



National Research and Development Centre
for adult literacy and numeracy

Qualifications for Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills teachers: A think paper

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June 2011

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Canada

This project was made possible with funding
support from the Government of Canada's
Office of Literacy and Essential Skills

Summer Institute 2011
**WORKPLACE LITERACY & ESSENTIAL SKILLS
EMBEDDING PRACTICE, PREPARING PROVIDERS**

June 27-29, 2011
Dawson College, Montreal

Introduction

This paper is written in the form of a dialogue between Jay Derrick and Anne McKeown.

Jay is at present a teacher educator based at the Institute of Education, University of London, UK. He has worked as a teacher, trainer and college manager in the fields of adult basic education and adult education in general, and has also worked as a consultant researcher and project manager. More about his work can be found at www.bluesky-learning.com and www.ioe.ac.uk/staff/CPEN/35233.html.

For this Institute, Jay has undertaken an international literature review of models for embedding literacy and essential skills in the workplace, which he draws on for this discussion.

Anne is Professional Development Manager at the National Research and Development Centre (NRDC) for adult literacy and numeracy, based at the Institute of Education, University of London, in the UK. Ann draws on her experience as a workplace practitioner and teacher trainer for adult literacy and ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) teachers in the UK.

The dialogue explores the following questions

1. Is there a case for a specialist workplace qualification?
2. Is there a case for a specialist LES qualification?
3. What type of continuing professional development is useful?
4. What type of qualification could be useful for those who provide professional development for workplace LES teachers?

Terminology

Different words are used for different types of teachers in different countries. In Scotland, the word "teacher" denotes "school teacher", and the word "tutor" is used for a teacher of adults. In England, the word "teacher" is generally used for anyone teaching in an institutional setting such as a college or school: "tutor" is often used in community-based adult education classes and prisons, and "trainer" usually in workplace settings. This paper concerns the teaching of adult literacy, language and numeracy in any post-school setting, and uses the word "teacher" as a catch-all for any of these terms, whatever the setting, whatever formal qualifications are possessed by the practitioner, and even if they have none.

Context

The qualifications framework for teachers of literacy, language and numeracy is much more highly-developed in England than in the US or Canada. This is due to ten years of development and investment – by professionals in the field of language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) teaching, supported by a commitment by national government to “professionalize” the post-compulsory sector teaching workforce, with particular support given to training in teaching the subjects in LLN. The position at present in the UK is that all LLN teachers working in government-funded colleges, adult education centres, prisons, workplaces etc have, since about 2002, been required to have or be working towards degree-level qualifications in their specialist subject (literacy, ESOL, or numeracy), AND a degree-level generic teaching qualification. The presumption is that teachers are able to adapt their teaching to different settings and groups of students. Masters level programs relevant to adult LLN teachers are also fairly common. After 10 years of this initiative we believe that about 50% of the Adult LLN workforce has achieved both qualifications, though the total number of practitioners is hard to measure.

In the UK at present, once post-compulsory sector teachers have acquired a “licence to teach” via their professional qualification, they are required to renew this every year, through their own professional organization (The Institute for Learning: www.ifl.ac.uk). They do this by uploading evidence of their Continuing Professional Development (CPD) activities for that year, together with written reflections on them. Each full-time teacher has to demonstrate evidence of at least 30 hours of CPD activity each year, and at present the range of activities is not highly-defined or restricted, as long as the teacher’s reflections show how the activity has contributed to their development as a teacher. What counts as appropriate professional development is fairly open at present, but usually consists of an event, such as attendance at a conference, reading an article, a piece of small-scale research, or perhaps a meeting with other teachers to discuss practice, accompanied by a short piece of reflective writing on the significance of the event in question. This part of the system is still in its infancy and only a fraction of ALLN teachers have so far registered with IfL and been formally awarded Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills (QTLS). This aspect of the English system raises the importance of continuous professional development for ALLN practitioners working within the English system.

The situation in Canada is very different, and varies from province to province. Literacy providers in institutions (school boards and colleges) generally have subject training but may or may not have teachers’ training. Providers in community organizations are often volunteers with local initial training of a few hours. A few qualifications in adult literacy instruction have been developed in specific provinces, but they are not mandatory and are not focused on workplace education.

We hope through this dialogue to provoke discussion on what types of qualifications or professional development are useful for workplace LES teachers and what might be appropriate or possible in the context of workplace LES in Canada.

The Dialogue

1. Is there a case for a specialist qualification for workplace LES teaching?

Jay:

My view is that the value of a specialist qualification for workplace LES teaching depends on the model and extent of embedding or contextualizing workplace literacy and essential skills with other formal or informal workplace learning. The four-model framework I have proposed is one way of looking at this question [See Appendix].

