Recruiting and retaining learners in workplace literacy programs in New Zealand

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Successful workplace literacy and numeracy programs are dependent on effective strategies to recruit and then retain course participants. This article reports on the recruitment strategies used in a large workplace literacy and numeracy project involving 535 workers in 18 courses. It provides an analysis of the strategies used, their rates of success in the companies, the overall retention rates and identifies effective ways to implement these strategies.

Keywords: workplace programs, literacy, retention, recruitment

Introduction

There has been a growing recognition of literacy and numeracy (LN) issues among adults following a series of national incidence studies in many Western countries (OECD, 1995, 1997, 2000). Increasingly, focus has turned to diversifying and increasing provision to address this issue, particularly for those adults with the greatest needs (usually seen as Levels 1 and 2 in these studies). Historically, provision has been dominated by community-based providers, but now policy interest has also turned to integrating or embedding the teaching of literacy and numeracy skills into mainstream tertiary provision and on-site workplace courses (Casey, 2006; Tertiary Education Commission, 2009). The interest in developing workplace provision has been boosted by parallel arguments that improved literacy and numeracy skills are central to upskilling workforces and ultimately, enhancing economic productivity (Ananiadou, Emslie-Henry, Evans, & Wolf, 2004; Ananiadou, Jenkins, & Wolf, 2003; Gray, 2006; Salomon, 2009). This convergence of two policy areas has led to considerable government interest in workplace literacy and numeracy programs, especially in comparison to more conventional contexts such as community provision and tertiary institutions (National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2011; Reid, 2008; Skills Australia, 2011; Tertiary Education Commission, 2010) .

Alongside the increase in workplace provision has been a corresponding interest in understanding how these programs can operate successfully in a context that can be challenging for providers and the courses' host companies (Australian Industry Group, 2012; Reid, 2008). Operational aspects of workplace literacy and numeracy programs differ not only from other provision contexts, but can also differ from other forms of workplace training because of the distinctive nature of literacy and numeracy issues for adults – especially the social stigma attached to this issue. This article examines one of these aspects: the recruitment and retention of learners in workplace literacy and numeracy courses.

Related research

There is a steadily growing body of research literature about workplace LN provision, including some comprehensive literature reviews (Ananiadou et al., 2003; Ananiadou, Jenkins, & Wolf, 2004; Benseman, Sutton, & Lander, 2005; Gray, 2006; Salomon, 2009). The literature includes some studies about pre-disposing conditions that inhibit or encourage companies to provide workplace literacy and numeracy programs (Salomon, 2009; Schick, 2005; Workbase, 2002), but there is an absence of studies about the logistics and operations of these programs once a decision is made to proceed.

Some studies (see for example, Finlay, Hodgson, & Steer, 2007) include some consideration of the course tutors and the learning environment, but have little to say about the recruitment and retention of the participants, even in large-scale evaluations (Wolf & Evans, 2009). Other evaluations (see Kelly, 1999; Long, 1997) mention the importance of developing strategies to recruit people with low literacy and numeracy skills, reporting attendance rates and describing the types of programs, but report nothing beyond this level.

Where there is some discussion of course logistics, there is usually little detail provided. For example the following prescription for running these courses is given in a Canadian literature review (summarised from Read Society, 2009, pp. 16-17)

1. Conduct an organizational needs assessment, taking into account learner goals as well as business objectives;
2. Identify specific training objectives. Select appropriate training techniques and delivery methods. Choose: formal and/or informal methods comprehensive or quick, targeted training how to remove barriers to employee participation (e.g., share the costs; provide transportation, childcare, on-site training, e-learning, and/or flexible schedules, integrated with on-the-job training) location and timing of service delivery. Training techniques; options include: classroom training, e-learning, on-the-job training, mentoring, self-study, one-on-one instruction, coaching, peer tutoring and mentoring;
3. Obtain management and employee support;
4. Then implement the plan.

There are also few studies of learner recruitment and participation in community-based LN programs. A study by Comings, Parrella and Soricone (1999) using force-field analysis, studied the barriers and social and organisational supports that influence whether learners persist in their LN courses. By understanding how positive, supporting influences can be maximised and negative, inhibiting factors can be minimised or eliminated, the authors argue that practitioners can effectively increase overall retention rates, both at individual and program levels. Based on consultations with experienced practitioners and interviews with 150 students, their study found that immigrants, parents of teenage or grown children and those over the age of 30 were the groups most likely to persist. Similarly, learners who had been involved previously in basic skills education, self-study or workplace training and those who have very specific goals were less likely to withdraw. Based on these findings, they identified four key supports to persistence:

- Management of the positive and negative forces that help and hinder persistence (especially the strongest ones);
- Build self-efficacy (belief in one's ability to learn successfully, not just self-confidence) about reaching goals (especially through mastery learning, vicarious experiences provided by social models such as former students, social persuasion from a culture of support and opportunities to address physiological and emotional states);
- Establishing and revising student goals to use as a context for instruction; and
- Making tangible progress towards the goals.

