

Moving literacy

Post-16 Educator talked to Kayte Haselgrove and Kirsty Haughton about the new FE Literacy Movement.

PSE: Tell us a bit about your background and that of the FE Literacy Movement.

Kayte: I started in FE as a learning mentor with vocational students. English was my background and I got interested in developing literacy to overcome various barriers - learning difficulties and disabilities, confidence, that kind of stuff. For a time, I was an advanced practitioner and then Head of Teaching and Learning, and worked on English within vocational subjects and supporting functional skills teachers moving on to teach GCSE English as a consultant. At Derby University, I've been training people to be GCSE English resit teachers. The huge difference in the starting points of these two groups - functional skills teachers moving to GCSE and the trainee teachers I work with on the PGCE and Cert. Ed. - is fascinating.

Kirsty: I actually started in early years. When chair of a committee-run preschool, we had to review the phonics and other elements of the curriculum for Ofsted. My children went there; my son was unable to speak and struggled with literacy through childhood. I then taught FE sociology. I'm interested in politics and how our educational system has been designed. Whilst teaching sociology, I realised that what I really was passionate about was young people needing better literacy skills. Retraining to teach English at Derby University was fantastic.

I thought a lot about the GCSE resit programme. It was so disjointed. I became an advanced practitioner for English and collaborated with different organisations - Literacy Trust, local libraries, art galleries, UNESCO - Nottingham was a UNESCO City of Literature and is tenth or eleventh for deprivation in the UK. I became even more focused on what we do with literacy in FE. Kayte

and I agreed: we'd got it all wrong. We're so focused on English GCSE, we've forgotten that we're all literacy practitioners in FE using literacy skills to communicate. English resits are important. But it's bigger than that. Everyone needs to invest in reading, writing and speaking. That's the bottom line. It all needs joining up. Kayte said: 'Let's do it then'.

Kayte: We're both interested in how important literacy is for everybody. But I saw staff teaching GCSE resits reverting back to those school approaches which hadn't worked for these students but there was pressure to get the GCSE grades. The English Language GCSE became very literature focused with teachers reverting to a repetition of modelling, modelling, modelling. That's not how you should teach vocational students. But that wasn't happening in Kirsty's classroom. They were being taught the way they need to be and developing their ability to communicate and articulate themselves.

We're both working mums, things are difficult to balance but, over summer last year, we thought a lot about what we wanted to achieve and what was realistic with the time we had, and spent time planning. We didn't want just another network but a movement and for people to move and make changes. Our official mission statement is: '*Together we aim to improve life chances for learners across the FE sector by harnessing literacy as a vehicle for social mobility*'.

We now co-convene the East Midlands LSRN [Learning and Skills Research Network]; the FE Literacy Movement is our LSRN project. The LSRN advised us to be realistic with what we could achieve in the year. Along with the LSRN, we also talked to the English Association and the Literacy Trust, which we're connected with through other projects and roles.

We thought about a three-year plan and more strategically with one activity per term. The first meeting was on-line. We talked about the idea of a literacy movement - what people would want from it and about people coming together to make change. We were really chuffed; 33 people from across the UK at the first meeting. Really encouraging. We introduced it as having two main focuses:

Kirsty: My focus is that everyone is a literacy practitioner and trying to engage vocational and English teachers in FE, encouraging them to spread the word so vocational teachers feel empowered to develop literacy contextualised within their vocational areas.

Kayte: My main interests were a conference where practitioners could share their research-based resources and activities or their research outcomes, as well as teacher training for GCSE resits. How do we prepare trainee teachers for that subject? The PGCE for FE is generic. Maths and English are different to vocational subjects. So I started researching into that. My PhD is on the orientations of subject specialists and how they change throughout their careers from initial training onwards. I'm looking at Initial Teacher Education for GCSE retake teachers in FE, so our conference is called Literacy, English and the Subject Specialist Teacher, which brings in Kirsty's interests in literacy within vocational teaching.

PSE: The idea that 'every teacher is a language teacher' goes back a long way. Is it concerning that we're still having the discussion about literacy across the curriculum and literacy teachers and vocational teachers collaborating?

