



Talisman

THE NEWSPAPER FOR ADULT LEARNING

Unqualified success

The ALI's latest survey report highlights the clear benefits to individuals and society of non-accredited learning, just as funding changes leave it facing an uncertain future.

It is very likely that we will look back on 2005 as a crossroads for the future of adult and community learning. Those of us who predicted the blossoming of adult learning with the removal of the schedule two/non-schedule two divide now face the prospect of the whole structure of adult education being run down over the next few years.

Ironically, this comes just at a time when the government is trying its hardest to encourage us all to think more about our social, civic and personal values. It is the development and nurturing of these very values, running like a golden thread through much adult learning provision, which are now in danger of being cut adrift from the funding that has sustained them thus far. The picture looks grim for anything in adult learning that doesn't count towards a target, or more pointedly, a "qualification".

So where does this leave the future of non-accredited learning? The type of learning that happens in all sorts of places; which involves different kinds of participants from all walks of life and uses a huge variety of platforms and methods; which is sometimes hard to categorise and measure; which is often wrongly described as "informal learning" and therefore falsely assumed to be unstructured; but which comes fairly low down the hierarchy of importance as far as learning is concerned, below the prioritised and, consequently, preferentially funded accredited learning programmes.

This report sets out to identify the key ingredients of good non-accredited learning and to celebrate the impact it has on the lives of a hugely diverse range of people. It changes, and has changed, the lives of so many; from those affected by serious illness or low self-esteem to the employees of some of the biggest and most successful blue-chip companies in the UK.

A wide range of very different organisations was visited, each of which deals with learners and communities who have evolving and highly contextualised needs. Every case study provides a powerful, and sometimes moving, testimony of the influence of non-accredited learning — whether formal, non-formal or informal — in empowering people to change their everyday lives. It also gives some key challenges to those who provide non-accredited learning to ensure it meets the agendas of the government and the individual learner.

THE WORKPLACE

It shouldn't be forgotten that employers are responsible for much of the non-accredited learning which takes place in this country. The importance of this non-accredited learning has been jointly recognised by the ALI and a number of companies, now working together to facilitate commissioned ALI inspections of their non-government-funded training.

Companies such as Tesco, James Beattie and Jewson clearly recognise that accredited qualifications, with their prescriptive nature, do not on their own meet business needs. Having said that, these qualifications can provide a meaningful development experience when combined with internal training programmes. Non-accredited learning can be purchased as necessary internally or externally,



Picture: Giles @ GMN Creative

A project run by Oxfordshire LEA is providing homeless people with a way back into learning

delivered at the most appropriate time and tailored to meet business and individual needs. Interestingly, some employers see no reason why the public should fund the achievement of accredited qualifications for their employees, who are already paid to carry out their job. The assessment demands of accredited courses put many employers off. Many do not have appropriately qualified assessors or verifiers and often find themselves buying in expertise, which leads to a perceived loss of quality control.

FLEXIBILITY AND RESPONSIVENESS

Non-accredited learning benefits from the freedom it gives organisations to design programmes in response to the needs of individuals or groups of learners. This is of fundamental importance where young people and adults are re-engaging in, or are completely new to, learning. It allows them to take responsibility for what, how, and when they learn. It also allows employers to meet the timely and specific needs of their business. Accreditation brings with it the benefits of a qualification but also the restraints of a syllabus, a timescale and, more often than not, some sort of external assessment.

The most successful non-accredited learning programmes fully engage the learner in ensuring that the opportunities to learn meet their needs and interests. Many successful providers plan programmes only after close consultation with their learners. Hill Holt Wood, Prospects Training and Nottingham County Council (in its Acorn Initiative) have all taken this approach with their E2E programmes.

At Hill Holt Wood, many learners start below entry level. The programme aims to help them overcome barriers that can often prevent further learning taking place, providing lower-level learning and meeting social needs. Staff gather a wide range of information about each learner, which might include their homecare

arrangements, relationships with others and attitudes to everyday experiences. Acorn Initiative learners set personal goals; some may have targets in relation to exercise and healthy eating, while others might concentrate on improving their attendance. The more challenging the targets set, the more often learners receive reviews.

Oxfordshire LEA's Adult Learning Service has recognised that the key to success is listening and reacting to what learners want. Because many non-accredited learning projects originate organically, in response to unmet needs, their initial tendency is to have, at best, broad agendas, minimal infrastructure and flexible organisation. A good example of this sort of evolution is the programme where members of the county's travelling community produce their own scrapbooks to celebrate their journey through life and their cultural ties.