Model 1: Where the teaching of LES is not contextualized for the workplace, there seems to be no logic for a specialist workplace qualification.

Model 2: Where the LES is taught alongside, but not integrated with, another set of workplace skills, the issue is less about how much the specialist LES teacher knows about the workplace, but about how he or she works together with a workplace trainer. It might be argued that one practitioner could be expert in and teach both curricula, but this would presume that different workplaces needed the same workplace training. This might be true across an occupational sector, making it possible to develop a qualification for LES practitioners specializing in workplaces in the same occupational sector. For example, you might have a health sector LES practitioner, or an engineering sector LES practitioner. However, this model is not supported by most research on workplace learning, which emphasizes the uniqueness of each workplace learning situation. This is known in the theory of workplace learning as the “situatedness” of each location for learning, following the terminology of American theorists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger. Even workplaces within the same broad occupational sector can be very different in terms of management culture, procedural norms, etc, and all this undermines the rationale for a specialist qualification based on standard characteristics of workplace learning.

There might be a case for specialist workplace qualifications for LES practitioners as a way to gain credibility with employers. Such a qualification would primarily consist of knowledge about workplaces, but surely this would, for the reasons noted above, be too general to be the basis of a practical workplace qualification. To avoid this, the qualification would need to be focused on specific workplaces, highly situated – but this would mean it would not be transferable, so its value as a qualification would be limited. This problem is even greater for Models 3 and 4, in which the LLN elements of the workplace curriculum are more and more embedded in the practice of the workplace itself.

The argument for specialist workplace LES qualifications has to address the problem of agreeing on an appropriate and practical level of focus. Workplaces vary enormously in size, diversity of roles, the range of occupations they utilise, the levels of those occupational roles, the management culture, the sophistication of their facilities and plant, the quality of facilities for employees, their procedural and quality systems, the sophistication of their strategic planning, and the economic environments in which they operate. Knowledge and skills relevant in one workplace are likely to be inadequate or misleading in another, even within the same broad occupational sector.

So the key question in designing such a qualification will be how to strike a balance between general knowledge applicable to all workplaces, and specific situated knowledge of practical use perhaps only in a few. Behind that question is another: Can such a balance ever be achieved within a qualification which has practical use and is also marketable?

My provisional answer to these questions is no. Whatever is developed will either be too general to be applicable and useful in real workplaces, or too specific to particular workplaces to be transferable.

Anne:

I tend to agree with you that a specialist workplace qualification is very problematic, given the diversity and complexity of workplaces and the situations of the workers who might be taking part in workplace LES programmes. However, I think it would be useful for workplace LES teachers to have training on some of the more generic aspects of workplace teaching; these include the constraints and limitations imposed by the requirements of the workplace and possibly by the employers, or aspects of collaboration with vocational colleagues and approaches to embedding or integrating LES in vocational contexts. In your review on embedding LES, you described four types of workplace learning models on a continuum from “decontextualized” to “situated-expansive” [See Appendix] It would be helpful for teachers to have thought about some of the questions you raise about the four models. Even if they are not in a position to effect change, they should consider the nature of their own workplace in terms of where it is positioned on the continuum towards being a “learning organization” in which the workplace and literacy curriculum are integrated wholly with work processes. But I do not think that these elements constitute a specialist qualification, merely aspects of workplace training which could be incorporated into a qualification which focuses more specifically on LES training, how adults learn, and how adults learn language, literacy and numeracy.

2. Is there a case for specialist subject qualifications for all LES teachers?

Jay:

A better way forward would be to develop professional entry qualifications for LES practitioners that emphasize multiple literacies and the vital importance of context in the application of literacies knowledge and skills, along the lines of the framework that has been developed in England (though I think there are some problems with some details of the English framework). In my view these should encourage practitioners to aspire to graduate level attainment or above, though qualifications at a lower level could also be designed. This framework of qualifications would include (a) training in basic linguistics and mathematics, (b) training in teaching, and (c) training in how to teach literacy, language and mathematics to basic level students in a variety of contexts. This framework, focusing on the subject (literacy, language and numeracy) would enable entry and progression within the profession.

Underpinning both the English and Australian systems is the principle that, while a well-trained LLN/LES teacher will be able to adapt their teaching to particular settings, someone with expert knowledge of a particular setting will not, without training, be able to teach LLN effectively. One of the most prolonged arguments we have had and continue to have in England is with politicians, college managers, and others who persist in the view that teaching basic skills is easy, and that you don't need training to do it. On the other hand, there is also a strong view that while adult numeracy teachers need training in how to teach mathematics, they do not perhaps need graduate-level mathematics knowledge to teach numeracy effectively. This is one of many ongoing debates in England.

