Voices from the workface: perspectives from a local authority workplace literacy programme

Jane Ward

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

**University of Sheffield
School of Education**

Doctor of Education Programme (Pt. 2)

February 2004

Abstract

This research is an in-depth study of a single workplace which investigates the following questions:

1. What were the needs, interests and aspirations of participants in a workplace literacy programme for local authority employees?
2. What strategies were adopted to meet these needs?
3. Were they successful?
4. What are the implications of the findings for wider policy and practice?

The research uses a qualitative approach within a case study framework. The primary research method is semi-structured interviews with 11 workers who were students on an adult literacy programme, and 9 other people whose roles were relevant to the programme.

The principal findings under each question were

1. The primary concerns related to gaining skills to enable employees to improve their current work situation, secure new employment, for wider life situations, and to access further learning opportunities; the research also demonstrated that whilst employers, employees and trade unions shared some interests, differing needs and priorities created some tensions.

2. The programmes adopted an empowerment approach that aimed to boost confidence and self-esteem and enhance critical, analytical and problem-solving skills alongside a contextualised approach to

i

developing reading, writing and sophisticated oracy skills.

3. Students progressed in the above areas and as a result significant benefits accrued to individuals, their employer and the trade union; these included improved performance, morale and industrial relations, adoption of new literacy practices and heightened aspirations for learning and employment.

4. Implications for policy and practice drawn from the research, although tentative because of the small-scale nature of the study, included broadening engagement strategies, devising additional context-specific curriculum and teacher training guidance, and extending union good practice in employee engagement to curriculum development.

'They are coming into work feeling far better, content, with high morale, as excellent workers who are bringing their brains to work and not leaving them on the gates.'

Dave (regional union official)

Contents

Acknowledgements

1 Introduction

1.1 The research area

The subject of this study is adult basic skills education in the workplace. I have used a case study framework and qualitative approach to investigate the following research questions:

- **What were the needs, interests and aspirations of participants in a workplace literacy programme for local authority employees?**
- **What strategies were adopted to meet these needs?**
- **Were they successful?**
- **What are the implications of the findings for wider policy and practice?**

This will also entail consideration of the question of what workplace literacy provision is, and I will ask whether workplace differs from generic literacy provision and, if so, what its distinct features and characteristics are.

I studied a workplace literacy programme which took place in a single local authority where two different departments each offered a course to staff who either were manual workers or had recently moved from manual occupations into administrative work. There was substantial trade union involvement in the development of one strand. My analysis seeks to draw out the similarities and differences between the two strands and identify how these affected the design, delivery and impact of the programmes.

I aimed to explore the ways in which national basic skills policy plays out at the micro level of practice, including how it impacted on the workers and others involved in the programme, and then relate this to macro-level policy and practice issues. In order to do this I have sketched recent developments in adult literacy and numeracy, lifelong learning and trade union education policy to illustrate the context for the study. I have asked what the basic skills requirements of public sector workplaces in contemporary society are, and the extent to which the definitions of basic skills currently used are appropriate for this context.

1.2 The source of my interest

A number of factors stimulated my interest in this area of study: my practice in the field of adult learning and basic skills since 1983; my recent work in developing workplace basic skills programmes; an increasing interest in policy which had been enhanced by membership of a government policy working group; and an interest in research in literacy and policy stimulated by my participation in an Ed.D. programme.

At the time I carried out the research I was employed as a curriculum manager by a large adult education service run by a local authority in the North of England, and was responsible for leading and developing the literacy, numeracy and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) curriculum across all parts of the service. I do not name the authority in this thesis because of my commitment to protect the identity of the people I interviewed, an aspect of the research methodology I discuss in more detail in chapter 3. As a result, quotations from documents relating to the authority will be anonymous and unreferenced.

My practice was informed by the ideas of Freire (1972), which I encountered at the beginning of my teaching career in the early 1980s. I

was working in multi-racial inner city areas and was very aware that the people with whom I worked were grappling to overcome a multiplicity of problems, for example poverty, poor housing and racism, from a position of very little social and economic power. I became interested in how the Freirean concepts of using literacy to develop critical understanding of situations, equip students to take action for change and bring about social justice and equity could be translated into the contexts in which I worked.

During the following decade, as chronicled by Street (1997), it appeared to me that social justice concerns were marginalised as the post-16 learning climate become increasingly concerned with individual skills development for economic purposes. This shift seemed to be reflected in basic skills teaching, which became progressively more individualised during this period, with a growing focus on decontextualised skills development leading to accreditation. At the same time, the value of a range of aims and approaches, for example family learning programmes (ALBSU 1993a, Brooks et al 1997), continued to be promoted by bodies such as the Basic Skills Agency. The funding regime also permitted different approaches since it was weighted to reward the number of hours of learning provided and did not require providers to adopt specific teaching approaches or content. This provided a space in which diverse practice, including that which retained more social or political than economic goals, could survive. As the debate concerning economic and social justice purposes of learning is still a live issue in the contemporary learning and skills context, I shall return to discuss this in more detail in chapter 2.

My experience as a tutor and a manager had also demonstrated to me that policies and strategies developed at national or authority level were mediated by the agency of the people implementing them in practice, the tutors, students and managers. This suggested that the original intent of the national, local or organisational policy makers might be carried out at

the level of practice, but, equally, it could be adapted or subverted to meet different interests. Thus one of my research interests was to explore how individuals defined their purposes, the similarities and differences and how these were dealt with at the level of practice.

A Fresh Start: Improving Literacy and Numeracy (DfEE 1999a), which became known as the Moser Report, was published in 1999. This report had a major impact and was taken up as a significant government policy initiative. It signalled the beginning of a massive interest in the whole field of basic skills and stimulated myriad new developments, including new approaches to basic skills in the workplace and the emergence of basic skills as a major trades union policy development alongside other workplace learning initiatives.

I quickly became closely connected to early post-Moser initiatives at both national and local levels. I was invited to join the national working group established by the Department for Education and Employment to consider the learning needs of people for whom English is an additional language; the recommendations of this group were published in 2000 (DfEE 2000a). This experience revealed some of the ways in which policy developments are shaped and mediated by the interests of a range of individuals and agencies both inside and outside government and stimulated further my interest in the inter-relationship between policy and practice.

At the level of practice, I was given responsibility for implementing new national developments and initiatives in the service I worked for. I was responsible for one of the first pilot projects introduced to test ways of implementing the Moser Committee's recommendation that opportunities in workplaces for low-paid workers to improve their basic skills should be increased (DfEE 1999a). This project became the 'case' I investigated in

my research, and I shall provide a more detailed description of this in section 1.5.

Although delighted by these new opportunities and the accompanying increase in funding and status of the field, I was also uneasy about some of the underlying assumptions and statements in the report and subsequent policy developments. One concern was that the correlation between poor basic skills and factors such as low income, reduced promotion prospects or the national economic failures highlighted by ALBSU (1993b), Bynner and Parsons (1997) and DfEE (1999a), was presented as a direct causal relationship; and consequently improving basic skills was presented as the solution. This caused me some disquiet as, whilst my experience indicated that there did indeed seem to be clear connections, these analyses and solutions appeared to be discounting or underplaying the significance of additional factors such as individuals' life choices, societal inequalities and power differentials, and the impact of wider economic and technological factors on underperformance. This research provided the opportunity to explore some of these concerns.

1.3 Existing research

In reading for my Ed.D. course, and as I searched for sources to inform my new areas of work I became aware of spaces in the research literature, for example in relation to students' perspectives, local authority workplace literacy provision, the very recent development of trade union roles in basic skills in the workplace, and the impact of provision.

There are significant omissions and underdeveloped areas in theory and research relating to adult basic skills (Brooks et al 2001a, Holland 1998, DfEE 1999a, Street 1997), and this is particularly true of research into work place basic skills in the UK, where analysts have identified a dearth

of studies (Ananiadou et al 2003, Payne 2003). The wider field of workplace learning is also relatively under-researched (Unwin and Fuller 2003). Consequently, the research and theoretical foundations for the current rapid developments of policy and practice in the field of workplace basic skills could be seen as somewhat shaky, and it seemed that a reflective study of a specific initiative could add to the underpinning needed to inform policy and practice in this field. Ananiadou et al, for instance, observed that 'case studies offering in-depth investigation of basic skills training at particular workplaces would be valuable' (2003: 14).

I found little research with a specific focus on key aspects of my areas of interest: theory and practice in public sector workplace literacy, union involvement in workplace basic skills and students' perspectives. There are few studies which address some of the questions I was particularly interested in: what motivates people to join basic skills provision in the workplace, what they want from this provision, whether and how their initial aims and aspirations change through participation, and what the gains and wider impact of these programmes are. One explanation for this may be that until recently a relatively small amount of adult basic skills was provided in the workplace (BSA 1999, DfEE 1999a), thus restricting scope for research activity. Studies have, therefore, tended to focus on general provision, for instance Brooks et al (2001b). Similarly, apart from a small number of initiatives, organised separately by different unions, the trade union movement paid little attention to the issue of adult basic skills in the 1980s and 1990s (Hamilton 1996), and consequently there has been little research in this area.

Research has also tended to consider workplace basic skills as either a generic issue, or in relation to the private sector, addressing themes such as globalisation, capitalism and the changing organisation of labour (Holland 1998, OECD 2000a), and the relationship between basic skills

and economic efficiency (ALBSU 1993b). There is a smaller amount of literature relating to public sector workplaces, for example (Davies and Byatt 2000, BSA 2003). Substantial knowledge gaps remain therefore, for instance in relation to the implications of recent local government legislation and initiatives for the organisation of work in local authorities and consequent skills requirements, the relationship between basic skills and recruitment practices and curriculum considerations.

There are omissions in the work on curriculum development, content and delivery, especially in relation to oracy as there is virtually no research into any aspect of developing adult oracy skills (Brooks et al 2001a). A great deal of importance is, however, attached to these skills by agencies leading the development of good practice. For instance, the national standards for adult literacy encompass speaking and listening skills (BSA 2001), and basic skills programmes are expected to develop these skills. Employers have also highlighted the importance of oral communication skills for work (Atkinson and Spilsbury 1993a). Atkinson et al (1993b) found that oral communication skills were essential for all but 5% of jobs, and that over 75% of manual jobs required oral communication skills at foundation level or above. This requirement may well have risen in the local government sector since the introduction of 'Best Value', a local government quality initiative which I describe in more detail in section 1.5.1, raised the quality standards for local government services.

Students' perspectives are largely absent from the literature relating to this field (Brooks et al 2001a), and their voices are largely absent from debates about the development of policy and practice (Frank 2000, Ward 2002). This is a significant omission since, whilst contemporary policy (Fryer 1997) and quality guidance (ALI 2001) emphasises the centrality of students' views and voices, relatively little research has been undertaken to investigate their views in relation to issues such as the purpose of

7

workplace basic skills, their priorities and what they regard as effective practice. Moreover, it is important to capture these perspectives as there is an increasing tendency in guides to practice to foreground the needs of employers and industry (DFES 2002, TUC/BSA 2000a), and these are not necessarily identical to those of employees (Payne 2003).

The paucity of research in the field of workplace literacy meant that there were many interesting possibilities for my research, any of which could add to knowledge of the field and have relevance to policy and practice. It was, however, important to adopt a clear focus in order to produce a meaningful study and to take account of constraints on my time and resources. I shall now delineate the focus and boundaries of my research.

1.4 Boundaries

I chose to carry out an in-depth exploration of the views and experiences of participants in one instance of practice. There are many different types of workplace in the both the public and commercial sectors, and I suspected that, whilst there were likely to be many common factors, there might also be distinctive features, related, perhaps, to the different purposes of the sectors, creating profit or providing services. Since my interest was in local government, I chose to investigate a programme in this sector, as this provided the opportunity to investigate whether there are any specific features of local government that appear to influence the development and outcomes of workplace programmes.

I considered a range of methods when deciding on my methodology, and elected to use a case study approach to consider why workers, trade unions and the employer became involved, the processes by which they did so, factors relating to curriculum design and teaching approaches, learning gains and the impact and wider benefits of these for workers,

their employer and the unions. This framework supports my aim of carrying out an in-depth investigation of one example of practice, which has clear starting and finishing points. I have also selected a methodology, semi-structured interviews with participants, which allows me to add some of the silent voices to research knowledge, the perspectives of students, tutors and union activists as well as employers. I have discussed the rationale for my choice of research methods in detail in chapter 3.

My primary interest is workplace literacy, but I did also consider whether broader fields of policy and practice relating to my questions would have relevance for my research. My major theme, for instance, touched on issues relating to lifelong learning and workplace training issues. The local government setting and the trades union involvement meant that the work inevitably impinged on broader policy relating to these areas in relation, for example, to local government legislation and quality standards and historical shifts and contemporary developments in trade union education policy. I have addressed these areas when relevant to the major focus, but although I found them interesting, issues outside the central concerns of the study are not investigated in detail.

Time boundaries were an important consideration. My study is concerned with current policy and practice, and my primary emphasis will be on the period from 1999 when the Moser Committee report (DfEE 1999a) was published. This is because this can be viewed as a significant period of basic skills development as the publication of the report stimulated rapid and extensive changes and developments in policy and practice. The origins of the project I adopted as my case study are located in the immediate post-Moser developments, which are of interest in their own right. However, as there have been numerous advances and changes in the field since the data were gathered, I have related my analysis of the

data and considered implications for policy and practice in relation to present circumstances, as I believe that my findings have significance for the contemporary workplace literacy landscape.

I was aware that the roots of recent policy developments and major themes and trends I wished to consider could be traced back to earlier periods, at least to the early 1970s when the first national government policies on basic skills were implemented (Street 1997), or possibly further back to the 19th or early 20th centuries. However, I had not set out to construct an in-depth history of adult workplace literacy policy development in the UK, and time constraints placed such an enterprise beyond the reach of this study. Moreover, the history of literacy policy in the UK from 1970-2000 is the subject of a larger-scale investigation, the 'Changing Faces' project led by Lancaster University, City University and the Centre for Longitudinal Studies at the Institute of Education, London (http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/links/changingfaces.htm accessed June 2003).

The study provides a snapshot of one particular programme. The short-term impact of the programme is investigated, and potential implications for policy and practice identified. The findings are also used to suggest research questions and areas of interest to investigate in further longitudinal studies which, although of interest and potential significance, were beyond the scope and scale of my research.

1.5 Local context and project description

The Moser Committee had asserted that provision of basic skills in the workplace was vitally important, but observed that there was very little provision in workplaces and scant employer commitment to developing this (DfEE 1999a). The report recommended that the government should

fund a substantial increase in workplace basic skills. As there was so little provision, there was recognition that this recommendation was more likely to be realised if more knowledge about effective ways of working and models of good practice was acquired and disseminated.

In response, the Department for Education and Employment established and funded the *Building Basic Skills in the Workplace* initiative as a first stage in this process. Organisations were invited to tender for funding from this initiative to develop 'small-scale capacity-building projects'. The overall aim, as stated in the guidance for applicants, was:

> As a result of the initiative, we want to see new or extended high quality workplace basic skills delivery activities which will not only increase the capacity in the sector but will also stimulate demand among employers and individuals, as well as offering examples of best practice to other organisations within the field.
> (DfEE 2000b: 1)

My interest in this initiative stemmed from some of my work in the previous year, in which I had developed a workplace project for garment industry workers in partnership with a trade union and employers. This work was subsequently featured as an example of good practice in several publications (TUC/BSA 2000a, TUC/BSA 2000c). As my interest and understanding of both workplace basic skills and the role that trade unions could play had grown through this experience, I submitted a successful bid to the *Building Basic Skills in the Workplace* initiative to fund a project which aimed to develop a framework for developing and delivering high quality basic skills in the workplace for employees of the local authority in which I worked. This project became the subject of my study.

Several key aspects of the local authority context provided a stimulus for offering basic skills provision to employees. The national focus on basic

skills has already been identified. I shall now address the introduction of Best Value, and the requirements of the Investors in People quality award.

1.5.1 Best Value

The Local Government Act 1999 imposed a statutory duty on local authorities to provide 'Best Value' by seeking to achieve continuous improvement in the efficiency, economy and effectiveness of the services they provide. Local authorities were to carry out Best Value reviews of their services in relation to performance indicators set by central government. The local authority in which my study was located was one of the 37 chosen to pilot Best Value before it was introduced universally in April 2000. It had published a Best Value policy, and this stated a commitment to providing quality, cost effective services:

> Best value in _____ will operate on the overarching principle of what matters is what works, and provide services that are relevant to local people by whoever is best placed and able to offer quality, cost and effectiveness. In most cases the in-house workforce should be able to achieve this and we will embrace the need for change that this will entail.

This had implications for the workforce. The commitment to effective, quality services for residents required high levels of efficiency and customer care. This meant that all people delivering the services, including manual workers, had to operate using high levels of problem-solving and oral and written communication skills. Whilst some employees were highly skilled in these areas, the skills of many were less well developed. In spite of this, no opportunities to develop communication skills had been offered before the workplace literacy project was initiated.

Best Value replaced Compulsory Competitive Tendering, the system by which local authority services had to be put out to tender, and the contracts had to be awarded to the bidder who could deliver the service to the required quality standards for the lowest cost. An emphasis on cost saving remained, and some services had already gone out from the local authority to external suppliers. Best Value assessments had to consider cost effectiveness, and usually resulted in efficiency savings, accomplished through reductions in the number of employees for both local authority and private employers. As the local authority had a 'no redundancy' policy, any employees who lost their jobs as a result of the transfer of services to private contractors or reductions in the in-house workforce had to enter a redeployment process.

The training manager who worked with these redeployees had realised that this process required higher-level literacy skills than many employees had needed to use in their previous employment. She was concerned because this was creating a barrier to securing new employment, but the local authority had not put any strategy in place to support these employees to develop their skills. Efficiency measures had also resulted in changes in the organisation of work, for example employees were required to carry out a wider range of duties and tasks than previously, and this had brought about new training needs, including communication skills, which were not being addressed.

1.5.2 Investors in People

The local authority required all departments to gain the Investors in People award, a national quality standard for good practice in employee training and development. In order to gain the Investors in People award, organisations must demonstrate that they are committed to investing in all their staff in order to achieve their aims and objectives, and that they are

taking specific and effective actions to do so. They must also show that managers and employees of all grades are aware of, implementing and benefiting from these actions (http://www.iipuk.co.uk/IIP/Internet/InvestorsinPeople, accessed May 2003).

The training managers of both departments who became involved in the pilot project recognised that there was an imbalance between the amount and quality of management staff development and that provided for lower level employees. They were attracted by the opportunity the project offered them to target quality training towards low-paid and low-skilled employees because they needed to provide training for this group to enhance their portfolios of evidence for assessment for the Investors in People award.

1.5.3 The Project

The project took place between September 2000 and June 2001 when the adult education service worked with the Direct Works and Treasurer's departments to develop a workplace literacy programme for low paid employees. The Direct Works department provided maintenance services for the local authority, and was structured in different sections which included vehicle maintenance, refuse collection, street cleaning, parks, gardens and cemeteries. Most of the employees of this department were manual workers. The Treasurer's department administered financial services for the authority, including collecting monies such as the council tax and administering housing benefits and, like the Works department, it was structured in different sections. Most employees worked in offices.

The project developed a literacy programme which consisted of two separate courses, one in each department. I shall refer to them as the

Treasurer's and Works courses. For the same reason, I shall use the workers' description of their status and adopt the term students rather than the ubiquitous 'learners' used by professionals. The work was guided by a steering group comprised of representatives from the three departments involved, with regional TUC representation.

Pending appointment of a project team, I carried out the groundwork needed to establish the project, establishing links, for instance, with other departments in the local authority. The adult education service then allocated overall management responsibility for the project to the manager of the area in which it was located. She delegated day-to-day development and delivery to a project manager who worked closely with the tutors, the departmental training managers and the union representative from the Works department to build the programme (see Figure 2, fold-out organisational chart inside the back cover). Although I was detached from the operational development and operation, I did retain an overview of the project, and this placed me in the role of insider researcher, an issue I shall return to when I address methodological issues in chapter 3.

The approval of the department director was an essential requirement and, although this was awarded in both cases, their levels of interest and active support differed. The Works Director was enthusiastic about the initiative and took a keen interest in progress. In contrast, the director of the Treasurer's department took a position which might be best described as benign indifference, since he agreed that a course could be offered in his department, then took little further interest and offered no active support. As I shall show in chapter 6, this affected the impact and legacy of the programme. It did not, however, appear to have a detrimental effect on the development and delivery of the provision, as responsibility for this was devolved to the departmental training managers who each took a

keen interest. The early stages of development were different in each department.

The Works director and training manager were committed to making learning opportunities accessible to manual and low paid workers. They had fully supported a 'Bargaining for Skills' initiative, introduced into the department by the trade unions in July 2000, which recruited, trained and supported trade union learning representatives who were given time off work to encourage their colleagues to take up learning opportunities. This was well before paid time off for learning representatives became a statutory right in July 2003. Moreover, a full-time union learning coordinator, with a brief to establish learning needs, develop learning opportunities and promote learning to the workforce, had been seconded from the learning representatives' network. He was elected by, and represented, all the different trade unions active in the workplace. His remit, however, was not restricted to union members as management would have viewed this as divisive and, in any case, his role created the opportunity to recruit new members from groups of workers who appreciated the benefits gained through his work. This post was fully funded by the Works department, and the department training manager managed the coordinator, with support from regional and national union officials.

This learning coordinator and the training manager were realising that a number of workers in the department had poor basic skills. There was no budget to enable them to respond to this need, so when they heard about the adult education project through the TUC they offered their department as a pilot site. The union coordinator then worked with the adult education staff to recruit the students by using a questionnaire and working with the learning representatives network to raise demand, then develop a course to match the interests identified.

There was no union involvement in the Treasurer's department, where the work was led solely by the training manager. She had volunteered her department after she attended a literacy awareness-raising course run by the adult education team to encourage local authority departments to take part in the project. She selected employees to join the course. They had all been identified as having poor literacy skills, either through redeployment skills assessments or because line managers had attributed weak areas of their work performance to poor skills. A fundamental difference between the student groups, which I shall return to in my analysis, is that the students from the Treasurer's department were all referred to the course because of a problem, whereas the Works students were all volunteers.

1.5.4 The courses

The courses, although initially intended primarily to develop literacy skills, were titled Communications at Work. This both reflected the primary content, oral and written communication skills, and avoided the use of terms such as 'basic skills' and 'literacy' which were judged to carry a stigma which might have deterred potential participants from coming forward. I shall refer to them as the communications courses in this study.

Seven students were recruited to each 36-hour course. The Treasurer's course took place one day a week, with a break for the Easter holidays, between 29 March and 23 April 2001. The Works course structure was different, mainly because it took longer to organise because of complicated negotiations to agree release for employees from seven different sections to attend the courses. This course took place over four consecutive weeks between 24 April and 4 June 2001, with one full-day

session of six hours in the first and last weeks and two full-day sessions in the middle weeks.

Once recruited, the students, who were all union members, were very committed to the courses, and there were remarkably few dropouts or missed sessions. All the Works recruits completed their course; only two missed a session and these absences were due to bereavement and illness. Two of the Treasurer's course participants left early; one because of a serious car accident and one because he felt coerced onto the course and decided it was not relevant for him. Four of the remaining five students attended every session and the other missed one session because of work demands.

1.6 Structure of this dissertation

This dissertation will be concerned with identifying the aims and aspirations of those who got involved in the courses, the extent to which these were met, the impact of their involvement, and the implications of these results for wider policy and practice.

In chapter 2 I establish the conceptual framework for the work. I examine the policy rationale for developing literacy provision at work, then trace policy developments in the fields of widening participation and basic skills since 1997, and consider their implications for workplace literacy. I shall also address the role of trade unions. Finally I consider the different ways in which literacy and work place basic skills are defined.

In chapter 3 I discuss the methodological approach I adopted. After providing a surface description of how I carried out the study, I consider each aspect of my methodology in detail, reflecting critically on the methods I used, and identifying positive aspects and challenges. I discuss

ethical issues, strategies for gathering and analysing the data, and the issues of reliability and validity. Finally I consider the extent to which my conclusions might carry messages for wider policy and practice.

As I describe the research findings in the following three chapters, I seek to draw out and compare significant differences or similarities between individuals and the programme strands, and suggest reasons for these. Chapter 4 will investigate relationships between literacy and learning and the workplace organisation and culture. I then look at the motivations of the different parties for getting involved. I trace the effects of these different perspectives through subsequent chapters. In chapter 5 I investigate how the curriculum was determined, negotiated and delivered, and the influence of the different interests on these processes. In chapter 6 I identify the learning gains and progress made by the students, then examine the impact and wider benefits of these gains.

The implications of these findings for policy and practice are drawn out and explored in the concluding chapter where I revisit my research questions to consider how the research has contributed to knowledge in these areas. I summarise my conclusions in relation to engaging employers and workers, curriculum content and delivery approaches and the outcomes and impact of the learning. I identify the limitations of the study and, finally, suggest that despite these constraints, the findings contain important, if tentative, messages for contemporary policy and practice.

2 Context

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss, in relation to the literature, the changes in the wider orbits of economic and educational policy that have impacted on workplace literacy policy and practice. The origins of the current drive to improve literacy skills through workplace provision can be located in post-16 learning policy, which is concerned with expanding and promoting learning opportunities to all sectors of the population, especially those who are the least likely to access them.

Although this policy arena promotes the creation of a learning society as the key to the twin aims of combating social injustice and increasing economic prosperity, many commentators contend that the economic agenda has taken priority over social justice in concepts of workplace learning. I shall consider this matter in more detail in this chapter

There are both commonalities and tensions between the interests of the different organisations and individuals involved in the provision of workplace literacy programmes. The complex interplay between these interests, laced with differing ideological positions and definitions of workplace literacy, has resulted in a range of approaches to workplace literacy provision. I have termed these approaches functional, employee development and critical. I shall discuss the principles of these models, noting that in practice elements of different approaches might be used in the same programme, and consider which interests they reflect.

2.2 The learning divide

Firstly I shall examine adult participation in learning, since concern with the under-representation of particular groups has informed lifelong learning and basic skills policy developments. The massive differences in access to learning opportunities for people of different social classes, with least participation by working-class people, have been highlighted in a number of studies, for example Sargant et al (1997). A 2002 study found that, despite policy and funding initiatives introduced to increase and widen participation in adult learning following the publication of the Kennedy and Fryer reports (Fryer 1997, Kennedy 1997), participation in learning between 1996 and 2002 had increased for all social groups except those in classes D and E where it had fallen by 1% (Aldridge and Tuckett 2002).

The workplace has enormous potential for broadening participation by drawing in these groups (Unwin and Fuller 2003), as almost 75% of the working-age population are engaged in paid work in the United Kingdom. However, until recently this was a relatively unexploited site for lifelong learning or literacy provision. In 1999, for instance, only 5% of literacy programmes were offered in the workplace (BSA 1999), although this had risen to 25% by 2003 according to a DfES survey (DfES 2003b). Whilst different data collection methods and sources of information might account for some of the differences in these findings, this does appear to represent a significant rise in basic skills provision at work.

Bynner and Parsons (1997) and DfES (2003b) have found a correlation between poor literacy and low paid and unskilled work, but individuals in this group have the least access to learning at work, and therefore fewest opportunities to improve their skills. People who already have educational qualifications are the most likely to be engaged in adult learning or training

activities, whilst those with the fewest qualifications, who left school at or before the age of sixteen are the least likely to consider participating. Employees with lower skills, lower pay and the least amount of power at work have fewer opportunities to access training or learning at work than those in professional and managerial positions (Rainbird 2000, Sargant et al 1997). Moreover, although overall male participation rates are higher than those of women, older males working in low paid manual occupations are significantly under-represented in training (McGivney 1999).

McGivney suggests that it is important to pay attention to the position of these men. They can be affected by changes in both society and work, and their low skills levels can leave them vulnerable, not only to job loss and difficulties gaining alternative employment resulting from changes in the organisation of work, but also to suffering loss of confidence and self-esteem and physical and or mental health problems in consequence. Learning could play an important role in equipping this group of citizens with the skills to support them to retain existing employment or access new employment. Wider benefits might include personal fulfilment, enhancement of self-esteem and new skills for family or community involvement. The reasons for low participation are likely to be multiple and complex, but the paucity of training offered to low paid, manual workers at work is possibly a major factor.

Another reason often cited is working-class antipathy to learning, particularly amongst men. There are, however, few studies of adult male attitudes to learning to show whether this particular group is resistant to engaging in adult learning and, if so, to help us to understand this. The conclusions of research on participation are somewhat contradictory. Maguire and Horrocks (2002) found that the majority of manual workers they studied in the Ford EDAP scheme did not hold anti-education attitudes. Their reasons for non-participation were to do with practical

issues such as lack of opportunity, time or money, and once these barriers were overcome they joined classes in large numbers. These conclusions contrast with most of the other enquiries in this area, which suggest that working-class men are likely to be hostile to education (Mac an Ghaill 1996, McGivney 1999, Sutherland and Marks 2001).

The gender divide in attitudes to learning is believed to start at school, which working-class boys frequently experience as alien and irrelevant, leading to an anti-learning culture (McGivney 1999, Sutherland and Marks 2001, Willis 1997). Rainbird (2000) cites this as a reason why many of these boys reject vocational training and enter manual work, where, she suggests, their anti-learning attitudes persist, inhibiting them from taking up further learning or training opportunities. Attitudes to learning might also be fed by cultural concepts. Mac an Ghaill (1996), for instance, suggests that traditional working-class masculine norms tend to associate masculinity with traditional physical labour, and education with feminine identities and roles. Males who subscribe to these norms are likely to be reluctant to take up a pursuit from the feminine domain, as this would entail the risk of losing status or face. A reluctance to step outside these majority cultural norms can thus operate as a major deterrent to engaging in adult learning (Merton et al 2003).

Developments in lifelong learning and basic skills since 1997 have paid attention to these low levels of participation and addressed the need to attract members of these groups to take up learning opportunities. I shall now examine these polices, suggesting reasons for this concern.

2.3 *Skills for Life* policy

The Moser Committee report of 1999 was a major political initiative, commissioned by the government. The Green Paper on lifelong learning

(DfEE 1998) regretted that one in five adults in England had poor literacy and numeracy skills, stated a commitment to funding more provision and established a working group, chaired by Claus Moser, to consider and recommend effective post-school basic skills provision (DfEE 1999a).

The Moser Committee drew on studies of basic skills levels, including Carey et al (1997) to conclude that approximately seven million adults in England and Wales had poor literacy and numeracy skills. The report spelled out the consequences of this, drawing on the work of ALBSU (1993a & 1993b) and Bynner and Parsons (1997) to link poor basic skills to social and economic disadvantage, including high levels of unemployment or low skilled employment, intergenerational educational underachievement, high instances of crime, poor health, poor housing and little civic involvement for the individuals and families concerned. The committee contended that improving poor basic skills would be an effective strategy for tackling these issues, which would benefit individuals, local communities and the economy.

The Moser Committee report stated that, for many years, organisations such as the Basic Skills Agency had pointed out these basic skills issues and suggested solutions, but 'As a national priority, improvements in literacy and numeracy never reached the front of the policy queue' (DfEE1999a: 2). The issue jumped to the head of the queue when the report was published, as a national 'crusade' was launched to improve the adult basic skills of the nation, and implementation groups were set to work to investigate the best ways of bringing this about. Over the next two years, a national strategy was produced and a high profile Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit was created to lead and oversee national developments. Projects to pilot new and better ways of offering basic skills, were established, supported by a financial commitment of 1.5 billion pounds.

Skills for Life, the government's strategy for improving adult basic skills, was published in 2001 (DfEE 2001). This strategy aimed to improve adult basic skills by increasing the numbers accessing provision to better their skills and improving the diversity and quality of this provision. Workplace basic skills provision was an important element of the strategy, which sought to engage both employers and trade unions to develop opportunities for employees to improve their literacy and numeracy skills at work. Priority groups were identified from those believed to have the lowest levels of skills, including local authority employees and low-paid manual workers, who were also amongst those identified in the previous section as least likely to have taken part in any learning since leaving school.

2.4 Lifelong learning

The development of a strong adult basic skills policy outlined above can be viewed as originating in the wider education policy context of the New Labour government which came to power in 1997. This government adopted education as one of the primary mechanisms for achieving its two key priorities: reviving the economy, and social and civic regeneration:

> As well as securing our economic future, learning has a wider contribution. It helps to make ours a civilised society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship. Learning enables people to play a full part in their community. It strengthens the family, the neighbourhood and consequently the nation. (DfEE 1998:7)

This policy priority stemmed from two seminal reports, Kennedy (1997) and Fryer (1997), which both asserted the potential for education to contribute to economic revival and increased social cohesion. Fryer was also careful to note that learning in itself would not resolve all these

challenges, but would only work alongside political, economic and social solutions, a concern also stressed by Coffield (1999) and Avis (2000).

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment established the National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning in June 1997, and in November the Group produced a report (Fryer 1997). This document set out the case for developing a culture of lifelong learning for all in the United Kingdom by broadening and expanding participation in learning. The report stressed that participation in lifelong learning would benefit the economy, individuals, their families and their communities, a proposition reiterated in succeeding policy documents (DfEE 1998, DfEE 1999b).

Recognition of the disparities in access to adult learning opportunities underpinned a strong argument not only to increase participation, but to widen it to encompass these 'excluded' groups. Both Kennedy (1997) and Fryer (1997) argued that if there was to be any hope of achieving their vision of a learning society, it was imperative to take action to reduce the gulf between the learning 'haves and have nots'. The expansion of workplace learning recommended by Fryer, for instance, was intended to secure the inclusion of the groups of workers often excluded from development programmes, that is, low paid and low or unskilled manual workers.

Fryer also sowed the seeds of workplace lifelong learning and basic skills policy developments by recommending that diverse lifelong learning opportunities should be offered in workplaces. Lifelong learning is a contested concept as there is no clear consensus on where its boundaries are (Edwards & Usher 1998). On the one hand it can be very widely defined as any learning in which adults engage, either formal or informal and undertaken for a variety of purposes, including individual fulfilment,

family support, community involvement and skills for work. Alternatively it can be much more closely related to economic imperatives and viewed primarily as vocational or workplace training.

There is no intrinsic reason why these types of learning cannot coexist, so that learning which takes place in the workplace could have individual and community purposes as well as vocational and economic objectives. However, a number of commentators have suggested that the policy agenda has tended to prioritise economic and occupational discourses over those concerned with the other purposes of learning (Coffield 1999, Ecclestone 1999), particularly in regard to learning at work. Even where the value of learning for social justice and individual development is recognised in the introductory rhetoric of policy documents, for example (DfEE 1999b, 2003a), vocational objectives appear to be prioritised in the main texts, for instance the recent Skills Strategy (DfES 2003a), which is primarily concerned with the role of learning and widening participation in upgrading the vocational and basic skills of low skilled workers.

The economic imperative has also been viewed as dominating the basic skills policy agenda by critics such as Crowther et al (2001), Hamilton and Merrifield (2000) and Hamilton et al (2001). They contend that this can result in an impoverished type of basic skills provision which aims to improve economic performance, but in doing so maintains the status quo and does little to address democratic and social justice purposes of workplace learning.

2.5 Economic rationale

The economic rationale, which is underpinned by contentions about the changing nature of work brought about by technological advancement, the changing demands created by a globalised economy and the cost to

industry of poor basic skills, is very powerful. However, the proposition that improving the skills of the workforce will equip both employers and individual employees to meet these challenges raises a number of fundamental questions. Do all jobs now require new working practices and demand higher levels of literacy as a result of a globalised economy? Does literacy really impact on economic competitiveness, or should other interventions also be considered? What are the benefits to individuals of improving their literacy skills?

Fryer (1997) argued that learning in the workplace should be transformed and expanded, as people must be equipped to meet the new challenges of the 21st century. These challenges include globalisation, which is seen to have brought about a need to increase economic competitiveness, resulting in changes in the organisation of labour and working practices in order to increase efficiency and productivity. At the same time there have been major advances in science and technology; these have generated profound changes in access to information and international communications, resulting in a shift to knowledge-based economies and work practices (OECD 2000b).

The market principles identified as a feature of globalisation are also manifested in local government, which, analysts such as Hamilton and Merrifield (2000) suggest, has started to operate more like commercial businesses, redefining citizens as customers and adopting a competitive contract culture. This is exemplified by the move, from the 1980s, to Compulsory Competitive Tendering and, more recently, Best Value. In these systems, work is contracted to the lowest bidder, which might be a private sector company, and the strategies employed to achieve low costs often result in a contraction of the workforce and reorganisation of working practices, for example, moving from strict demarcation of work roles and

tasks to more flexible, multi-task modes of working. In addition, there is increased emphasis on quality processes and improved customer service.

These factors are said to have had a major impact on raising the overall skills levels required of the labour force (OECD 2000b), and to create a demand for enhanced literacy skills. These are needed to equip workers to cope with change, use new technology and equipment, access training to learn new work processes, read more complex written instructions, complete more documentation and record interactions with 'customers', all of which are said to necessitate higher levels of text use (Holland 1998, Mawer 1999).

The skills levels, particularly the literacy and numeracy skills, of the British workforce have been identified as inadequate to meet these new challenges, as the skills base, particularly literacy and numeracy skills, is low compared to the United States and other European states. This is frequently cited as a reason for the weak performance of the British economy (DfEE 1998, DfEE 1999a, DfEE 1999b). Poor basic skills have also been identified as a cause of poor quality services and as a cost to local government employers (BSA 2003). In response, a policy drive has been launched to equip the British economy to compete in the global marketplace through the development of human capital, that is, the labour force (Avis 2000), and improving basic skills has been identified as the first stage in acquiring the more advanced skills needed to enhance economic performance (HM Treasury 2001, LSC 2002, PIU 2001, DfES 2003a).