The routes to new learning can be very informal and unexpected. Storybook Dads started as an opportunity for mums and dads in prison and their families to promote positive parental images. By sending their children a CD of them reading a bedtime story, the prisoners are fulfilling a natural parental role. This has led to other unexpected outcomes: some prisoners have been spurred on to improve their reading and writing skills in literacy classes, while others are trained to use the digital audio-editing software to record their stories and improve their IT skills into the bargain.

Sometimes, the ability to respond to learners' needs quickly and imaginatively can be crucial. In Oldham, the lifelong learning service has to deal with a whole range of needs identified by

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A special four-page report on
non-accredited learning

Learners able to make their own choices

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organisations working on health issues in the local community. Workers in these partner organisations appreciate the speed and reliability of the service staff's response. Asian women who feel isolated in their local communities have been encouraged to get involved in sewing classes, and learning in English as a second language has been successfully linked to yoga courses.

RELEVANCE AND CHOICE

To be successful, learning must be relevant to the individual. Non-accredited learning is often associated with notions of "informal learning", the very essence of which is the concept of learning resulting from daily work, family or leisure activities. Learning can also have a broader relevance to society at large, with examples including the economic benefits created as people develop work and employability skills, or the improvements to mental and physical health gained from activities. There is a very real danger of "throwing out the baby with the bath water" as many adult learning providers are forced to shelve what are categorised as general leisure and recreational courses. It isn't until one drills down to the individual learner's motives for attending such courses that one finds that their learning needs might just be fulfilling the government's priorities for developing employability skills or a healthier society.

Entry to Employment (E2E) is a government-funded programme for young people not yet ready or able to enter apprenticeships, further education or employment. E2E programmes are normally made up of the three interdependent core areas of basic and key skills, personal and social development and vocational training. The extent to which each programme is non-accredited will depend on the needs and interests of the learner.

For adults referred to the Learning on Prescription Project in Macclesfield, the support they get from their learning adviser to make a choice that is relevant to them means a great deal. What is relevant at a particular point in life depends on personal circumstances. Choosing to attend a course has been an important step for learners in taking some control over their lives.

For one learner, the decision has proved quite literally to be a "life-saver". Pam Anderton has a considerable history as an adult learner, and was part-way through a four-year degree course when a series of personal traumas led to her leaving the course, suffering from severe depression. With support from her learning adviser, Pam took up yoga, which she loved, and which has helped her deal with stress and meet new people. She said: "I felt more comfortable with these courses. More relaxed. More stress-free. It gave me peace of mind."

Giving adults and young people choice, and making learning relevant to their lives, also meets many of the government's aspirations for better citizenship and social inclusion. For the homeless learners in Oxfordshire, the elements of their individual learning programmes are fundamental to their goal of gaining a sustained tenancy. Storybook Dads gives prisoners an opportunity to mend damaged parental images and promotes the strengthening of family ties.

For the Oxfordshire travellers, the opportunity to promote positive images of their lifestyle and counteract negative stereotypes is an important thread that runs through most of their learning, as is the desire to encourage their children to preserve their traditional language, customs and skills.

Time and again, successful organisations emphasise how important it is to involve learners closely in making choices about their learning, and how non-accredited courses have enabled them to do this. Many young people on the E2E programmes visited have never experienced the process of making choices. Some have lived much of their lives in care, and the key decisions about many aspects of their lives have been made by social workers. These young people are empowered by being involved in activities that are real and which will make a difference to their lives. One provider builds into the programmes time for learners to make suggestions about future activities. The group discusses and agrees or discards these ideas as the programme progresses.

COLLECTIVE LEARNING

Many of the learners we spoke to talked of the importance of the links to other people that their learning gave them. Taking away the burden of paperwork and assessment can often make the development of relationships a key feature of non-accredited learning programmes.

For many people, the support given by other learners in a group setting is very important. For example, those attending the Learning Ambassadors programme in Oldham have significant barriers to their learning to overcome. Two women on the course who live in a hostel have been helped to remain involved by the support of other learners. Learners coping with mental health conditions are clear about the value of a structure which brings them into contact with other people. One commented: "I wasn't well this morning, but I forced myself to attend and I feel much better now. Your mood changes when you get here. It has changed a bit of negativity into positivity."

Oldham learners appreciate the social as well as the physical aspects of attending health and fitness classes. Elderly learners or those living on their own describe the "group experience" as particularly important. Learners with learning difficulties and disabilities are integrated well in many classes, being supported by carers until they are comfortable about attending independently. One learner explained that she comes to classes on her own because she can now do the exercises better than her carer!

