Embedding literacy, language and numeracy: First steps in a whole of organisation approach

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Introduction
Spurred by findings, from the 1996 and 2006 international literacy surveys, that over one million adults may have difficulty with literacy and numeracy tasks, Aotearoa New Zealand has paid increased attention to adult literacy. The Adult Literacy Strategy (Minister of Education 2001) was followed by an Adult ESOL Strategy (Ministry of Education 2003), the New Zealand Skills Strategy Action Plan (Department of Labour 2008) and the Literacy, Language and Numeracy Action Plan (Tertiary Education Commission, 2008). The Tertiary Education Commission was tasked with implementing and overseeing embedded literacy provision. Professional development programmes aimed to enhance tertiary teachers’ and workplace trainers’ capability to embed literacy in their teaching. Alongside these developments a research programme was initiated.

One project, funded by the Ministry of Education, investigated the organisational factors that influence the provision of literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) across the tertiary sector. The project consisted of a review of international literature which informed five case studies that investigated how different organisations were embedding LLN. The organisations included two Private Training Establishments, one Industry Training Organisation, one Institute of Technology Polytechnic (ITP) and one Wānanga (a provider focused on Māori [indigenous peoples’] learning). This paper draws on data from the ITP case study. Two data gathering methods were used: individual interviews and focus groups with 15 participants, 12 teachers and three managers; and analysis of pertinent institutional documents.

This paper provides a summary of themes identified in the literature review, then presents the findings under three headings – governance and management, pedagogy and professional development. From the findings 15 organisational factors influencing LLN embedding are identified. The paper concludes with some suggestions for organisations.

Literature review summary
The review drew on research, policy and theoretical papers primarily from the United Kingdom, Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, the United States and Canada. It had two focal points: embedded LLN and the organisational factors that impact on embedded LLN provision. The following definition of embedded literacy underpinned the literature review:

Embedded teaching and learning combines the development of literacy, language, and numeracy with vocational and other skills. The skills acquired provide learners with the confidence, competence and motivation necessary
for them to succeed in qualifications, in life and work (The Skills for Life Development Centre 2006, p. 8).

The review identified four strands relevant to the project: vocational LLN, English as an Additional Language (EAL) and biliteracy, LLN practice, and critical literacy/New Literacy Studies (NLS). Findings relevant to vocational LLN included: there is no single, perfect model of embedded LLN; embedding can be done in a variety of ways; it is a complex process; a whole of organisation approach is needed; LLN provision should be ‘built in’ not ‘bolted on’ to existing courses; close collaboration and teamwork between the vocational teacher and literacy specialist is essential; and professional development for staff is necessary. Key findings in the EAL and biliteracy strand were: there is a vital need for EAL and biliteracy provision for adults; there are significant differences between EAL and literacy provision for English native speakers, such that separate provision is advocated or, at least, teachers who are trained in both literacy and EAL are needed; the learning involved is not just about literacy but about cultural knowledge; EAL learners bring diverse levels of literacy knowledge and have diverse needs; there is a need for bilingual tutors and professional development for tutors; there is a danger that deep embedding could make LLN invisible to the students but embedding is still beneficial in terms of relevant and meaningful literacy learning.

Themes identified in the LLN practice strand were: there is no one ‘best’ model of practice; a ‘one size fits all’ approach is not ideal; learning needs to be contextualised and authentic; while the learner, their learning needs and interests will be central this should not produce an individualised approach as collaborative learning and group interactions result in improved outcomes; good practices are underpinned by adult education principles and constructivism; initial training and ongoing professional development for teachers is essential; adequate resourcing is necessary. The strand on critical literacy/NLS identified a recent shift in theories of LLN variously described as different paradigms, ideologies, frameworks and discourses; the key differences are between what is referred to as a functional approach, which focuses on literacy skills development and contribution to the economy, and a critical/participatory or NLS approach which emphasises social justice, equality, democracy and everyday life. Further, there are different understandings about benefits of LLN, for example human or social capital perspectives, about a deficit approach and about the use of power in LLN provision.

