence and help devise protocols for future research.
Appendix 2

Demographic Report on Blackburn, Lancaster & Liverpool

Commissioned by Lancaster Literacy Research Centre (David Barton)

Undertaken by Lancaster University Geography Department (Gemma Davies and Ganiyu Agbaje)

7 May 2003

This report summarises the demographic profile of three towns in North West England, Blackburn, Lancaster and Liverpool, contrasting the towns and where possible comparing them to regional and national averages. Its purpose is to illustrate how representative these towns are for the purpose of studying the lives of adult learners.

Each of the towns are located in the North West of England. Blackburn is part of the Blackburn and Darwen Unitary Authority, within the county of Lancashire. Lancaster is part of Lancaster District again within the county of Lancashire, while Liverpool forms the Metropolitan part of the county of Merseyside. Both Liverpool and Lancaster have city status. Figure 1 illustrates the relative location of the three towns within the North West.
Figure 1: Location of Towns in study
### General Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>Blackburn</th>
<th>Lancaster</th>
<th>Liverpool</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>100,974</td>
<td>47,962</td>
<td>452,450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998 estimate*</td>
<td><strong>101,580</strong></td>
<td>55,600</td>
<td>461,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2: Population totals**


Oxford University population estimates for wards in England in Mid 1998

*1998 population estimates were used, as they were the most recent population figures currently available at ward level. 2001 census data was not able to be used as this is currently only available at Local Authority level. For the purposes of this study the towns of Blackburn and Lancaster formed only part of the Local Authority in which they were situated, hence more detailed, ward level information needed to be used.

** Figures for Blackburn were derived using the per cent population increase from 1991 to 2001 for the Local authority, as a 1998 estimate matching the wards for 1991 was not available. The rate of population increase was taken from Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council website [http://council.blackburnworld.com/](http://council.blackburnworld.com/)

It can be seen from the population totals that the three towns included in this report vary considerably in the size of their population, with Blackburn approximately twice the size of Lancaster and Liverpool almost ten times the size of Lancaster. The population of Lancaster appears to be growing faster than that of Blackburn or Liverpool with Blackburn seeing the slowest rate of growth. Note, however that 2001 populations statistics for Liverpool suggest that the population of Liverpool has fallen to 439,473, rather than the slight increase seen in the 1998 estimate.

### Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Secondary Schools</th>
<th>Blackburn</th>
<th>Lancaster</th>
<th>Liverpool</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selective</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent /Selective</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3: Number and type of secondary schools**

Over the last 30 years the structure of schooling in England has changed considerably, with a shift from a two-tier approach of secondary modern and grammar schools, to a widespread system of comprehensive schools. However, although this has occurred in Liverpool both Blackburn and Lancaster has retained selective grammar schools. Blackburn also has a relatively large number of independent schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% 5 A-C’s at GCSE</th>
<th>Blackburn</th>
<th>Lancaster</th>
<th>Liverpool</th>
<th>England</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>51.6</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>44.3</td>
<td>51.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4: Percentage of pupils entered for GCSE examinations gaining at least 5 grades A–C.**


Average school performance based on the percentage of students achieving A–C grades at GCSE varies considerably between the three towns considered in this report. Figure 4 shows that while Blackburn has a level of school performance in line with the national average Liverpool falls well below this and Lancaster is well above the national average.

**Colleges and Universities**

Blackburn has two colleges, Accrington and Rossendale College and Blackburn College of Technology, while Lancaster has the one college, the Adult College and two Universities/University Colleges, St Martins University College and Lancaster University. The provision of higher education varies considerably between the towns, with Lancaster having a high level of provision relative to its size and Blackburn being without any higher education provision. Meanwhile Liverpool has three Universities/University Colleges, University of Liverpool, Liverpool John Moores University and Liverpool Hope University College as well as further education provision.

**Health**

**Mortality**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SMR</th>
<th>Blackburn</th>
<th>Lancaster</th>
<th>Liverpool</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Causes</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heart Disease</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breast Cancer</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prostate Cancer</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 5: Standardised Mortality Ratios (SMRs) for year 2000**

Source: 2000 Small Area Data from the North West Regional Office [Original source: Office of National Statistics]
Standardised mortality ratios (SMRs) represent a ratio between the number of deaths associated with a given disease relative to the expected number of deaths, given the national average and the size and structure of the population in an area. SMR values greater than 100 therefore represent a higher number of deaths than would be expected against the national average and values less than 100 represent a lower than expected number of deaths.

Of the three towns it is clear that the population of Lancaster experiences better health than either Blackburn or Liverpool. SMR values for heart disease and all causes are marginally above average, but rates for breast and prostate cancer are much lower than average. In both Blackburn and Liverpool it is the higher incidence of heart disease, which stands out most compared to the national average.

### Access to health care

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Blackburn</th>
<th>Lancaster</th>
<th>Liverpool</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hospitals</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Practices</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 9: Number of Hospitals and General Practice Surgeries**

Source: Yellow Pages (www.yell.com)

Data for number of GPs per practice was not available for individual practices therefore the number of people per GP could not be calculated.

### Crime

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offences per 1000 pop.</th>
<th>Blackburn</th>
<th>Lancaster</th>
<th>Liverpool</th>
<th>North West</th>
<th>England</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theft-Vehicle</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>28.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 10: Criminal offences per thousand population (April 2000 - March 2001)**


The figures above represent reported crime over the period of a year (April 2000 – March 2001). These figures show that for most types of crime recorded here, Lancaster experiences the least crime with the exception of sexual offences where Lancaster has a rate higher than the regional or national averages and higher than either Blackburn or Liverpool. All towns included in the study suffer less from burglary than would be expected looking at the regional and national averages. Of the three towns Liverpool appears to experience the highest level of crime, with robbery and violent crime above both the regional and national averages.
Housing tenure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% Households</th>
<th>Blackburn</th>
<th>Lancaster</th>
<th>Liverpool</th>
<th>North West</th>
<th>England</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Owned Outright</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>24.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owned Mortgaged</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>43.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Rent (Furnished)</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Rent (Unfurnished)</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing Authority Rent</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Authority Rent</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>38.3</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>19.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 12: Housing Tenure

Source: 1991 Population Census http://www.census.ac.uk/casweb/

The pattern of housing tenure shows the proportion of owner occupied properties to be highest in Lancaster (70.7 per cent), this is above the regional and national averages, with Lancaster demonstrating a lower than average proportion of local authority rented properties. Blackburn has a higher proportion of local authority rented properties than Lancaster and a slightly lower percentage of owner occupied dwellings. It also has a level of private rental below that of either Lancaster, Liverpool or regional and national averages. Liverpool shows the greatest variation from both the regional and national average, with only 50.6 per cent of properties owner occupied. This is accompanied by a high proportion (38.3 per cent) of households renting from the local authority. Liverpool also sees a higher number of households rented privately or from housing associations.

Ethnic group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of population</th>
<th>Blackburn</th>
<th>Lancaster</th>
<th>Liverpool</th>
<th>North West</th>
<th>England</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>79.64</td>
<td>96.68</td>
<td>96.23</td>
<td>96.33</td>
<td>93.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Caribbean</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black African</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Other</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>10.29</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistani</td>
<td>7.78</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladeshi</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Asian</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 11: Ethnic Group

Source: 1991 Population Census http://www.census.ac.uk/casweb/

The distribution of ethnic minorities varies noticeably between the three towns. In Liverpool the Black and Chinese population are proportionately higher than for the North West as a whole, while the Indian and Pakistani populations are lower than average. Lancaster has an ethnic distribution closest to that of the region as a whole, with a slightly lower than average black population. Of the three towns Blackburn demonstrates the greatest variation from the regional or national averages, with over 10 per cent of its population Indian and nearly 8 per
cent Pakistani, this is approximately ten times the average for the North West. The North West as a whole sees a lower proportion of ethnic minorities when compared to the national average, with the proportion of Pakistanis the only group above this average.

### Economic Profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of total population</th>
<th>Blackburn</th>
<th>Lancaster</th>
<th>Liverpool</th>
<th>North West</th>
<th>England</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employed full time</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>38.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed part time</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self employed – with employees</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self employed – no employees</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On government scheme</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students – economically inactive</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanently sick</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>19.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 13: Economic profile of households**

Source: 1991 population census 10 per cent sample http://www.census.ac.uk/casweb/

In all three towns the proportion of full-time employees is below the national average, with the lowest levels found in Liverpool. Lancaster has a slightly higher than average proportion of part-time employees, while both Blackburn and Liverpool remain slightly below average. Although Lancaster has a slightly lower than average rate of unemployment, both Blackburn and Liverpool experience higher than average unemployment, with Liverpool experiencing the higher rate of 11.6 per cent, which compares to a national average of 5.6 per cent. Liverpool and Blackburn also have above average percentages of people recorded as permanently sick.

### Industry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>%</th>
<th>Blackburn</th>
<th>Lancaster</th>
<th>Liverpool</th>
<th>North West</th>
<th>England</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture, forestry and fishing</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy and water</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mining</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distribution and catering</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banking and finance</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Services</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>27.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not classified</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 14: Employment by industry**

Source: 1991 Population Census 10 per cent sample http://www.census.ac.uk/casweb/
Figure 14 illustrates some of the key types of industry and the number of people employed in these industries. Of the three towns it can be seen that Blackburn has the highest proportion engaged in manufacturing (32.4 per cent), well above either the regional or national averages, whilst levels of manufacturing in Lancaster and Liverpool are below average. In both Lancaster and Liverpool the dominant sector is the service industry, with figures for both towns above the regional or national average.

### Occupation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of population</th>
<th>Blackburn</th>
<th>Lancaster</th>
<th>Liverpool</th>
<th>North West</th>
<th>England</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Managerial</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science and Engineering Professionals</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Professionals</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Professionals</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical and Secretarial</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled trades</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service sector workers</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial workers, drivers</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Figure 15: Occupation

Source: 1991 Population Census 10 per cent sample http://www.census.ac.uk/casweb/

Each of the three towns have a lower than average percentage of managerial workers. Lancaster has a higher proportion of teachers and health professionals than either Liverpool or Blackburn, with percentages significantly above the regional and national averages. Blackburn has a particularly high proportion of people employed in skilled trades, while Lancaster and Liverpool are below the regional and national averages.

### Social Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% households</th>
<th>Blackburn</th>
<th>Lancaster</th>
<th>Liverpool</th>
<th>North West</th>
<th>England</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managerial and technical</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled non-manual</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled manual</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partly skilled</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unskilled</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armed forces</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government scheme</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Figure 16: Social Class of household as defined by occupation of household head

Source: 1991 Population Census 10 per cent sample http://www.census.ac.uk/casweb/
The percentage of professional households in Lancaster is higher than the regional or national average, however, in both Blackburn and Liverpool it is significantly lower and below the average. A similar pattern can be seen with regards to managerial and technical households, where Lancaster has a proportion of households in line with the regional average, (28 per cent), while Blackburn and Liverpool remain well below this figure. Blackburn has a lower than average proportion of skilled non-manual households but a higher proportion of skilled manual households than either Lancaster or Liverpool. Each of the three towns has a higher than average percentage of partly skilled and unskilled households, with Blackburn having the most partly skilled and Lancaster the highest number of unskilled households. The proportion of households involved in government schemes is higher than average in each of the three towns with Liverpool having the highest proportion of people on government schemes (1.8 per cent), over twice the regional or national average of 0.7 per cent.

### Deprivation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Blackburn</th>
<th>Lancaster</th>
<th>Liverpool</th>
<th>North West</th>
<th>England</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average index for town</td>
<td>54.1</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>60.4</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 1 (Most Deprived)</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 5 (Least Deprived)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 17: Index of Multiple Deprivation**


$ Data for Blackburn is derived from just a subset of 6 wards within the town, as data was unavailable for all wards

The index uses the following domains:
- Income; employment; health & disability; education, skills and training; housing; geographical access to services.

These are used to give each ward a rank based on performance in response to a range of relevant indicators. The overall score is a sum of the weighted domain score. Higher scores indicate greater deprivation.

The quintiles represent data ranked for all wards from the most deprived to least deprived out of the 8,414 wards for England and divided into equal fifths depending on their rank. The data in the table above represents the percentage of the wards for each area that falls within each quintile.

The statistics show that Lancaster is the least deprived of the three towns considered in this study with an overall pattern of deprivation in line with the regional average. Blackburn and Liverpool, however, show indices well above average, suggesting that these are relatively deprived areas. The extent of deprivation will vary considerably within these towns with pockets of higher and lower deprivation seen in each of them. A more detailed study would be required to explore the spatial variations within towns. The North West is relatively deprived compared to England as a whole.
Summary

The size of each of the three towns in terms of total population varies considerably and this is likely to have an effect on the amount of variation within the towns themselves. This is something not considered by the current extent of this research. Lancaster, the smallest of the three towns has the most favourable indices in terms of health, crime, social class, which is also reflected by an IMD score considerably lower than either Blackburn or Liverpool. Both Blackburn and Liverpool appear to suffer from significant deprivation compared to the region or nation as a whole. Blackburn also stands out for its notably high proportion of ethnic minorities, particularly Indian and Pakistani.

The North West appears to be relatively more deprived compared to England, with a higher index of multiple deprivation. This is accompanied by a higher than average rate of unemployment and number of people reported as permanently sick. There also appears to be a higher rate of crime in the North West than for England, with vehicle thefts standing out as highest against the national average at a rate of 37.1 per thousand population for the North West compared to 28.5 per thousand for England as a whole.

Overall the three towns reflect a range of experiences across the region as a whole. However as two of the three towns have a deprivation status that is significantly worse than the average, they may not be completely representative of the region as a whole.
Appendix 3

Data collected from the three case study sites

Summary

Across the three sites in this first year of data gathering eight classrooms have been observed in detail. These include three ESOL classes, two spelling classes, two maths classes and one English class. Observational notes, audio and video recording have been collected to support analysis of teaching and learning activities in these different learning environments. Six of these classes are focal classes in the pedagogic phase of the research and will generate detailed information relating to what learners learn and what teachers teach. Over 12 basic skills tutors have been interviewed providing a direct comment on the practice being observed and recorded. Many managers and policy implementers who organise and support basic skills delivery in these three sites have contributed their knowledge and understanding providing a bigger picture of the provision we have observed.

We have talked with over 100 adult learners in the classes that we have visited and have interviewed over 30 learners across the three sites. Learners have explained their reasons for attending, including their hopes and aspirations. They have explained the difficulties and barriers to learning, particularly when they have refugee or asylum seekers status. Through the use of photographs and visits to homes and workplaces we have made links between everyday life and learning. We have responded to distance and time constraints and have explored the use of email and telephone communication to fit in with the learners lives.

Our data includes records of working with the six teacher researchers attached to the Adult Learners’ Lives project, records that chart the development of the research in the sites and of our collaboration with them.

Lancaster
Data generated from field research at Lancaster Adult College.

Participant observation fieldnotes

- **ESOL class November 2002 – June 2003**
These comprise of weekly fieldnotes of one class with additional notes from a second class observed.

- **Skills for Life English class November 2002 – June 2003**
These are weekly fieldnotes.

- **Skills for Life Spelling Class January 2003 – June 2003**
These are weekly fieldnotes.

- **Skills for Life Maths class November 2002 – June 2003**
These are weekly fieldnotes.
Audio recorded classroom interaction

**Skills for Life** English class, three sessions May 2003
This includes two one-to-one interactions and one group session.

**Skills for Life** Spelling class, session May 2003
This includes two one-to-one interactions and one group session.

Learner interviews
Initial interviews have been recorded on mini-disc with:

- Two ESOL learners
- Five SfL English class learners
- Four SfL Spelling class learners
- Two SfL Maths class learners

Teacher/volunteer interviews
Interviews have been recorded on minidisk with:

- Five Basic Skills tutors
- One Basic Skills volunteer

Teacher-researcher notes
Notes of meetings have been recorded with teacher researchers Gill Burgess and Carol Woods from Lancaster Adult College and Adult Learners’ Lives researcher Karin Tusting.

Additional material
- Notes of staff and college basic skills meetings attended, November 2002 – June 2003.
- Notes from visit to Beaumont College, February 2003.

Blackburn
Data generated from field research and the ESOL case study at Blackburn College.

Participant observation fieldnotes
- ESOL E1 (Entry Level One) class January 2003 – March 2003
  This comprises of detailed observational fieldnotes of six sessions.

- ESOL E3 (Entry Level Three) class February 2003 – April 2003
  This comprises of detailed observational fieldnotes of three sessions.

Audio-recorded classroom interaction
Supplemented by observation notes

- ESOL E1 class one session in February 2003.
- ESOL E1 class one photography session March 2003.
- ESOL E3 class two sessions in March 2003.
Learner interviews
- ESOL E1 seven learner interviews:
  - Three conducted in English
  - Two conducted in Portuguese
  - One conducted in French

  With accompanying interview notes.

- ESOL E3 four learner interviews all conducted in English.

Teacher interviews/teacher generated material
- Interviews conducted with three basic skills tutors.
- Tutor profile of students for: E1 class
  - E3 class

Case Study field reports
- Reports including meetings with college practitioner and management meetings at Blackburn College, learning partnership representatives and representatives of local asylum support team.

Additional data
- Photographs from ESOL E1 class photo journal project (March 2003).
- Copies of learning materials used in E1 and E3 class sessions.
- Copies of students’ Home Office asylum seeker and refugee communication/documents.
- Emails from learners.

Liverpool
- Data generated from fieldwork at Rotunda and Dovecot DISC (drop-in study centres), Liverpool Community College.

Observation fieldnotes
- Notes from other DISC visits and Second Chance lesson at Liverpool Community College.

Video recorded classroom interaction
- Spelling class at Dovecot DISC, 45 mins. April 2003.

Learner interviews
- Pre-video minidisc recorded mini-interviews with:
  - Four learners from Rotunda maths group
  - Five learners from Dovecote spelling group
Post-video minidisc recorded mini-interviews with:

Three learners from Rotunda maths group
Four learners from Dovecote spelling

Recorded group discussion about the video for Rotunda maths groups and Dovecote spelling group. April/May 2003.

Long term Adult learners’ lives interviews:

Initial interviews with eight learners (three from maths group and five from spelling group). May 2003 – June 2003.

Teacher interviews/teacher generated material

Minidisc recorded interview about the video with teacher-researcher tutors Kath and Dianne.
Tutor pre-plan and post-plan notes from focal class.
Tutor profile of students for: Rotunda maths group
Dovecote spelling group.
Two individual minidisc recorded interviews with teachers Kath and Dianne.

Teacher-researcher notes

Notes of weekly meetings and planning correspondence with teacher-researchers Dianne and Kath.
Notes from meetings with teacher-researchers and college advocate.

Additional material

Copies of learner material from videoed focal class.
Student photographs from Rotunda maths class and Dovecote spelling class showing link between literacy, numeracy and everyday life.
Minidisc recording of class discussion about photographs.
Email correspondence with two learners.
Learner essay on ‘being interviewed’ for the Adult Learners’ Lives project.
Notes from mapping visits.
Appendix 4

Literacy & health

Uta Papen

Background

The support provided by the NRDC was initially used to carry out a literature review of the topic including recent work in North America and Australia. The main purpose of the review was to develop a thorough understanding of existing research and development in the field of literacy and health, to identify main issues of concern for further research. On the basis of this, I developed a research proposal on the topic of health and literacy (including numeracy and ESOL).

The literature review initially focused on the available medical literature [including research in the field of health education and health promotion]. In a second step, we perused the relevant literature in the field of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL. The review was primarily carried out by the research associate, supported by the project manager.

Further activities of this initial period included liaising with the Institute for Health Research at Lancaster University, with NIACE and with the new NHS University.

On the basis of the literature review and further readings in the field of literacy and health, I then developed a project proposal – entitled Literacy, learning and health – which I submitted to the Lancaster University’s Small Grants Scheme. The main purpose of the application was twofold:

- to obtain funding that would allow me to continue to employ a research associate (who would then be able to extend the literature review).
- to further develop the design of the proposed research, with a view towards preparing a major grant application.

As a result of my successful application, I obtained funding to employ a part-time research associate for a further six months (40 per cent, April to September 2003).

Since April, we have extended the literature review to include current policies related to health and literacy, both in Britain as well as in North America. We have also made initial contacts with adult education providers in the North West, in view of identifying possible sites for research. A visit to an ESOL class in Preston provided interesting insights into the role of health as a topic, which appears to respond to learners’ interests and needs.

My main activity throughout spring was to develop a project proposal for a major research project on literacy and health. I submitted this proposal to NRDC in May 2003 and it has been funded to begin in October 2003.
Health and literacy: An overview of existing research

Introduction

This summary of existing research in the field of literacy and health covers both the medical literature and research within the field of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL. The main purpose of this review was to examine the current stage of research in the field, to identify gaps in the existing knowledge and, on the basis of this, to select topics and concerns for further research.

Summary of the literature review

Research that explores the links between health and education/literacy.

There is ample evidence that socio-economic status, educational attainment and health are linked. Findings are consistent across countries with similar pictures emerging from the UK (see for example Black, D. et al. 1980, Royal College of General Practitioners 1998), the US (Pamuk et al. 1998), Canada (Health Canada 1999) and Australia (Harris et al. 1999). People who have low levels of education are more likely to suffer from ill health than those with better incomes and higher educational achievement. However, most of the existing research was carried out in the US and Canada, and to a lesser extend in Australia. Relatively little has been done in the UK. Recent research in the UK has focused on the correlations between learning, as measured by years of education and a person’s physical and mental health (see for example Feinstein 2001 and Hammond 2002). A recent study carried out by NIACE has examined the effects of participation in adult education on health (Aldridge and Lavender 1999). NIACE has also reviewed existing learning initiatives for adults that focus on health issues (James 2001). However, none of these two reports looks specifically at adults with poor basic skills or those whose first language is not English, but are concerned with adult education more broadly.

With regards to health and literacy more precisely, much research has been undertaken in North America, particularly in the US. However, many of the existing studies come from the medical field and focus on a narrow view of health literacy. The main focus of research has been twofold: to design tools to assess patients’ literacy levels (see for example Davies 1991, Parker, Williams and Nurss 1995, Baker et al. 1999) and on the basis of this to assess people’s likelihood to benefit from health care services. Such research has for example found that people with low levels of literacy are also less likely to make use of existing prevention and screening facilities (Davis et al. 2001), to adhere to prescribed courses of treatment (Kalichman et al. 1999) or to be knowledgeable about their chronic disease (Williams et al. 1998).

Existing research on health-related documents

A second major strand of research in the field aims to measure the readability of health documents such as consent forms (Molina 2001, Raich et al. 2001) or patient leaflets (see for example Basara and Juergens 1994, Newton 1995, Glazer et al. 1996, Guidry et al. 1997, Molina 2001). One of the few studies carried out in the UK looked at the readability of patient information booklets on breast cancer. Using tools developed in the US, the study found the information booklets to have a high reading age and to be unsuitable for many women (Beaver and Luker 1997). More recently, research on written health information has been extended to a concern with information provided through the internet (McLellan 1998, Kalichman et al. 2001, Berland et al. 2001).
What is missing from existing research is an understanding of lay people’s strategies to access, comprehend and use the written information they receive from health care providers. Furthermore, there is little knowledge about how concretely low literacy skills impact on a person’s ability to access written information about health and to make use of existing health care facilities. None of the existing studies on readability levels or patients’ literacy skills has looked at whether and how patients make use of written texts, how they fill out forms and whether they feel that the information they are given is relevant and accessible. As part of a recent study in a hospital in Montreal, patients were interviewed about the usefulness of written information material displayed in the wards and received from health care providers. The majority of the 117 patients interviewed did not find the materials useful (Shohet 2003).

Accordingly, we know very little about the difficulties people with poor basic skills experience in dealing with the health care system and the particular skills that could help them to improve their health literacy. Some research has been carried out in the US, following people with low levels of basic skills through a hospital (Rudd forthcoming). The aim of this research was to identify the literacy-related problems these people experienced. No such research has yet been done in the UK. We also know very little about how people in the UK process and understand health-related information and how they deal with medical forms. One of the few existing pieces of research is a small study that looked at the experiences of students with a particular form to apply for support with health care costs (Fawns and Ivanic 2001).

The existing research on health and literacy has repeatedly shown that health education materials, consent forms and other documents are written at a level far too high for the average patient. On the basis of these findings, plain language has been advocated. However, many researchers have questioned whether the use of plain language in itself will be able to address the problems of low literacy patients and those whose first language is not English (Perrin 1998 – quoted in Shohet 2002, Hohn 1998, Rudd 2002). These cautionary remarks indicate that the issue of ‘readability’ is complex and not a matter of functional skills alone, but that other considerations such as the cultural appropriateness of materials, the necessity for contextual knowledge and the role of visual presentations need to be taken into account.

Health as a content area for literacy, numeracy and ESOL

As far as the role of health as a content area in literacy, numeracy and ESOL provision is concerned, very little research appears to have been done. No study was found that examines the role of health in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL programmes. A national survey of adult basic educators in the US carried out by NCSALL (Rudd and Moykens 1999) has found that health as a content and skill area is given high priority in many ABE and ESOL programmes. The survey found that practitioners valued health as a content area because it contributes more than other topics to students’ motivation, interest and participation. A similar survey of adult basic education and ESOL teachers in Massachusetts (Rudd, Zacharia and Daube 1998) supports these findings and indicates that health units help to support the teaching objectives of reading, writing, vocabulary building and speaking skills. No similar research exists in the UK.

A number of initiatives that link health and literacy or that use health-related materials in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL classes implemented in the US (see for example the Massachusetts Comprehensive Health Programme, www.sabes.org/health/index.htm, HEAL: breast and cervical cancer, a curriculum that offers health lessons linked to basic skills development, quoted in Rudd 2002) and in Canada (Norton 1992, Norton and Campbell 1998,
Canadian Public Health Association 2000] have been documented. These programmes have recognised health as an issue of critical importance to adults and therefore aim to incorporate health issues into existing curricula or even to create health literacy programmes that serve the double aim of teaching basic literacy and numeracy skills and increasing students’ health knowledge. Similar initiatives may exist in the UK, but they have not been documented or researched in any systematic way. An exception is the recent report by the Community Education Development Centre [Summer 2001]. This report suggests that improving people’s basic literacy skills is a way of tackling health inequalities. It discusses evidence that shows how poor basic skills can affect an individual's health. The report describes several initiatives in Harlow (Essex) that link health to literacy. These include a course on first aid that includes basic skills training and a practical course for staff working in the health sector and in other public services to design and produce written material which takes account of the needs of people with low basic skills.

It is reasonable to suppose that other such initiatives exist in the UK, but none of these appear to have been documented or studied in a systematic way. A further question that has not been researched in any detail is how experiences of ill health could relate to learning and to participation in adult basic education. Several studies have shown that health and illness are important matters of concern for many learners in adult basic education classes (see for example Frank 2001, Rudd et al. 1998). Illness, in particular when prolonged, serious and chronic, frequently can trigger people’s desire and need to learn (as documented in Barton and Hamilton 1998). Furthermore, there are indications that initiatives which combine health and basic skills may be successful in recruiting those individuals who are in need of skills improvement but would not come forward to regular ABE classes [Shohet 2002]. Yet no research has yet been carried out in the UK that has asked students in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL about possible health-related motivations or has examined the effects of participation on their health.

Conclusions: A broader concept of health literacy?

Overall, research in the area of literacy and health appears to reflect the concerns of medical professionals and health education specialists. Researchers in the field of literacy seem to have paid little attention to the potential of health as a curriculum area for literacy, numeracy and ESOL. Furthermore, very little research has been done that explores the skills requirements and the language and literacy practices of health care settings. Existing studies tend to be locked in a narrow framework which construes literacy and numeracy as abstract skills and pays little if any attention to the contextual and institutional nature of literacy practices in the health care sector. These studies assume a straightforward relationship between reading and writing skills, access to health education and the ability to act upon information obtained.

A strikingly different understanding of the role of literacy with regards to people’s health is suggested in WHO’s recent definition of health literacy:

*Health literacy represents the cognitive and social skills which determine the motivation and ability of individuals to gain access to, understand and use information in ways which promote and maintain good health.*
Health literacy means more than being able to read pamphlets and successfully make appointments. By improving people’s access to health information and their capacity to use it effectively, health literacy is critical to empowerment (WHO, 1998).

The above definition presents a significant step towards acknowledging the contextual nature and complexity of health literacy, extending beyond earlier functional models. However, it leaves much scope for interpretation, in particular with regards to the notion of ‘empowerment’ that is stated as crucial to health literacy.

On the basis of the above definition and drawing on Freebody and Luke’s (1990) four-dimensional concept of literacy, Nutbeam (1999, 2000) has proposed a model of health literacy that encompasses three levels: functional health literacy, interactive health literacy and critical health literacy. Nutbeam’s model presents a significant advancement from the narrow view that informs much research in the field of health and literacy. It provides the ground for thinking of health literacy as a range of situated practices rather than a single set of skills. Using data from their own research among health professionals, Freebody and Freiberg [1997, 1999] show how such a concept of health literacy can be applied to examine the role of written texts in patient–doctor communication, allowing us to pay attention to the social relationships in health care settings, the institutional nature of text and talk in these contexts and the role of power in relation to medical knowledge.

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Appendix 5
ESOL students in the prison system

Anita Wilson

I have carried out a brief study of aspects of ESOL need and provision in the prison setting. The initial thoughts, observations and findings reported here will go on to form the basis of a full report.

This is a marginal topic both in general educational research terms and also from the prison perspective as most learning in prison is concerned with the leveraging of basic skills for the general prison population and the remit to link education with training and resettlement. ESOL students are only a very small percentage of prison learners. However, they are a disparate group with complex issues. Some are ‘foreign nationals’ and as such will be deported during or following their incarceration. Some may be asylum seekers or detainees who are considered to have committed criminal offences while awaiting the processing of their claims. Many are obliged to choose prison employment over prison education as they need to send money home or need money for phone calls, and postage.

For this study, education managers from each prison were invited to answer questions on how many ESOL students they currently catered for, what languages these students spoke as their mother tongue, and the classes they attended. The questionnaire also asked for constructive suggestions on what improvements could be made in terms of provision for this group of students. Given that some prisons do not hold ‘foreign nationals’, that some prison education departments may be unaware of the presence of ESOL students within their prison and that education managers operate under considerable pressure, the response rate of 72 prisons from a total of 139 contacted was excellent.

On the basis of the information gathered, the number of ESOL students within the whole population of prison learners varied considerably, ranging from between five per cent to 20 per cent. 55 languages were identified but it is important to bear in mind that German, Portuguese, French and Spanish extend beyond any single country and so the range of languages does not represent the full range of ethnicity and cultural heritage of prison ESOL students. Due to the dispersal of prisoners within the system, there was also a wide variety in the numbers and profiles of prison ESOL students. Within London, HMP Wormwood Scrubs, for example, recorded that prisoners spoke Italian, French, German, Turkish, Spanish, Ethiopian, Somali, Armenian, Slovenian, Algerian, Pakistani, Chinese, Iranian, Farsi, Hindi, Portuguese, Arabic, Punjabi, and Russian. From the women’s perspective, HMP Holloway recorded that its prisoners spoke Spanish, Somali, Romanian, Chinese, Serbian, Iranian, French, Portuguese, Russian, German, Czech, and Arabic. Prisons located in other parts of the country had different profiles – and, given the fluidity of the prison population, one response rightly noted ‘it varies depending on our intake’. The data also shows the need be aware of gendered language differences. HMP Holloway, for example, holds female prisoners, many of whom are incarcerated as drug mules. Their country of origin and the current geography of the drug trafficking trade is reflected in the priority of languages such as Spanish, Chinese and French.

In terms of improved provision, there were a number of helpful and insightful comments in
the questionnaires. Many were practical and asked for teaching aids such as videos or more learning support assistants to help in the classroom. Others recognised that ESOL students might not be brought to their attention by the prison, or that prisoners who had English as a second or other language would be put to work in other areas of the jail where language barriers would not be an issue. Some felt that ESOL students themselves would opt for prison jobs that paid a higher rate than education, suggesting that they ‘be paid a little extra so that they don’t drift off to the kitchens or piece work, in order to earn enough to pay for international phones or occasionally to send money home’.

The two most prevalent responses were concerned with additional funding and better links with the rest of the institution. Comments on additional funding included ‘most education contractors cannot afford to pay the necessary salaries and instead offer part-time sessional contracts at hourly rates which does not attract high calibre staff’ and:

\[
\text{students don’t get enough time in ESOL – a couple of hours once a week feels like too little to make much impact! Frustrating for us all. Inevitably, funding [or lack of] is the perennial excuse for not making more time available.}
\]

Frustrations with the institution as a whole were also highlighted. Comments such as ‘[ESOL students] needs should be given a priority so that they are not taken from education and asked to take on other duties in prison’ were linked to wider institutional frustrations such as staff shortages:

\[
\text{students need to actually be able to come to class to access the support and wide educational provision for them here … currently Education is closed almost all the time due to a shortage of [prison] officers’ and prison protocols. No induction tailored to their needs. No accurate assessment is made until students come to classes.}
\]

In conclusion, initial findings would suggest that ESOL in prison is a contentious and complex issue. The politics of funding and supporting a small group of minority students who may well be deported after imprisonment or who are ‘better off’ working rather than learning in prison is not something that is easy to resolve. Lack of English still seems to be considered an indicator of lack of intelligence, as one manager noted, ‘I was surprised to discover they seem to equate ESOL class attendance with “not being clever”’. Societal prejudices about who learns, when and how would appear to continue to remain a factor regardless of the arena in which the learning takes place.