David Nelson, a learner from Cheshire, suffered from depression and became increasingly withdrawn after an accident at work left him unemployed for almost two years. The Learning on Prescription project has helped him find his



It's all smiles in this Pilates session at Oldham



Maintaining concentration during a keep-fit class

feet again and reconnect with society. Meeting with the project's learning adviser took courage but has proved to be a turning point for him: "The big difference was that there was someone to talk to, someone to listen to my story without judging me."

David went on to take a non-accredited introduction to counselling course, and has volunteered to help at a drop-in centre for young people. Both activities have brought a social acceptance that he perceived was lacking during the previous two years.

The excitement felt by David has had a similar impact on his wife Kerry, who, having initially taken up a yoga course, moved on to a range of other challenging courses at her local college and is now in the first year of an Open University degree course. She describes the non-accredited programme as having been so influential — "as a first step out of the house" — and as valuable time away from caring for their eight children. She plans to start a teaching assistant's course in September and now has "tons of confidence" in her academic ability. She and her husband are inspiring and supporting each other and their enthusiasm is affecting their children: "You influence them to try."

At Hill Holt Wood, collective learning through structured teamwork is a natural part of the daily work pattern and is central to the achievement of many learners' goals. Learners find out how to take responsibility and to be responsible for



Young people on the Hill Holt Wood project in Nottinghamshire develop important learning skills through a wide range of rural activities

others. They learn to make large tasks manageable by allocating aspects of them to different team members, and realise that each team member has a part to play to achieve the goal.

Learners are also clear that the benefits of non-accredited learning lead to better social cohesion. In almost all the case studies in this report, learners have used what they learn to help their family, friends or the wider community. This is particularly important in Storybook Dads, where one young mum has recorded two stories for her baby so that he recognises her voice when he visits her with his grandmother. One yoga learner in Oldham has passed on some of the techniques she has learned to a 19-year-old with an obsessive disorder, helping him to control his panic attacks. Another learner attending the same class stressed the positive effect it has had on her lifestyle and how she has started to teach yoga to her children.

Social links forged through non-accredited learning can go way beyond the immediate family. Learners at Hill Holt Wood attend a Remembrance Day service in a special woodland clearing and invite older people who served in the two World Wars. Staff find that the young people begin to change their attitudes to older people when they talk to them about their experiences. Some develop a new sense of respect as they learn about the sacrifices and risks that were taken during wartime. For the Oxfordshire travellers, links with the wider communities around their sites are bringing benefits and a shared understanding of their different cultures to all. Learners on the homeless project in Oxfordshire are given contacts which they can access by email at any of the night shelters or hostels in the hub. This continued support helps them avoid being drawn back into a culture of dependency on drugs or alcohol, and aids their re-integration into wider society.

PROGRESSION AND SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability is an issue and a challenge for almost anyone responsible for providing non-accredited learning, with much of the work depending on short-term or insecure funding. Often funding has to be found from a range of different sources and combined to best effect. Non-accredited learning can often be seen as an evolutionary process in which the learning that happens in response to an initial need triggers other needs and hence progression.

Since its inception, the Learning on Prescription project has depended on the skills of staff to access an ever-changing funding playing field. Staffing has been minimal, starting with one learning adviser on 10 hours a week, increasing to two additional advisers and clerical support, but then decreasing again to a single learning adviser with all funding having been due to cease at the end of June this year. This is despite the backing of doctors linked to the project who, along with the

learners, are only too aware of its benefits; it is also despite the fact that the project supports the government's stated aim of creating a healthier society. In addition, the project is working with particularly vulnerable learners: more than 80 per cent of the referrals have mental health conditions. Learning advisers frequently have to work with individuals over extended timescales — there is rarely the luxury of a quick fix. Consequently, short-term funding can undermine the potential benefits of the scheme.

Nevertheless, there is certainly evidence of learners

progressing as a result of their involvement with the project. David Nelson, who left school after a fragmented education with no qualifications has, after taking his non-accredited counselling course, completed an Open University course in health and social care and a certificate in counselling and is nearing the end of another Open University course in systems modelling. Another learner, Mandy Morley, after initially attending yoga classes, has progressed into training as a paramedic.

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Projects that fly the flag

Hill Holt Wood runs a project based in an area of ancient woodland near Newark in Nottinghamshire. Programme aspects are based on environmental sustainability and support young people, including school pupils, to change their lifestyles. Learners develop workplace ethics and discipline through activities such as traditional wood and metal craft, survival skills, organic food production and animal care.

Nottinghamshire County Council runs its Acorn Initiative at 14 training centres throughout the county. Young people develop personal and social skills through a wide range of activities including conservation and environmental work, outdoor pursuits, martial arts, visits and talks. They also gain practical skills in construction, retailing, painting, decorating and horticulture.

