

Perceptions of success in teaching and learning adult literacy, Jan Eldred, NIACE, Leicester 2002, ISBN 1862011737, 32pp, £7.95, paperback

The subject matter of this paper is of tremendous importance to educators across the spectrum. Determining literacy levels has proven difficult for policy-makers and service providers alike for decades. The difficulty is further evidenced in the complex task of measuring learning outcomes among participants in literacy programmes. This paper, which reveals the inadequacy of current success indicators, highlights the importance of continuing to press for more comprehensive indicators -- indicators that acknowledge the importance of enhanced quality of life for learners as valid and perhaps crucial in determining the success of literacy interventions.

A number of presentation features make the paper very accessible. The language used is clear and unambiguous. The layout is logical and easy-to-follow. The succinct and aptly titled subsections suggest a comprehensive level of consultation with the main stakeholders. The fact that this paper is distilled from a doctoral thesis adds to its appeal. It is unusual for this level of research to be disseminated to a wide audience. All efforts to do so are to be welcomed, especially in a sector such as adult education, characterised as it is by a paucity of serious academic investigation.

Given the brevity of the paper, its adherence to a thesis format serves as a reminder of the depth of the research that lies behind what might otherwise be dismissed as a cursory exploration of literacy. Furthermore, the paper models an approach to research that will undoubtedly be very useful for agencies and groups to follow when compiling evaluations of their own educational interventions. For example, the ways in which the data are presented are visually very accessible and meaningful, while the inclusion of 'real voices' inserts a quality of poignancy and relevance to the work. However, despite these positive attributes, it could be argued that the largely unreconstructed thesis format is overly contrived and altogether too stunted in its current incarnation to carry substantive or illuminating insights. The result is that the reader is required to accept the findings and conclusions of the research without being in a position to adequately judge their veracity.

A key finding of the paper is the importance of confidence-building as an indicator of the success of literacy interventions. I am sure this finding comes as no surprise to literacy tutors and adult educators across the world. However, I was disappointed that the paper did not outline ways in which the linear approach to evaluating the success of teaching and learning could be replaced or even augmented by methodologies that acknowledge and capture the complex and dynamic nature of learning. The inclusion of such would, I believe, greatly enhance the paper's appeal to literacy practitioners.

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By Anne Ryan

Anne Ryan is a lecturer at the Department of Adult and Community Education, National University of Ireland