A full report on the findings from this study will be made available in October 2003.
Appendix 6

Accelerated experience in teaching Basic Skills

Yvon Appleby, David Barton, Rachel Hodge, Roz Ivanic, Karin Tusting

January 2003

The issue

One of the most significant problems that is emerging from our entry into the basic skills field (across various institutions, training environments and practitioner groups) is a clash of resources: where recent changes required by the Skills for Life strategy mean an increase in staff training but where the staff pool to cover staff to do this training is qualified but not experienced. The root of the problem is a shortfall of experienced trained staff to provide cover. The effect of this shortfall is exacerbating the stress of introducing so many changes in the field of basic skills: both in the curriculum (i.e. core curriculum) and in teaching qualifications (FENTO standards). The overall impact that is felt by managers and institutions is of being overwhelmed and not having adequate time, or human resources, to introduce the new changes: even though these are embraced as positive steps forward.

The effectiveness of the implementation of the Skills for Life strategy is seriously being hampered by this single problem. This is not a long-term problem but one that is associated with the process of implementation of the Skills for Life strategy. The solution, is also therefore a short term one and geared explicitly to the problems being encountered as a result of this process of implementation.

Proposed solution

One of the ways of alleviating being overwhelmed is to increase the pool of experienced practitioners. This would enable institutions to provide cover using experienced staff, which would be less detrimental to students and would assist the ease of introduction of the core curriculum. It would also provide the possibility for institutions and experienced practitioners to gain from the benefits of research and professional development, currently being offered by many agencies and HE institutions. Presently many are unable to participate because of the shortage of experienced practitioners to attend or to cover for those attending.

Double staffing, as a method of accelerating acquisition of teaching experience, has been used in the past by some community education to provide ‘on the job’ experiential learning for new staff. This method has been used as an effective way of enhancing and accelerating the experience of qualified teachers from different teaching backgrounds, providing practical experience of the new teaching environment. This method uses peer support, with the possibility of team teaching, to provide a supportive, concrete learning environment that encourages reflective learning. Although recognised as an effective model, funding issues have curtailed its general and widespread use. This type of model has also been used in the United States under the name of ‘internships’ or mentoring.
Accelerated experience in teaching basic skills: implementing and testing this support mechanism.

Based upon the good practice within mentoring, peer support, internships and reflective practice, it would be possible to implement an accelerated experience in teaching basic skills using insights from these models. The accelerated and enhanced experience in this proposed model is based upon double funded teaching where an experienced basic skills tutor works with a qualified but inexperienced tutor. This 'practical acquisition' would be supported within a structure of critical reflection supported by a mentor and supporting institution.

Providing institutions do not have adequate funding to provide the resources for double staffed teaching or for adequate critical reflection and development time. Additional development money would therefore have to be made available – either nationally through BSA, or regionally through LSDAs or LSCs. A two-fold strategy is suggested that both tests the effectiveness of using an accelerated experience in teaching basic skills method whilst simultaneously collecting evidence that our original hypothesis of the problem is as widespread as we anticipate. By implementing a small pilot research study it would be possible to monitor and evaluate the impact and effectiveness of this model and its cost implications. This could either be new research or could effectively be attached to an existing NRDC project – for example the Adult Learners’ Lives project. Simultaneously the NRDC, or an existing centre like Lancaster, could conduct a survey of practitioners and some sample interviews, to assess how widespread the problem of the lack of experienced staff is. At the point of the survey findings, the evaluation of the accelerated experience in teaching basic skills pilot would also have been completed. It would be possible within a relatively short space of time to assess the nature of need and to have a ‘tested’ practical solution to offer fixed to a specific short-term timescale.

Background Discussion Paper

Time and overwhelm: initial impacts of the implementation of change in the Basic Skills sector

Since September 2002, the Adult Learners’ Lives project has been engaged in the first stages of setting up research in three sites in the North West. This has involved negotiating access, with managers and practitioners, to basic skills departments and learning groups, as well as recruiting teacher-researchers.

It is clear from the work that we have been doing so far that managers and practitioners are experiencing high levels of stress with regard to the implementation of the Skills for Life strategy. One of the main issues is time. Over and over again, we have been told the same story. Practitioners are generally very positive about the basic principles behind the strategy and the initiatives that are being introduced. However, they cannot do the impossible. The kinds of changes required by the strategy, and the speed at which they are being imposed, are unrealistic, given the levels of resources people are currently working with. There are so many initiatives coming out at the moment that, as several practitioners have told us, ‘as fast as you’re doing it, there’s something new to take into account’.

This does not appear to be a question of resistance to change. We have come across very little resistance to the changes associated with Skills for Life, indeed we have found a great deal of enthusiasm for many of them. It is simply a question of what it is possible to do in a given time period, and the order in which changes have to be made. The professionalisation of the
field and the need for trained practitioners and high quality provision is generally welcomed. But it takes time to train people and perhaps more significantly, it takes time for newly-trained people to gain the experience to be able to provide high-quality teaching.

In many areas, there exists a pool of people with City and Guilds or other qualifications in adult literacy. However, these have now been superseded by the new FENTO standards and so many of the already experienced basic skills staff will be expected to do Level 4 qualifications as soon as possible. This has been made even more difficult by the fact that the introduction of the new qualifications has not kept pace with the introduction of new provision, and therefore many managers have had to use the old qualifications in the interim period, which will need topping-up over the next couple of years.

At the same time, the introduction of the new curricula has meant that some teachers are being pulled out of classrooms for three-day curriculum trainings, some going to several three-day events in several different fields, eating into even more of their teaching time. The implementation of these complex new curricula is a demanding and very time-consuming task in itself, both for experienced teachers required to change their practices accordingly and especially for newly-trained teachers.

At the same time, several colleges and providers are also involved in other initiatives related to the Skills for Life strategy, such as the Pathfinder projects. All of these take the time of experienced basic skills staff, some of whom can potentially be involved in several initiatives at once, with all the headaches that entails in terms of the need for teaching cover. This also raises a serious question as to the quality of research that departments can carry out when there is already such a strain on resources of time and staff.

Although people have been attracted to the profession through the 'Get On' campaign and newly-trained teachers are entering the field, they need to accumulate experience before they are ready to take on the responsibilities associated with some of the new initiatives. Many of these are highly creative and innovative, for instance community provision involving ABE practitioners working alongside other specialists and mapping basic skills provision on to a particular subject area. This would be challenging for an experienced tutor, let alone one who has just come out of a few months training.

Another issue is the mismatch between the roles of college principals and LSCs, who have targets to meet in terms of numbers of students in basic skills provision, and the main task of the basic skills manager which is to provide learners with a high quality learning environment. Conflicts are being experienced when basic skills departments are trying to deal with a sudden influx of learners before the human resources are in place.

The phrase that comes up time and again is that practitioners feel they are being sent ‘mixed messages from those at the top’. On the one hand, they are being told that the need is for professional, trained staff and high quality provision, which takes time and experience. At the same time, they are being told that they need to get out there and develop and expand innovative work now.

What all of this means is that human resources are stretched beyond capacity. There is no redundancy in the system to allow time for development or embedding of new practices. Managers are struggling to find staff to cover the provision that currently exists, let alone to allow staff time to participate in other external initiatives, even where there is money available for this time to be bought out.
It is to be welcomed that new training opportunities are being made available to basic skills teachers and that the field is becoming more professionalised. In general terms, people are very committed to best practice and are working hard to implement recommendations and new initiatives. However, it needs to be recognised that these things do not happen overnight, and that there is a natural logic to the process. Teachers need to be trained and then to accumulate experience, before they are experienced and confident enough to implement some of the initiatives that are being brought in now. The current small pool of trained and experienced teachers is simply not sufficient to meet the demands being placed upon them. When colleges are stretched to the limit or beyond just in terms of staffing the learning provision, engagement in further research and development initiatives is simply not feasible.

Another vital issue impacting this situation is the different range of pay, conditions and contracts which are offered to basic skills practitioners. Some practitioners have commented that there is a mismatch between, on the one hand, standardisation of curricula and the demand for professionalisation and quality across the board and on the other, poor pay and conditions and short contracts which undervalue and demoralise staff, driving them away from the sector. We know of at least one case where prison basic skills practitioners are paid only in the region of £14,000 full-time for teaching basic skills to young offenders in compulsory provision. This is some of the most demanding teaching and yet it is seriously undervalued by the terms offered.

The danger is that by placing impossible demands on people from above, the current shortage of resources will be exacerbated, as people take time off with stress or vote with their feet and change jobs, a situation that is already taking its toll. Morale in the FE sector is very low and people are already leaving. Words like basic skills departments ‘haemorrhaging’ staff and ‘drowning’ have been used. This is an urgent issue that needs to be addressed as soon as possible, because the more people that start to leave the sector or become unavailable to work in the sector, the more skills and experience will be lost and the more severe these problems will become. It would be more efficient, in terms of time, money and human resources, to take some steps towards addressing these issues now, rather than to deal with a more severe crisis later.

What is needed is not more materials or more training. What seems to be desperately needed is a search for creative ways to allow teachers the time to implement, reflect on and embed new initiatives before further changes are introduced.

The Adult Learners’ Lives project has encountered all of these issues in the difficulties that we have faced negotiating access to colleges for the research as a whole and for the teacher-researcher part of the programme. Although managers and teachers have expressed a great deal of interest in the programme, it has been very challenging to find teachers meeting the criteria for involvement who could be released for the required time, when they are clearly a vital resource for their department at this time of rapid change. Similar issues were encountered when negotiating access. Even making contact with management to talk about involvement with the project proved difficult in some sites, not through any lack of enthusiasm but simply because they were engaged in so much front-line activity that research involvement of this kind had to take second place.
Appendix 7

Overall emerging themes and future issues

At an awayday in early July, the full-time researchers, teacher-researchers and project directors engaged in a reflective exercise which generated a jointly produced list of themes which were beginning to emerge across the project. These themes are listed below. This list and the discussion in Section 6.1 of the main report will serve as the basis for future analysis across all the data which the project has generated so far and for planning the project’s development.

Learning environment

Providing a place where students are not labelled failure/different.

The positive label of ‘learner’.

Safety of learning environment – a safe haven from everyday difficulties.

A place that acknowledges trauma – previous and current around racism.

Social activity within learning group.

Structure to an otherwise unstructured day.

Funding issues

Finding money for learning opportunities, especially informal non-accredited learning.

Funding – students being paid to attend.

Barriers to learning

Barriers often explained in existing (institutional) categories.

Families – students do balancing act between needs and roles of others in their life.

Fear and panic response to previous learning.

College systems – bureaucratic and not sensitive to individual needs.

Policy – especially accreditation, which puts some learners off.

Lack of self-confidence and self-esteem in individual learners.
Gender issues – particular for some ESOL female learners.
Individually experienced blame and responsibility for failure.

Overcoming learning barriers
Making links between past and future and the role of education in this.
Engagement, concentration and commitment from students even in challenging environments.
Recognising hidden and presented barriers.
Recognising roles and responsibilities in home and community.
Recognition that social contexts of learning can be threatening as well as supportive.

Coping strategies – overcoming everyday life barriers
Students coping in their everyday lives generally.
Proactiveness of women in education, family and community.
Amazing coping strategies already used through informal networks (although limited).
Informal community networks – these are area specific and often local (variety between sites).
Church as a supportive community

The significance of maths/numeracy
Maths is abstract, numeracy is everyday and concrete.
Numeracy as a cultural phenomenon.
Lives are shaped by maths abilities.
Numeracy needs in everyday lives - do literacy tutors know more about their students’ everyday life than maths tutors?
Existing feelings of fear about maths.
Issues of confidence.
Maths as a social activity.

Joined up maths – linked to everyday uses and understanding.

The significance of language/literacies

Language used to describe experiences.

Used to tell painful stories and life narratives.

Used for coping with children and accessing services.

Used to access provision, including health and child care.

Having a voice through participating in research.

Importance of oracy linked to literacy.

Teaching and learning issues

College responds to practical outcomes from research.

Issues of full-time/part-time courses for students.

Need for fast tracking on assessment for ESOL.

Recognising and responding to the changing needs of students.

Issues of accrediting prior learning and learning gains that can’t be quantified.

Flexible student friendly provision like drop-in study centres.

The uses of group and individual teaching.

The use of different materials and artefacts [e.g. worksheets] to support learning.

Understanding what happens in the classroom.

Social engagement, negotiation and concentration in learning environment.

Challenging our assumptions about what is ‘good’ teaching.

Subject specific learning – abstract (decontextualised) and concrete (contextualised) teaching.

Classroom versus theory and real life practices.
Working with students who do not apportion blame for previous failure.

Students know what they want to learn.

Wider benefits of learning

Empowerment – new roles in the classroom.

Empowerment in life.

New skills acquisition including speaking practice.

Change in feelings and attitudes to learning, adds quality to life.

Insights about learners generated from research

Enabled greater understanding of learner’s roles in learning.

Getting to know individuals, understanding existing abilities and feelings.

Considered how students bring individual circumstances to learning.

Recognised that student’s potential and resources are unique.

Greater insight into individual learning experiences.

Recognised commonality of needs and commonality of experience.

Enabled understanding of variety of experiences and individual motivation.

Encouraged valuing each individual learner within a huge variety.
Appendix 8
Forms of impact of the adult learners’ lives project

This list underlies the discussion in Section 6.4 of the report.

College impact at all levels

Held meetings with advocates, managers and college principals for dissemination, information and awareness-raising.

Engaged in collaborative involvement with practitioners – reciprocal skills-sharing – individually and in group forums (college meetings, etc).

Organised dissemination events for college staff.

Impact to learners

Through participating in the project, learners have engaged in critical reflexive dialogue about their learning, needs, hopes and aspirations, through interviews, individual talk, photography, email correspondence and informal feedback.

Increased opportunities for learners to practise their communication skills in real situations.

Feedback has identified interest in and commitment to participation in university and national policy research.

Impact to teacher-researchers

Developed research capacity through engaging with theory, developing research skills, and connecting this to practice.

Changed practice through developing relationships with learners, developing new materials and exploring different ways of teaching.

Created local and regional networking through exchange visits, involvement in research forums, teacher-researcher real and virtual meetings.

Suggested potential developments in research and practice.

Developed writing and presenting skills.

Developed critical reflective abilities which will continue to inform practice.
Impact to other teachers and practitioners

Involving teachers as consultants has raised awareness, reciprocal skills-sharing, recognition of their expertise, and inspired their interest in participating in further research. Encouraged involvement in regional research forums.

Has had direct impact on teaching strategies, has created a reflective space for teachers which has led to development of awareness of teaching strategies which reflect learners’ lives more closely.

Has created space for evidence-based critical professional dialogue between teachers and management.

Broken down barriers between research and practice through building up relationships with colleges and individuals.

Met with Helen Deacon from Lancaster and MC 11 December.

Gave presentation for diploma students’ induction day 18 January.

Impact to research community

Challenged presuppositions about good practice and ways of working.

Created more meaningful dialogue between different research traditions.

Gave presentations at Nottingham NRDC international conference 20 March 2003, developing theory and methodology around collaborative qualitative research in social practices and learners’ lives.

Attended Edge Hill Linguistic Ethnography meeting 8-9 April – lots of interest expressed in project.

Attended international conference on basic skills provision in Northern Ireland, in Belfast.

Attended NATECLA conference.

Attended SCUTREA conference.

Attended BAAL Annual Meeting Leeds.

Developed links with researchers in the field internationally – Roz Ivanić’s visit to Rutgers.

Impact to region

Developed networks and sharing information through:
Attended All our Voices conference Garstang 5 February. Led workshops on practitioner research, links between research and practice, policy history.

Co-ordinated setting up North West *Skills for Life* Research Forum.

Led regional research seminar, Bolton Institute, attended by managers, practitioners, researchers, representatives from learning partnerships, LSCs, Regional Intelligence Agency, TUC, and local authorities.

Participated in lifelong learning forum in Blackburn area.

Met with Liverpool learning partnership, East Lancs learning partnership and North Lancs learning partnership.

Made links with Merseyside LSC including visits from representatives to Literacy Research Centre.

Met with MACTAC and Local Solutions (providers in Merseyside area).

Supported development of Chrysalis, an independent voluntary group to support and train women experiencing domestic violence in Liverpool, including basic skills training.

Awareness-raising and dissemination

Launched project and centre 17 October attended by practitioners, managers, researchers, NRDC representatives, Vice-Chancellor and other senior university representatives, learning agency representatives, policy-makers and implementers. Developed an information pack for this event which was subsequently distributed widely.

8 February gave presentation at University Court, to senior representatives of local and regional agencies and organisations.

Developed website.

Maintained ongoing contacts with Workplace Basic Skills Network addressing issues around research into workplace basic skills.

Impact to NRDC

Acted as a conduit from local and regional level to national level.

Wrote 'time and overwhelm' report.

Participated in numeracy advisory group and numeracy review expert seminar.

Produced ESOL case study and contributed to development of ESOL research network.
Attended northern national ABSSU/NRDC conference Manchester Airport 14 November.

Developed collaborative methodologies that include the voice of the learner.

Organised methodology-focused researcher day at Lancaster 27 February.

Contributions to research literature

Wrote reviews of work in motivation and retention, informal learning, ethnography and literacy, teaching and learning.

Developing national research and practice links

Attended RaPAL (Research and practice in adult literacy) and contributing to organising RaPAL conference 2004.

Joined RaPAL journal editorial group.

Participated in ESRC ABE seminar series linking policy, practice and research communities.
Appendix 9

Visit to Rutgers University, New Jersey, USA

Roz Ivanic visited the NCSALL research team at Rutgers University on 21 March 2003. She was hosted by Hal Beder and met Patsy Medina and other researchers who were relatively new to the team in a full-day seminar. The purpose of the visit was to exchange experience of researching classroom processes in adult literacy classrooms.

In the morning the Rutgers team presented the background to their current research projects and details of their research methodology. They are moving on from the exploratory study entitled ‘Dynamics of adult literacy classroom interaction’, investigating issues which emerged from that study. The furthest advanced of these follow-on studies is focusing on the concept of ‘engagement’, motivated by the observation of a high rate of ‘tuning-out’ and ‘drop out’ in the initial study. The team are working in several classrooms in a local Literacy centre, studying the classroom practices of different staff members, the categories of engagement which they observe, and what appears to promote engagement. In addition they were at that time about to embark on what they called the ‘lab-site study’ undertaking in-depth, longitudinal case studies of students who had volunteered to attend a class at the Center which has been designated as a research lab. In this study they hope to observe change over time in learning processes and progress. They were also discussing a third study which was at the design stage, looking at the ways in which classroom learning might provide a scaffold for naturally occurring ‘acquisition’ of language and literacy outside the classroom.

One of the most valuable and striking benefits of the visit was discussion of their methodology. They are committed to taking a grounded theory approach, insisting on collecting only naturally occurring rather than experimental data. They video-recorded classrooms and identified telling moments within these video-recordings which they later discussed a) individually with selected students (not always the same ones), and b) in a research team meeting consisting of all university members of the research team and the teacher of the class. These discussions were audio-recorded and constituted additional data, providing multiple perspectives on the classroom event itself. In addition, the lead researcher for each classroom was responsible for producing a transcript of the chosen extracts with initial annotations, and circulating it electronically to other members of the research team in order to build up multiple codings of the same data. They had already completed three such data-sets, and were aiming to record between three and ten sessions in each of the classrooms they were studying. So far, they had identified three types of engagement in the classrooms: cognitive, social, and procedural, and they had evidence of students displaying strong engagement even in quite unfavourable circumstances. This process was producing very rich insights, but the patterning of these had yet to be established. There is much the ALL team can learn from the Rutgers NCSALL team’s work. In particular, it drew attention to:

- Ways in which the teachers of classes we observe can be more fully involved in the research process.
- How a particular construct such as ‘engagement’ can provide a productive focus.
- The difference between the classroom as the main unit of analysis, in their case, and the adult learner as the main focus of analysis, in our case.
- The value of multiple codings of data in order to arrive at interpretation and explanation.
- Some similarities between issues arising in US literacy classrooms and UK literacy
classrooms, for example: the ways in which teachers exercise their authority with adult learners; the motivations which keep learners engaged, even on what appear to be quite routine tasks; and the nature of classroom interaction when learners are working on individualised learning plans.

In the afternoon Roz presented a variety of aspects of the work of the Lancaster Literacy Research Centre. First she gave a broad overview of the various activities of the centre, including the different types of NRDC work going on there. The Rutgers team showed particular interest in the work we were doing developing the Diploma in effective practice in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL, in developing the Teacher-Researcher Fellowship Programme, and in evaluating a range of models of practitioner involvement in research. These are all issues of great concern to them as they work closely with practitioners and are facing similar issues regarding the best sorts of relationships between research and practice.

She then outlined the key tenets of a social view of literacy which underpins the research at Lancaster. This was also of great interest, particularly to Patsy Medina as the lead researcher in the team, and the lively discussion suggested that this view of literacy might be taken up, particularly in their proposed study of ways in which classroom activities can scaffold acquisition outside class. Finally she presented the framework for identifying discourses of literacy [Lancaster Literacy Research Centre Working Paper 1], which is likely to be drawn upon in the ALL project. This also elicited a great deal of interest, with several of the researchers responding that they could see how they might use it in the Rutgers projects.

The day was highly successful in achieving its main aim of exchanging information, in such a way that the two research teams can benefit from each other’s current and future work.
This report is funded by the Department for Education and Skills as part of *Skills for Life*: the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills. The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department.
Linking learning and everyday life: a social perspective on adult language, literacy and numeracy classes

by Roz Ivanič, Yvon Appleby, Rachel Hodge, Karin Tusting and David Barton

Literacy Research Centre, Lancaster University
April 2006
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This report is funded by the Department for Education and Skills as part of Skills for Life, the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the department.
Preface

This is one of the reports from the Adult Learners’ Lives project, a major NRDC research project carried out by members of the Lancaster Literacy Research Centre. The overall aim of the project has been to develop understanding of the relationships between learners’ lives and the language, literacy and numeracy learning (LLN) in which they are engaged, and to draw out the implications of these for the Skills for Life strategy, the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills. Starting from the perspectives of people attending LLN classes, the project focused on issues around motivation, participation, persistence and engagement. This project complements other research from the NRDC which approaches these issues with different methodologies, such as the quantitative cohort studies and the effective practice studies, and work which focuses primarily on provision itself or on the Skills for Life infrastructure.

The first year of the Adult Learners’ Lives project concentrated on college environments. Working with teacher researchers enabled the research to be embedded in real classrooms and ensured that it had an impact on practice. In the second year of the project we worked in other sites with learners in what has been referred to by others as provision for the “hard to reach”. This included a drug support and aftercare centre, a young homeless project and a domestic violence project. We also maintained contact with 53 learners who represent the longitudinal cohort of the study. Working collaboratively with practitioners in each of the sites, we explored questions of participation and engagement with learners who frequently have issues in their lives that impact upon learning.

Overall, 282 people participated in the research: 134 were students and the remainder tutors, managers and other support workers. The electronic database from the project consists of 403 files, which include 198 recorded interviews. Where we worked in depth with people in learning programmes, this ranged from carrying out several interviews over a six-month period to keeping in touch with the person and their learning for more than two years.

The project was rooted in an approach which sees LLN as social practices. They are activities which people carry out, and which relate to and are shaped by all the other activities they engage in throughout their lives, rather than just as skills or cognitive attributes which they ‘have’ or do not have. (See Barton et al. 2000, and Barton, 2006, for further details.) This has immediate implications for the way we approach research. We seek to observe people engaging in LLN practices, within the frame of their lives and socio-cultural contexts, and to listen to what they have to say about these practices and the meanings that they have in their lives. This broader view of LLN has been essential when trying to understand people’s participation in learning in diverse settings.

People are involved in many different activities and these change over time. Different approaches to studying them reveal different facets and relationships, deepening our understanding. We have therefore combined methods of data collection, and have been developing responsive ways of gaining insights into people’s meanings and experiences. These include observation, in-depth and repeated interviews, group work, photography and video. The rigour in this approach is in the richness of the data, in the level of detail and in the range of sources of data.
Throughout this research we have tried to respect the interests and agendas of all those involved and to be responsive to their concerns. We have negotiated the way the research would be carried out and what its main focus would be in each site. We have sought to find ways of working collaboratively in data collection and interpretation, and to communicate with participants about the results of the research and how they can best be disseminated. This is particularly important when working with groups which include people in positions of social disadvantage who have experienced marginalisation throughout their lives. We have done our best to represent people’s voices fairly and in consultation with them; this is not an evaluation of them, nor of the programmes they are participating in.

The project has been embedded in a coherent strategy of communication and impact which aims to have a direct effect on practice. There is growing evidence that practitioners are most likely to draw upon research findings which resonate with their own experience (as summarised in Rickinson, 2005) and our own work supports this. Throughout the project we have disseminated emergent findings from our work, firstly locally, and then regionally and nationally, in formal and informal ways.

This paper needs to be understood in the context of other NRDC reports. Three reviews were important starting points: Adult ESOL pedagogy: a review of research by David Barton and Kathy Pitt (2003); Models of adult learning: a literature review by Karin Tusting and David Barton (2003); and Understanding the relationship between learning and teaching: a review of the contribution of applied linguistics by Roz Ivanić and Ming-i Lydia Tseng (2005). Another report describes some of the practitioner research: Listening to learners: practitioner research on the adult learners’ lives project by Dianne Beck et al. (2004). This work links with ESOL case studies in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) – case studies of provision, learners’ needs and resources: research report by Celia Roberts et al. (2004). And this report is complemented by a report on learning in different settings: Relating adults’ lives and learning: issues of participation and engagement in different settings by David Barton et al. (2006). This will be followed by a report on practitioner development through involvement in research. Work is continuing with the preparation of practitioner guides based on the project, and by making the Adult Learners’ Lives data available as part of the NRDC research resource.

The project has been directed by David Barton and Roz Ivanić, with full-time researchers Yvon Appleby, Rachel Hodge and Karin Tusting, and the support of a range of practitioner-researchers in different sites, including, particularly, Dianne Beck, Gill Burgess, Kath Gilbert, Russ Hudson, and Carol Woods.

**Peer review**

This report was read and peer reviewed by: Carol Taylor, Basic Skills Agency; Dave Baker, NRDC, Institute of Education, University of London; Nancy Gidley, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education; Majorie Hallsworth; Mid-Cheshire College; Linda Jackson, Consultant; Isabella Jobson, Adult Learning Inspectorate; Alexandra Kendall, University of Wolverhampton; Mary Rhind, Highland Adult Literacies, Scotland; Olivia Sagan, University of Luton; John Vorhaus, NRDC, Institute of Education, University of London and Carol Woods, Researcher.
1. Introduction

This report presents insights into adult language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) learning and teaching, based on in-depth research in college classes. The aim is to draw out, analyse and discuss some of the crucial aspects of what is going on in these classes - aspects which will be familiar to many, but often go unnoticed: the social elements in LLN learning and teaching. In section 2 we outline the key features of a social perspective on LLN, and of teaching and learning in section 3.

Our observations are drawn from case study work with students in a range of college-based provision in three cities in the North West of England. For the first year of the research we worked in-depth with 37 students in five classes run by three colleges. The colleges and the way we undertook the research are described in section 4. In section 5 we provide detailed case studies of provision and students from four classes, which show how factors interact in people’s lives, and how widely one person’s circumstances can vary from another person’s. We then draw on these to illustrate points which have emerged from analysis of the whole data-set.

In sections 6 and 7, the report describes what students and teachers bring to the learning and teaching interaction. Section 6 demonstrates the range, variation and complexity of adult learners’ motivations, life circumstances, strengths and expertise, making links between learners’ lives and the ways they participate in classroom interactions. Section 7 shows the importance of what tutors bring to the classroom - their views about learners, teaching and learning, and language, literacy and numeracy - to what goes on in the teaching and learning setting. A tension is identified for adult LLN teachers working within the Skills for Life strategy between two types of professionalism. On the one hand, there is their professionalism as adult educators, responding to adult learners as individuals; on the other hand, there is the new professionalism which has been introduced by the adult literacy and numeracy core curriculum (QCA 2000; DfES 2001a and b), which places responsibility on them to plan their provision in terms of itemised skills.

The report then draws out the social nature of learning and teaching events. In section 8 we identify five aspects of learning and teaching as ‘social spaces’. These are: the dynamic dialogue between students’ and tutors’ contributions; the importance of social relationships; the negotiation of learning opportunities through the fine-tuning of elements of learning-teaching interactions such as pace, formality and structure; the role of learners as active agents in this negotiation; and the broader outcomes of attendance at Skills for Life provision, such as social confidence, which emerge from this negotiated process. Finally, in section 9, we identify the key implications of this work for practice, policy and training. We propose that the tension identified in section 7 might be alleviated to some extent by incorporating a fuller understanding of the social nature of LLN into professional development and into the curriculum.

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1 We use the term ‘tutors’ here to encompass both teachers of the whole group and individual or volunteer tutors. When we use the term ‘teachers’ we are referring specifically to the people responsible for the whole group.
2. Taking a social perspective on language, literacy and numeracy (LLN)

A social perspective on LLN recognises that these practices are always embedded in social contexts and purposes. This applies to LLN in everyday contexts of home, work, community, and also to LLN in educational contexts, although some practices more obviously have a purpose than others. People's everyday lives are extremely complex and varied, and the roles of languages, literacies and numeracies in them are equally complex and varied. Therefore, there are many varieties of any language, many 'literacies' and many 'numeracies', varying from context to context. For example, the ways in which language and numbers are used in a betting shop are very different from the ways they are used in a kitchen, which are very different again from reading, writing and working with numbers in educational contexts. The role of other people in the literacy/numeracy event, the interplay between spoken interaction, reading, writing and the use of numbers, the use of technology and resources such as paper, pencils and books, and the significance of speed and accuracy will all be shaped by the purposes to which they are put. Each context poses different demands, and requires different ways of communicating in words and numbers. Inevitably, the LLN classroom context is very different from the contexts of people's everyday lives, and sometimes the language, literacy and numeracy being practised in the classroom is hard to relate to other contexts. Taking a social perspective on LLN involves paying attention first and foremost to the contexts, purposes, and practices in which language, written language and numbers play a part.

It is worth pausing here to explain how viewing literacy and numeracy as sets of itemised, transferable skills differs from this social perspective. Focusing on skills narrows attention to linguistic and numerical patterns, distinctions and rules, and to 'reading', 'writing' and 'calculating' as if they were processes which are easily detachable from context. Skills such as 'Identify the main points and ideas, and predict words from context' (skill reference Rt/E3.4 in the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum, DfES 2001a, p. 15) are often taught and tested through exercises with right and wrong answers, such as comprehension questions, and often involve reading 'educational' texts chosen by the teacher, materials designer or test-maker, such as an encyclopedia extract. The ways of interacting with such a text in the classroom may be very different from the way in which someone would interact with it for real life purposes. In everyday life an encyclopedia entry is more often scanned for a particular piece of information at the moment of needing it, often collaboratively with other family members. The 'skill' of reading it thoroughly and then perhaps answering comprehension questions on it is probably education-specific. Beyond this, many of the people who come to LLN provision read entirely different texts in their everyday lives, such as the magazine AutoTrader, which might be read for the very specific purposes of keeping up to date with the car industry. Perhaps the inadequacy of defining LLN only as sets of skills is best summed up in a point which is fundamental to a social practice view of literacy: "We don’t just ’read’ and ’write’: we always read and write something" (Barton 1991, p. 8; see also Gee 2000/2001). This point can be expanded to: We always read and write something, for a particular purpose, in a particular way, in a particular time and place.

The Adult Literacy and Adult Numeracy Core Curriculum documents state clearly that 'this curriculum provides the skills framework, the learner provides the context, and the tutor needs to bring them together in a learning programme using relevant materials at the
appropriate level, to support learners in achieving their goals’ (DfES 2001a, p. 9, DfES 2001b, p. 9). To do this ‘bringing together’, we propose that tutors need to take as their starting-point a view of literacy and numeracy as social practices, situated in people’s lives and purposes, and differing from one context to another. They need to think about LLN holistically, in order to contextualise the ‘generic ... skills and knowledge elements’ (DfES 2001a, p. 9; DfES 2001b, p. 8), which appear in the national standards. With a social view of LLN, tutors can ensure that their provision starts from learners’ lives, and that the curriculum elements are not ends in themselves, but are encountered in the context of relevant and meaningful learning opportunities, thereby enhancing the learning of these skills and knowledge elements. For further discussion of the differences between these views of literacy, see Barton 1994, 2006, Barton and Hamilton 1998, 2000, Ivanić 2004, Papen 2005, and of numeracy, see Coben forthcoming.