Approaches to developing workforce basic skills are based on the premise that since there is a causal relationship between poor basic skills and economic underperformance (ALBSU 1993b, Bynner and Parsons 1997, DfEE 1999a), improving skills will increase productivity. This provides a

rationale for investment in learning and skills training and offers a seemingly simple solution to economic problems. However, the assumptions underlying these economic discourses of lifelong learning and basic skills have been widely criticised as inaccurate and inadequate (Avis 2000, Coffield 1999, Lankshear 1997, Robinson 1997). The notion that there is a simple causal relationship between poor skills and economic underperformance has been contested because there is little, if any, research evidence to substantiate it (Coffield 1999).

These notes of caution are not acknowledged in policy documents that identify improving adults' literacy and numeracy skills as an essential element of national strategies to improve skills through vocational and workplace training (DfEE 1998, DfEE1999a, DfEE 1999b):

> It is generally agreed that, if we are to achieve a world-class economy, we need a world-class workforce. To achieve this, employees and job applicants need good basic skills, not just for the current job, but for changing demands of employment. (DfEE 1999a: 25)

In the foreword to Skills for Life (DfEE 2001), the Secretary of State for Education and Employment restated the detrimental impact of poor basic skills on the economy, and asserted the economic rationale for improving skills.

2.5.1 The cost to industry

This rationale is fuelled by the so-called 'cost to industry' of poor basic skills in the workforce, which has been estimated at ten billion pounds a year (DfEE 1999a). However, the methodology of the study (ALBSU 1993b) that generated this figure has been widely criticised as unsound, and many regard it as highly suspect (Brooks et al 2001a, Frank 2003, Robinson 1997). The cost of ten million pounds originated in research

carried out by ALBSU (1993b) which surveyed 400 firms employing over fifty people. Robinson (1997) noted that only 4% of these employers identified a problem with basic skills, and only 15% of this number identified poor basic skills as a cost. Despite these low numbers, the figure was grossed up to represent a total cost to all firms employing over fifty people. The figure was subsequently adjusted to include the cost to all companies and, presumably, to take account of inflation between 1993 and 1999, appearing as 10 billion pounds in the Moser Committee report (DfEE 1999a). These costs were attributed to factors such as wastage, dispatch mistakes and recruitment costs created by staff turnover. They were said to be a consequence of poor basic skills, but other factors such as lack of prospects, poor pay, or working conditions were not considered as variables.

Over-emphasis on this causal relationship also obscures the impact of other factors such as workplace dynamics (Gowen 1992), international competition, limited investment, outdated plant or technological factors. Although poor basic skills are likely to have some effect, the precise extent and influence is not known. The relationship between basic skills and economic performance is complex and affected by many variables, presenting considerable difficulties for researchers in gathering and interpreting data in relation to this issue (OECD 2000b).

Although investment in skills development might bring about improvements, problematic aspects of this reasoning have also been identified (Coffield 1999). Responsibility for improving their skills is passed to individuals, with the implication that if they fail to acquire these skills it is their fault if they become unemployed, or their fault if their employer continues to experience problems, thus reinforcing the view to that the main barrier to success is the poor education, skills, and motivation of the workforce (Coffield 1999, Ecclestone 1999). However,

allocating the blame for the economic consequences of poor productivity, excess wastage or poor quality to the inadequacies of individual workers can lead to unrealistic expectations of the outcomes of workplace learning programmes. Investment in workplace basic skills, for example, will not necessarily improve economic performance and prosperity, because the complexity of major economic problems and social inequalities makes them unlikely to be resolved by educational interventions alone (Lankshear 1997).

2.5.2 Workers' skills needs

The orthodoxy that working practices have shifted, demanding new and higher level skills (OECD 2000a) is also open to question. Although organisations are said by some, for example Holland (1998), Mawer (1999), and OECD (2000a), to have moved to flatter management structures which demand more creativity and team working and require employees to take more individual responsibility for their work, other commentators maintain that many workplaces remain hierarchical, afford their workforce little worker autonomy, and retain monotonous, routine work practices (Lankshear 1997, Unwin and Fuller 2003).

There is also evidence to suggest that, whilst the basic skills demands of most occupations are increasing, many manual jobs still require only low level basic skills (Felstead et al 2002). Carey et al (1997) demonstrated that, whilst all occupations require workers to carry out some literacy activities, demand varies with type of employment and is significantly higher for managers and professionals than for manual workers. This might provide one reason why a recent survey found that only 2% felt that poor skills had an adverse effect on their ability to carry out their job (DfES 2003b). People in this group, therefore, are unlikely to perceive a need to

improve their skills, but at the same time their skills levels are likely to narrow opportunities for advancement to different employment.

This is recognised in policy documents which stress the necessity for individuals to upgrade their skills, including literacy skills, in order to improve their career prospects and enhance their employability in an increasingly unstable labour market in which 'jobs for life' are disappearing and employment patterns are shifting to flexible contracts (DfEE 1999b, DfEE 2001, DfES 2003a).

Little research has been undertaken to investigate the overall economic returns of taking part in lifelong learning, particularly for working-class men (Jenkins et al 2002). In relation to literacy, there is some evidence to suggest that there is a correlation between literacy skills and employment; individuals with poor basic skills are more likely to be unemployed or in low skilled, low paid employment (Bynner and Parsons 1997, Machin et al 2001, OECD 2000b). Furthermore, there is strong evidence to suggest that earnings increase in relation to levels of literacy skills (DfES 2003b). Post-school improvements in basic skills should, therefore, have a positive impact on both employment prospects and earnings, but Ananiadou et al (2003) sounded a note of caution when they found little empirical evidence to support this.

The assumption that participating in workplace basic skills provision can ensure individual security and advancement is highly problematic, since learning does not by itself bring greater economic rewards, protect from redundancy or guarantee new employment. As access to employment is restricted by low qualifications and poor basic skills, developing skills can increase a person's potential to survive or progress at work. However, even though higher levels of skills are likely to be a necessary precondition for economic survival or advancement, it is far from clear that

improving skills levels will necessarily result in access to new employment and higher salaries, because of economic and social barriers to success. These include factors such as class, gender and race, which have an impact on individual participation and success in both learning and economic activity (Rainbird 2000, Avis 2000).

Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that many jobs still require no qualifications, and there is not a general shortage of workers qualified at levels two and three. The 2001 Skills Survey (Felstead et al 2002), for example, found that, whilst there had been a rise in the generic skills requirements of most jobs, there was an imbalance between labour supply and demand in lower skilled jobs. There are more than twice as many jobs which do not demand any qualifications as there are unqualified economically active people. Furthermore, over a million more people hold level two qualifications than the job vacancies requiring this level. This suggests that, apart from geographical or industry-specific qualifications shortages, there is still a need for unskilled workers, and possibly insufficient employment for additional newly skilled workers (Lankshear 1997).

2.6 Engaging employers

The policy drives to improve skills and widen participation in learning include proposals to increase demand for workforce training and development from employers and employees (DfES 2001, HM Treasury 2002, LSC 2002, PIU 2001). Attention has been paid to developing strategies for persuading employers to provide basic skills in their workplaces; the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit has launched an 'employer engagement strategy', and support materials have been produced which target both business and public service employers (DfES 2002, BSA 2003). Despite the widespread criticism already noted, the

promotion campaign uses the argument that poor basic skills in their workforce could be costing employers up to £500,000 a year (http://www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/Workplace accessed August 2003) as evidence of the need to improve their employees' basic skills.

There is no compulsion for employers to offer basic skills training for employees, and the voluntarist approach has had limited success to date (Rainbird 2000). This history suggests that the extent to which employer support for provision at work will become widespread remains questionable, particularly as there is evidence to suggest that many employers are not convinced by the poor basic skills arguments (Frank 2003, Robinson 1997). The imperative to reduce labour costs created by Best Value could also reduce the likelihood of local authorities investing highly in workforce development (Rainbird op cit), and there are, as yet, few 'systematic data' from the UK on the benefits for employers of investing in this provision (Ananiadou et al 2003) that could be used to reinforce the case for this investment.

Conversely, the need to skill the workforce to adapt to these changes, to achieve the quality standards demanded by Best Value and to gain training awards such as Investors in People can result in investment in training low skilled employees, and might increase the likelihood of local authority employers supporting basic skills schemes. Fryer (1997) stressed the importance of partnerships involving the three major interest groups, employees, trade unions and employers, in developing and promoting workplace learning. Local authorities are well placed to develop this partnership approach as they are major employers and usually recognise trade unions, which can play an important role in developing provision. In the next section I shall examine recent developments in trade union education policy and activity, with particular reference to a growing focus on basic skills.

2.7 Trade unions and adult basic skills

Trade unions have long had a role in negotiating training and support for members at both national policy and local workplace levels. Their influence diminished in the 1980s and 1990s, when unions were progressively marginalised and excluded from policy formation and implementation as a result of the Conservative government ideology that employers should take the lead in determining training policy (Ackers et al 1996, Rainbird 1990). The position changed when the New Labour government came to power, as the trade unions' role in workforce development was reaffirmed and strengthened, and the contribution they could make to promoting and supporting the development of lifelong learning was again valued (DfEE 1998, Fryer 1997). The Department for Education and Employment established the Union Learning Fund to encourage and enable unions to promote workplace learning. The potential of unions to promote the basic skills agenda was also recognised, as the Moser Committee identified trade unions as having 'a central role to play in raising the standards of basic skills of adults' (DfEE 1999a: 50), and in 1999 a further tranche of funding was allocated to the Union Learning Fund for workplace basic skills initiatives.

In addition to government support and funding, other factors influenced trade unions' involvement in training and basic skills initiatives. Like employers, unions had been challenged to adopt new priorities, approaches and practices to ensure their survival and effectiveness in the changing political and economic order (Forrester and Payne 1999, Payne 2001). They needed to consider, for example, how best to protect members' jobs and employment rights and to combat falling union membership.

The Trades Union Congress (TUC) and many unions responded by shifting from combative bargaining approaches to working in partnership with employers to try to reach consensual solutions to workplace issues. This was accompanied by a move to offering new services in an attempt to recruit and meet the needs of new and non-traditional members (Rainbird 1990). In this climate, learning at work became an issue for collective bargaining (Claydon and Green 1994), and the TUC claimed that 'Trade unions could help ignite a learning revolution in this country' (TUC 1998: 3). Their emphasis was on widening participation, including basic skills provision, ensuring recognition of the rights of low skilled employees to training, and securing access to training and learning at work for those workers whose needs have historically been a low priority for employers.

This concern with securing access to learning opportunities marked an extension of union training priorities and activities. Historically, the two areas of most concern to unions were initial training, which had declined significantly as the traditional apprenticeship system disappeared (Ackers et al 1996, Rainbird 2000), and training to equip activists to carry out their roles (Forrester and Payne 1999, Rainbird 2000). Research by the TUC showed that although unions supported vocational training for members, with the exception of a small number of initiatives, such as the UNISON Return to Learn programme, their actual knowledge and activity in promoting or negotiating learning opportunities at work was very limited (Monks 2000). In response, the TUC set out to establish structures to encourage and support the new union learning agendas.

The TUC Learning Services section was established in 2000, with the following 'learning mission':

> The TUC aims to represent all employee interests in securing the learning and skills they require to maintain their employability, enhance their career progression and guarantee social inclusion. (TUC 2000a: 1)

The TUC also aimed to support individual unions to build their capacity to support their members to access learning and training opportunities and to develop partnerships with employers and providers to ensure these opportunities (Monks 2000).

Sparse attention had been paid to literacy issues by unions before this period (Hamilton and Merrifield 2000), but concern with members' basic skills development needs accelerated rapidly after the publication of the Moser report (TUC/BSA 2000a). TUC Learning Services employed a national development worker for basic and key skills, and started to work more closely with unions to address basic skills issues, by training union learning representatives, supporting unions to bid to the Union Learning Fund for basic skills work and publishing information and good practice guides (TUC/BSA 2000a, 2000b, 2000c & 2000d).

The union learning representative role, adopted at the 1998 TUC Congress, was crucial to the development of workplace learning. Learning representatives are union activists whose role is to promote learning to their members and support them to access learning opportunities. These representatives occupy a unique position as they are known and trusted by members and understand their concerns, and this gives them credibility when promoting the benefits of learning in their workplaces. It is viewed as an effective means of promoting basic skills provision, as colleagues might be reluctant to expose their skills levels

without encouragement and protection from repercussions. Learning representatives also take a key role in negotiating with employers on learning issues and brokering provision with providers (TUC 2001).

Union involvement is underpinned by a commitment to securing the rights of low paid workers to access learning opportunities. This is, however, not universally viewed as a valid area of trade union activity. Payne draws attention to criticisms of trade union basic skills developments as 'a form of incorporation into management concerns' (2003: 18), which buys into employers' economic priorities and exposes workers who reveal poor basic skills to risk of sanctions. Other writers, for instance Mace (1992), remind us that, whilst there may be commonalities, the interests and priorities of workers and employers are not necessarily the same, and may even conflict. The extent to which workers' interests are met depends to an extent on the skills of the union activists to negotiate appropriate provision. The nature of this will also be influenced by the ideologies and definitions of literacy adopted by unions and others involved. I shall now identify the concepts of literacy prevalent in current policy, practice and research, and suggest ways in which these might influence different models of workplace literacy provision.

2.8 What is literacy?

Literacy is potentially transformative in an overarching social and political sense and empowering on an individual level, but this potential to bring about change is mediated by the agency of different interest groups and individuals. Policy makers, employers, employees, trade unions and providers influence literacy provision, and their involvement is informed by the ideologies and definitions of literacy they employ, as well as by their differing motivations and priorities. In this section I shall explore

definitions of literacy and discuss their relevance for the contemporary context.

Literacy can be viewed as a social and cultural construct, because ideologies and definitions of literacy are usually connected to the needs of societies and individuals at different historical periods and in differing locations. These definitions often relate to contemporary notions of who needs to be, or has the right to be, literate, and to what level, and this is often determined by those with economic and political power (Gee 1996, Street 1997). It is, therefore, often difficult to determine clear boundaries and distinctions between literacy and illiteracy, since these tend to shift in response to political, economic and cultural changes and to be subject to ideological influences (Crowther et al 2001).

Modern industrialised societies, for instance, are demanding higher and more widespread literacy levels, though not all members of these societies will necessarily achieve, or be expected to achieve, the highest levels of literacy skills. Policy and practice developed to meet the requirements of these societies can be seen as shaped by notions of what it means to be literate. However, as Withnall (1994) suggests, these concepts of literacy are problematic and can be contested, since views differ as to whether literacy is a set of clearly defined, autonomous skills, which individuals either do or do not possess, or whether other factors such as social context also need to be taken into account when considering the nature of literacy.

The view of literacy as autonomous skills is dominant in current policy and practice (Hamilton and Merrifield 2000). This has been informed by the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), which has been very influential in the development of international literacy policy, including in England and Wales, and cited, for example, in DfEE (1999a and 2001). The IALS

presents a model of literacy as a continuum of skills against which individuals' proficiency can be judged (OECD 2000b).

The advantage of this skills view for policy makers and practitioners is that, once literacy skills and levels have been determined, they can be used to form a standardised basis for curriculum development and benchmarks for assessment. One of the difficulties is that, because views of what counts as literacy change over time, it is difficult to construct fixed descriptors of these skills and levels. This is perhaps demonstrated by inconsistencies in the definitions and literacy policies adopted by different countries, with distinct differences, for example, between England, Scotland and Ireland (Hamilton and Merrifield 2000). Moreover, decontextualised testing of these skills provides no guarantee that an individual will be able to employ them effectively in real life situations (Hamilton and Merrifield op cit, Hamilton et al 2001), and there is insufficient knowledge about the extent to which literacy skills learned in one situation can be transferred into different contexts, and the processes which could best facilitate this transfer (Barton 2001, Payne 2003)

For these reasons, the proponents of the 'New Literacy Studies', for example Barton (2001), Barton and Hamilton (1998), Gee (1996) and Street (2001), view the autonomous skills notion of literacy as inadequate. Using the term 'situated literacies', these researchers maintain that, far from literacy being a single set of pre-determined, autonomous skills, there are multiple literacies, and these are determined by their contexts and the purposes for which they are used. These literacies possess a number of defining characteristics: they are not static, but shift over time; they reflect cultural ways of using literacy, and institutional and social relationships and practices; the ways in which they are used, their meanings and the value they are accorded are always influenced by

41

power relationships; they do not necessarily transfer easily between contexts (Barton and Hamilton 1998).

The value of the notion of situated literacies is that it offers a framework for examining literacy issues which takes account of the meanings, values and uses they have for people in the context of their real life situations. It also provides a basis for a learner-centred approach to teaching and learning in which practitioners recognise and build on learners' existing skills, knowledge and aspirations, and consider their real-life contexts when designing programmes. As in the skills version of literacy, there is recognition that individuals do need specific knowledge of language features and structures such as spelling and grammar to enable them to understand, use and produce text. The difference is that, as these rules do not exist in a vacuum, it is seen as important that they are not learned as an end in themselves, and understanding of how they are used in practice in different situations is also developed (Street 2001).

One limitation of the situated literacies approach is that it does not provide satisfactory tools for considering the issue of common literacy practices which might exist across different domains, and how skills and practices might transfer to use in different circumstances. The notion of multiple literacies also creates difficulties for policy makers seeking universal solutions through approaches based on a standardised concept of literacy (Payne 2003). Perhaps this is why the thinking of the 'New Literacy Studies' appears to have had little influence on policy makers in England, who, on the whole, appear to have adopted skills-based concepts of literacy (Hamilton and Merrifield 2000).

Policy documents tend to employ definitions which portray literacy as skills that enable individuals to fulfil their roles in society. Their proficiency in these skills is seen to determine how well they function in these roles.

This is exemplified in the definition employed by the Basic Skills Agency which was used in the Moser report (DfEE 1999a) and has been adopted in subsequent policy and practice documents, for example DfEE (2001), DfES (2002) and TUC/BSA (2000a, 2000b, 2000c & 2000d):

> The ability to read, write and speak in English, and to use mathematics at a level necessary to function at work and in society in general. (ALBSU 1994: 8, DfEE 1999a: 2)

Literacy has multiple and diverse functions. It has, for instance, a role to play in action for social and economic change (Freire 1972), and in heightening aspirations. However, the above definition, adopted in policy in England and Wales, can be viewed as reflecting a poverty of vision, as it appears to promote the development of what can be interpreted as lower level coping skills and fails to encompass broader and higher-level functions. This leads to policy and practice that can be seen as maintaining the status quo since it focuses on training people to perform their roles better, but not to aspire very high or to challenge economic and societal inequalities (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation 1992, Crowther et al 1999).

Functional definitions of this nature also appear to lead to an assumption that basic skills are neutral technical skills. This has positive features, as individuals who do not have the technical competence to access the standard forms and literacies of their society continue to be disadvantaged and excluded from economic, political and social opportunities. On the other hand, they tend to represent a narrow version of literacy that privileges economic and societal aims within the status quo (Hamilton 2001 et al, Lankshear 1997).

They also appear to carry an implication that individuals who do not possess these skills are failing to function in society, whilst the reality is

perhaps more complex. Whereas there is evidence to suggest that individuals with poor basic skills are underachieving in many aspects of their lives (Bynner and Parsons 1997), other studies have found that many people with poor basic skills do not feel disadvantaged by their skills and are not necessarily excluded from living fulfilling lives and contributing to society (Barton and Hamilton 1998, DfES 2003b).

The issue of oracy skills is further awkward area. Barton (2001) has highlighted the complexity of the relationship between written and spoken language, but until relatively recently they were treated as separate skills; most studies focused on reading and writing, and speaking and listening were rarely considered outside the sphere of ESOL. Although speaking and listening skills are now recognised as basic skills, they have been categorised as literacy skills in the *Adult Literacy core curriculum* (BSA 2001). This is troublesome because, as Brooks et al (2001a) note, this is a category error, and oracy is more properly termed a communication skill. Furthermore, its distinctive characteristics might be masked by this failure to distinguish oracy skills and functions from literacy skills.

The adequacy of definitions which include only reading, writing and speaking skills for contemporary society (Hamilton et al 2001) or workplaces (Payne 2003) has been questioned because the complex demands of these modern contexts might be said to require a wider range of basic skills. As well as identifying the shortcomings of the functional definition of literacy, critics have considered the question of what would constitute a more useful definition. They have suggested that it should not be confined within the boundaries of decoding and producing text and low-level communication skills for restricted functional purposes, but should broaden to include more creative, aspirational and political purposes (Crowther et al 1999, Tett 2003). It would also encompass the complementary skills and learning processes required to operate

effectively in, and sometimes challenge, societal and political structures, modern sophisticated means of organising work and to meet workers' needs to make certain of their rights at work. These include enhanced skills, including high-level communication skills, analytical and critical thinking and understanding and problem-solving (Lankshear 1997, Hamilton et al 2001).

As information technology is increasing in importance as a means of communication and gaining information, the skills to access and manipulate this medium are more becoming essential. It has very recently been recognised as a basic skill (DfES 2003a), although precise definitions and the relationship of information technology to the basic skills of literacy, language and numeracy have yet to be developed. The processes of learning could also be explicitly included in a definition, as these equip people to continue to access and use knowledge and information. Many of these elements are already included in the key skills curriculum, but have increasing relevance for the basic skill of literacy. It is important to understand the ways in which literacy is conceptualised as this influences approaches to practice. This has resulted in different models of workplace literacy which I shall now examine.

2.9 Models of workplace literacy provision

Concepts of literacy tend to influence practice. The national infrastructure for basic skills developed in the wake of the launch of the Skills for Life strategy (DfES 2001), for instance, is underpinned by the functional definition of literacy contained in the Moser Committee report (DfES 1999a). As this framework is the foundation for approaches to the generic and workplace literacy practice promoted and funded by the government, I shall outline its major features before discussing different models of practice.

The infrastructure includes new tutor qualifications and training programmes, new quality standards for teaching and learning, and national standards for adult literacy and numeracy (QCA 2000). These literacy standards, which are based on the functional definition used in the Moser report (DfES 1999a), consist of a framework, divided into levels, which defines the literacy and language skills and capabilities that adults are said to need to function at work and in society. A new national curriculum for adult literacy sets out in detail the literacy and oracy skills adults 'should be taught' to enable them to reach the national literacy standards (BSA 2001), and new assessments of students' levels and achievements are based on these standards. There are potential tensions between this centralised definition of appropriate content for literacy learning, and meeting the full range of individuals' needs and interests (Tett 2003), as the skills and uses of literacy disregarded in the national teaching and learning infrastructure are less likely to be included in learning programmes.

Workplace literacy programmes share many teaching and learning strategies with generic literacy programmes, but there are also specific and distinctive features which relate to the positioning of this provision in the workplace (Holland 2002, Payne 2003,). The most significant consideration is that, unlike generic literacy provision where the learners' interests are usually the main consideration, albeit within the constraints of the national curriculum, employers and trade unions also have a stake in workplace provision. It usually takes place on work premises, often in work time, and employers sometimes contribute to the costs of provision. Unions might also be involved in setting up provision, and recruiting members to participate. Thus the objectives, approaches and content of the programmes have to take multiple concerns into account. As I noted in section 2.7, although these concerns might be shared, there is also

potential for divergence or conflict, and in these situations the question of whose interests have priority has to be resolved.

These interests, alongside differing concepts of literacy, have resulted in a number of models and approaches to workplace literacy, each having different purposes and approaches (Frank and Hamilton 1999, Holland 1998, Payne 2003). Hamilton and Merrifield (2000) identified four different ideologies that influence programmes; literacy for empowerment, social control, cultural improvement and remediating deficits. A complex mix of factors can influence the emphasis; these include policy and funding drivers, as well as employers' and employees' needs which are often overlaid with the political and ideological views of those involved.

I shall now describe three types of provision which I have termed functional, employee development and critical. Although one of these is usually dominant, the reality, as Hamilton and Merrifield (2000) and Holland (1998) note, is that elements of different approaches and ideologies are often present in single programmes. Views and priorities can also shift and develop as programmes and individuals progress and revise their attitudes and aspirations.

2.9.1 Functional approach

Many workplace literacy programmes stem from a policy imperative to improve basic skills in the workforce for economic reasons. These programmes aim to develop the work-related literacy skills that workers need in order to improve their job performance. Critics, including Holland (1998), contend that these programmes tend to use approaches that treat literacy as functional, technical skills. Whilst this may be true, contemporary guidance on quality in teaching and learning, for instance ALI (2001) and FENTO (2003), does emphasise that context should be

taken into account. However, the notion of context in this type of model tends to be constrained to a narrow view of current job tasks (BSA 2002, DFES 2002). The needs of employers are paramount in this approach as it audits the specific literacy skills required to enable workers to carry out their current roles effectively, assesses where individuals do not have these skills and designs programmes to fill these skills gaps in order to improve organisational performance (Holland 1998, Payne 2003). This is the model promoted by government policy in England, and by the Basic Skills Agency through publications and guides to delivering basic skills at work, for example (BSA 2002, DfES 2002,). These publications follow a similar pattern in that they use the functional definition of basic skills, cite examples of the negative effects of poor basic skills at work and recommend functional programmes of the type outlined above. The TUC also adopts a similar functional model, although workers' rights to access training are also stressed (TUC/BSA 2000a).

This model has been criticised as a narrow, deficit model which concentrates on workers' deficiencies with little recognition of what they do well (Frank 2003, Holland and Frank 2001, Payne 2003). By focusing on what people cannot do and what their employers need them to learn, this stance often fails to appreciate both what they can already do and where their own priorities lie, leaving little scope for the principles of learner participation. A further problem is raised by Mawer (1999) who contends, with particular reference to oracy skills, that the connection between developing decontextualised skills and improvements in work performance is far from certain, because competence also depends on additional factors such as understanding of context, interactional skills and the actions of others in the workplace. Whilst it is difficult to imagine that improving skills would have no effect, this argument does suggest that impact could be enhanced by approaches which incorporate consideration of context.

The emphasis on performing their current job better also restricts the potential of programmes to prepare workers for higher level or different types of employment. Frank (2003) proposes a more positive alternative to this deficit approach when she suggests using the language of workplace change and business benefits to shift the emphasis of this approach to positive contributions that workers make. This, however, still does not address the issue that in this model, corporate and economic interests are prioritised to the exclusion of wider purposes and contexts for literacy development (Holland 1998).

2.9.2 Employee development approach

This approach is one in which the workplace is the site for basic skills learning, but the programmes are not restricted to work-related content. Although the interests of the employer and unions are taken into account in this model (Holland 1998), programmes are not determined solely by economic and organisational needs, and programmes are more learner-focused. The purposes of learning can be broader than the skills needed to perform the current job, and can reflect either the workplace context or the wider purposes of literacy or elements of both. The model does not have a political focus or agenda.

Factors other than workers' deficits are stressed, as programmes establish a positive starting point by seeking to identify how the students can already use literacies in addition to their aims and interests. Rather than being imposed externally, the curriculum is negotiated with the students in this model (Crowther et al 2001), and this gives them some control over what is taught and learned. Technical skills and knowledge of the surface features of the language are developed, but are related to the contexts in which they can be used rather than taught as decontextualised

skills. One potential drawback of this model is that employers might be reluctant to support provision not identified as having direct relevance to employees' current jobs or where the content is not directly related to work (Payne 2003).

2.9.3 Critical approach

This approach is concerned with both individual empowerment and social change, and draws on the work of Paulo Freire (1972) in which literacy is viewed as inherently political. It is informed by issues of social justice, equality, and democracy, and uses a concept of literacy as embedded in social and cultural practices and relationships rather than as autonomous technical skills. The aim of literacy development in this model is to enable learners to use texts to develop a critical understanding of the world around them, and to use these skills and understanding as a resource to take more control over their lives by making choices and taking action for change (Freire 1972, Freire and Macedo 1987). In order to facilitate this, learners participate in negotiating the learning agenda and their experiences are recognised as a valid aspect of the learning content (Street 2001).

There is a distinction between the above and the discourse of critical learning that has entered mainstream educational discourse (Lankshear 1997), as the concept of critical skills can be understood in many different ways. At one end of the continuum, any approach that requires some form of textual analysis or understanding is presented as critical, for example, higher order skills in interpreting texts. At the other end, there is always a political dimension which involves exploration of inequalities, and devising ways of changing these circumstances. This might be in relation to local circumstances or at a societal level. However, it is important to recognise the constraints and limitations of this approach, as literacy

programmes cannot necessarily bring about change because of other external factors, personal choices, and the power of existing social and economic structures.

A critical and analytical approach could be the most appropriate model for workplaces where worker participation, high level communication skills and the ability to solve problems are valued. Conversely, employers might see the political dimension, which encourages workers to challenge or work for change, as less desirable or as threatening organisational interests. Changes sought as a result of an emancipatory literacy programme will prioritise workers' interests. They might bring about common benefits for workers and employers, for example improvements in health and safety, but are not in the employers' control and might conflict with their priorities.

2.10 Conclusion

In this chapter I have pointed to the contested nature of the economic arguments for improving poor literacy skills. Policies are based on the proposition that poor basic skills are a massive drain on the economy and a barrier to national, organisational and individual advancement. The policy mantra that improving skills will increase national wealth and ensure employment security and advancement for individuals has been questioned by critics who regard the proposition that there is a causal relationship between economic problems and poor basic skills as too simplistic. Whilst recognising that there may be a link, they contend that, because of other factors which also have an impact, improving literacy skills without also tackling other causes of social and economic problems will not necessarily bring about economic advances or change the situation of individuals.

However, this should not be used as an argument against providing basic skills provision at work, since poor basic skills do perpetuate inequalities and affect people's lives by restricting opportunities, choices and access to employment and the power structures of society. Improving basic skills, therefore, can equip people with more understanding of external barriers to success and more resources with which to overcome these hurdles and gain access to a wider range of opportunities and options. The extent to which provision does this will depend on the type of provision offered and whose interests it serves. This is influenced by multiple and complex factors, including human agency, and the next chapter will investigate how these aspects play out in practice.

3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a brief description of how I carried out the research, followed by an account of the methods I used. In telling the story of my research journey, I have attempted to make the research process transparent by making my own position explicit, and relating what actually happened, including the problems I encountered and how I tried to resolve them. All research is subject to constraints (Griffiths 1998), and I have indicated where my study was shaped or limited because of time, logistic or access considerations.

I start with a summary of the research process, which I then flesh out in subsequent sections where I reflect on each aspect in detail, and seek to explain the approaches I took. The overarching aspects of the research, the research paradigm, conceptual focus and ethical considerations and ethical concerns are considered. I then address the methodological approach and specific processes of deciding the sample, gaining access, gathering information and analysing the data. Finally, I reflect on the reliability, validity and generalisability of the research.

One issue which had possible implications for each stage of the research was my position, noted in chapter one, as an insider researcher. My management position, my relationships with colleagues and my role in the project might have influenced how I designed the study, collected the evidence and attributed meaning to the data. There were different degrees to my insider status reflecting, perhaps, Griffiths's (1998) observation that no-one is a total insider or outsider researcher. At one level I was close to the project because of my management role. I had

secured the funding and carried out some preparatory activity before the project team was appointed. This provided me with helpful knowledge when planning the research but, as it might have influenced what I looked for, I also had to guard against designing the research to try to produce findings to reinforce my own views or justify the way in which I had established the project. My management relationship to the project team, whilst helping to secure access, also had implications for the research relationships, an issue I address in more detail in section 3.4.3

The relationship with colleagues from the Treasurer's and Direct Works departments was more distant as, although we worked for the same authority, I did not know the project colleagues before this work started, and their working environments were strange to me, so in that sense I was more of an outsider than insider researcher. Nevertheless, my status as an employee of same local authority did provide me with some insider's privileges, for example securing agreement to carry out the research and access to carry out interviews. I shall return to my insider status where it becomes relevant as I discuss my research processes in the remainder of this chapter.

3.2 Overview

This section provides a surface description of how I carried out the enquiry. As stated in the introductory chapter, my research interests grew out of my work practice and my first step was to frame these interests as research questions. I then drew on the literature and the advice of colleagues to determine an appropriate methodology for the purposes and scale of my study; a qualitative approach within a case study framework. Semi-structured interviews became my primary source of evidence. I also observed two teaching sessions and drew on documentary sources to provide complementary data and triangulate the interview evidence.

Approaches to colleagues working with the project secured their support and assistance for the research, in particular to facilitate access to the students I wished to interview and collect the documents I needed. They also agreed to take part in interviews themselves. I visited each course twice, once to ask students to take part in the research and once to observe a class. I observed class sessions lasting one and a half hours, and took detailed notes to record my observations, supplemented by copies of the session plans and teaching materials. I also used time before and after the sessions to get to know the students so that, hopefully, they would be more relaxed and open in the interviews. I compiled a research diary in which I kept a reflective record of all my research conversations and interactions as well as noting emerging themes, ideas and possible theories to consider in the analysis stage.

I drew up a framework which set out the broad topics I wished to talk about in the interviews, and used this as a guide and aide-mémoire in the interviews (see appendix 1), which I taped to provide a full record for the analysis. I carried out 11 student interviews, six from the Works course and five from the Treasurer's course. All took place either in the final course session or shortly after the end of the courses, so that the students were in a position to reflect on the full programme. The Treasurer's interviews took place in a separate, private room during the last course session and in an extra day session after the official end of the course. Students took time out of their courses for the interviews, which lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. The union co-ordinator escorted me to the Works interviews which I conducted in workplaces, a park, a cemetery, a vehicle maintenance workshop and the training room at the main Works depot, two to four weeks after the end of their course.

The positive aspect of interviewing students at, or shortly after, the end of the course was that the experience was still vivid, and this produced some rich data. The disadvantage was that they were only able to reflect on the immediate impact and benefits. I interviewed the training managers, a line manager from the Treasurer's department and the union co-ordinator several weeks after the end of the course when the impact in the Works department was beginning to become apparent. The Treasurer's training manager had left her post by that time, so had less direct knowledge of impact. In this period, I also carried out interviews with the project manager and one of the literacy tutors, two trade union informants, one with a national and the other with a regional interest, and a national expert in the field of workplace literacy.

I had simultaneously collected documentary evidence in the period when I was carrying out the interviews. In the next stage I reviewed these sources, identified gaps in the information and gathered further documents. I also transcribed the tapes. By this time I had accumulated a great deal of evidence which I sorted and analysed, using the approaches discussed in detail in section 3.8, before I started writing, the final stage in the process. The above provides a brief, chronological overview of what I did, and I will now examine each of these processes in greater detail.

3.3 The research paradigm

I adopted a case study framework and qualitative research methods for my study, as I believed that these were the most appropriate to investigate my research question. In selecting my method, I recognised that whilst different research approaches do not necessarily have more intrinsic worth than each other, they do have different strengths and limitations and can generate different types of data (Arksey and Knight 1999). These

factors govern their suitability for different types of study. It is, therefore, of fundamental importance to consider the research questions to be investigated and the scope of the proposed study when deciding on research methods, and to select the most appropriate processes to suit the aims and approaches of the research, as the type of data collected will affect and shape the interpretations and conclusions drawn from the study.

An interpretive paradigm appeared to be most suitable choice for my research, as qualitative research methods support the researcher to carry out in-depth investigations which capture the unique features of a situation. I was concerned to explore individual perspectives and uncover details of the factors affecting the people, the learning and the impact of this learning. This was supported by the underlying premise of interpretive educational research, that educational activity is complex because it takes place in social contexts, and that these constantly shift and refocus and are always mediated by human agency.

The positivist or scientific paradigm, in contrast, tends to be more concerned with a search for certainties and finding explanations, usually employing methods that can be replicated and tested. In educational research these are often quantitative approaches using survey methods which can generate theories and generalisations on which to base changes to practice (Bassey 1999, Wellington 2000). These methods tend to be very broad-brush and therefore less appropriate for generating the detailed information I needed for my study.

I drew on critical educational research perspectives which also aim to develop interpretative understanding of educational events and practices. They then frame explanations in terms of power and equality issues, and seek to contribute to a process which can bring about social justice, for

example by empowering the participants (Griffiths 1998). This is not a neutral standpoint, and Cohen et al (2000) have noted the criticism of some commentators who believe that researchers should remain neutral. Others argue that research is never neutral or objective since it is inevitably influenced by the views, values and assumptions of the researcher, and these permeate all aspects of the research: the design of the study, the framing of the research question, the interpretation of the findings and the ways in which they are presented (Burgess 1994, Griffiths 1998, Ozga 2000). Despite this, the researcher should strive to minimise her effect on the research, and in pursuit of this I tried to be as detached as possible. It is also important to make these views explicit, so that the reader can take influences on the research design and analysis into account when formulating judgements and responses.

The critical approach provided a valuable conceptual focus in relation to power and equality issues at both macro political and micro workplace levels. I drew on the analytical concepts of equality and social justice to inform my research design and analysis. However, whilst identifying some potential for change at individual or workplace level, I remained aware of the limitations on wider change, as the extent to which this type of research can bring about individual empowerment or societal change in the face of deep-seated social and economic structures, which perpetuate inequalities, is open to question (Cohen et al 2000).

I also used conceptual tools from the literacy field to enhance the research design and practice. I found the 'New Literacy Studies' concept of literacy as shaped by social environment, rather than as a set of decontextualised technical skills, a useful way of thinking about literacy in the workplace because it recognises the importance of context and the students' interests (Barton and Hamilton 1998, Gee 1996). However, as I found that the situated literacies approach does not necessarily provide the tools for

critical analysis, I also drew on the Freirean-influenced critical or emancipatory concepts of literacy, which are more explicitly concerned with individual liberation and social change. These ideas influenced the focus of my investigation as I determined to look beyond skills needs, and to also investigate and gain an understanding of the contextual factors and power relationships that influenced the development, delivery and impact of provision. I also decided to research the views and perspectives of the people affected by policy, the students and trade unions as well as the employer and provide, and to consider factors such as power relationships when analysing the data.

3.4 Ethical concerns

Ensuring that that participants' rights were respected, and that my research did not harm, deceive, betray or exploit those involved, required consideration of ethical issues, which are inherent aspects of all research processes (Griffiths 1998). The complexities of ethical problems and dilemmas make it difficult to find definitive solutions, but I did my utmost to adopt ethical principles, address ethical issues as thoroughly as possible, and reflect constantly on these in relation to my research design and practice. I shall now discuss the primary ethical considerations raised in my study.