The ITP case study
The case study ITP offers a wide variety of courses, from certificate to degree level, that focus on vocational outcomes. It offers face-to-face and online modes, part- and full-time courses. Organisationally LLN delivery is the responsibility of the Academic Director. Interest in embedded literacy began in 2007, with three people attending regional clusters. Developments accelerated through 2009. LLN provision has focused on programmes at levels 1-3, although tutors teaching above these levels have expressed an interest in learning more. From 2010, the ITP is addressing embedding at all levels. Data gathered from interviews, focus groups and documents were analysed to identify organisational factors influencing LLN provision. Quotations are referenced to interviews or focus groups. For example, P3 is an individual interview; FG3 refers to focus group three.
Governance and management

Organisational change for embedded literacy has been driven from within. The vision, strategic planning, policy setting and monitoring have been led by staff, supported by the governing body. One person had good knowledge of adult literacy, was networking closely with colleagues nationally, was informed about research, had completed the National Certificate in Adult Literacy Education (NCALE) and became aware of the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) route: ‘All foundation tutors at polytechnics were obviously going to be targeted as people to deliver the literacy and numeracy in their pre-existing courses’ (P3:1). A case was made to management. They ‘have been on board … our CE and our Academic Director have been right there from the beginning and it’s been fantastic’ (P3:2). Key selling points were access to funding, ‘the underpinning of sound research’ (P3:3) and a realisation that ‘twenty of our staff and five managers are going to get rich staff development’ (P3:7). Management support was crucial because ‘selling an idea has got to trickle down from the top’ (P3:5).

There is a sense that they had to embed: ‘I don’t think there was any choice’ (P1:5). This has resulted in LLN developments that align closely with TEC expectations. Once committed, the institute engaged in strategic planning and policy development, with a focus on level 1-3 courses. This resulted in significant change: ‘The institution has gone from sod all and a bit of one-to-one literacy support … to all of a sudden involving the whole of the institution. It’s pretty exciting but it’s a big undertaking’ (P5:1).

LLN embedding appeared in institutional documents; relevant steering and working groups were established; policies were developed; funding was sought; positions created and appointments made. Twenty five staff attended TEC literacy and numeracy clusters in 2008 and 2009. Structurally, the literacy positions and the Steering Group report to the Academic Director. They work in a Staff Development Team that includes the Staff Development Advisor and Flexible Learning Facilitator. Further linkages are created by Academic Advisors. Located in each Department they work alongside tutors while collaborating with the literacy specialists: ‘They are very much the champions of policy’ (P5:12).

Operational planning for LLN embedding has focused on the capability development action plan. Programmes to be targeted for LLN embedding from 2009 to 2011 have been identified and plans to implement embedding have been developed and approved. These include programme reviews to ensure LLN outcomes are explicit; mapping LLN components to TEC learning progressions; diagnostic assessment; use of appropriate resources and deliberate acts of LLN teaching; rewriting and development of course materials as appropriate; providing staff development; and supporting staff to complete qualifications such as the NCALE.

Staff recognise the leadership individuals have exercised, including one seen as the champion: ‘People see her as a natural champion and that helps with the process’ (P1:5); ‘They are such lovely people to work with and they believe in what they are doing. They are experts in their field and have a wonderful way of working with people, drawing them in and getting them involved’ (P4:2). Commitment to embedding has also created a sense that it is being driven: ‘There are two … on the ground now to drive this project and I think driving is what is going to be required’
There is also a view that embedding is at an early stage: ‘Embryonic in development’ (P1:1); ‘It’s still in its infancy’ (P2:1); and that change has been slow: ‘We have been trying to implement it slowly … we are not pushing’ (P1:1); but ‘Making sure the momentum continues’ (P4:6). Take up by staff does vary: ‘We have got the early adopters that are positive … but we have also got pockets of absolute resistance’ (P1:1) but there has also been a lot of interest: ‘We also talked about a trickle starting off then we had a literacy and numeracy tsunami on our hands … the take up has been amazing’ (P3:8).

Learning cultures are being crafted in a variety of ways. Being part of literacy and numeracy clusters has ‘brought people together for the first time … we are viewing ourselves as cross discipline teams … for the first time people are seeing this huge cohort of cooperation’ (FG1:3). Team teaching ‘worked really well in the classroom’ (P4:4); specialists are seen as ‘that team of support’ (P2:14). Support for staff is evident in release to attend professional development clusters, the development of personal plans to monitor workload and the provision of literacy/numeracy specialists within the institute.