Conceptualising language, literacy and numeracy as social practices helps us as researchers to understand and explain what we observed. As researchers, therefore, we paid attention to how the LLN activities we observed were socially situated in their classroom contexts, and how this compared and contrasted with what we knew of the activities of the students’ current lives and imagined futures. We were also aiming to identify the views of LLN which underpinned the LLN teaching practices which we observed.
3. Taking a social perspective on teaching and learning: teaching as the creation of learning opportunities

We take a social perspective not only on LLN, but also on teaching and learning. This report draws attention to the importance of the social elements of the teaching and learning interactions we observed, which can often be overlooked, and to the relationship between these interactions and wider social contexts. We paid attention to the social characteristics both of learners’ lives and of the classes they were attending, and to the social interaction between participants. In this way we were able to take account of the substantial differences between learners’ lives, particularly as regards their motivations and goals. We also paid attention to the social context more broadly conceived, including the institution in which the provision was located, the practices which were typical in that context, and the policies within which that provision operated.

There is a substantial body of applied linguistics research which provides valuable insights for understanding adult LLN learning, firstly because much of it focuses on adult learning, secondly because it is concerned with the particular characteristics of language learning – ‘learning to …’ rather than ‘learning that …’, and thirdly because of its interest in the language of learning, often called ‘classroom interaction’. There has been a move in the study of language education away from attempting to identify the most effective method of teaching towards attempting to understand the complexity of what is involved in learning. This research is summarised in Ivanič and Tseng 2005 (see also Allwright 2005, 2006; Gieve and Miller 2006, Tseng and Ivanič 2006).

The factors which have been shown to shape learning are:
- Learners’ and teachers’ beliefs about learning, teaching, LLN.
- Learners’ and teachers’ motivations, goals and intentions for the class.
- The resources learners bring with them to learning from their everyday experience.
- The nature of the curriculum and teaching materials.
- The political and institutional context which enables and constrains what can be done in class.
- The socio-cultural context for learning, including issues of inequality.

The aspects of learning-teaching events which have been shown to be significant are:
- The physical context for learning.
- The approaches to teaching.
- The nature of the social interaction in the classroom.
- The construction of identities in classroom settings.
(For further details see, for example, Allwright 2005, Burns 1999, Cazden 2001, Wenger 1998.)

The implication of these findings for future research is that it should pay attention to these factors affecting learning, and to these aspects of learning-teaching events. In our research on LLN classrooms, therefore, we have used participant observation, recordings of classroom interaction and interviews with learners and teachers to provide as full an account as possible of these factors.
Recognising the sort of complexity outlined here, applied linguists concerned with language teaching have proposed that, rather than seeking to identify ‘what works’ in teaching, it is more useful to seek to understand the process of learning in a more nuanced way. This is because the findings from substantial research in the 1960s and 70s on different methods of language teaching were inconclusive, with the main finding being that differences between individual teachers and learners were more salient than the methods or techniques used. They suggested that it is useful to conceptualise teaching as ‘the creation of learning opportunities’, from which different learners will benefit in different ways (for further discussion, see Allwright and Bailey 1991, Crabbe 2003). This conceptualisation of teaching emphasises the active role of learners in setting their own agenda, participating in class and engaging in learning opportunities on their own terms. The implication for research is that we need to deepen our understanding of learning and teaching from the perspective of learners.

Research has also found that participating in a class can lead to a range of different types of outcome, although the actual benefits may not be discernible until some time after the class has finished. Types of outcome which have been identified are:

- Learning of ‘content’.
- Learning how to learn.
- Learning about language.
- Learning about social relations.
- The reconstruction of social identities.
- Wider benefits of learning, such as increased confidence and a greater sense of autonomy.
  
  (For further details see, for example, Eldred 2002, Eldred et al. 2004, Green and Dixon 1993, Overton 2001, Schuller et al. 2004 and Vorhaus 2001.)

The theory and research outlined here points to the complexity of learning, and the multiplicity of factors which need to be taken into account when trying to understand what is going on in educational environments. We found that this way of conceptualising the relationship between learning and teaching was a productive starting point for our research on adult LLN learning. In the Adult Learners’ Lives project we have focused our attention on what is happening in the classroom from the learners’ perspectives, in order better to understand what might constitute learning opportunities for them. Although our findings are based on very specific cases, they are intended to provide insights into the sorts of links that can be made between learning and everyday life for any learner in any class.
4. Researching adults learning in college classes

In this report we focus on instances of relatively formal provision for adults. By 'relatively
formal' we mean that they are classes which are offered in college settings, rather than other
contexts. These were:

• A maths class at a DISC (Drop-In Study Centre) in Liverpool.
• A spelling class at a different DISC in Liverpool.
• An entry level 3 ESOL class in Blackburn College.
• A mixed entry level 1 - level 1 spelling class at Lancaster Adult College.
• A mixed entry level 1 - entry level 3 English class at Lancaster Adult College.

(This class is not included in the case studies presented in section 3, but data from it are
included later in the report.)

Each of these classes was studied by one of the research team. We gained an in-depth
understanding of the regular patterns and practices of each class, and recorded one session
for more detailed analysis (referred to below as the 'focal session'). In Blackburn and
Lancaster, the research involved frequent participation in the class, where possible attending
every week in order to understand the routines and activities of the class as an insider. We
kept records of what happened in these sessions in detailed field notes, written within 24
hours of the visit. In the two classes in Liverpool, the students, tutor and researcher
collaborated in the production of a video over a four-week period to record a session as a
focus for discussion.

We studied not only the characteristics of each of these forms of provision but also how it is
experienced by a selection of participants in it, spanning 37 learners overall. We asked
learners about their intentions, their perceptions of what was happening, their perceptions of
what they gained, and how these factors related to their everyday lives. We juxtaposed the
learners’ perceptions with our own observations of the classes, and with teachers’ accounts
of what they were doing in the classes, and why. In each class, at least four learners were
selected for more detailed interviews about what they had learned, both from the class in
general, and from the focal session. We recorded the perspectives of the class tutors through
interviews, field-notes, and taped peer-discussions. Some of the class tutors were co-
researchers with us on the Adult Learners’ Lives project, conducting their own research (as
described in the report of their own research projects: Listening to Learners: Practitioner
research on the Adult Learners’ Lives Project, Beck et al. 2004), as well as working in
partnership with us on documenting these classes.

A major feature of the research was its collaborative nature. The researchers negotiated
relationships with tutors and students, accommodating the research to their priorities and
preferences. The researchers visited the classes frequently over a full college year, building
up research relationships over time. This allowed the researchers and class members to get
to know each other very well, to trust each other, and to feel comfortable about what they
wanted to disclose to each other. These features of our research methodology - developing
relationships, negotiation, respect and trust - are factors which, in our view, were essential
for us to gain an understanding of the more subtle personal and social aspects of learning-
teaching relationships.
The data collected in this way was analysed in a three-stage process. First, each researcher individually interpreted the data for their classes, annotating it for emerging themes. Each case showed how adult LLN learning is shaped by the characteristics of the specific social context, and how it differs from person to person, depending on the life histories, beliefs, motivations and resources which they bring with them to the same learning-teaching event. The case studies produced as a result of this work reveal the complexity of factors of which adult LLN teachers need to be aware and to which they need to be responsive - four of these are presented in section 3 of this report, to give a flavour of this complexity. The case studies were shared across the team, and themes identified collectively were then used as categories for a second round of analysis. The team then generated a set of provisional findings from the analysis, and these were checked against the data in order to see how far they were supported by the individual cases, and to identify specific details to exemplify each. This process led to the refinement of the findings, and the headings which we use in the main body of this paper.

The overarching message emerging from our research is the value of a greater understanding of learners and their lives outside the classroom for fine-tuning adult LLN pedagogy. In the sections below we introduce the issues underlying this message through brief descriptions of some of the focal sessions, followed by profiles of six individual students. We then identify the key insights emerging from these situated studies, focusing on those which are relevant across two or more contexts. These situated understandings arising from our research are likely to resonate with other contexts, maybe differing somewhat in detail or implications, but nevertheless worthy of consideration by practitioners and researchers, adapting them to the particularities of their work. We have presented these findings under discrete headings, but in reality these factors are intertwined. In many places what we observed was the complex interplay of factors which we list here; we will discuss some of these interactions among our findings as we proceed.

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2 Throughout the report we use the word ‘pedagogy’ as the term in common use to encompass principles of education. However, the origin of the word implies ‘the education of children’, and much of what we present in this report concerns principles of education which are specific to the teaching of adults rather than children. The term ‘andragogy’ meaning ‘the education of adults’ is sometimes used to capture this distinction (see, for example, Robinson 1994), and many of the methods of teaching and learning presented here are in keeping with what Robinson calls ‘an andragogical approach’.
5. Adults learning in four classes

We have chosen four case studies to present in this paper. Between them they represent the range of themes which we have drawn out of the dataset as a whole. For each case study, we describe the teaching and learning interaction in the class, and present a profile of an individual student. These case studies and profiles draw out what learners bring with them to their classes, their motivations for attending, how each person is unique, and their perspectives on the learning-teaching event in which they are engaged. They have been chosen to be as diverse as possible, with different types of class being studied: literacy, English, spelling, maths, and English for speakers of other languages; different types of provision: drop-in centre, class set up according to level, and one-to-one tuition with volunteer tutors; different cities, different genders, and different life circumstances. In the profiles, we describe people’s backgrounds, their motivations for attending provision and the way they participated in teaching and learning interactions in the class, drawing out perceptions of and strategies for learning. The profiles show how factors interact in people’s lives, and how widely one set of circumstances can vary from another.

5.1 The Liverpool maths class

Liverpool Community College delivers a large programme of adult learning through a mixture of city sites and local Drop In Study Centres (DISCs). The city sites are large new purpose-built buildings, offering a wide range of courses and facilities for adult learners. The DISCs are located within communities, making adult learning accessible and responsive to local needs. The maths group we studied is held as a two-hour session in the DISC in Redbrick Community College, an old Victorian building in the heart of the dockland area of Liverpool. The DISC room is situated on the second floor. It contains an office, two teaching spaces, filing cabinets and teaching resources. At first glance it seems cramped and noisy but it is a space that students clearly feel very comfortable in. They move around with confidence and a sense of ownership.

At the time of the research Kay 3, the tutor, had a drop-in maths session on Wednesday between 10 am and 12 noon. Students ranged between entry level 1 and level 2 and worked on worksheet material at the level appropriate to them, which they chose in consultation with Kay. As the session was a ‘drop in’ students were free to attend when they wanted. Generally everyone attended the whole session from beginning to end, taking a collective coffee break halfway through. Students sat around a group of tables in the middle section of the room, surrounded by filing cabinets with an old CD player on top, which often played classical music softly in the background. There were maths artefacts in the space including posters showing multiplication tables, number posters, sets of scales and tape measures. At the other end of the room a small group studying English used to meet at the same time.

3 Pseudonyms have been used for learners and tutors to ensure the anonymity of participants in the research. Where possible, participants were asked to select their own pseudonyms.
Focal session

The session took place on 2 April 2003, and was video recorded. Five students participated: Jason, Katrina, Sarah, Ella and Vicky. Kay greeted each person individually as they arrived and checked that they knew what they were going to do. They chatted about ‘public’ information like other study, work and their children as individuals entered. The group helped to arrange the video camera, which Yvon, the researcher, operated, and then continued with their usual lesson structure. Kay prepared the tables and set out materials whilst the students collected their worksheets and learning plan folders.

The students appeared at first sight to be working individually on their own curriculum-referenced worksheets. Jason was working at entry level 3/level 1 with fractions, Katrina on entry level 1/2 multiplication, Sarah on level 1 area and measurement, Ella on level 1 averages and Vicky on statistical analysis for her GCSE psychology coursework. They were using calculators, tape measures, pencils, pens, notebooks, worksheets and folders, recording their learning by keeping a learning plan in their own file. There was a high level of engagement with the worksheet and task. What was not so obvious at first sight was that Kay had contextualised these worksheet tasks in terms of each student’s own wider interests, and in terms of the meanings and uses of number which had emerged when she had asked such questions as: ‘Why do you want to work on area?’

The room was hot and noisy with the phone continually ringing and the admin worker responding to the calls. The English class also generated a continual low hum and there was noise from other parts of the building. But everyone in the maths group concentrated on their worksheet, ignoring all the noise. While students focused on their worksheets, Kay moved around the room, guiding, demonstrating and helping students to achieve the tasks on the worksheet. Her manner was quiet, respectful, calm, responsive and reassuring. She stood, knelt, bent, smiled a lot and laughed. She predominantly interacted with students on an individual basis, either responding to student requests or circulating. When circulating, she stood by the student and waited to be shown the work. She marked, or showed calculations in pencil and discussed follow-on topics or worksheets with each person. When responding to a request for help, Kay spent several minutes looking at the worksheet and discussing the difficulty. Through dialogue, she demonstrated how the answer was calculated, using her hands and arms to show size, proportion or area. The student either recalculated with her there or showed they could manage on their own.

The lesson worked on shared but individual enterprise. Students looked at each other, talked to each other and engaged socially, negotiating roles of provider or recipient of knowledge and understanding. Sarah used a tape measure for her worksheet on measurement and in between measuring the desk, a cup and her hand she mimed measuring her waist and her bust. The group, including Kay, joined in a light-hearted discussion about measuring their bodies. Katrina and Jason discussed what part of the head should be measured for a head measurement. After social interactions like this, individuals returned to work on their worksheets whilst Kay continued moving around the room.
### Student profile: Jason

#### Background

Jason is 31 years old. He is single and lives on his own in a flat but has close contact with his mum nearby who is housebound. He describes ‘going off the rails’ sometimes and at these times doesn’t always manage to get to college. Jason stopped going to school at 12 years old, spending his time hanging about the docks and riding the Mersey Ferry. He learned enough skills on building sites to earn a living as a scaffolder and later unloading containers at the docks. A serious hit-and-run road accident left Jason unemployed and with depression.

#### Motivations for coming to the class

Jason explained how he views learning maths now:

> I’m hoping to learn, when you say like maths, I’m hoping to get qualifications or something out of maths. Like when I went to school I was in the first year, I sort of went but [pause] when you look at maths now I want to learn something.

He described wanting to learn to overcome general feelings about being scared of maths and also particular skills he identified as fractions, subtraction and addition.

Jason did link maths, if not fractions, to everyday life:

> Yes, because you see objects every day don’t you? On buildings, or you’ll see even on the road, you know plaques like circles with name plates with numbers on or road marking, like 30 miles an hour, that’s a number.

He appreciated the learning about measuring that was occurring and thought this was useful for buying a shirt or for clothes. He also thought knowing numbers would help him with his voluntary work in the tenants’ association, for example in using numbers on the phone or sending a fax. Jason said that he understood money, in terms of how much he had in his pocket and what things cost in the shop. It was the link between the abstract concept of fractions and the everyday concept of dividing that he was learning and Kay was teaching him.

Jason felt that he was learning many new skills and knowledge that interconnected for him. He felt that Kay’s teaching was different from his previous negative school experience and he was excited and now enjoyed the whole process of learning:

> As I say we were having a good laugh and a joke about everything in maths. Maths now, as I explained it, I never went to school, but maths now, it’s just like teaching, that’s what it is the teacher’s learning us and I’m learning. I’m probably learning faster. As I say it’s just getting involved in everything. Same as when I go to college for computers, that’s another useful thing you know. Take maths, that’s probably like the keyboard, it’s got all numbers and then looking up the internet. And with English as well, because I’m learning English as well, that comes up the same as on a computer.

#### Participation in learning

In the focal session, Kay responded to Jason’s learning agenda and placed it within the curriculum framework for entry level three. She reported in her pre-session notes that Jason planned to continue with fractions both cancelling down and making a fraction in a context, possibly using a short group questionnaire. Her post-session comments recorded that Jason cancelled fractions confidently but was not quite sure about fractions in context and he therefore needed more practical examples.
Jason explained that he felt he learned best on his own, even when in a group setting. He described the videoed session as successful in these terms:

*Well, I thought the class was good 'cos everyone was doing their own individual work, I tend to stay on me own in a small, well by myself in me own project. I was doing fractions.*

The video recording showed that Jason interacted in the measuring episode enjoying the fun, some of which was directed at him as the only male. Observation notes recorded that Jason interacted socially with others in the group who responded in a friendly and interested way. The social interaction, as well as the maths skills, was part of Jason’s sense of what he was learning and of his increase in confidence:

*My confidence now has gone up. I used to be a very shy person. I wouldn’t do nothing, I used to hide away in one corner and now you meet everyone.*

### 5.2 The Liverpool spelling class

The spelling class was held as a two-hour session at Deepside DISC, housed in two rooms within the newly-refurbished Deepside library. Deepside is situated on the outskirts of Liverpool’s city centre, about four miles out. The area is made up of mainly post-war corporation housing, new build and regeneration projects. Access to the library is both hidden and unattractive, with litter and rubbish in the alleyway leading to its entrance. In contrast the library itself is new, warm and inviting with a bank of computers and many posters in the entrance.

The main DISC room is a large newly-furbished purpose-built teaching and learning space. It has a bank of about 20 computers at one end of the room where the IT tutor teaches a range of courses. This is always busy, with students working on their own with the support of the tutor. The middle section has the reception desk and file cabinets. The end section has tables grouped together to make a large space for about a dozen students. In this space there is a white board, flip chart and both numeracy and literacy artefacts including scales, multiplication table posters, dictionaries and files. The student filing cabinets are on one side of this space with the tea and coffee and photocopier on the other side.

The spelling class was held on Thursday morning between 9.30 and 11.30 am. It catered for students with different knowledge and confidence levels of English and spelling. Debbie, the tutor, taught the class at one end of the room with the IT course running at the other end, against a backdrop of a ringing telephone and people dropping in for information.

#### The focal session

The group worked collaboratively on videoing a focal session of the spelling class on 3 April 2003. Debbie welcomed each student individually as they entered and asked about homework, discussing any additional writing they had done, and asking about jobs, children and families. As the group settled people chatted to each other while getting out folders, worksheets, pens, paper and dictionaries. Eight people attended, sitting to accommodate Tommy and Susan, two hearing-impaired students, who sat at the front.

Debbie worked mainly from the flipchart, which was at one end of the table and the focal point
of the class, writing key words and phrases that she talked about and demonstrated. Her delivery was to the whole group, encouraging participation and involvement without putting anyone on the spot. Although clearly in charge, standing at the front using the flipchart, Debbie also came across as a warm human being who readily shared her passion for her subject and for the student’s own subjectivities and understandings. She skillfully engaged with the group in a performance mode, keeping their attention through the use of jokes, interjections and responses to comments that they made. By referring to her own, sometimes negative, experiences of learning she created a space where students were encouraged not to be fearful of learning new things, or of making mistakes.

The lesson started by recapping the previous lesson on prefixes, checking for understanding and any homework generated from it. She gave examples of a root word ‘willing’, the prefixes ‘un’ that made a new word ‘unwilling’, and asked students to give examples to show their own understanding. Then she demonstrated suffixes on the flip chart, explaining that ‘pre’ meant before and ‘suffix’ after. She wrote common examples on the flip chart, using a column to show the root word, the suffix being added, and the new word it made, and encouraged students to come up and add answers to the tasks she had set. Students then worked on worksheets, either individually or in pairs, filling in beginning and ends of words from memory or by using a dictionary.

As the students became more confident, recognising words that they knew and being able to identify suffixes and prefixes, they related this to a general awareness of language and how it was made up. They were interested in the Greek and Roman roots of the English language. Tommy, Elizabeth and Susan were enthusiastic, relating this knowledge to doing crosswords. Responding to this enthusiasm, Debbie departed from her prepared material to talk about grammar. Most of the students found this confusing: a step too far. Debbie’s post-lesson evaluation made reference to this in a critical self-reflection about the difficulty of the materials she used and going too far for the students’ understanding. Debbie recovered by explaining that grammar was something that they could do another class on, but they should concentrate on suffixes and prefixes for the time being. She discussed the possibility of a future class on grammar and both Tommy and Susan registered an interest, saying they hadn’t really understood what they had just done but would like to learn.

As the class came to an end Debbie asked who would like a worksheet to practise suffixes at home. Most in the group wanted one. She also asked who would like ten words to write a story for homework. Tommy was very enthusiastic and Debbie read out ten words that those who wanted to wrote down.

**Student profile: Susan**

*Background*
Susan is 69 years old, a widow who lives alone. She has six children and is a grandmother and great-grandmother with many family members living nearby. She has been attending the class to improve her spelling. She described going through her primary schooling without her deafness being picked up. This affected her confidence and skills in English. This was made worse as her schooling was interrupted by the war when she was evacuated to Chester. Although she says she was a shy and naïve child she describes herself now as being more confident. Susan talked about her limited writing practice when bringing up her six children:
I never put pen to paper, I’d be seeing to their needs and they were hardly ever off school so any little note I wrote was they were off sick, that’s it no more words and sign it. Then I’d sign me family allowance book once a week and then I’d sign me pension.

Motivations
Susan joined the spelling class after she had joined the IT course at the DISC and found she struggled with spelling. She had been given a computer by the family and wanted to know how to use it, keeping up with her grandchildren and helping with their homework. Susan described her motivation for coming as:

I hope to learn a lot of my spelling because when I joined the ICT I realised I couldn’t spell the shortest word, it had all gone out of my head.

By joining the class Susan had widened her understanding and appreciation of English language. When Yvon asked in the pre-class interview if she knew what she was going to do she replied:

No, because we were doing the prefixes, which I enjoy. I think English is fascinating and it’s a subject that you can go on and on with. The more you find out about it the more interesting it becomes. I think that’s the way learning should be, isn’t it?

Susan spoke a lot about finding pleasure, enjoyment and fun in learning about language and spelling. Although she enjoyed the social aspect of the group this was not always easy because of her hearing impairment. The video showed how she would engage with both Debbie and other members of the class when she could hear, but would work on her worksheet on suffixes when she could not. She described enjoying the challenge of learning, of acquiring new skills both through her own enquiry and through instruction. She saw her quest for the truth and understanding as potentially difficult:

... I’ve got to have the truth and I need to be told a bit. I’m a bit of nuisance really.

Susan showed through her classroom interactions and her worksheets that she acquired knowledge and understanding about suffixes – something she enjoyed. She also felt this was useful to her:

Well actually you know I can grasp, I can see the difference when I’ve done the word and added on the end, so it’s making the word a bit longer. So, it’s enabling me to spell a bit better.

Her positive relationship with Debbie was important to Susan in providing what she described as a ‘nurturing environment’ for this learning to take place.

Participation in learning
Debbie showed in her student profile that she was aware of the reflective nature of Susan’s learning and how although she came to learn a specific skill (spelling) her interest and learning had broadened out. She described small notes that Susan wrote in her homework to Debbie indicating her learning: ‘I didn’t think I understood this but I know I do now.’ This showed it was important for Susan to understand her own learning progress and not simply to be measured externally.
5.3 Blackburn entry level 3 ESOL class

The entry level 3 ESOL class started in September 2002. It was held four times a week, on Monday – Thursday 9am – 11am, following the ESOL national curriculum in a modular scheme. The classes are held in a large, pleasantly refurbished, grand Victorian building adjacent to the main college campus in the centre of town. In addition to ESOL, there are ‘mainstream’ courses with a wide student mix, which creates a lively atmosphere. The class is held in a spacious, high-ceilinged room. Students work on tables arranged in a horseshoe facing the teacher’s table with a blackboard behind and an OHP to the side. There is a photocopier in the room which is used by other teachers who come and go just before the lesson starts.

There are up to 12 students in the class, which the teacher, Duncan, sees as falling into two distinct social groups. There is an ‘urgent’ group, made up of students seeking asylum from a wide range of countries, who live with a sense of uncertainty and not belonging, and are desperate to learn English in order to quickly build up a life here. And there is a ‘non-urgent’ group of young South Asian women who live in a stable extended-family-and-community situation. Though some of this group would like to seek paid employment, there is not a desperation about this in terms of survival in society.

The class work together, all following the same learning activities which are decided by the teacher and are teacher-directed. It is a fairly formal but relaxed and friendly learning environment. Students are mainly focused on the learning tasks with minimal ‘off task’ interaction, except at the beginning and end of lessons.

Typically the two-hour session begins by the teacher explaining to the whole group which main grammar points will be covered in the session and carrying out introductory activities with the whole group which are teacher-directed using materials from the main source textbook, ‘Headway’. The rest of the session is a combination of pair work or small group work, with some individual work (on a common exercise) and whole-group feedback, working on exercises related to the grammar points being learned, which are photocopied from the textbook. Each of the four skills - speaking, listening, writing and reading - is practised in some way related to the task. The lesson concludes with a review of what has been learned in the session, which the teacher writes up on the board and the students copy on to their record sheets.

Focal class

The focal lesson on 27 March 2003 ran from 9am – 11am and was based on the ESOL textbook ‘Headway’ - Entry 3 Unit 12: Verb Patterns, which had a magazine feature story as the central text. There were 10 students, from a range of countries: Nusrat (Pakistan), Stevan (Angola), Tara (India), Aiad (Iraq), Martina (Angola), Nusrat (Pakistan), Sameena (Pakistan), Abdul (Iraq), Sumi (Pakistan) and Soraya (Iran).

Duncan signalled the start of the class by greeting students once most had arrived. He rearranged their seating arrangements, asking students he perceived as ‘stronger’ to sit with weaker students and pairing students of different linguistic backgrounds together. He explained that the main purpose of the lesson was ‘to look at some grammar’, and that he wanted to start with some reading, but that there would be a chance to speak more later.

He gave out the magazine feature story cut up into pieces and asked students, in pairs, to read the pieces and then put them in the correct order. The students were very engaged and there
was a buzz of ‘on task’ conversation. Sameena and Abdul and another pair completed the task easily; other students found it more difficult. Then Duncan gave the students a photocopy of the complete text and asked them check their text ordering. He then asked students what type of text it was. Abdul answered: ‘report....something that really happened’. Others were answering at the same time and Duncan did not hear his answer. After this discussion, Duncan read through the feature story, with little expression, seeming to use the text more as a vehicle for learning vocabulary and grammar structures rather than as an interesting story in its own right. He stopped frequently to elicit meanings of words he thought might be unfamiliar to the students, allowing them to help each other.

Then came two comprehension exercises: a whole group exercise involving a complicated process of folding the worksheet into thirds, which Duncan carefully explained, followed by pair work. Duncan moved around the room from group to group, sometimes perching on the table or crouching down near a student, checking that they were managing the task, encouraging them by asking them questions to help them get to the answer, and rarely providing them with an answer. Student interactions were almost all on-task and there was concentrated engagement with the exercise. Duncan asked different students to feed back answers from the comprehension exercise to the whole group. He continually gave praise and encouragement for correct answers, and handled incorrect answers in a positive and sensitive way, sometimes referring them to the other students for them to decide.

The next activity was a whole-group session on a range of verb patterns. Duncan explained each of these in turn and elicited examples from the students, continually asking questions to check that they understood. He elicited the meaning of the word ‘pattern’ from the students, referring to patterns on their clothes. He then elicited examples for the other verb patterns from them on the board, using different colour pens to highlight different structures. Then he asked the students to read the text individually and to tell the group when they had identified an example of the first verb pattern. He asked them to complete the exercise in pairs, and check with their partner if they wanted to. Sameena and Abdul were paired up, and although Sameena repeatedly asked Abdul for answers, which he gave correctly, she appeared not to accept these (even though she was a very pleasant and cooperative student). She continued to struggle to find the right answers on her own, using a range of colours to highlight the different patterns. As a result Abdul was not able to check and confirm that he was right, until finally he asked Duncan a question which brought him over.

Duncan asked students to prepare for homework by looking at a worksheet. He gave examples illustrating the exercises related to familiar situations at college, and drew cartoons on the board. Finally, he asked the students to review what they had learned in the lesson. They shouted out various answers such as ‘new words’, ‘about let and make’, ‘infinitive and –ing form’, ‘about adventure Tony in jungle’, ‘about adjective infinitives’. Finally, Duncan wrote on the board ‘verb patterns’, and students wrote this on their record sheets.

**Student profile: Abdul**

**Background**

Abdul from Iraq came with his wife and two children to Britain one year ago. He is in his late 40s and worked as an agronomist. He is highly motivated to learn English so that he can gain employment. He feels that this goal is ‘not in my control’ as he is waiting for the Home Office. He would really like to continue his Agriculture studies at university but in the meantime he is willing to take any job. These days he feels he is doing very little. He spends his spare time...
reading newspapers, books and the dictionary to try to keep learning, watching coverage of the Iraq war/situation on TV, taking the children to the park and town centre and helping them with their science and maths homework. He also attends the BBC Learning Centre in town most days where he is learning, with some tutor support, to use a computer. He says he has little opportunity to talk to English-speaking people outside the class so feels he does not get enough practice.

**Motivations for coming to the class**

Abdul has a higher level of literacy than speaking skills and can, for example, read and understand letters he receives from the Home Office. He says that his main reason for coming to the ESOL class is because he has difficulty in speaking English and understanding different accents. He says he wants to learn how to ‘speak very quickly [fluently] and correctly’. He has both a global and local perspective which reflects the uncertainty about his future:

> The main reason [I come] I think English is an international language. Everywhere you go if you speak English, you can manage your affairs...if I want to stay in England I should learn English, for everyday life.

He feels unsure of his progress saying: ‘I don’t feel it’ and ‘I am not fully confident at speaking’, but at the same time says: ‘I haven’t any problems’. Though this seems contradictory perhaps he is indicating that he has enough English to ‘get by’ in everyday life but at the same time needs to keep positive and keep his dignity despite the challenges. The way he describes how the focal class went also suggests this. He said that the class was ‘not very difficult’ and that ‘if I understand the language, I can order the story’. Rachel’s observations show that in fact this was very difficult for him. Duncan’s perception is that Abdul, as a mature, well-educated person who has little status in his new situation, possibly needs to show that he is intellectually equal to the challenge of learning English even if he cannot speak it so well.

When Rachel asked Abdul what he liked best about the lesson he said that he is ‘interested in grammar’. It is clear that as well as the intellectual enjoyment he experienced, he perceives the usefulness of this kind of lesson as giving him more underpinning knowledge of English which will enable him to make correct grammatical choices when speaking: ‘learning about....how arrange words in a sentence’.

**Participation in learning**

Abdul comes to the class with a strong educational background, knowledge about and interest in the English language. He likes working in groups, he says, for both learning and friendship. He likes Duncan’s teaching style saying that it is ‘more detailed and higher level’ and that there are ‘high expectations here of students’, which he sees as positive. He likes the way Duncan ‘asks first before telling answers’ and he that he ‘learns by Duncan’s explanations’. Abdul has a high meta-language awareness and a particular interest in and enjoyment of grammar which he demonstrates by the frequent questions he asks in class, for example referring to the subtext of the feature headline ‘500 kilos plus and four metres long’, he said: ‘Excuse me ... in this we haven’t verb .. what does this mean?.. I understand. It’s possible to have sentence without verb?’ Duncan explains that this is allowed in journalistic style. Abdul does acknowledge that ‘grammar is not everything’. He is a very quiet, unassuming man and sometimes seems to ‘disappear’ within the group. Duncan failed to hear Abdul’s correct answers on several occasions during the focal lesson. This happened in moments of high engagement when several students are speaking at once. Abdul is one of only two men in the class and at times seems to be ‘submerged’ by both the gender imbalance and his quiet personality. On the other hand it is
clear that despite this he feels well supported in class and completely free to ask questions and contribute whenever he wants to: ‘[it doesn’t matter] how much I ask questions, they don’t worry about my questions...they explain me in detail’.

Abdul found the article studied in the focal class ‘interesting ...because adventure’. He explained, and the researcher observed, some of his learning strategies in this lesson and more generally: he makes up his own examples of the structure they are learning and checks with Duncan whether it is right; he writes down words he doesn’t know; he makes links with words he has read outside. For example, he linked ‘500 kilos plus’ from the text to ‘Jobcentre Plus’ which he had seen in the town centre, asking Rachel what this meant. He learns with other students in group work, both checking and asking at the same time, for example (about how to order the story correctly): ‘I think it’s this one, which one is?’ He showed Rachel how he read the cut-up text to put in order, reading the last line first, possibly linked to the way he reads Arabic. Duncan, who has worked in Saudi Arabia, commented that he forms letters and lines of letters ‘in a Middle Eastern style with a right to left perspective’.

Abdul did suggest some factors that impeded his learning such as ‘sometimes no time in class’. As Duncan told Rachel, Abdul learns more slowly than most in the class, but he employs strategies such as frequently asking and checking with Duncan and other students and working on things at home. On more than one occasion Abdul seemed to know the correct answer but was not able to articulate an answer before Duncan turned from him to ask another student. Working with a very strong student can be an impediment for him, as well as a support. He said of the ‘re-ordering the text’ task with Sameena: ‘she didn’t let me do anything’.

