

Giving other literacies a place at college

Learning is enhanced when teachers integrate students' day to day practices

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Background

Literacy is identified as a significant factor affecting retention, progression and achievement in further education.

FE students, particularly those under 19, are regularly portrayed as a media generation with no interest in literacy beyond playing computer games. Furthermore, the literacy practices they are thought to be involved in are often devalued.

Evidence from these projects shows that their engagement with literacy is rich and varied, but this is rarely drawn upon during their vocational studies. If FE teachers actively developed an understanding of the literacy embedded in students' day to day lives, they could tap them to enhance students' learning experience at college.

In Wales, these issues are more complex, as bilingual provision is designed, delivered and consolidated in FE institutions. New forms of spoken and written communication in Welsh are being brought into play, along with new bilingual ways of using and producing texts.

Findings

Although public discussion focuses on students' deficits in literacy, they engage in rich and varied literacy activities in their daily lives.

Tutors often ignore the communicative aspects of learning, rather than explaining what they mean by terms such as 'analysis' or 'essay'.

Tutors often feel constrained to use existing assessments, even though changing them would benefit students' learning.

Implications

Students' learning is enhanced when FE teachers recognise and tap into these practices in their courses.

Tutors can make the communicative aspects of learning more explicit and visible.

Students should be assessed on their capacity to engage in the actual literacy practices for which their vocational and academic courses are preparing them.

Literacy in students' daily lives

The literacy practices students use in their day to day lives tend to be:

- **multi-modal** – combining symbols, pictures, colour, music
- **multi-media** – combining paper and electronic media
- **shared** – interactive, participatory and collaborative
- **non-linear** – with varied reading paths
- **agentic** – students having control
- **purposeful** to the student
- having a clear **audience**
- **generative** – involving sense-making and creativity
- **self-determined** in terms of activity, time and place
- **varied** – not repetitive

Students' literacy activities arise not only from their own interests and concerns, but from the practicalities of their lives.

For example, in their leisure time they write blogs, diaries and song lyrics and they produce posters and websites. Those with part-time jobs fill in forms, complete records and write invoices. In Wales, some of these writing practices are linked to bilingual workplaces.

What literacies are needed in FE?

Researchers identified four categories of literacy for learning: for learning to be a student; for particular subjects; for assessment and for learning related to work placements or simulations.

They found that most of the reading and writing students do on their college courses, in English and Welsh, is tied to assessment.

Although the cognitive, practical and communicative aspects of learning are integral to one another, they tend to be treated as separate. The communicative aspect is often taken for granted, with students being expected to understand writing genres automatically.

However, the notions of an 'essay' or a 'report' are used in a wide variety of ways, as are tasks such as 'to discuss', 'to research' or 'to analyse'.

It is often thought that the literacy requirements of more vocational courses are of a lower and less complex order than for academic study. This research suggests otherwise. Vocational courses involve a wider range of texts and genres, and require an understanding of social context.

Changes in teaching

As a result of the project, tutors made changes which aimed to:

- make the students more aware of the reading and writing in their everyday lives which could act as resources for their learning
- make reading and writing on courses more resonant with students' vernacular literacy practices
- make the communicative aspects of learning more explicit and visible
- make the reading and writing on courses more relevant to learning.

Changes which engaged with students' everyday literacy activities increased engagement, recall and confidence. One such change introduced on a course in Wales was to have students construct a website for a small business.

However, older students and those on advanced courses often preferred not to draw on leisure-time literacy practices in college.

Assessment

Often the most beneficial changes in teaching practice would have been to re-design assessments. But many staff felt constrained to use existing assessments because of the demands of moderation or because they believed it was not in their power to do otherwise.

Assessments for vocational and subject qualifications demand a great deal of writing in 'pedagogic genres' such as essays, reports, and logbooks. The LFLFE projects have identified assessment methods which are in greater harmony with real working practices used in the fields for which the courses are preparing students.

The findings also suggest that assessment for qualifications in communication skills should be reshaped. They should accredit capabilities developed through real contexts.



The research

LfLFE was conducted as a two-university partnership, in two FE sites in Scotland and two in England. 11 curriculum areas were researched across the 4 sites.

BiLfLFE, a collaboration among three universities and an FE college, studied 40 FE students in Wales.

The projects collected evidence through literacy diaries (using a clockface), student photos and photo-based interviews.

More information from:
www.lancs.ac.uk/lflfe and
<http://www.tlrp.org/proj/martin-jones.html>

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