In a quasi-experimental study of retention, Quigley & Uhland (2000) identified a group of 20 'at-risk' (AR) learners in a large educational complex in Pittsburgh. The AR learners were identified using criteria project members had developed from their professional experience: expressed hostility or overt negativity, overt anxiety about joining the program, obvious uncertainty about the program's value, evident lack of commitment to staying in the program, anxiousness expressed in body language and/or a desire to cut the initial interview short. The assessments were counter-checked by another project member and further exploration of the ARs' schooling experiences was undertaken on the assumption that negative school experiences increased the likelihood of withdrawing from the program. Participants were then randomly referred to a control and three treatment groups. The treatment groups had one of three strategies: a conventional classroom setting, but with considerable support provided by the teacher and a counsellor; small group tuition; or one-to-one tuition.

After three months, none of the control group was retained and only eight of the students remained; retention was highest in the small groups and lowest in the 1:1 group. The authors concluded that ARs can be identified reasonably accurately at enrolment that all three of the intervention strategies appear to work better than mainstream classrooms (a format they point out that failed for these learners in the past) and that small groups may well be the most effective tuition grouping for increasing retention.

Given this paucity of research on recruitment and retention in workplace literacy and numeracy programs, the present study provides a useful review of this issue as well as clear indicators for successful practice. Recruitment and retention differ from other contexts in that the programs occur in a controlled environment (a workplace), where group factors (vs. the individual learner in most other contexts) shape the learning environment. Workplace programs also need to address not only the individual worker's needs, but also those of the company.

Background

The data for this article were derived from the evaluations of 18 literacy and numeracy courses set up on-site in 15 companies around New Zealand, involving a total of 491 participants pre-course. The programs were diverse in terms of the industries involved, company size, geographical location, program formats, duration and types of learners. As part of the agreements to run these courses, the companies and program providers also agreed to be part of a comprehensive evaluation program.

The courses varied in approach and length and all had been tailored to the specific needs of the company. A third of them were block courses (typically two days of seven hours, followed by a break and then another block of 2x7 hours) and the others were run for one to two hours weekly. The great majority of attendees (71%) attended their teaching sessions during work time, while similar proportions attended both during work time and outside work time (15%) and outside work time only (14%). All participants were paid for their attendance time.

In the classes, there was a mix of small group and one-to-one tutoring. The courses' contents were usually based on needs analyses carried out by the providers. In about a third of the courses, the literacy content was embedded into other teaching content such as health and safety. The content was therefore highly contextualised, where the teaching material was related to the companies' operations and the participants' jobs rather than a prescribed generic course. Although there is no national database to match the distribution of course-types, consultation with key stakeholders identified these formats as the most common forms of workplace LN courses in New Zealand. The choices of teaching methods and course formats were made by the course providers in association with the companies.

Methodology

A comprehensive, multi-method evaluation study was implemented over a three-year period and sought a wide range of both quantitative and qualitative data to identify outcomes for the course participants, their workplace practices, the companies they work for and their lives outside work. Comprehensive data on all the participants' participation in the courses was collected, which was augmented by interviews with the participants and key stakeholders such as supervisors, company managers, course tutors and provider managers.

A total of 491 course participants were interviewed and assessed pre-course and 343 (69.8%) of these participants were also interviewed and assessed post-course; most of those who missed the post-course interviews had left their companies and were not able to be contacted. No participant refused to take part in the evaluations. The total numbers involved and low attrition rates (explored later in this article) in this study are notable compared with similar studies (Gray, 2006).

The average age of the participants was 40 and interviewees included similar proportions of Māori, Pasifika and New Zealand Europeans, as well as smaller numbers of Asians and people of other ethnicities. Two out of five were ESOL learners and they had been in New Zealand for around an average of eight years. Over half of the course participants had no school or tertiary qualifications and a third had either no workplace training or induction only in the previous two years.

Findings

Publicity and recruitment of participants

Most of the publicising of courses was done by staff within the 15 companies, usually a middle-level manager. In a few cases course providers were also involved, especially when initial recruitment was slow. A range of strategies and combinations of strategies was used to publicise their courses to employees: posters, individual emails, printed publicity sheets distributed to individual employees, announcements at company events (e.g. team meetings, BBQs) and direct approaches to employees by managers and/or supervisors ('shoulder-tapping').