### Student profile: Sameena

#### Background
Sameena from Pakistan came to England 10 years ago to get married, when she was 16 years old. She has two young children and her husband has a jewellery business. She finished her secondary schooling in Pakistan and after coming to Britain she attended a community-based ESOL class. Her studies were interrupted when she was caring for small children, then three years ago she again attended a community class, joining entry level 2 at college last year and entry level 3 this year. She felt she lost ground with the interruption and had to ‘catch up’ on previous learning. When she re-entered education she also attended a First Step childcare course, that she found very demanding as it was not tailored for ESOL learners. She is a very confident learner and has a very positive experience of both schooling and ESOL learning. She said she felt confident coming to classes in Britain because her teacher ‘spoke my language’ and also gave her support with her childcare course.

#### Motivations for coming to the class
Sameena is highly motivated to learn English: ‘I need practice...desperately I want to do job’. Learning English has already made a big difference to her life. Her relationship with her husband seems to be central to her feelings about this. He has encouraged her and Sameena’s new-found social confidence has brought them happiness and a closer relationship: ‘Big thing this one, my husband is happy, I am happy! ...’ Sameena speaks of her husband passing on many jobs requiring English to her which he used to do himself. She is very assertive and confident in using English outside the class: ‘I ring them, I ask for information...I don’t want every time my husband’s help, I want to do by myself.’ She has not allowed the negativity of some in the community to undermine her, though this has caused her some embarrassment.
when they say: ‘You still going to college?’’. Their perception that she knows enough: ‘You can understand and make yourself understand [understood]’, is very different from her husband’s: ‘No, you go, you in future speak good English’, and her own perception: ‘I said I want to a job or anything in the futures and this English is not enough ... takes many years, I said it’s a different language a lot of grammar in there.’ On the other hand she feels a sense of progress and achievement in that she can now socialise with her husband’s friends: ‘... not worried about make mistakes. I’m realise not a big deal if I don’t know English.’ Still her main goal is to learn enough English to be able to continue her childcare studies and get a job. She feels she needs practice and does not get it much at home and feels that the two-hour class does not give her enough either.

Sameena is learning patterns of language that she sees as a crucial framework for learning to speak English. ‘I like grammar, is very big thing to speak good English.’ She explains to me that this is useful outside because if, for example, she uses the present tense correctly, people understand what she wants to say. As she explained above, she is also experiencing the pleasure of intellectual challenge and gaining confidence both socially and as a learner.

Participation in learning
Sameena enjoys the ESOL class and sees it as a social as well as learning group. She has good friends there from her own community and likes to meet people from other countries. She especially likes grammar and ‘word patterns’. Sameena said of the article they read that it was a ‘nice story’. She finds Duncan’s style of teaching helps her to learn: ‘When he learn me I remember...he doesn’t answer straight away, he is try to make me think and very like it use my brain’. In reference to her confusion on a grammar point of when to use ‘ask’ or ‘tell’, which other students pointed out to her, she showed her confidence and assertiveness in learning: ‘I’m not shy, oh I’m wrong and leave it, I always ask him why...’. She suggests that her level of comfort and confidence again stems from Duncan’s style of teaching and communicating with her: ‘He never said “no” [something we also observed about how he deals with incorrect answers], always he answers very friendly, easily’. She explains to me the benefits of group work: ‘I speak a lot with her ... I ask meaning’. As Duncan said, we observed that she is a very cooperative and pleasant student. She worked in a pair with Abdul and gently helped Abdul find the answers in the whole group feedback as he is quite slow. But at the same time, her confidence and higher level of skills did cause an impediment to him in the re-ordering exercise.

Sameena clearly articulates how she learned from the focal text ‘depending on the task’ - reading ‘main points quickly but if questions I am reading slowly’; finding answers by locating key words she already understands, such as finding the word ‘wear’ then working out the answer to the question: ‘What did the guide make him wear and why?’. Her previous learning also helped her to order the story as she had read this particular story in another class and had awareness of layout, knowing that bold type indicates a heading. She says that it is necessary to read all the bits first before starting to order: ‘If we didn’t read ... then decide is hard’. Some other students did not employ these strategies or have the layout awareness that Sameena had and so struggled more with the task. She uses a highlighter so that she can quickly find the answer in the whole group feedback. She mentions how she came to understand a difficult grammar rule on choice and obligation - the use of ‘let’ and ‘make’: ‘I was confused...then I use brain...I did lots of time again and again one thing ... I like this style.’ She seems to suggest a combination of thinking and practice to achieve learning. She mentions Duncan’s ‘acting’ and drawing as aids to understanding words and word patterns in this lesson, such as the cartoons of happy and sad faces he drew to illustrate the difference between ‘choice’ and ‘obligation’. In
talking around how she did the grammar exercise in class, she said ‘doing it herself’ is the best way for her to learn: ‘I don’t want to copy another person ... do on my own ... then check together.’ She says that changing partners is important as there is the temptation to use a shared language with some students. She again shows how strongly she takes charge of her own learning. If she does not understand something at home she asks her husband or underlines it and the next day asks Duncan, but that does not go far enough for her: ‘But I want to put in sentence, in my sentence.’ Similarly she likes to use the dictionary herself so ‘I understand meaning’, and to her little daughter who wants to help her she says, ‘No, I want to do my own!’

5.4 Lancaster (entry level 1 - level 1) spelling class

The Adult College in Lancaster is a community college dedicated to adult education. *Skills for Life* is one of the college’s principal programme areas. It also offers a wide range of general adult education activities. The Wednesday evening spelling class took place in the ‘Skills for Life Centre’, a large purpose-built classroom which had been opened at the start of that academic year and was still relatively new, well-presented and well-equipped. It was lined with shelves and pigeon-holes full of literacy and numeracy resources, with a bank of new computers around the walls. It was a two-hour class with a short coffee break in between. The first hour consisted of people working either individually or with a volunteer tutor on work specific to their individual learning plan. The second hour was a tutor-led group session. For this paper, we will focus on describing two one-to-one sessions with volunteers from the Wednesday evening spelling class, which contrast with the tutor-led sessions in classes described above.

The Wednesday evening entry level 1 – level 1 spelling class is an established class which has been held at the same time for several years. Most of the students in this class are working people and there is a majority of men. The class has two components, group work led by the class tutors, and individual work by students alone or with volunteer tutors. Group work sometimes focuses on specific spelling patterns (‘ai’ words for instance) but often involves more general work, such as reading the college newsletter together and picking out spellings and grammar points. In individual work time, students focus on work that has been prepared for them by tutors or volunteers on the basis of their Individual Learning Plans (ILPs). Many students are working towards an Open College spelling certificate and have particular things to cover, such as knowledge of specific word patterns. Most also use an ongoing ‘spelling support programme’ which involves recording new words one week, working out strategies to spell them and practising them doing ‘look, cover, write, check’, being tested on them the next, and using them in dictation two weeks later. The analysis below will focus on two students’ participation in one-to-one sessions with their volunteer tutors.

**Jack and Hannah**

**Background**

Jack is a dairy farmer who runs a large farm in the local area. He has been attending this class for five years, having arrived as an entry level learner, and has been working with the same volunteer, Hannah, for much of that time. Hannah is a retired teacher. She takes most of the responsibility for planning out Jack’s individual work, based on the individual learning plan that they work through together, although the class tutors keep a check on what is being covered.

**Focal session**

The focal session took place on 7 May 2003. It began with general chat. Jack had had travellers
staying on his land without permission, a recurrent problem for him, and was discussing the Tony Martin case. The session ‘proper’ began when Hannah explained to Jack what she had planned for them to do in the session.

The lesson started with practice of a sample of ‘Dolch words’ and some social sight vocabulary reading. These are things which Jack and Hannah practise regularly together. They started off by filling in the date at the top of the piece of paper, leading to a discussion of Jack’s activities that day. He had been artificially inseminating cows, and explained that his computer provides the date automatically when the cow number is punched in. Hannah then tested him on a sample of Dolch words, reading them out first alone and then in sentences, and occasionally linking them with real things that have been happening (e.g. ‘Saw – you saw the gypsies on your land’). When Jack made a spelling mistake, Hannah hinted with phrases like ‘just nearly’ and Jack self-corrected. They also teased each other; they have been working together for several years now and have developed a joshing, friendly relationship. Social sight vocabulary was then tested with Jack reading out a number of common social words – way in, exit, etc. – which he did quickly and with assurance as if this is something he had done many times before.

They then moved on to a worksheet exercise about prefixes and suffixes, which Hannah had prepared, in which he was asked to select from a choice of prefixes and suffixes to add to words on the sheet (e.g. ‘happy’ – add ‘un’ to make it ‘unhappy’). Jack worked quietly writing these down for a long time with Hannah saying nothing. When he had finished, he read them out to her, and when they were both satisfied that he had them right Hannah asked Jack to put them in his file under the appropriate curriculum reference. While doing this, they came across a list of months, which they had decided not to practise writing because Jack never uses them in real life. Hannah quickly tested his reading knowledge of them by asking him to read them out, which again he did confidently and quickly.

They then moved on to doing an activity which Hannah had prepared to practise map-reading. She had brought in a map of Lancaster. First she asked him whether he ever comes in to Lancaster. It turned out that he does not; there is no point in coming to the Lancaster auction any more, since dairy cows at the end of their life are now bought at a fixed price by the Government. They talked through what the map represented and then Hannah asked Jack to point out where he went to school, teasing him gently, when she found it was in a prestigious area of town, that she did not realise he was ‘posh’.

After working with the map, they went on to practising some words from Jack’s own everyday life which they had worked on many times before. Hannah promised him that this would be the last time they did it. She removed one word, ‘concentrates’, from the list they had used before, having discovered that this is a word he never actually has to write. She asked him to test himself on the words using the ‘look, cover, write, check’ method. Looking at the words prompted more discussion about his farming work; for instance, talking about whether he still grows maize or not. Once Jack had tested himself, Hannah asked him to check through that he was ‘comfortable’ with them all. She then read out some sentences they had worked on before, using unusual words, and asked him to write them down, checking the spellings as he did so.

The next activity was to look at a paper Hannah had brought in: a notice that the council had sent her about some works that were to happen at the end of her road. This time Jack teased her, about living at the ‘posh end’. There was a punctuation mistake throughout the leaflet –

4 ‘Dolch words’ refers to a list of the most common words in the English language, which is widely used in entry level classes.
it’s for ‘its’ – and Hannah asked Jack to find it, chatting to the other people in the classroom as he looked for it.

Finally, Hannah asked Jack to write five sentences on the computer, using the words from his everyday life that he had been practising. He called Hannah over once in a while for assistance, but for the most part worked independently on this. When he had completed some sentences Hannah checked them with him and talked through how to correct a misspelt word before he continued working. The last time she went over to check they had a conversation about how the silaging works.

At the end of class Jack and Hannah filled in his ‘work done’ sheet together. They referred to Hannah’s lesson notes to do this, and Hannah prompted Jack as to what to write. They talked about whether he would attend in July, which depended on the silaging, and briefly discussed the activities that had happened in the group session, Hannah drawing attention to the progress Jack has made in the past year.

Motivations for coming to the class

Jack has been a successful farmer and businessman for many years, and was not impeded in this at all by his reading and writing capabilities. Where paperwork was necessary for the farm, his wife assisted him. So coming to class was not so much about opening up new opportunities for him in his everyday life as about addressing something which had been an issue in his life for a long time, as an ‘extra’ activity. He was spurred on to come to the class when his father saw an advert for the classes up in the local doctor’s surgery; this came shortly after his son had said something about him not being able to read and write which he said had ‘annoyed’ him.

In interviews Jack told us how the learning he does in class has had some impact on his everyday life. He feels he is getting benefits from coming. His reading and writing have both improved significantly. The main difference for him is that he used to feel pressured when writing in front of someone, and would rush and make a mess of it. Now, he finds he has the confidence to calm down and slow down even when someone is watching, and this helps him not to make mistakes.

Though his wife deals with most of the paperwork related to the farm, if something comes up when she is not there Jack deals with it himself. Hannah tries to ensure that at least some of the activities use words which will be useful to him in everyday life, which is why they practise the farm words towards the end. However they have found that in fact much of the business Jack transacts at the farm is done over the telephone, or ticking boxes in forms, so he doesn’t actually need to know how to write down many of the words they have worked on together. As Hannah learns more about the writing Jack needs to do in everyday life she tailors his work to it. This is why, for instance, they have not continued to test his spelling of ‘concentrates’. Jack says the classes have helped his confidence in dealing with farm paperwork.

Other things he now feels more confident about include going out driving with a map and being able to find his way to new places, though he always used to and still does sit down with a map to plan his journey by writing down junction numbers. He also reads more at home and particularly on holiday than he used to; the practice of reading for pleasure is something new, that he has developed through coming to class.

The class has also given him more confidence in general terms. He initially expected the class to be full of teenagers and was surprised to find a group of people of varying ages, many
around his own age, which gave him a feeling of being less ‘different’ than he had previously expected. There are social benefits associated with attending class, giving him the opportunity to socialise with people outside the farming world. This became particularly significant during the foot-and-mouth crisis in 2001, when Jack had to remain completely isolated from the rest of the farming community.

Participation in learning
The session is made up of short chunks of relatively discrete word-focused tasks, with few links made between them. This means that Jack’s participation in the session involves engagement in a wide range of different learning opportunities, including writing dates, Dolch words, social sight vocabulary, prefixes and suffixes, months of the year, map reading, and ‘farm words’, among others. He also engaged in a variety of strategies to support his learning, including ‘look, cover, write, check’, keeping track of where he was on a task using check marks, checking accuracy of his own spelling by developing a ‘feel’ for the words, using a word processor and keyboard, and organising papers in filing folders. Volunteer and student share knowledge of ‘the routine’, with shared understandings of what tasks consist of as a result of having engaged in similar activities for some time. There is little explicit explanation of tasks which are referred to simply by shorthand labels which both understand: ‘your Dolch words’, ‘your social sight’, ‘your farm words’.

The focal session is characterised by constant praise and reinforcement. Each time Jack gets something right Hannah makes a point of praising him. This constant focus on his success and progress has helped him to reshape his understanding of himself as a successful learner, which has contributed to the development of his confidence in his ability described above.

There is also a constant interweaving of on-task talk and off-task talk, which is usually about what is going on in Jack and Hannah’s lives. They share talk about memories and experiences, both memories of what has happened in previous sessions and memories about life beyond the classes. This is a deliberate strategy on Hannah’s part, who sees this provision of social support as being part of her role as a volunteer, and it plays an important part in the social benefits that Jack reports gaining from the classes.

He is also positioned as being an expert, particularly in some of the off-task conversations, as he explains to Hannah some of the ‘insider knowledge’ he has about how farming works that he is bringing to the session. It is an article of faith of the tutors of this class, Grace and Margaret, that all of their students are an ‘expert’ in something and they make deliberate efforts to find out what their students have expertise in and to draw this out during the classes, to make sure they are not positioned simply as ‘basic skills learners’ but as fully rounded adults.

Alfonso and Diana

Background
Alfonso is from the Dominican Republic. He married an Englishwoman who was there on holiday, and they had two children. The family came over to England three years before this focal session. He had been working with Diana, his volunteer tutor, for a few months. At the time of this recording she had been volunteering at the college for about a year and a half, training first as a literacy volunteer tutor and now engaged in ESOL volunteer training. They are good friends and talk a lot about what is going on in each others’ life, but this normally takes place during social time; in class time, they focus very much on the topic covered in the session. Diana takes most of the responsibility for planning out Alfonso’s one-to-one work on the basis
of his individual learning plan, though the class teachers keep a check on what they are doing.

**Focal session**
The focal session took place on 4 June 2003. The session began with Diana checking through Alfonso’s ‘work-done’ sheet to see when he last came and what was covered. She then told him about her plans for the session.

He had taken home a book about Winston Churchill from the library to read, so they began by talking about what he had learned from reading that. Diana suggested Alfonso pick a section to read so that she could check his pronunciation. He read aloud from the book for some time, and Diana corrected his pronunciation whenever he made an error. Where there was a cultural reference that she thought he might not understand, or where he asked what something meant, Diana explained it. This reading aloud took up the major part of the recorded session.

Once he had finished reading the book aloud, and Diana had checked whether he enjoyed it or not, they moved on to writing his individual learning plan. This happened very quickly and was largely directed by Diana, suggesting goals for the plan on the basis of what she already knew about Alfonso’s goals for learning.

Diana had prepared exercises from a pronunciation book with associated tapes: *Ship or Sheep*. They had the book available in class but Alfonso had the tapes at home. They worked through a written exercise together practising different pronunciations of ‘c’. They then started another pronunciation exercise but Diana decided the tapes were necessary for this one so curtailed it.

They worked through another exercise where he had to distinguish between similar sounds (such as ‘mouth’ and ‘mouse’). After a quick check where Alfonso read aloud the ordinal numbers in sequence, they played a game involving questions about the positioning of horses in a race, to practise his use of ordinal numbers. Finally they both went over to the library to select another book for him to read at home.

**Motivations for coming to the class**
Alfonso is very keen to learn and develop in general terms. He is motivated to get as many certificates and qualifications as he can, and enjoys spending time learning and studying. When he first came to England, he and his wife had both planned to work part-time and look after their two children part-time. However it proved easier for his wife to find work and he ended up being at home full-time with the children. He was not happy in this situation. He likes to be active, and found it difficult being in the house all the time. It was also hard for him to learn English and develop social networks. Eventually he and his wife decided on a trial separation, which is when he began living on his own, working and studying and meeting new people. He now works five days a week. When he is not at work, he is studying. He does a chef’s course at the local further education college one day a week, after which he spends a couple of hours in the learning centre there where he has been doing learndirect courses. On Tuesday evenings he takes driving lessons, on Wednesdays he attends the spelling class, and on Thursdays comes to a maths class.

Alfonso first found out about the adult College courses from the newspaper. Initially he came enquiring about ESOL classes and wasn’t sure about what he called adult basic education, but he has enjoyed the spelling classes and learned a lot. The spelling classes were seen as appropriate for him because while his spoken English is quite good, he has learned it all by speaking and listening and so does not know how to spell words. He also wants to work on his
pronunciation, and feels that learning how to spell words will help with that. He enjoys coming to classes, both because he is very, very keen on learning, and because he gets to meet new people and chat to them.

Given Alfonso’s high levels of motivation regarding any sort of learning, the first and most significant impact of his learning on his everyday life is that simply engaging in the process and in the classes improves his quality of life. He is also very motivated to improve his spoken English and pronunciation and sees the focus on spelling in this class as helping him with that. Again it is hard to say which specific aspects of this particular interaction are useful to him in his everyday life, but he finds any sort of learning positive and useful.

Participation in learning
The main task, reading the Winston Churchill text, is worked on for a long time, and takes up the majority of the time of the session. This is a longer activity than most of those observed taking place during the one-to-one sessions. The reading of the book is used for multiple teaching purposes, including to practise punctuation, to provide examples of spelling words, and to develop Alfonso’s cultural knowledge. Diana is keen to help him integrate in British society and tries to select tasks for him that will both help him in the subject-specific things he wants to work on, such as pronunciation, and inform him about British culture and history (she is an historian by training).

Repetition of words is used as a tool for ensuring correct pronunciation, and Diana makes sure that the pronunciation of every word is correct before moving on to the next. Whenever a pronunciation error is encountered there is a common pattern. First Diana corrects the pronunciation, and Alfonso repeats. Then, when Diana is happy with his pronunciation she explains the meaning. She seems to assess, through prosody or other non-verbal cues, when only a pronunciation correction is needed and when the word’s meaning should be explained too.

The principal subject-specific learning opportunities for Alfonso here are to practise and correct the pronunciation of the various words encountered while reading the Churchill book aloud. Embedded in this is explanation of the meaning of the words he does not know, and some review of spelling rules and patterns, such as the silent ‘e’ rule. The pronunciation exercises later give him the opportunity to practise different pronunciations of the letter ‘c’, different ways of spelling the sound /k/, and the th/s sound distinction, as well as the pronunciation of some difficult words like ‘ocean’. He also practises reading ordinal numbers aloud, and listening comprehension of ordinal numbers, including their use in question forms.

In addition to subject-specific learning opportunities, Alfonso and Diana discuss strategies for learning new words, including writing lists of new vocabulary. They also engage in educational practices, including reading aloud and filling in an individual learning plan. There is very little conversation in this session about Alfonso’s everyday life. Both volunteer tutor and student remain focused on the different tasks that are being worked on. Nevertheless, relationships of trust and friendliness are demonstrated between them, and a lot of laughter and joking is woven around the task-focused interaction. There is also not the same level of ongoing reassurance and praise seen in other volunteer–student sessions that have been recorded. Instead, there is explicit acknowledgement several times of what Alfonso has learned, through summarising and through Diana picking out and highlighting particularly significant difficult points he has mastered.
6. What adult learners bring to their LLN classes

In this section we draw on the detailed accounts of individuals above and on our research with all 37 students studied in this part of the project to discuss three main issues. The most significant of these is adult learners’ varied motivations for attending LLN provision. We also summarise how adult learners differ in terms of their life histories and current life circumstances, and indicate the nature of the strengths, experience and varied expertise adult learners bring with them to their classes. This and the previous section show how varied the lives of adult LLN learners are, even those who are attending the same classes. The point of emphasising the complexity and diversity of what people bring to their classes is to illustrate what tutors need to take into account in order to fulfil the challenge of the Skills for Life strategy to contextualise the curriculum and fine-tune their teaching to their learners.

6.1 Motivations for attending LLN classes

The Skills for Life Strategy makes a strong connection between learning, qualifications and employability. One tutor said: ‘Gone is the sense that you can come to college because you enjoy it. Even in the non-vocational courses there is constant pressure for progression, progression.’ Qualifications and employment are the main goals for many learners, especially those for whom English is an additional language. Alfonso is a ‘classic’ example of someone seeking to develop language skills and gain qualifications in order to get better work and settle in the country: a motivation more common for ESOL than literacy and numeracy learning. All the students seeking asylum in the Blackburn entry level 3 ESOL class had similar motivations to Alfonso. Abdul and Sameena both had clear ideas about what they wanted to do in the future. Abdul, like other recently arrived students, was very unsure of the learning route and the possible options, which suggests that there is a gap in addressing these students’ learning needs as a whole – he was learning English but not getting the information and advice he needed in order to move towards his goal as quickly as possible.

However, motivations could not always be tied into gaining qualifications and increasing their employability. Susan said at 69 she would not work again; Cheri, one of the students in the Liverpool maths class, doubted whether she would be able to hold down a job because she has been diagnosed and is currently being treated for bi-polar disorder; and Jason aspired to find work but thought he would probably do voluntary work for a while. Jack had a well-established job that he was happy with and good at, which was not affected by his reading and writing capabilities. He did not come to class for reasons related to work, but to boost his own confidence and to address something which has been an issue in his life for a long time.

We found that the students have many other motivations related to their everyday lives. Some of the learners are going to classes for general interest, some as a way of managing mental health issues, some for skills in non-paid voluntary work, and only some to help with employment. For some the motivation was to become confident in things that they had failed in at school, or had missed through non-attendance. These sorts of ‘educational’ motivation included individual small goals (like learning how to spell correctly a commonly misspelled

5 One outcome of the research was that new strategies were put in place by the ESOL Department at Blackburn College to provide ESOL students with information about mainstream college courses.
6 This finding corroborates findings in other NRDC research: Baxter, M. et al. (2006, forthcoming), and Davies, P. (2005).
word) or big goals, like Cheri’s to achieve GCSE maths. Several of the Lancaster students’ motivations related to increasing their confidence in everyday life, rather than seeking to develop their employability, for reasons partly related to mental health problems they were dealing with. Reasons for coming to class included supporting/enabling others as well as helping oneself - Susan to help her grandchildren, and Jason to help people who belonged to the tenants’ association he worked for. One tutor pointed out the significance of age differences in learners’ differing motivations.

Many learners held several types of motivation simultaneously - their own long/short term individual ones, including things like confidence, as well as external ones including learning fractions or completing a national test, getting a certificate or doing another course.

Learners’ motivations often change over time. One tutor pointed out that people often say their reason for coming to class is because they have specific difficulties with spelling, because this is something visible and self-diagnosable, but that they don’t know enough about the structure of language to say: ‘My sentence structure is poor.’ Once they start coming to class, broader issues and motivations emerge and they identify other motivations. One student said: ‘I don’t know what I need to know because I don’t know what there is to know.’ Sameena set out with mainly educational motivations but an unexpected outcome for her has been the effect her learning has had on her already happy relationship with her husband. They now share a broader range of activities such as watching films in English or with English subtitles and socialising together with English-speaking friends with whom previously only her husband communicated. Her motivations for learning English, are now, as a result, social as well as educational.

Learners often had to overcome considerable difficulties in order to attend, and displayed a high degree of commitment once they had done so. In spite of what often appeared to be quite bad conditions for learning – noisy or badly furnished classrooms, inconvenient locations or unsocial hours – the learners sustained their initial motivation to come to class, and participated actively when they were there. This suggests that, if the learning environment is good, it can ameliorate the effects of a poor physical environment.

### 6.2 Life histories and current circumstances

There were differences not just between, say, the ESOL class and the spelling class, where differences in the aims of the class itself would be likely to attract different learners, but also within each class. Differences are not just attributable to obvious characteristics such as country of origin or entry placement score, but were much more individual, dependent on the personal characteristics and life opportunities of each person. It was not just a question of a ‘spiky profile’ of current capabilities (a ‘spiky profile’ represents the profile of a learner whose achievements include unexpected high and low levels, which by no means always correlate with expected levels of difficulty). Other physical, material, social and affective aspects of people’s lives were equally relevant to this diversity, particularly their sense of independence, feelings of fear or willingness to take risks, and the extent to which they felt affected by negative prior educational experiences. Differences between people include those related to mental health issues, physical disabilities and complicated home circumstances. People vary in their concentration span, and in their comfort with working independently or in groups. The complexity and diversity of these individual circumstances showed the difficulty of attempting to tailor provision to particular groups: even within a narrowly defined group, individual differences are likely to be greater than similarities.
There is a marked difference between many ESOL students, particularly refugees and asylum seekers, and other literacy and numeracy students. This group have, on the whole, higher levels of self-esteem related to learning, having had, in many cases, positive life experiences of education. Compared with other learners, this group are experiencing downward mobility. Many are well qualified or have high academic potential, and even ‘fast tracking’ will not lead to jobs of the financial and social status they had or could expect in the countries they came from.

6.3 Strengths, experience and varied expertise of adult learners

Adult learners not only face difficulties in their lives but also bring a wide variety of capabilities, resources and strengths to their classes. In the entry level 1 – level 1 spelling class in Lancaster, tutors made a point of establishing that all students are ‘experts’ in something, and the tutor knew enough about the students’ everyday lives to know what each person is expert in. For example, Hannah selected Jack’s words to practise according to his expertise in farming, and often discussed his everyday life during the session. She adapted their activities according to his feedback on whether or not they reflect things he is doing in everyday life.
7. Tutors’ contributions to the learning-teaching event

We observed tutors in their interaction with students in the classroom: how they responded to them, and how they adapted the curriculum to their needs. We talked with them about their teaching, what led them to certain decisions, what they were pleased with and what troubled them. We identified key factors which they were bringing with them to their practice: responsiveness to learners as individuals, and the views of LLN underlying their practice. We also became aware of tensions between two types of professionalism which they brought to their work. We discuss these in the following sections.

7.1 Responsiveness to learners as individuals

We observed many tutors listening closely to what learners were saying, both out loud and between the lines, seeing learners ‘in 3D’, as complex individuals with a past, a present and a future, and responding to them as such. We observed tutors working to sustain the motivation which brought students to the class, and to find new challenges which would maintain their motivation. Many teachers knew not only about the difficulties they faced but also about their cultural resources, dispositions, propensities, capabilities, strengths, and the expertise they have in their everyday life. They often referred to these factors and based their teaching on them. Learners would bring things in or discuss things they had seen which the tutor might be interested in. The tutors also discussed things from their own lives, sometimes connected to the learners’ interests and experiences, and by doing so established a symmetry in the teacher-learner relationship.

The more tutors knew about the personal circumstances and styles of each individual, the more they were able to fine-tune their teaching to them, adjusting both the content of an activity and their management of the interaction to give the learners maximum opportunities for learning. For example, in the Blackburn ESOL class the teacher, Duncan, adapted his style of wit to suit students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Duncan’s understanding of Abdul’s prior education, of his experience as a learner and his existing knowledge of English [stronger literacy than oral skills] allowed him to set the right level of learning challenge and support to address Abdul’s learning needs. Duncan’s awareness of social dynamics, such as cultural and religious differences between Muslim students from the South Asian community and students seeking asylum from other countries, was important in helping him to foster a cooperative learning environment of mutual peer support.

In the Liverpool maths class, Kay worked with one of the students, Katrina, to understand the relevance of learning her multiplication tables in relation to the work that she wanted to do and the difficulties that she was experiencing. The meaning of ‘times tables’ was translated into concrete experiences, for example, measuring baby bottles and nappy changing timetables and shopping. Although Katrina was studying at NVQ level 2 her maths needs were at entry level 1/2. The way that Kay bridged the gap with concrete and everyday task-based understanding did not threaten Katrina’s other subject knowledge. Things like shopping were a baseline of everyday activities that Katrina already knew about and was proficient in. Kay also worked with Jason’s expressed fear about maths. Although he was working consistently well at entry level 3 and level 1 Kay understood the need to work on his
confidence as well as the skills involved. Again she located much of the understanding for learning [motivation] in his concrete skills experience with the tenants’ association - it therefore made sense to him and he wanted to learn to be better at what he did there.

Teaching was most engaging when learning activities were chosen or adapted to learners’ individual goals, personal interests or immediate lives. In very large classes there may come a point where it seems that numbers are too many for tutors to fine-tune their teaching to each individual. But responsiveness to learners as individuals is more a frame of mind than a form of classroom organisation. It is students’ sense that the teaching is focused on them rather than on coverage of content which makes a difference.

In some of the classes we observed, however, the class activities did not seem to be directly linked to learners’ goals. This resulted mainly from the teacher’s efforts to follow the Skills for Life framework, being guided by the curriculum specifications, assessment targets, and level descriptors. This often led them to concentrate their efforts on explicit attention to formal aspects of language or literacy.

These examples show that tutors’ responsiveness to adults’ unique circumstances and preferences is a crucial resource in LLN classes. Researching their own practice seemed to heighten tutors’ awareness of the importance of listening to learners and thinking about them as people with lives beyond the classroom as well as within it.

7.2 Views of the nature of LLN

As has been noted in previous theory and research (see Ivanič and Tseng 2005, Roz Ivanič 2004), participants in learning-teaching events bring with them conscious or subconscious beliefs about the nature of learning and teaching, and about the nature of LLN. We observed learning and teaching practices which appeared to be based on a variety of views about the nature of LLN, and recorded similarly varied views in our interviews with teachers and learners. Even though most lessons appeared to be relaxed and sociable, our observations suggested that LLN were frequently being treated as skills isolated from social practices. Many of the activities learners were undertaking involved a focus on linguistic form or abstract numerical calculations, often based around worksheets. In spite of many learners’ goals being formulated in terms of social purposes for speaking, reading, writing and calculating, there was comparatively little attention in some classes to the practical use of LLN to get things done.

A view of LLN as technical skills manifested itself in the high premium on ‘correctness’ which was evident in many situations. Correctness was emphasised and reinforced as a central value in many different ways across the different contexts, possibly to the detriment of other values such as expressiveness, fluency, speed, effectiveness for purpose, communicativeness, sociality. It manifests itself in activities which focus on form rather than meaning, in a building-block approach whereby a learner cannot move on until a prior stage has been achieved, in repetition and insistence on accuracy. This could lead to a limited view of what counts as success, or progress. This emphasis on correctness is linked to a view of literacy and numeracy as competence, and a focus on the formal set procedures of numerical calculations, rather than understanding literacies and numeracies as social practices which are concerned with meanings and use.

For example, the Lancaster spelling class, while responsive to students’ needs, showed
[particularly in the group work] a predominantly skills-oriented understanding of language and literacy from both learners and teachers, with a predominant focus on correctness. Teachers in group work broke tasks down into simple steps, repeating the same point several times, the goal clearly being for learners to achieve correctness. Texts were used as examples of relevant points, rather than for content. In one-to-one sessions Hannah selected small decontextualised tasks for Jack to practise: Dolch words, spelling tests, prefixes and suffixes. The main focus of the text Diana and Alfonso worked with was correctness of pronunciation; although broader ‘cultural knowledge’ was drawn out of it as well, this is more incidental to the interaction. Decontextualised pronunciation exercises were also used.

