Extending the Assessment of Literacy as Social Practice

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Abstract

This article explores how the FETAC standards and processes at Levels 1 and 2 can be used to recognise literacy as a social practice. A summary review of the development of the National Framework of Qualifications is provided. Levels 1 to 4 in Ireland are compared with three key international frameworks, including OECD levels and those in Northern Ireland/England and Europe. Following a short consideration of assessment in adult literacy practice in Ireland, a process is outlined that practitioners and managers in adult basic education can use to support the certification of literacy as a social practice in adult education and real life contexts.

Introduction

When the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was launched in 2003 adult learners and educators welcomed the innovation of the new Levels 1 and 2 and the potential they provide for national qualifications. These levels are particularly relevant to adult literacy and basic education practice and to adults with no or low qualifications and the educationally disadvantaged. The aim of this article is to explore the potential within these levels for recognising achievement for literacy as a social practice.

The methodology involved a comparison of NFQ levels with international benchmarks, analysis of FETAC statistics in relation to programme validation and awards at Level 1 and 2, and a consideration of assessment in adult literacy practice in Ireland against the standards at Levels 1-3 specific to literacy and numeracy practices.

The analysis of the above has resulted in certain outputs that will be of use to adult literacy and basic education practitioners.

- The provision of a summary table of levels 1 to 4 in Ireland, with international comparisons, including Northern Ireland.

- An outline of Level 2 standards involved in common social practices of literacy in adult education centres.

- A synthesis of a process practitioners and managers in adult basic education can use to support the certification of literacy as a social practice.

It is hoped that this article will inform a national dialogue on levels and assessment in adult basic education practice, and may enhance providers', and ultimately adult learners, engagement at these levels.

The Certification Context

The Irish National Framework of Qualifications is a 10 level framework of standards for accreditation purposes, established in October 2003. Levels 1-3 are of most relevance to adult literacy learners, but progression to levels 4 and 5 is also important. There were no previous awards at Level 1 and 2. However, accreditation is not a requirement of participation in adult literacy, and it is vital that participants continue to take part in adult literacy learning activities with an option of accreditation.

Before the NFQ, the most accessible certification for adult literacy learners was the Junior Certificate or an old NCVA / FETAC award now at Level 3 on the framework. The certification system was not unlike the fire escape of a New York building. It was easily used by those on the inside to move up or down levels, but the ladder could not be accessed by people on the ground outside. The introduction of NFQ Levels 1 and 2 brought the accreditation ladder within everyone's reach. For many, including the 500,000 Irish adults with literacy difficulties identified by the OECD International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) (1998), it provided a more appropriate or realistic opportunity for certification, often for the first time. This was a significant innovation in an Irish context and relatively new in international terms. Levels 1 and 2 are different in two key respects from the other levels. Firstly, the volume of learning is smaller than at Levels 3 up to 10. Volume of learning is important as over-assessment is a greater risk with smaller volumes of learning. Secondly, Level 1 and 2 were 'greenfield' levels, and assessment for certification at these levels remains a new development for national awarding bodies, providers and learners. The introduction of the NFQ has also facilitated discussion on levels in adult basic educa-

tion beyond what individuals could or could not do. The NFQ is now a familiar and concrete framework with a common language, and can be used to compare qualifications with those gained in Belfast or Berlin. A general and summary comparison of levels is provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1: General Comparative Table of Levels

Ireland – National Framework of Qualifications	European Qualifications Framework	International Adult Literacy Survey	National Qualifications Framework England Wales & Northern Ireland
NFQ	EQF	OECD IALS levels	NQF Levels
Level 1	*Level 1*	*Level 1*	*Pre-entry*
Level 2	*Level 2*	*Level 2*	*Entry*
Level 3	*Level 3*	*Level 3*	*Level 1*
Level 4			*Level 2*

This comparison is based on analysis of levels used in IALS, the European Qualifications Framework, the National Qualifications Framework in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the NFQ and NQAI publications (2008, 2009) as well as conference presentations [1].

