

Submission to the BIS Select Committee inquiry into adult literacy and numeracy

During the course of the inquiry there will rightly be a lot of focus on how adults learn and the various different teaching methods deployed in the successful teaching of English and maths.

While this focus on effective learning is very important, **in my experience the biggest factor affecting adult literacy and numeracy is not the quality or effectiveness of the teaching, it is getting people engaged with the learning in the first place.** The difficult conversations that need to be had, the overcoming of fear and stigma, the denials about the effects of poor literacy and numeracy, and the adoption of coping strategies to mitigate the most immediate effects are all powerful barriers to participation in programmes to improve literacy and numeracy.

And these barriers not only affect the potential learner, they often apply to their employer as well.

I have a background as a delivery driver and then both a training and operations manager for a large logistics company. I subsequently worked for the logistics Sector Skills Council where I was responsible for what was then called "Skills for Life". I chaired the SW England Workplace Development Group, a cross sector group that brought together a wide variety of organisations keen to improve levels of adult literacy and numeracy in the region. This included the SW TUC and I worked closely with them, talking to learners and union learning representatives both individually and at conferences and other events.

There are many interactions in everyday life which represent potential opportunities for people to start thinking about improving their English and maths skills. Such opportunities occur at, among other places, job centres, citizens advice bureaux, schools (parents evenings) and social housing offices. But I'd like to write about the opportunities presented by the workplace, which is where almost all my knowledge and experience of the subject come from.

The barriers to learner engagement I identified above are rampant in many workplaces. Quite apart from the learner being reluctant to admit they have "problems" with English and maths, their employer will often be not particularly interested in this either, particularly when concerning people in the "lower skilled" job roles. ("Just because he can't read very well, doesn't mean he's not a good driver/plasterer/cook etc"). Linked to this is the fact that many supervisors and first line managers may themselves may not be particularly proficient at English and maths – apart from the fact that this will adversely affect how well

they do their own job, it can also put them off encouraging others to take up opportunities to improve these skills.

And even among enlightened employers (which most, to be honest, are or have the potential to be) there is a reluctance to address the issue with individual workers for fear of upsetting or being seen to patronise them.

Lots of publicity and promotional material have been produced by various organisations over the years to encourage people to enrol on English and maths courses. While this has been useful, by far the most effective way of engaging people is to talk to them individually.

But these are very difficult conversations to have, so a lot of the time it's simply easier not to have them. Despite the fact that the employee may and probably will welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues with a supportive line manager, it still takes a considerable amount of courage for someone with no expertise or training in this field to start talking about it to someone they have known and worked with for years.

Fundamental to this reluctance is the thought that one is singling someone out and drawing attention to a weakness which is particular to them. And not just any old weakness ("you're not very good with this bit of equipment – we need to help you improve"), but a weakness that carries a particularly powerful social stigma.

The way round this is to depersonalise the whole issue and make it part of "the way we work here". This is the "Whole Organisation Approach" adopted by workplaces that are serious about improving English and maths skills. Central to this approach is to understand what skills need to be improved, something established by carrying out some form of individual diagnostic assessment.

If structured assessment can be built into normal HR processes then individuals need no longer be singled out. There are naturally occurring "trigger points" where employees can reasonably expect to be assessed – these include:

- Recruitment
- Promotion
- Prior to training programmes

But a successful assessment involves a very great deal more than sitting someone in front of a computer screen and getting a print out of the results. Done well, it can provide a safe place for difficult and long standing issues to be discussed and potentially resolved. Done badly it is little more than a tick box exercise which achieves very little.

A good assessment carried out at the right time is a wonderful opportunity to get people to take up learning opportunities relatively painlessly. So it is worth understanding what constitutes a good assessment and what can be done to ensure more of them happen more often.

A good assessment will involve:

1. Explaining to the employee/candidate why it is being done, what it involves and, equally importantly, what it is not (a pass/fail test).
2. The carrying out of the assessment using tools that the learner can relate to and feels comfortable with.
3. The feeding back of the findings of the assessment in a supportive and constructive way
4. Supporting the employee/candidate into the appropriate learning provision.

Only the second of these is relatively straightforward. Initial and Diagnostic assessment tools are constantly being developed – further refinement and innovative approaches will almost always be useful, but this should not be a key priority when allocating time or resources.

But the other three stages require conversations which are informed, empathetic and underpinned by a level of emotional intelligence. For this to happen the person carrying out the assessment needs to understand the issues around adult literacy and numeracy. They need to be able to put the candidate at their ease, and deal with their possible fear and resistance, which is often manifested as bluster and other defensive behaviours. They need, above all, to provide a safe space for these potentially difficult and long standing personal issues to be talked about openly and honestly. And they need to have a seamless access to good quality learning provision – this is a world away from “signposting the learner” to an adult literacy class.

However too few people carrying out these assessments have these skills. In many SMEs, and some larger companies as well, those who recruit people will not feel willing or able to assess literacy and numeracy. Line managers, particularly male ones who are operationally focused, will feel a similar reluctance which is completely unsurprising, given their own background and personal development. And many vocational instructors and assessors, while being completely ease discussing vocational competence, would rather not stray into areas beyond their remit (“He couldn’t write a personal statement for his portfolio, so I used a Dictaphone”).

So an enormous difference could be made **by taking action to close this particular skills gap, a gap that is widespread across UK industry, though one barely acknowledged or reported.**

There are training courses and qualifications for trainers and assessors. There is also a suite of qualifications and courses for those teaching and supporting adult literacy and numeracy programmes. But what we don't have are any programmes or qualifications that equip lay people with a greater understanding of the issues around adult literacy and numeracy together with the skills and confidence to talk to those they manage or come in contact with about how opportunities to improve might be realised.

We ran a pilot programme in SW England called "Assessor Plus" designed for precisely this purpose. (This followed a grim statistic that in September 2006 nine hundred learners without Level 2 qualifications had been enrolled on free Train to Gain programmes – statistically 450 of those would be expected to have sub level 2 literacy and numeracy, yet just six of the nine hundred were enrolled on to adult literacy/numeracy courses). This pilot was very successful; Construction Skills, for example, reported that where previously only 10% of learners had enrolled on Literacy and Numeracy courses, after their assessors had gone through the Assessor Plus programme the figure rose to over 90%.

And where a Whole Organisation Approach is in place, and well conducted assessments are the norm, take up of literacy and numeracy opportunities can be spectacular. DHL at East Midlands Airport was a well publicised example, where people were queuing up to be assessed, where there were excellent links with a local FE College and where KPIs, notably staff turnover and sickness absence, improved dramatically.

If it were decided that there should be greater focus on the skills and understanding of those in a position to carry out assessments (primarily recruiters, managers and vocational trainers), this will involve certain people and organisations taking responsibility for making this happen.

That is a whole different discussion, but given that this is about improving skills in the workplace, there should be a role for UKCES and the Sector Skills Councils. So far their record of action to address literacy and numeracy issues in their sectors has been mostly lamentable; perhaps this is a chance for them to make amends.

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