3.4.1 Informed consent

I worked on the principle of informed consent (Arksey and Knight 1999) and, as already noted, explained to the participants why I was carrying out the research, the areas I wished to study and how I intended to use the research. I also considered the extent to which I would disclose my own values to participants since this information has the potential to influence the responses of the participants. It could encourage them if they shared

my views although, as Riddell (1989) found, differences of perspective would not necessarily deter participants who have differing or opposing views. A number of the people I was interviewing were already aware of my perspectives so I decided, in the interests of equity, to share this with all the respondents. I was also aware that different amounts of detail might be more helpful for the different groups; the employers and employees for example were not particularly interested in the detail of theoretical perspectives on basic skills issues, whereas the participants from education wanted to discuss these issues. Knowing my perspectives also helped to gain trust with the students as they realised that I genuinely wanted to hear their real experiences and viewpoints, and was not there, for example, to coerce them into ratifying a management view of events.

3.4.2 Confidentiality and anonymity

Encouraging people to reveal experiences and personal views carries the risk of exposing them to harm (Griffiths 1998). In my study, some students were critical of their employers, tutors revealed how they presented curriculum content in ways which masked the true content from the managers, and other respondents criticised practices or policies upheld by their employers. This had the potential to expose them to repercussions, for example if employers gained access to their interview transcripts or quotes in the research could be attributed to specific individuals. I undertook to ensure confidentiality and, where possible, anonymity. I guaranteed that transcripts of their interviews would be stored securely and accessible only to me and my supervisor, concealed the identity of the local authority and changed all the names used in the text. However, these strategies are not foolproof (Bassey 1999). I could not guarantee absolute anonymity to all participants, especially the informants with national roles, because the small number of people working in the field raised the possibility that someone might identify them.

I made these individuals aware of this and offered them the opportunity to embargo the use of any of their views or confidences, although they chose not to do so.

3.4.3 Research relationships

The personal characteristics of the interviewer and the interviewees and the relationship between them can have a profound effect on the research relationship (Burgess 1989, Griffiths 1998). In this research I had to reflect on the implications of the similarities and differences between the participants and me, because issues such as power relationships, status, class, culture and gender might complicate interactions, or affect my ability to elicit reliable data from participants. My two major areas of concern were how my relationship with the tutors might impact on their interviews, and the ways in which power, gender and class might affect my interviews with the students.

I was fortunate to have constructive working relationships with the tutors, based on mutual respect, because negative attitudes could have affected their co-operation. Despite this, I still questioned whether my management position would bias the research, for example by influencing the information the tutors were willing to share with me. They might be tempted, for example, to exaggerate attitudes or practices they thought I would approve of, or to conceal issues they suspected I would not agree with. I tried to overcome this by making what Burgess (1991) terms a 'research bargain'; this consisted of drawing a clear distinction between my research and management roles and undertaking to keep them separate, promising confidentiality, and agreeing not to use information or materials given to me for research purposes for other functions such as appraisal. This was helped as I was not their direct line manager, and at

the time I interviewed them I was working my notice period as I had secured a new job outside the organisation.

I considered how my position as a professional woman might affect the interviews with the male manual workers, and was concerned about differential power relationships. I had some power to exploit or harm them, but they had power to damage my research by refusing to take part, withholding information or telling lies. I questioned, for example, what they would be willing to reveal to me, as I was aware of some of the reasons they might have for suspicion, for example their previous experience of exploitation by managers. Mac an Ghaill (1991) found that demonstrating to the participants some knowledge and understanding of relevant issues can establish trust, and we established shared views on areas important to them such as my views on equality and respect. I was able to build a rapport and, as far as I can establish, respondents did contribute positively and honestly to the research process.

I was aware that some areas for discussion had the potential to cause distress or embarrassment, for example discussion of school experiences, which might be associated with failure. I took care in the ways in which I phrased questions and allowed interviewees to take the lead in talking about areas in which they might feel exposed. Most participants did reveal their feelings about sensitive issues, and I was surprised at the extent to which they did talk about situations in which they felt vulnerable or upset, as I had anticipated that 'macho culture' would prevent this.

My different position also brought advantages to the research relationship; as I was obviously not a male manual worker, respondents assumed that I was not familiar with the culture of their working environment, and this produced some rich and interesting data. Experiences and assumptions, which they might have assumed were known to a researcher from the

same background, were made explicit to me. Particularly fruitful examples included explanations of the dynamics of the 'macho' culture and attitudes to literacy at work.

3.4.4 Representing voices

Foregrounding the voices not usually heard in the development of policy and practice, particularly students' voices, was an important aspect of the research. For the students, taking part in the research was a powerful means of counteracting the lack of control and voice they experienced at work. Other respondents also reflected that they appreciated the opportunity to think through and express their views. The research process brought their interests, concerns, ways of acting and thinking into focus, but this also carried with it a responsibility not to exploit or misrepresent them.

Although individuals chose what to say, they did not have control over how I interpreted their words or presented them in my text, and it was inevitable that I would mediate their voices by analysing and interpreting what was said. I spent time meticulously checking and rechecking my analysis and text with the interview transcripts to try to ensure that I did not misrepresent their evidence. I chose to bring the interviewees' voices into the findings section by quoting their words to illuminate my analysis, and endeavoured to avoid the distortion that can occur when taking quotes out of context by a similar process of constantly returning to the transcripts to verify my selections and interpretations.

Selecting quotations presented further ethical dilemmas, as I had to consider that these could display aspects of respondents' views or behaviour that were not necessarily complimentary. I deliberated, for example, whether to include Joanna's account of her initial ignorance of

63

literacy issues, which could be viewed by a reader either as patronising behaviour or as the understandable lack of knowledge of a newcomer to the field. I decided to include this as it illustrated a significant aspect of literacy issues in the workplace, and to report only one type of behaviour or perspective would mask the complexity of the issues under investigation and could seriously distort the research.

3.5 Case study research

Case studies can be an effective means of generating data on the effects on people of macro political decisions (Cohen et al 2000). It can provide rich accounts and insights into how policy is translated into practice in particular settings, and these can inform further policy development (Bryman and Burgess 1999). I chose to use a case study approach because it provided a framework for the in-depth understanding I wished to gain from my study of an instance of practice in a policy context; a workplace literacy programme involving one of the priority groups identified in the national adult *Skills for Life* strategy (DfEE 2001).

Case studies are not a method in themselves, but a framework for a detailed study of a particular situation (Bassey 1999, Deem and Brehony 1994). Bassey (1999) points to the difficulties of formulating precise definitions of a case study, and there is no standard definition of what case study research is. However there is some consensus on the salient features of case study research. It is in-depth research; it is carried out in real-life contexts; it studies a singularity; it has boundaries and these define the context and scope of the study (Bassey 1999, Cohen et al 2000, Stake 1995). The 'case' to be investigated might be one individual, a set of individuals participating in a particular activity, or several similar activities or events. The self-contained and time-limited nature of the

project I selected for study provided natural boundaries which contained rich data sources.

3.6 Data-gathering methods

The case study frame can encompass a variety of research methods, which can be either qualitative or quantitative, or a mixture of both (Bryman and Burgess 1999). As already noted, I adopted qualitative research methods to generate my data as these methods support the type of in-depth exploration I wished to carry out (Bryman and Burgess op cit, Eisenhardt 1999). Multiple sources can be used to gather complementary data and provide more and differing insights than would be generated by a single-method approach, as well as to triangulate evidence (Bassey 1999, Stake 1995). My primary research method was to conduct semi-structured interviews with individuals involved in the project. In addition, I used observation of practice and examination of documentary sources to enrich my evidence base.

The workplace literacy case offered a focus for gathering comprehensive evidence of the project processes, the perspectives, views and experiences of the different participants, and for identifying both shared meanings and points of difference. I considered using oral or written survey methods, but as these use uniform questions based on pre-formed categories, I felt they were more suitable for gathering large amounts of quantifiable, factual data than for my research purpose of generating and exploring the complexities of participants' stories. I did not want to use methods based on reading and writing to elicit information from students attending literacy courses, as these were likely to cause some anxiety. Furthermore, I was concerned that respondents' literacy skills could limit the quality of their written answers, whereas oral interactions could

65

provide them with the opportunity to articulate more fully their attitudes, opinions and feelings.

Participant observation was used very effectively by Gowen (1992) in her study of a workplace literacy programme, and could have yielded appropriate data for my study. However, this approach was impractical for two reasons. Firstly, I was working full-time whilst carrying out the research and was not allocated any work time to carry out the research. As a result, I would have been unable to attend the provision for sufficient hours to use participant observation methods. In addition, my position as overall manager of the project could have influenced the content and dynamics of the courses had I attended a substantial number of sessions, and it would have been difficult to sustain dual management and participant observer roles. I did however attend one session in each strand as an observer as I was interested in the content and dynamics of the teaching and learning. Direct observation enabled me to triangulate documentary evidence, especially session plans and teaching materials which I saw translated from print into practice, as well as providing further rich and detailed evidence of actual events and interactions in the sessions.

3.7 The sample

The primary consideration when selecting my sample was the question of how to obtain a sample that would enable me to gather sufficient and relevant information (Arksey and Knight 1999). It is also important to think about practical issues when determining the criteria for selection and the make up and size of the sample (Cohen et al 2000), and I had to take into account the time I had available for carrying out interviews, how far it would be practical to travel to interviews and the probability of gaining access.

A number of different approaches can be used to select a sample, and these tend to reflect the research methods used (Arksey and Knight 1999, Wellington 2000). Probability sampling methods are often used in large-scale studies where researchers need to eliminate bias from the sample and ensure that it represents all the characteristics and variables of the population they are studying. I used a non-probability method, an approach which is usually most suitable for case studies such as mine where the aim is not to represent a whole population but to focus in detail on a singularity (Cohen et al 2000). I wanted to assemble sufficient information to enable me to investigate my research question in depth and to compare the findings from each of the two strands in the project, so sought data from all the different perspectives; students, tutors, union representatives, training managers and line managers. As there were small numbers of people in each of these groups, I opted to invite all the individuals directly involved in the project to take part in the research.

All the students were invited to participate. One outcome of this approach was that 9 of the 11 respondents in this group were men, creating a gender bias in the sample. This presented an unexpected opportunity to investigate aspects of workplace literacy relating to men, although, as there were only two women, the sample was too small to generate extensive gender comparisons within the study. The two tutors, the training managers in each strand and the union learning representative in the Works strand all agreed to be interviewed. I anticipated that gaining access to the students' line managers would be more problematic because they were less directly involved in the work, so invited all to take part, but only one agreed to do so.

I also wanted to gain 'outside' perspectives on both the project I was studying and broader workplace literacy policy and practice in order to

triangulate the internal evidence. I anticipated that insights into the external, national picture might contribute to the formation of judgements about which of the research findings might have more general relevance and application. I carried out three such interviews as my ability to interview a larger sample from this group was restricted by time factors and the costs of national travel. I selected informants who had regional or national roles in addition to some knowledge of the project; a national expert in the field of workplace literacy and two trade union representatives, one with a regional remit and one with a national role.

3.8 Gaining access

Gaining access is a fundamental consideration for the researcher (Bryman and Burgess 1999), as it has the potential to affect the success and quality of the research. The outcomes of the research, for example, could be become unbalanced if only partial access to individuals or documents is obtained. Whilst my position as an 'insider' researcher helped to open doors to both people and documentary sources in my own service, access was less straightforward in the other two departments where I was able to interview students and training managers, but some documents were withheld and, as already noted, with only one exception, line managers refused to take part.

3.8.1 Access to people

Even though my employer had granted permission for me to carry out the study, this did not guarantee access to all the people I wished to interview, since different individuals had the power to either facilitate or block access. Furthermore, people could choose whether or not to take part in the research, as any attempt at compulsion would have been both highly unethical and very unlikely to generate rich or reliable information.

I negotiated access by making direct requests to the people I already had contact with; the course tutors, the training managers, the workplace union representative and the national and regional informants. I worked through intermediaries, the tutors, training managers and workplace union representative, to reach the students and line managers. These 'gatekeepers' had the power to grant, withhold or obstruct access (Burgess 1991), and some of the conditions necessary to convince them to work with me were gaining trust and support for the research, and overcoming potential logistic obstacles such as time and location. I endeavoured to ensure that everyone I approached understood the aims of my research and the methodology I intended to employ, and I had already gained trust through working relationships developed either on the project to be studied or through previous work. As a result, most responses were very constructive as, in addition to seeing the potential relevance of the research for their work, individuals wanted to support a colleague.

The Works union representative and the tutors facilitated access to the students. I visited both groups during learning sessions to explain the research and ask members to take part. These group meetings also enabled me to establish a relationship with the students before the individual interviews. I explained what I was trying to do in the research and what it would involve as well as guaranteeing confidentiality. The students were enthusiastic about the research, agreed to take part and immediately entered into debate about the issues. They said that they wanted to give as much back as possible because their experiences of the project had been very positive and affirming. They contrasted their treatment as students with their treatment as workers, where no one listened to them or wanted to know about their opinions. They wanted to be interviewed because they were being given a voice, an opportunity to

state their positions. They also identified common purpose with me and wanted to help because I was a student like them. Initially I had felt some diffidence about my position as a post-graduate student approaching literacy students, but this was misplaced, as the students made no distinction between our levels of study, perhaps reinforcing the theme identified in the research that they placed importance on measures such as personal qualities rather than educational background.

I had very little success in persuading line managers to be interviewed, and only one, from the Treasurer's strand, agreed. The intermediaries in both departments were the training managers who reported different reasons for refusal. The Treasurer's managers felt under high levels of pressure of work and did not see these interviews as a priority or as having any benefit for them. The one manager who did consent to an interview had showed particular interest in the literacy programme, and this possibly influenced his decision to take part.

The line managers in the Works department all refused, again because of work demands, but also because they had some hostility to the course which they viewed as taking staff away from their 'real' work. This created a gap in the data as I was unable to elicit the Works managers' views on the literacy in their workplaces, and there was no alternative primary source of this information. The perspectives of this group might have either added weight to, or, alternatively, provided different insights into some of the themes identified as significant, such as management styles, the actual literacy demands of the manual work and the impact and benefits of the programme.

3.8.2 Access to documents

Ease of access to documents depends on the type of document, where it is located and who controls access. Published documents such as the policy documents I used presented me with no access problems; they were relatively accessible as they are in the public domain, available either in printed form, often for no cost, or through websites. Access to unpublished material can be more problematic as the researcher has no right of access, and issues such as confidentiality may be live for documents still in use or those produced recently.

The adult education department held most of the course documents I wished to scrutinise, and my position as an insider researcher secured relatively easy access. I had, for example, written the funding application myself, and was able to ask tutors for materials related to the courses, including learner assessments and course materials. This presented potential problems, for example, the tutors might have been reluctant to subject their work to critical scrutiny. However, the 'research bargain' identified in section 3.4, complemented by the relationship of trust and mutual respect which I had already established, secured their agreement to provide the information.

Access to Works and Treasurer's department documents was more problematic. I wanted to examine reports relating to Best Value and Investors in People. There were two categories of Best Value documents; internal documents, which included detailed assessments of performance and value for money, and published progress summaries of target achievement. The latter were freely available to any city resident but contained very little detail. Permission to use the internal documents was withheld because the information was viewed as too sensitive to reveal to outsiders. Access to departmental Investors in People information was

also refused, for similar reasons. Although these documents might have contained useful information, I was able to use policy documents in the public domain to gain background information, for instance the national Investors in People standards,
http://www.iipuk.co.uk/IIP/Internet/InvestorsinPeople, accessed May 2003, and to triangulate data using my group visits and interviews with the different sources.

3.9 Gathering the evidence

I analysed documentary sources to gain background information, identify trends and themes and provide detailed information about both the macro policy context and the micro content of the programme I was studying. Published primary sources included policy documents and guides to practice. Unpublished records relating to the project included the funding bid, project reports and meeting minutes, teaching plans, teaching materials and students' initial assessments. I recognised the limitations affecting the use of documents of this nature as they can give a partial or misleading picture of a situation, and they can contain overt or covert bias (Scott 1990). The course session plans, for example, did not necessarily contain an accurate representation of what actually occurred during the sessions. However, when combined with other methods, the use of documents can supply complementary evidence which contributes to the construction of a fuller picture, and I used the different sources and types of information to facilitate a triangulation approach to testing the validity of the data, for instance I compared completed training needs questionnaires with what the students, the tutors and union learning coordinator told me in interviews.

I adopted interviewing as my primary method of collecting the participants' stories, as this enabled me to meet and interact with them, to listen to their

accounts and explore in detail the issues they raised. I had identified initial areas of interest as a starting point, but also wished to allow unknown factors to emerge. Interviews can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured (Arksey and Knight 1999, Wellington 2000) and, as they tend to produce different types of data, the type of research to be carried out will influence the choice of method. Structured interviews employ pre-set questions and, since they share many of the functions and limitations of written surveys that I identified in section 3.6, I judged that they were unlikely to provide an appropriate framework for my study. Unstructured interviews tend not to use a pre-determined format and this supports very general explorations of a topic or theme. Whilst they tend to produce very detailed and complex information, there might be little commonality in the issues raised, and this limited the suitability of this type of interviewing for my research, since I wished to elicit comparative data within the broad areas of inquiry I had defined. I used semi-structured interviews, based on a thematic framework, as they enabled me to explore common topics whilst providing the flexibility to pursue interesting issues and generate new themes (see Appendix 1).

3.9.1 Interview questions

Skills and knowledge gained through my training and work as an English language tutor alongside my experience of working with literacy students were invaluable during the interview process, because I was able to build on my awareness of language to develop effective techniques to encourage interviewees to articulate their experiences and views in the research situation.

I tried to use clear focused questions because ambiguous or inappropriate questions might unsettle the interviewees, antagonise them or produce inadequate information. I sought to avoid using difficult to answer

73

question forms, for example double questions such as 'What have you learned and how do you feel about your progress?' The respondent often forgets half of these questions and may feel uncomfortable about this. I used closed and open questions for different purposes in the interview. Closed questions were useful at the beginning of the interview when some individuals were apprehensive, as they required straightforward responses. I also used them for checking my understanding of information, and sometimes to introduce a new topic, which I then followed up with open questions to probe for more information.

I avoided using technical language which could have been unfamiliar to students by referring instead to the process, for example, 'How did the tutor find out what you wanted to learn?' rather than, 'How was your initial assessment carried out?' A further problem with the latter version is that it carries an assumption that initial assessment was carried out, whereas the former prompted respondents to talk about the ways in which this happened. I tried not to use leading questions such as 'Do you think you spent too much/little time in discussion tasks?' as this could bias the results by influencing responses. Questions such as 'Did you gain anything you didn't expect from the course?' and 'What was the best thing about the course for you?' did not assume any particular answer, and opened rich seams of information.

3.9.2 Recording information

I wanted a full record of all the interviews so that I could review and reflect on what was said in order to decide which information was significant for my research. I considered whether to use written notes, or video or audio recording. Note-taking distorts the conduct of an interview, as it is difficult to take down what is said, and at the same time maintain eye contact, notice body language and identify issues of interest to explore in greater

depth. In addition, I lacked the skills and speed to take accurate verbatim notes, and to summarise would have started the data selection process at a very early stage, creating the risk of discarding potentially significant information or views. On the other hand, my experience of working with literacy students led me to suspect that videoing interviews might be off-putting, and gaining access to equipment would have presented further difficulties.

I therefore used audio-tape recording, which produced a complete record whilst leaving me free to concentrate on the conduct and content of the interviews. I did take into account the possibility that the presence of a tape recorder might distort the interviews, for example by inhibiting what was said, so asked whether individuals would feel comfortable with the tape when I arranged the interviews and checked again at the start of each interview. All agreed, and, although it is impossible to know for certain, the recording appeared to have no discernible effect on the interviews, as the interviewees seemed to be relaxed and to pay no attention to the tape recorder.

3.10 Data analysis

Analysis of the qualitative data was a complex task as there were multiple threads to be organised, sorted and drawn together to generate explanations. As Bassey (1999) and Arksey and Knight (1999) recommend, I sorted the data from the interview transcripts and documents into categories to which analytical questions could be applied in order to generate explanations and theories. This was not an entirely linear process, as I started thinking about the meaning of the data as I carried out the interviews. For example, as comments on work culture and confidence building in the early interviews started to indicate that these were emerging as significant areas, I ensured that I gathered data

on these themes in each subsequent interview, and recorded ideas and hunches about their potential significance in the research diary.

I had amassed vast amounts of data, which included interview transcripts, published and unpublished documents, and detailed notes of observations, meetings and conversations about the research, and I needed to sort, organise and make sense of all this before I could start to interpret it. I had transcribed all the interviews in full, as I did not know exactly which information would be relevant and useful, and did not want to prejudge outcomes by selecting at this stage. Although this process was very time-consuming, it helped me to become very familiar with the data. I noted categories, themes and issues that I thought might have some interest or significance as I transcribed, often in bold type in the transcripts, and this provided a starting point for the sorting process.

I aimed to sort the data, and then seek patterns in order to generate themes. Wellington (2000) notes that there is no one correct strategy for sorting and analysing information, and personal preference plays a great part in determining the approaches used. I had planned to use information technology to support my interrogation of the data and intended to use the NUD*ST software programme to facilitate the process of categorising the data. Although they are not a substitute for human thinking processes, an advantage of computers is that they can sort data very quickly into many different permutations. I did start to use this package, but in practice found the software too time-consuming and difficult to use, so reverted to manual methods.

Making sense of the interview data presented a major challenge, not least because of the volume of information I had to analyse. Broad categories and themes used at the start of the research process included reasons for getting involved with the programme, views on the teaching, and

perceptions of learning gain, and others had emerged as I collected the data. I read the transcripts in detail to look for further broad themes, and identified, for example, the significance of redeployment as a catalyst for participation. I noted these areas, using different coloured highlighter pens to mark references to them in the texts. The coloured annotation enabled me to find references to different themes quickly, and the amount of shading provided a quick visual indication of the volume of information on specifc issues. I also created a profile of the students using documentary evidence and information from the interviews.

I then drew on an approach suggested by Barton and Hamilton (1998), and transferred information from the transcripts and learner profiles to charts, thus creating visual representations of the data. These enabled me to organise the material into categories, which I could then analyse in greater depth. I listed the categories down the left-hand side of the grid and used the horizontal lines to summarise information from respondents relating to each category. The vertical columns contained the information from each respondent. As some categories contained a mass of rich and interesting information, I created thematic grids and these facilitated further, detailed exploration of the data (see appendix 3 for an example).

The next stage was to use the charts and documentary sources to make sense of the findings by searching for patterns in the data which I then used to generate interpretations and explanations. One issue I needed to consider was that I carried out my research at a time of intense activity and development in policy and practice in the field of basic skills. I gathered data at a specific instant of time but the field had changed and new initiatives were brought in between this stage and the analysis. I considered how to relate these two aspects, and decided to discuss the findings in relation to current policy and practice.

The visual portrayal of the key points enabled me to see very easily the common elements and differences within and between the different themes and individuals. By reading from top to bottom I could see a summary of the experiences and views of each respondent, and by reading from left to right I could view and compare the information from all the respondents in relation to each category. For example, I read across the grid to find the different reasons given by students for joining their course, then used individual learner information to question whether the reasons related to variables such as literacy skills levels, occupation or which strand they attended.

As it is easy to misrepresent data once they are summarised or taken out of context, I consistently returned to the transcripts to check that I had not corrupted the content or meaning as I developed the analysis. In considering reasons for these findings, I referred to the literature where there was other relevant research. However, I also recognised that, as interpretations are inevitably affected by human agency (Griffiths 1998), my conclusions and meanings were shaped by my own perceptions and conceptual frameworks.

3.11 Establishing validity and reliability

Validity is to do with whether a research finding is what it claims to be; that is, are the findings credible and can they be trusted? The question of reliability is concerned with the quality of the research, and the usual test of this in the positivist paradigm is whether the results can be replicated (Cohen et al 2000). However, qualitative case study research such as mine is highly unlikely to generate absolute truths because of the nature of the study (Arksey and Knight 1999, Bassey 1999). As case study data are context-specific and not generated by a representative sample of the population, exact replication is also improbable, particularly as people

78

don't necessarily react in exactly the same way in apparently similar situations. This is not to argue that validity and reliability are impossible to achieve in qualitative case study research, but that the tests and questions asked to establish them should be appropriate for the research methodology. Bassey (1999) suggests using the concept of 'trustworthiness', which can be used to underpin the quest for honesty and reliability in the research process.

I aimed to ensure the quality and credibility of the research through my methods, for example in approaches to sampling, concern for ethical issues, and interviewing strategies to gain truthful information. I used triangulation, constant checking of the data and external key informants to consider and check the adequacy and accuracy of the data as well as my analysis and interpretations.

3.11.1 Triangulation

It is sometimes difficult to ensure that reliable information is gained through a single method, because if researchers only look at the data through one lens their view may be distorted or biased. One challenge I faced was that I was working with individuals and, although different people's perceptions and versions of the truth are real to them, they might differ from others'. I needed to question whether the respondents had told the truth or tried to mislead me, and to consider external measures against which the truth of their stories could be measured. Triangulation is the use of multiple methods of data collection (Arksey and Knight 1999, Cohen et al 2000), and it can enhance the validity of the research by ensuring that the data is viewed from more than one perspective.

Using multiple sources, namely interview, observation and documentary evidence, enabled me to compare and cross-check data. To judge

whether the people I interviewed were telling the truth, I interrogated other sources and types of information referring to the same issue to check for congruence with interviewees' narratives. I found, for example, that the trade union representative's account of recruiting students was consistent with the documentary evidence, and the tutors' reflections on their teaching strategies corresponded with both my observations and the teaching and learning materials and documents in the students' course files.

In instances where I did not have alternative types of evidence, I triangulated perspectives from the interviews and used them to build a cumulative picture to reveal situations or typical attitudes. The veracity of accounts of bad industrial relations in the Works department, for example, was supported by the fact that all the respondents referred to this issue, and these accounts came from three different positions, management, workers and the union.

This, however, did not mean that the different sources of evidence always said the same thing. There might be multiple versions of a situation, because the individuals involved are in different positions and their experiences are likely to lead to the expression of divergent, or even conflicting, perceptions and points of view. The two training managers' perspectives differed, but this did not lead me to distrust their data, as there is no reason that they should share an outlook, and their views could be treated as equally valid. My approach was to identify areas of consensus and divergence, consider supporting evidence from other sources and check for internal consistency in their individual accounts. It was obviously important to seek to explain differences in the analysis.

Internal inconsistencies in the respondents' narratives were more problematic. I found very few instances of this, and all were students'

references to reading skills. Were these indications of lying, of different interpretations of reality or of embarrassment? Robert, for instance, offered apparently inconsistent versions of his reading skills at different points in his interview, at one time telling me about his fears that his peers would discover his low skills levels and at another saying he was 'quite good' at reading. I considered whether he set out to deceive me, and concluded that this was unlikely because he would not have revealed his low skills at all if he wanted to deliberately misrepresent his reading abilities. References to tutor praise and his view that he had made great progress since the start of the course because he had started a dyslexia programme indicated that he genuinely believed that his skills had improved. However, it is impossible to construct definitive retrospective explanations, and I treated contradictory narrative aspects with caution.

3.11.2 External views

Wellington (2000) emphasises the value of checking with others that the findings make sense. When I designed the research I had considered how to enable respondents to check that I had not misrepresented their views and experiences as well as to contribute to the analysis phase of the research. I had concluded that sending written accounts of findings and interpretations to people with literacy development needs might be both insensitive and unproductive, as their literacy skills levels could restrict the content of their responses. I planned to organise focus group discussions with the students and follow up conversations with other participants. Unfortunately, I was unable to implement these plans, as people were no longer available because they had moved to new employment, I could not contact them or they were no longer willing to participate.

Moran and Miriam, the two informants with national roles, agreed to act as key informants and discussed emerging findings and tentative explanations with me. I also engaged in critical discussion with a group of peers from my Ed.D. study programme and discussed issues, questions and provisional conclusions with colleagues from work. These critical conversations were of great value as they reassured me on some issues whilst refining my thinking on others.

3.12 Generalisation

A case study can contribute to knowledge by gathering and interpreting rich contextual data, and using this to produce theory, but these findings are more likely to offer illumination and illustration than empirical generalisability. Can this type of research, therefore, have any relevance or meaning for more general contexts? The answer lies in the fact that if something can be shown to exist in one case there is a possibility that it could happen in others. Hence theoretical explanations might have more universal applications (Bryman and Burgess 1999, Deem and Brehony 1994, Eisenhardt 1999, Platt 1999). Moreover, even if the practices are not identical, the theoretical concepts may be applicable in other situations (Barton and Hamilton 1998).

The task then is to try to judge the likelihood that interpretations and theories will apply in similar situations elsewhere (Bassey 1999). A case study can demonstrate that something exists which needs to be taken into account. It can also refute an existing generalisation, since discovery of even one exception demonstrates that the generalisation is not universal. My findings offered new insights into what might be considered to be effective practice. New theoretical notions had emerged from my data, for example the significance of workplace cultures in explaining attitudes to literacy and learning at work, and some of the data contradicted general

82

understandings about stigma in relation to literacy. I needed to ask to what extent they might have any relevance for similar workplaces beyond the project and group of people I studied. These judgments were informed by my knowledge, experience and beliefs, and sometimes by common sense or hunches (Stake 1995). I also drew on the literature and the opinions of my external key informants.

One function of research is to develop theory and knowledge to provide a basis for transformation and change. Hargreaves (1996) argued that the primary goal of educational research should be to produce evidence-based knowledge in order to improve the quality of educational practice. However, critics of this stance, for example Hammersley (1997) and Ranson (1996), argue that this view is too instrumental. Whilst it is valid to recognise the value of research in providing a sound theoretical underpinning for policy and practice, it is questionable whether it is possible for research to provide definitive answers to questions about how to improve practice. In addition, blueprints for action date quickly, and this is especially true in the current climate of rapidly moving basic skills initiatives. I have suggested some implications of my findings for the development of policy and practice but not absolute prescriptions for action. I have also identified areas where further research could be a valuable means of testing and advancing the conclusions and theoretical ideas of this study.

3.13 Conclusion

In this account I have traced the route of a research journey I undertook to try to make sense of one small part of the world of literacy. I have documented factors influencing my choice of research problem, research approaches and conceptual focus. I have attempted to show, through consideration of multiple aspects of the process, that I was striving to carry

out ethical research using methods which would stand up to critical scrutiny. I considered what relevance the work might have, although ultimately it is colleagues, practitioners and policy makers who will decide whether it passes the 'so what?' test.

Although I have related what I did and explored some of the thinking informing these actions, feelings are largely absent from the account. As a final reflection, carrying out the research was immensely enjoyable, despite my annoyance or frustration when it didn't go to plan. It was a pleasure to talk with the people I interviewed, who were generous with their time and ideas, were always interesting and gave me fascinating insights into their working lives and culture. Surfacing from the mire of papers and grids with new connections, themes and ideas was exciting, and the many conversations I had with people about the research were challenging and stimulating. I shall now present my data and findings, starting with an exploration of the relationship between literacy and organisational features of the workplaces in the study, followed by consideration of the motivations of the different individuals for becoming involved in the programme.

4 Getting started: recruitment to the courses

The findings from this research are analysed and summarised in the next three chapters, which are structured, broadly speaking, as 'Before', 'During' and 'After'. Chapter 4 traces changes in work circumstances and relates these to the motivations of the different individuals for getting involved with the programmes. Chapter 5 investigates the factors influencing the design and delivery of the curriculum and Chapter 6 the impact of the programme as participation brought about learning gains and precipitated changes in work situations, attitudes, aspirations, and involvement in learning and in literacy practices. In doing so, I shall introduce the people involved, the students, the union coordinator and the managers, and explore the themes through their views and words. The organisational chart inside the back cover (figure 2) can be folded out to provide a reference for the reader, and appendix 2 contains a brief profile of each student.

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I shall investigate the drivers that brought about the establishment of the programme and precipitated individuals into participating. These include attitudinal factors as well as organisational issues. Best Value and competitive tendering are inescapable features of contemporary local authority service provision, and in the case I studied they brought about changes which were of major significance for employees. I shall draw out where they crossed departmental boundaries and were common to both strands, as well as trace differences in impact on the two departments. The starting point is a brief reminder of the

programme structure, followed by identification of the significant features of organisational structures and culture in the two work domains. Next I examine the implications of changing work practices, job reductions and training for employees, and, finally, I will consider why all the participants got involved; the students' reasons for enrolling and the factors that decided managers and the union to work to set up the programmes in their departments.

I described the background to the programme in detail in chapter 1. Here I provide a brief resume of the main elements as a reminder before I turn to structural and cultural issues. The programme developed two communications courses, one for employees of the Treasurer's department and the other for Works staff. With one exception, the Works students were manual workers and were recruited, with the support of the training manager, by the union learning coordinator and learning representatives who used a questionnaire to raise interest and establish needs. The Treasurer's employees were all office workers who had either been redeployed, or were in the process of being redeployed, from manual occupations and were referred to the provision by the departmental training manager.

4.2 Organisational structures and cultures

Organisational structures and informal cultures provided differing contexts for the courses. Whilst both departments were organised in hierarchical structures, there were distinctive differences in their cultures and management styles. In this section I shall identify their main features and discuss their impact on literacy issues, in particular on the disclosure of problems with literacy skills at work. This appeared to be related to attitudes to literacy and the extent to which people had to carry out literacy

tasks as part of their day to work, relations with management and the informal workplace culture.

4.2.1 Structures

Literacy-based tasks were an inherent feature of the administrative jobs, and colleagues and managers were usually aware of difficulties. Most of the administrative staff who joined the programme were based in different offices in the Treasurer's department. Val, the only female student from the Works department, was based with one colleague in a small office located in a cemetery. All the office staff encountered literacy-related problems which they could not conceal from colleagues, as they worked in open plan offices where 'everyone knew what was happening', and they needed to ask these colleagues for assistance.

Chas had moved from painting and decorating work to a job in the housing benefits section, and his colleague Bridget, who had previously worked in a bar, frequently had to request assistance. All found that their colleagues responded helpfully to these requests, but their own feelings about this differed. Chas was totally unselfconscious, Nigel, who was temporarily employed as a liquidation officer in the business rates department, preferred to try to resolve problems himself, and Bridget felt 'dead pathetic, a bit stupid'. As I will discuss in the next section, there were few literacy requirements in the manual jobs, and disclosure to colleagues did not usually arise.

Relationships between management and staff were very different in the two departments. There was a performance-monitoring approach in place in the Treasurer's department, in which management roles were clearly defined, employees were set targets and met regularly with their managers to review their performance, achievements and weak areas,

described by Chas as the 'one-to-ones'. Since tasks requiring literacy skills were an integral aspect of work in this department, there was little choice about revealing skills gaps. Employees such as Bridget and Chas had discussed their work-related literacy difficulties with managers at these reviews and had found them both supportive and sympathetic. The introduction of the literacy and communications programme had provided an opportunity to address these weaknesses in a structured and non-threatening manner, and both were pleased to be offered the opportunity to access this provision. Despite this, individuals still felt pressurised as their skills gaps related to performance were not only exposed, but they were required to develop these skills and faced sanctions if their performance did not improve.

In contrast, industrial relations in the Works department were described as 'antagonistic'. This situation was attributed to the management approaches of the employees' line managers and middle managers in the department, known as the operational managers. Their management was described by everyone, including Eddie, the departmental training manager who was a member of the senior management team, as a 'very autocratic type of rule' which adopted an approach based on blame and sanction, and was a manifestation of the macho culture dominant in this department. This management style bred a culture of hostility and blame, and there were very high levels of disciplinary action against the workforce, with a corresponding union focus on defending members in these cases, leading to some hostility in relations between unions and management. Eddie said that most of these operational managers felt 'disdain' for the workforce and possessed little respect or regard for the staff in their sections. As a result of the above conditions, antagonism, mistrust and low morale permeated the manual sections of the department and there was a deeply embedded 'them and us' culture.

Rick, an auto electrician who had worked in the vehicle repair workshop for about 20 years, related low morale in his workshop to the imposition of what he viewed as unreasonable and petty rules and described how these made him feel. He used to paint landscapes and display them in the workshop but had recently been made to take them down: 'We used to look at these murals of the moors at dinner. We didn't used to look at refuse vehicles. This is how we are treated, as refuse.'

The low levels of trust and respect between workers and operational managers also had a significant impact on the extent to which the men were willing to disclose literacy skills to managers. In this climate, shop floor workers were reluctant to reveal literacy skills gaps to supervisors or managers with whom they had poor or negative relationships because they feared repercussions such as ridicule, discrimination, or even dismissal. Robert, a gulley attendant in the street cleaning section, was embarrassed to tell his foreman but also said: 'I thought they would turn round and say well if you can't do the forms and all this, well you can't do the job. We'll have to get rid of you.'

From his senior management perspective, Eddie believed that this apprehension about discrimination at work could have been well founded. He was striving to bring about change by trying to foster relationships based on dignity and respect, but he acknowledged that many managers in his department did not yet share either his attitudes or his management style. He cited this as one of the more negative aspects of the macho culture of this department. This culture also influenced attitudes to literacy and learning, and I shall now examine this in more detail.

4.2.2 Informal culture

In this section, I shall explore the significance of the clearly identifiable and pervasive 'macho' workplace culture prevalent in the Works department for attitudes to literacy and learning. Culture did not emerge as a strong influence in the Treasurer's strand where the male respondents had excluded themselves from the gendered 'female' culture, which they contrasted negatively with the male environment they had enjoyed as manual workers. As there were only two women students on the courses, there were no noteworthy findings on women's workplace culture. It is possible that cultures other than the dominant macho culture existed in the Works department, but the workers I interviewed identified with the prevailing culture, and this section will focus on their views and experiences.

The male respondents enjoyed and valued their membership of their work culture, and the redeployees regretted losing it from their working lives. Chas, for instance, had been medically redeployed from painting and decorating work to an administrative job, and was uncomfortable and unhappy working in an office environment:

> 'You know when I was a painter and decorator I used to love getting up for work and doing the work with all my mates. I just loved doing it and now I've gone into the offices it's totally different. I find the work hard and it's a different atmosphere. I'm not really happy in work.'