FETAC Common Awards System

FETAC are currently rolling out the new Common Awards System (CAS) which will cover every award they make at Levels 1-6 on the NFQ by 2014. Providers are required to formally agree quality assurance arrangements and to validate programmes with FETAC before they can offer programmes to learners that lead to certification. Both the quality assurance agreement and programme validation cover assessment policies and processes.

The roll out of the CAS is being achieved on a phased basis, and started with awards at Levels 1 and 2 in 2007. Analysis of the FETAC Register of Validated Programmes[2] shows that the response from providers to Levels 1 and 2 has been mixed. While VECs have led the way in this regard, there are still consider-

1 For example, a presentation by John Vorhaus, NRDC, Institute of Education, London on 1/12/08 in Germany.
2 www.fetac.ie FETAC Register of Validated Programmes, Levels 1 and 2, May 2009 and February 2011.

able gaps. It is also clear that community based providers of adult education are struggling to use the CAS. According to FETAC award statistics, 65 FETAC Major Awards were made at Level 1 and 2, in 2008, with 266 Major Awards in 2009 and 451 Major Awards in 2010[3]. When Minor Awards are included, less than 1% of all awards made in those three years were at Levels 1 and 2. The implementation can be described as disappointingly slow, at best. Adult learners in Ireland do not yet have equal access to the option of accreditation for learning at these levels. In 2011, eight years after the NFQ was launched, where a person lives, and which provider a person accesses services from, are still determinant factors in the availability of Level 1 and 2 awards to learners, including adults returning to basic education.

Adult Literacy Learners

Adults return to education to tackle a literacy need for a wide range of reasons (Bailey & Coleman 1998, NALA 2009). For instance, adult literacy learners tend to go back for a particular social purpose. For some it is to write their own Christmas cards, to read for leisure, or to help children with homework. For others, it may be to grapple with changes in literacy practices at work or in wider society, such as the increasing use of websites and ICT. Success for learners is about participation, reaching goals and improving their facility to engage more fully in the contexts they want, without literacy and numeracy practices being a barrier (NALA 2008, 2009).

A typical profile of a participant in VEC adult literacy services in 2008 was an adult, about 40 years of age, who had left school at 15-16, most likely without achieving a Junior Certificate level qualification. The learner typically received two hours literacy tuition per week. Analysis of the VEC adult literacy returns indicates that in 2008[4]:

- 70% of all students were under 45 years of age.
- 79% of all students were in group tuition.
- Females comprised 60% of all students and with 40% males.
- 38% of all students had Primary Certificate qualifications or less.

3 www.fetac.ie FETAC Annual Statistics 2008, 2009 & 2010.

4 Based on an analysis of the DES VEC Adult Literacy Returns 2008, unpublished.

- 70% had a Junior Certificate level qualification or less.
- 26.5% of learners were ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) learners.
- 39% of students were in employment, but students were increasingly likely to be unemployed in 2008 than in previous years.

Literacy as social practice

There is a compelling literature base that maps the evolution of literacy as social practice (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 1996; Street, 1995, 2001; Crowther, Hamilton, & Tett, 2001; Prinsloo 2005; Reder & Devila 2005; Tett, Hamilton, & Hillier, 2006; and Hegarty & Feely 2009). One way of understanding literacy as social practice is, as Barton (2007) describes, to use a perspective which sees literacy as

> located in interactions between people, rather than being a decontextualised cognitive skill…

Adult literacy is predominately conceptualised in Ireland as social practice. This approach is central to NALA's (2005) definition of literacy, which recognises that people use different skills for various real life situations, including in family, community and work settings. This means literacy cannot be seen as a discrete set of technical skills. A social practice approach recognises the limits of a focus on the autonomous skills of reading, writing, numeracy and language, to embrace…

> what people do with literacy, numeracy and language, with whom, where and how. (Tett, Hamilton, and Hillier, 2006)

The purposes, uses and contexts of literacy practice are fundamental to literacy development in Irish basic education. It follows then that purpose and context should be included in the assessment of literacy. This has not always been the case, and it is timely to explore the challenge to literacy practitioners as they develop programmes and assessment systems to recognise literacy achievement under the FETAC CAS.

