Identifying effective workplace basic skills strategies for enhancing employee development and productivity

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1. Background and aims of the study

Poor literacy, numeracy and language skills among adults are perceived to be one of the major educational issues currently facing this country and working towards their improvement has recently become a major government priority, following the Moser Report *A Fresh Start* (DfEE, 1999), and the *Skills for Life* strategy document (DfES, 2001). It is estimated that up to 3.5 million adults in work in England have poor levels of literacy and numeracy. Further, both the above documents emphasise the importance and potential of learning provided in – or linked to – the workplace, for example:

‘poor basic skills…represent a significant cost to British industry…all too few have the opportunity to learn in the workplace. The provision of more such opportunities is a key element in the National Strategy’ (DfEE 1999:47-48).

The number of programmes delivered at the workplace, or recruiting through employers or unions, has increased in recent years and is expected to grow further in the future, following measures announced recently by the Chancellor (HM Treasury, 2002).

One of the arguments put forward in favour of workplace-linked basic skills programmes – as opposed to the more conventional, general-purpose classes, delivered for example at FE colleges – is that the former offer potential learners a larger incentive and more motivation to participate, particularly if promotion opportunities are linked explicitly to improvements in skills. Most of the empirical evidence so far on participation in remedial, general-purpose language, literacy and numeracy programmes has been discouraging, indicating low enrolment and high drop-out rates and limited impact on participants’ skills (see for example, Parsons, 2002; Kambouri and Francis, 1994; Brooks *et al*, 2001). Conversely, the few research studies that have investigated the effectiveness of workplace-linked programmes (e.g. Sticht and Mikulecky, 1984) have provided evidence that specialised literacy programmes linked to occupational requirements are much more effective in improving adult literacy skills.

However, since Sticht’s studies, there has been almost no research in the area which examines how far his results generalise to other settings, how far gains in skills are maintained over time and the extent to which workplace-linked

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programmes are successful in changing the occupational prospects of participants, as well as having a positive impact in other life-course variables. The present study aims to fill some of these gaps in the literature and provide some clear answers to the above questions.

2. Methodology and development of instruments

Our study will be using a longitudinal design in order to address the research questions set out in the previous section. We propose to study, in detail, and over a twenty-four month period, the success of occupationally-linked literacy, language and numeracy programmes on a sample of 500 learner participants. We will be using a mixed methods approach in order to examine the above issues; we believe that this approach will enable us to form a more holistic understanding of the development, learning and challenges experienced by the individuals participating in our study. More specifically, we will be collecting the following two types of data that will complement each other: i) quantitative data, including learners’ demographic characteristics, employment details, job satisfaction, attitudes towards workplace learning and learning in general, and levels of literacy, language and/or numeracy skills; and ii) qualitative data focusing on participants’ learning biographies, collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Further, routine, administrative data on the organisation/company as well as on the training programmes (e.g. attendance and drop-out rates) will be collected directly from managers and/or tutors and a sample of managers and tutors will also be interviewed by means of semi-structured interviews, in order to evaluate the impact of course provision on the enterprise and on indicators of organisational capital.

Below, we present in detail the instruments that we have developed in order to examine the above and explain how we think that they will help us to address the research questions we seek to answer.

i) Structured interview schedule for employees

This interview schedule (questionnaire) aims to collect basic demographic information on the participants as well as quantitative information on their attitudes towards their jobs and workplace training. Specifically, the questionnaire consists of three parts: a) the first part collects basic factual information on the participants, including information on age, number of years with the organisation, family circumstances, recent employment history, educational history and qualifications. b) The second part addresses the issue of job satisfaction (this being regarded as one of the factors on which training may have a positive impact), by asking participants to rate their feelings and attitudes towards different aspects of their work (e.g. working hours and patterns, relationship with colleagues and managers, opportunities for promotion), as well as give an overall rating for their job in general. c) The third part of the questionnaire aims to gauge participants’ perceptions of the training they are
receiving at their workplace, including questions on what they consider the main benefits of such training to be, how positive or negative the feel about receiving it and whether they anticipate continuing with further training in the future, either within or outside their workplace.