There was a strong grammar focus in the entry level 3 ESOL class in Blackburn. The tutor said that ESOL teachers feel that the ESOL assessment criteria demand a fairly hierarchical step-by-step approach to covering the curriculum. Abdul, Sameena and other students all mention the importance for them of producing ‘correct’ English which is clearly a main motivation for attending the class. However, their goal to learn, as soon as possible, to speak English fluently enough to join other courses and seek employment does not seem to be sufficiently addressed by this hierarchical approach and suggests the need for opportunities to practise more free, spontaneous use of English. The materials used in the class are mainly textbook-based and there is very little time and support for the development of specific materials and resources which would help these students to gain information and knowledge about the cultures of the society they are living in. However, the predominantly textbook-based materials are mediated by the respectful and sensitive inter-personal approach of the teacher, as described in section 7.2 below.

It is not clear why teachers are privileging correctness (of, for example, spelling, grammar, letter formation, punctuation, apostrophe use) over fluency or fitness for purpose. It may be because it is what they themselves believe in, because of the influence of the curriculum, because this is what students say they want, because of demands made by employers and teachers of other courses, and/or because of the washback effect of assessment criteria. One tutor said that the curriculum and auditing requirements have significantly influenced this, saying that they used to focus more on the uses of literacy in everyday life ‘pre-curriculum’. Another emphasised multiple pressure from the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), the Skills for Life Strategy Unit (SILSU), formerly known as the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit (ABSSU), and ‘the Government’ to show ‘progression, progression, progression’: always learning new things, never time to consolidate. A volunteer tutor who was a retired teacher found the core curriculum ‘very unfriendly’ and hard to work with. However, an experienced tutor thought that it was not the curriculum itself but people’s interpretations of it that are preventing them from treating LLN as social practices and making their teaching relevant to real-life situations, perhaps under the influence of what they perceive to be institutional and inspection expectations. This evidence suggests that there is a need for further research on the effects of the new curriculum on practice, and perhaps further training of teachers about ways in which the curriculum can be integrated into a pedagogy which focuses on LLN as practices fulfilling social purposes.

We did not observe many activities which involved continuous writing, which was significant considering that, in the country as a whole, many people’s motivations for attending included

7 This parallels a provisional finding from the NRDC research on Effective Approaches to the Teaching and Learning of Writing, in which it was noticed that correctness and emphasis on sub-skills was a priority for learners.

8 A consequence of working to a national curriculum for literacy which has also been observed in primary schools since the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy.
the wish to improve their writing. In the spelling classes we observed, there was frequent writing, but this was usually of individual words or notes about spelling. Activities which did involve continuous writing were mainly exercises to practise the use of a formal feature, rather than writing for meaning or purpose. This implied a view of literacy as knowledge about the linguistic rules and patterns of written language, rather than as creative self-expression, or purposeful communication of content. However, we did observe writing by some students working with volunteers during the ‘individual work’ part of a class in which students wrote on topics of their own choice, mainly exploring issues which were central to their own life and identity. In one case this continuous writing was only included at the student’s insistence, and then only as a ‘reward’ for completing what was considered to be ‘real work’ – that is, a worksheet that practised formal features of written language.

A view of language, literacy and numeracy as social practices, embedded in everyday purposeful activities, was evident when tutors chose or adapted learning activities to relate to learners’ individual goals, personal interests or immediate lives. In doing so they were fulfilling the *Skills for Life* Strategy recommendation that ‘each individual learner’s ... own set of priorities and requirements ... must be the starting point of their learning programme development’ (DfES 2001a, p. 9, DfES 2001b, p. 8). The learner’s context, aims, everyday informal knowledge and approaches to learning are often hard to mesh with the LLN knowledge and skills which are codified in the *Skills for Life* core curriculum. Tutors were sometimes able to translate between these different ‘knowledges’, contextualising curriculum content to make sure that learners get what they want whilst satisfying the institutional requirements to ‘deliver’ the curriculum. This process of translation required listening to the learner as a whole (as a ‘three-dimensional person’) and making pragmatic decisions. At best, tutors were taking account of everything they knew about learners’ lives in order to help them to engage with LLN learning. For example, in the numeracy drop-in and in some one-to-one sessions the tutors encouraged and discussed engaging in language, literacy and/or numeracy practices for social purposes associated with the class itself or in everyday life. Individual tutors sometimes followed a student-initiated topic rather than sticking to a planned activity. In the Liverpool maths class, Kay often started from the students’ own images and understandings of numerical ideas, rather than trying to redirect them towards her own understandings. Students appeared to be most engaged when tutors sought the relevance of what they were teaching to the learners’ everyday lives, but this was often in passing, rather than a central part of the curriculum.

Tutors may have developed these views of the nature of language, literacy and numeracy, and of how they are learned, through their training, through their education before becoming LLN professionals, through their independent reading, through years of experience, through a personal commitment to a particular view of LLN, or some combination of these. For some tutors, there seemed to be a coherent and deep-seated philosophy underpinning their practice. Others appeared not to have such a well-established teaching philosophy, which could lead them to experience as yet unresolved contradictions in their practice.

### 7.3 Tensions between two types of professionalism

Our research showed that tutors bring two types of professionalism to their work. Firstly, as adult educators, many tutors bring the sort of responsiveness to learners as individuals which we described above, often informed by an understanding of and commitment to social justice issues. Many tutors saw their capacity to listen to learners in order to fine-tune their teaching to make it relevant to people’s lives as a crucial factor in their professional identity: a ‘responsive professionalism’. 
Secondly, tutors bring training in the content of the *Skills for Life* core curriculum, and professional knowledge of the requirements of the Strategy. These requirements include delivering the core curriculum, meeting targets in terms of recruitment, retention and achievement, and administering the specified forms of assessment. This aspect of tutors’ professionalism involves the ability to fulfil their institution’s commitments through adherence to procedures and completion of the associated paperwork. While on the one hand this ‘new professionalism’ was helping tutors to make their teaching more systematic than it was before, on the other hand some tutors were finding it crowded out the ‘responsive professionalism’ which had previously been the cornerstone of their practice. The way in which the core curriculum is presented in terms of itemised skills, knowledge and understanding is also, we suggest, making it more difficult for tutors to conceptualise LLN as social practices.

We found that tutors were often faced with a tension between these two types of professionalism. Often the requirements of the curriculum and institutional constraints made it difficult for them to put students’ individual interests and motivations at the centre of their teaching. For example, they experienced a tension between the requirement to teach to the test, and serving the needs of students who wanted to work on their writing. Similarly, individual learners’ interests and wishes were often in tension with the demands of the real world – people’s need to gain measurable skills if they are to find employment and more self-respect, and Government’s wish to see an economic benefit resulting from the expenditure of taxpayers’ money.
8. Learning-teaching events as social spaces

8.1 A dynamic dialogue between students’ and tutors’ contributions

Our research shows that learning opportunities emerge from dialogue between what students bring to classes and what their tutors bring. This dialogue evolves and changes over time, as tutors listen to students’ accounts of their purposes, their desires, their lives and their perspectives on learning. There is an ongoing, deepening dynamic between these different contributions to the classroom, facilitated by the ‘responsive-to-learners’ type of professionalism we identified in the previous section. It is dependent on time to talk, and time to listen.

In this section we discuss four key aspects of this dynamic, all of which underline the social nature of learning-teaching events. Firstly, in the section entitled The importance of social relationships, we discuss the types of social relationship which both facilitate the development of dialogue and emerge from it. Secondly, in the section entitled The negotiation of learning opportunities, we discuss the aspects of learning-teaching events which need to be negotiated as part of this dialogue. Thirdly, in the section entitled Learners as active agents in their own learning, we discuss learners’ own agency in these processes. Finally, in the section entitled The broader outcomes from attending Skills for Life provision we mention some of the wider, social benefits of participation in classes which students gained in addition to knowledge, skills and qualifications.

8.2 Importance of social relationships

A major part of providing successful learning opportunities was creating a supportive atmosphere – a ‘safe space’ for people, many of whom had had negative experiences of LLN learning at school. Students responded positively to opportunities to engage with one another socially. Being treated with respect and equality as adults was, for many, in stark contrast to their perception of how they had been treated at school. Teachers paid a great deal of attention to establishing, sustaining and supporting relationships of warmth and trust in the classroom, and learners appeared to be relaxed and happy and enjoying class. Having an adult relationship with a tutor was important in overcoming the sense of inferiority experienced by those previously labelled ‘unsuccessful learners’. Many talked about enjoying coming to class because of all the friendly people. This relationship encouraged wider benefits of learning beyond curriculum knowledge and the achievement of qualifications. In this section we discuss in more detail issues which will resonate with the experience of the majority of teachers: the ways in which personal relationships in the classes we observed made students feel better about themselves and contributed to their engagement and participation in LLN learning.

Personal relationships were crucial to engaging people in LLN learning, and hence to the successful implementation of the Skills for Life Strategy. We cannot emphasise strongly enough how important we found this factor in the dynamics of the LLN classrooms we studied. Nor can we ignore how important a factor it was to students, who in interviews consistently privileged these social relationships as being crucial for successful learning. For this reason, we are devoting a section of this report to this factor.
Social aspects of learning were viewed by both learners and tutors as fundamental to the provision of learning opportunities. One teacher commented that some people come to class whose greatest need cannot be defined in terms of literacy skills, but in terms of social factors such as making relationships with people, and that lack of opportunity for social relationships can impede learning. Teachers paid close attention to social aspects by, for example, the way they introduced a new student to the class. Personal relationships were valued, supported and acknowledged in all classes, albeit in different ways. For example, in the Liverpool spelling class the personal relationships were important for Susan, who valued being treated as a proper person by a teacher - not looked down on by them. For Cheri the good relationship she had with her teacher enabled her to attend whilst managing her bi-polar disorder. She was quite categorical that without this relationship she would have dropped out. In the Wednesday one-to-one tuition in Lancaster, the relationships between Jack and Hannah, and Diana and Alfonso, were warm, friendly and well-established. Hannah and Diana both drew on their understandings coming out of their friendships with their students to guide what they did in class.

The building of such relationships depended to a large extent on respect and trust between learners and teachers, the teacher’s commitment and professionalism, and the teacher’s authenticity of response as a person. There was a big spectrum as to what this meant, ranging from a more conventional, structured personal style to a more physical and emotional one. Duncan took a fairly formal, teacher-directed approach but had a relaxed and friendly relationship with the students as equals, as educated adults. Abdul and Sameena and others interviewed said that they respected and trusted him as a teacher, as they felt they were learning and progressing well. They mentioned his consistency and fairness and his high expectations of them, expecting them to learn as much as they could for themselves, facilitating rather than spoon-feeding them, which gave them confidence. Duncan treated them as individuals even though he was taking a ‘whole-class’ teaching approach, taking account of their individual needs and personalities, such as always taking time to respond to Abdul’s frequent detailed questions about grammar. In the maths class in Liverpool the nature of the social relationship was vital for Jason and Katrina - both had received support from others to get to the point where they could attend college to build this relationship. A pre-relationship building process (telling them it would be friendly with a tutor who would treat them as an adult) had taken place through Katrina’s placement officer and Jason’s support at the tenants’ association. The relationship itself was not the first step in the process. What these had in common was the sense that they cared personally about their students’ success and well-being. This mattered as much as the nature of the curriculum, the physical characteristics of the environment and resources, or the teaching approach adopted.

The classroom acted as an arena for the social construction of the identities of students and tutors. Furniture layout, body language, tone of voice, form of address, organisation of groups, and the structure of activities all position people having particular identities. Learners can be positioned as competent adults, as ‘experts’, as learners, or as people with a deficit. We noticed many examples of tutors re-positioning learners as experts in their jobs or in some aspect of what they did in their everyday lives. This was part of seeing learners as people with other aspects to their identity in addition to being a member of the class. In some activities, however, learners were positioned as people with ‘difficulties’ or ‘problems’ – usually not overtly, but implicitly, by the choice of examples, by the illustrations, or by the tone of instructions on worksheets. In many instances we observed, the tutors tried to counter any negative positioning inherent in materials or learning tasks by the way they directed the activity. Class participants were positioned and positioned themselves in different ways, often
shifting positioning within one class. As we will discuss further in section 7.5, a changed sense of their own identity is one of the outcomes which participants might take away from learning-teaching events. The ways in which classroom interaction and other factors in the learning-teaching event position learners are therefore important considerations for teachers.

The classes we observed could be described as ‘learning communities’ in which the participants had built up shared understandings of what it means to be a member of the community, of how to participate, of what tasks consist of, of what counts as the beginning and end of a class, of the routines and rituals associated with class time. A class culture of peer friendship, support, a joint endeavour to learn and common learning goals provides a relaxed, positive learning environment. Such ‘learning communities’ were established as a result of having engaged in similar activities for some time, through trust, fun and commitment by tutors and learners. A learning community is transitory (the life of a class), and is also linked to the local community where the class is situated. Relationships had an impact on sustaining the learning community as well as supporting the individuals of which it consisted.

We identified a distinction between developing individual confidence, and developing ‘social confidence’. Social confidence is associated with, but not the same as, individual confidence: it concerns not just a person’s confidence in what s/he can do (for example ‘I can achieve level 1 maths’), but who s/he is and who s/he can be in relation to others. It was encouraged in listening to one another talk about learning, talking about home life and things which mattered, and sharing things that were affecting learning. Whether the method of learning was individual, paired or group, learning to be socially confident was valued highly by students. This is particularly relevant to most ESOL students. They generally have a high level of self-esteem in relation to their educational achievement, but low social confidence because of their lack of English language capability and their positioning in society.

Classes all maintained a serious intent, but, within this, learning was conducted in relaxed, friendly and enjoyable ways. There was lots of humour, laughter and play: the students found learning fun. This is an important factor in countering previous negative experiences of learning as embarrassing and painful. In the Lancaster class there was a marked use of humour to deconstruct teacher authority. There were jokes about social conventions and teacher authority which served to shift positioning and break down unequal power relations between tutors and students. Learning activities were sometimes akin to play, especially those which emerged spontaneously.

The importance of personal relationships was apparent also in the amount of praise, encouragement and minimising of error evident in the classes. Tutors provided a lot of encouragement to learners to participate in class, to try things, and to see their progress positively. However, there was no associated cost for choosing not to participate or take risks. Most tutors responded to student contributions with praise and reinforcement for everything successful, or even nearly successful. Some tutors’ responses were exclusively positive. Even in a situation where the student made an error, the way many tutors responded to it was to avoid reference to the error, to comment on something which was nearly right, thereby building up the learners’ trust that they would not be exposed to failure.

9 This notion of a class becoming a ‘learning community’ has much in common with the concept of a ‘community of practice’ as developed by Lave and Wenger 1991 and Wenger 1998 (see also Barton and Tusting 2005). In the classes we observed, however, learning something was usually the primary objective of the activities in which people participated, whereas the concept of ‘communities of practice’ refers to participation in purposeful activities in which learning is a more incidental outcome.
Tutors were on the whole tolerant of off-task discussion in English or in other languages, seeing it as a way in which students can gain confidence, can make links between their lives outside class and what they are learning, and can participate as ‘experts’. In the Liverpool classes, we noticed that tutors used social talk, talk about the everyday, talk about themselves as bridging between formal and informal elements of lessons. Sometimes this is tutor-led, as in Debbie’s admission that she had ‘messed the lesson up’ by getting ‘carried away’, and sometimes it was student-led as in Sarah’s measuring episode. Humour, jokes, mimicry and play-acting were also mechanisms for moving between one and the other.

By contrast, we observed that lack of attention to social factors may impede learning. Instances we observed of social factors which had potential to impede learning included personality clashes, gender imbalances, and the dominance of confident, vocal students over quieter ones. One tutor commented that team teaching can help to avert personality clashes between teachers and students. Some students appeared to be denied learning opportunities by being in a minority group in a class, or just by being shy or reserved in their style of participation. These sorts of difficulties may be hard to address, but tutors found that being aware of them helped.

8.3 Negotiation of learning opportunities

Within the sort of supportive environment described above, learners and teachers can collaborate in order to maximise learning opportunities for everyone concerned. This involves making decisions about content, methods, style, formality, structure, pace, tone, materials and activities of the classroom. The tutor’s task is to negotiate these in interaction with all concerned, to fine-tune them according to the individuals involved, to be flexible and responsive to ongoing changes in configurations of purposes and preferences, and – as we emphasise in the following section – to be responsive to the learners’ own agency in these processes. We saw many examples of these sorts of negotiations, some of which we include here.

Teaching which maximised the availability of learning opportunities seemed to develop in negotiation between learners and teachers: it was not only carefully planned, but was also responsive – both to individuals and to the group as a whole - and emergent from the ongoing interaction. This involved collaboration, dialogue and flexibility around the content, method and mode of delivery. Pre-planned schemes of work are often recommended as good practice, but the flexibility to respond dynamically to learners’ changing needs and interests is also essential. Teachers were frequently adapting their plans in order to accommodate the particular circumstances of learners’ lives, for example by being flexible about timekeeping and ensuring that the scheduling of classes was responsive to students’ needs.

We observed tutors adjusting their teaching out of sensitivity to mental health difficulties, stepping tasks down to give students opportunities to succeed, using different means to get across the same points, checking student understanding in different ways, and using constant repetition and review. Gauging the appropriate amount of support without stepping the task down so much that students are no longer challenged is a difficult balance. We observed tutors making fine-grained decisions to ensure they did not scaffold students so much that they are no longer learning anything new. For example, at the times when Duncan elicited Abdul’s contributions in the group and answered his questions on grammar this could be seen as a successful provision of learning opportunities. When Abdul and Sameena were left floundering without the necessary support in the pair work the learning was not so successful. When
Duncan spent a long time trying to help another student understand a point in the whole group feedback, it may have been a learning opportunity for her but those who already understood may have felt held back, which two of the students suggested sometimes happens in this group. The balance between challenge and support was largely achieved by the tutors we observed, but there were moments when it appeared students might have been able to respond had they been given a little more time before the task was broken down.

We observed many instances of tutors moving skilfully between formality and informality, structure and flexibility, interweaving personal and task-based talk, fine-tuning their individual or group interactions according to the reactions of students. Formality and informality are often intertwined. We noticed that in quite informal settings (such as a relaxed, friendly atmosphere at a small table) the nature of the work could be formal (such as worksheets about language forms or abstract numerical operations). For example, in the entry level 1 – 3 English class in Lancaster, structured worksheets were used during the one-to-one part of the session, which had an informal, conversational atmosphere. In the Blackburn ESOL class, Duncan took a formal approach to teaching grammar using an ESOL textbook, closely controlling the learning activities. At the same time, his good sense of humour and appreciation of his students and their enjoyment and engagement with the tasks created a ‘buzz’ and a relaxed, informal atmosphere. Students were chatting freely, either in English or in their shared languages whilst doing the learning tasks.

Formal, structured teaching methods and materials were not straightforwardly positive or negative features of these classes. Some students found a degree of formality reassuring, giving them a sense of order, structure, purpose, challenge and achievement. Formality can provide security and familiarity: this is what many learners expect of classes. Many ESOL students had thrived and achieved well in their own countries going through very formal systems of schooling. However, structure could become counter-productive if it squeezed out individual responsiveness and links to worlds beyond the classroom. Formal procedures and ground rules were reminiscent of the school practices which some students associated with previous fear and failure.

Classes and one-to-one tuition sessions varied in pace and nature of activities. Some spent a long time over a single point, repeating and checking until everyone appeared to understand it. Some used many different activities to present and reinforce the same content. On the other hand, a single activity often had multiple uses and multiple outcomes, either for the class as a whole, or for an individual learner. These different or additional learning opportunities were often driven by tutors’ ingenuity in adapting or extending activities to suit individual and emerging needs and possibilities, but also by the students’ own motivations for attending.

8.4 Learners as active agents in their own learning

Our observation has shown that many learners reinterpret what they encounter in classrooms to create learning opportunities for themselves. Whatever the nature of the provision, they work actively to ‘make something of it’ according to their own agenda, and to take ownership of their own learning experiences. This may be a characteristic which is specific to adult learning as compared with child learning. Most of the students we observed had strong views about

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10 The way in which aspects of in/formality are often intertwined is a key theme in the LSDA literature review on formal and informal learning (Colley et al. 2003). For discussion of different definitions of formal and informal learning, see Tusting 2003.
11 This can be interpreted in terms of Bernstein’s concepts of classification and framing (Bernstein 1996): the curriculum content was strongly classified, but by being mediated informally, it was weakly framed.
their learning: about what their goals were, and how these would best be met. However, some students did not display the same degree of agency and might have benefited from having their own role as agent discussed and encouraged. Recognising the possibility of learners taking a more active part in shaping learning-teaching events presents a challenge to views of teaching as the transmission of knowledge with teachers taking responsibility for planning what will be learnt.

In the Liverpool Drop-In maths class the learners were supported to choose the topic area and worksheet that they wanted to work on. For example, Sarah wanted to learn ‘area’ as she wanted to know how to measure for a bedroom carpet, or the amount of wood for an alcove shelf. In the interview she said that her dad always did this and she wanted to learn. Jason said he wanted to do fractions because he found them hard, so he wanted to be able to do them. He chose the level of worksheet (he could do a ‘harder’ or ‘easier’ one depending on his confidence level). He decided the pace and called Kay when he wanted to check or move on. Katrina, in discussion with Kay, said she wanted to learn the basics like ‘times tables’ - as she knew these were important and she could not do them. She said this would help her with her money and with her job. Her pace was very slow and she had to keep asking Kay for help, but in all her interviews and observations she displayed an enormous sense of being an active agent. She felt that she would succeed if she tried hard enough - she did not seem to be daunted by her lack of skill as she worked up to entry level 1.

Students have the ultimate option of attending or not attending, attending but tuning out, or attending and engaging in the event. Participation and engagement, therefore, are crucial factors within students’ control, and a crucial aim for tutors is to encourage and facilitate them. We observed that engagement was most apparent when tasks were personally meaningful to students, in the sense that they could see the relevance of the task to their own lives, and when they were exercising choice and control over what they do. However, we observed a surprisingly high level of engagement even in tasks for which the rationale was not immediately apparent: good learning can happen in what on the surface look like bad conditions. For example, in the Liverpool Drop-In maths class students worked assiduously on worksheets – not what some may see as an engaging activity – because of the way they were framed and mediated by the tutor, Kay, and because of their trust in her. These adult learners seemed to have a high degree of tolerance for uncertainty as to the ultimate purpose of activities. Even when there was considerable mismatch between the class activities and the students’ motivations to attend we observed high levels of engagement, especially when the motivation was very urgent, as in the case of asylum seekers and refugees.

We observed students participating in discussion about what and how they were learning, being involved in democratic decision-making about how courses were run, and negotiating their own pace. Many learners were active in understanding how they are learning, taking ownership and making choices. Some tutors also encouraged critique from their learners, further boosting learners’ sense of agency and control. Students taking control of their own learning through dialogue in this way depends on tutors taking account of the wider perspective of students’ lives and capabilities beyond the classroom, and recognising the importance of social relationships in the class, as discussed above.

In the Liverpool Drop-In spelling class Susan developed a relationship with Debbie that supported her learning outside the class. She often wrote little notes in her homework for Debbie telling her how she felt about learning, for example: ‘That was hard and I didn’t understand but I think I do now’. She often stayed behind to talk to Debbie about what she was
reading or writing, or her delight in learning about language. Tommy took an active role in developing his interest in creative writing, writing more than required and discussing this with Debbie. He decided from this positive experience to sign up for a creative writing course following the spelling class. Tommy linked this experience of learning with other learning experiences in his everyday life where he got books out of the library to teach himself about astronomy, photography or sea fishing. Cheri also took the initiative in developing a relationship with Debbie that supported her learning - with this support she explored writing poetry, which she brought for Debbie to see. Debbie also used this space to discuss her progress in her maths course - so it was about learning more generally. Elizabeth explained that by using the ‘look, cover, write, check’ method that she had learned in class she was practising words herself - she was constructing her own methods for learning outside the classroom. Sameena, Abdul and most of the other students responded to the strongly teacher-directed learning environment of the Blackburn ESOL class by taking charge of their own learning within the framework offered, through their contributions in whole-group and pair work, their questions to each other and to Duncan and the use of their individual learning strategies.

We gathered evidence of learners gaining benefits which went beyond what the teacher had intended or planned. For example, what the students learned in the Blackburn ESOL class went way beyond the main aims of the lessons for learning new grammatical structures that seemed to be the major focus. What they were ostensibly learning was a grammatical framework or scaffolding that can underpin learning to speak English, but they were also developing reading, writing, speaking and listening skills in the process. In the focal lesson Duncan used the central text as a ‘vehicle’ for learning grammar rather than to be read as an interesting story. He purposely read it with little expression directing their focus to concentrate on learning new words and verb patterns. Despite this, Abdul, Sameena and other students said they liked the article because they found the story ‘interesting because I like people’, ‘adventure’, ‘nice’. It was through their own reading for the comprehension exercise that they came to appreciate the story. The lesson was around a written text but there was as much speaking as reading, though this was mainly focused on comprehension and grammar related to the text. In the end-of-lesson review, although Duncan wrote on the board and the students recorded on their sheets ‘verb patterns’, the students identified other learning such as “we did [comprehension] exercises about [what] happens”, “describing text”, and “new words”.

A particular arena in which students could take control was the pacing of their work. Many of the students, particularly in Kay’s class, reported liking worksheets, as they gave them control over the pace they worked at. Using worksheets enabled learners in the maths class to talk and then return to task. This was felt to be distinctly different from a school regime of learning. In many classes the students responded to worksheets and ILPs positively – they felt some sense of ownership and involvement in choosing their pace of learning and in their progress, especially when these were used more flexibly and personally than just as a ‘record of work done’, and when the ILPs were used to facilitate discussion about the individual learner, not just to collect data about ‘students’. The type of teaching, whether individual or group, seemed to matter less than the students feeling they were learning at their own pace and could participate in discussion about how they were learning.

12 As with so much good practice in adult LLN provision, Debbie gave up her own time for such meetings, but this was beyond the call of duty under the current funding arrangements. The value to the student of this sort of out-of-class engagement should be recognised by time for it being built into Skills for Life tutors’ contracts.
8.5 Broader outcomes from attending Skills for Life classes

‘Content’ learning is privileged by curricula, but it is inextricably bound up with other types of learning: learning how to learn, learning about language, learning about social relations, the reconstruction of social identities, and wider benefits of learning such as increases in confidence and physical and psychological well-being. In the classes we observed, these other forms of learning were in evidence, and emerged as essential factors in the success of the classes. Curriculum targets were by no means always considered to be the most important outcome, except in relation to gaining employment. For example, in both the Liverpool DISC classes the learners explained that gaining confidence, managing their health, meeting other people, learning things they did not know and making up for skills not learned at school were more important than achieving curriculum targets.

An important outcome of participation in LLN education is an increase in ‘social confidence’, as described in section 8.2. This is not only to do with demonstrating competence, which might be done in isolation, but more a change in self-perception, a conscious awareness of competence, and a sense of confidence in interacting with others (for further discussion of the wider benefits of participation in educational provision see, for example, Eldred 2002, Eldred et al. 2004, Vorhaus 2001, Schuller et al. 2004). Tutors seemed to be aware of the value of their classes in building social confidence, and many of the things we observed them doing or saying were indirectly contributing to this. For example, Jack in the Lancaster spelling class learnt that he is not ‘different’ and that there are other people of a similar age to him who have similar learning needs; this was very important in terms of changing his self-image and boosting his confidence.

We observed many instances of students learning about how to benefit from attending classes. For example, in all the Lancaster classes observed, including others not reported here, learners are not only learning content, but learning about classroom practices by participating in them, such as patterns of interaction in groups, and classroom rituals (filling in ‘Work Done sheets’, etc.).

Students often came to classes with one goal, but gained something more, different or unexpected. As we pointed out in the section on ‘motivation’, Sameena’s initial motivations were educational, and the positive effect her learning had on her relationship with her husband was unexpected. They now share a broader range of activities such as watching films in English or with English subtitles and socialising together with English-speaking friends that previously only her husband communicated with. Her motivations for learning English are now, as a result, social as well as educational. Abdul and Sameena were learning not only English language but also about a new learning culture in a new country. They were learning about this society and about the wider world from their teacher, their peers and to some extent through learning materials, though a broader range including ‘real’ and locally contextualised materials/resources would have made this even more effective. Sameena and other female South Asian ESOL students were learning to learn with male learners, not a norm associated with their cultural background and previous educational experience. In Lancaster, a student came to a spelling class to work on form-filling so she could apply for a passport. She got the passport, took her first holiday abroad, and enjoyed it so much that she stopped coming to class because she was too busy working at a second job in order to earn money to pay for more holidays. This is an example of the direct economic benefit of attending classes. It had a huge impact on the learner’s life, but not measurable in terms of standard achievement targets/passing tests and would show up on college records as a ‘drop-out’.
9. Conclusion

In this research we have studied learning-teaching events from the perspective of learners and learning. Following the example of much applied linguistics research, we have not been looking for direct relationships between teaching method and learning outcomes. Rather, we have been seeking to understand learning, and to identify ways in which tutors facilitate the creation of learning opportunities. We have recognised the importance of what participants bring into classes, particularly their life experiences and purposes for learning. We have observed not only the teaching methods and tasks, but also the physical and social environment of the classes. We worked with teachers who are all totally committed to their students and their work, and identified factors which helped them to serve their students’ interests. The research has shown the value of tutors understanding learners and their lives outside the classroom for fine-tuning adult LLN pedagogy, of recognising the diversity and complexity of the social life of the classroom, and of responding flexibly to this. The involvement of tutors as teacher-researchers in this research has shown the value of developing and supporting reflective practitioners so that they can take an exploratory approach to practice.

Finally we summarise the key issues emerging from the research which have been discussed in detail above, and propose implications for policy and practice.

9.1 Key issues emerging from the research

- Every learning-teaching context is different, and calls forth responses from teachers which are specific both to the context and to the individual learners.
- Learning is the product of a dynamic dialogue between what learners bring and what teachers bring to the learning-teaching event.
- Teachers experience a tension between two types of professionalism: on the one hand meeting institutional demands and on the other hand responding to learners’ aims, interests and lives.
- The way in which the core curriculum is presented in terms of itemised skills, knowledge and understanding may make it more difficult for tutors to conceptualise LLN as social practices, and hence to bring the learner’s context and the skills framework together.
- Providing successful learning opportunities is not just a question of implementing particular methods or following general guidance as to ‘what works’, but also of understanding and responding to the complex interplay of factors in learning-teaching events.
- The nurturing of good personal relationships is an essential factor in successful teaching. Being treated with respect and equality as adults had a positive impact on learners’ motivation, perseverance in coming to classes, and perception of being successful in and beyond the classroom.
- People learn LLN both inside and outside the classroom.
- Listening to learners requires time, recognition and resources.
- Teachers need time and support to embrace innovation and change.
9.2 Implications for practice, policy and professional development

- Tutors need to take as their starting-point a view of literacy and numeracy as social practices, situated in people’s lives and purposes, and differing from one context to another. They need to think about LLN holistically, in order to contextualise the skills which are itemised in the national standards.

- Tutors should make listening to learners, and gaining knowledge of learners’ lives, motivations, interests and capabilities, the cornerstone of their pedagogy, as recommended in the section of the Adult Literacy and Adult Numeracy Core Curriculum documents on The learner’s context (DfES 2001a, p.9; DfES 2001b, pp. 8 - 9). In this way adults’ LLN learning needs can be met and evidenced in the context of relevant and meaningful learning opportunities.

- Tutors need to be aware of a wide range of methods and receive guidance on fine-tuning methods to contexts and individuals.

- Pedagogy should be responsive and flexible; not prescribed by too restrictive a curriculum, nor constrained by rigid targets and assessment procedures. The funding of provision should take account of the time needed for responsiveness to students’ lives, for the creation of social spaces that are conducive to learning, and for fulfilling the demands of the curriculum.

- Tutors should be rewarded for reflecting on their practice, and for openness and exploration in response to new contexts and new students.

- The core curriculum should place more emphasis on responsiveness to learners, and less on coverage of itemised skills.

- Success should be defined in relation to learners’ lives.

- Those who put funding policies into practice should make it quite clear to all concerned that funding is not tied solely to the achievement of qualifications.

- New practitioners need the opportunity to develop awareness and understanding of issues of culture, poverty, power and social justice, and how these affect learning.

- LLN tutor training needs to include specific guidance on how to gain knowledge about adult learners’ lives and capabilities, how to be responsive to what learners bring to learning, how to contextualise the Skills for Life curriculum, and how to reflect on their own practice.
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This report shows how an understanding of language, literacy and numeracy as social practices can help tutors to understand and respond to learners’ needs. It analyses and provides detailed examples of what adult learners bring with them to their adult classes, illustrates how tutors contribute to these classes, and investigates the social nature of learning-teaching events. It is based on the research of the Adult Learners’ Lives project in colleges in Liverpool, Blackburn and Lancaster.

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Relating adults’ lives and learning: participation and engagement in different settings

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Preface

This paper is one of the reports from the Adult Learners’ Lives project, a major NRDC research study carried out by members of the Lancaster Literacy Research Centre. The overall aim of the project has been to develop understandings of the relationships between learners’ lives and the literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) learning in which they are engaged, and to draw out the implications for the Skills for Life strategy. Starting from the perspectives of the adult learners the project focused on issues around motivation, participation, persistence and engagement. It complements other research from the NRDC which approaches these issues with different methodologies, such as the quantitative cohort studies and the effective practice studies, and work which focuses primarily on provision itself or on the Skills for Life infrastructure.