One feature of nearly all the courses was that companies were careful not to use explicit literacy and numeracy-related terminology (e.g. literacy, reading, maths) either in their publicity about the course or in discussions with potential participants because they believed that these words would act as a deterrent. Hence, courses used titles such as *Upskill Yourself, Fast Forward, Growing Lines, Perform, LEAP, Way2Work, Stepping Up, Boost, TeamWorks* and *SWOT*.

Several employers commented that they felt that words such as reading, writing and maths had connotations of failure and negative schooling experiences and were therefore likely to arouse feeling of inadequacy - "they'll run a mile if they think that that's what we're on about." About a third of the managers were adamant on this position pre-course and most had explicitly instructed their providers to avoid this terminology. However, only three of the 14 managers who completed the manager questionnaire still felt the same way after their course had ended. Eight said that they had thought it was an issue at the outset, but were no longer concerned and the remainder (3) said they had never thought it was an issue.

The reasons for this change can probably be related to a number of factors. Firstly, the managers had come to realise that no matter what terms are used; the course participants quickly came to understand that the course involved the teaching of literacy and numeracy skills—irrespective of how they were described. Secondly, once a company has run a course for the first time, word gets out through the company's informal networks and there is not only widespread understanding of what the course involves, but also a realisation that attending the course does not have the negative stigma that managers had thought it might involve. The courses simply become part of a company's training program alongside any others that a company runs—in some cases, for example, they are showcased through company graduation ceremonies for the participants. In several companies, these graduates were deliberately used as recruiters for successive courses. Thirdly, in many cases, the providers and their tutors had been using LN terminology during the running of the course in ways that help make it part of the everyday discussions that go on around the running of the courses. They helped demonstrate that it is possible to use these terms in ways that are both useful and non-threatening.

The course providers were, for the most part, more relaxed about using LN terms, but still respected the employers themselves not to use them. In most cases, this avoidance also occurred because the providers became involved in the programs after the initial publicity and/or the recruitment process had been completed by the companies. The more experienced providers often commented that they would have liked to have been involved in these processes at the start and believe they would have been able to make useful contributions based on their professional experience in getting courses underway. Where providers were involved in second and third generations of the courses, their input added another dimension and was appreciated by the employers for this contribution. As one tutor commented "it's our bread and butter to be able to describe these courses in ways that are non-threatening to workers, even if they are feeling apprehensive about admitting they need help."

The proof of any publicity is firstly whether the targeted group is aware of it and secondly whether they understand the content. In many of the courses, a significant number of the participants interviewed in the period just before the courses started said that they were not aware of the course (i.e. the publicity), they did not know that they were going to be involved with it and/or that they did not understand what the course was about. For whatever reason, the publicity did not register with these people even when multiple strategies had been used. Some of the explanation for this discrepancy lay in the complexities of workplaces—multiple shifts, absenteeism, leave and movement within and between departments—which means that single strategies invariably miss some people at crucial times, even when they are well-written and clearly presented.

In some companies, the avoidance of literacy and numeracy-related terms and the description of courses in broad generic terms probably contributed to course participants in these companies saying that they did not understand what the course was about and sometimes that they had not been told about their expected involvement beforehand. In the former case, the managers had minimised the risk of deterring participants by only providing a broad explanation of what the course was about. It is also clear that in some instances the managers themselves did not understand the content or intentions of the courses that senior management asked them to promote.

Across all 18 courses, analysis of the recruitment and attendance patterns showed that the best results of publicising and recruiting (used in about half the courses) were achieved when potential participants were proactively shoulder-tapped by managers, supervisors or key people in the office. These people were usually widely respected by potential participants. Using multiple strategies also increased the likelihood of ensuring good levels of awareness and understanding about the courses by covering exigencies of the workplace and people's lives. When asked what they thought was the best way of notifying about courses, several interviewees suggested inserts with pay notifications: "it's the one thing that everyone looks at!"

Overall, the publicising of 18 courses and the recruitment of the course participants proceeded reasonably well in the participating companies, although there were also considerable variations across the companies. The evaluations showed that the biggest issues were:

- workers were given inadequate notice of the course;
- poor explanation of what the course involved (especially its LN components);
- over-promising by managers of what could be offered to individual participants.