Laurie had also moved from manual employment in construction to office work in one of the warehouses linked to the department. He had enjoyed the male camaraderie in his previous work and described himself as an outsider in the female-dominated office environment.

This culture was characterised by those interviewed as a 'macho culture' in which the men were expected to act tough, and status was conferred not by educational background, but by other factors such as physical strength, craft skills, verbal wit and the ability to amuse colleagues. As it was common practice for the manual workers to engage in conversation, banter or teasing to pass the time, the ability to entertain workmates was also a valued skill. Respect for verbal dexterity was often earned at someone's expense. Selwyn described the way in which the men sometimes made fun of others: 'You can't stop it. It's a man's thing isn't it?' People were also respected for their ability to 'stand up to management'. John, the union coordinator earned a great deal of respect as, in addition to being a highly skilled electrician, he was always willing to take up issues and grievances and negotiate with management on the men's behalf.

Before the introduction of the literacy and communications programme the issue of literacy simply did not arise for most people in the Works department. Break time activities centred round playing cards and discussing typical 'male' topics such as football. Literacy and education were neither subjects of everyday conversation nor matters of particular interest to anyone. Len, who worked in street lighting maintenance, suggested that this was because people 'don't think they need that skill honing so they are not bothered, not interested'. Moreover, as Rick pointed out, it was craft skills rather than literacy skills that earned respect: 'It just doesn't come up because if you are good with your tools that's all people want to know.'

Most respondents concurred with this view, although Eddie, from his position as a manager, believed that, despite the fact literacy was not talked about on the shop floor, some workers were worried that they, as 'big macho men, did not have the basic reading and writing skills' and it

would go against them if they admitted this. Selwyn, who worked in security as the gatekeeper, also suspected that some people might be embarrassed to talk about their literacy skills 'because they are all men working together'. Robert, who had entry-level skills, was the only student who said that he concealed his difficulties and was anxious about discovery, but even for Robert this was only a concern in specific situations, and this anxiety was a sporadic and minor part of his working life. Mark, a gardener in one of the large parks in the city, who had a similar low-skills level, was open about this, and although, like other colleagues, he was sometimes teased by his workmates, this was not in reference to his literacy skills.

4.3 Organisational changes

Literacy was not an overtly problematic issue for most individuals as long as their employment was protected and conditions remained unchanged. However, problems surfaced when their work situations altered, and in order to move forward they needed to engage in the more complex literacy practices required to meet the demands of new working practices or different types of employment, or to participate effectively in recruitment processes. In this section I shall examine the implications of this changing employment landscape for the literacy and oracy skills of employees, as this was one of the major catalysts for taking up provision.

4.3.1 New work practices

Best Value redefined the ways in which people were expected to work in two major ways: they were required to carry out new and more diverse duties, and there was a new focus on customer care. Each aspect required higher levels of literacy and oracy skills, both to carry out the new duties and to participate in the training programmes designed to equip

employees with the skills needed for their new responsibilities. There were different types and levels of demand in different departments, as well as differences between the perceptions of managers and groups of employees as to the actual impact of these changes on literacy and oracy requirements at work.

A fundamental change was that employees were now required to carry out multiple job tasks rather than the single task which had been common practice in the past; for example the work of road sweepers had expanded to include duties such as mowing verges, and in order to do this they had to use new tools and machinery and be trained to operate them. Office workers were required to produce a wider range of more complex written documents than in the past. In addition there was a new emphasis on customer service for all employees, and this involved more direct interaction between staff and the public than previously.

Mark illustrated these changes as he described how the volume of work and number of different tasks he was required to carry out had increased. In addition to increased gardening and landscaping duties he had to undertake training in the use of a number of different machines. His job had also expanded to include customer service so that he now had to deal with enquiries and requests for help from members of the public who used the parks where he worked. He felt pressured by the need to balance his interactions with the public with completing his increased workload, and said that on occasions he had been reprimanded for failing to do this.

All the managers believed that these new working practices demanded increased and higher-level oracy and literacy skills from employees. They were expected, for example, to use computers, complete more forms, interpret health and safety information, read complex instructions such as how to operate new machinery, participate in training related to new

policies or tasks and duties, and communicate effectively with service users.

The requirement for more communication with the public had created a demand for more sophisticated communication skills. Neil, one of the section managers in the Treasurer's department, had identified poor telephone skills as a 'massive issue' when carrying out Best Value reviews in his own section. He believed that paying more attention to training in oracy skills was crucial, since 'Local government has been very poor in this area for a long time.' Eddie pointed out that manual staff were also now required to interact with the public:

> 'People are required to know more, they are required to learn more, they are required to be more interactive with the customer, the person who we are providing the service to. They need slightly different skills.'

All employees also needed higher-level literacy skills. In the past, lower-grade administrative post-holders had rarely composed documents as their work primarily consisted of completing form letters with simple details such as names, addresses and payment amounts. The new working practices required them to use computers to compose and produce documents such as emails, letters, memoranda and reports. Neil had noticed that a high number of employees struggled with technical skills such as grammar and spelling, and that others had problems constructing texts. Whereas they could conceal these skills gaps when their work was restricted to completing form letters, the new tasks exposed their difficulties.

Eddie said that more advanced literacy skills were also needed by manual employees in the Works department, not because of changes in the actual hands-on work, which had remained virtually the same, and required only what he described as a 'basic grasp of literacy and numeracy', but

because of new requirements to use literacy and numeracy associated with the work. He acknowledged: 'It's not that they're not capable of doing the work, they're not capable of interpreting the [written] instructions to do that work.' John was concerned that health and safety could be compromised by poor literacy skills as the literacy associated with health and safety had become more complex, for instance in relation to understanding written guidelines or carrying out risk assessments.

The manual employees in the Works department did not share John and Eddie's perception that new and important literacy and oracy requirements had been introduced. On the contrary, they identified very little necessity to use literacy in their day-to-day work. They perceived the work as requiring minimal writing skills which did not present most of them with significant difficulties, for example filling in time sheets or work record sheets; Rick's work-related writing as an auto electrician, for instance, was to tick items on lists of parts and daily job sheets. The health and safety message had not yet permeated the wider workforce as instructions were customarily passed on by word of mouth, and no one referred to difficulties with health and safety literacy requirements.

Only one person, Robert, felt that work presented literacy challenges, but these were minimal and presented him with few day-to-day problems as he had devised coping strategies. The only literacy tasks his job required were completing time sheets and recording the streets cleaned; he copied street names from signs onto his work records and relied on the drivers he worked with to complete both their time sheets.

John highlighted the problematic aspects of coping strategies used to avoid literacy tasks, especially asking others to complete paperwork. Although employees can manage to do their work, their autonomy and ability to make informed choices is limited. Moreover, since they carry the

responsibility for papers in their name even when another person has completed them on their behalf, mistakes or inaccuracies could have serious repercussions, including disciplinary action. Asking others to complete paperwork may also be dangerous; if, for instance, repairs are recorded as passed when they have not been checked, colleagues and members of the public are exposed to the danger of accidents and the employees concerned to blame if mistakes come to light. Coping strategies also became inadequate when more fundamental changes occurred, especially job loss or transfer to work with more overt literacy skills requirements, and I shall now turn my attention to these circumstances.

4.3.2 Redeployment and recruitment processes

Redeployment resulted in changes in working lives which both exposed individuals' poor literacy skills and led to decisions to take steps to improve their skills. The redeployment process highlighted literacy needs, as individuals were placed in temporary administrative posts whilst seeking new employment, their skills were assessed, and they had to take part in recruitment and selection procedures. I shall now explore these factors in some depth.

Many of the course participants had been forced to take up alternative employment because of ill health, site closures, departmental restructuring or job cuts. Eight of the 11 students interviewed were, or had been, redeployees, and others in the Works department feared that their jobs would disappear, as restructuring was continuing. Two had gone through the process some years previously and managed to remain in the Works department in unskilled work. Three had already been redeployed from manual to administrative work because of job loss due to site closure or for medical reasons in the last nine years, whereas the others were

currently immersed in this process, as the closure of the warehouse where they worked had pushed them into the redeployment pool.

Redeployees were often placed in administrative positions pending a move to new permanent employment, and many were forced to consider making a permanent career change to an administrative occupation. One reason for this was that ill health prevented them from continuing their original occupation. The overall reduction in the number of manual jobs made other redeployees consider moving into office work. This type of move is often presented as a positive opportunity, and Joanna certainly viewed it in this way: 'I sold office work to them from the start. I said this is a really good opportunity to develop something to get out of here.' However manual workers did not necessarily aspire to office work for a number of reasons; the pay was lower, they disliked the nature of the work, they viewed the work as difficult or, as noted earlier in this chapter, they found the office culture uncongenial. Len pointed out that, whilst administrative work might be physically easier than his current manual occupation, he could not afford to move into this type of work because the pay was comparatively low and he had two young children to support.

Moreover, this type of work created problems for some redeployees, as they needed higher-level skills in order to cope with the literacy requirements of temporary administrative work placements, as well as to broaden their employment options. There was no system of training in place to support staff in this position, an issue I shall return to in the next section.

Students such as Nigel and Laurie were struggling with the demands of the temporary jobs they had been allocated whilst seeking a permanent position. This resulted in personal feelings of frustration and inadequacy, but inadequate skills had potentially more serious consequences. Bridget

and Chas, for instance, who worked together, had both experienced supervision sessions with their manager in the housing benefits section in which poor performance due to weak areas in their literacy skills had been identified, and they needed to improve their work in order to avoid sanctions.

An early stage in the redeployment process was a skills review, and this revealed that many redeployees had poor literacy skills. Joanna was responsible for conducting review interviews with redeployees in order to identify their skills gaps and training needs. The discussion was based on a form which employees completed prior to an interview, and she had encountered a great deal of resistance to completing these forms which she attributed to employees' poor literacy skills:

> 'They were very, very antagonistic. They didn't want to do the forms, but I realise now they were probably antagonistic because they didn't know how to write and they didn't know how to do a form.'

The redeployees, on the other hand, attributed their anger to feelings about their job loss. Those affected were hostile to the redeployment process, which they viewed as unwarranted and unfair, and they resented what they perceived as unjust treatment from their employer. They attributed this to the introduction of Best Value. Tom felt bitter about the loss of his job as a warehouse operational manager, and his views were representative of others in the group when he said it was meant to make councils more effective but in fact was used by the council 'for their own ends. Staff at the bottom are treated differently from management, and the reviews are used to cut back the number of employees.' In this climate, they did not want to admit to literacy problems because they feared it would affect their employment prospects:

'When these other firms are taking you over they want the cream of the crop, and if they found out he can't read well, they think, "What's the point of us employing him, he can't read. Right, we'll leave him there with the council." So with the council what do they do? "He can't read, we've got no job for him to do. It's only office-based jobs now".'

The authority's recruitment processes also involved very specific and complex literacy practices which presented significant challenges. When a suitable vacancy was identified redeployees were not automatically given the job but had to go through the council's formal recruitment and selection procedures. These had been introduced in 1983 as an equal opportunities measure because the old methods of recruiting staff excluded large numbers of people, particularly women and people from black and minority ethnic groups. All had started work before this time, when hiring was through recommendation by a relative or friend followed by a nominal interview. Selwyn, who had worked for the authority for many years, paraphrased a typical old style job interview for work on the bins:

'Are you strong, prepared to be early in, work in the rain and that?'
'Oh yes.'
'Right, you've got the job.'

In contrast, the new system laid down formal processes that had to be strictly adhered to. All job vacancies were analysed in order to identify the tasks involved. These tasks, with the knowledge, abilities, experience and skills needed to carry them out, were written into job descriptions and person specifications. All applicants were required to complete written application forms in a way which demonstrated that they possessed the specified attributes. Short-listed candidates then had to undergo a formal selection interview, often for the first time in their lives.

Individuals need specific types of literacy and communication skills to enable them to participate in this process. Dave, the regional union official who was very familiar with recruitment processes in many different companies and authorities, described the application form, which covers eight sides, as 'daunting'. It is difficult to complete, even for people with high levels of literacy and numeracy, and the skills needed to fill in the forms are often well above those required for the actual work. Nigel, who had been relocated from a warehouse which was closing, found the whole process very stressful, and echoed Dave when he said he wanted to learn to fill out application forms because 'It's a bit daunting for me. I didn't know what you were supposed to do or what version or manner of written communication they needed.' The interviews also presented significant communication challenges, and candidates often needed different or higher-level skills than those required to carry out the job for which they were applying.

Despite these new and higher-level literacy demands placed on redeployees by their situation, no training had been put in place to support either the recent redeployees or those who had transferred from manual to office work in the past, and I shall now turn to the findings on training for these workers.

4.3.3 Training

Approaches to training for non-management staff before the communications courses were introduced had resulted in attitudes towards training which ranged from indifference to antipathy. Job losses and changes in working practices resulting from Best Value had created new training needs, and this, with the Investors in People requirement (described in chapter 1) to train all levels of staff, had brought about a new concern in each department to offer training to lower grade staff. In this

section I will examine training practices and attitudes prior to the introduction of the communications courses, as this might help to explain responses to the communication skills opportunity.

The drive to gain Investors in People status was a stimulus for reviewing the training provided for manual and lower grade clerical staff, but this process was still at a very early stage when the opportunity arose to offer communications courses to lower-grade staff. Although some training had been provided in the past, entitlement differed between different levels of staff, and both departments had prioritised training for managers.

It was not common practice to consult manual and other low-grade staff about their training needs. Managers determined the training programme, and employees at this level were hardly ever funded or allowed to undertake training in work time for personal development or to develop skills not required for their current employment. Training, where it was available, was almost always directly related to current work duties, for example instruction in the operation of new equipment, health and safety requirements, or related to the introduction of new corporate practices and policies. The restricted and imposed nature of this training had fostered resentment and negative attitudes to training, which were expressed by employees from both departments and also recognised by the training managers and union coordinator.

The workers experienced the courses as irrelevant and boring, and associated them with unwanted changes to working practices and increases in workloads. Furthermore, the training they were really interested in, for example 'how to use computers', never materialised. Chas described his experience of work training: 'They send you on courses you don't really need to know.' As a result: 'It goes in one ear and out the other really.' Consequently, there was little interest in training and

high levels of non-attendance. One student, Robert, also cited literacy as a reason for reluctance to attend courses; in addition to fearing failure because his reading skills were inadequate, he worried that he would be exposed to 'the lads'.

Eddie believed that this type of anxiety was widespread and that the literacy requirements of training courses were a significant deterrent. Programmes often required participants to read and write, either to access course materials or assessment tasks or to fulfil course requirements; for example a handheld vibration training programme required participants to complete questionnaires to comply with mandatory medical screening associated with the course. Eddie felt that many employees experienced this unfamiliar exposure to a learning environment as frightening or threatening, particularly when they lacked confidence in their literacy or learning abilities. Although Robert's experience demonstrates the existence of this anxiety, other reasons were given by workers for their antipathy towards training, and these must also be considered as serious barriers.

The local authority did not have a policy or particular commitment to developing literacy in the workplace, and work-related courses had not, in the past, included literacy skills. As a result no training was offered through work to support employees who could not fill all the literacy demands of their job, either because the requirements had changed, or because employees had moved from a different type of work and did not have the required skills.

Although the council had been redeploying people to new jobs for over 15 years, there was no system to ensure that redeployees possessed the skills to carry out all aspects of their new posts, and they were not offered training to develop the new skills they needed. Neil, for instance, said that

in his role as a section manager in the Treasurer's department over the past ten years he had managed numerous staff who had problems with the writing tasks required in their job. Even though he felt strongly that 'those skills should be tested before somebody gets appointed' he had not done this with Nigel at the time of his assignment to Neil's section because they 'were crying out for resources'. 'We took a chance, so there wasn't any 100% sort of confirmation that they could or did have literacy skills to be honest with you.'

John, from his position as a union activist, noted the unfairness of this aspect of the process as people became vulnerable to the stresses of struggling with different work demands, to the threat of management pressure and, in some cases, to disciplinary action. Chas, for example, had struggled with the writing demands of the administrative post he had moved to from his painting and decorating work, and, as already noted, this had been raised at formal performance reviews. Val had been redeployed from work as a swimming pool attendant to her permanent administrative post in the cemetery offices eight years previously, and had struggled with some of the writing demands of the job ever since. As she worried about looking 'daft' and could not face discussing her problems with her manager, she developed strategies to conceal her difficulties from him, primarily by asking her colleague for help.

Training had never been available and she only took action when the union initiative presented an opportunity to address her skills needs. Similarly, the other students, whatever their difficulties, had not taken any action to develop their skills before enrolling on the workplace communications course. I shall now examine the reasons for this, as well as their reasons for joining the course. I shall discuss the union and managers' motivations for supporting the development.

4.4 Motivations for involvement

This section examines the motivations of the students, union representatives and managers for getting involved in the programme. The students had diverse reasons which both diverged and overlapped. I shall also consider their reasons for not accessing provision before this course, since knowing more about the barriers to learning as well as what works can help to develop more effective ways of enticing new students to take up provision. I will then reflect on the different attitudes to literacy provision for employees and the motivations and drivers that resulted in the union and management support for this development.

4.4.1 The students

In addition to their diverse and multiple aims, a number of common factors led to students' involvement. They had all arrived at the courses through the intervention of an intermediary; either Joanna, the training manager, in the Treasurer's department or John, the union coordinator, in the Works department. None of the students said they had been looking for an opportunity to join a literacy course or to improve their reading, writing or oral communication skills before the opportunity to join the course was presented to them, and they had not felt held back by their literacy.

The accessibility of the courses was a significant factor in students taking the decision to join. All said that they signed up because the courses took place in paid work time and were free. This encouraged them to try, as they had nothing to lose, and, if nothing else, they gained time away from their everyday work. Laurie and Nigel said that they definitely would not have joined if attendance had been outside working hours. Low morale influenced the decision of some workers, including Rick, to try the course, just because it offered an opportunity to spend time away from the shop

floor in work time. They viewed it as a 'skiving day' but quickly got hooked into learning and after the first sessions attended for the learning more than for the 'skive'. Rick found it 'inspirational' and Robert admitted, 'To be honest with you I thought it was a skiving day and I got really interested in it.' Similarly Len, who didn't think he needed much help, said 'I must admit, I thought it was a day out of work, and having got on the course it was great, it was fantastic.'

In the Treasurer's department, students' reasons for taking up provision were exclusively related to the workplace, primarily the need to gain or sharpen skills because of the changes brought about by Best Value and redeployment described in the preceding sections of this chapter. Their initial responses when Joanna first referred them to the course varied, and she recognised that whereas some welcomed the support, others were negative because people 'had it forced upon them'. Nigel for example said he was 'open to things because I want to learn more', and he was 'willing to try anything that will improve my chances of getting a job'. Laurie, on the other hand, felt he had been coerced into joining the course: 'I think it's more the council's policy than volunteering. It's a matter of pushing rather than volunteering should we say.' He also felt it was another step towards closing his options and pushing him into an office where he didn't want to be.

In contrast, the Works employees, although sometimes unsure about what it might entail, were all positive about joining their course. They had filled in a training needs analysis form because the union distributed it, and were delighted to be offered a course in response. Rick expressed the common view: 'We filled in a questionnaire with what we wanted. Two weeks later I got a letter saying I had the course for it, where and when to go. It's the union, brilliant.' These students decided to take up the course place they were offered. Most did not have a clear idea of what the

course was about at this stage, but were still happy to 'see what it was like' or to 'give it a go' because they trusted the union coordinator who was promoting the learning opportunity.

These recruits were encouraged by the union to think in a broad way about their needs and interests, and cited a greater variety which related to family and everyday life as well as work. These included helping their children or grandchildren with their school work, accessing the Internet and learning to drive.

With the exception of Val, who worked in an office, none of this group expressed a need for skills for their current job. However, some were anxious that their jobs might be under threat. As John explained, there was widespread concern about 'downsizing', as many of the Works services were being contracted to outside firms who selected the employees they wished to employ, with the remainder placed in the redeployment pool. Rick, for example, said that the number of jobs in his vehicle maintenance section had dropped from 140 to 40; he had applied for his own job three times in the last three years and did not want to undergo the process a fourth time. In addition, he was unhappy with the new working practices and low morale in his department and saw the course as providing an escape route.

None of the students from either department had taken steps to improve their literacy and communications skills until a combination of changed circumstances and the intervention of an intermediary presented this as an opportunity. This was either because they did not perceive themselves as having a problem, or they did know and chose not to take any action.

Experiences of schooling had deterred them from voluntarily entering formal learning situations. People who had not enjoyed school did not

look to repeat the experience of education as an adult. Laurie, for instance, said that he never considered going to night school because he had disliked school so much. Others just didn't consider learning as an activity for them; it didn't occur to them, they thought it would be boring or they didn't think they were very bright. Fear of tests, another school legacy, was also a significant deterrent. Robert said he walked out of his 11 plus and would not take another test, and Chas was frightened to death of a test because of his experiences at school.

School had been either an indifferent or a negative experience because of underachievement, boredom, bullying from other pupils, lack of interest or attention from their teachers, and insufficient or no support when struggling to acquire literacy skills. Six people described themselves as average at school, as not top but not bottom; they were not interested in reading and writing because they were bored by schoolwork, preferred other subjects such as sport, or did not achieve very much.

The other five remembered school as a time of struggle and said they received little or no specialist support there. Robert remembered that 'As a young kid we used to go into this little room for reading but there was never owt[1] done after that you see.' This lack of support was a consistent theme. Mark and Tom both felt that they should have received extra help but hadn't because their classes were so large. Tom said he got terrible marks and just kept going down. Rick did have 'extra help' but viewed it as ineffective: 'It wasn't actual tuition. It was mainly sticking pictures on pieces of paper. It wasn't really what I wanted or needed but at the age of eight or ten you don't realise.' These experiences of education had ensured that most left school feeling they were 'never really any good'. Selwyn, for example, did not really see himself as having the ability to learn before joining the adult course: 'I am not an educated person.'

---

[1] anything

Despite this lack of achievement at school, people really did not perceive their skills levels as having a detrimental effect on their lives. They had all worked since leaving school and had not anticipated that they would need to change jobs because they worked for the council 'which was what was aspired to. It was a secure job for life with a pension.' They also experienced reasonably happy family and social lives which were not adversely affected by literacy concerns. Even Robert, who struggles to read and write, said he always managed and 'never thought anything of it' as he had always worked and could do everything he wanted to do.

None of the people interviewed nursed their literacy skills as a secret in their families, but were open with partners and relatives. Mark and Bridget lived at home with their parents and asked them for help when they needed it, for example with writing letters. Val had no problems with the everyday literacies required in her home life and when she came on the course to improve her skills, discussions about her course and homework became part of family life. The other men all said that their girlfriends or wives took on the home literacy tasks. Robert's wife, for instance, paid the bills and wrote all the letters, and Tom's wife checked and improved the letters he drafted. None of them felt any shame or embarrassment about this.

Miriam suggested that one reason for the depiction of the stigma of illiteracy in its current terms is because the portrayers are usually middle-class, very literate tutors, who cannot imagine what it is like to live life with poor literacy skills. They imagine themselves losing a highly valued, integral part of themselves and project their feelings about this on to the person with poor literacy. In doing so they fail to recognise that many people, like those in this study, live rich and fulfilled lives in which literacy is not a major part. As they could not imagine being without these ways of

operating, they project a view of stigma which leads to 'the closed curtain approach' described by Miriam, where 'you pull the curtains, creep in and nobody will know.' She surmised that this could do a great deal to perpetuate notions of shame and stigma. For similar reasons, Moran and Dave also commented that, whilst they recognised the need for sensitivity, the union approach was to treat literacy skills in the same way as other skills that people either did or did not possess. Literacy provision was then viewed as equivalent in status to other forms of skills development.

4.4.2 The managers

The Works department director and Eddie, the training manager, both expressed a personal commitment to lifelong learning. They also had an inkling that there were literacy and numeracy skills gaps in the workforce. Hence they were receptive to the findings and recommendations in the Moser report, which they read as soon as it was published. This report confirmed and strengthened their initial 'gut feelings' about literacy levels in the workforce and they were beginning to develop ideas about how they wanted to approach this issue, but had not progressed to developing a strategy or developmental framework. They saw the workplace literacy initiative as a fortuitous opportunity as it provided a starting point at the right time. Eddie wanted to provide what he termed 'remedial' provision to address the 'basic skills deficiencies of the work force', but within a framework of training for personal development and progress.

He articulated a strong commitment to developing a more inclusive training programme to meet the wider development interests and priorities of lower-paid workers, and was working closely with the union to put this into place. His rationale for this sprang from a conviction that investment in training, as well as benefiting individual workers, could contribute to improving the antagonistic relations in the workplace. He believed that it

109

could promote a cultural shift in both attitudes and relationships, through the content of programmes and by trying to show the manual workers that they were valued by investing in them and trying to provide the training they wanted rather then perpetuating previous patterns of imposing the training management thought they should have. He also recognised the value of working with the union to do this, had promoted the establishment of the union coordinator post, which was funded by the department, and had established an effective working relationship with John which was based on mutual respect. He observed they had managed to build this in spite of the more confrontational relations between management and unions elsewhere in the department.

Joanna's job was to develop training to meet corporate objectives, which included gaining the Investors in People award for the department, improving staff job performance and securing alternative employment for displaced staff. Her involvement in the communications programme originated in her need to develop more training for what she termed 'bottom-line staff' to meet the requirements of Investors in People. As she carried out skills audits and received requests for help from managers because redeployed personnel placed in their departments were struggling with the literacy demands of their new positions, she realised that the literacy skills levels of many people employed by the council affected their capacity to carry out their jobs, reduced their promotion prospects and created difficulties for those who were being redeployed.

Joanna pointed out that the authority had not taken up literacy as a corporate priority area, and she was very unaware about basic skills issues when she started to work with redeployees to draw up their skills profiles to support their search for a new job:

'I was amazed because I went to fill a form in with them and I really thought they were having me on because they couldn't write. I look back now and think I was really naïve, because I remember saying to one guy, "Well, this isn't your best writing," and really it was'.

As her awareness of the low literacy levels of the workforce increased she became committed to introducing support. This was a personal rather than a policy or corporate development, and because of this she was working alone with little support or access to background information about the issues. It was not until she responded to the opportunity to work with the workplace basic skills initiative team that she began to develop a greater understanding of the issues.

Neil was a senior manager in one of the Treasurer's sections where Nigel, one of the redeployee students, was placed. He had volunteered to mentor Nigel and the training for this had raised his level of awareness of literacy issues. He had noticed the poor quality of written work from members of his team in the past and had responded by trying to help them in an informal way. However he was adamant that it was not his role to become a teacher, since he had neither the time nor the skills to do this. Although he was willing to offer mentoring support and to refer people for help, he emphasised that the massive workload that he and his colleagues carried limited the extent of this offer. He believed that existing employees who could not work at the required levels should be trained and supported to enable them to produce work of a satisfactory standard, but that new staff should not be employed unless they already possessed the required skills levels; this should be ensured through the recruitment and selection process.

4.4.3 The union

John, the union learning coordinator, had become aware of some of the impact that literacy issues could have on members' lives and work when he trained to become a union learning representative. He was committed to working to ensure that his members had access to opportunities to develop their skills, and discovered the extent of poor basic skills in the Works department when he carried out a training needs analysis in which employees identified their own training needs. His commitment to union involvement in providing access to training and development opportunities was underpinned by a strong belief that access to skills development was an equalities and rights issue, a conviction echoed by the regional and national TUC informants. Moran, a national activist, explained:

'I think for the unions basic skills have been seen as a real issue for us in terms of equality. Groups of people missed out and they continue to miss out and actually that's not fair. Unions also don't look at what people can't do but unions work alongside people in workplaces and see what they can do and the skills they do have and that's important. I think it's about getting away from deficit models and getting away from patronising individuals.'

Departmental restructuring and changes in employment were a major reason for union involvement in developing training programmes, as this was a means of protecting the interests of members by ensuring that they developed the skills they needed to adapt to new working conditions or apply for new work. The union was instrumental in gaining trust in the Works department, and a number of people said that they only came forward because the union fronted the initiative. John believed that the union made a difference because the representatives 'can talk to their members', and Eddie acknowledged that members who would not disclose literacy difficulties to managers for the reasons cited above would talk to union representatives because of the role of the union:

'They enjoy a special relationship with their members, and, by and large, an individual would be more likely to identify a development need of that nature to a trade union representative rather than to a manager.'

Miriam, who had wide experience of working with unions, reinforced the point that the strength of unions' involvement in workplace literacy schemes is that they can ensure that members are protected from repercussions when they expose their basic skills, stressing the importance of union participation in building trust between employers and employees so that 'if you say you want to improve your basic skills you are not then on the redundancy list'. John and Dave had identified this fear of repercussion as a barrier to participation: 'There's a massive fear. We have to alleviate the fear, building confidences up within our sectors, within our own workplace.' They were adamant that the unions would protect their members in this process and pursue grievances against anyone discriminating against a member because they had exposed their literacy problems. The fact that members did trust the unions was one of the success factors in recruiting to this course.

The union role was particularly important given the poor industrial relations identified earlier in this chapter. Although John, in his shop steward role, was often in dispute with operational managers on behalf of his members, he viewed Eddie as 'a force for positive change' and was committed to working in close partnership with him to develop training opportunities for members.

4.5 Conclusions

This chapter has illustrated some of the reasons why employees and employers do not get involved in literacy provision, as well as changes

which act as catalysts for developing programmes which recruit low paid and manual staff.

4.5.1 Organisational issues

Unwin and Fuller (2003) pointed to the significance of organisational characteristics for developing workplace learning, and my study yielded some detailed information about aspects of the local authority context that appeared to have significance for the development of literacy provision. Cultural and structural factors affected attitudes to literacy, and Best Value brought about changes that acted as a catalyst for joining.

The lack of a literacy policy or strategy in the local authority meant that awareness of the extent of poor literacy skills in the workforce and the potential implications of this was very limited. Consequently, section and operational managers appeared to have very little awareness of literacy issues, and even when they identified problems there was very little support for either managers or employees to respond constructively. Training managers acquired knowledge in an ad hoc manner, resulting in significant differences in both awareness and commitment to action. Although Investors in People required the authority to meet the training needs of low-skilled staff, this was developed on a departmental rather than authority-wide basis, and this project demonstrated the potential for differences between departments in the absence of a strategic approach. Even where there was more knowledge, there was no provision before the communications course was offered.

The evidence also demonstrated ways in which management styles and relationships have an effect on literacy at work. Employees did not reveal poor literacy skills or training needs to managers where relations were sour, where job loss was feared, or when they feared repercussions. In

performance management cultures, managers inevitably discussed skills in relation to work performance levels with their staff. The findings indicated that, even where this process was conducted in a supportive manner, employees found it difficult; they felt uncomfortable and insecure because it raised the prospect of a link between poor skills and some form of disciplinary action.

The study identified ways in which Best Value policy was changing the literacy and oracy requirements of local authority work. New working practices demanded higher-level literacy and oracy skills both for work and training in new practices and procedures. The skills demands differed in relation to the type of occupation, and, whilst it was still possible to carry out some manual work with low-level literacy skills, literacy skills demands, particularly writing skills, had increased significantly where they were an integral and inescapable aspect of the work. Reductions in the number of jobs were also forcing employees to enter recruitment and selection processes which demanded higher levels of literacy skills, often higher than those required by the jobs for which they were applying. The disappearance of manual jobs was forcing redeployed staff to consider alternative employment, and these tended to demand higher levels of literacy. My findings also revealed that, contrary to common perceptions, administrative occupations were not particularly sought after by manual workers as the pay was low and they disliked the nature of the work.

The study showed that the above organisational features acted as a catalyst for establishing and joining the programmes. The managers' and union learning coordinator's aims appeared to be linked to the primary driver for their involvement. The need to provide training to improve work performance and support staff designated as redeployees into new work produced a very work-focused view of the programme. Where the driver was a response to a toxic working environment, the aim was to improve

morale and relations through the type of programme which encompassed both work and broader interests. The union also wanted to secure members' rights to training and protect employment through a programme focused on employees' needs.

The evidence suggested that whilst changes in their work situation provided many employees with reasons for improving their skills, none took the initiative to seek provision to develop their literacy skills, and the intervention of an intermediary was needed before they actually joined provision. This was equally true where workers had not perceived a need for literacy skills development and only joined in response to the union coordinator's intervention. This contrasts with the reports cited by Brooks et al (2001a), which showed that the great majority of basic skills students referred themselves to provision. My findings indicate that, at least in some workplaces, an intermediary is a crucial success factor in persuading people to participate.

The evidence also provided insights into why people have little interest in learning and how this group can be motivated to join, an area about which, as Macleod (2003) found, there is relatively little knowledge.

4.5.2 Informal workplace cultures

Workplace cultures and relationships have significance for learning at work (Evans and Rainbird 2002), and my findings illuminated ways in which the informal culture affected participation. This culture influenced attitudes to literacy and learning and provided a vehicle for changing these attitudes, leading to involvement. The evidence indicated that where the culture discounts the importance of learning, participation is unlikely, but individuals might be more likely to consider joining provision in contexts

where the culture and the informal leaders sanction and encourage participation.

The informal culture emerged as an important element in the working lives of the male Works employees. Work, as Sutherland and Marks (2001) also propose, was a major aspect of the men's personal identity. It not only enabled them to fulfil their traditional role as breadwinner, but also functioned to create and maintain their social identity (Goodwin 1999). This identity was bound up with being 'one of the lads', in other words belonging to the workplace culture. In order to gain membership of this culture, they needed to demonstrate conformity with the dominant values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviour, which, commentators such as Gee (1996) maintain, constitute a culture. In the workplace I studied, the norm was to value attributes such as physical strength, craft skills and wit. Conforming to dominant values and norms, and excelling in these qualities and skills earned esteem from peers, and those who became natural leaders influenced behavioural and attitudinal norms. Education did not carry currency in this context, and neither literacy nor learning was a topic of particular interest.

This indicated that, whilst high levels of literacy and educational qualifications did not feature in the 'A' list of macho virtues, there was more indifference than hostility to learning in this culture. This was significant as it was perhaps easier to change this than it might have been to overturn overt antagonism. Mac an Ghaill (1996) and McGivney (1999) have suggested that many working-class males do have an antipathy to education which is rooted in their educational experience and notions of masculinity. This did not seem to be the case in this instance, perhaps supporting Maguire and Horrocks' (2002) suggestion that many manual workers are not unwilling to take part in adult learning experiences. The change agent in this circumstance was the union coordinator who held

117

high status in the informal cultural hierarchy. Hence his word carried weight and members were willing to try provision on his recommendation.

4.5.3 Perception of need

The findings offered insights into some of reasons why many people, as both Carey et al (1997), and a more recent survey (DFES 2003c) found, do not believe either that their skills are low, or that low skills have limited their opportunities in life. This belief is a deterrent to participation as people who do not recognise a need are unlikely to seek provision, and my study also provided examples of effective approaches for reaching this group, based on an understanding of these factors.

Workers did not view their literacy levels as a problem because they regarded themselves as successful in areas they valued; these included family life and securing a permanent job with a pension. They did not aspire to different kinds of work, and valued membership of the workplace culture described above. Even the people who had some concerns about their skills did not find this a problem in all aspects of their lives, or even in all aspects of their working lives, and preferred to develop coping strategies rather than seek training. This was linked to previous school experiences which many concerned with participation, such as McGivney (1999), have cited as a deterrent. Less notice has been taken of the way in which subsequent experiences of work-related training can also function as a deterrent, both by perpetuating notions of education as irrelevant and boring, and through content designed to reflect management's rather than individuals' priorities and interests.

The attitudes expressed by participants in this research opened a window on some of the complexities of shame and embarrassment, and provided a different take on the prevalent stereotypes of stigma in relation to adults

with poor literacy skills. My findings indicated that these feelings are perhaps not as universal as commonly portrayed, as only one of the people I interviewed felt any embarrassment about his skills levels, and this was restricted to specific work situations rather than permeating all aspects of his life.

Burton (2002 & 2003) suggests that the notions of shame, embarrassment and humiliation associated with poor literacy are rooted in the social stigma associated with illiteracy and its connotations of stupidity. As a result, the common perception of adults with poor literacy skills is that this causes them a great deal of distress, as they go through life fearing humiliation and feeling stupid, ashamed and embarrassed. Mace (2002) explores this theme, commenting that it is the view of the highly literate commenting on poor literacy and, like Miriam, suggests that their values affect their interpretations. This view is both reflected and perpetuated in policy documents which portray individuals as suffering the shame engendered by the stigma of illiteracy or poor literacy, for example DfEE (1999a), and by campaigns such as the current national *Get On* recruitment campaign, to which I shall return in chapter 7.

This is not to say that people do not feel humiliated and embarrassed by poor literacy skills. Indeed, testimonies by tutors and students, for example Burton (2002) and Mace (1992), and Robert in this study, demonstrate that many do experience these feelings. However, my findings provide a glimpse of a different perspective. This might be because, like the students in this study, and as Barton and Hamilton suggest:

> Adults with difficulties reading or writing are not empty people living in barren homes waiting to be saved and filled up with literacy. For the most part adults who identify problems with reading or writing are ordinary people leading ordinary lives. (1998: 161)

None of the respondents reported feeling any shame or embarrassment in their families about their skills. Their approach to using literacy at home seems to equate with Barton and Hamilton's (1998) notion of 'literacy chores', in which they liken literacy tasks to other household chores. The people I interviewed described different approaches to household literacy tasks where partners either carried out the tasks or helped them to do so. Literacy jobs were the responsibility of family members in the same way as cooking or cleaning the car, and the division of labour was influenced by practical considerations which included skills and time. As Mace (1998) notes, this type of mutual support model is very different from the notion of the individual consumed by shame and embarrassment and hiding their poor literacy, although, as noted above, there are also such cases in the literature. These exceptions do, however, provide an insight into why people do not participate.