Time emerged as the major issue facing staff: ‘The biggest problem we face is time. People have time allocated to do it [attend clusters] but often other responsibilities and duties encroach’ (P4:6). A second issue concerned getting cover for teaching release. While funding was available it was not always possible to get a replacement tutor: ‘Let’s take welding tutors. You can’t just pull in some welder for two hours a week … freeing up tutors does become an issue’ (P5:6). A third concern was that funding may disappear: ‘I’ve seen this before … they give us … money and we do it for two years and then it dies … so with the literacy I suspected it would be the same’. (P4:4)

Pedagogy

At an institutional level pedagogy has been supported by the development of relevant policies and quality assurance processes: ‘We’ve recently reviewed all of our course development policies … so we have already implemented it within all our guidelines for developing courses’ (P1:10). At programme level pedagogy was thought about in different ways. Participants talked about one-to-one literacy support, team teaching, and the version of embedded literacy being promoted by TEC – the vocational tutor teaching LLN in their course. Some thought different literacy needs require different approaches:

We classify a learner as ‘can’, ‘can do with help’, ‘can’t’. The ‘can do with help’, I firmly believe will blossom with the tutor providing embedded literacy and numeracy … but certainly the high needs people … that is not the job of a vocational tutor. (FG2:7)

Some thought a variety of pedagogies was desirable: ‘I would not support one initiative because you may only capture one group of students … you have to come at it from different perspectives’ (P4:11). Some: ‘would like to see more team teaching’ (P2:3); others supported the TEC approach to embedding: ‘If you really seriously want to improve the literacy in somebody who wants to be a photographer, put him in a photography course and put the literacy and learning skills in there’ (P5:16) For some tutors pedagogy emerged at the lesson level: ‘It’s about pulling the lesson plans apart, we can add in literacy and numeracy’. (FG1:5)
A few felt their pedagogy was under pressure:
   We are being measured on outcomes such as retention and completion.
   ... as much as I would like them to get the numeracy, get the literacy and
certainly embed it ... we’ve had to cut out all these nice frilly things ... we’re teaching the same content in a lot fewer hours and to big classes.
   (FG3:6)

The amount of assessment with unit standards was also a pressure, particularly in relation to the TEC learning progressions:
   They are already writing assessments, 240 of them, so to overlay the
complexity of progressions around someone’s literacy and numeracy
development, nah ... When tutors could see that ten students had a
weakness here and five had a weakness there ... It will be like ‘What the hell
do I do?’ (FG2: 5, 15).

Teaching in the institution is clearly student-centred: ‘I don’t know of anyone who
isn’t here to support their students’ (P1:4). Outcomes were understood as more than
hard outcomes:
   We have even gone a little bit further than that and have developed a
chart for monitoring soft outcomes. ... So if we ever get into a situation
where we are talking about completion, retention and we are looking at
value added, we have actually got some evidence behind it. (P1:11-12)

Adult education principles are integrated into the good teaching practices espoused
in the institutional document A guide to effective teaching and learning and an
awareness of them was evident: ‘They might be fantastic tradespeople but they are
new to teaching adults’ (P5:2). Several phrases about pedagogy recurred throughout
the interviews. Embedding literacy was seen as ‘good teaching’ involving ‘deliberate
acts of teaching’ that were ‘built in not bolted on’:
   The thing with embedding literacy is that it’s not a whole lot of extra
work, just good teaching practice ... it’s a matter of slotting in five or ten
minutes somewhere to make sure the students have understood.
   (FG1:3)

Links between embedded LLN pedagogy and flexible learning are being made, and
most staff seemed to be aware that learning progressions are part of LLN
embedding: ‘They will do an on-line assessment to see where they would sit on the
progressions’ (FG1:9); ‘I was able to make sure that we were covering the
progressions’ (P2:5). There were, however, different views on whether embedded
LLN was functional or critical:
   A critical aspect of the politics of literacy and things like that is just alien
speak for those people [Level 2 students] and it’s not needed. They
actually need informational stuff to help them get skills and knowledge
that help them do something pragmatic. (FG2:12)

Others thought there was a place for critical literacy and some saw a progression
across programme levels: ‘Levels One to Three I suspect it will be functional … but
really, at the end of it [degrees], you want to produce a graduate who is a critical
consumer of knowledge and information’. (P1:13-14)
Professional development

A commitment to professional development for LLN embedding is evident. Purpose 5 in the Capability Development Proposal identifies specific goals and actions: providing staff development opportunities; releasing tutors to attend them; supporting tutors to complete the relevant National Certificates. Information on LLN embedding is included in staff induction; foundation learning courses are developed and delivered by appropriately qualified staff. A staff development advisor has been appointed and the job descriptions for LLN positions include responsibilities for professional development. In-house clusters, modelled on the TEC ones, are available from 2010. This organisational commitment is especially important given that ‘staff development hasn’t been on the radar for a while’ (P4:3).