Final participant selections

The final group of course participants who actually started their courses eventuated as a result of the employees volunteering on an open-entry basis, some careful cajoling and active encouragement of employees by managers or supervisors, and in one case enrolling all the employees of a small company. Even with proactive strategies such as shoulder-tapping, there did not appear to have been any coercive recruiting; all the workers interviewed for the evaluations said they felt that they could have refused to go on to their course if they really did not want to do it. Most of those who expressed some hesitation about doing the course in their first interviews came to enjoy the experience. Very few were hesitant before the course and disgruntled afterwards.

A total of 535 workers who were initially enrolled in courses were interviewed before the courses started. These people had all been chosen by managers as participants for the courses or had volunteered in response to course publicity. After the courses had ended, records showed that 44 (8%) of the 535 had never started their courses, but were still working for the companies.

The reasons for these 44 not starting on their courses varied. In some cases, managers changed their minds and had decided that there were more appropriate candidates for the courses. The managers saw this as fine-tuning their selection processes as they became more aware of the nature of the courses and further reflected on which workers would benefit most from them. In some cases, the workers had been told that they were going on the course and then "nothing happened, we never heard anything more, so we just assumed that we weren't needed on it." These workers certainly felt frustrated that they weren't told what was happening or why by either the company or the providers.

Seven workers (mainly men aged over 50 years) flatly refused to go on the course when they found out that it involved literacy and numeracy. As one of these people said, "I can't stand these airy-fairy, Kumbayah -type courses" and that he would only attend courses that teach practical aspects of their jobs. With two others (both older Pacific Island men), the refusals were probably due to a loss of face of being in courses with women (a daughter and wife in one case) and younger men.

Course attendance and retention

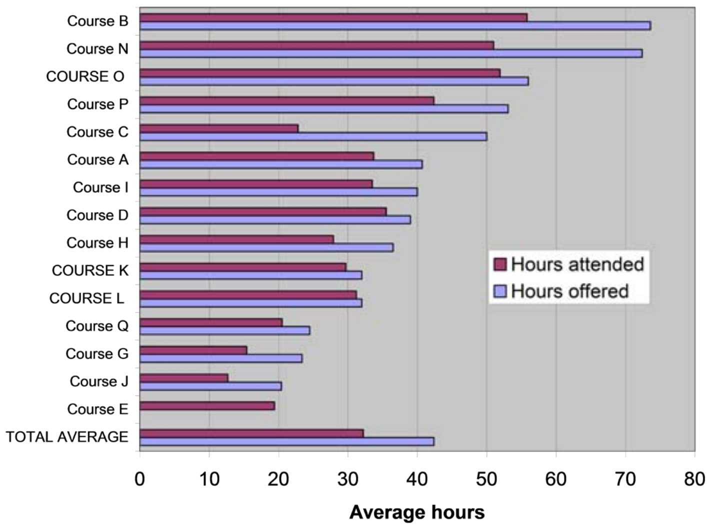
Beyond recruitment, attendance then becomes integral to the success of a workplace LN program. However, maintaining high levels of attendance is not easy, given the many and varied demands in workplaces which compete for priority. For example, releasing workers to attend sessions puts additional demands on fellow-workers and their supervisors and there are always variations in availability with the type of workplace. Some types of work organisation make learning at work easier than others (especially in larger companies); while some sites have consistently high demands throughout the year, others have seasonal variations in production tempo.

Over the duration of the project it became clear that it was more insightful to monitor course attendance than course withdrawals. Often it was not clear whether someone had finally withdrawn from a course as they might not attend teaching sessions due to factors outside their control such as work demands and subsequently dip in and out of the course over a long period. Others might exit from a course even after a short period when they or their tutor felt that they had achieved the skills they set out to master (e.g. a specific skill in maths such as calculating percentages). Defining a withdrawal is therefore always problematic, whereas monitoring course attendance rates is more straightforward and provides a more discerning perspective on what was happening in the courses.

Fourteen of the 18 courses supplied complete attendance figures for the evaluations; one had attendance data, but did not report on how many hours were offered. Attendance data was not provided at all for three courses, although these courses had small numbers of participants. In total there were attendance figures for 311 (90.7%) of the 343 post-course interviewees. Two-thirds of the participants achieved 80%+ attendance rates. Course withdrawals and poor attendance occurred because participants left their companies, there was lack of cover and participants experienced personal issues and/or changes in work demands.

Figure 1 below gives the number of hours offered and attended for the 15 courses where data is available. The three courses offered in block format are in capital letters. These courses have the highest attendance rates, which is not surprising as their total number of teaching sessions was much lower than those courses that had teaching sessions weekly. Weekly sessions therefore had a greater potential for absences and work intrusions.