The first year of the Adult Learners’ Lives project concentrated on college environments. Working with teacher-researchers enabled the research to be embedded in real classrooms and ensured that it had an impact on practice. In the second year of the project we worked in other sites with learners in what has been referred to by others as provision for the ‘hard to reach’. This included a drug support and aftercare centre, a young homeless scheme and a domestic violence project. We also maintained contact with 53 learners who represent the longitudinal cohort of the study. Working collaboratively with practitioners in each of the sites, we explored participation and engagement with learners who frequently have issues in their lives that impact upon learning.

Overall, 282 people participated in the research, 134 were students and the remainder tutors, managers and support workers. The project’s electronic database consists of 403 files, which include 198 recorded interviews. Where we worked in depth with people in learning programmes, this ranged from carrying out several interviews over a six-month period to keeping in touch with the person and their learning for more than two years.

The project was rooted in an approach which sees LLN as social practices. They are activities which people carry out and which relate to and are shaped by all the other activities they engage in throughout their lives, rather than just as skills or cognitive attributes which they ‘have’ or do not have. (See Barton, Hamilton & Ivanić, 2000, and Barton, 2006, for further details.) This has implications for the way we approach research. We seek to observe people engaging in LLN practices, within the frame of their lives and sociocultural contexts, and to listen to what they have to say about these practices and the meanings that they have in their lives. This broader view of LLN has been essential when trying to understand people’s participation in learning in diverse settings.

People are involved in many different activities and these change over time. Different approaches to studying them reveal different facets and relationships, deepening our understandings. We have therefore combined methods of data collection, and have been developing responsive ways of gaining insights into people’s meanings and experiences. These include observation, in-depth and repeated interviews, group work, photography and video. The rigour in this approach is in the richness of the data, in the level of detail and in the range of sources of data.

Throughout this research we have tried to respect the interests and agendas of all those
involved and to be responsive to their concerns. We have negotiated the way the research would be carried out and what its main focus would be in each site. We have sought to find ways of working collaboratively in data collection and interpretation, and to communicate with participants about the results of the research and how they can best be disseminated. This is particularly important when working with groups which include people who have experienced marginalisation throughout their lives. We have done our best to represent people’s voices fairly and in consultation with them; this is not an evaluation of them, nor of the programmes they are participating in.

The project has been embedded in a coherent strategy of communication and impact which aims to have a direct effect on practice. There is growing evidence that practitioners are most likely to draw upon research findings which resonate with their own experience (Rickinson, 2005) and our own work supports this. Throughout the project we have disseminated emergent findings from our work, first locally, and then regionally and nationally, in formal and informal ways.

This paper needs to be understood in the context of other NRDC reports. Three reviews were important starting points: Adult ESOL pedagogy: a review of research by David Barton and Kathy Pitt (2003); Models of adult learning: a literature review by Karin Tusting and David Barton (2003); and Understanding the Relationship between Learning and Teaching: A review of the contribution of Applied Linguistics by Roz Ivanič and Ming-i Lydia Tseng (2005). Another report describes some of the practitioner research: Listening to learners: practitioner research on the adult learners’ lives project by Dianne Beck et al. (2004). This work also links with English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) - case studies of provision, learners’ needs and resources: research report by Celia Roberts et al. (2004). And it is complemented by a simultaneously-published report relating learning and teaching: Linking learning and everyday life: a social perspective on adult language, literacy and numeracy classes by Roz Ivanič et al. (2006). This will be followed by a report on practitioner development through involvement in research. Work is continuing with the preparation of practitioner guides based on the project and by making the Adult Learners’ Lives data available as part of the NRDC research resource.

The project has been directed by David Barton and Roz Ivanič, with full-time researchers Yvon Appleby, Rachel Hodge and Karin Tusting, and the support of practitioner-researchers in different sites, including, particularly, Dianne Beck, Gill Burgess, Kath Gilbert, Russ Hudson, and Carol Woods.

Peer review

This report was read and peer reviewed by: Carol Taylor, Basic Skills Agency; John Vorhaus, NRDC, Institute of Education, University of London; Olivia Sagan, University of Luton; Dave Baker, NRDC, Institute of Education, University of London; Alexandra Kendall, University of Wolverhampton; Majorie Hallsworth, Mid-Cheshire College; Isabella Jobson, Adult Learning Inspectorate; Carol Woods, Researcher; Linda Jackson, Consultant; Mary Rhind, Highland Adult Literacies, Scotland; Nancy Gidley, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.
1. Introduction

Issues of engagement and participation are central to language, literacy and numeracy work in the range of settings in which it is delivered. The Skills for Life strategy identified a number of priority groups, including unemployed people and benefit claimants, prisoners and those supervised in the community, and other groups at risk of social exclusion. This has led to an increase in the number of settings in which literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) programmes are being delivered. They are being delivered by LLN specialists working in partnership with community workers, by community workers themselves, or through other means such as learndirect, a government-funded distance learning initiative. It is therefore very important to understand the characteristics of these contexts and the ways in which they differ from college provision.

Much of the initial focus of strategy has been on college and other large providers. However, in recent years there has been a strong strand of work in community and other settings working with people who have been referred to in public discussion as ‘hard-to-reach’. This has been supported by the Adult and Community Learning Fund, as reviewed in McMeeking et al. (2002) and Sampson et al. (2004). In terms of research there is a small literature on community-based provision. Bird & Akerman (2005) provide a recent position paper and Hannon et al. (2003) include a literature review. Our study makes a distinctive contribution to the existing literature in the field, as described in section 7.1, in drawing together this work, in providing detail and, crucially, in understanding provision from the perspective of the learners.

The focus of this paper is on issues of engagement and participation for learners in these settings, issues which are central to learning. Engagement is concerned with purposes, why people come, and participation is concerned with the practices they engage in while they are there. The paper reports on the parts of the work of the Adult Learners’ Lives project which address these issues. We have disseminated emergent findings from this work, firstly locally, and then regionally and nationally, in formal and informal ways. This report is shaped in part by these conversations around the meanings of our research findings.¹

Key findings

- Many people brought highly-developed skills and competences. These included literacies unrelated to the curriculum, such as song writing or poetry.

- The majority of people we spoke to across the different forms of provision and had had very negative experiences of education and authority figures.

- People carried histories of violence and trauma that were not always open and visible. Experiences of living with ill health both in the past and present were common. Many had been bullied at school.

¹ We would like particularly to acknowledge the participants in our workshops at the November 2004 Skills for Life conferences; the Literacy Research Centre Discussion Group, Lancaster; and representatives at each of our individual research sites, whose various responses have been invaluable in writing this report.
People had different reasons for being involved with these settings; for some it was about safety and survival; others came with more specific learning goals.

People experienced a range of barriers on engaging in learning, including physical, mental, social and emotional constraints. Social circumstances meant that many experienced turbulence and unpredictable change in their lives.

Feelings and emotions shaped people's experiences of learning; for some this made engagement, particularly in more formal, structured learning very difficult; other people talked about formal learning provision as a safe haven from other overwhelming issues in their lives.

Many people talked in different ways about seeing themselves as having been outside a world of 'normality', for example very young people forced to live independently due to family breakdown and becoming drug dependent. Feeling very different had put people off participating in learning in the past.

People had a range of common aspirations to most people, such as a safe, settled life, a good home, good family relationships, good work, good health.

People needed to feel it was the 'right time' for them to engage in learning and change in their lives; this was something they had to identify for themselves.

People had many roles, responsibilities and commitments; they had shifting priorities and circumstances which led to dipping in and out of learning. Often immediate concerns had to take priority over formal learning. Goals were flexible and changed as circumstances changed, sometimes very unpredictably.

Some key issues for policy and provision

Provision needs to recognise and respond to people's practical constraints.

What is funded and what is not funded can have a significant impact on possibilities for engaging in learning, such as travel and childcare.

LLN provision needs to be funded to work within the principal purposes of these settings.

LLN tutors need support and training to equip them to work in specific community settings; they need time and space to be flexible and reflective practitioners.

Teaching needs to take advantage of people's existing skills, competences, passions and talents.

Funding affects learners in seemingly random ways; often the most vulnerable learners end up with the most insecure provision.
2. Research settings and methods

For this study we selected a number of settings in north-west England where literacy and numeracy learning was happening, in a variety of ways, ranging from provided educational programmes by college-based specialists, through to informal learning by participation in the activities of the organisation. The aim was to have a set of contrasting sites in terms of learners and the forms of provision. From the most formal to the least formal, these were:

- **Falcon House in Lancaster**, a drug and alcohol support centre which offered clients both one-to-one support and a group-based Structured Day Programme, the educational activities of which included literacy, communications and IT, and distance literacy and numeracy courses delivered through a partnership with the local learndirect centre.

- **The Big Issue in Liverpool**, an organisation for the homeless which offered educational provision including literacy, numeracy and IT.

- **Nightsafe in Blackburn**, a shelter for young homeless people, and the associated day centre Fusebox, which had always offered informal educational provision on a needs-driven basis and was in the process of introducing more structured programmes including literacy and numeracy.

- **Midway Tenants’ Association in Liverpool**, run by volunteers, which supported people on a disadvantaged estate. Through the association, volunteers were encouraged to develop their skills, both through participation in the association’s everyday activities, and through attending college programmes where appropriate.

- **Chrysalis, a domestic violence support group in Liverpool**, which as part of its activities supported women’s attendance at college and other courses.

Rachel Hodge worked in the Blackburn sites, Yvon Appleby in the Liverpool sites and Karin Tusting in the Lancaster site. Research participants in all of these settings were from organisations who had profiles defined as ‘priority groups’ in the *Skills for Life* strategy. Based on earlier experience in college settings, we knew that gaining good research access to sites such as these can often be difficult. We invested a great deal of time in building up good relationships with people in the sites, explaining our approach to research, and negotiating how it would be carried out and what the focus would be. This enabled a degree of trust to be built up which is crucial for successful research relationships.

We gradually got to know and understand each of the research sites and the kinds of literacy and numeracy learning that was taking place. We interviewed staff and service users, both informally, recorded through field notes, and using more formal semi-structured interviews, audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed. This involved regular visits (20–25 visits per site over the course of the year), over 50 formally-recorded interviews, and many more informal conversations recorded in field notes. We developed other methods as appropriate to the settings, in dialogue with participants. At the homeless shelter, for example, Rachel Hodge worked with Gilly Kelly, a storyteller and dramatist, to develop a photo project in which young people took photographs of places and activities in their everyday lives and wrote and spoke...
about the meanings of these photographs for them. These were then used as the basis for group discussion, individual interviews and a display. At the tenants’ association, Yvon Appleby worked in collaboration with Jason, one of the longitudinal participants in the research, who wrote a brief history of the association, kept a log of the drop-in sessions, photographed the office and collected documents and forms.

In representing other people’s lives we were trying to understand their perspectives. We were not attempting to evaluate what was going on, but to make sense of it and to report on their perspectives. In each of the sites, initial analyses and individual reports were taken back to research participants, both learners and practitioners for discussion and feedback. This helped develop the analysis, tested the local validity of the research and enabled participants to draw on it in developing their own practices. (We refer to people attending formal courses as learners, whilst respecting the fact that much of their learning takes place outside such courses.)

As we have outlined above, this approach to research relies on developing detailed local understandings in collaboration with research participants. Therefore, we first produced detailed reports on each of these sites which were fed back to the sites and discussed with participants. These have acted as background papers in preparing this report. Understanding the specific sites was an important step in making sense of the data. In this paper we bring together our principal findings across these different sites. There are two distinct aspects to the analysis. First, we describe the characteristics of people’s lives in these settings, and how these characteristics influence and shape the learning in which they participate. We provide profiles of four individuals to give a sense of the kind of data the analysis is based on. The following section shows how these aspects of people’s lives affected their learning. Secondly, we examine the dynamics of the individual sites, their distinct purposes and the patterns of participation and we show how aspects of people’s lives shape the provision. The final section relates our work to the broader literature on community provision and outlines implications for policy and practice. In this work there is an implicit comparison with college sites; another paper from our project (Ivanič et al. 2005) focuses more on the dynamics of teaching and learning in college settings.
3. People’s lives: what do people bring to learning settings?

We will describe what people bring to the settings under four headings: their history, their current identities, their current life circumstances, and their imagined futures. We find it very useful to think of people’s lives in terms of these four aspects in order to navigate through complex data and to draw out significant themes, and we explain each aspect in more detail in the sections below. This provides a framework for understanding how to link literacy and numeracy learning to people’s lives. Figure 1 illustrates these four aspects in a simple manner, the idea being that each person has a particular combination of practices and identities, with a history behind them and an imagined future towards which they are travelling, situated within a set of current life circumstances and events.

![Figure 1. Four aspects crucial for linking learning and lives.](image)

We want to emphasise these four aspects of life: the importance of individual histories; how people have their own ‘ways of being’, the cluster of social, psychological and affective factors which make up their identities; the significance of factors they may have little control over; and the importance of people’s plans and how they see future possibilities. Of course, these four areas overlap and interact. People’s current practices are shaped by their life history; people’s purposes and goals are influenced by their current circumstances. Nevertheless, distinguishing between these four areas helps us understand engagement, participation and learning. The four aspects can be expressed in chronological terms: what has happened in people’s pasts, who they are now, what is happening in their lives now, and where they want to go.

To give a sense of the rich data that has generated these findings, one of the people we worked with will be profiled under each heading. The profiles are based on field notes written at the end of data collection. While each of the four people, Sophie, Caroline, Jason and Steve, has been selected to illustrate one of these four areas, their profiles also demonstrate the ways these interact. Of course, any representation of individuals is a partial and selective picture of who they are. In these profiles, our selection has been guided by drawing out those
aspects of people’s lives which seem to us particularly relevant for our concerns in this paper, around the relationships between life and learning and, to reiterate, these descriptions draw upon the full range of data which we have collected.

3.1 History

Sophie, 18, was a regular attender at Nightsafe, the shelter for young homeless people. She had had an unsettled family situation as her mother, a teacher, was drug and alcohol dependent. She is very bright but hated school, often absconded, and was expelled as a result of repeated assault and arson offences. She eventually became homeless at age 15 and as a result underachieved in her GCSE exams. Due to the difficulty of studying whilst homeless and coping with substance misuse, she has dipped in and out of college. She had to give up her most recent course, in landscape gardening, when she became pregnant.

For some time she lived in the Nightsafe hostel and came to Fusebox, the associated day centre, every day for somewhere to go, to meet friends, chill and get help, support and food. She says she learns things at the day centre without realising it. She likes creative and practical activities, but prefers not to attend drugs/alcohol advice sessions and finds the basic skills stuff boring and easy. However, for a while new funding rules meant that she was not supposed to stay or eat at the centre unless she agreed to take part in the education sessions provided, until these rules were re-negotiated.

Sophie is a reader, and her favourite author is Virginia Andrews (who writes in graphic detail about child abuse), saying: ‘Like it’s like real life... I can relate to the people, like the stuff that’s going on.’ She likes to write Haiku poetry in English and in French, and freer style poetry, especially when she is going through a bad patch.

Sophie guards her privacy well and it is not easy to know what is dream and what is reality in her life. She showed Rachel one poem about anorexia which she said she had written for a friend but which was clearly related to herself.

Towards the end of the study Sophie had just had a baby girl, was in much better health, and was moving on from a mother-and-baby unit to her sister’s for a while, and wanted to find her own flat. She was determined to go back to college, take her GCSEs and A levels and eventually study veterinary medicine or psychology. The staff were all hoping that she would be able to manage to look after her baby with continuing support, but they were also worried about her.

These notes show how people are bringing their whole history with them when they enter these community settings. Each person has a distinct and individual history, but there are patterns in the lives of the learners we worked with in community settings which have particular impacts on their learning and which give rise to common themes.

As we have already noted, any profile is a partial picture of people, who are whole and complex individuals. People come with a wide range of backgrounds and histories, and generalisations about trends can be misleading if they are thought to apply to everyone’s particular history. Nevertheless, common patterns of socially-organised inequalities have been documented. Large-scale cohort studies (e.g. Bynner and Parsons 1997, 2001).
demonstrate how literacy and numeracy difficulties correlate closely with measures of social exclusion such as unemployment, poverty, poor health, and overcrowded housing conditions. Most of the people we worked with in these community settings had lived their lives at the sharp end of such social inequalities and this is reflected in some common patterns in the histories they carried with them. We identify two areas where their histories affected their learning in formal situations: extreme histories of pain, trauma, violence and ill-health, and negative previous experiences of education and of authority.

Histories of pain, trauma, violence and ill-health
Many of the people we worked with had come from unsettled and shifting family backgrounds, which often included violence and physical or mental abuse. This was particularly true of the young people at the homeless shelter, most of whom had had periods of living in care. It was also true of the women at the domestic violence support group. Where people had experienced periods of homelessness, this was often associated with incidents of violence, particularly if they had spent time in hostels. Drug and alcohol misuse and associated health and social problems were common, most obviously in the drug and alcohol support centre data, but also in the homeless shelter, the domestic violence support group and Big Issue work where alcohol and drugs were often described by people as being part of their coping strategies for survival. Where people were bringing histories involving pain, trauma, violence and ill-health, these could form significant barriers to engagement in learning, which we explore in more detail below.

Negative previous experiences of education and of authority
Like Sophie, many people had very negative previous experiences of education. They reported extensive physical and emotional bullying, both from teachers and from other pupils. Experiences of humiliation were described, like those of Steve, profiled below, who was expected to read aloud in English classes despite finding this very difficult because of dyslexia, which was not diagnosed until after he left school. Many people felt they had been positioned as ‘thick’ or as ‘failures’. School work was described as ‘too hard’ or as ‘boring’. Many had coped by skipping individual lessons, whole subjects or full days, or dropping out completely. Where people had come from difficult home situations, characterised by violence or abuse, this had often led to behaviour such as Sophie’s assault and arson offences. This, in turn, had resulted in disciplinary action and eventually suspensions or exclusions. Where home situations were mobile and shifting, this had led to periods of discontinuous and interrupted schooling for some, which had caused further problems. People said they felt very different from other pupils who were not dealing with the same issues, and this feeling of not belonging also led to skipping school and spending time in situations where they felt more at ease, such as with groups of friends instead.

A related point is that many of these people had had negative experiences with authority throughout much of their lives. Encounters with authority at home, at school, through social services and through the criminal justice system had often involved sanctions and disciplinary procedures which were experienced by many as unjust impositions. This was especially true of those people who had come from family situations characterised by violence and mental or physical abuse, and for whom any authority tended to be met with deep distrust and wariness.

At the homeless shelter in particular, where they felt safe and valued, most of the young people displayed resentment of impersonal authority, rigidity and control, especially when this was seen to be displayed without respect and understanding. This was a recurrent problem for them, which they had experienced in many official and institutional contexts,
particularly the job centre, the police station and school. These people are dependent on the services and benefits associated with these settings, so cannot escape them, and often display levels of frustration and anger which colour their emotional experience. Similar feelings, although to a less extreme extent, were described by many at the drug and alcohol support centre, particularly by people who were there on drug treatment and testing orders, and who had to manage many contacts and appointments with various agencies, including probation, the community drug team, social services and the job centre (an issue which we will return to below).

3.2 Current practices and identities

Caroline, in her 40s, attends the Structured Day Programme at Falcon House regularly. She enjoyed school, was in the top class, and always got good reports, but got fed up with it in her last year, when she was doing exams and wanted to leave. By then she had started to go out and drink. She got married aged 20 and had two children. She trained and got a job as a secretary, but had to leave because of childcare requirements and thereafter only had what she calls ‘daft jobs’, like factory work. The family moved to a new area when their marriage ran into difficulties, but the problems continued and her husband eventually left. Caroline met someone else whom she married and had three children with, but he drank and was violent throughout the marriage and eventually they divorced.

After the divorce, Caroline says she had her worst time. She used to drop the kids off at school and then spend the day in a shelter on the local promenade. ‘I used to drink all day in the shelters, bottles of cider. I was always pissed up, just going with anybody, messing about, a lot of that. And ended up in hospital, and at the police station.’ After a while, she noticed she was bruising very easily and bleeding a lot. She went to the doctor’s, who referred her to the local alcohol detox unit. She has been in the detox unit about 20 times. At various times, her health has been very poor. She has been in short-term residential rehab, which was not successful for her, and longer-term structured residential in another part of the country. This was better for the four months she was there, but she had to face all the same issues when she returned home. She finds the programme at Falcon House much better, because she can carry on with support, rather than being just stuck at home. The structure and the activities give her something to think about other than drinking, and she says it has ‘saved my life’.

Caroline has always been interested in learning, and likes having something to do. She had previously tried going to college, but found this very difficult. She found the people there described lives that were very different from hers – ‘people that are talking about their families, and going for meals, and golfing, and stuff like that’. She couldn’t say she had a problem with drink, because they didn’t. College staff did ask her if she was drinking, and she said a bit, but didn’t want to tell them she had a problem with it. As a result of feeling this pressure, she used to feel scared, so would take a bottle with her so that she could drink at college. She had also gone on courses at a local employment training centre, but had encountered similar difficulties, dealing with those she referred to as ‘normal people’. Despite these difficulties, she persevered and got her European Computer Driving Licence, but did not want to continue at college. At Falcon House, in contrast, she can come and learn without feeling under pressure about her drinking. If she has lapses and is drinking, people will understand why, she will not have to pretend she
has been ill. And because she feels secure, she no longer feels the need to drink. ‘I don’t drink when I come here. I don’t want to’.

Caroline came in to the centre every day when she could, doing courses in IT, art, creative writing, and music technology, and having acupuncture on a Friday. She also started doing learndirect courses there, including numeracy and IT. Eventually she would like to gain the qualifications needed to get back into office work. Despite her previous negative experience of college, once her confidence had developed, she felt able to sign up to do a course at a local community college. This was possible for her partly because the tutor would be someone she had already been working with in the Structured Day Programme and whom she knew and trusted, partly because a friend from the same programme would be going, and partly because the site felt different to her from the local FE college, particularly as it was not full of disruptive teenagers.

It is clear from this example that there were some aspects of how Caroline saw herself and how she led her life which were helping her make the changes she wanted to in her life, whilst others were creating barriers. People’s current practices and identities are important in affecting how they approach formal learning. The skills, competences, passions and talents which people in this study had were either acknowledged and taken up in the learning situations or were ignored or unrecognised. At the same time, how people saw themselves and conducted their lives created conflicts and barriers with the educational opportunities they were offered.

Skills, competences, passions and talents
The first thing that people brought to learning as part of who they were was a wide variety of skills, competences, talents and passions, including literacies unrelated to the curriculum. At the drug and alcohol support centre, people shared their multiple skills, often supporting one another with practical activities such as fixing each other’s cars, domestic appliances or computers, or engaging in complex negotiations with agencies like social services or probation. Many of them, too, enjoyed and became skilled in the creative arts activities offered as part of the Structured Day Programme, particularly visual arts, creative writing and music technology. Several people described this in terms of having discovered unexpected ‘hidden talents’, or passions and interests from earlier on in their lives which they felt had been set aside or even trampled on by everything else they were dealing with. This was particularly important in contributing to the development of people’s self-esteem, by placing value on an aspect of themselves which had not been valued before.

At the tenants’ association, volunteers used a range of LLN skills to carry out their support roles, including taking minutes, making fliers, gathering new information, keeping records, supporting people with form-filling, letter writing or finding out who to contact to make a complaint, and running a bonus ball/prize draw scheme around the estate (and organising a children’s outing with the funds raised) which required extensive literacy and numeracy skills. While some of these had been taught through formal courses, most were acquired and passed on informally as volunteers participated in the association’s activities.

People’s skills and competences were often not reflected in the qualifications that they had. The majority of people we worked with in these settings had left school with no or very few qualifications (although this was not true of some clients at the drug and alcohol support centre who had qualifications up to degree level and beyond). However, this did not necessarily mean that they had no academic abilities. Sophie is a good example of this, with
her enjoyment of reading and of writing poetry – even in a foreign language – not being reflected in her current paper qualifications. The other young people at the homeless shelter had a range of literacy skills from minimal word recognition through to GCSE-level.

Conflict with discourses of education
Part of people’s identities and practices were the ways of talking and interacting (which we will call ‘discourses’) that they brought with them, which were shaped by their histories. Often, there were clashes between these different ways of talking and interacting in the settings. For instance, the discourse of young people at the homeless shelter was very different from the discourse of formal education, which in many ways was alien to them, and within which they had been positioned as failures. Staff drew on informal discourses when interacting with the young people. But this raised issues when the centre changed from being a ‘drop-in’ centre to being a ‘centre for educational activities’, when the ‘activities’ had to be re-framed if the service users were to accept them (discussed below). Given that many people had these negative associations with education, we found that learning and, particularly, participating in formal structured learning meant more to people than just acquiring new skills. It could mean entering a different culture or taking on a whole new identity, a process that could be experienced as difficult and sometimes even as dangerous. One client at the drug and alcohol support centre, who had attended university, described having lived two parallel lives associated with two different identities, his identity as a mature student and his identity as a drinker. This eventually became too difficult for him to sustain and he did not complete his degree.

Ways of structuring everyday life
In addition to identities, people also brought with them habits and practices which challenged some of the assumptions of more structured provision. One important goal of the programme at the drug and alcohol support centre was to provide people with a regular routine in their day, to replace the habits associated with the addiction they were dealing with. Otherwise, clients described how they would have had an ‘empty hole’ in their lives which would have been hard to fill and, they felt, made it more likely for them to go back to using their substance of choice. Many attenders, especially those at the start of their involvement with the programme, said that they did not really care what the content of the educational provision was; the most important thing for them was that they had something positive to get up and out for each day. As one client explained:

> It’s something to get up out of bed for in the morning. I find I’m getting up in the morning and living a useful day. [...] By coming in every day it’s getting me into a routine which I’ve not been in for a long time. And that’s getting up in the morning, washing, shaving, dressing and getting out. So that when the time comes when hopefully I’ll get back to work it’s not going to be completely alien to me.

Service users spoke in very positive terms about the programme, explaining that it took time and support to introduce structure into lives which had previously often been very unstructured.

Similarly, the young people attending the homeless shelter had often come from unsettled and shifting home situations and unstable living conditions, and were dealing with unpredictable life events. Sustaining the regularity of going to college or engaging in a structured course with deadlines was hard to co-ordinate, and they would often ‘dip in and out’ of activities as these were feasible for them. Many of the women’s lives at the domestic
violence support group had been structured around the imperatives of their own and their family’s survival in violent relationships, which took priority over other activities and made regular attendance elsewhere difficult.

The practices people were bringing with them did not fit in well with the expectations of formal learning programmes. It is important to recognise, however, that an apparent lack of structure in people’s lives, often described by outsiders as ‘chaotic’, is closely related to the life circumstances and events that they are dealing with on a daily basis. For many of the people we worked with, their lives were not so much chaotic as very complex. They were constantly juggling unpredictable demands which could make the introduction of learning activities on any regular basis difficult. This was particularly true where people’s lives were regulated by several different systems of social support. (See the section on roles and responsibilities, below.)

Feelings of exclusion from so-called ‘normal’ culture
People bring with them particular identities and cultures which shape their experience of learning. Caroline’s experience of college representing a culture which excluded her is a common one, described by many of the people we worked with. Steve, profiled below, explained that ‘a lot of people with drug problems have this thing about “normality” and what normality is and being part of it’. At the drug and alcohol support centre, one of the most important benefits people identified was being with people who had been dealing with similar issues, rather than, as Caroline describes, having to hide what was going on or trying to explain it to people who did not understand.

The young people at the homeless shelter felt particularly marginalised by the difference between their lives and those of young college students. As a worker there told us,

If you look around nowadays it’s very important for young people to be wearing the right clothes and look the part... you can’t do that on £40s a week in your own little bedsit, kipping on someone else’s floor. But when you go down to the college a lot of them live at home with parents who can afford to buy the latest stuff, they can afford to go out at weekends, they’re taking driving lessons, going on holidays. They can get a part-time job at the weekends, go home and have their tea, they’ve got their own bed and their clothes get washed and ironed for them and if they haven’t got money they can hopefully get some off their parents. Our young people, a lot of them have nowhere to live, no-one’s washing their clothes, nobody’s making their tea, you know. It does affect whether or not they attend training or work or education because they haven’t got the confidence and they’re struggling with their own mental health and they just feel down, feeling absolutely awful.

One of the crucial ways the domestic violence support group offered support to women was in helping them to see that they were not alone in their experiences. For those who were attending college, while learning support was available for them, they found additional support was necessary to help them deal with their difficulties, which were largely invisible within the college system. Vendors at Big Issue told of the ‘regular’ lives they had had in the past, and the catalysts – illness, relationship breakdown, drug and alcohol addiction, leaving the armed forces - which had led to these lives ‘falling apart’.

And while this distinction was not made in quite the same way at the tenants’ association, the members were nevertheless proud that they were doing it for themselves, making a clear
distinction between those on the estate and those from the outside. They were guarding their independence fiercely and resisting outside interference wherever possible.

3.3 Life circumstances and events

Jason is just over 30 years old. He stopped attending school at the age of 12 and hung about the docks with older employed members of his family. After a YTS course on a building site he worked as a labourer and then as a container operator. He did jobs that did not require reading and writing. A hit-and-run accident left him unemployed and with depression. He has been unable to work since then.

Members of his local tenants’ association persuaded Jason to have a go at learning. He started courses in computers, maths and family history. Although lacking in confidence Jason passed his national test in maths at level 2, travelled to Ireland with family members to research his family history and has undertaken several computer courses. He was positive about learning: ‘It’s learning anything, life is great, it’s just learning and learning and learning. It’s exciting’. He enjoyed the challenge of learning new skills, and aspired to study to become a Blue Badge Guide, telling people about the history of his local area.

Jason used his new skills in his voluntary work at the tenants’ association, helping to set up and run the computer and internet, as well as keeping the accounts. He also enrolled on a Tourism NVQ course. However, he was not able to start this as his drinking pattern of ‘going on benders’ increased. He attended a computer course, as it was necessary for his work at the tenants’ association, but he was not able to manage the regularity of other formal learning. In the last two years Jason has moved from being enthusiastic about learning, to habitually drinking and currently not engaging in organised learning activities. Although committed to the tenants’ association, he has been unable to sustain his work with them because of his depression and drinking. The other members, who are dealing with issues in their own lives, understand this and he is welcome to participate again if and when he chooses to.

Jason appears in the college records as a ‘non-attender’. But the tenants’ association provide a non-judgmental learning environment where he can succeed over time with support, at the points in his life when he chooses to do so.

Jason’s story shows the complex lives people led, the constraints on their lives, the many interacting roles and responsibilities they had and the many relationships which they were part of. External circumstances meant that many of the people lived what we refer to as turbulent lives (as discussed by Reder, 2004 in a US study), where they often described events they had little control over.

Multiple interacting constraints
People experienced multiple constraints when engaging with conventionally structured learning activities. These constraints were of different kinds: physical, social, emotional and practical. It was the interaction of these multiple constraints which constructed barriers for people. Having left school early, Jason was successfully employed for some time, initially through family contacts. At this point, the fact that he had not been at school since the age of 12 was not problematic for him. Nor was it seen as unusual or stigmatised by people in his
immediate social circle. It was after his accident, which caused physical constraints on his activities, that this aspect of his history became an issue, as he was no longer able to do manual work which did not require any reading and writing. At the same time, broader social constraints had a role to play in his opportunities, as local employment opportunities in general in the docks and construction trades where he had experience were dwindling. These factors contributed to the onset of depression, and in turn to him using alcohol as a coping strategy, both of which became constraints on his engagement. Despite these constraints, Jason found a route through the tenants’ association which was positive for him for some time, supporting him to gain qualifications and skills which could assist him to move towards the sort of life and employment he was striving for.

Jason’s hit-and-run accident shows the importance of unpredictable events in shaping people’s lives. Where people are already managing multiple constraints, such an event can have more significant consequences than where people have fewer existing issues to deal with. Sophie’s story gives another good example of this: her pregnancy forced her to give up a landscape gardening course. It also shows how such unpredictable events can have both negative and positive effects at different points: after having the baby Sophie moved to live in a more supportive environment with her sister and seemed to be doing well. Such unpredictable changes characterised the daily lives of many of the people we worked with. Events like sudden health problems, court decisions, family problems or housing difficulties could all lead to spiralling consequences, with people who had been very committed to learning suddenly finding it difficult or impossible. Practical issues, including financial ones, could prove severe barriers to learning: Caroline, profiled above, would have liked to come into the centre every day, but could only afford a bus pass on the first week of her fortnightly benefits payment.