In the last two years professional development had focused on the TEC clusters. Most staff have welcomed the opportunity: ‘It is some of the best tutor development that has come out of the system for tertiary tutors’ (P5:3). Working together has been beneficial: ‘Bringing people together ... talking to each other and sharing experiences ... has been really valuable’ (FG2:2). Many also referred to awareness raising: ‘It really raised awareness and I think we used it to identify students with some literacy problems that probably wouldn’t have been identified without the clusters’ (FG3:2). One issue is the time they take: ‘In some weeks it was eight hours of meetings on top of what you already have … there was no time to do any work in those weeks and I thought it was outrageous’ (FG2:17); and the times they are scheduled: “The time schedules were really peak teaching times ... so you had this conflict of interest’. (FG3:2)

Staff are encouraged to enrol in a variety of relevant qualifications from National Certificate to masterate. However, there were some divergent views on the NCALE: ‘I would like to think that numbers of our tutors will do the NCALE’ (P3:13); ‘For me the NCALE is a piece of paper to keep the ivory tower people happy’ (P2:9). Issues related to qualifications also emerged. Some tutors, who already hold a professional qualification and have a Certificate in Adult Teaching (CAT), face being required to complete the NCALE as well: ‘I have the Level 5 National Certificate. I have ticked that box. I have done what I had to. And if they are going to give me another box to tick ... I don’t know if I’ll be so inclined (FG3:9). Finally, some people identified a sensitive professional development issue that will take careful handling and potentially has an important impact on successful LLN embedding: ‘Some of the staff actually have literacy and numeracy issues, so to actually expect them [to do qualifications] is quite a hard concept’ (P1:9).

Organisational factors

A number of organisational factors in embedded LLN provision emerge from this case study:

- There is a whole-of-organisation focus.
- A champion influenced organisational commitment to LLN.
- Government funding and professional development has been a major driver, though there is also a professional commitment to LLN provision.
- Policies and procedures inform organisational direction and practice.
- An organisational plan for developments to 2011 is in place.
- There is a commitment to professional development.
- Some partnerships with ITOs have been developed.
• Staff appointments support LLN delivery.
• Teaching is student-centred; LLN provision is student-centred.
• LLN provision is promoted as ‘good teaching’, ‘deliberate acts of teaching’ and as ‘built in not bolted on’.
• Partnership between flexible learning, staff development and LLN is fostered.
• While aligning with the government-supported approach to embedded LLN staff also understand that there is no single model of embedded provision.
• The friendly approach of the ‘specialists’ is a key factor in tutor take up; these people work well together and with tutors.
• Opportunities exist for vocational and literacy specialists to work together.
• While some focus on functional literacy there is recognition of critical literacy.

Suggestions for organisations: first steps
This case study demonstrates that a range of organisational factors influence successful LLN provision. It identifies first steps for other organisations to consider. A whole of organisation approach seems to be important. It requires high levels of support from management, commitment from organisation champions and staff, development and implementation of relevant policies and procedures, and a plan for the implementation of embedded LLN that is communicated clearly. Embedded LLN seems to work best when built into programmes and thought about as part of good, student-centred teaching rather than something alien and an addition to existing workloads. Embedded LLN requires people to drive it, but slowly enough that most staff can keep up and with approaches that draw staff in. There is no single embedding model; each organisation will adapt and create models for their context. Champions are important factors. They advocate with both management and staff, paving the way to organisational commitment and successful provision. The qualities and skills of the champion are a vital part of their success. Professional development is an essential factor. All staff need to learn how to embed LLN in their own teaching; qualifications in literacy teaching may be part of this. Of course, some issues will need to be addressed. Many of these relate to resourcing of professional development, such as teacher release, workload allocations and time, and literacy qualifications.

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References

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