Individual items (questions) for the questionnaire were developed after consulting a range of other relevant questionnaires and survey instruments, such as those of the British Household Panel Survey, the British Social Attitudes Survey and staff perception surveys that large organisations run internally with their own staff; there was also some consultation with practitioners in the field. Questions were then adapted from other instruments or new questions written by the members of the research team. The questionnaire was piloted on a small number of employees attending basic skills training programmes at their workplace and amendments were made as a result.

ii) Semi-structured interview schedules

Three different interview schedules have been designed for use with a selected sub-sample of learner employees, as well as a sample of tutors and line managers or supervisors involved in the organisation and delivery of the programmes within each company or organisation. These interview schedules will be used in a context of semi-structured, in-depth interviews of the participants involved. The employee questions aim to explore in more depth some of the issues addressed in the more standardised questionnaire described above, as well as explore some additional topics which lend themselves more naturally to a qualitative mode of enquiry. They include questions on the participants’ attitudes and feelings towards their jobs, workplace and training and on how the learning they are experiencing at work may be affecting their family or personal lives and their feelings towards themselves.

The questions for tutors aim to obtain information on the tutor’s role in the process of setting up a training programme, their possible input in any needs analysis and the planning of the sessions, as well as their views on how the employees participating in the programmes are progressing or more generally benefiting from them. The questions for managers, in addition to obtaining some factual information regarding the company and the training programme, also aim to elicit this group’s views on the reasons for setting up the programme and the potential benefits arising from it.

iii) Literacy assessment tool (reading and writing)

After an extensive review of existing assessment tools for adult literacy (see also Brooks et al, forthcoming), it was decided that a new instrument would be necessary for use in our study, as none of the existing ones could satisfy all of following criteria deemed essential given the nature and aims of our study: i) assess both reading and writing, ii ) be based on and mapped to the national
standards, iii) be secure, iv) have two parallel forms, one for pre- and one for post-testing and v) be sensitive to relatively small amounts of progress. The latter was considered important in the context of our study, as our scoping work indicated that workplace training programmes are often of rather short duration (2 hours a week over a period of ten weeks seems to be typical) and to have rather low attendance rates. We do not therefore anticipate that participants’ skills would improve by, say, one whole QCA-defined level after attending such a programme or course. We are also conscious that many programmes focus on writing, which is not covered by the existing standards-based national tests, hence our requirement that the instrument cover this aspect of literacy too.

The design and piloting of the new assessment tool is currently under development by external contractors.

iv) Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLI)

ELLI is an instrument designed to assess ‘learning power’, which is defined as ‘the complex mix of dispositions, lived experiences, social relations, values, attitudes and beliefs that coalesce to shape the nature of an individual’s engagement with any particular learning opportunity’ (Broadfoot et al, 2002; Crick et al, 2002). The instrument was developed by researchers at the University of Bristol and has been trialled and used extensively with children aged 8-16; in its current form, it consists of 55 items each describing values, beliefs or attitudes towards learning; the participant has to indicate how much she/he agrees with each statement on a four point Likert-type scale.

A factor analytic study carried out by Broadfoot et al (2002) resulted in the identification of the following seven dimensions of learning power: growth orientation, critical curiosity, meaning making, dependence and fragility, creativity, learning relationships and strategic awareness. We think that ELLI may prove a very useful instrument in the context of adult learners of literacy, language and numeracy, and particularly those attending programmes at their workplace. This is because, as discussed above, the nature of many of these programmes suggests to us that a large number of learners may make small amounts of progress, if the latter is only viewed within the narrower framework of the national standards and qualifications. We hypothesise, however, that these programmes may well have an impact on participants’ attitudes to learning or ‘learning power’, helping them to become more effective learners and encouraging them to undertake further learning outside the context of their workplace.