Multiple roles and responsibilities
People in these settings had multiple roles and responsibilities, many of which had to be prioritised over engaging with learning opportunities. People managing caring responsibilities, for a child, parent or sick partner, had to prioritise these, particularly where they had few financial or social resources to draw on. If your childcare is provided by a family member who falls ill or goes away suddenly, or you have no support and you cannot afford to pay for any, you have no choice but to stay with that child. On the other hand, responsibilities such as caring for a child or supporting your community also had the potential to act as ‘pull’ factors back into learning, where people perceived this learning as being something which could contribute to or offer support with fulfilling their responsibilities. At the tenants’ association, volunteers were engaged in a range of commitments within their local community, and their engagement in learning was primarily in order to carry these out effectively and successfully.

Similarly, people who were involved with multiple agencies, such as the people on drug treatment and testing orders mentioned above, or many of the women at the domestic violence support group who were engaged with social services and the legal system, did not have a choice about many of the appointments they had to keep during the week. One of the women we worked with, Suzanne, was living alone with her daughter for the first time, with support from social services. She was involved in a complicated court case to retain custody of her daughter, which involved dealing with a range of professionals, among them psychologists, solicitors, social workers for herself and her daughter, support workers, NSPCC representatives and Sure Start co-ordinators. When appointments and arrangements with these people clashed with learning opportunities, it is clear that the learning
opportunities had to take second place.

Relationships
The relationships that people had, both within and outside the community sites, had a significant impact on their engagement with learning. Being able to come in for *a brew and a chat* was an important feature of the homeless shelter, the domestic violence support group, the drug and alcohol support centre and the tenants’ association. The relationships people build up at the drug and alcohol support centre, both with staff and with other clients, play a crucial part in supporting them. The range of services available to people interacted to form a climate in which learning could take place within a network of support. People talked about the importance of the staff being available to them all the time, the egalitarian relationships that were built up, which are described in more detail below, and, as has been mentioned already, the importance of being with other people with similar issues who understand what they are going through.

People also bring with them relationships from outside the setting. Some of these can have positive effects on their engagement in learning, and some can have the reverse. At the homeless shelter, the young people brought with them a complex social structure of relationships and identities. The presence or absence of particular groups of people shaped others’ willingness to engage with the activities that were offered. They appreciated being in a space with others who shared their experiences, such as homelessness, pregnancy or the drug culture. While they valued the positive support this offered, this could also have negative effects. As staff told us:

> It does drag them down [group involvement]. One lad got a job and the others kept coming saying: Come on, let’s go - so he did and lost his job...All your friends don’t want to do things, and they just want to get wrecked every night.  

*Nightsafe worker*

>Falling in with a peer group of like mind, which accentuates how they are feeling, as though there isn’t anything for them and that they are fairly worthless so they generally have a low opinion of themselves and their position... and that they expect almost nothing at all.  

*Connexions adviser - a one-to-one support worker for 13 to19-year-olds addressing social and educational issues*

Jason found a great deal of support for his learning from the people in the tenants’ association, and this support was one of the things that made his engagement possible. However, he also had support of a different kind from friends he socialised with. When his depression worsened, this was the support he chose for a while, rather than that which related to learning activities.

This takes us to the final aspect of people’s lives, which is concerned with the crucial importance of people’s own purposes and desires in whether and when they choose to engage in organised learning activities.

### 3.4 Imagined futures

*Steve* is in his early 30s. He has negative memories of his secondary schooling, describing the teaching as having been authoritarian, clinical and abrupt. He has dyslexia but received no support for it at school, and remembers getting into trouble for his reactions
when people laughed at him reading aloud. He is very critical of ‘old fashioned schoolteacher types’, who feel that taking on a strict or authoritarian role is part of their job. In his experience of talking to people who have had problems with drugs and alcohol, they have often gone through an authoritarian kind of schooling. He frequently skipped school from the age of 13 and left officially at 16. He sat some exams but does not know the results. He worked as a joiner for a while, locally and in London.

By his early 20s, he had started dabbling in hard drugs with friends, which led to addiction. He rapidly lost interest in work and made money by other means. Finally, after stealing money he was sent to prison for three years. He maintained his habit in prison, so needed to ‘score’ straight after getting out. Within weeks he had committed another robbery and was sent down again, this time for five years. Steve says this was ‘basically what saved my life, really; it changed things forever for me.’ He chose to spend this time getting himself sorted out, did some courses, and signed up for a residential rehab in the south of England.

When he came out of jail he went to London for a fresh start. He stayed clean there for a year, but had to come back suddenly when his mother fell ill. Soon he started using again. Then his girlfriend had a baby and they moved down to London, wanting to get back to the good work he had done before. But their drug use continued, he was arrested, and their son was taken away by social services and placed with his girlfriend’s mother. Steve and his girlfriend returned to the local area to be close to their son; since when, ironically enough considering this is where he had always had problems before, he has ‘got my shit together’. He and his girlfriend have got married, they have had another baby, and he has got involved in setting up a group to support local people using drugs.

Steve’s writing skills are poor, related to his dyslexia. However, he was very reluctant to engage with discrete literacy provision. This was not a priority in his life, he did not see any immediate use for it, and the strong negative associations he retained regarding ‘study’ from his school days made him unlikely to choose to spend his time in this way. He was, however, eager to engage with educational and support provision - which he perceived as being useful and productive for him. He finds the support he receives from the Structured Day Programme to be absolutely vital, because it is there whenever he needs it, and because it is a ‘safe place’ where he can engage in structured activities without risking bumping into old acquaintances.

He expresses his future goal as to have ‘just a clean, healthy life really. The rest of it I’ll make, and mould, and manufacture… My goals are to just maintain what I’m doing, and try and achieve something, whatever it be, however small or big, to achieve something.’ By the end of our study he was working as a community research assistant for a local university.

Steve’s sense of a possible future, of what he might become and how he could achieve it, was crucial to his engagement in learning. In this section we introduce the fourth component of people’s lives which affects their learning. It is concerned with their purposes, aspirations, hopes and desires, and we refer to this as their imagined futures. People’s imagined futures create and constrain what they see as possible. People’s plans changed as they saw different possibilities for themselves, and the sites we worked in were important catalysts for this.

**Engagement in learning driven by broader life purposes**

We found that the different individuals we worked with had many and varied reasons for engaging in educational provision. These could be very different in the different sites. People
attending the drug and alcohol support centre were for the most part engaged in a process of transition, and this shaped their relationship to learning. Where literacy and numeracy learning were seen as important or useful to them and their goals, as with Caroline above, who wanted eventually to get back into office work, they were taken up. For other people, introducing structure of any kind was perceived by them to be useful for their development, and so for a while they attended all the courses that were offered, but with quite a different motivation. Recognition of the diversity of things that people want from engaging in learning is crucial when working in these settings.

'Conventional' long-term aspirations
Nearly everyone we talked to described their long-term aspirations in conventional terms: a settled home, a family, a good job, happy relationships - although these aspirations were often held in tension with the concept of ‘normality’ in a culture which, they felt, excluded ‘people like us’, as mentioned above. At the homeless shelter, all but one of the interviewees cited these as being their significant goals in life. But these longer-term goals often took a secondary place to more immediate and urgent priorities. At the homeless shelter, for instance, the principal purpose for many was immediate survival. Most of them in the medium term wanted to train and to prepare themselves for work, and most of them had dipped in and out of vocational study and training at college or with other providers. However, most have found this difficult to sustain, experiencing difficulties related to unstable living arrangements, drug use, and all sorts of more immediate priorities linked to their current circumstances that we have described above.

Purposes and desires change over time
People’s purposes and desires are not fixed, but change over time. As people’s life circumstances changed, the relative priority of their goals could shift rapidly, and the place of literacy and numeracy learning within these could shift too. At the Big Issue, survival was the vendors’ major concern, and this meant different things to different people: a hostel bed, money for drugs or alcohol, clean needles or a chance to attend a detox programme. Learning came secondary to these issues. People’s purposes and desires could also change as a result of the learning and support activities they were engaging with in these settings. As they built up confidence and self-esteem, they might begin to consider options which they did not feel were open to them before, like Caroline, who ended up attending a mainstream college class only months after explaining to us how she did not think she would ever go back to college.

The search for wellbeing
One constant, however, was the search for wellbeing which shaped people’s choices. The young people at the homeless shelter were looking for a place to stay where they felt happy, safe and settled. They often moved around a lot to escape shifting relationships, noise, disruption and violence. But this mobility was not in itself their goal, but was a function of their search for settledness and wellbeing. Safety and happiness had a much greater priority for them than formal learning achievements. Where engaging in learning challenged their safety and happiness, it was not taken up. This included examples we came across where attending college became very uncomfortable, or when learning activities offered at the centre were perceived as being too formal, school-like and off-putting. When a woman attending an assertiveness training course run by the domestic violence support group felt she had exposed too much of her personal history at the first session, she was too uncomfortable to return the following week.
4. How lives shaped learning

The above characteristics combine to shape people’s responses to and feelings about participating in formal learning. There were common factors influencing choices and ability to participate.

Reluctance to access mainstream provision
A key point to recognise is that in these settings, people were for the most part unwilling and unlikely to access mainstream college provision, or indeed community provision which appeared similar to mainstream college provision. Negative previous experiences of education and negative experiences with authority meant that what they perceived as hierarchical formal learning environments were very off-putting. Feelings of exclusion from so-called ‘normal’ culture made it very challenging for many to contemplate participating in college activities or taking on a new identity as a college student. Mainstream college provision is normally provided on a regular daily or weekly basis, and this could be problematic for people whose lives were not structured in this regular way, or who were dealing with a range of unpredictable life circumstances and events which might have to be prioritised over learning. These difficulties were reinforced where people were in relationships, whether with partners, family members, friends or peer groups, which were not supportive of learning.

This is not to say that people in these groups would never access mainstream college provision. Some clients of the drug and alcohol support centre day programme went on to mainstream courses at the local community college, including Caroline, profiled earlier, who only a few months earlier had explained how unlikely she felt it was that she would ever attend college. In 2004, 12 clients went on to college and this was seen by the support centre as a significant achievement. This was in a setting where support was available for moving on to mainstream courses, and where the same teachers from the college were teaching the mainstream and the community classes, so clients felt supported by the existing positive relationships they had built up. Some of the mainstream classes were even running on the same site, making the step that much easier to take. The college principal was supportive in continuing this community provision, even when the numbers were low, which paid off in the long run both in terms of people’s progress. Brian, another client, is a good example of this progression. He went from doing a creative writing class as part of the Structured Day Programme, to an evening creative writing class with the same tutor on the same site which was part of the mainstream provision. He then took an introductory counselling course on the main site and eventually a diploma course, which he considered vocational training as he planned to work as a counsellor himself eventually.

Accessing mainstream provision required support. As part of their core activities the domestic violence centre offered bridging support to women to attend college. This included childcare, financial support for travel and, most importantly, attending with other women for the first few sessions. At Nightsafe the Connexions adviser accompanied young people through the application process for college, but they did not have the resources to sustain this bridging support.

Emotional experiences influence learning
People in these settings were regularly dealing with difficult or overwhelming mental, emotional and physical experiences in response to events in their lives which could
profoundly influence their whole learning experience. This could happen for a range of reasons: for instance, if elements of the learning environment recalled people’s previous negative experiences of education or authority, or other traumatic or painful events from their histories; or if they brought with them difficult or challenging life circumstances and events. For more on this see Jenny Horsman’s (2000) study in Canada where she identifies both the prevalence of trauma and violence in the lives of women attending literacy education, and the devastating impact these life experiences can have on people’s learning.

The teachers and learning providers we worked with were sensitive to such issues and had developed ways of dealing with them in the classroom. This might mean being ready to change the lesson plan very quickly, in order directly to address the issue at hand. But equally, it might mean being prepared to sit outside with a cup of tea and give people some space, rather than launching straight into activities. Teachers with no experience in this area need to be provided with training which will give them confidence in making such decisions, an issue which we return to below.

‘Dipping in and out’
Many of the people in these sites ‘dipped in and out’ of learning. This was particularly true of people attending the homeless shelter who, as we have already mentioned, would often attend for a short period of time before other circumstances got in the way. While on college records this would appear as a ‘drop out’, within the context of that young person’s life it wasn’t necessarily failure. Attending college, even for a short time, could be a significant and important step for them, given the histories they were carrying with them, the circumstances they were dealing with and the multiple life goals they were addressing. This is well illustrated by a summary of a case history from the Connexions adviser at the homeless shelter:

One young person I was working with was a heroin addict. He had a lot of support from Fusebox. He had a really unsettled lifestyle but had some support from a ‘leaving care’ worker. He then got thrown out of his hostel and went to NACRO for training which didn’t work out. But at that time he stopped being a heroin addict so he had moved a million miles because he was completely down and out when I first met him. He then managed to get his own flat, attended college for a while but something went wrong and he was asked to leave. Statistically he has not moved on and not achieved and on our system he is 19, still unemployed and failed. But I can see that a lot of input from a lot of people has achieved a lot in his case.

Where the experience of attending college was a positive one for people, it could challenge conceptions of a normality which excluded them or a new identity which they could not take on, and perhaps lead them to engage for longer the next time. But where the experience was negative, it could make them less likely to engage in the future. With this group in particular, having support and encouragement for small steps could make a big difference to their future choices within the context of their lives as a whole.

Another example is that of Jason, referred to earlier, who appeared in college records as a ‘non-completer’. However, he had had a very positive experience of learning, had continued to engage in informal learning in the tenants’ association and as a co-researcher, and made a significant contribution to the work of the association and to our research. His progression routes at the end of our study were unclear, as his return to drinking had led to difficulty in managing his learning and life. Nevertheless, the support from other volunteers at the
tenants’ association was still open to him, and his positive experiences of and attitude to learning meant that it was entirely possible that he would return to it in the future, when the time was right for him.

The ‘right time’
This idea that learning opportunities needed to be made available at the ‘right time’ in a given individual’s life if they were to be taken up effectively was a common one among the people we worked with. This ‘right time’ emerged from a combination of their life experiences, their purposes and goals and the priority of learning within them at this point, the support that was available for them for making potentially difficult changes, and the learning opportunities that they had access to. Sophie’s immediate priority needs were for safety, support and company, rather than for formalised learning. While she had tried to engage in formal learning, this had been difficult for her to sustain whilst living with homelessness. She had clear life goals, but at the end of our study engaging in formal learning was not seen as a priority to help her to meet them. She needed ongoing support through her rapidly changing life circumstances, from people who were able to spend time with her, build trust and positive relationships and understand how she represented herself, her realities, her wants and her needs. With sensitivity, the supportive people in her life could encourage her to move towards her own ‘right time’ for learning; but this is essentially a subjective experience, so she is ultimately the only person who can really recognise and engage with it.

This interaction of history, circumstances and purposes meant that the relative priority of LLN learning – or indeed of learning in general – varied a great deal, both between people and over the course of any individual’s life. Where these were not aligned, developing the motivation to engage in formal learning was less likely. Since Sophie’s underachievement at school does not necessarily indicate basic skills needs, it is unlikely that literacy and numeracy learning will be her top priority when her ‘right time’ comes. Steve gives a different perspective of this, from someone who does have what would be classed as ‘basic skills needs’. He explained how, despite having dyslexia and not feeling confident in writing, literacy learning was of very low priority for him in relation to his overall life goals, which had been first and foremost to get and stay clean, and secondly to ‘make, mould and manufacture’ the other things that he wanted to achieve.

In summary, the characteristics of people’s lives – the histories, their current identities and life circumstances, and the shifting goals and purposes they have for their futures – interact to shape their engagement in and experience of learning. In community settings such as these in particular, people are often unlikely or unwilling to access mainstream provision, especially if this resembles school. They may be dealing with difficult and overwhelming emotional and physical experiences, which may be relatively invisible to practitioners, but nevertheless shape the possibilities for their engagement in learning. They often ‘dip in and out’ of learning; from the perspective of provision this might be classed as failure, but within the context of their lives might be a very positive step. And for learning to be successful and positive, it had to be made available at the ‘right time’ for that individual, a subjective experience which emerges from the interaction of the characteristics they bring with them and the support and opportunities available to them at that point.

This takes us to the next aspect of the analysis: the ways in which people participated in the different sites we worked in. This then leads on to how characteristics of people’s lives shaped the forms of provision to support people.
5. What goes on in the sites

Having described some common patterns in the lives of people we have worked with, we will now move on to describe and analyse the patterns of participation and engagement in learning that we observed in the different sites. We will draw out in particular how these patterns were fundamentally shaped by the characteristics of learners’ lives described above. These sites were distinctive in their purposes, and yet we observed a range of similarities in the patterns of participation that emerged.

5.1 Purposes

Each site had a set of principal purposes which were not directly educational and which determined the patterns of participation there. These purposes shaped the priority and visibility of formal literacy and numeracy learning in these places, from an explicit role at the drug and alcohol support centre to a more indirect, though important one, at the domestic violence support group, where people were learning as it became necessary in carrying out their responsibilities.

The principal purpose of the programme at the drug and alcohol support centre was to offer support for drug and alcohol users and ex-users. People who had been given drug treatment and testing orders were obliged to have regular structured support. The centre offered a variety of approaches, including one-to-one support and a Structured Day Programme of activities. These included relapse prevention and harm minimisation support groups, complementary therapies, and educational courses provided by tutors from the local adult community college, such as music technology, art and Skills for Life which was taught by a literacy tutor. Once a week, staff from the local learndirect centre visited and supported people who were doing courses online, including literacy, numeracy, ICT and web design. After signing up for these, several clients also spent time at the learndirect centre in town. Again, engagement in learning was driven by the needs of the clients. The courses that had been put on as part of the day programme had been selected in consultation, and were chosen primarily because they were likely to be of interest to people attending the centre. While people were initially encouraged to attend all the courses to try them out, they were then free to choose which ones they continued to go to, in negotiation with staff. The principal priority was meeting their own particular needs and wants.

The Big Issue in Liverpool worked with people who were vendors of The Big Issue magazine. The principal purpose of the organisation is to provide opportunities for people facing homelessness to help themselves, first through selling the magazine, and secondly through empowering them to change their lives by supporting them around issues of housing, employment and education, developing self-esteem, self-confidence and independence. At the organisation’s Liverpool base, training and education for vendors had for some years included literacy and numeracy, delivered in a flexible way responsive to vendors’ needs. With the introduction of Skills for Life funding, discrete maths and English classes were offered, which included the incentive of an extra 15 magazines to sell. The organisation also offered music and IT classes.

At the homeless shelter, the principal purpose was to offer support to young homeless
people. The priority issue was ensuring their survival and wellbeing, making sure they had a safe place to come to and a safe place to live. Once this was established, staff worked with the young people on individual action plans, including addressing accommodation issues, drug and alcohol use, and planning for the future. These young people were learning all the time, but often this was not phrased in explicitly educational terms. For some young people, their action plan included engaging in formal learning, such as attending college; and educational activities formed part of what was going on at the day centre. But everything was framed in terms of meeting the particular needs of the young people involved, with learning being focused on to the extent that this was appropriate for these individuals.

The principal purpose of the tenants’ association was to offer support to residents of the estate with practical issues, particularly relating to their housing. For volunteers, the association offered support with educational and development issues, which included both helping people to attend formal courses and supporting their learning through participation in the activities of the organisation.

The principal purpose of the domestic violence support group was to offer advice and support to women who were or had been victims of domestic and family violence, and to raise awareness of these issues in the community and in legislation. The organisation sought to be an alternative to official support services run by professionals, which the organiser, Jacqui, felt disempowered women. The organisation, run from a local church hall, offered drop-in support sessions and activities including an assertiveness training course, a men’s stress management course and a telephone support and advice service. As part of their support activities, the domestic violence support group worked with women attending college, including those taking Skills for Life classes. Education and training were seen as part of the way women receiving support could develop their confidence and self-esteem, and the possibilities open to them for paid employment and new opportunities.

5.2 Patterns of participation

Staff and volunteers in all of these different community settings made it a priority to foster and develop a supportive, informal, relaxed atmosphere. They appreciated the issues that clients and service users might have with authority, structure and formality, already described, and worked to develop each site as a ‘safe place’ in which social interaction and developing mutually supportive relationships were as important as any more structured activity which might be going on. This was achieved through particular patterns of the use of space, the use of time and the interactions in the sites, which built up supportive and informal relationships between people.

Use of space
In each of these sites, spaces were available both for structured activities and for less structured social interaction. At the drug and alcohol support centre, group activities took place in several rooms. A large room with a central table and chairs, decorated with clients’ art works, was used for group discussions and activities not requiring the use of computers. The room behind it, of a similar size, was lined with broadband-equipped computers and mixing decks, and was used for music technology and IT classes and as a drop-in computer resource room. There were also local newspapers and information leaflets and the room also served as an informal space for people. The entry hall held a signing-in book and led onto the staff office, so had institutional functions, but also served as a place for people to wait, chat
and circulate. At the end of a corridor with one-to-one rooms and an office leading off it came a kitchen, where clients and staff made tea and coffee and chatted, and beyond this a small and comfortable room primarily used for complementary therapies.

The key place for informal interaction, though, was outside the centre itself, in a small space outside the back door leading onto the yard. A corrugated plastic roof offered some protection from the elements, and chairs were arranged in a small group. This was where people congregated for a cup of tea or coffee and often a smoke. Clients told us that one of the key supports that the centre offered was a space to come and “have a brew and a fag” and “just have a chat and a laugh” in a non-pressured environment. It was an egalitarian space, where community workers, tutors, management and administrative staff met on an equal footing with service users to talk about everyday life, and was therefore a key site for the development of informal patterns of interaction and positive relationships. Staff told us that some of their most important work was done in that small space outside the back door.

All of the other sites we worked in had similar spaces for unstructured social interaction. The day centre for young homeless people was housed in a converted electricity station. In a corner near the door were a sofa and some armchairs, where a few of the young people would normally be sitting relaxing, with a brew area on the other side of the entrance for making tea and coffee. The tables in the middle of the room were used both as a place for organised activities and as a space for sitting, chatting, drinking tea, eating lunch, playing games, and planning activities. The centre also had a kitchen at one end, office space at the other, along with a quiet room, toilets, showers and a store room; but most of the space was unstructured enough so that the young people could wander about in it and use it as they chose to.

The tenants’ association occupied in a first floor flat in a maisonette on the estate. It contained an office room with telephones and computer facilities, a bedroom with an internet computer and a kitchen. The kitchen was a crucial resource for the association: people were continually dropping in on an informal basis. Teas and coffees were constantly being produced and there would normally be people sitting on easy chairs in the office, discussing everyday activities. The domestic violence support group was based in a church hall, providing a safe and supportive environment both for women coming to the centre and for those who provide the service. It was in a single room, with a phone line and a computer available. When training events and meetings are not happening, the room functions as a drop-in when staff are available, and people sit around on easy chairs. The Big Issue is housed in a large building in Liverpool city centre. It contains a magazine collection point for vendors and offices downstairs. Upstairs is a computer suite, several classrooms, a kitchen, a music room and several training rooms. As at the drug and alcohol support centre, there is a space outside the door where smokers congregate and chat. The informal space here is the office, which is always open. At Training 2000, the young people congregate outside, if it is fine, or in the canteen and around the entrance and stairs in bad weather. All of these spaces for unstructured social interaction allow for the de-emphasis of the institutional identity of the sites and the development of informal interpersonal interactions and relationships.

Another key point is that in most of these settings, ownership of the space is visibly demonstrated by the use of clients’ own work in decorative wall displays. The homeless shelter is a particularly interesting example, showing a tension between the use of space to display ownership and the use of space to construct a particular atmosphere. When we began our work, the day centre was filled with artwork done by the young people: glass painting on
the windows, banners, collages from magazines up the stairs, artwork and posters. This produced a large, vibrant and colourful space, clearly marked as being owned by the young people themselves. But staff decided to redecorate to produce a calmer, more minimalist environment, partly because they were working with a particularly challenging group of young people at that time and felt that this would help to quieten the atmosphere. However, the young people rejected this new look and the staff realised the importance of the young people marking the space in their own style. Colourful and visually attractive advice and information leaflets on life issues produced by the young people themselves were made available, contrasting with rather duller-looking nationally produced ones, and locally-produced centre information such as a "rules of the house" poster produced with a local community arts organisation were prominently displayed.

Finally, and significantly, attention was paid to security in all of the sites where this was an issue, an important part of constructing the various settings as "safe places". Access to the drug and alcohol support centre was through a locked door. Staff served as gatekeepers, and if people appeared to have been drinking or taking drugs they would be turned away. The tenants' association rooms were protected by a large steel door. Access to the church hall where the domestic violence support group was sited was used for many activities, making it possible for people to visit the organisation without making it obvious why they were there, and access to the hall was controlled through an intercom by the caretaker. Access to the upstairs space at The Big Issue is controlled through a security door, with notices on it warning that it is a drug-free space. Access to the day centre for young homeless was through a single door, which people who have been barred are not permitted to enter. This might not seem on the face of it to be an issue directly relevant to learning. But where people were living in circumstances in which they might be actively under threat, focusing on learning activities could only happen when they felt sure that the space they were in was secure and where learning would not be disrupted.

Use of time
In similar ways to the existence of unstructured social space, unstructured social time was a common feature of all these settings. Time was made available in the social spaces just to chat and interact. Clients at the drug and alcohol support centre talked about the importance of having somewhere in their lives without pressure, where they could sit, chat, have a laugh and be peaceful without feeling pressured to do anything. Staff also saw this time as important and made it clear that some of their most important work happened during this time. Similarly, time spent chatting was an important element of what went on at the domestic violence support group, at the tenants' association and at The Big Issue.

Where the setting offered structured activities, these often had relaxed starting times. At the drug and alcohol support centre, though classes were advertised as starting at a particular time, they often began later, after people had come in, settled down and had a brew and a smoke. During this time, the class tutor would normally sit outside and talk to people, giving them the opportunity to assess the clients' current state of mind and their feelings, and to be responsive to that once the class began. At the homeless shelter, activities might be going on for some time in one corner of the space before the young people would express interest or feel ready to join in. The same was true on a longer-term basis, where people were not pressured to begin formal course-related activities straight away. Once these relationships were established, people were happier about focusing on learning activities where these were relevant to their own purposes.
Another time issue was making support available to people for as long as possible, within the
resource constraints of the organisation. The homeless shelter offered 24-hour support for
those young people who were staying in its emergency accommodation, and the day centre
was available to young people on a drop-in basis during its opening hours. And many of the
clients at the drug and alcohol support centre appreciated being able to come in for support
whenever they needed to, in addition to their classes and appointments.

Patterns of interaction
In all of these settings, the style of interaction was predominantly informal. Staff and clients
addressed each other by first names. There were implicit and explicit ground rules about
what sorts of interaction were appropriate. These differed from one setting to another; for
instance, swearing was frowned upon at the homeless shelter, which had a younger clientele,
but less so at the drug and alcohol support centre. But in all of them showing respect, by
listening to one another and avoiding displays of anger or irritation, was important.

At the homeless shelter, an interesting manifestation of this informality was that care had to
be taken to avoid presenting what was going on to people in a formal, structured way. When
they had the day’s programme displayed as a list of ‘activities’, some young people refused to
be involved – ‘we’re not doing “activities”.’ When it was changed to be presented as ‘what’s
happening today’, there was much less resistance. This relates to the young people’s previous
negative experiences with structured education and with authority. As one staff member put
it:

The way we work with them is like we never say: ‘we’re going to have a cooking
session’. We might say: ‘Do you fancy a barbecue?’ Then we might joke about the crap
in sausages and show them how to cook them.... They often have a mental block about
instructions as they associate these with authority. They find authority difficult either
because they have had bad memories of abuse of authority or the opposite – they have
never ever been disciplined by anybody and have brought themselves up more or less.

The homeless centre’s change of decor, mentioned earlier, was associated with a change in
the name of the centre, from a ‘drop-in centre’ to an ‘educationally-based day centre’, related
to new funding requirements. This led to a difficult period of adjustment. The manager told
us:

It’s better now but it’s been a difficult time. The culture changed overnight because we
not only changed the décor but also the language such as naming Fusebox
‘educational activity centre’ which sounds formal and you know these young people
don’t do ‘education’ so we’ve changed the words and we’ve not used the word
‘education’...It’s about words that people feel comfortable with.

In all of these settings, there was an attempt to develop relationships between staff and
clients that were egalitarian, rather than authoritarian. This worked out differently in different
places. The tenants’ association saw themselves as representing the local voice against
external offici2aldom, and there was already little social distance between volunteers and
people coming to the centre. Similarly, the domestic violence support group was set up as a
support service offered by people who had themselves had experience of domestic and family
violence. The Big Issue and the drug and alcohol support centre were staffed by professionals
in community work, which set up more distance between staff and clients; however, explicit
attempts were made to minimise this. For instance, staff at the drug and alcohol support
centre made efforts to talk with clients about their own problems and current issues and seek advice from them, partly to challenge the idea that so-called ‘normal’ people don’t have problems and to ensure that clients were themselves positioned as competent people with things to contribute. As one client told us,

I’ve found the staff very supportive, really. Wherever I’ve been before, there’s been a very definite staff-client divide. But here, the staff tend to treat you like an individual rather than: ‘Oh, an alcoholic, and all alcoholics are the same, and typical alcoholic, and ...’ You know, we’re all just treated like individuals, which is great.

At the homeless shelter, this development of egalitarian relationships was complicated somewhat by the difference in age between staff and young people. Here, the staff took on not only supportive but also disciplinary roles, for instance when the young people challenged the ground rules of interaction at the centre, or in discussions challenging aspects of their behaviour, such as gambling. They attempted to strike a careful balance between setting boundaries and maintaining positive relationships.

And as a result of building up this knowledge and understanding of people as individuals, staff were able to be responsive to people’s immediate concerns and experiences, and the histories, events and circumstances that people were bringing with them to the setting. Where centres were offering structured learning activities, for instance at the drug and alcohol support centre, this might mean leaving an extra few minutes before starting an activity, to give people a chance to ‘get their head together’; having extra breaks during activities; or people choosing not to participate that day, or to engage in peripheral ways, such as playing Solitaire during an IT or music technology class. Bertie, one of the clients, told us that the courses were great because of the lack of pressure associated with them. This seemed to be one of the few times and places in his life at that stage where this was the case, where he could unwind and forget about difficulties that he was currently facing. And from a programme of very fluctuating numbers attending formal provision, in one year 12 people went on to a mainstream college course who would have been unlikely, for all the reasons outlined, to have done so without this interim stage.
6. How lives shaped provision

The features of provision identified above are shaped by the concern of all of the workers in these sites that what they provide should be driven by the needs of their clients, rather than solely by external targets. The informal patterns of participation and the building up of trusting and respectful relationships with people as individuals were central to the achievement of the principal purposes of the sites. This approach was necessary precisely because of everything that clients and service users were bringing with them from their lives.

With regard to learning, this approach implied that agendas for learning had to be flexible, and respond to the changing circumstances and needs of clients. The Connexions adviser at the homeless shelter explained how it was necessary in his view for all those supporting vulnerable young people to be prepared to ‘go the extra mile’ and to ‘walk alongside’ that young person for as long as it takes. Where the settings offered formal, structured learning, it was important that this was delivered in a flexible, responsive way. In many of the sites, the principal learning that was going on was happening informally, through participation; and this was true even when there was more structured learning also available. For instance, Steve explained to us how, although he was profoundly reluctant to attend dedicated literacy provision at the drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre, he was happy to be able to bring in a piece of writing he had to do for work and go through it with one of the centre staff.

A key issue, particularly in relation to literacy, numeracy and language learning, was that this localised, needs-driven approach could clash with the agendas and priorities of funders and institutions. For instance, there were instances where staff felt they were under pressure to persuade clients to undergo basic skills diagnostic testing. Where this was not a priority for the client concerned, where it evoked previous negative memories of testing, where it was inappropriate given their level of literacy, or where this was experienced as an institutional imposition before trusting relationships had been built up, this could be counter-productive, even leading to clients leaving the provision.

A related point is that some of the structures and frameworks of formal educational provision were inappropriate for the needs of this client group. At the drug and alcohol support centre, much of the formal literacy and numeracy provision clients were engaging in was offered by learndirect. In order for these courses to be funded, they had to be completed within a certain period of time. But as a result of all the issues raised earlier, particularly the turbulent unpredictability of the life events people were often dealing with and the fact that many did not lead lives structured around regular routines, clients would often start a course but not complete it within the specified period. This was demoralising for the client, who had again been positioned as a failure within the educational system, and for staff, who might have spent a long time supporting that client to be ready to try engaging in education again. Clients would then understandably be reluctant to try another learndirect course, as this had reinforced their negative experiences of education. This underlines the importance of considering carefully the sorts of timescales for learning which are realistic for different groups of people.

At The Big Issue, the initial impact of the Skills for Life strategy was perceived as a shift from a locally-produced, flexible literacy programme relating primarily to vendors’ concerns, to one based on the national curriculum. Previously, literacy and numeracy had been embedded in a
wider essential skills curriculum that had fewer time constraints and assessment requirements, and a general approach described by the manager as ‘a person-centred style of community education, looking at the whole person’. This was the approach that had worked best with this client group, and they were resisting a felt shift away from this towards a model structuring learning from the outside by means of the national curriculum and assessment framework.