Kirsty: I think the roots are in the shifting political landscape. We see that cycle. It feels like we're coming back round to things that were tested out before. English and maths are important. We need to focus on them. But that focus has become so intense we've almost forgotten why English was the thing to resit. Well, it's because literacy and oracy are important. But the GCSE specifications stripped away a lot of those core skills and the value that used to exist. I'm not saying that previous qualifications were absolutely fit for purpose. But we've become fixated on GCSE exams and the subject of English rather than what we need from English - not 'can you give ten language features?' but competent readers, confident speakers, people able to write effectively. And we're saying vocational tutors have a responsibility to embed English and

maths, which is in the Education and Training Foundation professional standards.

We have a thorough early careers framework for primary and secondary teachers which outlines the importance of literacy across the curriculum and the teacher's responsibility to develop literacy. Why in FE is it: 'yeah, do a bit of English and maths'? That so misses the mark. This is where policy is important and that FE organisations buy into literacy too.

Kayte: There's currently some work happening on early career teacher frameworks for FE. But I agree. There was a shift in Ofsted. English and maths were mentioned about 116 times in the Common Inspection Framework and everybody was so focused on English and maths being shoehorned in that I think Ofsted thought they'd emphasised English and maths too much, because everybody follows the framework to the tee. Now I think English and maths are mentioned twice in the inspection framework. Of course, you need English and maths Level 2 qualifications to get QTLS [Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills] status. It's still part of our professional formation, required by the Education and Training Foundation and the Society for Education and Training. I think most ITE [Initial Teacher Education] providers follow that; English and maths are needed to get employment. But I don't think Ofsted are pushing it anymore with regard to 'embedding'; there's just not the same priority. But what's the answer? Literacy people trying to push literacy across their colleges? Literacy has always been put second, you know.

But we were delighted that at our first event on Oracy in FE we had two mathematicians! But it's how do we move forward? I remember talking about English and maths and FE in management training in 2016. There was no answer to that question. We're constantly trying to make things work. At the time of that training, we went from ten students sitting a GCSE retake to 1000 overnight. We literally didn't have enough chairs for them all to do it. And we've found that the literature out there is predominantly on the management of GCSE English and maths in FE and how you manage the situation, including your functional or key skills teachers so they can teach GCSE. Now we're seeing a shift. People are doing research into how to teach students doing the GCSE resits, not just to pass the exam. There's some amazing stuff out there, such as the Outstanding Teaching, Learning and Assessment work from the ETF and more research and writing coming from teachers in FE, which is really fantastic to see. We want to bring those people and those ideas together.

PSE: You're questioning the stress on retaking GCSE. It feels like teachers trying to solve a problem not of their making - achieving ends that aren't the ends they should be trying to achieve.

Kirsty: Yes. I'm interested in what the general election might bring. I'm optimistic about change around literacy and pleased we've created a platform in which others can also have a voice about literacy in FE. But we need to think about the political agenda for literacy. There are no social benefits having people that can't read. It's not good for people struggling with low literacy or illiteracy or for the economy, which doesn't function as well as it should. It makes no sense.

PSE: But there are concerns about how literacy has been dealt with in policy, including the figures for poor literacy and the way we moralise literacy and view illiteracy as a social problem. Are there really 7.1 million people with poor literacy skill? How's that measured? 'Poor' literacy is linked to all kinds of social ills - worklessness, not voting. How do we get practitioners discussing literacy policy and the assumptions it makes? What kind of literacy are we after? Functional literacy? Somebody else deciding what you need literacy for: a functional worker not somebody engaging with the literacy they think is important?

Kirsty: Absolutely. That's always been important to me. When teaching, I've always tried to provide opportunities to engage with issues. I had the three Nottingham MPs in so my students could plan, with support, to speak in that political forum. It's important. People need to be able to express themselves; literacy and oracy are tied together. And yet we have a huge amount of people, especially in deprived areas, without a voice. FE is somewhere for people who need transformation in their lives. We can't help that transformation if we don't support them to use that voice. That's where it starts. But if we're talking about figures, there's a hidden figure that's hard to get to the bottom of: Julia Alissa from Literacy 100 did some research into literacy among homeless people and found that over 50 per cent were functionally illiterate. Absolutely shocking. We've got a huge homelessness problem in our country; half of them potentially can't fill out a form or advocate for themselves to improve their situation. Nobody benefits when people can't read, write or articulate what they want and think.

