A Basis for Inquiry

West Lothian Council Adult Basic Education (ABE) operates under the social practice model for literacies learning. Key to this is the structuring of the teaching and learning process around the learner’s practices within their everyday lives. Part of this process is the encouragement of learners’ reflections on their learning and its impact on their lives. The benefit is two-fold: understanding and acting on their own reflections enables the development of the learning process; discussion of these reflections supports the tutor to develop their teaching practice and best respond to the learner’s needs.

Participant reflection is one theme of the HMIE indicator for participant learning/development in Community Learning and Development. Services are assessed on their ability to support participants to reflect and consolidate their learning. As part of effective delivery

“participants reflect systematically on their own learning, identifying progress and making decisions on next steps.” (HM Inspectorate of Education, 2006: 46)

During self-evaluation, ABE identified this as a target area for improvement and aimed to use practitioner inquiry as a means to achieving this.

Learning to Learn

Literacies learners are very often at the initial stages of learning as adults in a non-formal setting. They are, however, bringing with them their own experiences of informal learning throughout their lives. One of the key principles of learning and teaching with the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Framework for Scotland is the development and use of metacognitive strategies (Scottish Executive, 2005). Learners’ actions are
influenced by their own monitoring and assessment of their learning. Metacognitive monitoring is routine in the everyday lives of adults but it isn’t always easy to transfer these skills into the learning environment (Cromley, 2005). For this reason, learning how to be a self-determined learner is integral to literacies’ teaching and learning. Supporting the development of metacognition encourages

“learners to see themselves as people who construct knowledge themselves rather than rely on ‘expert’ teachers” (Scottish Executive, 2005: 44)

Mezirow(1990) identifies that reflection on prior learning is central to adult learning. In order to achieve transformational change, learners are not only advancing in what they know but changing how they know (Drago-Severson, 2004). The way in which we make meaning of our learning process shapes the way we learn. The self-determined learner is able to consider the impact of their learning experience and so influence future learning.

The Tutor’s Role

In our learning environments, part of the process of reflection is the sharing of thoughts and feelings between tutor and learner. This has mutual benefit as discussion with the tutor can prompt the learner to consider different perspectives and the tutor can gain knowledge and understanding to inform her practice. The social practice view recognises how people learn and how they use their learning. Discussion promotes tutors’ understanding of learners’ needs and identities and supports the tutor to understand the learner’s experiences and perspectives. The learner and tutor are working together to find a way forward.
Methods of Inquiry

An initial meeting of tutors identified the challenges and issues relating to supporting learners to reflect. A variety of staff opted to become involved in the project; both full time and part time workers; development workers and sessional tutors; experienced staff and those that were fairly new to the workings of the organisation. It was seen as a challenge to manage this process within a busy workload. This could be separated into time spent working with learners during delivery and the time needed to reflect on and develop teaching practice. The process of encouraging reflection was seen as far from straightforward. We didn’t think that students always valued or took responsibility for their own reflective processes and we found it difficult to work with learners who struggled to verbalise their own thoughts and feelings without ‘putting words into their mouths’. We recognised the benefits of learner reflection on the teaching and learning process but weren’t always confident on how best to achieve this.

In order to best fit any inquiry into our current practice, and with a realistic view of the time we could commit to it, we chose an action research approach. We already used Kemmis’ cyclical model of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002) in our own delivery. Our intention was to focus our reflections on supporting learners to reflect by using critical questioning and observe the impact of this on our practice. We would use our findings to develop and expand our ideas.

We started by considering the question ‘How can we best support our learners to reflect?’ Each tutor identified a group of students that they wanted to work with. All students were working towards individual learning goals and came from a range of backgrounds and had differing needs. These included young people, mental health service users, disabled people, employed and unemployed adults. The students’
involvement in the project was discussed and agreed with each group. We agreed to make changes to our delivery and reflect and record these in our existing reflective logs. We also aimed to share our experiences so we could support each other in the process. As the project developed we tailored our log-keeping to consider specific aspects of the process and used peer observation to draw our reflections together. Some tutors digitally recorded aspects of their delivery to support their own reflections. However, many students were resistant to the idea of being recorded so this method of evidence collection was mainly considered inappropriate.

