



National Research and Development Centre
for adult literacy and numeracy

Research Summary

Putting good practice into practice: literacy, numeracy and key skills in apprenticeships

Part two: Revisiting and re-evaluating (May 2005)

An evaluation report for the Qualifications and Curriculum Agency (QCA) and the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA)*

Synopsis

This report follows on from the earlier NRDC publication *Putting good practice into practice: literacy, numeracy and key skills within apprenticeships* (NRDC: January 2004).

The 2004 report was an evaluation of a development project by the LSDA. The project explored the impact of using a 'front-end' delivery model, also known as 'front-loading', which concentrates literacy, numeracy and the wider key skills at the beginning of apprenticeship frameworks. This was in contrast to a range of previous practices, including that of covering key skills as an addition at the end of programmes. It concluded that although early indications regarding the success of the various front-loaded delivery models were positive, they were inconclusive.

The current project, commissioned by the QCA and the LSDA, and funded by the DfES, set out to revisit and re-evaluate six of the original eight sites to report on progress in 2004-5. In particular, it aimed to examine the longer-term impact of front-loaded delivery in terms of both hard and soft outcomes, and to explore the 'embedding' of key skills in vocational courses and qualifications (defined broadly as the process of learning literacy and numeracy as contextualised within a vocationally- and occupationally-relevant setting).

The research team revisited the six sites in order to conduct semi-structured interviews with project managers and to collect data on completion and retention. Samples of embedded teaching and learning materials were also gathered. The project provides brief summaries of progress from the six centres, each one presenting different approaches and displaying different strengths. This is followed by key findings and recommendations. The findings emerge from the synthesis of the qualitative and the quantitative data.

Key Points

Benefits of using front-loaded models of delivery:

- ❑ Front-loaded delivery can be an effective means of offering extra contextualised support to learners with literacy and numeracy needs early in their vocational course.
- ❑ The adoption of front-loaded models in the centres evaluated has led to patterns of increased achievement, often over shorter timescales than had previously been observed. Retention patterns have also improved.
- ❑ Early completion of key skills has enabled newer trainees to leap ahead of their more established counterparts within the workplace and on site.

* The LSDA was succeeded by the Learning and Skills Network (LSN) and the Quality Improvement Agency for Lifelong Learning (QIA) in April 2006. We retain reference to the LSDA here as the body that commissioned this report from 2004-5.

- Front-loaded delivery is an effective means of according priority to key skills: it sends out a signal that trainees need these skills as a precondition for undertaking their portfolio.

Benefits of combining front-loaded and embedded models of delivery:

- The combination of front-loaded with embedded delivery can be a particularly effective model for training. This approach prioritises key skills, making it clear that such skills are central to all portfolios, whilst also drawing on all the advantages of embedded provision.
- By presenting key skills in contexts that are both real and relevant, embedded provision can counteract resistance towards the learning of literacy and numeracy and enhance trainees' engagement and motivation.
- Integrating or embedding key skills into multi-faceted activities accustoms trainees to using the skills in naturally-arising situations – thereby enhancing the application of these skills.
- The recent data gathered indicate that an emphasis on embedding key skills throughout the course has had a positive effect on retention, progress and completion.

Additional features impacting on success:

- Close links between the employer and training provider assist in establishing the relevance of key skills amongst trainees.
- Some of the most effective practice observed exists where the employer is also the training provider and training outcomes are linked to pay and promotion.
- Establishing clear and well-planned training, supported by structured trainee assessment and course evaluation, contributes to more efficient delivery of key skills.

Recommendations for staff training:

- Trainers would benefit from professional development activity which is tailored to their own needs and work-based settings, rather than that which presumes a college or classroom environment.
- Vocational staff could benefit from training in how to incorporate inclusive approaches to literacy, numeracy and key skills within their teaching.
- Organisational support for staff teams and managers is needed to develop a positive culture with respect to literacy, numeracy and key skills.

Background and rationale of research

This project aimed to follow up six of the eight apprenticeship programmes that took part in an earlier NRDC research project, *Putting good practice into practice: literacy, numeracy and key skills in apprenticeships*, to describe progress and developments in the academic year 2004-5.

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