Kayte: it makes me think about GCSE resit trainee teachers and the expectation that students have this

tacit knowledge of literacy, and the shift between being a subject expert in English and being able to communicate your subject to others.

Communicating your subject to others in an A-level class will be very different to communicating your knowledge to students resitting GCSE. We do a lot of work on that and the expectations you mentioned. Part of working with the trainee teachers is helping them to think about their expectations of students and what they're aiming for with them. It's about shifting perceptions. For example, the GCSE maths resit trainee teaching maths students thinking 'why am I bothering to try and get these students to do any work? They're not going to pass', but now he's thinking: 'Yeah, I could help them to make some progress'. We worked really hard developing the trainee teachers' thinking around what students need from them as English and maths teachers.

But there's a big debate. It's been going on for years. But we've got to start somewhere. Our focus this year is finding out what literacy teachers and teachers of English care about and how we can underpin this with research so that we can demonstrate the validity of what these practitioners are saying. None of these practitioners and researchers will be focusing on how we get students to pass the exam during the conference. Policy has changed. Colleges aren't measured against how many get a grade 4 anymore but how many make progress. It's a good shift. Students still feel like they've failed, so absolutely there's work to do, but there are contrasting priorities: get them through the exam, but actually we want them to enjoy literacy and understand how oracy will help them in their ~~lives~~

PSE: How do you navigate that dilemma: institutional pressure to get outcomes; encouraging a richer, more engaged literacy practice with spaces for practitioners to develop that?

Kirsty: There are constraints from the outside and the inside. But there's been a huge change at my college - lots of innovation, a positive place to work, not all about getting students through an exam. We're talking about the inclusion of students that struggle. We agree: we cannot say, right, you've got to get through the exam from September. That's not how we want to work any more. We need freedom to deviate from exam papers. But there are constraints on FE - data and cost-saving and despite increases in funding, it's still not enough. There are lots of issues that are not easy to solve. There was a shift across the country to reduce - or in some cases get rid of - functional skills. But

functional skills is a fantastic qualification. It covers the nuts and bolts of literacy, particularly for entry level students with spiky profiles and gaps in their knowledge.

PSE: So what about your forthcoming conference (on June 28th 2024)?

Kayte: One thing that we really want is to make this professional development accessible to everybody. It's a small thing but it really mattered. We've made it £30 a head. No speakers are being paid.

But what's this movement meant to be? We're trying to remove the constraints and make the event as open as possible and to get people to a conference where we talk about ways to support students with their literacy in the sector that's research informed and has credibility. We've got people talking about all sorts of things - dyslexia, what we can do about policy, what books are interesting for students, challenging a view of literacy that's solely about passing, using a lens of social practice to explore literacy in FE.

For more information about the FE Literacy Movement:

<https://padlet.com/edukayte/the-fe-literacy-movement-d2ujisnfx15zs1kd>

X / Twitter: @LiteracyFE

Where we stand:

Post-16 Educator seeks to defend and extend good practice in all sectors of post compulsory education and training. Good practice includes teachers working with students to increase their power to look critically at the world around them and act effectively within it. This entails challenging racism, sexism, heterosexism, inequality based on disability and other discriminatory beliefs and practices.

For the mass of people, access to valid post compulsory education and training is more necessary now than ever. It should be theirs by right! All provision should be organised and taught by staff who are trained for and committed to it. Publicly funded provision of valid post compulsory education and training for all who require it should be a fundamental demand of the trade union movement.

Post-16 Educator seeks to persuade the labour movement as a whole of the importance of this demand. In mobilising to do so it bases itself first and foremost upon practitioners - those who are in direct, daily contact with students. It seeks the support of every practitioner, in any area of post-16 education and training, and in particular that of women, of part timers and of people outside London and the Southeast.

Post-16 Educator works to organise readers/contributors into a national network that is democratic, that is politically and financially independent of all other organisations, that develops their practice and their thinking, and that equips them to take action over issues rather than always having to react to changes imposed from above.