Initial Stages

Our existing delivery included the opportunity for learners to reflect on each session and record this on a record sheet. Each group had developed its own way of recording and as new students entered a group, they would adopt this method. Each group would occasionally review their own record sheet and make changes to the format and the prompt questions used. Although learners saw a need to record their learning, there seemed to be lack of engagement with this process. For many, it became a routine task to be done at the end of the session which would result in similar responses each week. For most learners, there was the added issue of putting their thoughts into words and writing them down with some students requiring the tutor to scribe for them. A valuable part of this process, however, seemed to be the discussion that happened between tutor and learner where learning was reviewed, links were made to the learner’s everyday life and the next step of learning was planned. There was wide variation in how responsive students were to this discussion and the level of apparent critical reflection.
Most tutors involved in the project chose to develop reflection through discussion by developing group activities. These tended to take place in ‘group work’ time at the end of the session so as not to impact on time for individual learning. The main theme was using visual and kinaesthetic prompts to open up discussion between students and the tutor. As students and tutors became familiar with these types of activities, picture prompts were adapted to meet the needs of different groups. For example, ‘scene bean’ character clip art pictures helped learners to identify the emotions they were feeling.
Sample Initial Activity

Several cards of photographs (Appendix 1) of different scenes (mountains, road, beach, woods, shopping centre etc.) were placed on the table. Learners were asked to choose the picture which best represented how they felt about their learning that day.

Examples of Responses

Learner that chose the road photograph:

“Your learning’s constant isn’t it? And it’s like you don’t get any stops within your learning... You’re constantly learning, even when you go home. Like if you’ve done your maths for the day, if you go shopping after on the bus, you’re still using your maths. It’s constant.”

Learner that chose the shopping centre activity:

“It wasn’t really the shopping centre, it was the elevator because I just started a new goal today so it’s like I’m at the bottom of the elevator. And as I work up the goal I’ll go to the top of the elevator. When I finish the goal, I’ll be at the top of the elevator”
Two groups took a slightly different approach to reflection. One group decided to adapt their record sheets from a series of prompt questions to an open diary entry where they could write whatever they wanted. The tutor included a vocabulary page to encourage them to express how they felt. This group gained renewed enthusiasm for completing their records and this was backed up with informal discussion about their learning during break time in the session.

The other group consisted of young people at a training centre. Group discussion didn’t tend to be an engaging or comfortable experience for participants. The tutor tried other options such as encouraging the students to express their feelings through doodling. Again this didn’t prove successful and she gained more success through working on a one-to-one basis with learners. She adapted the record sheet to consider what each learner wanted to get out of the session at the start and reviewing it at the end. (Appendix 2)
Sharing First Thoughts.

After two months delivery, the tutors met to review progress. There were positive developments, some of which hadn't been anticipated initially.

- Tutors felt a renewed enthusiasm for their own reflective practices. Given the focus of the project, tutors were able to consider in detail one particular aspect of their delivery and so reflecting stopped being the routine procedure that it may have become. Also, because we were jointly participating in the project, there was more opportunity for discussion between tutors. This collaborative approach allowed tutors to develop and share ideas and reflection became less isolated.

- Using collaborative approaches with our groups seemed to enable individuals to develop. The group discussion seemed to support individual reflection with group members responding to and encouraging each other. This peer discussion removed part of the tutors' concerns about putting words into the students' mouths and yet students were prompting each other to consider different aspects of their learning.

- Using visual and kinaesthetic approaches helped to engage learners in the process.

- Learners were able to give their own interpretation to the metaphorical picture prompts which extended their reflections into other areas.

- New learners to the groups seemed comfortable with the process and it seemed to support their integration into the group.
We also encountered some challenges

- It was felt necessary to vary the picture prompts or use different activities in order that the process didn’t become repetitive. This needed planning and preparation time.

- Some learners were more critical in their reflections than others. It was felt that some learners were skimming the surface whereas others seemed to reflect more deeply.

As a group, we considered how we could create a reflective log which would enable us to focus in on these issues (see Appendix 3). As well as examining aspects relating to resources and collaborative processes, we developed a ‘reflection ladder’ listing aspects of their learning that our students had discussed. We tried to place these in order from those that a surface reflector might use to those that a deeper reflector considered. We could then begin to consider the areas that an individual reflected on and what we could do to further those reflections.