The national teaching standards also had an impact on the provision at The Big Issue. The manager felt that the most important quality in the teachers they employed was the ability to work with this client group, rather than having a level 4 qualification, but this qualification was now becoming a requirement, limiting their already small potential pool of teachers. This is a particularly significant issue in these community settings, where provision is far more fragile than in a college setting, cover is not readily available, and unexpected difficulties such as having one person off sick can make the provision fall apart. We came across frequent examples of the impact of such funding and structural issues. For instance, as we started our work with Big Issue, the basic skills tutor – who had built up excellent relationships with clients and was rated very highly by the management – fell ill, and it proved impossible to replace her. Sustainability of provision is a very important issue in these settings.

In general terms, where LLN provision was happening in partnership between Skills for Life specialists and community staff, it was important for tutors coming in from college settings to understand and respect the importance of the patterns of interaction that were practised in the site. They were often quite different from those in colleges. Although there might be no visible, immediate outcomes of the relaxed social interaction that was central to all of these settings, it underpinned and made possible everything else that was going on. It helped when literacy and numeracy specialists understood the reasons for this and were able to participate in it. This also underlines the importance of community workers understanding clients’ LLN needs.
7. Drawing the threads together

There are specific implications of this work for the particular settings where the research was carried out and we have worked locally and regionally to have an effect on current practice and on training. Here, we draw out more general implications for research, practice and training, and for the development of the Skills for Life strategy. These have been developed in dialogue with participants in the research sites, with practitioners and policy makers who participated in our workshops at the annual Skills for Life conferences in 2004, and with members of the Adult Learners’ Lives project advisory group.

7.1 Common understandings of learning in community settings

This work develops and extends conclusions from existing research in this field. A key initiative for work in community settings was the Adult and Community Learning Fund (ACLF). This was set up in 1998 to explore innovative ways to expand the provision of, and increase access to, local community-based learning opportunities. An evaluation was undertaken in 2002, part way through the ACLF programme (McMeeking et al. 2002), and a final report was produced in 2004 (Sampson et al. 2004). Many of the findings of these evaluations resonate with our own fundings. Our research reinforces and pulls together the findings from these other studies and offers deeper understandings of the perspectives of learners which can be of value for practice and training.

The importance of building and maintaining positive relationships with learners and service users is a thread which runs through many of the findings of our research. The same is true of the ACLF work, which reflects the traditions and insights of community learning more generally. The ACLF reports found that the most successful way to attract people to participate in community-based learning was by word of mouth, particularly when outreach staff talking about the programmes were accompanied by successful learners acting as role models, and when they were building upon existing relationships with learners. The social atmosphere of the programme and the personal commitment of tutors were critical to learner retention, and ‘taking the programme to the learners’, holding sessions in safe, familiar and welcoming places, was important. The third element critical to learner retention was the quality and relevance of the learning programme, with the attention to relevance recalling the need for flexibility and responsiveness to learners’ individual needs and circumstances found in our research. Attractive activities, such as using IT as a ‘hook’, targeting programmes on people’s interests and contexts (such as football for young men), or working within the interests of existing groups, worked well to engage new learners.

Many of the ACLF learners were dealing with similar life circumstances and events to those in our research. The reports point out that the so-called ‘hardest to reach’ learners may often have a range of problems, including health, housing, finance, family and crime-related issues, which are more immediate than their basic skills needs. This parallels our findings on the turbulence of life experiences and the need to respond to learners’ own purposes. It was also found to be necessary to address practical and financial barriers to learning, through providing for travel costs, materials and other necessary support (such as childcare and counselling, where appropriate). This ‘holistic’ approach to support is unusual in the post-16 learning and skills sector and does not continue when people enter mainstream learning.
provision, but it resonates with the 'multidimensional' approach of many organisations in the voluntary and community sector.

As in our study, many of the ACLF learners identified negative previous experiences of education and the ACLF evaluation report found that an informal style of delivery, which allowed learners to work at their own pace, and which, critically, was unlike school, was important. Many of the projects offered one-to-one support, enabling individualised provision appropriate to the particular learner involved. This links in with work on formal and informal learning, such as Colley et al. In earlier work we have discussed how people learn and how the term 'informal' is used in quite distinct ways (Tusting & Barton, 2003, Tusting, 2003).

The programmes helped to improve learners’ basic skills, and in some cases also their practical skills, knowledge of where to get information, and ability to cope with problems. The final report of the ACLF programme refers to an ‘encouraging’ proportion of learners moving into mainstream education; further basic skills classes was the most common form of progression. There were also important ‘soft’ outcomes around personal development, such as learners’ self-esteem, motivation, teamworking, timekeeping and ability to think for themselves. The reports recommend that innovative and effective ways of measuring such ‘soft’ outcomes of programmes be identified and disseminated, so that basic skills programmes which have these impacts on the ‘hardest-to-reach learners’ are not undervalued.

A particular problem experienced by many of the ACLF projects was in recruiting appropriately qualified staff, once the Skills for Life strategy had been launched. The projects needed to find people who had the appropriate skills and experience for working with this client group, or develop the training for existing staff, issues which we have also emphasised.

The point made above about the entirely conventional aspirations of supposedly disaffected people has also been made in a Prince’s Trust report (Calder and Cope, 2003), based on interviews with 900 people from disadvantaged backgrounds. They found the aspirations of this group to be very similar to those of a control group: to have a family, an interesting job, and enough money to support their lifestyle; and to have a nice house, good friends and be in control of their own future. The issue for them was that of not knowing how to go about achieving these aspirations. Again, this reinforces some of our findings, described earlier.

Case study-based work with community providers also identified similar issues. This study found that community-based providers understood their work in terms of having a holistic view of learning, in which LLN were integrated without making them too apparent (Hannon et.al 2003). Issues around the difficulty of obtaining funding for development work and core long-term funding were common. Reaching out to people through going out beyond the organisation, networking and talking to people, and putting on taster courses catering for people’s existing interests were felt to be crucial for development.

Our work also relates to McGivney’s (1999) study of informal learning in the community. She calls for community learning to be valued as an end in itself, not merely in terms of educational progression. She highlights the importance of good relationships, intermediaries between people and educational providers, flexible and responsive systems, provision which responds to people’s existing interests and needs, and support mechanisms, with the most important factor being the key people involved in development work. She draws out other outcomes of engaging in community learning, such as increased self-esteem, greater personal autonomy and the development of personal, social and practical knowledge and
skills. She suggests that too much emphasis on educational progression may be counter-productive, undermining efforts to widen participation, particularly when working with disadvantaged groups, with whom raising confidence and aspirations can take a long time. Our work shows how confidence relates to engagement in learning and how it carries over to other settings (see also Eldred et al. Catching confidence).

McNeil and Smith’s (2004) work assessing success factors of working with young people in informal learning also raises similar issues, including: the need for practitioners who understand the needs of working with this client group, and associated difficulties in recruiting appropriate staff; the importance of working with people’s existing interests to promote engagement; the need for provision to be flexible, individualised and non-academic; and the importance of non-judgemental relationships, particularly of not being ‘like teachers’.

Cieslik and Simpson [2004] have carried out research with young people on the importance of poor basic skills as a factor in the relative success or failure of their transitions into adulthood. They show how literacy and numeracy are only part of the story, drawing attention to the importance of the social relationships and networks people are involved in, to the resources they can access from their own particular life circumstances, and to their life projects and ‘horizons for action’, all of which mediate the impact of their level of basic skills on their lives. Their recommendations are similar to ours: that formal provision and learning opportunities overly focused on literacy and numeracy are unlikely to succeed without attention to the people attending, to their life projects and to how these are placed within complex circumstances.

Another overview drawing out similar issues is a paper from the National Literacy Trust (Bird & Akerman 2005). Following extensive consultation and surveying existing research, they suggest that successful literacy approaches need to draw upon a strategy which includes engaging individuals and building relationships, meeting learners’ needs and interests, and working in partnership. These are all issues which our research has identified as being crucial.

Researching this issue from the point of view of learners rather than from that of provision offers a new perspective on certain issues. For instance, the ACLF evaluation report found that attracting and retaining learners was a major challenge. But we can see from some of the work described earlier that some of the learners who might have been seen to have ‘dropped out’ might actually have been involved in a ‘dipping in and out’ process, as they worked out how and where learning fitted into their lives, a much more positive interpretation.

7.2 Implications for practice and training

There are clear implications for practice and training emerging from this research, particularly given that since the launch of the Skills for Life strategy there has been an increase in the numbers of LLN specialists working in partnership with voluntary and community organisations. Our findings are accessible to practitioners: they can see the implications of this work for their own practice. It is also clear from this work that it is vitally important that training be available in ways of working with these groups, as well as in subject knowledge. This means training Skills for Life specialists in the importance of spending time and energy in getting to know people as individuals, understanding their own purposes and circumstances, and developing dialogue about how and whether LLN learning
fit in with these. The importance and benefits of investing time in developing trusting relationships with people need to be recognised, and teaching methods used which make this integral to practice. Informal styles of working with people will probably be the most appropriate for this.

It is also important that tutors are supported to invest time and energy in developing an understanding of the purposes and practices of the voluntary and community settings in which they are working, and that where specific literacy, numeracy and language provision is introduced, this is done in dialogue with staff and service users, so that the way it is done is not detrimental to the setting’s principal purposes. It needs to be recognised, for instance, that some of the most important work of the setting may be going on outside the officially structured time, and that informal social interaction which does not directly contribute to the achievement of institutional targets may nevertheless underlie and make possible everything else that goes on in that setting.

Tutor training needs to take account of the fact that there may be issues in people’s lives such as violence which can remain invisible in the learning setting. The unpredictability of people’s lives implies that teachers need to be prepared for the specifics of each learning situation in which they are working, and be equipped to be responsive to rapid and unexpected changes. There is likely to be an ongoing process of negotiation of learning around people’s everyday survival needs. This requires teachers to be given support and encouragement to develop themselves as ‘reflective practitioners’. As well as being able to work with the curriculum, they need to have the confidence to reflect on and respond appropriately and flexibly to the circumstances of the particular people they are working with. Training needs to be provided in appropriate responses to issues such as violence and trauma which may not be part of standard teacher training in literacy and numeracy. Horsman (2000) suggests a range of ways to redesign learning situations to take such issues into account, from a perspective which sees violence as a societal, rather than an individual phenomenon.

Finally, the primacy of people’s own goals and purposes, which may or may not include literacy and numeracy learning at a specific point in their lives, implies that teachers need to have ways of recognising achievements within people’s own agendas and purposes, in addition to the external forms of accreditation. This may involve the recognition of small steps, such as the introduction of a new routine into someone’s day, and taking more account of ‘soft outcomes’, such as increased confidence.

### 7.3 Implications for policy and funding

All of these implications for practice require that teachers and staff working in these settings be given the time and space to develop informal relationships with people and to reflect on their own settings. This requires an institutional infrastructure which enables tutors to invest this time and space.

However, staff reported that the principal challenges of delivering effective provision in these settings were related to the demands of the infrastructure. For example, staff were experiencing increasing accountability requirements which required a great deal of time to be spent on recording and reporting paperwork. This paperwork overload needs to be directly addressed, as it was endemic in the field and seems not the most effective use of staff time.
One crucial factor which we identified as contributing to this sense of overload was the constant need to apply for new funding. Much work in the voluntary and community sector is funded on a short-term basis. It is much easier to get money for specific, innovative, bounded ‘projects’ than to mainstream those projects on a longer-term basis once their success has been demonstrated. Staff, particularly at management level, were spending a great deal of their time applying for new funding to keep provision going, which took their energies away from fulfilling the main purposes of the organisation. The resultant insecurity could affect staff morale and cause people to leave, making it difficult to plan ahead. This is much more of an issue in community work than it is in colleges, where greater continuity can be presupposed. Literacy, numeracy and language provision in these settings is far more fragile than that in college settings anyway, since it cannot be the central purposes of many of these organisations in the way that it is in college. In practice it may be the responsibility of only one person, and we observed examples where that one person became ill and this affected the whole provision. For these various reasons we have a situation where the most vulnerable learners end up with the most insecure provision.

All of this implies that thought needs to be given to simplifying access to funding, and to making funding available to facilitate longer-term mainstreaming of successful projects. We emphasise this as it was one of the strongest responses to the findings of our work when we presented it to delegates at the national Skills for Life conferences. There are many aspects to this. Part of it would involve allowing funding for classes and groups with small numbers of people, and relaxing deadlines for course completion and the achievement of particular targets. The benefits of such changes might not be immediately visible but they are likely to have longer-term effects, in terms of encouraging people into structured learning rather than putting them off. Alongside this, it is crucial to formalise ways of recognising achievement in small steps and to accept ‘softer’ outcomes as important, in addition to having the national tests available. These achievements might need to be assessed internally, by staff and service users working together, but externally recognised in funding terms.

Of course these are difficult circumstances for LLN. In any community setting many changing factors interact, meaning there is no automatic recipe that can be followed for success in these settings. However, we do believe that the issues we have identified are central to understanding participation, engagement and progression. Working with learners and service users and trying to understand their own perspectives, we have found a great deal of engagement and participation in certain circumstances. This has been where people have become involved with community providers or organisations in which their purposes and agendas are addressed, when it has been at a time which is right for them, and in a place where they feel they are treated with respect. This demonstrates the central importance of understanding and respecting people’s own purposes and agency. People in settings like these are not intrinsically ‘hard to reach’, they are very willing to engage if provision reaches out to become available to them, meets their needs and responds to them as individuals. Our work has been in settings which provide the most challenges to educators. However, we believe that the need to take account of learners’ perspectives is crucial to issues of engagement in all adult LLN settings.
References


This report shows how an understanding of language, literacy and numeracy as social practices can help practitioners to take account of learners’ lives. It demonstrates how people’s histories, current circumstances and imagined futures can shape their learning and affect their level of engagement. The study is based on the research of the Adult Learners’ Lives project in community settings in Blackburn, Lancaster and Liverpool.

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LISTENING TO LEARNERS
Practitioner research on the Adult Learners’ Lives project

by Dianne Beck, Gill Burgess, Kath Gilbert, Russ Hodson, Andrew Hudson, Carol Woods, edited by Roz Ivanič
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LISTENING TO LEARNERS:
Practitioner research on the Adult Learners’ Lives project

The centre pages of this publication contain brief reports on six research projects which were undertaken by practitioner-researchers as part of the NRDC Adult Learners’ Lives project during 2003. All six projects involved listening to learners in order to understand links between learning provision and everyday lives more fully, as a basis for developing practice.

BACKGROUND
The Adult Learners’ Lives project, based at Lancaster University Literacy Research Centre, is studying people’s uses of language, literacy and numeracy at home, in the community and at work, their reasons for attending and continuing to attend classes, their perceptions of what they are learning and of how useful it is to them. As part of its first year activities, this project incorporated a Teacher-Researcher Fellowship Programme. It aimed to ensure an active role for practitioners in the research of the NRDC, and to build capacity for organisations to carry out research and reflective practice in the field of adult Language, Literacy and/or Numeracy (LLN). The involvement of teacher-researchers in the project ensures that the work done is relevant, geared to the needs of adult learners and that its value is recognised by teachers.

The programme was designed for adult LLN practitioners currently working in the field. The six teacher-researchers on the programme were all practitioners at institutions which are research sites for the Adult Learners’ Lives project:

Gill Burgess and Carol Woods at The Adult College, Lancaster
Dianne Beck and Kath Gilbert at Liverpool Community College
Andrew Hudson at Blackburn College
Russ Hodson at Accrington and Rossendale College

HOW THE RESEARCH WAS DONE
The six teacher-researchers were seconded to the programme for one day a week for a year (January – December 2003) to learn ways of doing research, to design and carry out their own research project in collaboration with the Adult Learners’ Lives research team and to feedback their work to colleagues in their work-place. Their research was integrated with the aims of the Adult Learners’ Lives project, and involved them in all stages of the research: establishing aims, design, data collection, data analysis, writing, and identifying implications for their own practice and for their colleges.

The programme provided an intensive experience of undertaking research as a practitioner. As an introduction to research issues and methods, they all took the ‘Reflective Research and Evaluation for Professional Practice’ Module of the Diploma in Adult Basic Education: Literacy, Numeracy and ESOL at Lancaster University. They had regular meetings with the Adult Learners’ Lives researcher attached to their institution to advise them on the design of their research, as well as occasional meetings with the Adult Learners’ Lives team as a whole, including a residential seminar focusing on data analysis.

The researchers presented their research at workshops for different audiences, including colleagues and managers in their own colleges, and learning partnerships. They also made poster displays and panel presentations about their research at NRDC regional and national conferences.

THE FOCUS OF THE PROJECTS
Each of the six projects contributes to the overall focus of the Adult Learners’ Lives project by researching a particular aspect of the relationship between adults’ everyday lives and their LLN classes. Three of the case studies (by Dianne Beck, Russ Hodson and Carol Woods) focus on issues of access and barriers to learning, identifying factors which providers should take into account when planning their recruitment, admissions and support programmes. The other three (by Kath Gilbert, Gill Burgess and Andrew Hudson) focus on learners’ everyday numeracy and language practices, identifying ways in which provision can recognise, build on and relate more closely to learners’ lives.

THIS PUBLICATION
The research projects were presented as posters which were displayed at several conferences and workshops. This publication is based on the posters.
“As my confidence increases I’m not as shy. People notice me more.”  Barriers to learning
Barriers to learning
Carol Woods, The Adult College, Lancaster

QUESTIONS
Why do some people experience difficulties in engaging with learning when there are no quantifiable barriers (e.g. recognised learning difficulties, long-term illness, financial constraints, child-care problems)?

Is there a case for success in overcoming non-quantifiable barriers being acknowledged as part of achievement?

Should the overcoming of non-quantifiable barriers (i.e. lack of confidence and low self-esteem) be recognised as being worthy of ‘accrediting’ within the Skills for Life remit?

Can the funding of courses be justified if learners only gain non-quantifiable outcomes?

GETTING TO THIS
I can say things better now, I know more words, I used to swear a lot, I didn’t know words.
Gradually things come to you, you think, “Oh, I can do that now”.
I can fill forms in myself without asking him (the husband).

I can understand bills now and share household responsibilities more.
As my confidence increases I’m not as shy. People notice me more.

WHY NOT?
You think you’ve left school and that’s it...too late to go.
I know that authority and officialdom frightens me. I can’t understand it.
It feels weird coming into these places.
You feel real foolish because you can’t spell. You feel inadequate.

I was terrified (of approaching college).
Wanted to come for 20 years, but always worked shifts so never been able to.
I was taught by nuns, I was petrified of them; I don’t think I’ve lost that fear.

HOW?
Funding simplify the funding approach.
Community take learning out of colleges.
Inclusive plan and develop appropriate learning opportunities.

Advertising positive messages – “Build on skills you already have”.
Workplace Skills for Life initiatives bringing employees’ and employers’ needs together.

“Yeah, like that when I said first time I’d writ [sic] Christmas cards, I’d never ever writ a Christmas card out for anybody. People were saying, “Blimey, what’s wrong with her, she’s sent Christmas cards”. I’d actually done it myself. ”

To Carol
Merry Christmas and
Happy New Year

From [blank]
**A preliminary investigation into how family/domestic violence affects learning**

Dianne Beck, Liverpool Community College

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AIMS</th>
<th>CONTEXT</th>
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<td>The aim was to establish if there were any links between, primarily, female adult literacy needs and victims and volunteers in the field of domestic violence</td>
<td>The founder of the domestic violence project was an adult learner at the Community College. She had requested a course in Business English which I then delivered in the Drop in Study Centre in her local area. Her needs were to write competent formal letters, complete complex forms e.g. to register the project as a company and as a charity; to participate in and chair formal meetings and to raise awareness of the impact of domestic violence through the development and delivery of courses on the subject within the community and to professionals involved in the care, rescue and treatment of survivors.</td>
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<td>Through my involvement with the Community College and the research guided by Lancaster University Literacy Research Centre, I am now Company Secretary of this organisation.</td>
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**METHODOLOGY**

Preliminary interviews were held with the founder of a community-based, voluntary domestic violence project, a volunteer working in the project and a survivor who had been assisted by the project. The initial interviews were held in a Drop in Study Centre.

Secondary interviews were held in the interviewees’ homes and picked up some common themes expressed in the first interviews.

Both the founder of the project and the researcher kept notes/journals expressing their thoughts and feelings about the development of the project and the research into it, particularly where it impacted on literacy needs and skill acquisition.

There has been little research into this area in the UK; a larger body of research exists in Canada and the USA and I have tried to compare and contrast my experiences with a leader in the field, Jenny Horsman.

More recently, because of spontaneous disclosures of histories of domestic violence by other adult learners in the College, I have sent a questionnaire to all literacy practitioners in the Basic Skills Unit to ascertain whether my experience of disclosure is unique or shared, what numbers and frequencies, ages and genders are involved.

**IMPLICATIONS**

For the College:

The founder of the group I was working with accessed all manner of courses to help train volunteers, both in the formation of the company and in the development of training courses for the project to deliver. Most of the courses accessed were run in the project’s own offices, delivered only to the group, were held in the evenings and carried expenses or child minding funding to eliminate obstacles to learning. It became clear that the founder was in the process of establishing a community of literacy: all decisions, mission statements, statements of aims and plans for future development being made as a group with each member empowered to contribute through developing their knowledge within the group. The Community College could access these groups through the developing community networks and satisfy training needs by being more flexible in delivery and times of provision. Investigating sources of funding to help pay expenses and childcare costs would be of benefit to the college in the recruitment of ‘learning groups’.

For the practitioner:

Rather than shying away from the subject of family or other kinds of violence within the teaching environment, practitioners should help air the subject and bring it into the open. The weight of keeping family violence secret bears heavily on women and children and directly and indirectly affects their efforts to educate themselves – particularly when the perpetrator keeps them isolated through financial or other controls and prevents them from pursuing courses and making contact with professionals who might help effect their escape. In the course of this research, both the interviewees I have worked with and those quoted by Jenny Horsman, find an enormous relief in telling their stories, finding common cause with others and being freed of their pain through disclosure. Being heard and believed is the first step out of the circle of degradation and misery that is family violence.
FINDINGS

12 years old:
- Disaffected due to poor achievement.
- Low concentration due to keeping the ‘secret’.
- Sense of isolation.

18 years old:
- Follow in mother’s footsteps (learned behaviour/low expectations).
- Follow in dad’s footsteps.
- Begin abusive relationship cycle.
- Sense of isolation.

24 years old:
- Leave/return/leave abusive partner.
- Shame/hurt/pain/trap.
- Ask children to keep quiet.
- Worry about effect of keeping quiet on children.
- Need to help children with school work.
- Realise need for college.
- Partner objects.
- Sense of isolation.

30 years old:
- Leave/return to abusive partner.
- Begin college course (again).
- Learn something → sense of achievement.
- Leave partner (again) – risk life/death.
- Seek support/education.
- Begin to feel sense of empowerment.

6 years old:
- Too tired/anxious to learn in school → low achievement/disapproval.
- Family violence effects/issues not raised at school.
- Sense of isolation.

12 years old:
- Disaffected due to poor achievement.
- Low concentration due to keeping the ‘secret’.
- Sense of isolation.

6 AM
- Very quiet – too quiet.
  How is mum?
  Will she be able to go out today?
  Can she take me to school?

9 AM
- Too tired to learn. Teacher shouts.

3 AM
- Anxiety/Disturbed sleep.
  How is mum? Is she crying? Is she hurt? Where is dad?

Midnight
- Shouting/Fighting. Too scared to sleep.

? 30 plus:
- Learn more.
- Take + give support.
- Raise awareness.
- Be aware of learning needs and have power to address them.
Learners’ perspectives on numeracy
Andrew Hudson, Blackburn College

AIMS
To investigate what learners perceive to be numeracy, and their experiences with numeracy practices in work, education and everyday life.

CONTEXT
The learners were attending a Jobcentreplus work based training programme at Blackburn College. The aim is to improve numeracy, literacy, language and employability skills to help learners into employment.

FINDINGS

Numeracy tasks and methods
Learners highlighted tasks involving money, measure and time to be the core competencies they used and needed. They felt that their methods were not the same as those taught in education, and were a composite based on work, life and educational experiences.

Coping Strategies
Strategies to avoid numeracy tasks or to enlist the help of others were carefully constructed to avoid appearing to struggle with numeracy tasks. Numeracy practices often involved social interaction, situated in everyday activities.

IMPLICATIONS
Learners often develop involved situated strategies, understandings and methods. There is a need for these to be recognised and utilised in new learning experiences. This would help to establish and embed new learning into a learner’s life.

This could be achieved through:

- Curriculum planning which includes identification of learners’ current numeracy practices. This could operate alongside the new diagnostic assessment packages.

- Teaching strategies which interact with learners’ lives. Bringing the outside into the classroom and significantly taking new learning outside of the classroom. Learners recording numeracy events through videos, photos and journals help to facilitate this process.

FINDINGS

“ I saw this builder. I wanted to know does he use centimetres or inches and if he had any tips. He measures stuff everyday and if he doesn’t know how to do it, who does?”

“ Timetables are confusing, I get baffled, so I would ask someone waiting. If they point to the timetable, I pretend I’ve forgot my glasses, I even do this with my kids.”
ESOL women learners and their lives
Gill Burgess, The Adult College, Lancaster

**AIMS**

To investigate:
- how the women cope with accessing services for themselves and their children;
- how they become involved in supportive groups in the community;
- how such involvement may support their learning of spoken English;
- how they experience learning and using English; and
- how they see themselves as wives, mothers, learners, workers, individuals.

**CONTEXT**

Interviews with women from a variety of national, educational and professional backgrounds who share the common experience of settling in the UK, having babies and bringing up small children here; all are ESOL learners past or present from the college.

**FINDINGS**

Learning and using English: awareness of different competences leads to differing learning aspirations; language is a barrier to work, health and children’s services and to integration with the local community; prior learning experiences are important; a premium is placed on practice; involvement in community groups is valuable for language learning; college is a place for learning and confidence building; barriers to formal learning opportunities are childcare, health issues, cost; feelings are crucial and inseparable from learning and life issues.

Involvement in community groups depends on whether the woman is joining established communities – individual contacts are crucial for isolated women; the church plays a key role; children can form bridges with others; literacy links women with community groups.

Coping - dependence and independence: women are supporters as well as supported; access a wide range of support from different individuals/groups; are resourceful in overcoming barriers; use their literacy skills to develop their oracy; are de-skilled and re-skilled – which is inextricably linked with language learning; face uncertain futures; are sometimes coping alone.

The women present themselves as focused on home and family; as putting their own needs after those of their families; as regarding their own professional development as secondary to their husbands’; as seeing their learning as a way of fulfilling themselves as individuals; as proactive, reflective and responsible learners, making the most of their opportunities.

**IMPLICATIONS**

- Valuable community resources exist which we could draw better on to support our learners.
- Less experienced/confident learners need support/training to turn informal encounters into learning opportunities.
- Current funding arrangements appear to be depriving women of language learning opportunities at the time they need it most – which can ultimately handicap the whole family.
- College providers need to be creative and proactive in reaching isolated women learners.
- Flexible childcare and attendance arrangements are an essential part of access to learning for ESOL women with young families.
- We must keep listening to our learners – they know what works for them.
How maths shapes lives:
Exploring attitudes to and uses of numeracy in daily life
Beginning to bring everyday numeracies into the classroom
Kath Gilbert, Liverpool Community College

AIMS
As a numeracy practitioner in a drop-in context, I felt I wanted to get a deeper understanding of the role of numeracy in people’s lives and experiences. I hoped this would help to democratise the teaching situation and make learning more relevant.

CONTEXT
I interviewed maths learners and centre workers (mainly women with families) in a small adult college site in the dockside area of Liverpool, where I teach. I asked about past learning histories and present uses and feelings about numeracy.

I also ran a questionnaire around the centre, and suggested that students photograph their maths experiences.

THE BRICK WALL WHERE LEARNING STOPPED...

“I think everything you need to know, you acquire – I kind of learnt more what I needed to know at the time I needed to learn it” Trish

Lauren photographed the view which was once full of busy streets and houses. Now you can see the river. We worked out how far you can see now.

QUESTIONNAIRE
You need a shelf for an alcove which measures 24 inches. In the shop the shelf lengths are in cm.

Would you:
- a) have measured in cm in the first place?
- b) go home and try again?
- c) ask for help?
- d) convert it to cm? – please say how
- e) buy what you think looks right?

DIRECTIONS

The most important outcome for me was the privilege of seeing the unique quality of each life viewed through the lens of numeracy – three-dimensional beings with a road behind and ahead. During the research, the questionnaires and photos, the classroom began to feel more open and democratic, more reflective of people’s lives. By respecting people’s own methods and understandings, the questionnaire helped to put these on the agenda and reinforce people’s confidence in their abilities. I would like to develop this process to focus attention on everyday practices and experiences and thereby open up opportunities for people to situate learning more firmly in their lives.

“Even the poorest people in the city are like that – doesn’t matter how much you budgeted, you’re still budgeting. Even if you’re only living off £30 a week, you’re still budgeting to make sure the kids are fed.” Eileen
The role of referral agencies in *Skills for Life* provision in Stacksteads and the implications for learners

Russ Hodson, Accrington and Rossendale College

**AIMS**

- Investigate learners’ journeys
- Evaluate the role of referral agencies
- Compare / contrast learners’ experiences
- Evaluate the impact of collaborative and competitive approaches to *Skills for Life* learning in Stacksteads

**CONTEXT**

Stacksteads is one of three wards which make up Bacup, a town with a population of 15,000 situated in the borough of Rossendale, Lancashire. It is part of the 20% most deprived wards in the UK. There are an estimated 3,200 people with literacy / numeracy needs in the town yet there is very little Basic Skills provision in the area.

Stacksteads sits within the reach of four colleges: Accrington & Rossendale, Burnley, Nelson & Colne and Rochdale. Accrington & Rossendale College has tried unsuccessfully to put on Basic Skills provision in the area for a number of years.

There is a "gap" in the research in this area and I hope to develop a "learner voice" through my research findings. There is also a distinct social aspect to the research: I am not viewing Basic Skills in isolation but as part of a chain of related social factors which prevent people from participating, achieving or progressing in learning.

The research was tied in with a real educational situation – a Basic Skills class being run in a Youth Training centre in the area.

**METHODS**

- Classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with learners, interviews with key informants (partners, tutors and referral agencies) and photos.

**FINDINGS**

- Wide variation in the level of support offered to individuals by referral agencies
- Wide variation in prior learning experiences
- Lack of shared goals amongst partners
- The importance of a relevant curriculum to learners

**IMPLICATIONS**

- Reaching out to learners project set up to work on the ground with the communities of Stacksteads
- Collaboration versus competition philosophies need to be unravelled to improve Basic Skills learning experiences
- Much greater shared ownership of the design of learning needed (multi-agency)

**DATA SNAPSHOT 1** – ex-heroin-addict who has severe bouts of epilepsy

Researcher: What other agencies have you been involved with in the last couple of years? Give me a picture of who else has been involved in your life.

Student 1: None, I’ve been on me own…If it weren’t for this place I’d still be up the wall…If it weren’t for [a key worker in the centre] I dunno where I’d be. She found me sat down in Bacup crying me eyes out in the pouring rain. She brought me here…

Researcher: Going back to your writing, what writers do you like?

Student 1: Science fiction…I’ve got this idea at the moment, it’s like everyone says there’s been too many vampire films, it’s about vampires who kill people ‘cos they’re heroin addicts, it’s something in the blood, it’s like vampires doing the world a favour…by killing all the smack heads.

**DATA SNAPSHOT 2** – referral agency interview

We run IT classes and have a project with milestones and outcomes which are well known by other bodies in the area. However, another organisation set up IT classes in a building opposite ours.

**DATA SNAPSHOT 3** – key partner in local forum

I don’t think it [the forum] has achieved anything yet …we have shared goals coming from central government but we don’t have the ability to share it out. God help Fred when he sticks his head out of the water and says "I want to do English" ‘cos we’re all on him…

Floating around with this idea of learned helplessness is a feeling that education’s “not for me, it’s for other people”…it’s a very poor area and learning to read and write are not top of the agenda, finding the dinner money or feeding the kids is top of the agenda.

Local groups are dependent on agencies and aren’t strong enough to drive forward without the statutory agencies, many of which are only in the area for a limited timespan.
This research was carried out as part of the NRDC Adult Learners’ Lives project, based at Lancaster University and directed by David Barton and Roz Ivanič. The six teacher-researchers on the programme worked alongside Adult Learners’ Lives researchers. They were all practitioners at institutions which are research sites for the project.

Gill Burgess and Carol Woods, based at The Adult College, Lancaster, worked with Karin Tusting.

Dianne Beck and Kath Gilbert, based at Liverpool Community College, worked with Yvon Appleby.

Andrew Hudson, based at Blackburn College, and Russ Hodson, based at Accrington and Rossendale College, worked with Rachel Hodge.

For further information, please write to literacy@lancaster.ac.uk or see www.literacy.lancaster.ac.uk