

The way ahead

A lot of work is currently being done, most notably in Scotland by Learning Connections. Much of this work has been based on the Diana Coben research report entitled "Adult Numeracy: shifting the focus". From this, initiatives such as The Scottish Numeracy Energiser Training and the ICT in Adult Numeracy Project provide opportunities for practitioners to develop skills and update on current thinking, while the National Numeracy Conferences, the first of which was in December 2004, give a platform for dissemination of current theory and good practice and facilitate networking and collaborative activities.

NIACE and the Basic Skills Agency are another source of useful information and practical resources.

learndirect scotland has a range of resources available in their learning bytes catalogue and will be promoting a range of themed Numeracy clusters in the near future.

A selection of key documents and websites is listed below:

- Adult Numeracy: shifting the focus (see Learning Connections website, below)
- Adult numeracy: review of research and related literature (see NRDC website, below)
- An Adult Literacy and Numeracy Curriculum Framework for Scotland (see Learning Connections website, below)
- Learning Connections is located within Communities Scotland and houses the Adult Literacies Team. Numeracy specific research, projects and resources can be accessed at www.lc.communitiesscotland.gov.uk
- The National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy (NRDC) is a useful site to track down research reports, reviews, developments and general news: www.nrdc.org.uk
- The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) also provides useful material: www.niace.org.uk

Gordon Craigie

Director
The McIntosh Partnership



Alhambra House
45 Waterloo Street
Glasgow G2 6HS
Tel: 0141 285 6000
Fax: 0141 285 6001

www.lds4partners.com

Numeracy Issues

This article is aimed mainly at practitioners in learning centres who have acquired a responsibility for numeracy but who may not have a particular specialism in the teaching of numeracy.



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There has been much activity in recent years in the field of adult literacies yet, until very recently, not much of this has focused on numeracy. Indeed it has long been recognised by practitioners that numeracy was very much the poor relation in regard to research and resource allocation, a view validated in *Adult Numeracy: shifting the focus*, a report on adult numeracy in Scotland commissioned by Communities Scotland in 2004. However recent initiatives have sought to redress the balance and much good work has taken place which should re-focus and re-energise numeracy provision in Scotland.

This article seeks to highlight a few key findings from these activities and to raise awareness of issues related to the learning and teaching of numeracy particularly as they relate to learners.

What is Numeracy?

A fundamental question but important because of the confusion that persists - numeracy is not mathematics! Every practitioner will be familiar with the "I was never any good at maths" mantra when confronting elements related to numeracy with a learner. There is no doubt that having good mathematical abilities (or potential) will help in addressing the development of numeracy skills but it is neither a prerequisite nor do these abilities have to be overt.

Why would learners want to improve their numeracy skills?

To be numerate is to have confidence in your ability to deal with any situation involving numbers. Those of us who have these skills cannot imagine what it is like to struggle with prices, times, statistical information or any of the plethora of contexts in which numeracy has a role. Acquiring or developing numeracy skills can pave the way for, or remove barriers to, progression within a range of activities and can be viewed as a minimum requirement for functioning as an active citizen in today's society.





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Why would learners not want to improve their numeracy skills?

Fear! Again familiar to every practitioner will be "hate it", "don't like it", "it's too hard" and "canny dae it"! Mostly this is all rooted in negative experiences from schooldays and the image of the subject that has developed in the learner's mind over the years. It may have its roots in fear of failure, related to the right/wrong nature of many numeracy related tasks. Even where the learner has highly developed Numeracy skills for their own situation (household management, sports and games etc) this is often not recognised, particularly by the learner, and so the lack of confidence and reluctance to engage/progress persists. These transferable skills are an important place to start when working with adult learners.

Presentation and approach

In order to persuade learners to re-engage with numeracy, or to encourage them to keep going, innovative ways of marketing and presenting the learning opportunities are key. From the initial contact, whether that's face to face, by telephone or by viewing a poster, the experience must be positive, upbeat and encouraging. Establishing a starting point based on interest and what the learner can do is crucial, and then developing the learning through a range of structured activities that build confidence and reduce/remove fear is an appropriate model to ensure the learner "sticks with it" long enough to see progression.

The attitude and ability of the tutor is also key with people skills being much more important than mathematical knowledge. A didactic approach will almost certainly not be successful, as this will merely reinforce previous (often negative) experiences and images of numeracy.

Some key issues

Attracting the learner

Building on national press and TV campaigns, from learndirect scotland and others such as The Big Plus+ and the very recent R@W Campaign, more local solutions can be advertised by attractive theming. Themes can be interest or vocationally based or focused on supporting learners' children, for example.

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Welcoming the learner

One of the key features of the welcome should be establishing the learner's current level of ability. To minimise any residual fear this can be approached conversationally, drawing out positive experiences by stealth. Establishing why they fear/don't like numbers then contrasting with what they actually can do and do on an everyday basis (household management, sports etc) can provide a positive basis for more structured diagnosis if appropriate.

Establishing goals

As with all learning, establishing goals for the learner's numeracy development is what will help them see a way ahead and give them something to work towards. Also, organising the learning in small, manageable and achievable chunks can be extremely motivating. Their goals should, of course, be realistic and geared to success. For example, if someone wishes to be able to understand/recognise their change correctly when they go into the bar for a pint or wishes to understand their electricity bills or help their children with their learning, etc.

The learning process

"Stealth learning" and "having fun" are key components to ensure that any previous negative experiences are overcome. An important lesson for learners at this stage is to realise that it's OK to "not know" something or how to do something and that asking or finding out is what learning is all about. Tutors can provide positive role models in this by admitting "I don't know but let's see if we can find out" or "I don't know but Jenny/Jimmy does – let's ask them".

Progress and certification

Progress can be measured by consistently revisiting, and revising if necessary, the goals which the learner has set. If this progression is eventually to lead to certification, the learner should be introduced gradually to the more formal situation they are likely to encounter in a group/class/college environment. Of course, learning and assessment leading to certification doesn't have to be in a formal setting – within the Literacies Project, community learning staff can be delivering up to Intermediate 1 Numeracy although it may be accredited through the local college. The key point again is that the learner should be prepared for whatever is appropriate for them.