The study provided evidence of recruitment approaches in one department which appeared to be successful as they were founded on an understanding of the above factors. The evidence indicated that, where there was no overt perception of need, an approach appealing to people on the basis of a skills deficit they did not recognise was unlikely to be effective. There are potential problems in selling literacy by telling workers how inadequate they are, and the study illustrated the advantages of presenting learning as an opportunity and something new to try rather than as a remedial course. This was reinforced by the access conditions which were a contributory factor for all the students attending, resonating with Maguire and Horrocks' (2002) contention that barriers to participation need to be removed to create the conditions in which manual workers will access learning programmes. Free provision in work time and the opportunity to escape the shop floor were attractive, and people who thought they were opting for a 'skive day' quickly became hooked,

highlighting the importance of finding new ways of getting people to try learning, as initial experiences can very quickly convert them to enthusiastic participants.

4.5.4 Union role

As the union had a profound influence in bringing about this participation, the study provided insights into ways in which unions can connect members into the learning agenda, an important role acknowledged in government strategy (DfEE 2001) and by the TUC (1998). In contrast to the imperatives to secure new work or improve performance facing the Treasurer's workers, there were no urgent issues driving Works department employees towards provision. On the contrary, their skills levels caused them few problems and they displayed no interest in either education or literacy. It appears unlikely, therefore, that they would have accessed learning without the intervention of the union coordinator who led the initiative that provided a route into learning for these individuals.

The coordinator's high status in the informal cultural hierarchy made him a credible advocate of learning and sent a strong message that it was culturally acceptable to get involved. His knowledge of this culture also enabled him to choose the right strategies and language to promote the course. Furthermore, members trusted him to protect them from repercussions of joining the course and exposing literacy difficulties, a crucial issue given the hostile relations between the men and their managers.

In this climate, senior management support was important, and the evidence illuminated ways in which a constructive working relationship between management and unions can develop to pursue a single issue, even when bargaining on other matters remains fraught. Despite his

sometimes adversarial relations with management, the union coordinator managed to work constructively with the training manager to develop the course. An explanation for this might lie in the way in which, regardless of their other differences, both shared a commitment to developing learning opportunities for low paid employees, and they each recognised the advantages of working in partnership to bring this about.

Payne (2001) noted the potential of partnerships between unions and employees to bring mutual benefits. The TUC views developing partnerships as an effective means of establishing learning cultures in workplaces, and aims to 'work in partnership with employers as well as government and providers to maximise lifelong learning opportunities for union members' (TUC 2000a: 12). In my study, both parties found common ground in their commitment to securing low paid employees' rights to access learning at work. Furthermore, the training manager and union activist established a constructive working relationship underpinned by trust, in which they respected each other's personal qualities as well as their aims and priorities in relation to the learning programme.

The beliefs and discourse of the individuals supporting the development of provision were based on their different priorities, which included the need to address individual skills deficits, corporate requirements or the concept of access to literacy skills as a right. Although those interviewed tended to have a dominant viewpoint, none of them held this exclusively, so that in practice the strands were woven together but with different interpretations and emphases. There were distinctive differences in the working environments, literacy demands of the work and motivations of different individuals to get involved. Whether these different circumstances and motivations made a difference to the design, delivery and outcomes of the programmes is one of the questions considered in the next two chapters.

5 Content and methods of the communications programme

5.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to examine the factors influencing the development and delivery of the courses. In the previous chapter, different but intersecting interests and reasons for establishing and taking up the provision were identified, and I now explore how these were translated into curriculum content and teaching methods. I examine the processes of deciding the curriculum content, paying particular attention to who determined this, the delivery approaches, and the relative levels of priority given to individual student interests and corporate, that is employer, interests. I will also seek to identify differences and similarities between the two strands and ask whether there is any correlation between these and the different ideologies and priorities underlying programme development and delivery: corporate interests, employee personal development, and workers' rights to access learning opportunities.

5.2 Negotiating the content

I shall start by discussing the involvement of the providers, managers, trade union and students in developing the content of the courses. All those involved in setting up the courses in the Treasurer's and Works departments recognised and respected the expertise of the provider, and there was a consensus that it was the provider's role to carry out the in-depth work needed to analyse information about needs, interests and students' skills levels and translate this into learning programmes. Beyond this, there were differences in the ways in which the courses were

developed, and in the extent to which the managers and the union coordinator became involved in determining the course content, with a high level of management involvement in the Treasurer's strand and less influence in the Works department.

Individuals' differing attitudes about the extent to which they should be involved in determining the curriculum content appeared to mirror their views on the degree to which the curriculum should be work-related and reflect employer priorities. Whilst there was agreement that the priorities identified by students were important and should be taken into account when negotiating curriculum content, there were different views as to which interests should be prioritised.

5.2.1 Organisational views and involvement

There was a strong view in the Treasurer's department that the course content should be designed to meet the employer's requirements. This reflected Joanna's primary reasons for establishing the course, identified in the previous chapter as improving work performance and preparing redeployees to secure new work. She spent several weeks working closely with Amanda, the adult education project manager who was leading the curriculum development, to develop this strand. Joanna observed that she had less input than she would usually have when organising training provision, because the literacy and communication skills content and teaching methods were beyond her area of expertise. Despite this she was closely involved in course planning as she had a clear idea of what she wanted the course to achieve.

She considered that the curriculum content should be based on 'the sorts of things they need to do on the job', since the aim of the course was related to the 'basic core duties we want them to do', and to this end she

provided the adult education team with details of these core duties. She also obtained information from managers about the problems they were encountering and samples of real work tasks. These were primarily related to writing skills, and included writing memos, reports and letters, taking phone messages, and, for redeployees, filling in application forms. The course team programme designed the programme to equip the employees to improve their performance of these tasks.

Although Joanna's primary concern was very clearly work-related, she did acknowledge that some skills might be transferable between different situations. Despite this, she was reluctant to see elements from other contexts such as union activity, family or social life included, and thought this was acceptable only if 'they did not detract from work skills'. Ensuring that provision was work-focused was also an important factor in gaining the commitment of departmental managers to the programme. Neil, a section manager in the Treasurer's department, believed that the content of provision attended in work time should be entirely work-related, because his priority had to be ensuring that his section met their work targets, rather than staff personal development not related to current work duties: 'I would say the trade-in for me to release somebody who isn't at their desk, who isn't answering the phone, who isn't dealing with the workload, is that it needs to have some links with work.'

This contrasted with the views of the Works training manager, who recognised the benefits of a programme content that was not necessarily related to the work context. Whereas Joanna's priority was to meet corporate needs, as described in section 4.4.2 of the previous chapter, Eddie identified employee development as the most important aspect of training, and he believed that prioritising employees' interests would also lead to achievement of workplace objectives.

His position was that training should meet individuals' needs whether or not they were work-related:

> 'Whether people want to improve their skills for work issues, to advance themselves at work or they just want to improve themselves so that they can deal with the rigours of modern life or everything that's thrown at them, training should be catered accordingly.'

He believed that skills were transferable between different contexts so it was not necessary to insist on work-related topics and contexts for the course. His priority was to engage people in learning, show them they have the ability to 'take up opportunities and progress if they would like', and to develop their confidence to do so. He saw his role as 'getting people on that first rung'.

The priority for John, reflecting the trade union movement's widening participation concerns, was securing members' rights to access learning opportunities: 'Everybody should reach a certain level and everybody should be encouraged to keep up with education.' Like Eddie, he believed that the curriculum should reflect both work and broader life contexts, but stressed that it was often in workers' interests to engage with work-related developments. Dave and Moran, from regional and national union perspectives, also shared the view that, although the needs of the students had to be paramount, 'Not only is it sensible to link them to the needs of the employers to get their support, it's actually useful for students to do that as it is a way to help them to progress at work or to get another job.'

Despite their clear vision of what they wanted to achieve, neither Eddie nor John had taken part in discussions to determine either the broad content and contexts or the specific detail of the content. Amanda observed that 'they were very much led by us'. They considered all

aspects of curriculum design to be outside their spheres of expertise; when asked whether he had any involvement in determining the course content, John replied, 'No, I'm not experienced.' They trusted the provider to develop appropriate provision, but their absence from the process meant that they had no way of knowing whether their vision for training was realised. They were concerned that the course content should reflect the employees' concerns, and I shall now consider the workers' interests and aspirations.

5.2.2 Employees' views

The employees, as described in the last chapter, had different reasons for joining, and different routes to the courses. These were reflected in the needs they identified, which were almost entirely related to work in the Treasurer's strand but encompassed a broader range of interests in the Works strand. Learning needs were established through an initial assessment process, then reviewed and expanded, especially in the Works strand, as the courses progressed and the students' self-awareness and sense of what was possible increased.

The Treasurer's students, except for Laurie who was a reluctant recruit, had a reasonably clear idea of what they wanted to gain from the course from the beginning, whereas most students from the Works strand had no vision of what the course would be like before they started; they did not know what to expect or what it would involve. Len, for instance, said, 'I didn't know what to expect. I didn't think it would be in a classroom.' Because of this they had little to say about their specific aspirations before they joined, and these were elicited through both initial assessment and ongoing review processes.

Employees' learning needs were identified in two ways: assessment tasks which were used to assess current skills levels, and individual discussions with members of the tutor team about their experiences of education, aims, aspirations, interests and needs. The assessment materials included a free writing task in which employees were asked to write a description of their job and a questionnaire headed 'Literacy skills needed at work' which employees completed in conversation with the tutors. They were asked whether they needed support with different work tasks, for example completing accident report forms, completing time sheets, writing telephone messages and writing emails. As the content of much of this assessment material was related to reading and writing in the work context, it was perhaps inevitable that many of the needs identified through this process related primarily to work, particularly in the Treasurer's strand. Nevertheless, Works students also wanted to gain skills for activities in their wider lives, as identified in chapter 4.

With the exception of the three students who were assessed at the lowest levels, all described themselves as competent in using English when they left school. Only Len and Val had gained any qualifications at school, but others said they had been 'all right' at English. They believed that their writing skills had deteriorated since leaving school because they hadn't used them; their jobs had not required writing skills and they had not done much writing in life outside work. Rick, for example, said he was never very good at school but had some skills and 'after 25 years just working with the tools you lose the skill'.

They saw the course as an opportunity to 'brush up', in other words to regain the skills they had lost. Chas said that as he was a painter and decorator and had not really done any writing since school, he needed to 'brush up' more than anything. Nigel described himself as needing a refresher because 'since leaving school you get out of the habit of written

communication. Your written skills seem to have diminished or you're not as confident as to your writing skills' and Bridget, who had achieved grade C in GCSE English, said, 'and because I hadn't done it [writing] for so long I was unconfident about it. I wanted to touch up on it.'

All the students, whatever their assessed level, said that their reading was 'all right' or good, and identified writing as their weak skill. Although initial assessments at the start of the project placed Laurie, Robert and Mark at entry level or below for both reading and writing, they described themselves as readers. Laurie said that though he did 'struggle' with his writing, which he described as 'scribble', he 'used to read a lot actually, but then I started suffering with my eyes so had to give up.' Consequently, the most frequently expressed needs were to improve writing skills, especially structuring writing. All the office workers said they were 'not bad' at technical skills but needed to know how to organise and structure their writing, to 'put sentences in the right way.' Bridget, for example, said that her reading was 'fine' and that 'getting her words onto paper' was the problem. She knew what she wanted to say but needed to get it into a short paragraph instead of 'a big long waffle about it then losing the point'. Nigel also said, 'I tend to go on instead of sticking to the basics or to the point. I tend to waffle or say more than I should do and I tried to come on this course to get me to put it in a form or way of being brief or getting to the point or doing formal letters.' These needs were directly related to the requirements of their work.

A strong need to develop two significant curriculum areas, oracy and confidence-building, emerged during the course. These were not considered in the original course design and were not included in the initial assessment process. However, as the courses progressed, the students' confidence in themselves as learners increased, their knowledge and awareness of possibilities broadened, and they contributed more

129

confidently to curriculum negotiation processes. These discussions revealed that conditions such as job loss, problems with work tasks and relations with management had deeply undermined the confidence of all the students in these aspects of their work. At the same time, as they were anxious to assure me, they were highly confident in other aspects of their work or lives, for instance, when with their family or in social situations. Oral communication skills development needs also became apparent, as redeployees were grappling with the prospect of undergoing interviews, and the Works students revealed the extent of conflict and dispute in their working environment.

5.3 Content

In this section I shall examine how the above needs and priorities were translated into curriculum content. The adult education team designed customised courses to meet the needs of these particular students and their workplaces. As noted, Amanda devised the Treasurer's course, with input from Joanna, in advance of the start of the course. The content was later modified to meet some of the additional needs identified by participants, but, as the next section will indicate, these changes reflected students' priorities and were largely concealed from Joanna. The Works strand was not pre-planned. Participants evaluated the sessions each week, discussed their needs for the following week and agreed the content with the tutors, who then planned the sessions. Amanda reflected that this process resulted in a very student-focused programme which 'took off' in new directions, and the range of the content expanded much more than in the Treasurer's course, which, as already noted, was structured in advance and prioritised corporate over individual student needs. She also noted that short-term responsive planning placed much heavier demands on the tutor team than the pre-course development model.

Both strands included the development of contextualised oracy and literacy skills, but the weight placed on the development of specific skills differed. The courses shared some curriculum elements, but the Treasurer's course was almost entirely work-related whereas the Works course covered a wider range of contexts and topics. Amanda considered that one reason for this was that there was not a 'direct and obvious need for basic skills' in many of the Works department jobs. For this reason the work-analysis approach to designing the curriculum adopted for the Treasurer's strand would have been unlikely to generate sufficient material on which to base a curriculum. This approach would also have been unlikely to interest or attract the students because of the workers' aversion, identified in the last chapter, to the content of training being imposed by management.

The courses in each department taught reading, writing and oral skills, which were related to both the work environment and everyday life, using a range of topics as a vehicle. Work-related topics common to both courses included job interviews, literacy audits of participants' jobs, roles and relationships at work, and written and oral communication with colleagues, managers, and the public. Additional topics covered in the Works strand included the media, racism, crime and politics. Neither strand included union issues, or based literacy and communication tasks on union documents or contexts, this absence perhaps a reflection of the failure of the union representatives to contribute to the course content, as well as an indication that union-related communications were not a priority interest of the students.

The groups differed in the emphasis and amount of time accorded to reading, writing and oracy skills, with more stress on oral communication skills in the Works department and on writing skills in the Treasurer's

131

department. Reading skills including reading for information, using dictionaries and other reference sources, reading techniques such as skimming and scanning and recognising an author's viewpoint or bias. Writing skills included strategies for planning writing, constructing sentences and paragraphs, spelling, grammar and punctuation. Oracy covered interview skills, listening skills, negotiating skills, interpersonal skills and, in the Works department, conflict resolution in the workplace.

The courses also aimed to build participants' confidence in two ways; through the teaching approaches and specific elements of the content, which supported them to develop strategies for building up their own confidence, self-esteem and assertiveness skills. This included activities to develop understanding of what gives people confidence, and exercises to identify and value their personal strengths, to think positively about themselves and to raise their perceptions of what they were capable of achieving. Work situations that they regarded as difficult, challenging or undermining were used as the context vehicle for this skills development. Tutors also encouraged students to develop critical and analytical skills. There was some uncertainty as to whether managers would approve of these aspects of the course. This relates to the issue of whose interests are prioritised and I shall now discuss the tutors' responses to this question.

5.3.1 Prioritising interests

The interests of managers, students and students converged in many of the curriculum elements. However, there were also actual or potential disjunctures, particularly in relation to the balance of oracy and literacy skills, the non-work content included in the Treasurer's course and the focus of the oracy, confidence and assertiveness skills building sessions, which included discussion of dissatisfaction with work situations. The

132

project manager, Amanda, and the lead tutor, Sue, differed in their approaches to the question of whose interests should be prioritised in the curriculum development and delivery. Sue's main concerns were with the students, whereas her manager took the more pragmatic view that the corporate interests of the employer and managers had to be embraced in addition to those of the students, as she believed that this was the only way to ensure management support for the work.

As project manager, it was Amanda's responsibility to ensure that all involved were satisfied with the courses. Although she empathised with the employees, and wanted the courses to reflect their needs, she believed that she had to ensure that the employer's interests were also fully accommodated; that it was important to 'strike a balance' between the different interests involved because employers needed to be 'convinced of the value' of the provision and to see results immediately rather than 'in some amorphous [sic] time in the future'. At the same time she recognised that employees had to perceive the course as interesting, enjoyable and, like the employers, immediately useful to them if they were to commit to it. She balanced these needs by trying to include all priorities in the curriculum and by presenting them in a way she felt would be acceptable to all concerned; for example when the employees' need to develop assertiveness skills was revealed early in the course, she added this to the course content but called it 'Effective Oral Communication' as she felt this would be acceptable to managers, whereas they might regard the inclusion of assertiveness skills as irrelevant or threatening.

Sue, on the other hand, believed that the students' needs should be paramount, and endeavoured to reflect this in all aspects of the courses. She recognised that her emphasis differed from Amanda's in this respect, and that the overt power of determining the curriculum content rested with the managers. She responded by concealing the extent of her

prioritisation of the employees' needs. When the students identified oracy skills as a priority, Sue endeavoured to develop these skills, but was told to reduce this emphasis because the employers would expect to see more time dedicated to developing reading and writing skills. Her response was to continue with the same amount of oracy content, but to conceal this by not recording it on her lesson plans. In a similar way she was concerned that her commitment to developing critical thinking skills through the curriculum would be disapproved of, and did not reflect the details of this in her documentation of session aims and activities. This issue also relates to the approaches to teaching and learning adopted by the tutors, and I shall examine these in the next section.

5.4 Methods

In this section I consider the teaching methods employed, starting with an overview of the tutors' approach before examining the specific strategies employed in the course delivery, including ethos and values as well as teaching methods.

The courses were underpinned by what the tutors termed an 'empowerment' model. For them this meant that they aimed to equip students with critical and analytical skills as well as technical oracy and literacy skills, and to encourage them to use this knowledge, understanding and skills to take control of their learning, to make choices for themselves and to change problematic areas in their everyday or working lives. Amanda explained:

> 'It was also about getting people to develop the skills and the confidence to be more flexible in work, but also to take the initiative to try to change things they were not happy with, to make choices for themselves rather than wait for things to happen to them.'

This was reflected in the course content, and was woven into the course through the teaching and learning methods, an ethos of respecting and valuing students' experiences and contributions and the development of critical and analytical skills.

The course team employed multiple teaching and learning methods to support students to set and achieve challenging learning goals. A further aim was to develop strategies and understanding so that students could apply their knowledge and continue learning in situations outside the classroom. Tutors provided opportunities for students to work individually on their specific development areas as well as to work together in groups. There was a balance between tutor explanation and student contributions, and a variety of learning tasks and activities. The latter included diverse reading and writing tasks, role-plays, structured discussions and problem-solving activities. Although the tutors used published materials where they were available, they produced a large proportion of the course materials themselves, as this ensured that the level of the work was appropriate and the content was directly relevant to the students' needs and interests.

5.4.1 Ethos

As the ethos of the course was a crucial factor in the students' positive and successful experience of it, I shall examine this aspect of the provision in some detail. The principles underlying all aspects of the courses were that students should be treated with respect and as adult equals, and that their life and learning experiences and achievements should be recognised and valued in the course sessions. The tutors believed that an ethos based on these principles would both create an affirmative climate in which successful learning could take place and contribute to raising the students' confidence.

Participants from each strand identified this respectful, non–patronising treatment as a significant factor in their successful learning experiences. Selwyn appreciated that the tutors 'didn't talk down to you', and Val noted the contrast with school, as here 'they talked to you from adult to adult rather than "you will do this and you won't do that". It was really good.' Chas explained that it was important to be treated with respect and listened to, 'to be on the same level' because 'you're an adult aren't you?' This made him feel relaxed and 'willing to learn' and he contrasted his adult and school learning experiences: 'Sometimes at school when you've been on a course you sort of want to get out the room and you're not bothered, but I've not done that once on this course.' Bridget found that the tutor was 'really approachable' and this was important to her success on the course because, 'I think it's better if you are comfortable with somebody and they are approachable. It made the course a whole lot easier.'

As already observed, confidence very quickly emerged in both strands as 'the biggest issue for all the students', because, as Sue discovered, employees from both departments consistently underestimated their own abilities, and had lost confidence because of their work circumstances, and their self-esteem was low. Amanda identified confidence-building as the most important element in turning this round and getting people to believe they could achieve:

> 'The biggest thing is getting people to believe it's possible they can do it and it ain't magic. It isn't one of the mysteries that comes down from heaven.'

Building the students' confidence and developing their self-esteem, which became fundamental elements of both courses, aimed to support students to start to believe they could succeed, to identify themselves as people

capable of learning, and to engage fully with the learning processes, as well as to widen their options for responding to negative situations at work.

One strategy for raising the students' self-esteem and confidence in their ability to learn was providing positive reinforcement through tutor encouragement and praise. All the students said this gave them the confidence in their own abilities to learn and make progress. Len's self-assurance as a student increased because of 'bags and bags of encouragement and the tutor saying, "You are really good".' Bridget's confidence also increased because 'Sue was always saying, "You're great. You can do this." She was always picking you up to make you think, "Oh, I can do it".'

Praise was particularly important for Robert, who felt very uncomfortable about his reading and writing skills levels and was fearful that he would be exposed to the others in his group: 'I found that very good. She didn't single me out for special treatment or anything like that. She used to treat me like the rest of them and she thought I was very good at communication.' The tutors' positive attitudes and encouragement created a climate in which successful learning could take place. This also depended on specific teaching approaches, which I shall now discuss.

5.4.2 Working in groups

Group work was used as a powerful and successful teaching tool. The tutors encouraged students to work and learn together as well as individually. Group work helped to create a comfortable physical and emotional environment in which individuals could support and encourage each other and develop, share and test ideas. This enhanced both their confidence and their technical, analytical and critical skills development. Learning through working in groups and pairs was a new, and largely

positive, experience for these students, and all commented on its value in motivating them, developing their skills and raising their confidence.

Adult learning was a new experience for most of the students; they were initially apprehensive, as they had not expected to be working in groups and discussing their experiences and ideas with others. The tutor had anticipated this and used strategies which included negotiating ground rules and 'ice-breaker' activities to establish the course groups so that members trusted each other and were at ease working together. Len's views were representative: 'There was no animosity. Everyone felt very happy and very comfortable. The people were very relaxed.' When asked why this was important for learning he expanded:

'No one was left out, no one was isolated, everybody was talked to, everybody said their bit and everybody listened. Nobody was laughing at the next person because he couldn't get a word or speak.'

Group work was also used to build confidence. Discussions enabled students to share past experiences, worries and concerns, and then to move on from these to develop more constructive beliefs in their own abilities. The ethos was one of encouraging positive thinking and getting people to identify what they could already do, what they could change and what they could achieve. Through this process they realised that others often had similar experiences, that past failure was not necessarily their fault, and they encouraged each other, with tutor support, to believe that they could accomplish their aims. Amanda used group discussion in the initial course meetings to encourage people to share experiences and to introduce self-esteem issues. She encouraged people to talk about their experiences, what they couldn't do and what they could do and identify and share reasons for this, then moved on to focus on alternative ways of

looking, emphasising the positive and developing the belief that they could achieve.

Pair and group activities were an effective mechanism for supporting the students to develop oracy and literacy skills. Structured discussions, role-plays and problem-solving activities supported them to enhance their range of communication skills and to explore effective communication strategies, for example in relation to working with the public or resolving problems at work. They also complemented individual work as an effective strategy for developing specific reading and writing skills. Discussions enabled students to share and compare experiences or feelings that acted as blocks to learning literacy skills or carrying out literacy-related tasks at home or work. They then worked together to share strategies they already used and to work out new ones. They took on the role of 'expert' as they articulated their knowledge, views and expertise, and this in turn boosted confidence and self-esteem.

The students were positive about the ways in which group work facilitated learning, and only one, Robert, was ambivalent about the benefits of working with others. On the one hand he enjoyed the opportunity to take part in discussions, as his oral communication skills were at a much higher level than his reading and writing skills, but at the same time he felt anxious when working with others, as he feared that his colleagues would realise just how low his reading and writing skills levels were.

Chas found that the group work 'got you thinking about things.' Although he found it hard to talk about himself in a group, Nigel appreciated the opportunity to compare situations and talk about what he wanted and needed to learn. Laurie found many strengths in the group work: 'It's like when you are struggling, it's nice to talk it through in a group. If you don't know how to do something, it's nice to talk to somebody who knows it a

little bit better than you rather than just struggle on yourself.' He also wanted opportunities to work things out for himself and felt that this course provided experience of both. Bridget summarised the views expressed by most of the students in response to the question 'How did working as a group help you to learn?':

> 'It helped me to be more confident. At first it was a bit difficult, then after a bit you could see people's different points of views and opinions and then you could say something back. You got different feedback. I think it's better in a group than in a one-to-one because you're learning different points of view and thinking, "Oh, maybe he's right there".'

Group-based activities, in particular discussion, were also of fundamental importance in supporting students to develop the critical and analytical skills discussed in the next section.

5.4.3 Developing skills for critical understanding

Both personal development and the improvement of technical literacy and oracy skills were underpinned by an approach which encouraged the students to develop their analytical skills and strive for critical understanding of both texts and life situations. This was to support them to develop higher level literacy and oracy skills, for example to recognise aspects of written documents such as underlying bias in order to develop a deeper understanding of their message. It also aimed to equip them to analyse and understand the reasons for their blocks and barriers to learning so that they could work out how to conquer them. A third factor was to encourage them to make choices and to use their skills most effectively in real life situations, for example to resolve difficult situations such as conflict with peers or managers, or to make changes to unsatisfactory ones, for instance to change employment from a job which gave them no satisfaction.

Skills development sessions were often founded on discussions which identified students' prior knowledge and experiences. They were encouraged and supported to analyse their past learning experiences and find reasons for any difficulties they had, then to use this understanding to realise that they were capable of developing this skill area and find ways to move forward. Peers were also encouraged to share strategies they had already used successfully.

An example

I observed part of an early course session in which spelling was introduced for the first time. The session demonstrated the way in which group discussion was used to encourage the students, to share learning experiences, identify barriers and support each other in their approaches to learning. All were interested as their colleagues revealed their stories, and as they asked questions, made comments and compared their own experiences, most started to see that hey could move on and begin to address their spelling difficulties.

The tutor introduced the topic and initiated a student-led discussion in which they shared their experiences of learning to spell at school, their feelings about their spelling now, reasons why spelling was important, their individual learning styles and strategies for learning to spell. They shared positive and negative experiences, and the most forceful story was Rick's explanation of the roots of his fear of spelling.

At school he had to learn spellings. Each person in his class had to stand up in turn and spell a word given to them by the teacher. They were not allowed to sit down again until they had spelled the word correctly and he still, in his forties, vividly remembers the day when he was eight and could not spell the word 'biscuit.' His voiced dropped as he recounted how he

141

had to stand there in front of everyone for five rounds as he failed to get the word right, and eventually a girl was asked to spell the word for him. He said that the incident was still with him; he still remembers the word, the girl, the teacher and his feelings of fear, shame and humiliation as he failed to spell the word each time his turn came around. As a result of this type of incident he never became secure in his spelling and feels dread when he has to write anything.

Others said they shared similar fears when asked to write, and compared their own experiences. The group members concluded that the climate in which they learned might have affected their current attitudes and spelling abilities. The discussion moved on to why spelling was important and, with input from the tutor, they reached a consensus that it was important for clarity of expression and to create a good impression on the reader, particularly in job applications and work documents. They agreed that they needed to improve their own spelling and writing skills.

Next, the tutor introduced different strategies for learning spelling, including learning rules, the 'look, cover, say, write, check' method, using dictionaries, and memory techniques such as mnemonics and remembering smaller words within longer words. At each stage she checked how the students learned and remembered, and encouraged them to share their strategies, for example their personal 'difficult words' and the mnemonics they used to remember them. They laughed as they shared some of the nonsense rhymes and phrases they used to remind themselves how to spell words and suggested new ones for people's particular 'nightmare words'. This activity assisted people to overcome their fear, demonstrated that different people are more comfortable with different strategies and also, by equipping them with a range of approaches they could use to learn and remember spellings both in and

outside the classroom environment, enabled them to take control of their own learning.

The students then worked individually on their particular spelling difficulties. These were followed up in written homework tasks and subsequent sessions in which they had to use them in a context. Later, Rick reflected that the group and the way the class was taught were helping him to overcome his fear; he was now improving his spelling, and thereby his writing, as the group were supportive, he was not put on the spot, and the tutor explained everything well.

A similar approach was used to analyse workplace issues, including communications. Some aspects were treated as relatively uncontroversial, for example the dynamics of employment interviews or effective everyday communications. However in both strands, students also introduced potentially contentious topics such as work policies and practices they were unhappy about; this included Best Value and, in the Works strand, situations stemming from the poor industrial relations which were identified in the previous chapter. These could have degenerated into moaning or 'offloading' sessions with little relation to communication skills development, but the tutors were concerned to avoid this because the aim was to focus on developing skills and understanding. In addition, they were worried about repercussions from the employers. They responded in two ways: by using the discussions as a springboard for developing communication skills and identifying approaches to bring about positive resolutions of the issues raised, or shifting to a 'safe' activity such as written skills development.

When the former response was adopted, the students were challenged to analyse the underlying causes of the problems they were raising, to identify where they could take action to bring about changes and to

develop constructive approaches to doing so. The skills and knowledge to enable them to do this were developed in course sessions on assertive and effective oral communications. The content of these sessions included communicating confidently, dealing with difficult situations and the underlying principles of assertive communication, for example, that assertiveness is not about either aggression or submission, but about respect, sticking up for your rights but not trampling on other people's rights in the process, being honest and fair, recognising other points of view, being willing to make compromises and aiming for 'win-win' solutions. The students also practised using listening skills, non-aggressive ways of raising problems, for example by avoiding accusations and blame, focusing on the issue and not dragging in past or unrelated grudges and speaking to the other person quietly and without aggression. They then built on this to work out how they could apply these principles and techniques to specific situations.

The tutors were apprehensive about managers' responses to this aspect of the courses, which had been introduced in response to student demand and not negotiated with managers. Sue, for instance, was fearful, that the critical discussions would create problems with the employers:

> 'We'd talk about the City Council and everybody just felt badly treated, badly demoralised, trapped. Although we did talk about it, I felt it was possible I was going to get into trouble for that so I pulled back. I kept coming back to the traditional content as it was a workplace basic skills course.'

She 'pulled back' because, 'we are frightened to, aren't we?' This fear stemmed from feeling vulnerable to repercussions because of her position as a union activist and 'a part-timer and I was new and I had a temporary contract'.

The participants cited these activities as the most unexpected, but often the best, aspect of the courses. One reason these sessions were popular was that they equipped people with the confidence and skills to address work issues they perceived as difficult or unfair. As Sue reflected:

> 'They all really enjoyed the effective oral communications content because it gave them the skills to say, "I'm a human being. I don't have to be oppressed. I can say I don't like this. I know how to deal with conflict".'

Although these discussion activities, like other aspects of the courses, were difficult and challenging for the students, success brought about high levels of satisfaction.

5.4.4 Challenge

The courses were demanding. The tutors set challenging work and demonstrated high expectations of the students, who were asked to expand their critical and analytical thinking and reading skills. This required them to adopt new approaches and sometimes shift their thinking, attitudes and ways of doing things. They were pushed to improve their reading and writing skills and progress to a higher level, and asked to carry out home tasks to reinforce and test their learning, and I shall now discuss students' responses to these challenges.

This approach maintained interest and focus. Bridget said:

> 'We did loads actually. It was quite intense and they gave me a lot to read and stuff but it kept my mind occupied all the time and it was always, you were always learning something different. It wasn't just harking on all day about the same thing.'

Rick was surprised at the combination of an informal and student-centred approach with high expectations and demands:

'It didn't look like she was doing much and it was informal, very informal, but the work she was getting out of us was like so challenging. Like to me the computer was Everest and we realised how hard it was but there was somebody there to put you in the right direction, and they didn't put you on the spot. It was well done.'

The challenge extended to asking students to carry out tasks at home to consolidate their learning and develop their ability to work independently. Handouts and materials were provided to support the independent application and development of their writing skills. Whilst homework was unexpected, all the students recognised its value as a learning tool; they felt that working alone provided an opportunity to engage with the materials at their own pace and level and gave a clearer picture of whether they had learned skills to the stage where they could use them without assistance.

Initially the students were surprised to be given homework; some were even more surprised at themselves for engaging in home study. Laurie, who was most resistant to the course initially and retained doubts throughout, when asked whether he did the home tasks said, 'I did actually. It surprised me.' When asked why he did them, he said it was to help him learn more because he could work at his own pace and go over things which he had found too fast in the class. He also said it was an opportunity to test whether he could do things without the assistance of tutors or peers. Chas described feeling that he would never be able to do the homework, then starting and feeling he couldn't do it on his own, then concentrating and finding he could do it. This made him feel good about himself and he started to believe in his ability to learn. Nigel found it a useful means of checking whether he had learned something, but had difficulty in finding time for home tasks and would have found them more useful if accompanied by an allocation of work time to complete them.

Others, including Val, did one hour a night, commenting that she had plenty of time as her family were grown up.

All the students responded enthusiastically to the teaching. The tutors 'were good at putting things across' as their approach to explaining the material ensured that students understood without feeling 'put down or stupid'. As Selwyn said: 'They explained, as basic as you wanted to be. They were really helpful with it.' The students viewed the adult courses as very different from school and the course tutors were identified as playing a key role in changing their perceptions of learning and in developing their identities as successful students. Chas commented that he had expected it to be like school, 'working out of books', but it was much more interesting, and Tom said that after the first lesson he couldn't understand why he had never liked learning in the past. All identified working with others as the most positive aspect of the teaching strategies employed. All attributed their enjoyment and successful learning, which will be considered in the next chapter, to the attitudes and interpersonal skills of the tutors as well as their teaching methods and style. They described the teaching as 'inspirational' and 'interesting', summed up by Chas: 'The teaching has been brilliant.'

5.5 Conclusions

The messages emerging from this chapter are that managers' priorities and views as to the purposes of workplace learning influenced what they considered appropriate course content. Tutors were a powerful agency in interpreting these identified priorities and translating them into a course; their potential to meet these needs and to subvert priorities was identified. The importance of critical teaching approaches, building confidence and developing oracy skills was also demonstrated.

147

5.5.1 Curriculum priorities

The findings indicated that motivations for involvement did affect views on curriculum content and priorities. Views differed, and appeared to be influenced by organisational and structural factors, the amount of literacy skills entailed in the work, and the personal perspectives of the managers involved. Prioritisation of corporate interests, and views that the purpose of literacy skills training is to increase work competence, were accompanied by beliefs that curriculum design should be led by work requirements and aim to fill skills gaps. Recognition that employees' needs were not necessarily work-task-related and a wider view of the purposes of literacy skills training led to a broader-based view of the curriculum.

The study also provided valuable insights into how students with no experience of learning since leaving school view their own skills and define their learning needs. Initial expectations appear to relate to whether their jobs demanded overt literacy skills, their employment situation and their route to joining the course, and were clearer when they joined as a result of identified literacy skills deficiencies.

The students insisted that they left schools with reasonable writing skills, which they needed to 'brush up' as these skills had declined because they had not used them since their school days. It was not possible to assess either the reality or extent of this decline in my study, but if the students' perceptions are taken at face value the explanation offered by Bynner and Parsons (1998) in their study of unemployed individuals, that skills diminish because of restricted opportunities to practise and develop them, might equally apply to employed workers whose jobs offer little opportunity to use these skills.

5.5.2 Curriculum design processes

The study also draws attention to the importance of the processes by which content is determined. The findings indicated the benefits of building flexibility into courses in order to accommodate students' changing aspirations as their sense of possibilities develops. Attitudes and priorities resulted in two different planning models. Corporate and work-related priorities resulted in a pre-planned course designed to fill identified skills gaps, reflecting the model promoted by, for example, the Basic Skills Agency (2003). Student priorities led to a more student-centred model of provision, which was very adaptable and very responsive to changing student needs, and contained a wide range of content.

As Ozga (2000) observed, the agency of tutors has a major influence on how policy is implemented. The power of the tutor team to determine the course content, and the ways in which they did so, illustrated ways in which intentions can be modified as tutors overlay them with their own beliefs and priorities as they transform them into practice. The employers' and employees' interests intersected and overlapped, but when they differed, the tutors were able to determine whose interests took priority, as they had overall responsibility for the delivery of the courses. As the project manager aimed to meet both student and corporate interests, the emphasis and some content of the courses differed, although they did also share elements of curriculum content and teaching and learning practice.

Empathy with the workers also led tutors to include curriculum elements which they concealed from the employer. The critical discussion of employment issues and encouragement of the employees to address their problems and injustices at work, albeit in a constructive manner, could be viewed in different ways by the employers. It could be perceived as undermining authority and inciting employees to 'make trouble' by

questioning or challenging workplace practices. In this instance, as I shall show in the next chapter, it was viewed as a positive development which led to constructive outcomes for both individuals and their employers.

5.5.3 Union influence

The findings also showed that the union involvement was much more substantial in the recruitment activities than course design and delivery. The union coordinator did not claim a role in negotiating the course content or approaches with the provider, citing lack of expertise as a reason. This absence was somewhat surprising given the strength of the commitment at local, national and regional levels to ensuring members' rights in education, and raises the question why did they not promote the rights issue in relation to curriculum content and teaching methodology.

One answer might be traced to the absence of an analytical or theoretical trade union perspective on basic skills; this has influenced the training and thereby the confidence, skills, and knowledge of learning representatives. Whilst individual unions lead workplace literacy developments, the TUC has produced materials to guide providers (TUC/BSA 2000c), and to equip learning representatives to carry out their roles (TUC 2000b & 2001, TUC/BSA 2000a & 2000b). The guidance for providers and unions reproduces, without discussion or critique, the 'cost to industry' arguments cited by the Moser Committee report (DFEE 1999a) to make the case for providing basic skills at work. It also advocates an instrumental, functional type of approach (TUC/BSA 2000a & 2000b), in which the examples of skills needed at work for different occupations are restricted to very functional reading and writing tasks.

