



# Developing embedded literacy, language and numeracy: supporting achievement

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The Regional Achievement Programme is supported by the *Skills for Life Strategy Unit*

## 1 Introduction: Why does it matter?

### Background

Since the beginning of the Adult Literacy Campaign of the 1970s the notion that literacy and numeracy should be taught within contexts which are relevant and purposeful to the learner has been paramount. While some teaching does, of necessity, demand an examination and exploration of the theory of literacy and numeracy, its application has, in good, responsive practice, responded to the interests and purposes of the individual. Discovery of why learners have sought to develop their skills and knowledge has been one of the key characteristics of provision and often provided a starting point for individual tuition. This approach is based on an understanding that literacy and numeracy are not only tools to function in society but also vehicles to engage with, make sense of and question, values and practices of living and working. The inclusion of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in the umbrella term of basic skills is because literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) are seen as essential skills for living and working in the UK. They have some shared history and practices. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is currently being considered as the fourth basic skill. Basic skills are currently being referred to as literacy, language and numeracy; some people refer to them as essential skills.

The delivery of LLN over the last 30 years has included a great deal of discrete provision. It has attracted many learners to colleges, community and work-based learning activities offered in small groups or one-to-one. However, the Moser report of 1999, *A Fresh Start*, suggested that few of the estimated seven million people, whose skills are not sufficiently developed, acknowledge they have any difficulties. The report claimed that:

“Many people are unaware of their poor skills, and many, even if aware, don’t regard it as a problem. And of course there is often a strong stigma in admitting to it.” (DfEE, 1999, p21)

This suggests that some people have found ways of addressing any obstacles raised through poor skills, probably using other family members, close colleagues or avoidance strategies. For a wide range of reasons, these individuals are unlikely to seek out literacy, language and numeracy learning opportunities. Providers and

practitioners are charged with finding different ways to help individuals develop their skills. Embedding LLN could offer this opportunity.

### **Embedding harnesses the way we use LLN**

Embedding LLN is important because it harnesses the ways we use these skills. All social and economic activities, whether they are daily transactions at home or work or ground-breaking initiatives, involve LLN. Living and working, being part of a family, community, workplace, faith group, sports or social club, demand the use of LLN. Embedding approaches to teaching and learning use the purposes to which LLN will be put and capitalise on their natural associations.

### **Embedding helps to motivate learners**

The Moser report also suggested that one of the most difficult challenges in developing a strategy to develop basic skills was to motivate people to become involved in learning:

“How to make it all attractive, accessible and obviously worthwhile is the key issue. Motivation – and how to encourage it – is all.” (DfEE, 1999, p21)

The government’s response to the Moser report was to launch the *Skills for Life Strategy*, with bold targets to increase participation and achievement in the adult population in literacy, language and numeracy by the year 2004. The targets were subsequently increased and extended to 2007. If more and different people are to be attracted into developing LLN and if the essential skills of individuals as well as UK society as a whole are to be improved, then motivation, purposes and interests must be harnessed. Embedding LLN learning could be an attractive way to draw people into learning activities while supporting them with the necessary skills that help them to achieve. This approach seems to be valid whether adults are taking tentative steps towards community-based learning, committed to full vocational programmes or entering work-based opportunities. Harnessing a personal, leisure or employment related purpose could provide the stimulus or motivation to engage in learning. Embedding the subject-related LLN could help the achievement of both the ‘host’ subject as well as the basic skills.

### **Embedding helps overcome prior failure and anxieties**

For many people, the idea of returning to learning is not attractive because their initial experiences of education were unrewarding and, for some, damaging. This is particularly so in relation to LLN learning where painful memories can cloud considerations of whether to engage in taking up opportunities. A possible repetition of failure deters many adults from seeking to develop their LLN skills. An embedded approach could focus on developing an area of interest or a work-

related skill where some prior knowledge and confidence might support motivation. By using such a context as a starting point and embedding LLN within the activity, negative attitudes might be addressed and positive learning experiences offered.

### **Embedding supports achievement of wider goals and ambitions**

Embedding LLN in other subjects or learning activities is important because it helps people to achieve wider personal and employment ambitions and taps into individual purposes and motivations. Importantly, learners are not told to improve their LLN skills before moving into their chosen area of study; they can pursue their aims and aspirations immediately. In workplace learning where employees have insecure LLN skills, progress and development in the job can be more effective if LLN learning is embedded.

### **Embedding helps both subject and LLN teachers**

The development of LLN in other courses helps teachers to deliver more effective learning. The ‘host’ subject tutor has more tools to help learners achieve and the LLN tutor has a clear context and purpose in which to deliver LLN learning. Where teachers make the connections explicit the host subject and LLN become mutually supportive areas of learning. Learners are then more likely to see the relevant links between the subject and the LLN and recognise the necessity to develop in both areas. In response to questions about the importance of embedded LLN, quotations from providers, practitioners and policy-makers have included:

“It’s motivational!”

“It takes basic skills out of its silo.”

“It’s a rich way of working; it is more mainstream than discrete provision. Many people who are disaffected need an holistic approach to learning; embedded basic skills offers this.”

“It’s supportive; if you’re on a vocational programme, it helps you to achieve your goal.”