Prospects Training helps to develop the employment skills of young people in Humberside who have disengaged from learning. The training programme includes work tasters in catering and hairdressing, health and safety, key skills and a wide range of other activities designed to improve teamworking, planning and evaluative skills, self-confidence and communication.

Storybook Dads started as a charity venture at HMP Dartmoor three years ago, and has since spread to 23 prisons and Young Offenders' Custodial Establishments across England. Prisoners write stories and/or record them on CDs, maintaining family ties and becoming more involved with their own and their children's education.

Eastern Cheshire Primary Care Trust uses its Learning on Prescription project to tackle the links between poor health,

low self-esteem and resultant social exclusion. Doctors, practice nurses and health visitors at six local practices in Macclesfield identify and refer to the project adults who might benefit from a learning activity such as yoga or arts and crafts. Most participants are struggling with health, social, emotional or personal problems. Choosing to attend a course is an important step for them in taking some control of their lives and re-engaging not only with learning, but also with other people.

Oldham Lifelong Learning Service targets its health and fitness courses at local residents most in need of the boost that learning can bring to their lives. The service supports the elderly and learners recovering from debilitating illnesses or with mental health conditions. Many learners come from wards in Oldham that register high indices of deprivation. Health professionals refer people who would get most physical and emotional benefit from a wide range of courses including yoga, healthy eating, t'ai chi and Pilates.

Staff working for **Oxfordshire LEA's Adult Learning Service** spend a lot of time supporting homeless people and travellers to help them integrate with other communities around the county. The homeless project started in 2002 and gives adults and young people, many recovering from drug and alcohol misuse, a way back into learning. It places homeless people in sustainable tenancies through a range of courses that give them the skills to cope with everyday living. The scheme for travellers supports women and their children based at some of the six council-leased sites in Oxfordshire.



Pam Anderton



David Nelson with wife Kerry



Mandy Morley

'Cuts will hit many'

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Oldham's health and fitness provision is similarly vulnerable to shifts in funding priorities, particularly now as uncertainty surrounds how this sort of provision might be classified for funding purposes in the future. Learners progress in and beyond their chosen programme; those with learning difficulties and disabilities and mental health conditions are supported well to integrate into mainstream provision. Nine out of a group of 13 learners who started the Learning Ambassador project in Oldham have gone on to achieve a Level 3 qualification. Not surprisingly, the group was subsequently nominated for an Adult Learners' Week award. These learners are now active in their own communities and have developed personal ambitions through the programme. One wants to become a midwife and is currently working with local young mothers on the benefits of breast-feeding, and another is considering a university course on health and community.

Progression is the very *raison d'être* of E2E programmes and is measured in terms of moving on to further training, learning or employment. All projects visited for this report demonstrated good rates of progression for learners. Nevertheless, progress in less easily measured ways is valued just as much. The learners develop reliability, positive attitudes, interpersonal skills, trustworthiness and timekeeping — the skills that they need throughout life to sustain work and social relationships. The Acorn Initiative gives a monthly award to the learner making the most significant progress. The winner receives a small financial reward but also takes responsibility for being the next monthly chairperson of the learners' forum. Learners at Hill Holt Wood are encouraged to apply for assistant ranger roles with increased responsibility, thereby taking another step in preparing themselves for employment outside the project.

LITERACY SKILLS

Some of the Oxfordshire travellers have been taking part in a variety of projects for several years. Many of the women have progressed to accredited provision and have finally begun to admit that their poor literacy skills are a barrier they need to remove. Many have become motivated to take on a qualification once one member of the group has paved the way — the power of "word of mouth" cannot be underestimated.

Many of the Storybook Dads participants progress beyond the project. Some take literacy classes to improve their reading and writing skills. Selected prisoners train as sound editors at the three prisons with editing suites; some are now being offered accreditation, having developed their editing skills to a sufficiently high standard. In addition, they develop graphic design skills by producing the cover for the CD, or by producing their own book for their child.

Significant changes that typically occur in the evolution of non-accredited learning include the formalisation of learning and accreditation. It is important to emphasise, however, that this does not always mean more paperwork and the dreaded threat of increased bureaucracy. The



Members of the Oxfordshire travelling community have taken part in several projects

providers in this report have all found their own "fit for purpose" ways to recognise their learners' progress. Accreditation is often a source of stress for learners. Non-accredited learning gives people breathing space to try out different experiences, but this doesn't mean that the learning is not valuable. With increased confidence, some learners do progress to accredited courses, but to quote one learner: "The piece of paper is just something to say that I've done it, but it's the 'doing it' that counts."

