

## Viewpoint

# Idealism meets pragmatism



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**A**fter years of searching for a satisfactory solution to the country's adult literacy and numeracy problems, some real progress is now being made in improving workplace basic skills. Just why have these contrasting worlds – the idealism of education and the pragmatism of business – started to put their differences aside to forge meaningful partnerships?

For a start, they have learned to listen to one another. There was, after all, a huge cultural gulf to negotiate. Even language proved a stumbling block. Take some typical introductory literature from a college. Marketing speak such as, "We offer a basic skills curriculum to improve literacy, numeracy and ESOL [English for speakers of other languages] skills for entry level learners as part of the Skills for Life strategy" contains enough incomprehensible jargon to turn off most employers there and then.

When providers say, "We offer courses at our college where we have a strong track record of...", it's not what the employer wants to hear. They'd prefer to be told something like: "Your organisation needs to improve its performance. Training is available to meet your needs."

Clearly, there can be a damaging clash of cultures here. It's those providers who have ditched education-speak in favour of business-speak who have made the real inroads. If the provider can painstakingly find out how the company can benefit from basic skills training, then the bosses may be persuaded to put aside their fear of losing staff to "English classes" in company time.

The secret here is listening, and that goes for the provider as much as for the employer. Practitioners in literacy and numeracy programmes need to be aware of organisations' needs and constraints. If not, negotiations can go wrong at an early stage. And they have to be aware that small and big businesses will probably have very different priorities. It is likely that the boss of a small company wants staff to be more efficient and autonomous so that

management can reduce the amount of time spent on supervision.

This was the approach adopted at a company called Vitacress Salads, a provider of produce to supermarkets, where mistakes on the production line were costing hundreds of thousands of pounds a year. The errors were invariably as a result of staff putting the wrong sell-by date on bags of salad, so that production had to be stopped and the process started again. To address the problem, management at the Hampshire introduced literacy and numeracy learning. Standards improved and profits increased. Workers' morale and teamwork improved as well.

A large organisation, on the other hand, may see workplace training as simply a quality issue, a way of gaining an "Investors in People" award or of enhancing customer loyalty.

In addition, employer training pilots have had great success in engaging basic skills learners. The main change in emphasis has been in the specific targeting of employers. With firm employer backing, learners have felt more supported, and retention rates have been higher, though there is still resistance from some employers.

At the same time, providers have come up with some creative packaging of basic literacy and numeracy, with the most responsive ones offering report writing, business English and commercial numeracy. These all start with Basic Skills Agency screening and conclude with a national test.

Payment regimes, provider training and contract management by the Learning and Skills Councils must focus on the output, quality and appropriateness of the learning. And it must never be forgotten that many learners feel a real benefit from gaining a nationally recognised qualification.

Engagement of the employers is paramount. This means that basic skills education must fit in with their needs. When employers see communication, numeracy and language skills as part of their organisation's overall development plans rather than a bolt-on, experience shows that literacy and numeracy programmes have the best chance of success.

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