As ELLI has been developed for and used on a different population from ours, we will first pilot the instrument extensively on a large number of basic skills adult learners in order to validate it for this population and carry out any amendments if necessary.
3. Other methodological issues

In this final section, we discuss other issues that have arisen during the course of our initial scoping work and that led us to make decisions that affected the methodology we are going to adopt in the main part of the study.

i) Participants with ESOL needs

During the scoping phase our study, we increasingly became aware that a substantial proportions of employees receiving basic skills training at the workplace have English as a second language, particularly in London and other major cities. These people range from those born, raised and educated in the UK, but within a non-English speaking family and/or wider community, to people born (and possibly educated) outside the country who have been living and working in the UK for a number of years, to those who may have arrived in the UK within the last few months with very little prior knowledge of the language (and sometimes none at all). All of the above types of learners (and any in between) can be classified in terms of basic skills as ESOL learners; in addition, given the diverse nature of provision, the boundaries between ESOL and ‘mainstream’ literacy courses or training programmes (i.e. programmes intended primarily for learners whose first language is English) are not clear-cut; frequently, ESOL and non-ESOL participants are found attending the same sessions, particularly if numbers are low or employers and providers and trying to keep costs to a minimum.

The original scope of our study included all types of basic skills provision, i.e. literacy, numeracy and ESOL. However, we soon began to suspect that the level of –particularly spoken – English of some of the ESOL participants would be too low to allow them to participate fully either in the structured interviews, or, more especially, in the more semi-structured, in-depth ones. Some early pilot work confirmed on the whole these initial impressions, with a few interviewees being even unable to understand what was required of them (i.e. to take part in a short, questionnaire-based study).

The only way we could meaningfully include this particular sub-group of ESOL participants in the project would therefore be to employ a fairly large number of professional interpreters, fluent in a wide variety of languages, along with some training or experience of interviewing work. Quite apart from the extra costs that this process would involve and which we could not have met given our project budget, the use of interpreters in the more qualitative aspect of our work would also present us with additional methodological problems, as the presence of an additional person (the interpreter) in the interview would be an extraneous variable difficult to control by the project researcher.

On the basis of the above, we finally decided to include only ESOL participants whose standard of spoken English is enough for them to communicate
reasonably fluently in the context of a research interview. In terms of the national standards, we believe that spoken English at Entry Level 3 or above would be sufficient for participation in the project. We would, however, like to stress that there is an urgent need for more research that will address the particular issue of that particular sub-group of employees with ESOL needs, as our scoping work suggests that they form a substantial proportion of those attending workplace training programmes. The need for more research in the area is also pointed out by Roberts (forthcoming).

ii) The fragmented nature of the sector

We would ideally have wished to sample schemes using a more or less complete natural sampling frame, and drawing a sample either on random basis, or stratified by sector and/or subject area (literacy, numeracy or ESOL). In the very early months of the study, we hoped to identify this information, or something close to it. However, it soon became clear to us that this was not possible, as there is to date no comprehensive database or register of workplace basic skills courses or training programmes, either at national or regional level. Instead, our scoping work confirmed the extent to which the sector is and remains fragmented, with schemes and programmes differing substantially between regions, sectors, individual companies or training providers and funding bodies and methods. This also reflects the rapidly changing and expanding nature of provision.

The main implication of the above situation for our study is that we will have to rely on an opportunity sample, built through the various networks of practitioners, employers, trade unions and employer organisations that we established during our scoping work. These networks sometimes cross and sometimes are specific to the four occupational sectors that we have decided to focus on and which all have high levels of basic skills needs and relatively high levels of employer activity (transport, food processing, cleaning and health and care).

4. Summary

In this short paper, we have discussed some of the methodological challenges that we faced during the initial phase of a longitudinal study into the effectiveness of workplace basic skills programmes and how we tried to resolve them. The almost complete absence of similar studies in this field meant that we had to invest a great deal of time and effort into the development and piloting of suitable instruments that could adequately address our research questions. The results of our pilot study have been very encouraging in this respect, as we found that participants (learners, tutors and managers) were on the whole happy answering our questions and found our research instruments interesting, engaging and relevant to their experiences of learning or training.

Furthermore, there was a host of other methodological issues arising through the rather diverse and fragmented nature of provision of these types of training
programmes, some of which we had not anticipated before undertaking our scoping work. We believe that, given the dearth of good measurement instruments in the area, this part of our work is particularly important, not just in the context of the present study, but in terms of future research projects in related areas.

References


