

# Lifelong Learning and Research Methodologies: focus on the use of mixed methods in the 'Adult Basic Skills and Workplace Learning' project

Institute of Education, *TEMPUS IV Project*

13<sup>th</sup> October 2014

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# Preliminary discussion:



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Consider previous presentations and your visit to the LLAKES centre.

What research methodologies have been employed in the projects that you have been discussing?

Is it possible to identify some advantages and disadvantages of the selected methodologies?

# Mixed methods research: focus on the 'ABSWL project'



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'Adult Basic Skills and Workplace learning' project: a five year (2003-2008) study of the impact of workplace 'Skills for Life' provision on organisations and employees (564 learners in 53 organisations from a variety of sectors).

## *Follow up research:*

LLAKES Strand 3 project 2 (2009-2011): key factors that facilitate and inhibit sustainable workplace SFL provision, spatial dimensions of SFL workplace provision, learner biographies/transitions.

# Policy background to the research (1)



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- The International Adult Literacy Survey (OECD) in 1997: the findings claim that 1 in 5 adults in the UK have Level 1 literacy skills (at or below the age of an 11 year old).
- The Moser committee (1999) highlights national literacy and numeracy skills crisis in the UK.
- The national 'Skills for Life' strategy launched in 2001: more than £5 billion allocated to the development literacy, numeracy and ESOL provision.
- An important component of this strategy entailed major investment in the funding of literacy, numeracy and ESOL provision in the workplace.
- The publication of the Leitch Review of Skills in 2006 and the subsequent launch of the 'Train to Gain' initiative further extended UK policy emphasis on the significance of 'Skills for Life' workplace provision.

# Policy background to the research (2)



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UK policy assumptions underpinning Skills for Life provision:

- Investment in workplace SFL provision is motivated by the goal of boosting the UK's economic productivity and competitiveness.
- The economic rationale of workplace SFL provision is underpinned by assumptions about the pervasive reach of the 'knowledge economy' to all sectors and levels of the UK economy.

# Examples of differing research approaches to the study of adult literacy



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Quantitative approaches towards the study of literacy:

Literacy assessments underpinned by ‘autonomous’ model of literacy. e.g. OECD analysis of International Adult Literacy Surveys (IALS).

Qualitative approaches towards the study of literacy:

The ‘social practices’ approach towards literacy: explores the diverse contexts in which literacy practices are employed and the key role of power relations in privileging specific types of literacy practices. (e.g. Street 1995).

# The ABSWL project approach to mixed methods.



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- Methodological pragmatism (Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998): ‘fitness of purpose’ of research methods. Dialogical and Iterative engagement between quantitative and qualitative methods. Avoidance of privileging one method over another.
- The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods are regarded as broadly complementary: ‘non-overlapping weaknesses and complementary strengths’ (Brewer and Hunter 1989: 1).

# Commonly cited purposes for employing mixed methods



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Through their analysis of 57 mixed methods evaluation projects, Greene et al (1989: 259) identified the following 5 key purposes for employing a mixed methods research design:

**Triangulation:** seeks convergence, corroboration, correspondence of results from the different methods

**Complementarity:** seeks elaboration, enhancement, illustration, clarification of the results from one method with the results of the other method.

**Development:** seeks to use the results from one method to help develop or inform the results of the other method.

**Initiation** seeks the discovery of paradox and contradiction, new perspectives and frameworks, the recasting of questions or results from one method with the questions or results from another method.

**Expansion** seeks to extend the breadth and range of inquiry by using different methods for different inquiry components.

# The ABSWL project research questions



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What gets a workplace programme off the ground?

What sort of environment promotes success / ensures survival?

What happens to the learners which may be related to their learning experiences?

What happens to the company/organisation that may be related to the existence of the learning programme?

- Literacy assessments (reading and writing) were conducted on three occasions: Time 1 (at beginning of the course), Time 2 (2005/6), and Time 3 (2007).
- Structured Questionnaire for learners, tutors and personnel/training managers.
- In-depth interviews with sub-sample of learners, tutors, employers/managers.