Figure 1: Hours teaching offered and attended in 15 courses



[Courses in capital letters indicate block format]

The average number of teaching hours the participants were offered was 42.4 hours and the average number of hours attended was 32.2 hours. There was considerable variation in the attendance patterns of different courses and of individuals within the same course. Most participants received between 21–39 hours of teaching, followed by 40–59 hours and 0–20 hours. Only 8.9% received 60+ hours of teaching. There was little variation in attendance among different groups of participants, although ethnic minority members and those with qualifications had slightly higher rates of attendance.

Courses run by experienced workplace providers also achieved higher attendance rates.

Factors affecting course attendance

Asked how difficult they found it to access their courses, nearly two-thirds (62%) said they 'did not find it difficult', a quarter (26%) said it was 'sometimes difficult' and one in eight (12%) said it was 'usually difficult'. All interviewees were asked post-course what factors had hindered or prevented their course attendance. The most frequent responses included:

- changing jobs within the company;
- working away from normal work sites;
- work crises (both within the company and in the wider world including the Global Financial Crisis);
- changes in work structures;
- variations in seasonal demands;
- general workplace absenteeism;
- personal crises and family issues.

Based on feedback from both course participants and their supervisors, it appears that educational factors in relation to the courses themselves (e.g. poor teaching, difficulties learning material) have been at most a very minor element influencing attendance. But there was consistent feedback that poor attendance is much more likely to be affected by the realities of running courses around the demands and complexities of workplaces that always have their on-going company performance as their prime consideration.

That said, it is also important to acknowledge that learner commitment is also part of the overall formula for achieving good attendance rates. There were some courses where attendance was poor (especially among some groups of learners in the courses) despite herculean efforts on the part of the tutors concerned (including running public meetings to engage partners and families; reminding learners at work; ringing/texting them reminders; calling round to their homes; and even transporting them to teaching sessions). It is difficult to envisage what more could have been done in some cases and yet attendance in these cases never reached satisfactory levels. Although it is possible to speculate why these learners did not respond very well to these strategies, it is difficult not to conclude that individual motivation was the major factor missing.

Course withdrawals also occurred mainly because of the same reasons, but especially due to workers leaving their companies.

Discussion

While the design of workplace LN programs inevitably focuses primarily on the core components of the teaching process and the teaching content (neither of which were the specific focus of this study), logistical aspects also warrant careful consideration. Recruiting appropriate learners for these courses is a fundamental pre-condition to ensuring that these programs achieve the intended positive impact both on the learners themselves and their wider context of the workplace. The findings reported here show that strategies do vary in their ability to attract, recruit and retain prospective learners, but it is possible to achieve very satisfactory results overall.

Pro-active recruitment by company staff who are respected by prospective participants is probably the most effective strategy, especially when it is complemented by a range of other strategies to ensure that the information is conveyed to workers irrespective of their shift patterns, idiosyncrasies of company operations and any other of the myriad of diversions that abound in workplaces. Course tutors are also an invaluable resource in the recruitment process. They know their prospective learners well from their prior experiences and are able to couch invitations in ways that convey the intention of the course, while also ensuring that the strategies are non-threatening and don't deter involvement. Probably the greatest concern with the pre-course procedures was that a small, but significant minority of enrollees said that they had not been aware they were going on a course in the near future, and even when they did know, they often did not know anything about its content.

Many managers are apprehensive on behalf of their workers that 'the L word' (literacy) is a major deterrent to workers who (they assume) are embarrassed about their LN skills and associate them with a sense of failure resulting from negative experiences of the schooling system. However these evaluations have clearly shown that such apprehension is usually misplaced as participants soon detect the true intent of the courses anyway and come to see LN courses as little different from any other training course they attend. Fudging the issue by publicising courses with vague descriptions and non-descript course names only tends to increase confusion and delays the process of understanding what the courses are intended to achieve.

There was a high rate of attendance in most of the 18 courses, which is testament to the high degree of support the courses received from management (especially supervisors), the tutors' skills, the high relevance of the contextualised teaching content and the learners' commitment. Where it did occur, absenteeism and withdrawals from the courses were usually related to workers leaving the company or the ups and downs of workplace demands and changes. Educational factors appear to play little role in influencing attendance.

Overall, these workplace LN courses were successful in not only recruiting an appropriate group of participants, but they also managed to retain a high proportion of the initial enrollees through to completion. As in Brinkerhoff's research of workplace training (2003) these evaluations have shown that the eventual impact of an educational course is considerably influenced by what happens in its early stages.

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