Common to many of these projects is the breaking of old habits and patterns of behaviour — changing attitudes which have previously been a barrier to progress or acceptance. Many of the people we spoke to for this report have been marginalised by society. In many cases, their previous experience has been of little or no choice in their lives. They need to learn how to make decisions for themselves.

Skills are developed almost by stealth, particularly where programmes are specifically tailored to the wider needs of each individual. Unsurprisingly, learning about IT is a common and popular feature of many of the projects. Often, the starting point is giving learners what they say they want — satisfying an interest, for example — but building from this to meet their real needs as their confidence grows and their expectations begin to expand.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

An inability to assess progress and learning outcomes is a criticism often levelled at non-accredited provision. Although many of the positive outcomes are difficult to measure objectively, most of the projects do have specific and measurable targets and have found innovative ways to record learners' achievements. The Oxfordshire travellers use "catch-up" time at the end of programmes to evaluate and record their progress. Of course, for many of the older learners, the maintenance of a skill or level of health is just as valuable as learning something new: "I've had two replacement knees. I'd just seize up if I didn't come!"

A common theme running through all these stories is the positive self-image which people develop from learning. Non-accredited learning is making real differences to the lives of people who feel written off by society before taking part in these activities. For instance, prisoners' self-esteem and perception of themselves as a valued parent are transformed by producing stories for their children — often reading to them for the first time in their lives. Some have come to realise what effect their absence is having on their partners and children.

Young learners with a history of non-attendance or exclusion from school learn that they have valuable skills and can contribute positively to their communities. They learn the value of teamworking to achieve a common goal. Success becomes a routine part of their lives, sometimes in new activities such as quizzes or "brain gyms"; just as importantly, they also learn not to be discouraged by failures. Many learners develop a new sense of pride and joy in their achievements.

Travellers who have worked on their scrapbook diaries every year for the past 12 years are proud of their culture and achievements. Their experiences during the project can be life-changing. This pride is not only helping them to set a strong example of the value of learning, but also to recognise and confront the needs of their families and communities.

Most of these projects produce tangible benefits, too. For example, conservation of ancient woodland is enjoyable and will benefit generations to come, long after the young people involved have moved on. Many older learners benefit from improvements in their physical and psychological health. Sometimes the existence of a class motivates learners to get out of bed. Other learners — such as David, mentioned earlier — who have lost their jobs through ill health, build their confidence and self-esteem to the point where they can support others in the same position. Learners who progress to accredited courses sometimes achieve formal

qualifications for the first time in their lives. Some are now building careers on the basis of their earlier non-accredited learning. All the learners are very conscious of the effect their experiences can have on future prospective learners and their communities.

THE RIGHT MIX

In conclusion, this report paints a rich picture of the diverse nature of non-accredited learning and the huge impact it has on so many people, young and old. It reveals that good non-accredited learning contains the right mix of formality and informality, and that the strong temptation to see informal and formal learning as separate domains should be resisted.

Those involved in adult education have long promoted less formal, non-accredited learning as a means of empowering disadvantaged learners. The danger for the government is that in driving a countervailing, more economically motivated movement in the name of global competitiveness, it risks the loss of the entrepreneurial spirit and social cohesiveness brought about by so much non-accredited learning.

Many see the impending cuts to the funding of adult courses as being confined to so-called "leisure learning". It is clear from this report, however, that any cuts will hit many different types of participants, some of whom truly depend on non-accredited courses for real lifelong learning and for whom it has been an unqualified success.

■ This ALI report was compiled by Penny Allen, Susan Bain, Kevin Dowson, Nick Gadfield, Lorna Fitzjohn, Ann Jackson and Richard Moore and edited by David Parker.

Is your non-accredited learning an "unqualified success"? How does your non-accredited learning measure up?

- ▲ Do you know what skills learners bring to the programme, and what skills they lack?
- ▲ Are your learners involved in developing their programme?
- ▲ What skills do learners gain, or maintain, and how do they use them?
- ▲ Are you clear what the learning is supposed to achieve?
- ▲ Do you measure learners' progress and achievements in a way which is easy to understand for all involved?
- ▲ Can learners see the difference that learning makes to their everyday lives?
- ▲ Are you providing a learning opportunity which is sustainable?
- ▲ Do you evaluate its success and how does it evolve as a consequence?
- ▲ Do you have realistic and easily understandable progression routes for learners, and do they move into other learning?
- ▲ Where does it sit in your overall strategy?



A painting class on a drug recovery project