

England and Scotland Team Up in Pioneering Adult Literacies

Robert Nurden, of The Workplace Basic Skills Network, Lancaster University, describes an innovative training package that has supported Scotland's Big Plans for business pilot to improve levels of adult literacies.



The Workplace Basic Skills Network at Lancaster University has just completed the delivery of a special training programme for providers of workplace literacies in Scotland. As the country embraces the need for better literacy and numeracy skills among its working population, Learning Connections - part of the Scottish Executive - called on one of England's leading consultants in the field to make a contribution.

It employed the Network to plan and deliver, in partnership, a package of training for providers to support the launch of Scotland's Big Plus for Business pilot toolkit. The toolkit pro-

vides awareness-raising materials and information on the benefits and successes of workplace literacies learning, and will support providers to work more closely with employers.

Learning Connections was aware that it was important to support providers in using the toolkit. Recognising the Network's experience with workplace training, a successful partnership was formed with the Network to develop the training and contribute towards developing adult literacies (ALS) in Scotland.

"The approach to literacies in Scotland is different to that in England," said the Network's National Trainer, Fiona Wells. "In Scotland,

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literacies are viewed as a social practice, so that the learning is seen as more directly relevant to an individual's needs. We had to find out what those needs there were, and create the course accordingly. We are pleased with the result and impressed with the materials in the Big Plus for Business Toolkit, which made the development of the course more relevant to providers' needs too."

The training course was successfully delivered in Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow during February and March. Participants on the courses welcomed the training and the new resources designed to bring about increased employer engagement.

The Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland strategy report, which was published by the Scottish Executive in 2001, aims to address the needs of the estimated 800,000 of adults in Scotland with low literacy skills. It is hoped to reach 150,000 new learners by the end of March 2006.

The Big Plus is the brand name for Scotland's national awareness raising campaign for adult literacies. The campaign - launched in January 2004 - has consisted of advertisements on TV and radio, in cinemas, and at bus shelters, and was supported by learndirect Scotland. The Big Plus for Business is the next phase of the campaign. It is generally considered to be the equivalent of the English Gremlins Get on at Work campaign.

The toolkit course designed by the Network was for experienced literacies tutors, development workers and other professionals who plan to deliver in the workplace, and for those who wish to expand their understanding of the practicalities involved in developing workplace provision.

Scotland makes some interesting ideological departures from the approach adopted in England, which challenged the Network trainers in all sorts of ways. For example, the country sees literacy and numeracy as complex capabilities rather than as a simple set of basic skills. It is believed that learners are more likely to develop and retain knowledge, skills and understanding if they see them as relevant to their own problems and challenges.

Innovative approaches to the provision of adult literacies, for example, though Pathfinder Projects, are encouraged, while at the same time making the best use of electronic information and technology. Dissemination of good practice - something often lacking among English agencies - is being prioritised. Research, too, will play a vital part both at the outset and throughout delivery, as will the encouragement of professional development through a national training framework.

"The greater emphasis on communication and the social implications of literacies gave the Network some fresh insights into the delivery of basic skills," said Ms Wells. "The learning process was very much a two-way affair."

Scotland's decision to tackle the literacy and numeracy skills shortfall comes against a background of wider government initiatives. In March the country launched a joint industry-government strategy for financial services, which directly employ more than 100,000 people or 4.7 per cent of the workforce. The strategy recognised the importance to the Scottish economy of an industry that generates £5bn - almost 6 per cent - of GDP. It aims to build on the strengths that have made Scotland the most important UK financial centre outside London. And it was recognised that employees' skills play an important part in the strategy.

For a number of years the Workplace Basic Skills Network has supported the Department for Education and Skills in England to help deliver Skills for Life, the national strategy for improving levels of adult literacy and numeracy. It also works closely with many key agencies in the field such as the Basic Skills Agency, the Learning and Skills Council, Regional Development Agencies and Sector Skills Councils, to ensure that its work is complementary to other initiatives, and has currency in an arena of fast-changing strategy and targets. It is this wide-ranging and thorough approach in this highly complex field that is behind Scottish Connections' desire to forge a partnership with the Network.

The toolkit course, which was delivered in Scotland's three key cities, was designed to encourage participants to be able to under-

stand their role and also the role of other partnership members to encourage a team-working approach. They were urged to explore the factors to consider when developing strategic and operational plans, including opportunities to contribute to their partnerships action and strategic plans. An opportunity was provided for delegates to identify training and development needs to enable partnerships to meet the challenges of workplace literacies development.

This led on to considering further training opportunities that can be tailored to address partnership needs and the context they will be working in – for example, rural areas and small- and medium-sized businesses. This “open access” approach is one that has been adopted by the Network with a great deal of success over the years. Feedback from delegates has been very positive, as such courses have provided not only a learning experience but also the sharing of good practice and networking opportunities, particularly useful for those delegates working in more rural areas.

Following the successful delivery of the one-day course in Scotland, it is possible that the Network may in the future be called on to offer more specialist programmes. Among these would be marketing workplace ALS, promoting provision to employers, adapting an ALS curriculum for the workplace and for core qualifications, ESOL in the workplace, dyslexia in the workplace, using and developing the Scottish curriculum to deliver workplace ALS, developing a workplace curriculum and supporting workplace learners using distance and e-learning.

Scotland’s Learning Connections was set up last year to support the development of ALS and the Scottish Strategy. The programme is funded through the 32 local authorities, which up until now have been able to choose how they funded and developed ALS.

A recent report identified that up to 20 per cent of Scottish adults needed an ALS input. The Scottish strategy is very much about the regeneration of communities and ALS is considered an important part of that. Each partnership has been instructed to develop an

action plan for their area. The emphasis is on partnerships being established as widely as possible to be able to meet and deliver packages relevant to local needs.

There will be regular evaluation of both partnerships and providers. This approach is seen as vital because there is concern in some quarters that a few colleges of further education are not fully aware of all the issues surrounding literacy. There is considerable emphasis on partnerships making their own self-evaluation and a belief that “honesty is the best policy” if any headway is going to be made.

The adult literacies curriculum is in the final stages of consultation. Existing feedback from tutors and practitioners is that it still needs to be more practitioner-based, with a practical rather than a theoretical approach.

Among the materials developed so far are a 14-minute DVD/video and information booklet, which act as a focal point of the development strategy. A CD-Rom is also being produced for providers to adapt materials from the national campaign to support local development with employers and marketing strategies. Also included will be a PowerPoint presentation for “The Big Plus for Business” for providers to use in their promotion to employers.

“It has been an especially productive partnership for us,” said Ms Wells. “It shows that our training programmes can be adapted to meet the required local situation, and that is gratifying.”

The Workplace Basic Skills Network, founded in 1993 and based at Lancaster University, is a national organisation dedicated to workplace language, literacy and numeracy provision. It builds professional capacity in workplace basic skills through sharing and dissemination of good practice and continuing professional development, supporting basic skills professionals to meet the language, literacy and numeracy needs of today’s changing workplace. Address: Workplace Basic Skills Network, CSET, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YL; tel: 01524 593405; website: www.lancaster.ac.uk/wbsnet www.communitiescotland.gov.uk