A further explanation might lie in learning representatives' own confidence and expectations. One reason that unions work with providers rather than

delivering basic skills provision themselves is that, rightly, they recognise the providers' specialist expertise (TUC 2000a, TUC/BSA 2000b). Union learning representatives are not trained to negotiate with providers in relation to the curriculum content, and consequently, like John, can regard it as outside their area of expertise and feel unconfident to take part in these discussions. Furthermore, as Payne (2001) suggests, union contact with 'expert systems' such as education can lead to tensions, for example if the experts regard the union learning representatives as unqualified to carry out their role, and the representatives are not trained to justify their case.

Union silence on this issue means there is one less voice championing employees' interests; also it reduces unions' opportunities to ensure that their equality principles are followed through from initial engagement into course design and delivery. Although the tutors in this case adopted an empowerment model, which did accord with union principles, they could equally have adopted a different type of approach or priorities. The voluntarist approach, which assumes that providers will recognise members' rights, leaves the students vulnerable to the priorities of the providers and the employers. What happens, for instance, if tutors are not aware of union contexts or if employers seek to determine the curriculum?

5.5.4 Course delivery

A strong message emerging from my investigation of the delivery methods is that skills can be developed and different priorities met using an empowerment methodology which moves beyond the type of deficit approach which has been widely criticised by, for example, Holland (1998) and Lankshear (1997). The noteworthy aspects of the empowerment model were the affirmative ethos which underpinned all aspects of the course, the ways in which the content and skills were related to the work

contexts and realities of the students' own lives, and the group learning element of the courses. This approach did not merely contextualise the learning programmes, but sought to include the students as partners in the learning process and to work with them to develop critical, analytical and assertiveness skills in addition to communication skills to understand and act to change their situations.

The programmes took account of unequal power relationships in the workplace and the consequences of these for the students, including job losses and unjust treatment by managers. This resonated with a critical literacy approach, although the tutors' concern to incorporate managers' concerns and discuss strategies to deal with problems within the existing status quo perhaps fell short of the 'literacy for change' programmes envisaged by some proponents of this approach, such as Freire (1972) and Lankshear (1997). Nevertheless, it did seek to promote reflective, analytical and active responses to enable students to gain more control over their work situations, and as such was distinct from a deficit or solely employer-led model. I will consider the actual effects and changes brought about by the programme in the next chapter. Two major components of the curriculum content had particular resonance for the empowerment approach, oral communication skills and confidence building, and I will now consider the findings in relation to these elements.

5.5.5 Oracy skills

The immense importance of oracy skills development was highlighted, as a tool for learning, as a basis for literacy skills development, and as skills in their own right. The persistently low level of recognition in the basic skills field of the value of developing these skills for students (other than those learning English as a second language) was demonstrated in the tutors' initial failure to consider oral communication skills needs beyond

those needed for job interviews. This is not surprising as, until recently, relatively little attention has been paid to the issue of developing the oracy skills of native English speakers, and in the workplace context there has been little consideration of the oral communications skills needs, especially higher-level skills, of lower-skilled workers. A list of the top ten basic skills needed at work produced by the TUC, for example, cites only reading and writing skills (TUC/BSA 2000a). Where they are identified in relation to workplace needs, for example DfES (2002), oracy skills appear as low-level functional skills. These findings indicate the importance of prioritising oracy skills in the curriculum, and I shall return to this issue when discussing impact and outcomes in the next chapter.

5.5.6 Confidence building

The study added insights into the issue of learning and confidence by illustrating learning processes that improved confidence, and providing insights into the benefits of improved confidence for individuals and their workplaces. It is perhaps worth considering what is meant by confidence because, as Norman and Hyland (2003) note, concepts of confidence used in the literature differ. Their suggestion that there are three elements to confidence is helpful, as these appear to reflect the issues aired in my discussions about confidence: 'cognitive' is a person's knowledge of their abilities; 'performance' is their ability to do something; and 'emotional' is feeling comfortable about the former two aspects.

I found that the students were all experiencing lack of confidence in their ability to learn and in some, but not all, aspects of their working lives. Recognising that people did not necessarily feel the same degree of confidence or lack of confidence in all the different contexts of their lives, Eldred's (2002) notion of 'situated confidence', was helpful to the students,

as the tutors focused on their strengths as well as the sources of their low confidence levels.

McGivney (1999) notes that one of the most powerful barriers to learning for men can be fear of failure. The affirmative ethos of this course countered this fear and built confidence and self-esteem by valuing life experiences, views and existing skills and knowledge. Students were both challenged and supported to succeed, and recognising and praising early learning successes reinforced confidence gains, giving participants a belief in their own abilities to learn and progress and to use their new knowledge and confidence in real life situations. The oral communication skills content, especially group learning activities, supported participants to grow their confidence, a strategy also found to be successful by Ward (2002).

This chapter provided insights into the ways in which different motivations and views affected curriculum development and delivery, and the processes associated with this. A major test of the quality of a learning programme is whether learning gains result from participation. In the next chapter I will consider progress in literacy skills and personal development, then investigate the impact of this, and wider benefits for the individual students and their workplaces. This will include consideration of whether the different priorities and influences identified in this chapter made any difference to the outcomes for the students and their employers.

6 Outcomes and Impact

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter I discuss participants' learning gains and consider whether the skills they developed helped them achieve the aims they identified at the start of the course. I start by exploring gains in literacy and oracy skills, and then consider the impact of these gains on literacy practices and work. I then examine ways in which the both the experience and the outcomes of learning affected the participants' work and everyday lives, and identify the wider benefits in relation to employment, confidence and self-esteem, relationships and learning. I also appraise the differences in impact between the two strands, considering the potential significance of factors such as trade union involvement, routes to participation, choices and level of involvement in negotiating course content.

6.2 Learning gains

As the previous chapter revealed, students felt both challenged and supported to learn, but did they make progress and what did they learn? Although they had noted students' progress in their own records, the tutors had not carried out end-of-course assessments of achievement and progress as they felt that students would find these off-putting and stressful. My evidence on progress and achievement, therefore, is based primarily on the students' own perceptions, which were supported by the observations of others including tutors, managers and the learning coordinator. All said that they had made progress, but their levels of satisfaction with the amount of progress differed. All the students expressed learning gains in relation to both technical skills and how they applied them to real-life activities. In addition to equipping them with new

reading, writing and oral communication skills, the courses had 'brought back' technical skills they had once known.

6.2.1 Skills gains

Although, as shown in the last chapter, oracy skills development had not been anticipated at the start of the course, this proved to be one of the most significant areas of skills gain for all the students. Their improved oracy skills included higher-level skills, for instance those required for negotiation and conflict resolution. As a consequence of enhancing their oral communication skills, students were more comfortable talking to people, could 'project themselves better', were better equipped to deal with different and difficult situations and had learned interview techniques. These gains in oracy skills also had a profound impact in the Works department, which I shall describe in section 6.4.2

Despite their belief at the start of the course that their reading skills were 'all right', all the students, whatever their level, recognised and welcomed advances in their reading. Improvements in reading skills included techniques such as scanning and using reference sources, particularly dictionaries, and critical understanding of a wider range of more complex texts, including the ability to recognise register and bias. Rick, for example, felt that he had become a more confident and fluent reader, and Robert, who experienced difficulties with reading, was still embarrassed about his level of literacy, but recognised that he had improved his reading skills through participation in the course, saying that this had inspired him to 'get his reading and writing better', which would give him more confidence so that he could enrol on other courses at work.

The students cited improvements in the following writing skills: punctuation (including full stops, commas and apostrophes), spelling, sentence and

paragraph construction, and knowledge of register and appropriate style and language. Students who worked in administrative jobs had wanted to improve their ability to structure written documents, and they felt that they achieved this through the course. They had gained techniques for planning their writing and were able to express what they wanted to say more fluently and concisely than before, thus improving their ability to produce written documents such as application forms and letters for work and everyday life. Val, for instance, who had never heard of a spider-gram before the course, found this a very effective tool which she had started to use regularly to plan her writing. She had improved her punctuation, learned to construct paragraphs, grasped more spelling rules and started to use a dictionary, and estimated that her spelling had improved greatly. She used her new skills to write work documents independently and felt 'That's really good.'

The students gained additional knowledge and skills which were related to, but different from, oracy and literacy skills. They became aware of learning processes and strategies for learning to learn, evidenced, for example, by their responses to homework tasks and learning from and supporting peers in groups. They heightened their critical and analytical skills, not simply for textual analysis but in relation to a wide range of situations and issues, thereby developing more reflective and sophisticated approaches to solving problems and resolving conflicts.

6.2.2. Satisfaction with progress

Despite these gains, students from the redeployees group in the Treasurer's strand were disappointed with the rate and level of their skills gain and progress. Without further evidence, it is difficult to judge whether this was because their initial expectations were unrealistic, or their learning gain really had been insignificant, or a mixture of both. It might

also have been connected to their feelings about their negative work situation. There was more pressure on these students to progress quickly as there was an urgency to secure new employment. Laurie was ambivalent about the extent of his learning gain; although he did concede that he had developed specific skills, he also wondered whether the course had been any use to him: 'I didn't know what I was getting out of it and I still don't know.' Nigel said that he had very specific needs in relation to boosting his job application and interview skills very quickly, and he felt that he only partially achieved this through this course.

In contrast, all the Works strand participants reported that their skills had advanced significantly, and they were delighted with their progress in both literacy and oral communication skills. Many of these gains were unexpected, as they had joined with little awareness of the purposes and possibilities offered by the course. One of the gains for this group was developing a sense of the benefits that learning could offer as well as recognising their own potential and, through this, heightened aspirations.

As participants moved from their educational legacy of failure and underachievement to become successful students, with one exception, their attitudes to both literacy and education were transformed. The students became more confident and fluent readers and writers, their new skills and knowledge led to changes at work, and they took up new adult learning pursuits, as they came to believe that they could learn successfully. However, as I will show, in the Treasurer's section these transformations were less marked in relation to work. In the following sections I examine these changes in more detail.

6.3 Changing everyday literacy and oracy practices

Enhanced literacy and oral communication skills, coupled with increased self-confidence, had changed attitudes and approaches to literacy and oracy activities in participants' everyday lives. Consequently, they became more independent and took up new literacy activities.

All the students became more independent and autonomous writers. In addition to improving their technical skills, they had been equipped with a range of strategies they could use to check their work, for example knowledge of how to use dictionaries, electronic spell checkers, cribs such as model letters, and the course packs, which they used as reference materials. The combination of these new skills and props gave them the confidence to become independent writers, as they felt secure that their communications would be well presented and not reveal skills deficits to their readers. Val, for example, had started to write letters to friends and relatives rather than making phone calls, and said that her new confidence in her own abilities reassured her that the recipients would not think she was 'daft' or 'stupid'. Even Laurie conceded that he had improved his writing skills, despite his assertion that he had not benefited significantly from the course because his work situation had not changed. Oral communication skills were also used in everyday life interactions; Bridget said that her new approaches to negotiating decisions with her boyfriend had improved their relationship, and Rick had starting trying to meet new people and have 'different sorts of conversations'.

Individuals had taken up new reading activities as a direct result of participating in the course. They started reading either as a means of consolidating and building on their learning gains or for pleasure. This was a significant change in their lives, as none of the participants had read books, and most had not read newspapers, before they started the

course, and it led to further changes in their lives as their interests broadened and developed. Robert had initially started reading newspapers and books because the tutor suggested this as a way to practise reading. He then continued reading books because he enjoyed them, and attributed his new interest in reading to the attitude of the tutor and the encouragement he received from her. This might also help to explain why he described himself as a reader despite his fear of revealing his low level skills. Rick's new enthusiasm for literacy activities led him to read books and papers, do crosswords and spend time with his partner searching for new reading material on second-hand stalls. He gained a great deal of pleasure from these pursuits and explained that they had 'opened up a whole new world' to him and inspired him to take up new and different leisure-time activities.

These students illustrated the existence of a 'digital divide' in which people with the least education and financial resources have the least access to computers. All had been interested in using computers for some time, but had been deterred by cost, lack of access or lack of confidence. Some participants used computers at work, but only for a limited range of job-related functions such as inputting data or producing form letters, and they had never been encouraged or permitted to extend their skills beyond this. Three had computers in their homes but never used them, as they lacked the confidence to try, or family members, usually children, barred their access to the machine. Through the course they gained enthusiasm and the confidence and determination to start using computers at home, for example to access the Internet and use email. They were resolved to pursue their interest in computers by joining computer courses and, where they were available, accessing their home computers.

6.4 Work benefits

Literacy and oracy skills improvements, reinforced by the wider learning gains, had a significant impact on work. Advances in skills increased the capability of workers to carry out their jobs, and industrial relations in the Works department began to improve.

6.4.1 Working better

People reported using their new or improved writing and oral communication skills in their work contexts. All used their improved oral communication skills, and workers who needed to produce written documents at work increased their competence.

The training managers, the union and the course participants agreed that oral communication skills, which were an essential element of all types and grades of jobs, had been improved by the courses. This was reflected in enhanced work performance in both departments. Mark, for instance, felt that the skills he acquired through the course had improved his ability and confidence to deal with the public, adding that his managers had praised him for this aspect of his work. Improved communication skills also resulted in changes in industrial relations in the Works department, a benefit I shall discuss in more detail in the next section.

The administrative staff all needed to use literacy skills in their jobs, and their work performance improved as their competence in technical and composition skills became more secure. As with oral communication skills, these improvements were noted and welcomed by their line managers and the training manager as well as the individuals concerned. Val, for example, had learned skills to enable her to write letters accurately and independently, so ceased to use avoidance strategies and started to

161

accept writing tasks. She felt that she was taking her share of the work, and recognised that her employers benefited as this took pressure off her manager and colleague. Most jobs in the Works department did not require the post-holders to produce written texts, and this reduced their scope for using their new writing skills for work.

6.4.2 Working relationships

The skills gained on the courses also contributed to improved industrial relations. This was particularly noticeable in the Works department where, as already described, relationships between managers and manual workers were often negative, and morale was low. Morale improved and attitudes to work and relationships with managers changed following workers' participation in the course. Workers started to use their new skills and knowledge about effective communication with the wider critical, analytical and problem-solving skills they had gained through the course in their interactions and events at work. The workers, the union, and management all identified these changes as amongst the most significant outcomes of the project. They were also, perhaps, the most unexpected as they had not been anticipated in the project planning processes.

Increases in confidence and morale had an impact on relationships with colleagues, but this took different forms in each department. In the Treasurer's department it was related to inclusion in, and contribution to, work teams, whereas in the Works department it was more to do with finding better responses to aggression and bullying. As they started to succeed in carrying out their work independently without the need for close supervision, some office workers started to feel that they were more equal members of teams, for instance Bridget, who said that she was able to participate more as a member of the team because she had lost the

fear of saying things since she no longer felt all the time that she 'can't do it'.

Changes in relations with peers in the Works department were primarily related to oral communication skills. In the macho work culture, disagreements were often dealt with in an aggressive manner, and the course had supported members to work out ways of avoiding these hostile interactions, and of deflecting others from engaging in them, in order to improve the atmosphere at work. Other aspects of the macho culture included teasing and banter, often cruel and directed at more vulnerable individuals. There was a view that, whilst this was not always fair or good behaviour, it was an inevitable aspect of working life since there were always people who are 'a bit cocky' and who 'like having a go at people'. Selwyn related it to the male culture: 'If there's somebody there and it makes all the lads laugh if I say something funny about him, that's how we are.' The change was that individuals developed a wider range of responses to this baiting. Mark, for example, continued to be the object of this type of 'humour' but had learned different ways of responding so that he was less upset by the teasing and could deflect it more easily.

Communications with managers also improved in both departments due to increased confidence and more effective approaches to problem-solving and managing conflict situations. Strategies for being more assertive and expressing opinions or raising concerns, problems and issues in a constructive, non-aggressive manner had been rehearsed on the course and were put into practice back on the shop floor. This meant that problems were aired and addressed rather than becoming further unexpressed sources of grievance and discontent. In addition, a new emphasis on conflict resolution and problem-solving had replaced some of the old confrontational approaches.

Some workers became more willing to talk to managers or interacted with them more effectively. A number of managers responded positively to the courses, resulting in the development of new trust and more positive and constructive relationships between these managers and their staff. Nigel from the Treasurer's strand said that whereas he would not have done so before, he would now go and talk to his manager about a problem, and Robert from the Works section described how he used to 'talk low' to the foreman but now talks normally instead of 'shying off'. He had never disclosed his difficulties at work because he was worried about repercussions. After the course he had felt confident enough to tell his foreman and works manager about his difficulties and was surprised at how helpful they were. This changed his relationship with them and he respected them more because of their helpful attitude. However he also said that underlying relations were the same, 'It's still them and us.'

One reason the 'them and us' situation remained in the Works department was that there continued to be concerns, grievances and tensions. Eddie, John and some of the men observed that some managers and supervisors were regarded as having poor communication skills themselves and as using tactics which created more conflict than they resolved. Examples of this included shouting at members of their team and raising problems with their work in front of colleagues, often continuing to argue with them about these issues in public.

What did change were the course participants' attitudes and responses to problems in the department. New and 'wiser' strategies for taking up these issues and dealing with conflict with operational managers had been acquired through the course, and participants were attempting to put these into practice in their everyday working lives. Len described what happened when one of his supervisors did not like something:

'Instead of speaking to you he's always shouting. He bellows and bellows and just gets your back up. Some people want to shout as loudly as him and try and put him down so it's a battle of wits seeing who is the funniest and who can put who down.'

Since the course Len had decided to avoid getting into that type of public verbal confrontation because he knew it created conflicts and tensions leading to a bad atmosphere which could linger for several weeks. He would now speak privately to a manager and not 'shout his mouth off' in front of others, thereby avoiding creating 'a conflict situation which is almost impossible to resolve'.

John pointed out that employees were using their new confidence and skills to deploy constructive tactics and assert their rights, for example in relation to health and safety issues or changes in contracted hours, when previously they might have accepted them without complaint: 'People have started to stick up for themselves and insist on their rights.' Rick and Len both said that in the past they would have avoided addressing issues with their managers but had now started to articulate concerns. Rick attributed his new response to an increase in confidence: 'I can now approach them. At one time I would go em, em and stutter a bit.'

6.5 Wider benefits

The courses also resulted in a number of wider benefits for the employers and individuals. These were identified primarily in relation to work, as this was the focus of the study. There were gains in confidence and self-esteem, changes in attitudes to learning and increased morale. Interest in learning and training was generated, and a workplace learning culture began to develop in the Works department as, with one exception, the participants became committed learning champions, and managers and union activists developed an awareness of both the impact of poor basic

skills and the power of learning. The students became committed to adult learning, and a number raised their employment aspirations.

6.5.1 Confidence and self-esteem

Enhanced confidence and self-esteem was a significant factor in changes to students' lives resulting from participation in the courses. These were major unanticipated gains reported by students from each course. Chapter 5 found that students' low levels of confidence at work were revealed during the course and described the measures taken by the tutors to build confidence and self-esteem. These appeared to have been successful as every person interviewed referred to their increased confidence, although gains in confidence for the redeployees were tempered by the persistence of their uncertain situation. Laurie had started to overcome his deep-seated shyness when talking to others, and Rick's self-esteem was boosted because: 'It's shown me I'm as good as anyone and better than a lot.'

These increases in confidence and self-esteem supported students to use their new skills in the workplace. Successful application of new skills in their work then further increased some individuals' levels of confidence and self-esteem and enhanced their feelings of well-being at work. One reason for this was that the levels of stress and worry they felt, because of, for instance, their underperformance, had reduced as their competence at work increased. Dependence on help with writing tasks and the need to have their writing checked for accuracy had made people feel anxious, as well as inferior to peers in the office. As their skills and coping strategies developed, the need to ask for help and to have their work monitored was reduced or removed. This in turn raised their self-esteem as they stopped feeling 'stupid' and their level of anxiety about their work performance reduced.

Bridget, for example, felt more relaxed because she was 'not worried about mithering[1] somebody'. Although she had found her manager supportive she had always felt stupid about having to ask for help: 'When my writing was bad I was unconfident about everything, but now I'm getting it right I know I can do something and I feel more confidence in everything and feel better about it.' Chas found that feeling more competent to carry out his work had considerably reduced his stress levels at work, and Mark was happier at work because he was happier about himself. Tom said that he had always struggled with writing but now felt more relaxed and at ease with himself because he knew exactly what he wanted to say and had the confidence to put it on to paper, for example when writing memos and reports.

The redeployees in the Treasurer's department were more ambivalent about gains in confidence and self-esteem at work. They recognised that their skills had improved and felt more confident to use them. However their situations remained fundamentally unchanged, as only one of them had secured employment and this post was only temporary. They needed more training and other types of intervention to change the negative circumstances they were in. Nigel, for example, said he felt more confident in some writing skills but also knew he needed to improve his skills further and that his overall confidence had been 'knocked' because of his situation. He attributed his continuing lack of confidence at work to his situation as a redeployee after working for the council over 20 years, which 'puts you on edge'.

---

[1] pestering

6.5.2 Improved morale

Participants in both strands identified a connection between the courses and increases in morale. This was true of some individuals in the Treasurer's and of all the participants in the Works department, where the impact went beyond those who took part in the course. However this did not apply to all employees, and a connection can be traced between the work situations of individuals, the reasons they were attending the courses and improvements in morale.

Morale can be viewed as relating to issues such as the confidence, enthusiasm, optimism and attitudes of individuals and groups at work. As the uncertain situation of most of the redeployees had not changed, their overall morale remained low because they were still seeking work, were still unconfident about their ability to cope with the recruitment and selection process and still uncertain what shape their future would take. Employees such as Laurie started with an overtly negative attitude to their work situation and employer, and this did not significantly change as a result of participating in the learning programme.

In contrast, morale improved where participants had chosen to attend and/or had experienced a change in their work situation as a result of the courses. The offer of the programme had in itself boosted morale by making people feel that they were valued employees. Workers such as Bridget and Chas, who had identified areas of struggle in their jobs and feared sanctions in response, viewed the offer of the opportunity to attend a course as a supportive measure which demonstrated that their managers valued them. Participants from the Works department, as shown in chapter 4, felt strongly that in the past training was imposed to meet the needs of management rather than their own interests. In contrast, the public commitment of the director and training manager to

continue to work with the union and to invest in workplace learning that takes account of the workers' priorities sent a clear message that the department valued employees of all grades.

Improved morale benefited individuals, as they felt better about themselves and their work. It also benefited the employer, as people were more enthusiastic and motivated at work and they worked harder because of this. This had been observed by management and the union. Eddie noted that 'There is certainly that bounce in their step now. They approach things in a much more positive manner now, and they tend to do things better.' Dave, the regional union official, described course graduates:

> 'They are coming into work feeling far better, content, with high morale, as excellent workers who are bringing their brains to work and not leaving them on the gates.'

As employees started to feel better about their work and their employer they also started to contribute more to the department, for example by volunteering for tasks and responsibilities beyond the remit of their job descriptions. John observed that, 'They (the managers) are giving things, so people are giving a bit back where they wouldn't before.' Rick had felt so much more positive about work since the course ended that he had volunteered and trained as a first-aider. Subsequently there was an accident at work to which he responded in his new role as an accredited first aider. He was able to both provide emergency first aid and write the required accident report, and this resulted in a further boost to his self-esteem and morale.

Enhanced morale in the Works department had spread from the course participants to their work colleagues. As with the course participants, improved morale was demonstrated by improved motivation, harder work,

a better atmosphere and more commitment to the workplace; one person, who had not been on a course, had 'dug out a patch, a spare bit of land in the car park. He's dug it out and put all plants in.' This was viewed by all as something that would have been unthinkable before the learning programmes were organised.

6.5.3 Developing a learning culture

On the Treasurer's strand, the course had little impact on interest in learning and training beyond the participants. In contrast, the programmes stimulated interest in learning in the wider workforce in the Works department, where a learning culture started to develop.

There was little legacy in the Treasurer's department, where there were no further communications courses. Some managers, including Neil, had developed an awareness of the benefits of this type of training and wanted to refer more staff for this area of skills development. However, there were no structured departmental approaches to continuing these programmes, and no follow-on courses were organised to capitalise on this interest. There were a number of reasons for this. Directors and senior managers were not driving or championing this type of initiative in their departments. The initiative had been developed and led by an individual training manager but not integrated into the planning and programmes of the training section, which had been restructured during the programme. As a result, when this training manager left her employment, the initiative was not continued. Neil described the situation:

> 'Our training section had a clear focus on this and that's been decimated. They've changed they way that they operate and I don't think they have pursued the nature and outcomes of the course. I think that's a failure of training.'

170

The union had been instrumental in the original initiative and in ensuring the continued development of the programme in the Works department, but had not been involved in the Treasurer's strand. Thus, the union learning structures embedded in the Works department were not replicated in the other department. Finally, the employees who participated in the Treasurer's strand had no roots in the department, as they were in new or temporary positions awaiting redeployment, and did not become advocates for learning with colleagues in their work situations.

The situation in the Works department was very different, as demand for, and supply of, learning opportunities grew significantly. Eddie and John organised more courses and capitalised on the success of the pilot course to stimulate interest and demand, generating so much interest in the second round that waiting lists had to be established. I shall now explore the different factors that had contributed to this change.

The success of the first programme strengthened union and senior management commitment to extending the programme, and this was widely publicised and promoted in the department. A departmental workplace learning initiative was launched at a formal event at the City Hall which was attended by elected members, regional union officials, directors of the Works and other departments and senior training officers, as well as the course participants, who were presented with certificates. This high profile event sent a very positive message to the whole department. This was accompanied by an active recruitment drive. Promotion of the courses included circulation round the Works department of a publicity flyer, which used the positive experience of the first course to promote the new provision. Union learning representatives put up recruiting posters in rest rooms alongside lists for people to sign up for the next courses. However, resistance to the initiative from most of the operational managers continued, and, curiously, even though the training

manager was very aware of their attitudes, few steps were taken at this stage to try to win them over.

The most powerful change agent was the way in which graduates from the first course became fervent advocates for learning and training and spread the message about their positive experiences and promoted the courses to their workmates. They stimulated the interest of their peers, and this was a major contributor to a change of culture and attitudes to improving literacy skills at work. They spread an upbeat message through informal conversations as they actively tried to recruit workmates on to courses. John, the union coordinator, believed that people who went on the first course were the best recruiting agents because they openly talked to people, and got a good response because they spoke the same language as their peers and knew which aspects of the programme to emphasise in order to attract them:

> 'It's brilliant. It's because they're open about it and fortunately they're all the same. They're not frightened of the thing and they're encouraging other people, saying, "There's nothing to be scared of like when you was at school you used to feel bad, they don't treat you like that. You want to go, it's dead interesting".'

Rick, for example, came back from his course and told the lads 'put your names down. It's another world out there' and met with a positive response. Most successful of all was Selwyn, who became perhaps the most evangelical learning champion: 'I've got about 12 people to go on. I tell them what it is like, tell them not to be embarrassed.' He said most people were frightened of exams and he had to emphasise that they wouldn't be tested or shown up.

6.5.4 Going public

In order to advocate learning, individuals had to become more open about their own skills levels. Why did people feel able to start discussing the issue of literacy at work and to refer to their own literacy skills and learning? This seemed to be related to the relative values placed on literacy and craft skills, and the popularity and social standing of individuals in the social hierarchy of the workplace.

Amanda observed that the experience of the course had changed most participants' attitudes to their literacy skills and to discussing them with others. With the exception of Robert, all became very open about their participation in the course and the ways in which they had improved their skills. Val, for example, made a very public speech to an audience of members, managers and peers at the City Hall event referred to above about her experiences and skills gains from participating in this course.

Literacy skills levels may have affected the extent to which individuals were willing to discuss issues at work. It was possibly easier for people who were at level one and not overtly struggling with reading or writing to discuss 'brushing up' skills with colleagues, than for those like Robert who still feared discovery of his low literacy skills levels. After the end of his course, Robert was still reluctant to discuss the issue with his work colleagues: 'I suppose it's because of ridicule and stuff like that you know, taking the Mickey.' He had also realised that there may be others in his position and would like to help but still felt that the whole issue was too embarrassing. He said that he noticed one 'lad' avoiding filling in a form: 'I was just wondering whether he was the same as me and he wouldn't say, for which I don't blame the lad. I feel like when I see him, approaching him and saying summat[2], but you can't do it because it is an

---

[2] something

173

embarrassing thing and it could be embarrassing for him like it was for me.' However skills levels were not the sole factor, as Mark, who had similar skills levels, did promote learning to his workmates. He told me that he was not ashamed of his literacy levels and felt strongly that everyone should have the opportunity to access learning, although he recognised 'it's then up to them' whether they take it up.

Some individuals, Rick and Len for example, knew that their craft skills had earned them respect at work, and did not fear ridicule when they discussed the courses with colleagues. Their standing ensured that they were taken seriously, and their workmates listened to what they had to say when they described their experiences and encouraged others to join classes. Popularity worked in a similar way. Selwyn was an unskilled worker but had a wide range of contacts in his depot and was universally liked and trusted because of his manner and because he helped people in many different ways. His status meant that individuals listened when he related his experiences and the changes the course had already made to his life, then trusted his recommendation that they should also enrol on courses. John reflected, 'They all trust him so believe him if he says, "You'll really like it".'

Len offered an example of the power of the workplace culture and personality hierarchy. He described some elements of what he, Tom and Eddie had referred to as the 'macho culture' in the Works department in which some people identified the 'weak spots' of their workmates and used these as the basis of teasing or bullying. Len noted that the good response to the course and the way in which respected and popular colleagues championed it silenced the 'ring leaders' who would normally 'shout their mouth off', in other words make negative remarks about taking part in courses. He noted that one person had tried to make derogatory comments but nobody took any notice because by then everybody saw it

as a good thing. He was surprised because before that 'nobody had talked about literacy or numeracy'.

6.5.5 Further learning

Individuals also became committed to their own learning. One of the most striking effects of the provision was that, with one exception, the participants were transformed from non-learners into people who were keen to engage in more learning activities. They had little interest in learning before they joined these courses and only Rick had voluntarily engaged with formal learning since leaving school. In addition some had joined for reasons not related to learning, for example those who wanted a 'skive day'. Despite this initial indifference, by the end of the course everyone except Laurie had either started, or was planning to enrol on, further learning pursuits.

A number of factors had combined to kindle this new appreciation of the enjoyment and benefits to be derived from learning. Students had been consulted about their needs and interests and, as a result, found the course content and materials designed to meet these needs relevant and interesting. They enjoyed the adult environment and the teaching and learning methods used on the courses. The tutors had been supportive and encouraging and this was a factor in their learning successes on the courses. These experiences of successful learning enhanced their confidence and this had motivated them and generated enthusiasm.

Mark described how he felt:

> 'I'm learning to drive a car now. It's given me that extra confidence to drive that car, and also, actually, confidence to talk to different people. It's given me confidence or courage in myself, determination I can do things.'

175

Others had been 'inspired' by their learning experiences and Len explained that it had 'woken him up' again. Rick had been 'opened up' by the course: 'It's like hunger for knowledge. I'm ravenous. I can't get enough.'

This interest in learning extended beyond literacy and communication skills development to a diverse range of learning aspirations. Only Tom and Robert intended to continue on discrete literacy courses; Robert had already started regular dyslexia support sessions and Tom intended to enrol on a writing skills course. Other interests included computer skills, using the Internet, driving, sign language and Spanish. Eagerness for learning was spreading to family members, and some had already enthused their spouses and partners to join them in their quest for knowledge and skills. Robert's wife, for example, accompanied him to the learning centre where she attended a computer class whilst he developed his literacy skills, and Tom and his wife had signed up for a Spanish class together.

6.5.6 New employment

The programmes also influenced attitudes to employment as some participants were inspired to seek new or different employment, either as a means of resolving dissatisfaction with their current work situation or because participation in learning had extended their horizons and raised their employment aspirations.

Some of the permanent employees in both strands were unhappy with their work situation. In contrast to the redeployees who had no choice about changing jobs, these employees had permanent positions, but at the start of the course felt either worried about looming restructuring and

176

job reductions in their sections, or trapped in jobs they disliked. The courses had two effects, as they both inspired people to consider new employment and convinced them that they could achieve this, by equipping them with the skills and confidence they needed to enter into the selection procedure, particularly interviews.

A number of participants had made positive decisions to seek different employment. This was an immediate aim for some who had already applied for new jobs, whereas others saw it as a longer-term prospect because they needed to carry on their skills development to prepare for a change. Rick, who had been unhappy in his work environment for some time, and was worried about the prospect of further restructuring, decided to apply for a new job as a direct result of participating in the course. He said that he had developed new confidence he could use in interviews despite the intense nervousness he felt in these situations. Chas was unhappy and stressed by working in the housing benefits office. Although the skills gained on the course made him more confident and happier at work, he had made a positive decision to move to an occupation he would find more satisfying and enjoyable, and, as a result of the course, was planning to see a careers officer for advice.

The course had raised the ambition of some participants who had not been unhappy at work or dissatisfied with the type of work they did before they started the course. Improving their skills and discussing options and alternatives on the course had made them realise that they could aim for different and better employment. Robert became aware that with better literacy skills he would be able to change his occupation. His dyslexia diagnosis and progress since he had been receiving support made him revise his attitude to his work as a gully attendant, and awakened an ambition to retrain as a driving instructor when he had developed his literacy skills to a higher level. He now felt that he could have had good

jobs and wished he had found out how to get support before, but said he had only thought this way since going on the course.

Others had been motivated to apply for promotion. Len, for instance, had tried a few years ago and given up as he was discouraged by a sequence of rejections. The course had inspired him to try again and he had already applied for a job since the course finished:

> 'I shocked myself. I just lacked so much confidence because I'm not in that environment so I thought I couldn't do it. Then I was put in a situation on the course where I had to do it and found I could. That's why I want to change and go and do a different job in a different area.'

This new motivation and energy had also spread beyond the course participants, but only in the Works department, where as already stated, morale had been low and some workers were anxious about further job reductions. Rick commented on the improved morale of others in the department who had not yet done a course as they now knew they had the prospect of a different future: 'It's given them a lifeline to know that they can do a course and it will help them get out of the garage.'

6.6   Causal processes

The above sections indicated that participating in the provision had a profound impact on individuals, and brought substantial benefits for the employer that reached far beyond those envisaged at the outset of the project. It is therefore important to consider the question of what moved participants from their starting point of no interest to successful completion of the course and the positive outcomes and impact of this. The different elements were considered independently in chapters 4 and 5, but it was the integration of the elements in a holistic process that can be seen as bringing about the successful results.

The process diagram below indicates the causal route from initial involvement to impact.

Figure 1 Causal route from involvement to impact

Enrolment

↓

Engagement

skills ←→ confidence

Impact and benefits

Workers
and their families   Employers   Union
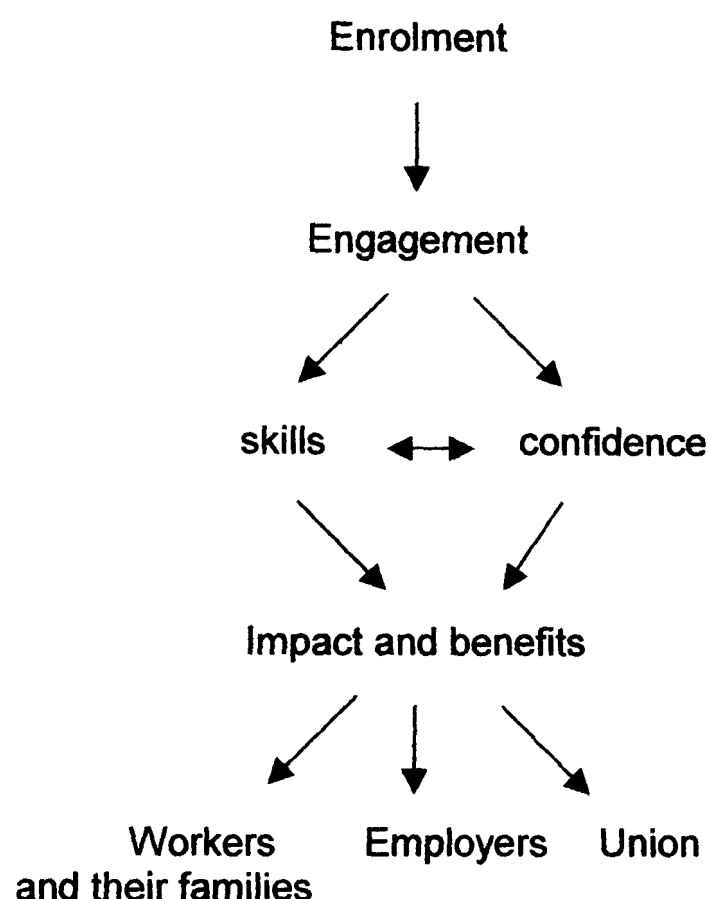
The initial recruitment processes for involving students were successful as they took both the drivers creating the need to develop skills and the barriers to involvement into account. In addition to an understanding of these issues, the role of an intermediary was crucial, since none of the students on the programme had independently considered accessing provision, and each one only became involved through the intervention of another person. These interventions were effective because they were informed by an understanding of the organisational changes providing the catalysts for enrolment. The union learning co-ordinator also drew on his understanding of the factors that functioned as barriers to participation,

including informal workplace cultures, management styles and relationship, and lack of perception of need, to inform his approaches.

It is important to recognise the processes by which the students became engaged, in other words 'got hooked' on learning, once they were enrolled on the courses. This is not an inevitable consequence of taking part in learning, since participation carries equal potential to fail to enthuse, or even to deter or demotivate individuals, as evidenced by some of the students' previous experiences of training. In the provision studied, engagement was brought about by a powerful combination of interrelated aspects, the most important of which was perhaps the empowerment and student-focused ethos of the course. This was extremely motivating, especially as members of this group were in relatively powerless positions in their work situations where they felt that their voices and needs didn't count. In contrast, the course tutors treated the students with respect, avoided patronising them and valued their views and experiences. Ensuring that the curriculum reflected the students' needs and interests, including oracy skills and contentious topics, and employing diverse teaching and learning methods, most notably group work, also served to interest and motivate the students.