Anne:

Well, what you suggest here is similar to the framework we actually have in the UK, but it has taken the last ten years of development and investment – by professionals in the field of LLN teaching, supported by a commitment by national government to “professionalize” the post-compulsory sector teaching workforce, with particular support given to training in teaching the subjects in LLN. As I understand it, the situation in Canada is very different. There might be scope for developing a framework at provincial level though and it would be useful to consider what that might look like. The key aim in England, justifying the years of work and significant state spending, has been to ‘professionalize’ the ALLN teaching workforce. To anyone who has worked in ALLN in England for 20 years or more, it is clear that great strides have been taken in realizing this aim, though there is still a long way to go.

I agree that knowledge about language frameworks and how people learn languages and literacies is essential, as is the importance of contextualizing learning. You could argue that if LES teachers are sufficiently trained in how to teach their subject, including how to contextualize learning according to the learner's situation and literacy practices, then they would be able to apply their training to sufficiently contextualize it to any workplace. I think

the curriculum framework we have in the UK for literacy and ESOL learning is helpful in that it focuses on the use and development of language and literacy at the level of either text or discourse (type of text), as well as at sentence and word level. This emphasizes the importance of texts in relevant and meaningful contexts, and means that teachers using this framework have to consider context in what they teach, whereas if we only consider sentence or word level use of language and literacy we are in danger of endlessly focusing on repetitive de-contextualized grammar or spelling exercises.

Another element of practice in the UK that I think can be helpful in focusing on context is that LLN teachers are usually involved in the diagnostic assessment of learners, their strengths and areas for development. Where this is done well and in a holistic way which takes account of learners' aspirations, contexts for use of LLN, previous experience of learning and other personal and social factors, it informs the content and approach of their teaching. In the context of workplace LLN this would help to identify the particular LLN practices that learners would like to develop further.

Jay:

I agree with you on that, but unfortunately in practice, when funding is scarce and quality assurance is more technical than holistic, diagnostic assessment can sometimes become a bureaucratic, box-ticking process which assesses a narrow range of skills and is related to performance targets in the UK post-16 provision. This pressure directly undermines the aim of raising the level of professionalism of teachers, as it makes it seem that teaching and learning can largely be planned and led by relatively low-qualified and low-paid administrative staff. In some private training contexts, this is indeed the case.

Anne:

The question of who decides what is taught in workplace LES is another area for debate. How much agency does the workplace LES teacher have in negotiating the curriculum? How far is it determined by others – employers, or as in the case of UK provision, external qualifications and funding mechanisms? It is relevant to the discussion of subject specialist qualifications for all LLN teachers, as the ability to carry out diagnostic assessments for LLN learning would be an important element of such qualifications.

The LLN teacher qualifications that we have in the UK are in distinct subjects, i.e. we have separate teaching qualifications for teachers of literacy, ESOL and numeracy. There is some common content, especially between ESOL and literacy qualifications, but currently teachers would qualify in one of the three areas, at least as a starting point. This differs, for example,

from Australia, another country with a highly-developed qualifications framework, where basic skills teacher training qualifies the same practitioner to teach all three subjects. This is another area for discussion – are teachers expected to be fully trained to teach all three – literacy, language and numeracy, as well as the essential skills? In England when teachers are teaching two or more of language literacy and numeracy, for example literacy teachers who also teach numeracy, they generally train as a specialist in one area first, and then add on specialist training on the other subject later. There is some overlap of content on the specialist teacher training courses, particularly in relation to understanding of personal, social and cultural factors influencing learning, theories and approaches for adult learning, explicit knowledge about LLN, how each is used in practice, and approaches to supporting the development of LLN skills. The LLN teacher qualifications take common theoretical approaches employing a critical literacies or numeracies approach, based on a social practice model, and with a learner-centred focus (although this is not reflected in the skills/competence-focused ethos in the UK in relation to basic skills, it is evident on the teacher training programmes). Models and types of assessment are also covered in all three subject specialities.

Jay:

There is an ongoing debate among ALLN practitioners, policymakers and researchers about whether adult basic education can be defined as decontextualized skills and knowledge, or whether it is better seen from the social practices perspective. Each of these perspectives has implications for the organization and content of teacher training. My view is that systematic training for ALLN teachers is definitely needed: in my experience helping adult literacy and numeracy students to become fluent and autonomous users of literacy and mathematics is a very complex and difficult process. But I don't see why that training couldn't be organized mainly as Continuing Professional Development rather than as initial teacher training intended to take place before practitioners begin their work in earnest. This would be an apprenticeship model of training, which if well-organized and connected to practice, has been shown by research to be highly effective and sustainable.