Assessment in adult literacy in Ireland

Assessment in the Irish adult literacy services developed in the absence of a comprehensive national standard and has been practiced informally and often intuitively by literacy practitioners[5]. Juliet Merrifield (2001) outlines three main purposes of assessment – for accountability purposes, for accreditation purposes and for teaching and learning purposes. In some cases processes are interlinked. For example, in Ireland initial assessment in adult literacy provides information for both teaching and learning purposes and for accountability.

While there is no formal national procedure for initial assessment currently in use in Irish adult literacy services, there is a common approach in terms of the aims, ethos and the principles underlying initial assessment[6]. Initial assessment is characterised as a process which is informal, adult friendly, and carried out by initial interview with the Adult Literacy Organiser. The Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education (ITABE) programme was introduced in 2006 and provided for six hours tuition per week for 14 weeks. It required all participants (about 2,000) to have an initial or pre-programme assessment, as well as an assessment at the end of the programme. The assessment process is based on checklists for reading, writing, speaking and listening and numeracy that reference the FETAC national standards.

Formative assessment is a core feature of literacy work. Mapping the Learning Journey (MLJ) was introduced in 2005 as a framework to capture and support formative assessment for teaching and learning purposes, based on practice in the field and international research. MLJ can help identify, record and summarise progress learners make in literacy work. It covers the areas of reading, writing, numeracy, oral skills and personal development. MLJ informed the development of Levels 1 and 2[7]. FETAC Level 1 and 2 awards in Reading, Writing and Listening and speaking closely match the standards and range of the MLJ beginning and mid-level levels respectively[8]. The upper level of MLJ is not closely aligned with standards at Level 3.

5 A short account of assessment in adult literacy practice was outlined in Guidelines to the level definitions for the Department of Education and Science VEC adult literacy returns (NALA, 2007).

6 Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work NALA 2005.

7 NALA provided drafts of standards for awards in Reading, Writing, and Listening and Speaking at Levels 2, based on MLJ, and these were largely adopted by FETAC.

8 The cornerstone cards in the MLJ guide (NALA 2005) are a very useful reference for comparison with the published standards for Level 1 and 2.

Summative assessment processes in literacy work have until very recently been based on the standards within the 'old' FETAC Foundation Certificate and the Junior Certificate.

When a person joins a literacy service they immediately engage in a process of initial and formative assessment. Initial assessment usually starts with their first visit to the centre and focuses on what they can do already and what they want to do. From the first few literacy classes, a learning plan is developed based on the goals, objectives and preferred learning styles and teaching methodologies that emerge. These processes are critical to 'assessment for learning' – that is, assessment activities that inform the teaching and learning plans and activities (See Black and Williams, 1998). But they are also important for students and practitioners in deciding what areas, if any, may be the focus for 'assessment of learning', which involves making judgements about learning achieved, often including certification.

Literacy Standards in Ireland

The FETAC CAS standards are based on learning outcomes and are criterion-referenced. Each award has a specific set of standards that a learner must demonstrate to achieve it. The standards for Reading at Levels 1 and 2 are outlined in Table 2 below. They identify a small number of realistic and specific outcomes a learner must achieve. But they do not prioritise how the learner has achieved the standards. The standards are blind to provider, courses, methodologies, and student background. The requirement is simply that a person must demonstrate the standards, and do so to the satisfaction of the quality assurance process of the provider. This presents what Jay Derrick (in Campbell, 2007) refers to as "local freedom" in the assessment of standards, while maintaining the integrity of the standards themselves. This local freedom is at the discretion of the provider but can only happen within the assessment processes that are approved with FETAC and instituionalised. Providing flexibility, without undermining the rigour of summative assessment processes, is key to demonstrating standards in a way that will allow for different learning journeys to the same destination.