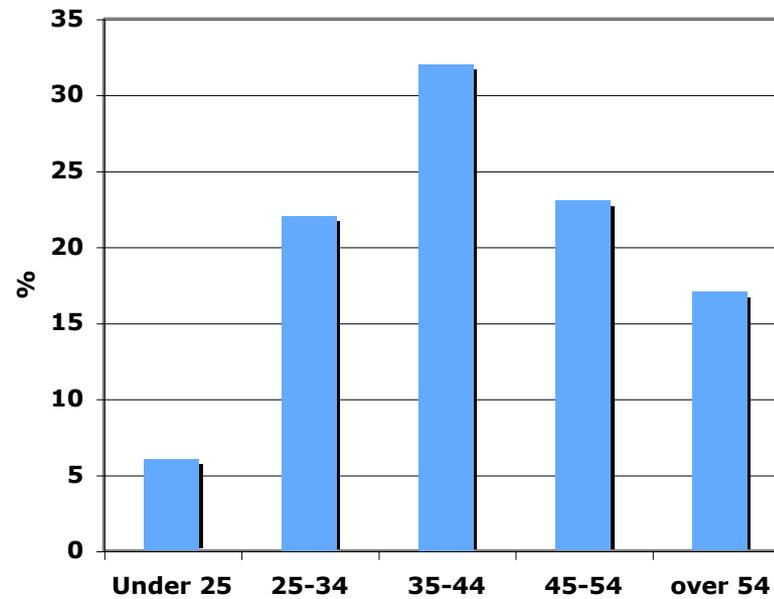
# Learner characteristics:



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- Almost two-thirds male.
- Average age just over 40.
- Almost all in permanent full-time employment.
- Average time with current employers almost 8 years.
- ESOL learners are heavily represented in the sample: Basic skills workplace learners in sample are 35% ESOL, whereas current UK employed workforce is 3% ESOL.

# Age profile of study learners



# Highest qualification obtained (%)



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	Learners	Non-ESOL learners	UK working age population, 2001
None	46	44	27
Level 1	11	16	12
Level 2	18	23	16
Level 1 or 2 (includes those where unclear which)	36	48	
Level 3	11	6	16
Level 4	6	2	
Level 5	1	0	29

*NB: numbers in column 1 do not sum to 100*

# Some examples of workplace SFL provision (1)



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- The food company (North-West England): ESOL provision. 50 % of employees do not speak English as their first language. Combination of online learning and classes.
- The bus company: several hundred bus drivers undertake SFL embedded in customer care courses. The courses respond to increasing use of accident or incident report forms: company fear of litigation
- The care workers (London): SFL and care work course. The course responds to increasing use of report writing (care-plans, monthly reviews of patients, record of medication) and ICT.

# Some examples of workplace SFL provision (2)



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- The engineering firm (Midlands): Union Learning Representatives are responsible for setting up the courses. Learners see literacy course as a 'first step' towards taking other courses.
- The food manufacturing company (north-east England). ICT and literacy courses undertaken in the company's learndirect centre (also open to the local community). The company aims to strengthen corporate loyalty and build ties with the wider community

# Some key issues that emerged from the ABSWL project quantitative data:



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- For those who were native English speakers, the courses had a very limited impact on the improvement of literacy skills.
- Learners for whom English was a second language showed modest but statistically significant improvements (but difficult to establish cause).
- Wide range of motivations for learning (not just related to job-specific considerations).
- The outcomes of participation on the courses were equally diverse.
- Issue of sustainability: very few organizations developed the capacity to deliver SFL provision on a long-term basis (Wolf et al 2010 ).