Enthusiasm, enjoyment and feeling good, whilst important, are insufficient if learning does not also take place. In the courses I studied, these factors appeared to contribute to the creation of conditions in which successful learning did occur. This in turn further inspired the students and deepened their engagement.

The empowerment model adopted set high and challenging expectations, supported students to achieve and progress, and acknowledged their learning gains. Teaching and learning methods were varied, but a common element was that they drew on students' knowledge and

experience to enhance learning. Group activities were a vital strategy for this as students shared views and knowledge and encouraged each other to learn. As the students were apprehensive and unconfident learners when they started the courses, success was further underpinned by the development of their confidence, both through specific elements of the course content and the overall teaching approaches. There appeared to be a symbiotic relationship between confidence and learning, since enhanced confidence supported successful learning and this, in turn, increased confidence.

The cumulation of the students' newly gained enthusiasm for adult learning, their improved literacy and oracy, critical analytical and problem-solving skills and their enhanced confidence and self-esteem had a considerable impact on their work and lives. As a result of these learning processes, significant benefits accrued to individuals, their employer, and, to a lesser extent, the union. Application of learning did not take place in a vacuum, however, and the potential of external factors to either diminish or enhance the impact of attitudinal changes and skills and confidence gains was demonstrated. The persistence of negative factors, such as employment instability, for instance, reduced gains in confidence, and a learning culture did not develop in the absence of the strategies, structures and cultures needed to foster this. On the other hand, factors such as management and union support appeared to boost the gains ensuing from the learning experiences. I now explore issues relating to these gains.

6.7 Conclusions

The study indicated that even short courses, with as little as 30 hours of study, can have significant benefits for both students and their workplaces, as the programme investigated had a considerable impact which rippled

far beyond the acquisition of technical skills. The findings indicate that participation and achievement had a transformative effect on individuals and their work as their job performances, relationships at work and morale improved, they engaged with new literacy practices in their lives and took up further learning opportunities. This could be attributed to the holistic approach of the course as well as the resulting skills acquisition, personal development and attitudinal changes traced in the preceding sections.

6.7.1 Learning gains

On the issue of skills gains, I found that all the students made progress and achieved new skills, became more reflective learners and gained in confidence and self-esteem. The learning aims they identified at the beginning of the course were, on the whole, met. In addition, they made many gains that had been unanticipated at the planning stage of the courses, especially the Treasurer's course which was planned in advance to reflect needs identified by the training manager.

This perhaps highlights one of the limitations of the functional approach in which skills needs are identified in relation to work requirements before the start of the course and a learning programme designed to fill the gaps, as advocated for instance by the Basic Skills Agency (BSA 2003) and the TUC (TUC/BSA 2000b). This type of approach appears to leave little scope for expanding the content in new directions in response to students' needs revealed as they take part in provision.

The absence of procedures to assess and record achievement and progress made by the students was a rather surprising omission from the provision. The reluctance to introduce formal testing is understandable, given the fears expressed by some students, and many students are able to recognise their own progress (Ward 2002). However, whilst there was

unqualified student satisfaction with learning gains in the Works strand, some Treasurer's students were disappointed, and an external procedure for considering progress would have provided an additional measure to enable students to reflect on their distance travelled, a process which Grief and Windsor (2002) and Turner (2003) have suggested can considerably enhance learning experiences. As Grief and Windsor also observe, developing robust measures of achievement in non-accredited provision which take account of students' own learning priorities and views on progress presents a considerable challenge. Despite this, adopting this approach is worthwhile because it can empower students by focusing on what they can do, tracing how far they have travelled and recognising their own assessments as a valid aspect of the process.

Basic skills learning is usually undertaken not as end in itself, but as a means of acquiring tools to enable students to do other things more effectively in real life, and students themselves often recognise their own achievements in relation to what they can do in their everyday lives (Ward 2002). I shall now consider the implications of the findings in relation to the impact at work of learning gains in relation to individuals, employers and the union. This is the primary focus of this study, but additional benefits emerged in relation to everyday life, which I also consider.

6.7.2 Confidence

Gains in confidence were a significant outcome of the course, closely related to, although not confined to, the development of oracy skills. This had a powerful impact, as enhanced confidence and self-esteem supported students in their learning activities and to implement their learning at work. Although Brooks et al (2001a) suggest that the evidence for a correlation between gains in literacy and self-esteem is inconclusive, they cited no research in relation to confidence and oracy, and did not

address the issue of confidence and self-esteem in relation to the specific area of workplace literacy, these findings appear to resonate with those of the researchers and practitioners, for instance Eldred (2002) and Ward (2002), who have observed a correlation between successful literacy learning and enhanced confidence. Schuller et al (2002) also concluded that 'The most fundamental and pervasive benefit from learning of every kind is a growth in self-confidence' (2002: 14).

6.7.3 Impact on work

The primary message from my findings on the impact on the workplace was that performance at work improved and there was a profound effect on organisational culture, behaviour and relationships, a potential highlighted by Unwin and Fuller (2003). Although it is often difficult to trace a direct correlation between workplace literacy and benefits such as increased efficiency or production, as it is difficult to disaggregate the different possible variables (Ananiadou et al 2003, Unwin and Fuller 2003), both the workers and their managers believed that the courses had brought about substantial benefits for both employees and the employer. These included enhanced job performance, improved industrial relations and increases in morale; additional benefits for individuals included a reduction in personal stress levels and increased motivation, independence and job satisfaction.

There is some evidence to suggest that employers might value these types of outcomes more than improvements in literacy skills, and that critical and analytical skills are increasingly viewed as positive attributes by employers (Holland 1998, Payne 2003). This might be a particularly pertinent issue for work environments such as the Works department, where the requirement for literacy skills for job tasks is not so pronounced,

and it certainly has messages that could be useful for engagement strategies.

The union also benefited from contributing to this development. Short-term gains included more constructive bargaining relationships with management, and renewed respect and valuing of their services by members. In the longer term this could lead to increased membership, as union support for learning and less combative approaches to bargaining are recognised as incentives for new members to join.

6.7.4 Development of a learning culture

A further significant benefit was the shift in attitudes to learning, accompanied, in the Works department only, by the development of a learning culture. This provided the employer with a workforce interested in training and developing their skills, and workers with more opportunities for personal development. There were distinct differences in the development of further learning opportunities in the two departments, and investigating reasons for this revealed some of the conditions that underpin the development of learning cultures in the workplace. These include a holistic approach based on a strategic vision and active support from senior management and training managers, strong union leadership, shop floor champions, and enticements such as paid time to learn to attract individuals to take their first steps into learning.

One of the consequences of the experience of the first course was a significant shift in attitudes to learning within the workplace as this became culturally acceptable. I suggested in chapter 4 that the findings showed a connection between the values and norms of the informal workplace culture, and these were influenced by those with a high position in the cultural hierarchy. I also concluded that there appeared to be indifference

185

rather than antagonism to learning. One reason why attitudes to learning shifted relatively easily is that there is a shorter distance to travel from indifference to participation than from antipathy.

The study also indicated that one of the change agents that supported this shift was that graduates of the first course started to talk about literacy issues and to champion learning at work. McGivney (1999) notes the difficulty some men perceive in 'breaking ranks' to act against the norm. What caused these men to not only act against dominant cultural norms and expectations by taking part in the first place, but then go on to celebrate their experience and encourage others to follow their lead? Most of them were, with John from the union, highly respected, and leaders within the workplace culture. They appeared to be willing to act against cultural norms, as they knew they had the respect of colleagues. They also had power to determine, influence and modify norms, so were able to move the boundaries of culturally acceptable attitudes and behaviour to include interest and participation in learning at work. As a result, others became confident to follow their lead. A number of factors had a bearing on the failure of the Treasurer's department to embed learning, but the fact that these workers were outside whatever workplace culture existed effectively eliminated informal culture as a route to developing a learning culture in this department.

6.7.5 Changes and limitations

The study indicated ways in which the empowerment approach adopted by the programme investigated can bring about changes, as the course helped to give individuals some control over their lives, and certainly broadened their options by developing their knowledge on which choices can be based.

The courses can be viewed as containing elements of each of the three models of workplace literacy described in chapter 2. The Treasurer's strand was closer to the functional model, particularly at the planning stage where the employer's perspective determined the curriculum design, However, in practice, the agency and pedagogical approaches of the tutors moved it towards an employee development model which also contained elements of a critical approach. The Works course, on the other hand, because of its different aims and starting point, which centralised students' interests and issues and emphasised their strengths and potential, was more closely aligned with the employee development and critical models, and it was this strand which appeared to have the most pronounced impact.

The defining characteristic of the critical model is that it has a political agenda, as it aims to equip students to act for change and, as I noted in section 5.6.4 of the previous chapter, the empowerment approach, whilst not adopting a total critical model, did include some elements that dealt with power and action for change. A fundamental question therefore, also posed by Gee (1996), is the extent to which literacy development did, or can, make a difference. If we ask whether the programme studied had any discernible impact on wider societal structures and inequities, the answer would be no. This was not an aim of the courses and the students did not necessarily want to become campaigners; their aims did not include developing skills for political activism, and none of them developed political aspirations during the courses. Furthermore, the pervasive nature of inequalities, which are deeply embedded within the social, political and economic structures of society, would seem to limit the possibilities for transforming society through literacy development.

The programme did, however, result in micro-level changes in the workplace as students started to take greater control over their working

lives. This was more marked in the Works department where it made a positive difference to the students' working lives. However, since there was little structural change in the management culture, the existing power structures remained fundamentally unchanged and, at least in the short term, this was a brake on more radical reshaping of circumstances. The situation of the redeployees remained unchanged and unchallenged as they had little power or capacity to change this. They all, however, made changes in their lives and literacy practices which I shall now consider.

6.7.6 Impact on everyday life

I found that the skills gain had an impact on everyday life. This aspect was not a major focus of my study and I did not set out to examine it in detail. Nevertheless, two areas emerged where there had been a significant impact, literacy practices and learning, and I shall refer to these, as they illustrate ways in which learning can have an effect beyond the bounds of the context in which it takes place. It is often difficult to establish a direct causal relationship between learning and impact, because of the unknown and unseen effects of other aspects of the situation and the everyday lives of those concerned (Schuller et al 2002). However, in this case, the changes and benefits identified did appear to be directly attributable to the learning experience, since no other interventions were identified which could have brought about these changes at this particular time.

A major transformation was the conversion of individuals who were uninterested in learning to committed adult students. Unwin and Fuller's (2003) observation that workplace learning is likely to lead to further learning outside work was borne out by this study. This parallels the impact of family literacy programmes, where Brooks et al (1997) found

that a very high percentage of students continued to learn following their initial engagement in family literacy provision.

A noteworthy aspect of the directions taken by the students was that only three planned to continue developing their literacy skills, and new courses were not selected with the aim of improving employment prospects, although topics such as computers might well contribute to this. It is perhaps not surprising that once people develop an appetite for learning they do not choose to situate this in the areas in which they either struggle or do not define a need, but this has implications for how progression is viewed. It indicates that, to be learner-centred, it is important not to assume that even where students have been successful and feel positive about literacy provision they will choose to develop their skills further in discrete provision, moving up a 'ladder' model of progression.

The findings also provide an insight into how widening participation in learning and interest in literacy can be developed through 'hooking' one member of the family. An interesting aspect of students' new literacy and learning interests is that they encouraged spouses and partners to share them. This demonstrates the potential of learning to enhance relationships, noted by Schuller et al (2002), as improved communications and new interests provided a fresh dimension to marriages and partnerships.

These findings indicate the powerful potential of workplace literacy to benefit individuals, their workplaces and the union. At the same time they demonstrate that learning is a difficult activity to confine to neat boundaries, as it develops in unexpected directions and it carries a rich array of benefits. Only a very impoverished vision of learning would seek to constrain it to pre-determined narrow, functional outcomes. Although recognition of the wider benefits should not obscure the need to also focus

189

on the achievement of technical skills, this evidence indicates that contextualising skills development and adopting a holistic, empowerment approach can bring immense rewards for both employees and employers.

7 Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

In this concluding chapter I return to my research questions to consider how the research has contributed to knowledge in these areas. I aimed to explore the application of workplace literacy policy at the micro level of practice by asking what were the needs, interests and aspirations of workers, employers and union activists who took part in a workplace literacy programme for local authority employees, investigating the strategies adopted to meet these needs and considering the extent to which the programme met them. My other area of interest was the implications of this practice for macro-level policy and strategy.

I summarise my conclusions in relation to establishing workplace programmes and recruiting students, developing the programmes and content and delivery methods and, finally, learning gains and impact. Different interests and purposes will be identified and their implications considered. I then consider the limitations of the research and suggest that, whilst there are questions as to the extent to which the conclusions can be generalised from a limited sample, they do appear to contain messages for wider policy and practice and to signal areas for further research. I identify the most significant implications and then, in conclusion, suggest immediate starting points.

I adopted a case study framework for this research in which I examined documentary evidence and used interviews with students, managers, union activists and tutors to gather evidence. The views of those interviewed are of particular interest because policy-makers and organisations constructing good practice guidelines rarely seek their

opinions. The students' views were of special significance, as they are the recipients of policy but are rarely consulted when evidence is gathered to underpin developments, and their voices are silent in most of the research. To a lesser extent this is also true of tutors and union activists. I found that this evidence base is relatively underdeveloped, and there is still a great need to find out more about what constitutes effective provision in workplace basic skills. My study provides a small contribution to that endeavour, and I shall now summarise the main findings.

7.2   Initial involvement

My study confirmed the view, expressed for example by Unwin and Fuller (2003), that workplaces have enormous potential for widening participation in learning, and it contributed to knowledge about ways of attracting low-paid manual workers and those with no qualifications, who have been identified as the least likely to participate in post-school education. It also added to the sparse data about what affects working-class men's participation in learning, which is of significance, since looking at what inspires the minority who do participate, and what affects their experiences, attitudes and achievements might shine some light on routes to working-class male participation.

The evidence provided insights into the powerful barriers to learning created by attitudinal factors. The most telling findings were that, before joining the course, the employees interviewed felt no shame about their literacy skills, did not regard them as having any adverse effect on their lives, and were uninterested in either literacy or learning; the cultural norms and values of the manual workplace reinforced this lack of interest.

Of equal or perhaps greater significance was the evidence of strategies which proved effective in overcoming these obstacles to participation. As

Macleod (2003) contends, although there is a need to continue to develop knowledge on barriers, there is even less known about how people become motivated to learn and the 'dynamics of the decision-making process'. These motivations were rooted in workplace conditions and, with decision-making processes, appeared to differ in response to factors that included working structures, cultures, type of occupation and the literacy requirements of the work. The most noteworthy change agent in moving people to join provision was the intervention of an intermediary.

These processes illustrated that different types of workplace circumstances generate different responses. The findings in relation to the Treasurer's group illustrated a situation in which the literacy skills demanded in new work situations, and the changes brought about by Best Value, particularly redeployment, acted as a catalyst for managers to identify skills gaps. The intermediary was a training manager, motivated by her responsibility to provide training to support improved performance, and students had agreed to take part, sometimes reluctantly, for two reasons: the offer provided an opportunity to develop their skills, and the consequences of failing to improve their skills included disciplinary sanctions or failure to secure work.

The Works group provided insights into effective strategies for persuading people who have not identified literacy skills needs as a reason for joining provision. Success factors included the role of the trusted union activist, motivated by a commitment to securing workers' rights, in promoting the course, presenting the provision as a positive opportunity, not as a response to a deficit, and guaranteeing protection from reprisals. By sending a message that people were valued, the offer of provision in work time was a powerful motivator. The evidence indicates the importance of getting people to sample learning, since even those who initially went for a 'skive day' very quickly converted to enthusiastic students. Although the

learning aims of this group were unclear at the start of the programme, they became committed learners and clarified their priorities during the course as a result of the ethos, content and approaches, which I will now discuss.

7.3 On course

It is important to consider what employers, employees and unions judge to be valuable learning, as this will affect how provision is developed, as well as influencing success criteria. In my study, views on the purposes of learning and what counted as success were closely related to organisational cultures and occupations, and the findings illustrated ways in which these considerations affected development of the provision, and illuminated the complexities that can affect how the form and content of learning in the workplace are determined.

Whilst mutual priorities were identified, there were also areas of potential tension or disjuncture. The study demonstrated that the different values, interests and motivations affecting participation also influence curriculum design and delivery. It provided insights into ways in which both economic and social justice imperatives can shape programmes, and the role that practitioners can take in translating priorities and interests into practice, particularly in curriculum content and delivery approaches.

The evidence showed that, whilst many of the interests of workers and employers did coincide, they were not inherently the same, and possible conflicts of interest arose from the differences in their situations and relative positions in the workforce, a potential inherent in workplace basic skills also noted by Payne (2001) and the TUC (1998). In curriculum terms this translated into priorities which largely corresponded but contained some differences of emphasis and areas of divergence,

particularly in relation to the question of whether the curriculum should be designed to produce a tight fit between identified work needs and course content or encompass broader-ranging subject matter.

The agency of the tutors added a further layer of complexity, and illustrated their power to both reconcile differing interests and decide priorities, sometimes by stealth. Although taking account of corporate interests, the programmes privileged equality issues. Tutors taking a partisan line in favour of employees run the risk of creating dissension between themselves and the organisations. This is a problematic issue as it might be seen as foolhardy to dispute employers' interests since this might have the counterproductive result of deterring them from participating. On the other hand, as Gowen (1992) discovered, a programme based on skills or content that workers do not perceive as relevant or meaningful is unlikely to win much commitment.

This programme provided evidence of one resolution of this dilemma, and the outcomes suggested that it benefited both employer and employees. The findings drew attention to the ways in which an empowerment ethos, a contextualised approach to skills development and development of high-level oracy, critical and analytical skills and confidence-building elements proved effective in workplace provision. A noteworthy aspect was that the interdependence of these elements built a powerful combination that had a profound impact on the lives of individuals and their work. The approach, which did include technical skills development, demonstrated the benefits of a broader vision of workplace basic skills than the narrower, functional type of model described in chapter 2.

7.4 Outcomes and impact

The outcomes of taking part in learning experiences can reach further than the acquisition of technical skills, although these were regarded as extremely important. My study provided some insights into what brings about learning gains, how they translate into real life situations and some of the wider benefits of taking part in the learning for both individual workers and their employers.

The programmes demonstrated that an empowerment model can lead to gains in technical skills. Building confidence was cited as one of the ingredients in students' successful learning, and the study suggested that there is a close relationship between confidence and learning in which successful learning leads to gains in confidence. This enhanced confidence enables students not only to succeed in learning activities, but also to apply their new attitudes, skills and knowledge in real-life situations. My findings provide further insights into the issue of links between learning and confidence noted by Eldred (2002) and Ward (2002). They add weight to the contention that they are important outcomes of learning in their own right, although, as the study also indicated, their benefits can be limited by external factors. However, knowledge of this area remains scant, and further research would be profitable, particularly into the dynamics of the relationship between literacy, learning, oracy and critical skills development, group learning methods and literacy skills development in workplace provision.

Ways in which learning gains made an impact on work and day-to-day life were indicated. In addition to technical communication skills other learning gains were shown to be important. These were enhanced critical, analytical and problem-solving skills, and 'soft' skills which included confidence, self-esteem and assertiveness. Together these learning gains

led to changed attitudes and aspirations, which enriched both personal and workplace developments.

The issue of impact on the workplace was perhaps the most illuminating. The study indicated ways in which developing skills can improve work performance, and that this improvement can be related to both literacy and oracy skills. The importance of sophisticated high-level oracy skills was also revealed. Wider benefits which extended well beyond improvements in work tasks were identified, in particular the potential of workplace programmes to improve morale and industrial relations at work and enriched relationships with partners. Benefits were also seen in heightened employment aspirations and changed attitudes to learning, both at work and in personal lives. Perhaps the most significant personal change noted was the movement from a starting point of total indifference to commitment to adult learning across a range of subjects.

The research also showed that whilst improving literacy and oracy skills does appear to affect work performance, the impact of learning gains can be reduced when underlying conditions remain fundamentally unchanged. This highlights the dangers of founding policy and notions of practice on the premise that there is a simple correlation between workplace problems and workers' literacy skills. Whilst there might be a link between poor skills and issues such as poor quality service delivery, it is likely that this is one of a number of multiple and complex reasons rather than the sole cause. Hence, although it can contribute, the likelihood of improving literacy skills in the workforce alone providing solutions is very remote.

The study also illuminated processes which resulted in the discourses of a deep-seated macho culture shifting to accommodate the growth of a learning culture. In seeking the reasons why learning developments were embedded in one department and slipped away in the other, I identified a

number of factors which seemed to be significant conditions for the successful introduction of a learning culture. These indicated that support and encouragement should come from all levels of an organisation, union involvement is of fundamental importance, further learning opportunities should be accessible, and the learning experience should be successful and affirming.

The study traced the causal route from initial involvement to impact, and suggested that the integration of the different elements in a holistic process based on an empowerment ethos which valued, respected, challenged and supported students provided a powerful and successful model. Improvements in literacy and oracy skills enhanced work performance, but the approach and content resulted in many further benefits. However, external factors were seen to affect impact, and they could either reduce or enhance benefits, suggesting that these should be taken into account when developing programmes in order to reduce, if possible, negative influences and exploit the positive potential of factors such as informal culture and management support.

These themes, with the other findings above, offer messages for policy and practice which I shall outline in the final section. First I will consider the extent to which my research methodology affects the broader significance of the findings.

7.5 Limitations of the research

Research can either validate or challenge the status quo by asking critical questions and opening up new areas of investigation, and this was one aim of my study. I set out to carry out a detailed investigation of one workplace literacy programme in order to add to the knowledge base in relation to workplace literacy. By adopting an interpretive paradigm, I

198

generated a wealth of detailed information which revealed the complexity of workplace literacy programmes through the motivations, attitudes, interactions, experiences and gains of individuals who were involved, thereby enhancing understanding of this area. There were, however, a number of limitations to the research which will need to be taken into account when considering its relevance for the fields of policy and practice.

My position as an insider researcher, gender, class and power differentials, and my research perspectives all carried the potential to influence or bias the research design, the data gathered and the analysis. This almost certainly was the case, but, as I suggested in chapter 3, this is not uncommon, and researchers' own positions and perspectives influence all research to some extent. I contended that what is important is to consider, and strive to minimise, the impact of these issues at all stages of the research process, and to make them transparent in written accounts of the research so that readers can take them into account. I examined these issues in my discussion of methodology in chapter 3, making my perspectives clear, indicating where my position might have affected the approach, and outlining my strategies for retaining the integrity of the research process.

One of the issues I needed to highlight in the research account was the under-representation of the views of operational line managers. The one interview I was able to conduct yielded interesting data, but inevitably provided only a partial picture of the values, priorities and concerns of this group. As the workplace culture was found to be a significant factor in shaping attitudes to literacy and learning and to have an effect on participation of manual workers, the absence of the operational managers' perspectives left questions that could not be answered by this study. By

highlighting the significant role of this group of managers, the investigation did, however, reveal an important area for future research.

The research concluded that the communications programmes had a significant impact on the literacy and workplace practices of the participants. There was also an element of frustration in leaving the research at the end of the programmes as this left many tantalising questions about what happened next, for example were there any economic benefits to individuals and did the benefits to the employer accrue or diminish? Even if I had been able to carry out follow-up interviews, these would not have provided the ongoing data that a more richly resourced longitudinal study could have produced. The long-term impact of workplace literacy programmes is a research topic that could be of immense value to the field.

I did my utmost to ensure that the results, explanations and theories were trustworthy, but this still leaves the question of the extent to which they can be generalised. The focus on a single instance of practice and the small number of participants involved mean that it is valid to ask to what extent messages from such a small-scale study can be applied in other situations. Do my conclusions have any relevance for policy or other workplaces beyond the project and group of people I studied? Although it is impossible to say definitively that what I found to be the case would be the same elsewhere, the occurrence of something in one setting carries the possibility that it will exist in others. It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that the major themes will have some resonance with other workplaces sharing characteristics with the ones I studied, even where conditions are not identical. If this is the case, it is at least possible that my conclusions have more general significance. They certainly indicate areas for further research to test this. I shall now suggest themes for

consideration as research, policy and practice relating to workplace literacy is developed.

7.6 Themes for further research

My research has yielded some in-depth insights which have added to knowledge about processes relating to participation, curriculum and the benefits of provision. Some of these areas appear to provide potentially fruitful topics for further research, either to develop and extend knowledge on particular issues, or to test whether, and how, the conclusions might apply in different work contexts.

Existing data on working-class male participation is thin (McGivney 1999), and my study suggested that cultural norms and attitudes play a significant role in the dynamics of participation and non-participation. Further research into the effects of different types of workplace culture might reveal more insights into the dynamics of the relationship between culture and learning, and indicate ways in which interventions to widen participation could use this effectively. In a similar way, testing whether the conditions I identified as underpinning the development of a workplace learning culture applied in other settings would be beneficial to the field as it could point to effective strategies for development.

The study indicated the importance and potential influences of the different roles involved in developing workplace provision. In addition to developing this knowledge further, investigating the role and influence of line managers, the group who are under-represented in my study, might produce further important data.

In relation to the curriculum, I traced a connection between a growth in confidence and self-esteem on the one hand, and progress in learning and

use of newly acquired skills and knowledge in real-life settings on the other. The knowledge base in this area is underdeveloped (Brooks et al 2001a), and more research to establish the mechanisms of this correlation could be of great value to practice. My findings on the value of oracy and critical skills development in workplace provision are also new and investigation of their significance in other situations could add important knowledge to the field. Finally, the programmes were shown to have considerable short-term impact and benefits for workers and employers, and it would be beneficial to extend knowledge about the wider benefits and the long-term effects of literacy programmes at work, as this could inform engagement strategies and curriculum development.

7.7 Implications for policy and practice

I shall now consider areas where my findings might have messages for policy and practice. Although some of the conclusions might have resonance for the wider field, I have focused on workplace literacy, as this research has highlighted that, whilst workplace basic literacy provision shares many features with generic literacy provision, it is also characterised by a number of unique and distinct aspects. It is important, as Payne (2003) emphasises, that researchers, policy makers and practitioners take account of this specific nature of workplace basic skills when developing policy and practice, but in order to prevent this field becoming marginalised, developments should be located within wider Skills for Life, lifelong learning and workplace training frameworks. I take these into account as I consider some of the implications of my conclusions for conceptualising workplace basic skills, recruitment, course and curriculum development, tutor training and the role of trade unions.

7.7.1 Conceptualising workplace basic skills

The study demonstrated that workplace literacy programmes are complex, as they have to meet multiple and potentially conflicting interests and agendas. This programme worked at the intersection of these interests, adopting an empowerment approach which was seen to benefit each interest, having positive rather than negative effects for all parties. Policy and good practice guides are silent on this type of approach, for example DfES (2002), but if the purposes and advantages of critical pedagogies remain invisible to practitioners, then students' voices and interests are likely be stifled, and the rich potential of this approach to benefit all interests wasted.

Holland (1998) suggests that in the current climate it appears to be employers and government that dictate the terms of work place literacy. Both policy and practice ensuing from these policies are based on a 'cost to industry' rationale and appear to be weighted towards the interests of the employers, seen, for instance, in the instrumentalist approach advocated by the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit (DfES 2002). My study has indicated that there are problems with the assumptions underlying this type of approach and that it might not provide the best model to meet either employees' or employers' needs.

The findings appear to support the contention that it is too simplistic to expect that improving literacy skills will provide the sole solution to workplace problems if other causes are not also resolved. Moreover, the single-factor model is less appropriate for individuals such as the manual workers in this study whose jobs involve few literacy tasks. There appears to be an assumption in national guidance that the functional approach will automatically meet employers' priorities (DFES 2002), whereas my

investigation indicated that a broader-based approach was very effective and led to learning gains which benefited all parties.

This type of approach recognises the wider purposes of learning, contextualises learning, and acknowledges the value of students' prior knowledge, skills and experiences. It respects the needs of both students and employers but does not automatically prioritise those of employers. Power imbalances are recognised and equality issues prioritised, and there is a commitment to identifying problematic areas and then equipping students with the skills to find solutions. A major strength is that it integrates effective student engagement with strategies to develop skills and confidence in parallel, and these combine to produce a range of learning gains which include more than literacy and oracy skills and have extensive benefits for all involved. It could benefit the field to increase awareness of this type of approach through policy and practice guidelines. I will now examine some of the implications of the findings in relation to engaging employers and students, followed by consideration of the curriculum development and delivery aspects of an empowerment model.

7.7.2 Engaging employers

The conclusions contain messages for strategies adopted to engage employers. The current system is based on voluntarism and, whilst employers are encouraged to develop literacy learning opportunities for their workforces, there is no element of compulsion to do so, or sanctions for failing to offer this type of development opportunity. To date, this approach, whilst resulting in some gains, appears to have failed to convince the majority of employers. Ananiadou et al (2003) cited evidence to suggest that 10% of all employers now offer literacy provision at work with the figure rising to 44% where 500 or more people are

employed, but this still leaves an absence of opportunities to access provision in the majority of employment.

Convincing more employers of the value of this provision presents a major challenge. The dominant theme in publications aiming to convince employers to support literacy provision at work is the argument that poor basic skills carry high costs for employers (BSA 2003, DfES 2002, TUC/BSA 2002a). This argument appears to have failed to convince many employers, and one reason might be that, as Frank (2003) also notes, employers do not recognise this in their workplaces. I found that literacy skills were not really needed to carry out many manual occupational tasks, and poor reading and writing skills had no overt detrimental effect on the work. If replicated elsewhere, this might explain the persistent failure of employers with similar workforce profiles to recognise the benefits of developing their employees' skills, indicating that in these cases a different emphasis might be more effective.

There is something invidious in concentrating the blame for efficiency or productivity problems on low-paid workers, especially if, as I found, the cause is equally likely to lie in organisational or external factors. Employers, as in the Works department, might be well aware of these issues. My research implies that whilst the resolution of some of these issues is beyond the reach of educational interventions, workplace learning can also operate very effectively to contribute to development and to support employees to adapt to new conditions and resolve some of the difficulties imposed by external factors.

This suggests that, it would be more productive to base employer engagement strategies on a broader conceptualisation of workplace literacy, of the type suggested above. This would entail a shift of focus from the current emphasis on workers' deficits to a stress on the positive

contributions that employees with enhanced skills could make. This approach would take account of the complexities of the changing situations in contemporary workplaces, stress the contribution that employees can make to developments at work and promote the potential of this type of provision to provide substantial and far-reaching benefits for employers of the type illustrated in this study, including those accruing from enhancement of personal, oracy and problem-solving skills. Employers might find arguments that recognise the realities of their contexts and a fuller range of benefits of introducing workplace literacy programme more persuasive, and, if so, revised promotional activity and materials based on this approach have the potential to be more effective in attracting employers who remain unconvinced by the cost-to-industry argument.

7.7.3 Engaging students

My findings on attitudes to literacy and learning, the reasons why individuals do not seek oportunties to develop their literacy skills and the mechanisms which lead to successful engagement have implications for approaches to recruiting students at work.

The evidence provided insights into the position of individuals whose feelings differ from widely held beliefs about the shame and embarrassment associated with poor literacy. They are based on a small sample, but if replicated on a wider basis would have significance for recruitment, thus are worthy of further attention. The government's *Get On* campaign to recruit people to basic skills provision was founded on the premise that, whereas people with poor basic skills did not view them as limiting their lives, in reality they were only 'getting by'. Furthermore, they feared discovery and were continually frustrated by their inability to perform tasks (http://www.dfes.gov.uk/get-on/docs/11gre10.doc accessed

July 2003). The campaign uses the device of a Gremlin, a menacing creature that taunts and mocks people as they avoid literacy tasks. The Gremlin is supposed to personify an individual's fears and frustrations and in so doing remove a sense of personal failure, thus enabling them to take action to improve their skills.

The Gremlins campaign might be an effective means of reaching those who do feel inhibited, or paralysed by, or ashamed of their skills, and the relative merits of this type of approach are an argument for elsewhere. However, the indications are that many people simply do not recognise themselves as having low skills. A recent national survey (DfES 2003b), for instance, found massive discrepancies between self-assessments of literacy skills and skills levels determined by tests; 41% of individuals tested as having lower level skills believed their reading skills were very good. If, as my study also indicates, not all people with poor literacy skills do feel this shame or fear of discovery, and they do not feel limited by their skills, then appealing to a non-existent gremlin inside them is likely to be irrelevant and therefore ineffective. This implies that a range of different approaches is needed to attract different types of individuals from diverse circumstances.

The insights into cultural dynamics in relation to learning generated by the study could have relevance for recruiting students, particularly those who have not perceived literacy needs and are uninterested in adult learning. The significance of workplace cultures for explaining attitudes to literacy and providing a vehicle for changing values and attitudes, if replicated elsewhere, is new and, as it could have great value to the field, would be a fruitful area for further research.

The evidence demonstrated the fundamental importance of intermediaries in recruiting new students. The potential of managers to act in this

207

capacity was revealed, and it is already recognised and exploited in unionised workplaces. The findings also have implications for promoting learning in non-unionised workplaces. The informal cultural leaders, for example, might be recruited as champions to promote learning in their workplaces and develop a parallel role to that of the union learning representatives. Lessons could also be learned from the approach taken by the TUC, which stresses that needing to brush up literacy skills is not shameful, and that representatives should not encourage secrecy which can perpetuate stigma (TUC/BSA 2000b). Of course replicating the type of support and training that unions provide would be an enormous and expensive challenge, but could result in a significant widening of participation.

7.7.4 Implications for curriculum

My findings indicate that there are specific curriculum issues related to the workplace, and it is relevant to take up the question of the implications of this for the national curriculum framework in relation to workplace provision. It could be of great value to the field to devise additional context-specific guidance for tutors and others working in the workplace to complement the generic adult literacy core curriculum (BSA 2001).

Workplace literacy has distinct characteristics and requirements, and the extent to which these can be reflected in total through a generic framework is questionable. This is a standardised framework containing guidance on generic skills and levels of achievement that are relevant to any context. One of the strengths of this approach is that the framework is designed as an enabling tool rather than a prescription. Despite this, without additional context-specific information, it is difficult to see how tutors will be equipped to design programmes that encompass the full range of possibilities for workplace learning suggested by this study.

There are also limitations and omissions deriving from its content and scope, particularly in relation to oracy and personal development or 'soft' skills', identified in my study as highly valuable. The curriculum document does not provide a model for specific contexts, and the guidance it provides for tutors working in the workplace context is limited.

Oracy skills were shown to carry great value in the workplace context. I found that some of the technical oracy skills most valued by students in the study are not explicitly detailed in the core curriculum. This is particularly pertinent as the guidance for training tutors stresses that teaching and learning programmes should be firmly based on the core curriculum (FENTO 2003). Thus, tutors are unlikely to be trained in areas excluded from this document. These areas are likely to be of more general relevance, therefore worthy of consideration for inclusion when the core curriculum is evaluated and revised. In the meantime, specific workplace curriculum guidance could address these skills in relation to workplace contexts.

Speaking and listening skills are included in the national curriculum for adults, albeit as an element of the adult literacy core curriculum, which states that 'Literacy covers the ability to speak, listen and respond, read and comprehend, write to communicate' (BSA 2001: 3). It is possible that speaking and listening skills have been placed with literacy as a convenience rather than for pedagogical reasons, although, as I noted in Chapter 3, some, including Brooks et al (2001a), view this as a category error. Whilst pursuing the debate about whether oracy skills should be located within the framework of a literacy curriculum is beyond the scope of this study, its placement there does perhaps raise some questions about the extent to which specialist linguistic knowledge will be reflected through this framework.

My evidence suggested that oracy skills were of immense importance in supporting the development of reading and writing skills, and the curriculum also stresses the importance of this (BSA 2001). Limitations lie in the absence of reference to their value in supporting the development of other areas including attitudes, confidence and self-esteem which, my findings indicate, are crucial elements in both successful learning and application of this learning in the workplace.

Shortcomings of the generic approach in relation to oral communications skills were also revealed. The commentary sections of the adult literacy core curriculum place more stress on the value of oral communication skills in supporting the acquisition of reading and writing skills than as skills in their own right, whereas my study indicated their importance for both aspects. This appears to support the view of Schuller et al that, because learning is important in enhancing communication, 'policies and provision should address the development of appropriate and effective communication competences in many different contexts' (2002: vii).

The research revealed communication skills applications in relation to the workplace context that are unlikely to be gleaned from the curriculum as currently presented, particularly by inexperienced tutors. Many of the speaking and listening activities on the workplace programme studied could certainly be encompassed by curriculum elements such as SLd/L2 'Adapt contributions to discussion to suit audience, context, purpose and situation' (BSA 2001). On the other hand there is little stimulus for the unaware tutor to consider some of the skills which I found to be most valuable, for example negotiation, problem-resolution and dealing with conflict situations, as these are not specified in the curriculum. Moreover, existing publications tend to focus on relatively low-level instrumental skills to improve workers' performance and offer little in-depth consideration of the oracy curriculum (DfES 2002, TUC 2000a).

There is a question of whether 'soft' skills should be an integral part of a basic skills curriculum. My findings indicate that they have more merit than merely supporting students to feel good about themselves, as they appeared to be a vital element of successful workplace learning, intrinsically linked to literacy skills development and valued by both students and their employers. More attention could, therefore, be paid to defining these skills, establishing how they can be developed through the learning process and, conversely, whether and how they support literacy skills development and the ways in which they enable students to put their skills development into practice in real situations. Establishing indicators and measures of achievement would be an important aspect of this work, since without these it is difficult to evidence and sustain arguments for the worth of viewing these skills as valuable and identifiable elements of curriculum development and individual or group learning plans.

The above issues indicate that it would be beneficial to produce guidance for providers and tutors on how to interpret the curriculum for the workplace domain. This would encompass the high-level oracy skills needed at work and recognise the value of oracy and 'soft' skills as tools for learning and as skills in their own right. There might be additional silences, especially in relation to reading and writing skills, not identified by this study, but of equal importance to the areas highlighted in this work. These curriculum issues, with other findings, also have implications for tutor training, which I shall now discuss.