**Reflecting on Progress**
- I’m nearly at the end of my goal
- I’ve done a lot today
- I worked quickly today

**Reflecting on Links to Life**
- I’m making the same mistakes that I do in my college course
- I’ve been working out which packet is better value
- I need to stay focused; it’s the same in the rest of my life
Each aspect covered by the ladder links in with one or more of the three dimensions of learning (Appleby & Barton, 2008).

- cognitive processes
  - progress
  - strategies
  - learning styles
  - self-direction

- emotional processes
  - engagement
  - emotions
  - barriers
  - self-direction

- social processes
  - links to life
  - self-direction

It is clear that self-direction is the ultimate aim. A self-directed learner can identify the cognitive progress they have made, understand what helped them to get there and apply this to other learning. They understand their feelings towards learning and those barriers that impact on their learning. They are also able to make the connection between their learning and their everyday practices, using these to inform each other.

Drago-Severson’s (2004) adaptation of Kegan’s ‘Ways of Knowing’ was useful in considering behaviours that we may link to surface reflectors and self-directed reflectors in order that we could support the transition from the former to the latter. A surface or ‘Instrumental’ knower identifies concrete goals, follows specified steps to achieve them and sees the tutor as a means to achieving this. A self-directed or ‘Self-authoring’ knower, in contrast, identifies their independently conceived goals and considers the various ways in which to achieve them, seeing the tutor as one of many resources they can use.
In order to respond to the issue of time limitations for planning and preparation, we formed a sub-group who met to develop further tools and resources that tutors could share based on the collaborative and multi-sensory processes used thus far. Tutors began to make use of these resources as the project developed.

We agreed a timetable of peer observation where each tutor observe another’s practice and be observed. Using distinct groups and separate observers supported space and investigator triangulation for evidence collection (Cohen et al, 2007). It allowed us to standardise our observations and gave each tutor further chance for reflection through discussion and sharing of practice.
Developing Resources

The subgroup developed resources both through working together to create multi-sensory tools and using and developing these in their own practice. They gave consideration to the practicalities of the working environment, in particular the availability of resources at an outreach location.

It was recognised that alongside abstract visual tools to encourage open reflection, there was the need to develop resources that prompted learners to consider particular aspects of their learning relating to the topics on the ladder.

The following resources were developed.

**The Tree**

This is a 3-dimensional resource based on The visual Evaluation Tree (commonly known in ABE as the Jelly Tree). Learners choose a pipe cleaner figure and attach a face with the appropriate expression. They can then alter the ‘body language’ of the figure and give it a position on the tree.
The Spider

This is an A3 spider diagram of prompts which can be adapted to meet the needs of the group. Each learner has a set of different coloured post-it notes. They write their responses to the prompts on and stick them on the diagram. The learners then take it in turns to talk through their responses. After the activity, each learner can attach their responses to their own smaller individual version of the diagram.

The Road

This is a felt map which learners use to visually and metaphorically represent their learning journey. The learner can attach a selection of pictures to their map to help tell their story (e.g. type of car, road signs, weather etc.)
The Jigsaw

This resource was developed to be incorporated into a group work theme of ‘jigsaws’. The learners would verbally respond to the prompts on the pieces in order to construct their jigsaws.

The Balloon

Adapted from an existing evaluation tool, the learner notes their responses to a set of prompts and feeds back to the group.

Other resources and activities were experimented with. For example, using sound prompts, but these were not considered to be as successful in eliciting comprehensive reflections.
Analysing Reflections

Resources and Groups

Tutors’ reflections on the different resources and activities used have been collated in Appendix 4. The abstract visual tools (e.g. the tree and map) were viewed as a useful way of initially engaging learners, opening up discussions and encouraging reflection. The prompt tools (e.g. the jigsaw, spider and balloon) could be then used to focus reflection and be easily adapted to consider different areas.