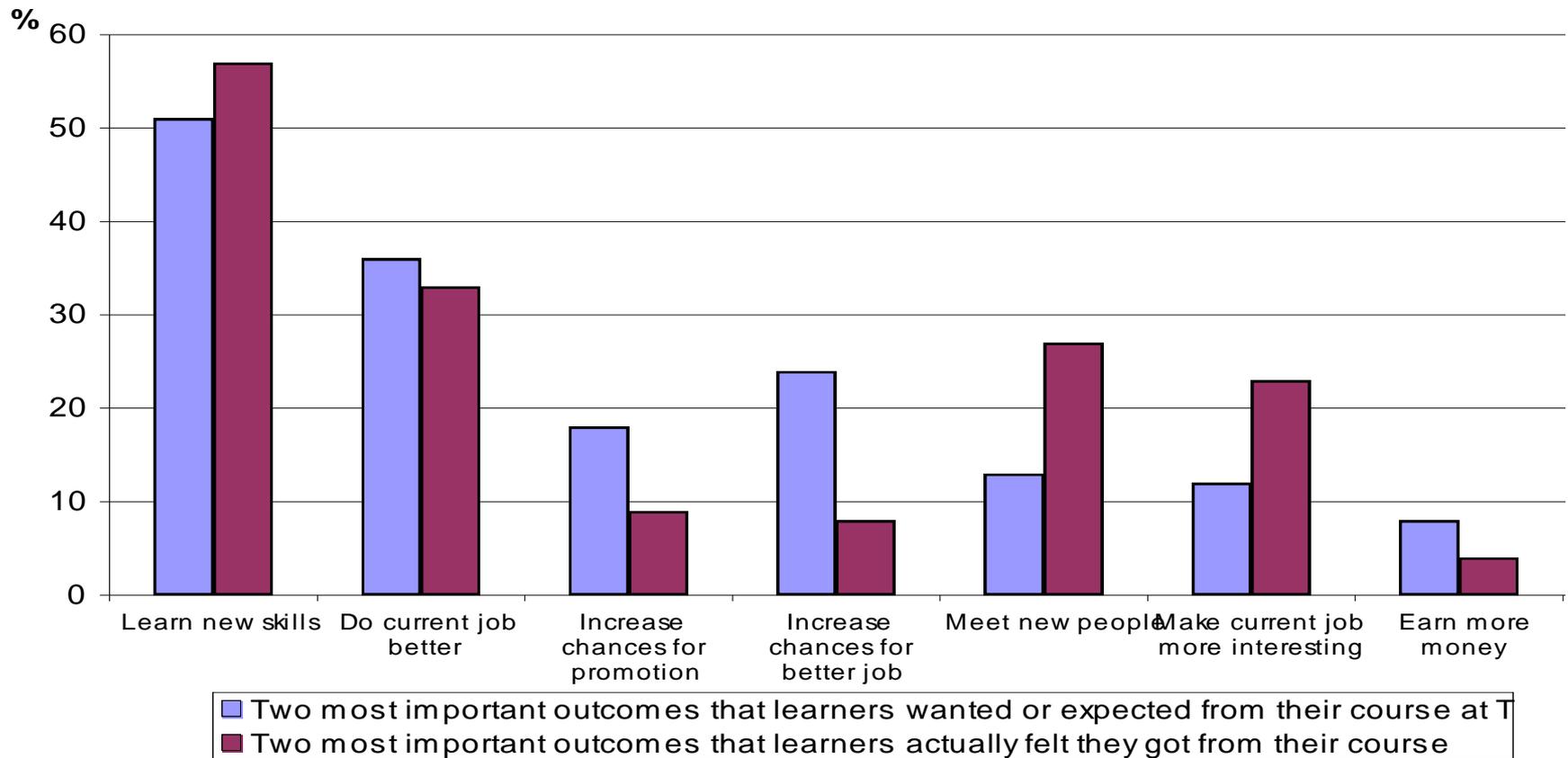
# Outcomes of course (item by item basis)

Increased confidence at work	66%
Developed new skills	61%
Increased confidence outside work	59%
Met new people	58%
Affected how current job is done*	45%
Helped with use of computers outside work	33%
Helped with use of computers at work	27%
Made work more interesting	25%
Increased chances for promotion	11%
Increased chances of a better job	10%
Helped earn more money	2%

\* 40% elaborated: all reported positive impact

Whether or not a course increased confidence at work was highly (and positively) related to whether a learner also thought it had helped them to do their current job better/had affected how they did the job.

# Most important expected and actual benefits from the course



# Some key issues that emerged from the ABSWL project qualitative data:



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- Organisational case-studies: identification of processes that shape literacy and numeracy skills utilisation (e.g. ‘flattening out’ of management structures, audit regimes, impact of ICT) (Evans and Waite 2008).
- Learner biographies: SFL courses can respond effectively to shifting attitudes towards learning since childhood (Evans and Waite, 2009 and 2013).
- The spatial dimensions of workplace learning (e.g. the convenience and accessibility of this type of provision) (Kersh et al 2011).
- Key factors that determine sustainable workplace SFL provision (e.g. ‘whole organization’ approaches to SFL provision). (Waite et al 2014).

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# The combination of quantitative and qualitative research reveals:



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- Despite government's goal of promoting workplace Skills for Life courses to boost economic productivity, the learners' motivations for participating on the courses were not primarily related to job-specific considerations.
- The outcomes were similarly diverse. Learners made small gains in formal literacy but there were wider benefits associated with participation on the courses (increased confidence, participation in further learning etc. ).
- 'Compensatory' learning experiences: workplace SFL provision can provide opportunities for learning for those who have missed out on the chances to benefit from education at an earlier stage in their lives.
- Challenges around sustaining SFL provision on a long-term basis.

# Some advantages of using both quantitative and qualitative research methods



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- Triangulation/corroboratorion of findings.
- Quantitative research combined with in-depth interviews that explore the more 'subjective' aspects of the learners' experiences. 'Complementarity' (Greene et al 1989: 259).
- The iterative use of mixed methods: quantitative findings are explored in more detail through qualitative research. Qualitative findings inform subsequent design of the next stage of structured interviews. 'Initiation' and 'expansion' (Greene et al 1989: 259).

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