7.7.5 Implications for tutor training

Workplace literacy provision has features which are distinctive and different from generic literacy (Payne 2003), and my findings identified some of these features which are likely to apply in other workplace

contexts. Generic adult literacy tutor training will equip tutors with many of the teaching skills they need, but the evidence of this study indicates that there are additional context-specific aspects of workplace literacy not covered by this training as currently proposed.

Many aspects of generic tutor training will have relevance for literacy teaching whatever the situation, and, of course, tutors undergoing initial training need to gain the skills to enable them to work in the full range of situations. The *Skills for Life* national teaching and learning infrastructure comprises standards which define the knowledge needed in order to teach literacy at levels 3 and 4 (DfES/FENTO 2002), and tutor training courses to develop this knowledge and the skills required to teach literacy. The level 4 guidance does state that tutors should consider the students' contexts in teaching and learning programmes (http://www.fento.org/staff_dev/subject_specs_lit_and_num/guid_using_lit 4.pdf accessed November 2003). However, because this type of knowledge is omitted from the standards, the framework as presently constructed does not equip tutors with the context-specific guidance they need.

An additional layer of knowledge might enable tutors to work more effectively in workplace literacy by developing a high degree of understanding of workplace issues in addition to pedagogical skills. My research indicates that this might include knowledge of working contexts such as Best Value, organisational structures, the role of training officers and the role of unions and union learning representatives. The study highlighted that the process of negotiating a workplace literacy programme differs from the generic context because of the different interests that need to be taken into account. Arguably, pedagogical skills for an empowerment approach should be developed through the generic training programme, in which case it would be relevant to include in the specialist

training consideration of how this translates into a workplace context. This type of training could be offered as a stand-alone specialist module, available at any time as professional development for tutors when they move into this area of work.

7.7.6 Implications for unions

In relation to trade union involvement in workplace literacy the study reaffirmed the powerful contribution that unions can make to workplace learning, which is already recognised in national policy. The comparative elements of the study drew attention to ways in which unions can be particularly effective, and the generic features suggested ways of developing this contribution to make it more effective, in particular by ensuring that unions' concerns with members' rights extend into the ethos, content and delivery aspects of provision.

My study provided insights into ways in which unions can connect members into the learning agenda. There were lessons for involvement strategies in the construction of a constructive partnership between union and management, which operated in parallel to other less amicable negotiations in the same workplace. The ways in which the union position in, and understanding of, the workplace culture was used to bring about successful recruitment of male workers with no apparent needs or interest in learning also provided messages for widening participation policy and strategy.

On the issue of curriculum content and delivery methods, I intimated that there are contradictions between the TUC's concern with members' rights and an uncritical adoption of the 'cost to industry' argument and the functional delivery model. These appear to stem from an absence of a theoretical underpinning to the TUC contribution to the field of workplace

literacy, and this has resulted in an apparent failure to equip learning representatives to negotiate approaches to curriculum design and delivery with providers. Development of a strategy underpinned by a critical appraisal of the different approaches to workplace literacy and their implications for members might be a helpful starting point. This could lead to a more dynamic and expansive view of provision in which the rights of the students are central not only to access, but to curriculum content and delivery methods.

Developing strategies for persuading employers to cooperate with developments is a live issue for unions, and they have to adopt a pragmatic approach. However, the contention made earlier, that a shift from a deficit conception of workplace basic skills to one which focuses on the positive benefits of enhancing a range of workers' skills, for both employees and employers, would also sit better with the union rights agenda.

Promotion of an empowerment approach, of the type identified in my study, could also meet union priorities. Bringing this about could involve identifying the boundaries of what would constitute legitimate union contributions to curriculum development. A union voice in curriculum negotiations would ensure that that it is not left solely to employers and providers to define the parameters of the learning, so that the full range of members' rights and interests are reflected in the programmes. This has implications for training learning representatives and raises the question of how ongoing support and development would be provided, for example through mentoring programmes.

The findings indicated potential hazards in bringing outsiders with a legitimate concern into contact with expert systems, and this type of negotiation is likely to be most effective when tutors' awareness of union

roles and contribution has been developed. This might constitute one aspect of the specialist tutor training proposed in the previous section. Appropriate training could support both learning representatives and tutors to develop as critical and empowering educators.

7.8 Summary of principal findings

The main findings in relation to my four research questions were as follows:

1. What were the needs, interests and aspirations of participants in a workplace literacy programme for local authority employees?
The primary concerns related to gaining skills to enable employees to improve their current work situation, secure new employment, for wider life situations, and to access further learning opportunities; the research also demonstrated that whilst employers, employees and unions shared some interests, priorities also differed.

2. What strategies were adopted to meet these needs?
The programmes adopted an empowerment approach that aimed to boost confidence and self-esteem and enhance critical, analytical and problem-solving skills alongside a contextualised approach to developing reading, writing and sophisticated oracy skills.

3. Were they successful?
Students progressed in the above areas and as a result, significant benefits accrued to individuals, their employer and the trade union; these included improved work-performance, morale and industrial relations, adoption of new literacy practices and heightened aspirations for learning and employment.

4. What are the implications of the findings for wider policy and practice?

Implications for policy and practice drawn from the research, although tentative because of the small-scale nature of the study, included broadening engagement strategies, devising additional context-specific curriculum and teacher training guidance, and extending union good practice in employee engagement to curriculum development.

7.9 Postscript

Although not able to carry out detailed follow-up research I learned informally about subsequent developments. Louise, the Treasurer's departmental training manager, and the adult education managers and tutors involved have all moved on to new employment, but the eventual destination of the redeployees is not known. The outcomes and impact of the course I studied convinced the director of the Works department of the value of this approach to providing learning at work. He allocated further funding to extend John's secondment as union learning coordinator, and secured additional resources to establish a learning centre in the main depot. John and Eddie continue to work together in a constructive partnership approach to developments, and over 150 students have now undertaken basic skills courses. Union members' interest has strengthened and over 25 learning representatives have been recruited.

7.9 Where next?

Because of the small-scale nature of this research and the limited number of subjects interviewed, the implications identified for policy and practice should be regarded as tentative. Despite this, it is important to consider their potential for the field since this is developing extremely quickly as it is

a major government priority underpinned by high levels of funding but the research base informing this development is still relatively immature.

Perhaps the major messages emerging from this research could have immediate effect in the field. A much broader model of workplace literacy than that currently considered or promoted in the literature appears to have the potential to bring far-reaching benefits for both employers and employees. This would involve consideration of the factors identified as successful in this research, in particular the substitution of an empowerment approach for the current functional model. A conclusion with particular resonance for this approach is that a broad-based 'empowerment' curriculum, which included both work and wider topics, confidence-building and assertiveness and critical and analytical skills, brought about substantial benefits for employees and employers. The study also concluded that training tutors in workplace issues would be of value. The importance of union involvement was recognised and areas for enhancing this contribution identified.

Initial actions to implement these areas could include development of guidelines for employers and providers, additional curriculum guidelines and the introduction of contextualised workplace literacy training modules for tutors to complement current generic developments. The TUC could develop a statement of principle and a strategy that promotes a more inclusive empowerment model. These developments could meet the policy imperative to put students at the heart of learning processes, and provide a springboard for widening the opportunity for workers, unions and employers to benefit from the powerful potential of workplace literacy to transform lives and workplaces demonstrated by this study.

References

http://www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/Workplace, accessed August 2003

http://www.iipuk.co.uk/IIP/Internet/InvestorsinPeople, accessed May 2003

http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/links/changingfaces.htm, accessed June 2003

Ackers, P., Smith, C. and Smith, P. (1996) *The New Workplace and Trade Unionism,* London: Routledge

ALBSU (1993a) *Parents and Their Children: the intergenerational effects of poor basic skills,* London: Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit

ALBSU (1993b) *The Cost to Industry: basic skills and the UK workforce,* London: Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit

Aldridge, F. and Tuckett, A. (2002) *Two Steps Forward, One Step Back,* Leicester: NIACE

ALI (2001) *The Common Inspection Framework,* Coventry: Adult Learning Inspectorate

Ananiadou, K., Jenkins, A. and Wolf, A. (2003) *The Benefits to Employers of Raising Workforce Basic Skills Levels: a review of the literature,* London: National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy

Arksey, H. and Knight, P. (1999) *Interviewing for Social Scientists,* London: Sage

Atkinson, J. and Spilsbury, M. (1993a) *Basic Skills and Jobs: a report on the basic skills needed at work*, London: Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit

Atkinson, J., Spilsbury, M. and Williams, M. (1993b) *The Basic Skills Needed at Work: a directory*, London: Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit

Avis, J. (2000) 'Policy talk: reflexive modernization and the construction of teaching and learning within post-compulsory education and lifelong learning in England', *Journal of Educational Policy*, 15 (2): 185-199

Barton, D. (2001) 'Directions for literacy research: analysing language and social practices in a textually mediated world', *Language and Education*, 15 (2): 92-104

Barton, D. and Hamilton, M. (1998) *Local Literacies*, London: Routledge

Basic Skills Agency (1999) *Basic Skills Provision for Adults*, London: Basic Skills Agency

Basic Skills Agency (2001) *Adult Literacy Core Curriculum*, London: Basic Skills Agency

Basic Skills Agency (2002) *Making it Happen: improving the basic skills of the workforce*, London: Basic Skills Agency

Basic Skills Agency (2003) *Basic Skills and Local Government*, London: Basic Skills Agency

Bassey, M. (1999) *Case Study Research in Educational Settings*, Buckingham: Open University Press

Brooks, G., Gorman, T., Harman, J., Hutchison, D., Kinder, K., Moor, H. and Wilkin, A. (1997) *Family Literacy Lasts,* London: Basic Skills Agency

Brooks, G., Giles, K., Harman, J., Kendall, S., Rees, F. and Whittaker, S. (2001a) *Assembling the Fragments: a review of research on adult basic skills,* London: Department for Education and Employment

Brooks, G., Davies, R., Duckett, L., Hutchison, D., Kendall, S. and Wilkin, A. (2001b) *Progress in Adult Literacy: do learners learn?,* London: Basic Skills Agency

Bryman, A. and Burgess, R.G. (1999) *Qualitative Research: Volume 1,* London: Sage

Burgess, R.G. (1989) *The Ethics of Educational Research,* London: Falmer

Burgess, R.G. (1991) *In the Field: an introduction to field research,* London: Routledge

Burgess, R.G. (1994) *The Research Process in Educational Settings: ten case studies,* London: Falmer

Burton, M. (2002) 'The stigma of illiteracy', *RaPAL Bulletin,* 47: 6-8

Burton, M. (2003) Signs of Stigma? Attitudes to illiteracy in Victorian fiction, 1850-1890. Unpublished Ed.D. thesis, University of Sheffield

Bynner, J. and Parsons, S. (1997) *It Doesn't Get any Better*, London: Basic Skills Agency

Bynner, J. and Parsons, S. (1998) *Use It or Lose It? The impact of time out of work on literacy and numeracy skills*, London: Basic Skills Agency

Carey, S., Low, S. and Hansbro, J. (1997) *Adult Literacy in Britain*, London: The Stationery Office

Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (1992) *Adult Illiteracy and Economic Performance*, Paris: OECD

Claydon, T. and Green, F. (1994) 'Can trade unions improve training in Britain?', *Personnel Review*, 23 (1): 37-51

Coffield, F. (1999) 'Breaking the consensus: lifelong learning as social control', *British Education Research Journal*, 25 (4): 479-499

Coffield, F. (2000) *Differing Visions of a Learning Society*, Bristol: Policy Press

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2000) *Research Methods in Education*, London: RoutledgeFalmer

Crowther, J., Tett, L. and Galloway, V. (1999) 'Adult literacy and democratic renewal in the new Scotland', *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 31(2): 210-219

Crowther, J., Hamilton, M. and Tett, L. (2001) 'Powerful literacies: an introduction', in Crowther, J., Hamilton, M. and Tett, L. (eds.) *Powerful Literacies*, Leicester: NIACE

Davies, K. and Byatt, J. (2000) *Public Sector, Public Potential: improving the basic skills of public sector workers*, London: Basic Skills Agency

Deem, R. and Brehony, K. (1994) 'Why didn't you use a survey so you could generalize your findings? Methodological issues in a multiple site case study of school governing bodies after the 1988 Education Reform Act', in Halpin, D. and Troyna, B. (eds.), *Researching Education Policy: ethical and methodological issues*, London: Falmer

DfEE (1998) *The Learning Age*, London: Department for Education and Employment

DfEE (1999a) *A Fresh Start: improving literacy and numeracy*, London: Department for Education and Employment

DfEE (1999b) *Learning to Succeed*, London: Department for Education and Employment

DfEE (2000a) *Breaking the Language Barriers*, London: Department for Education and Employment

DfEE (2000b) *Building Basic Skills in the Workplace Initiative: guidance for applicants*, London: Department for Education and Employment

DfEE (2001) *Skills for Life: the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy:* London: Department for Education and Employment

DfES (2002) *The Employer Toolkit,* London: Department for Education and Skills

DfES (2003a) *21st Century Skills: "Realising our Potential",* London: Department for Education and Skills

DfES (2003b) *The Skills for Life Survey: a national needs and impact survey of literacy, numeracy and ICT needs,* www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR490.pdf accessed December 2003

DfES/FENTO (2002) *Subject Specifications for Teachers of Adult Literacy and Numeracy,* London: Department for Education and Skills

Ecclestone, K. (1999) 'Care or control? Defining learners' needs for lifelong learning', *British Journal of Educational Studies,* 47 (4): 332-347

Edwards, R. and Usher, R. (1998) 'Lo(o)s(en)ing the boundaries: from "education" to "lifelong learning" ', *Studies in Continuing Education,* 20 (1): 83-103

Eisenhardt, K. (1999) 'Building theories from case study research', in Bryman, A. and Burgess, R.G. (eds.) *Qualitative Research: Volume 1,* London: Sage

Eldred, J. (2002) *Moving on with Confidence: perceptions of success in teaching and learning adult literacy,* Leicester: NIACE

Evans, K. and Rainbird, H. (2002) 'The significance of workplace learning for a "learning society" ', in Evans, K., Hodkinson, P. and Unwin, L. (eds.), *Working to Learn,* London: Kogan Page

Felstead, A., Gallie, M. and Green. F. (2002) *Work Skills in Britain 1986-2002*, Nottingham: Department for Education and Skills

FENTO (2003) *Guidance on using the Subject Specifications for teachers of adult literacy at Level Four in conjunction with the Standards for teaching and supporting learning*, http://www.fento.org/staff_dev/subject_specs_lit_and_num/guid_using_lit4.pdf accessed November 2003

Forrester, K. and Payne, J. (1999) ' "A sort of metamorphosis": the role of trade unions in widening participation in lifelong learning', *Journal of Access and Widening Participation*, 1 (2): 24-32

Frank, F. (2000) *Researching Workplace Basic Skills in the UK – ways and means to an end; towards a comprehensive model of research methodologies*, http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/wbsnet accessed June 2002

Frank, F. (2003) 'Learning to accentuate the positive', *Adults Learning*, 14 (8): 18–19

Frank, F. and Hamilton, M. (1999) 'Whatever next? Policy and practice in workplace basic skills in the UK', in Forrester, K., Payne, J. and Ward, K. (eds.) *Researching Work and Learning: a first international conference*, Leeds: University of Leeds, School of Continuing Education

Freire, P. (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Middlesex: Penguin

Freire, P and Macedo D. (1987) *Literacy: reading the word and the world*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

Fryer, R. (1997) *Learning for the Twenty-first Century: first report of the National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning*, London: NAGCELL

Gee, J. (1996) *Social Linguistics and Literacies: ideology in discourses*, London: Taylor and Francis

Goodwin, J. (1999) *Men, Gender and Work in Dublin: initial findings on work and class*, Leicester: Centre for Labour Market Studies, http://www.clms.le.ac.uk/publication/wkpapers/working_paperNo24.pdf accessed August 2003

Gowen, S. G. (1992) *The Politics of Workplace Literacy*, New York: Teachers College Press

Grief, S. and Windsor, V. (2002) *Recognising and Validating Learning Outcomes and Achievements in Non-accredited Basic Skills and ESOL*, London: Learning and Skills Development Agency

Griffiths, M. (1998) *Educational Research for Social Justice: getting off the fence*, Buckingham: Open University Press

Hamilton, M. (1996) 'Literacy and adult basic education', in R. Fieldhouse (ed.), *A History of Modern British Adult Education*, Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education

Hamilton, M. and Merrifield, J. (2000) 'Adult learning and literacy in the United Kingdom', in Comings J., Garner, B. and Smith, C. (eds.) *Annual Review of Adult Learning and Literacy volume 1*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Hamilton, M., Macrae, C. and Tett, L. (2001) 'Powerful literacies: the policy context', in Crowther, J., Hamilton, M. and Tett, L. (eds.) *Powerful Literacies*, Leicester: NIACE

Hammersley, M. (1997) 'Education research and teaching: a response to David Hargreaves' TTA Lecture', *British Educational Research Journal*, 23(2): 141-161

Hargreaves, D. (1996) *Teaching as a Research Based Profession: possibilities and prospects*, London: Teacher Training Agency Annual Lecture 1996

HM Treasury (2001) *Developing Workforce Skills: piloting a new approach*, London: HM Treasury

Holland, C. (1998) *Literacy and the New Work Order*, Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education

Holland, C. (2002) 'Workplace literacy: try a consultancy approach', *Adults Learning*, 13 (8): 15-17

Holland, C. and Frank, F. (2001) 'A holistic approach to workplace language, literacy and numeracy', *Workplace Basic Skills Network Bulletin*, 28

Jenkins, A., Vignoles, A., Wolf, A. and Galindo-Rueda, F. (2002) *The Determinants and Effects of Lifelong Learning*, London: Centre for Economics of Education

Kennedy, H. (1997) *Learning Works*, Coventry: Further Education Funding Council

Lankshear, C. (1997) *Changing Literacies,* Buckingham: Open University Press

LSC (2002) *Workforce Development Strategy,* Coventry: Learning and Skills Council

Mac an Ghaill, M. (1991) 'Young, gifted and black: methodological reflections of a teacher/researcher', in G. Walford (ed.) *Doing Educational Research,* London: Routledge

Mac an Ghaill M. (1996) 'What about the boys? Schooling, class and crisis masculinity', *Sociological Review,* 44 (3): 380-397

Mace, J. (1992) *Talking about Literacy: principles and practice of adult literacy education,* London: Routledge

Mace, J. (1998) *Playing with Time: mothers and the meaning of literacy,* London: UCL Press

Mace, J. (2002) *The Give and Take of Writing,* Leicester: NIACE

McGivney, V. (1999) *Excluded Men: men who are missing from education and training,* Leicester: NIACE

Machin, S., McIntosh, S., Vignoles, A. and Viitanen, T. (2001) *Basic Skills, Soft Skills and Labour Market Outcomes: secondary analysis of the National Child Development Study,* London: DfEE Research Centre for the Economics of Education

Macleod, D. (2003) *Widening Adult Participation: a review of research and development*, London: Learning and Skills Development Agency

Maguire, M. and Horrocks, B. (2002) *Employee Development Programmes and Lifetime Learning, CLMS working paper no 6*, Leicester: Centre for Labour Market Studies, http://www.clms.le.ac.uk/publication/wkpapers/working_paperNo6.pdf accessed August 2003

Mawer, G. (1999) *Workplace Education: learning at work*, London: Longman

Merton, B., Turner, C., Ward J. and White, L. (2003) *Learning for the Future*, Leicester: NIACE

Monks, J. (2000) 'Learning with the unions', *Adults Learning*, 13 (4): 12-15

Norman, M. and Hyland, T. (2003) 'The role of confidence in lifelong learning', *Educational Studies*, 29 (2): 261-272

OECD (2000a) *Literacy, Economy and Society*, Paris: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

OECD (2000b) *Literacy in the Information Age*, Paris: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

Ozga, J. (2000) *Policy Research in Educational Settings*, Buckingham: Open University Press

Payne, J. (2001) 'Lifelong learning: a national trade union strategy in a global economy', *International Journal of Lifelong Education.* 20 (5): 378-392

Payne, J. (2003) *Basic Skills in the Workplace: a research review,* London: Learning and Skills Development Agency

Performance and Innovation Unit (2001) *In Demand: adult skills in the 21st Century,* London: PIU

Platt, J. (1999) 'What can case studies do?', in Bryman, A. and Burgess, R.G. (eds.) *Qualitative Research: Volume 1,* London: Sage

QCA (2000) *National Standards for Adult Literacy and Numeracy,* London: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

Rainbird H. (1990) *Training Matters,* Oxford: Basil Blackwell

Rainbird, H. (2000) 'Skilling the unskilled: access to work-based learning and the lifelong learning agenda', *Journal of Education and Work,* 13 (2): 183-197

Ranson, S. (1996) 'The future of education research: learning at the centre', *British Education Research Journal,* 22 (5): 523-535

Riddell, S. (1989) 'Exploiting the exploited? The ethics of feminist educational research', in R.G. Burgess, (ed.) *The Ethics of Educational Research,* London: Falmer

Robinson, P. (1997) *Literacy, Numeracy and Economic Performance,* London: Centre for Economic Performance

Sargant, N. with Field, J., Francis, H., Schuller,T. and Tuckett, A. (1997) *The Learning Divide*, Leicester: National Institute for Adult Continuing Education

Schuller, T., Brassett-Grundy, A., Green, A., Hammond, C. and Preston, J. (2002) *Learning, Continuity and Change in Adult Life*, London: Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning

Scott, J. (1990) *A Matter of Record: documentary sources in social research*, Cambridge: Polity Press

Stake, R. (1995) *The Art of Case Study Research*, London: Sage

Street, B. (1997) *Adult Literacy in the United Kingdom: a history of research and practice*, Lancaster: RaPAL

Street, B. (2001) 'Contexts for literacy work: the "new orders" and the "new literacy studies" ', in Crowther, J., Hamilton, M. and Tett, L. (eds.) *Powerful Literacies*, Leicester: NIACE

Sutherland, P. and Marks A. (2001) 'The man learner: neglected species or dying breed?' *Adults Learning*, 12 (5): 11-13

Tett, L. (2003) 'Reading and writing the world', in *Adults Learning*, 14 (9): 9-10

TUC (1998) *Union Gateways to Learning*, London: TUC

TUC (2000a) *Learning in Partnership*, London: TUC

TUC (2000b) *Learning with the Unions*, London: TUC and DfEE

TUC (2001) *Union Learning Representatives Training*, London: TUC

TUC/BSA, (2000a) *Basic Skills are Union Business*, London: Basic Skills Agency

TUC/BSA, (2000b) *Basic Skills are Union Business: public sector*, London: Basic Skills Agency

TUC/BSA (2000c) *Better Basic Skills*, London: TUC

TUC/BSA (2000d) *Working with Unions: handbook for basic skills providers*, London: TUC

Turner, C. with Tuckett, A. (2003) *Catching the Tide*, Leicester: NIACE

Unwin, L. and Fuller, A. (2003) *Expanding Learning in the Workplace*, Leicester: NIACE

Ward, J. with Edwards, J. (2002) *Learning Journeys: learners' voices*, London: Learning and Skills Development Agency

Wellington, J. (2000) *Educational Research: contemporary issues and practical approaches*, London: Continuum

Willis, P. (1977) *Learning to Labour*, Farnborough: Saxon House

Withnall, A. (1994) 'Literacy on the agenda: the origins of the adult literacy campaign in the United Kingdom', *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 26 (1): 67-85

Appendix 1 Interview framework

1. Work
   - Job/type of work
   - job tasks
   - length of time employed
   - feelings about job (explore reasons)
   - union membership/activism

2. Literacy at work
   - reading and writing related to work tasks
   - other reading and writing e.g. union, social
   - importance of reading and writing for doing their job
   - confidence in skills
     (explore reasons and elicit examples)
   - if not confident, elicit coping strategies
   - managers' and colleagues' attitudes to literacy
   - explore above in relation to oral communication skills

3. Education background
   - experiences of school
   - literacy/other skills gained at school
   - feelings about school
   - participation in education or training since leaving school
   (explore views on this if have participated, or reasons if not)

4. Joining the course
   - how they found out about the course
   - referral if appropriate and views on this
   - reasons for joining - related to:

   work

   everyday life

   skills, knowledge

   other

5. Experience of the course
   - views on content and materials
   - teaching methods
   - tutors

6. Has the course met their needs
   - learning gains, progress, distance travelled
   - discuss in relation to reasons for joining
   - new needs discovered (if any)

7. Outcomes of the course in relation to
   - changes at work
   - home life
   - benefits to employer
   - benefits to trade union

8. Overall views of the course
   - anything unexpected about the course
   - would you recommend it to anyone else? If so what would you say to encourage them to join?
   - Anything not already covered would like to add

Appendix 2 Student profiles

Works Department

Len is in his late 30s and now works for the council as a lighting maintenance engineer after spending his early working life in the private sector in a range of unskilled jobs. He is bored by his job and would like to do something different and more demanding. The only literacy tasks in his work are reading job sheets and completing time sheets, and work-related contact with members of the public is limited. He has two children at primary school and encourages them to develop their reading skills and reads to them at home. His skills were at the high end of level 1.

Mark is in his early 30s and works as a gardener in one of the large parks in the city. The literacy tasks he needs to do at work are understanding diagrams showing the areas he has to work on and complete time sheets. Giving information to the public using the parks has recently been added to his job role. He is single and lives with his father who raised him after the death of his mother when he was a child. His father is elderly and Mark has to take responsibility for the home literacy with help from his father and aunt. His literacy skills were assessed[1] at entry level. Although he would like to improve his skills, he believes that he can cope with most day-to-day literacy tasks.

Rick is in his 40s. He is employed in a skilled job as an auto electrician, and his main work duties are repairing and maintaining the Works department's fleet of vehicles. He has to read complicated schematics for

---

[1] These assessments took place before new initial assessment processes were introduced and refer to the levels in use, Entry level, Level 1 and Level 2 before the revised standards were established (QCA 2000).

234

work, but the only writing required is simple form-filling and time sheets. He has little communication with members of the public through his work. He has had to apply for his own job several times in recent years as a result of departmental restructurings. He lives with his partner and her teenage children, and used to do voluntary work at a sports club for disabled young people but had to give this up because of his shift patterns. He was assessed at level 1 literacy.

Robert is 45 and has worked as a gulley attendant since he was redeployed from the parks department 18 months before he joined the course. He is required to keep a record of the streets he covers and fill in time sheets, but usually relies on the driver he works with to do this. He has little contact with members of the public in his work. He has been employed by the Works department since leaving school. He is married with children and has 2 grandchildren aged 16 months and 3 months. His literacy skills were assessed at entry level but the tutor commented that his reading skills appeared to be at a higher level than the assessment.

Selwyn was redeployed from street cleaning to work in the security section as a gatekeeper after he became disabled 7 years ago. His work involves very little literacy other than taking 'out of hours' telephone messages from staff and members of the public when the main switchboard is closed. He lives alone and spends a great deal of his spare time doing voluntary work in the city centre with prostitutes; work which demands very high-level interpersonal skills. His skills were assessed at entry level

Val is in her 40s and has worked as an administrator in a cemetery since the closure of the swimming baths where she was employed as a pool attendant. Her new job requires her to use reading and writing skills on a daily basis and she is very unconfident about her writing skills. She also

has to communicate with recently bereaved people and handle enquiries from individuals trying to locate graves through the records. She is married with grown up children who achieved well at school and are now employed in professional occupations. She was assessed as level 1.

Treasurer's department

Bridget is in her 20s and has recently moved from bar work into an administrative post as a claims assessor in the housing benefits section, which she prefers to her previous occupation. Most of her work requires her to use literacy skills as she has to read and assess benefit claim forms and produce written responses to claimants' applications and queries. She also has to deal with telephone enquiries from claimants. She has no problems with the reading but struggles to produce written documents. She lives at home with her parents who help her with personal writing.

Chas works alongside Bridget in the housing benefits claims section and his work has similar literacy and oracy requirements. He was redeployed to this post when he developed a disability which forced him to stop working as a painter and decorator. He is not very happy doing this type of work and misses the male camaraderie of his previous work. Like Bridget he is fairly confident with reading but is worried about producing written documents. He has built up a file of letters to use for reference. He is married and has an active social life outside work. His skills are just in level 1.

Laurie had worked in construction but is working temporarily in a warehouse post until he can secure a permanent post. He feels very resentful about the loss of his job, and unhappy about his temporary employment as he preferred physical work in a male environment. The literacy demands of the job are relatively low-level, primarily checking

literacy demands of the job are relatively low-level, primarily checking stock items against lists and using a computer to check addresses, and he feels that he can cope them. He has little contact with the general public. His skills are entry level.

Nigel is working temporarily as a liquidation officer in the business rates department while he waits for permanent employment. He had been an assistant buyer in his previous post. His work as a liquidation officer demands higher-level literacy tasks which include checking information, writing letters and completing forms. He finds this very stressful as he is unconfident about knowing what to write and how to express it. His anxiety is increased by his situation as a redeployee. He also has to deal with telephone calls in relation to the work. He was assessed at level 1.

Tom is a warehouse manager in his late 50s who was in the redeployment pool as his warehouse was closing three weeks after the end of the course. His work requires him to check stock lists and write letters, reports and memos. He feels that whilst his managers have always accepted his work, he struggles to compose texts and makes a lot of mistakes. He has a great deal of telephone and personal contact with suppliers and customers. He needs higher-level skills to secure equivalent employment. He is married with a wife and two daughters, and is very proud of their literacy abilities. He is assessed with level 1 skills.

Appendix 3 An example of using a thematic grid

Scrutiny of the work history grid (see p.240) showed very clearly that all except one of the students were either in the process of being redeployed or had been redeployed at some stage in their work history. This suggested that redeployment might be a significant theme, and led me to interrogate the data to investigate whether there did appear to be connections between redeployment and aspects such as recruitment, achievement and impact.

I started by asking whether there were any links between redeployment and routes to enrolment. I noted that all the students from the Treasurer's strand joined the course as a direct result of the redeployment process, and that all had been referred by the training manager. I returned to the transcripts to follow this up in more detail and discovered that whilst all had an urgent need to improve their skills, none had considered joining a course until the training manager suggested they enrol on the communications course.

I then asked the same questions in relation to the Works strand and considered whether there were similarities and differences between the groups and the reasons for what I found. The grid indicated that, although a number of the Works employees had been redeployed or feared redeployment, this was not the major driver for joining the course, as their reasons for joining were related to escaping from the shop floor and to union encouragement. I considered the reasons for this difference, and as these were not apparent in the information in the work history grid, I sought explanations in the information in other grids. The literacy skills grid revealed that manual workers felt there was little need to use literacy in their job, which appeared to be a plausible explanation. Using the transcripts I also found that, whilst the only office worker in this
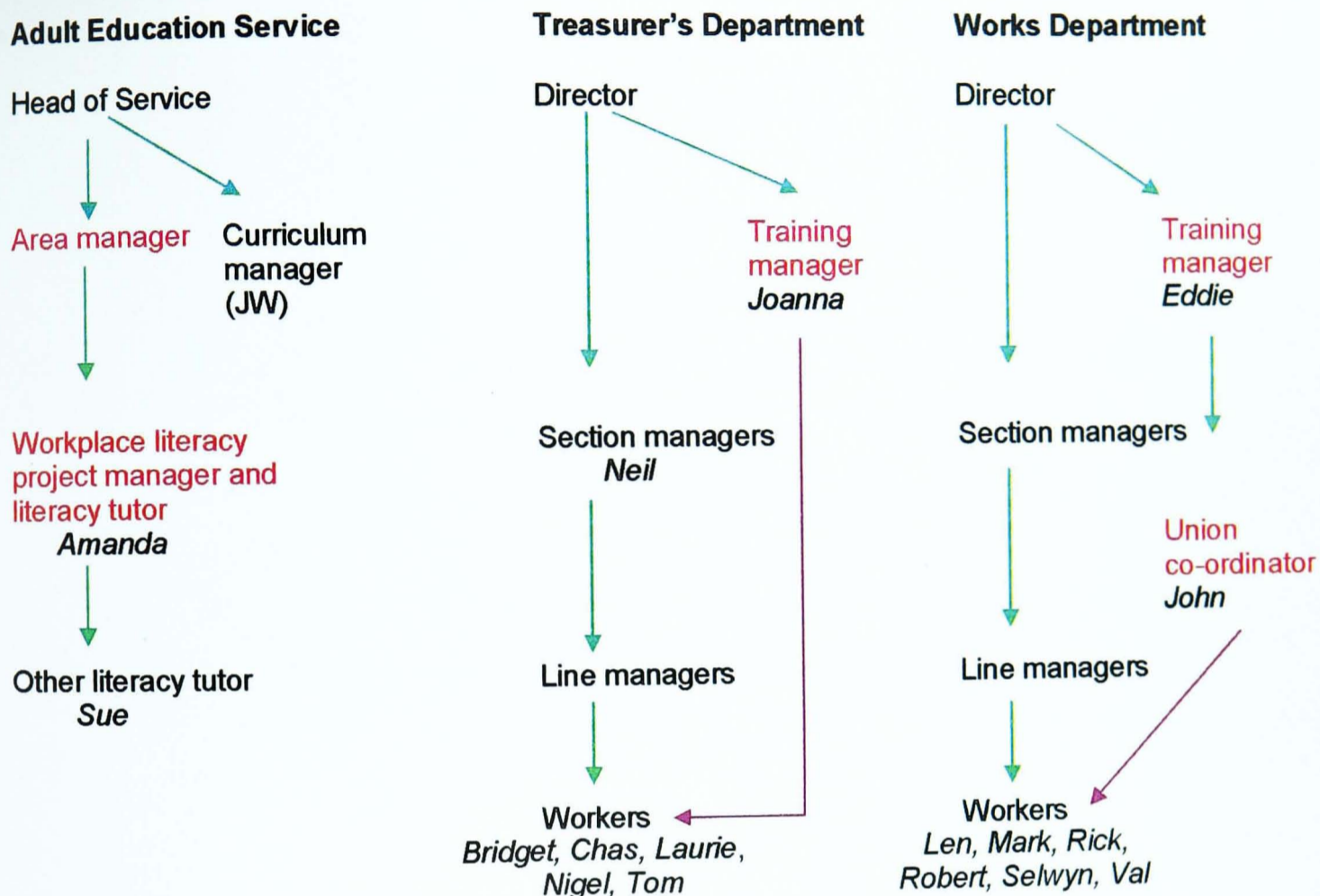
department had been redeployed and did have some concerns about her skills levels, unlike the Treasurer's employees she was under no management pressure in relation to this issue.

Having discovered differences and started to explore explanations for this, I returned to the grid to ask whether there were any common elements. I noted that none of the students self-referred to provision, and that as all joined their course through the intervention of an intermediary, albeit for different reasons, this appeared to be a significant element of recruitment. I then I asked whether redeployment might be a significant factor in other elements of the provision and repeated this process of comparing information within and between grids and returning to the transcripts for more detailed information in relation to questions such as student satisfaction, achievement and recruitment.

Figure 2 Work history grid

	Works department						Treasurer's department				
	Mark	**Robert**	**Rick**	**Len**	**Selwyn**	**Val**	**Bridget**	**Laurie**	**Chas**	**Nigel**	**Tom**
Section	Parks	Street cleaning	Vehicle maintenance	Lighting maintenance	Security	Cemeteries	Housing benefits	Warehouse	Housing benefits	Business rates	Warehouse
Job	gardener	gully attendant	auto electrician	maintenance engineer	gatekeeper	administrator	claims assessor	administrator	claims assessor	liquidation officer	manager
Status	permanent – was redeployed to job; awaiting result of current re-structuring	permanent – redeployed from parks 18 months ago	permanent – applied for own job 3 times in last 3 years; another restructuring due to start	permanent	permanent – medical redeployment	permanent – redeployed from pool attendant work 8 years ago	permanent – recently redeployed from bar work	temporary – redeployed from construction work; seeking permanent job	permanent – recent medical redeploy-ment	temporary – redeploy-ment from assistant buyer post	redeployee – as post dis-appears in 3 weeks, faces temporary re-deployment to office work while seeks permanent post
Response to work situation	unsure about future	wasn't pleased to be moved but has now accepted it	can't face the prospect of more cuts/ reapplying for job again	dissatisfied with the job; applied for promotion in past but got nowhere and gave up	no complaints	adjusted to new job as 8 years ago but still anxious about some writing tasks	enjoys new job but unconfident about some tasks; anxious about one to ones	unhappy about losing job – hates new temporary work	unhappy in new job – dislikes office environ-ment	finds situation very stressful – not keen on the work	angry about job loss and uncertain future
Need identified/ referral	union question-naire	union questionnaire	union questionnaire	union questionnaire	union questionnaire	union questionnaire	1:1 with line manager	redeployment process – training manager	1:1 with line manager	redeploy-ment process – training manager	redeployment process – training manager
Recruit-ment	union	union	union	union	union	union	training manager	training manager	training manager	training manager	training manager
Union member	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y (shop steward in past)	Y
Reason for joining	Union suggestion, interest	skive day	time off shop floor	to find out what it was – day away from work	to see what it was – union suggestion	because union suggested joining	manager said needed to improve skills	pushed on to course by training manager	manager said needed to join	learn to fill in applic-ation forms for rede-ployment	to help get a new job

Figure 3 Organisational structure

Adult Education Service

Head of Service

Area manager   Curriculum
manager
(JW)

Workplace literacy
project manager and
literacy tutor
Amanda

Other literacy tutor
Sue

Treasurer's Department

Director

Training
manager
Joanna

Section managers
Neil

Line managers

Workers
*Bridget, Chas, Laurie,
Nigel, Tom*

Works Department

Director

Training
manager
Eddie

Section managers

Union
co-ordinator
John

Line managers

Workers
*Len, Mark, Rick,
Robert, Selwyn, Val*

External project support

National TUC   Regional TUC   Workplace literacy advisor

Moran   *Dave*   *Miriam*

Key

red = steering group member

Italics = interviewee

(all names are changed)

→ line manager

→ recruitment

NB for further background details on students see Appendix 2