Students were quickly able to engage in using these tools for reflection and were on the whole comfortable in contributing ideas. Tutors identified that students were clearly listening to each other, sometimes mirroring other people’s responses or using responses to trigger their own thoughts and bouncing ideas off each other. The students often felt supported by other people’s experiences and were able to encourage students, for example, if they felt disheartened. Discussions were sometimes continued informally at break-time and previous discussions were referred back to. Students expressed a genuine interest in knowing about each other’s learning and this helped some students to focus on their individual goal setting needs and relate their learning to their everyday lives.

Tutors found the discussions useful for focusing on specific aspects of learning. For example, one discussion relating to the ground rules of being in the group encouraged students who were prone to forgetting to bring their learning tools to take more responsibility for this. They also noted that record sheets were being used in a more detailed way.

New students were consistently identified by tutors as being comfortable in engaging in activities. More experienced learners showed empathy and encouragement to the newer students and shared how they had felt when they were new to
the group. The new students seemed confident to participate. This helped them to identify their goals and motivations for attending the group. This openness encouraged further informal discussion and so relationships and trust between students developed.

Supporting Deeper Reflection

Reflections relating to each individual student who participated in the project were analysed. Students were categorised into surface reflectors, self-directed reflectors and those who were initially surface reflectors but had developed the depth of their reflections (transition reflectors).

Using the tutors’ reflections common themes were identified which helped to define each type of reflector.

**Surface Reflectors**
- know they are doing ‘well’ or have had ‘a good session’
- don’t necessarily link these feelings of progress to learning outcomes
- aren’t always specific about strategies that work
- can’t identify what barriers they face or how they might overcome them
- can identify ‘big-picture’ motivations for being at ABE, for example, helping their children’s learning. However, they don’t then link their learning to other aspects of their lives or specific literacies practices

**Transition Reflectors**
- begin to identify strategies that work and continue to apply to their learning or their everyday practices
- are prepared to identify barriers and challenges. They are then able to accept the support of the group and tutor to overcome these and build confidence
• start to make decisions about their own learning and, in doing this, begin to recognise the impact of being self directed on their learning
• begin to identify progress as specific learning achievements but also progression through a learning journey

Self-directed Reflectors
• understand their own motivations
• identify aspects of their life that are affected by their learning and understand that their learning impacts on their development
• identify barriers and solutions
• identify strategies and can transfer to other areas
• plan their learning

Understanding the key steps that learners take in beginning to develop their reflective practices can help the tutor to understand their role in supporting this by using one-to-one and group discussion.

The young people involved in this project were mainly identified as being surface reflectors and many of them struggled to engage at all with the process. For some this was part of their disengagement with learning as a whole. Engaging the students in discussion was very challenging for the tutor. Peer pressure to not be seen to be engaged was a clear issue. However, using the Youth Achievement Award seemed to help to support the process as it focused and motivated learners and help to draw out their thoughts. It also gave the opportunity for a more private one-to-one discussion with the tutor where peer pressure became less of an issue,
Development of Practice

All the tutors involved in this project have identified it as a positive means of developing their own practice. They have been able to provide a focus for their reflective practice and develop their recording skills. Working together has helped them to feel less isolated and recognise the challenges that they all face in their delivery. Through shared practice they have developed an extended appreciation and knowledge and have tried new approaches and resources. They are now ready to move forward both by continued work with the groups involved in this project and extending their delivery with other groups. In particular, the groups involved are keen to continue using reflection activities and make changes to their record sheets that reflect their development.

The tutors have used their reflections to put together a framework of good practice (Appendix 5) that they can use to further develop their own practice and that can also be used by other tutors looking to develop in this area. Training is being planned to share the resources and ideas that have come from this project. It is also seen as necessary to extend these ideas to other delivery, in particular, short courses where there is a restricted time to spend on reflection and develop trusting relationships.

In order to support learners’ reflections, a new Individual Learning Plan has been developed which asks the learner to consider the key areas of reflection on setting a new goal, during a review of the goal and on completion of the goal. It is hoped that this formal structure will encourage tutors to see learner reflection as an integral part of their delivery which needs to be planned and time-managed. It also allows ABE to maintain a record of learners’ perceptions of the impact their learning has.
Individual Learning Plan Stages

Stage 1

A new goal is set. The learner assesses their existing skills in this area and the tutor and learner work together to identify the learning outcomes the learner will need to achieve in order to successfully complete the goal. The learner identifies their motivations for choosing the goal and the areas of life where they will use their learning.

