

▶ ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH

Assessing and acknowledging learning through non-accredited community adult language, literacy and numeracy programs

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▶ IN ADDITION TO the development of the intended literacy and numeracy skills, there are other important benefits of language, literacy and numeracy programs. These include personal growth and an increased confidence to undertake further education and training or employment. These important learning outcomes are not yet sufficiently accounted for in other assessment frameworks.

The purpose of this research was to explore the potential for developing an instrument or instruments capable of assessing the wider benefits of learning for adults participating in non-accredited community language, literacy and numeracy programs.

▶ Methodology

The project was undertaken in three stages:

- reviewing existing Australian and international research on assessment practices in non-accredited adult and community education and language, literacy and numeracy programs
- collaborating with five organisations representing a variety of provider types and client groups to develop a portfolio of possible instruments for assessing and acknowledging learner outcomes
- trialling those instruments in non-accredited literacy and numeracy programs at the five sites.

▶ The research and its findings

Learners

Further analysis of the data from an earlier survey (2006) and discussions with representatives from the partner organisations confirmed the diversity of the client groups' learning needs. While many participants are driven by a desire for greater proficiency in English and for an improvement in their employment opportunities, social and personal development needs are also a strong motivational factor. Learners often face obstacles such as a physical or mental disability, incomplete schooling or negative school experiences, and/or poor self-esteem.

Outcomes

The literature identified seven categories of 'wider learning outcomes' or benefits of learning resulting from participation in language, literacy and numeracy learning. The outcomes are:

- self-confidence and personal competence
- engagement with others in the family, at work and in society
- attitudes to learning
- ability to learn from experience
- identification of life trajectories or goals
- personal growth/personal change
- social capital or community participation.



The review of research indicated that the extent of wider learning outcomes is influenced by an individual's ability to determine and achieve their desired goals, and that the development of an individual 'learning identity', that is, personal identity and goals, may be a key element to the learning process.

Assessment approaches

The research identified five existing instruments as having the potential to measure outcomes. Before being trialled, all were modified slightly based on input from the partner organisations. There was also one composite instrument developed. All six instruments were used to some effect in different teaching and learning contexts, although no single instrument was 'the most preferred' across all sites. Each had particular qualities and degrees of usefulness, indicating that assessment of the diversity of outcomes arising from non-accredited learning is likely to require a similarly diverse array of approaches. The assessment process seemed to work best when it was jointly undertaken by both learner and tutor.

The instrument

The complexity of the language used in the instrument was the most frequently raised issue during the trials, both in the context of the 'English-readiness' of learners participating in the assessment processes (particularly for those who had English as a second language) and in relation to the terminology used in particular instruments.

The trials demonstrated that the choice of instruments will ultimately be determined by their role: whether they should be used formatively as a monitoring tool or whether they should be used a summative assessment instrument—or through some combination of these two.

Initial assessment of a learner's needs and capabilities in non-accredited language, literacy and numeracy tends to be undertaken through interview and discussion, so it seems unlikely that the sorts of instruments trialled in the project would be used for initial assessment. Moreover, some argue that their use at this stage might cause anxiety to learners.

The tutor

In most cases, the instruments in the trial were reported as being completed jointly by the tutors and learners. This has obvious implications for the role of the tutor in terms of their understanding of the purposes of the instrument,

as well as of the concepts and terminology underpinning its use. The research indicated that the tutors—many of whom are unpaid volunteers—were as diverse a group as the learners, with respect to backgrounds, language and literacy competence, and assessment competence. However, one of the unexpected outcomes of the trial process was the positive response of tutors themselves: they developed confidence as a result of participating in the assessment tasks. The fact that completion of the instruments was almost invariably undertaken jointly by the tutor and learner may well have contributed to this outcome, with the tutor supporting the learner as they worked through the items. These positive outcomes suggest that the future use of an instrument might be integrated as part of the tutoring role.

► **Conclusion**

The diversity of learners, their motivations and outcomes in non-accredited language, literacy and numeracy programs, together with the variety of tutoring and learning processes, highlights the need for choice in the range of instruments for assessing and acknowledging learning outcomes.

While the findings indicate potential benefits for both learner and tutor from their joint engagement in the assessment process, tutors are likely to need training to enable a better understanding of the purposes of the various assessment instruments. That may be difficult given that tutors in non-accredited programs are largely volunteers.

The research shows that assessing the wider benefits of the non-accredited community language, literacy and numeracy learning provided by many Australian community education organisations is possible. With such assessment comes recognition of the contribution that these learners make to the social and economic development of communities.

Assessing and acknowledging learning through non-accredited community adult language, literacy and numeracy programs, by Darryl Dymock and Stephen Billett, is available at <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2021.html>>.