A system based primarily on CPD would need to be co-ordinated to ensure resources are used efficiently and to provide professional support and perhaps mentoring and coaching at key moments in a practitioner's development. But overall this needn't be resource heavy: the most common type of CPD for teachers could be small groups of colleagues meeting now and again to discuss their teaching practice with each other, perhaps organizing this around deliberate experiments: trying things out in their classes, and then later reflecting collectively on how things went, and what to try next.

Anne:

If it is agreed that in principle it would be desirable for Canadian LES practitioners to have access to professional training, perhaps a useful model would be for a relatively short initial teaching qualification providing an introduction to teaching, with professional development modules in greater depth and with greater subject specific application that teachers could choose from and follow on an in-service basis, according to their specialist interests and contexts. This would be similar to what Jay suggests – a pre-service entry qualification, followed by on-going continuous professional development (CPD), in an accredited framework within which practitioners could progress if they wished to.

3. Continuing Professional Development for all LES practitioners

Jay:

It would be essential that once in the profession, there was a rich and stimulating menu of professional development opportunities. Most teachers learn most of their professional expertise once they have started teaching, not before. As I suggested earlier, this would typically involve collaborative investigations of teaching and learning between colleagues. These CPD activities might include supported research activity, focusing on the particular settings in which the practitioners found themselves, which would of course include workplaces. Ideally there would exist a system for ensuring that practitioners engaged in professional development on a regular basis: the “License to Practice” system in England is intended to ensure this, though it is still in its infancy. My view is that having a robust system for initial teacher training of Literacy, Language and Numeracy practitioners, combined with provision for frequent, regular CPD, which would include opportunities for collaborative research by practitioners, is a far more important requirement for LES practitioners and their students, whatever setting they work in, than trying to develop workplace LES practitioner qualifications which probably would be either practical, or transferable, but hardly ever both.

Anne:

I agree about the importance of on-going CPD and the value of professional collaboration and practitioner-research type CPD activities. I also think it would be useful to have a modular framework for both the initial entry qualification and for CPD. I’m not suggesting that all CPD should be accredited, but having some accredited modules would enable teachers to build on their portfolio on expertise in a systematic way. It would also help them to identify any specific development needs they would like to address.

4. Qualifications for facilitators/professional developers for workplace LES practitioners

Jay:

A system which emphasized training through CPD would seem to be very appropriate for the Canadian context, though I realize that political realities mean that each province would have to develop its own framework of qualifications and accreditation. Each CPD programme could be located in such a framework, credits accumulated by practitioners following programmes and completing assessed work, and credits achieved through appropriate combinations of programmes could lead to professional qualifications. Oversight and quality assurance could be provided by universities, colleges, provincial government, or a combination of all of these. There would be costs associated with the accreditation process, but that could be shared with the practitioner. Taking part in the professional development framework would not only support increased professionalization of the workforce, but it would also contribute to the spread of effective practice.

It is also possible to envisage a scheme by which workplace practitioners working within one occupational sector, or one geographical area, were supported to share information, experiences and reflections about the workplace LES activities and programs they were engaged in. This would build a collective fund of knowledge and experience about that group of workplaces which would enable valuable mentoring of less or differently-experienced practitioners arriving to work in that group of workplaces. The knowledge and skills of individual practitioners would be situated and therefore highly applicable, but their collective expertise would also be accessible. There would be a strong case for training facilitators/professional developers to support practitioners in this process of making explicit their highly situated expertise. The skills of these facilitators would incorporate some of the skills of field researchers, of professional mentors, of teacher trainers and professional developers, and of academic thinkers. But they would not necessarily be LES practitioners themselves, and a qualification for facilitators would not necessarily be relevant for LES practitioners working in the field. It would make sense for these qualifications to be set at graduate or masters level, to enable career development, and also to facilitate the linkages across different disciplines which might be relevant to the wide range of issues that arise within workplace LES activities.

In a context like Canada, where formal qualifications for LES teachers are rare, the professional facilitator system proposed above might help to 'kick-start' a shift within the system towards greater professionalization of all its LLN teachers, for the benefit of their students. Such a process could move as slowly or as quickly as participants wished, so that existing staff did not feel unduly pressured. In the early stages of this process, the facilitators would work to offer a wide range of appropriate and accredited CPD as accessibly as possible, and begin designing, building and the qualifications framework, as well as piloting

preliminary qualifications at appropriate levels. As the initiative gained momentum, the facilitators work would gradually shift to supporting the ongoing professional development of higher-level professionals, maintaining and adding to the framework while continuing to develop the range of CPD opportunities available, including those using digital applications.