Stage 2

The learner reassesses their skill level and identifies any barriers which may have prevented them from making progress. They assess progress made for each learning outcome and identify successful strategies. They consider their life areas to link their learning to their everyday practices.
Stage 3

On completing the goal, the learner is encouraged to again reflect on the progress they have made and the impact that the learning has had. This discussion can then be used to consider next steps, including setting a further goal, if appropriate.

At any point in the process, learners are encouraged to consider how their learning links with other aspects of their life, what their future aims are and what steps they need to take to achieve them.
Final Thoughts

Reflecting on learning isn’t an automatic part of the learning process, nor is it assumed that learners will make progress in this area at the same rate as other areas of their learning. It is very much linked to critical thinking. Some learners may begin their learning with the skills and ability to be reflective; for others, it may take a long time to develop. As a tutor, it is an investment of time; time spent listening to and discussing with learners; time spent developing your own reflective processes and an allowance for the passage of time with an acceptance that learners need to develop at their own pace.
References


Appendix 1

Using photographs as metaphors for learning
Appendix 2
Name……………………………………………. Date……………………………………

Working towards my target

Today I will start my target towards………………………………………………… here.

Last session I learned……………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………………………………

This session I hope to……………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………………………………

Do this at the end of the session:

- Today I worked on …………………………………………………………………………………
- I learned how to …………………………………………………………………………………

Tick one word to describe how you feel about the session:

- enjoyable - difficult - positive - tough
- boring - interesting - negative - easy

What I need to think about for next week…………………………………………………
Appendix 3

**Reflection Reflection!!**

Use the 3 questions to comment on the group’s reflection as a whole. Use an individual ladder to comment on the stage of the reflective process that a student is at and your thoughts on supporting them to progress.

Date________________

Did any group discussion support individuals to reflect?

Did reflective discussion support integration of new group members?

Have any visual tools supported reflection?
### Appendix 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Tutors’ Reflections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 2D Evaluation Tree  | • learners felt comfortable using it  
|                     | • one group returned to using it after using some of the prompt activities but it wasn’t used as successfully on that occasion                                |
| 3D Tree             | • was found to be user-friendly & engaging  
|                     | • The faces helped to express emotions and were used more than ‘body language’  
|                     | • supported discussion                                                                     |
| Flipchartted discussion | • Helpful for recording ideas                                                                                                                                         |
| Hot Air Balloon     | • gained a variety of interpretations to the prompts  
|                     | • could be used by different levels of reflectors but process found more difficult by surface reflectors (in one group)  
|                     | • preferred by newer students (in one group)                                                                                                                          |
| Jigsaw              | • Used supplementary questions for building on responses                                                                                    |
| Object/picture/sound | • Reacted to each others responses  
|                     | • More of a surface response than prompt activities                                                                                                              |
| Scene Beans         | • encouraged learners to express emotions  
|                     | • allowed negative feelings to be explored in a non-critical way                                                                                                    |
| Spider              | • prompts were helpful in the reflective process  
|                     | • learners were focused on each question  
|                     | • learners confidently wrote answers on the post-its  
|                     | • the diagram was included in their record sheet by one group who continued to record confidently on the diagram                                                        |
| Road Map            | • useful for reviewing a term  
|                     | • learners liked its interactivity                                                                                                                                         |
Appendix 5

Good Practice in Supporting Learner Reflection

Creating the right environment
- valuing people’s contributions
- devoting time to it; finding the time during the session when people feel comfortable to discuss
- building trust and ensuring confidentiality
- allowing time for learners to get to know each other and give feedback on other learners’ reflections
- making activities relaxed and fun
- allowing for sufficient tutor/learner contact time

Developing critical thinking
- discussing with learners and referring back to learning
- embedding reflection in the learning process
- using a variety of tools to focus reflection
- using prompts
- recapping learning
- letting the process develop over time

Managing the session
- reflecting and forward planning
- giving enough time in the session
- using a recorder to catch everyone’s comments

Valuing reflection
- linking it to the learning (looking at the bigger picture)
- making learners aware of the importance of reflection as a part of becoming self-directed learners
- encouraging ownership and a learning partnership