Anne:

I see the importance of building capacity in the field, and of having a career structure, but I suspect this may be further in the future. I also think there would have to be debate about the knowledge and practice base of such facilitators, the extent to which they should be practitioners themselves in order to maintain credibility and currency with workplace LES matters, or could be from a more academic background and approach. There is also a role for professional associations in facilitating the bringing together of practitioners for exchange of knowledge, ideas and practice.

Questions to consider

It seems that we have raised more questions than we have answers.

The main areas for discussion from this paper are:

- Is there a place for a qualification for teaching in the workplace? If so, what should it include and in how much depth?
- Is a professional entry qualification for workplace LES teachers desirable or possible?
- If so, what should it include? How to teach all three of LLN specializations? What about the other “essential skills”? A single subject specialization? – i.e. how to teach literacy, or numeracy or ESOL?
- What level should it be? College diploma/certificate? Undergraduate? Postgraduate?
- Should it be a requirement pre-entry?
- What nature and type of on-going Continuing Professional Development is desirable or possible?
- Should it be a requirement?
- Who should be involved in the facilitation of professional development and training of teachers? What are the necessary qualities or qualifications for such a role?
- What would be the costs and benefits of provincial or regional-level ALLN/LES teacher development support units, staffed by professional development facilitators?
- Would a framework of accredited CPD leading eventually to fully-developed qualifications help develop the professionalism of ALLN/LES teachers?

Appendix 1

Four models of embedded literacy and essential skills learning in the workplace

Jay Derrick, May 2011

Excerpt from literature review on embedded literacy learning in the workplace

Model of Embedded workplace LES	Characteristics	Content of learning	Focus
Decontextualized	<p>LES is Not embedded:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • literacy defined as technical skills • deficit model of learners • participants seen as passive recipients of learning • programs evaluated through individual assessment of learners • LES expertise brought in from outside • No collaboration between LES teachers and workplace trainers 	<p>Workplace specific: Not relevant in this approach</p> <p>Literacy and Essential Skills: Defined as technical skills, fixed, non-negotiable</p>	<p>Restricted: The technical skills and knowledge of individual learners</p>
Technical	<p>LES is Potentially embedded:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • aims to teach both sets of skills at the same time • deficit model of learners • participants seen as passive recipients of learning • programs evaluated through individual assessment of learners • LES expertise brought in from outside • Variable collaboration between LES teachers and workplace trainers 	<p>Workplace specific: Fixed, well-defined, non-negotiable</p> <p>Literacy and Essential Skills: Defined as technical skills, fixed, non-negotiable</p>	<p>Restricted: The technical skills and knowledge of individual learners</p>
*Situated-restricted	<p>LES is embedded:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workplace curriculum defined narrowly as technical skills • social view of literacies** 	<p>Workplace specific: Fixed, well-defined, non-negotiable</p> <p>Literacy and Essential</p>	<p>Restricted: The technical and situated skills and knowledge of individual learners</p>

	<p>and literacy practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • deficit view of learners in relation to work but not in relation to literacy • programs evaluated by individual assessment of work competencies • participants active in relation to literacy learning but not the workplace curriculum • LES expertise brought in from outside • Variable collaboration between LES teachers and workplace trainers 	<p>Skills: Situating literacies approach, but main content and activities determined by narrowly defined workplace curriculum</p>	
Situated-expansive	<p>LES is Embedded:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • workplace and literacy curriculum integrated wholly with work processes • Learners actively engaged in all aspects • focus on continuous improvement and the production of new knowledge • collaborative approach to continuous learning through work • primary focus of learning is the organization • LES expertise provided from within organization 	<p>Workplace specific: Situating view of work knowledge and practices, knowledge base not pre-determined, negotiable</p> <p>Literacy and Essential Skills: Situating literacies as social practices view, knowledge base not pre-determined, negotiable</p>	<p>Expansive: Improvement of work processes and learners as members of the workforce and as social beings</p>

- Each of these models is discussed in detail in the literature review and a few key publications related to each model are briefly summarized.

* “The term “situated” is taken from studies that highlight the particular characteristics or features of **specific** settings, including diverse workplaces, that influence the kinds of literacy skills that are called for and the ways in which they are used by participants. It assumes that skills are not context-free and fixed. Among the most important theorists of this view are Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger: *Situated learning*, Cambridge University Press 1991.

From Models for embedding literacy and essential skills in workplace training: A literature review