Table 2: Learning outcomes for Level 1 and 2 Reading Awards[9]

FETAC Level 1 Reading	FETAC Level 2 Reading
(R1) Recognise some familiar words independently including some that are commonly used and personally relevant	(R1) Read familiar words that are commonly used and personally relevant
(R2) Interpret some common symbols and signs in familiar contexts	(R2) Use simple rules and text conventions that support meaning
(R3) Demonstrate awareness of text conventions, print material and the alphabet	(R3) Interpret different forms of writing and text, including social sight signs and symbols
(R4) Make sense of simple personally relevant sentences containing familiar words	(R4) Find key information from different forms of writing
(R5) Use word identification strategies	(R5) Use reading strategies
(R6) Identify the nature of familiar documents	

Assessment for certification purposes in literacy

At the heart of the literacy approach is the understanding that 'A beginner reader is not a beginner thinker' (Frost and Hoy 1985). People are not at levels, programmes and standards are. The range of skills, interests and experiences of an adult learner is unlikely to produce a neat or linear result in terms of national standards. For example, an adult learner may demonstrate a set of knowledge, skill and competence in reading at Level 2, but not in writing at that level, while their competence in health and safety awareness may be at a much higher level. Adult learners demonstrate spiky profiles. That is, they have strengths in some areas and weaknesses in others. When these skillsets are benchmarked against the defined sets of knowledge, skill and competence that make up FETAC awards, they may stretch across levels 1-6 (or even higher). This is especially true for adults returning to basic education.

In December 2010, I had the privilege to attend the SIPTU Basic English Scheme celebration of 20 years of service. It centered on the production of a magazine of student writing and a reading night. Some were clearly emergent readers while others were more advanced. There was a wide range of literacy practices demonstrated that night and these can be specifically matched to the FETAC standards for reading and writing. All readers met some or all of reading standards at Levels 1 and 2 in their performance that evening (see Table 2). This included

9 FETAC Level 1 and 2 Reading award specifications on www.fetac.ie.

the emergent readers, as learning at these levels is intended to be supported and familiar, and help with the odd word here and there does not negate achievement. Some demonstrated competencies at Level 3.

Many adult literacy services and community schemes hold similar reading nights and events. Adult literacy students also contribute to the life of their centre in other ways. Students regularly contribute to promotional events. They are usually involved in training courses for volunteer tutors. Student committees are another regular feature of literacy centres. In all these cases, the students are using literacy and numeracy skills in their social practice within the education centre. The point is that assessment systems can capture these practices and provide accreditation, once it is built in to their learning programmes.

Table 3 below provides a comparison of some literacy practices that typically occur in a learning centre with relevant learning outcomes within Level 2 awards. However, many other awards may be relevant. For example, at the SIPTU reading night, Reading, Writing, and Personal Decision Making awards at Level 1 may have been appropriate to recognise achievement in some cases. At Level 3, practitioners will recognise opportunities to meet some or all learning outcomes in such awards as Communications, Self Advocacy, or Event Participation.

Table 3: A comparison of literacy practices in a learning centre with relevant learning outcomes within Level 2 awards

Activity	Level 2 award and outcomes*	Note on assessment evidence
Contributing to a student reading night	Level 2 Writing W2 & W3 Partial meeting of W4 Level 2 Reading R1, R2, R4 & R5	Digital Recording, or tutor verification of the quality, of a students participation
Contributing to a student writing publication	Level 2 Writing W2 & W3 Partial meeting of W4	Draft of student input to publication Copy of publication
Participation in Initial Tutor Training (or a specific promotional event)	Level 2 Listening and Speaking All outcomes	Digital Recording, or tutor verification of Evaluation by participants, of a students participation
Participation on a committee (benchmarked against practices in the NALA student development committee)	Level 2 Listening and Speaking Level 2 Reading Level 2 Personal Decision Making All outcomes	Learner Record Meeting documentation – including agenda, minutes, tutor verification
Participation in a consultation process or event	Level 2 Listening and Speaking, Reading All outcomes	Learner Record Meeting documentation – including agenda, minutes, tutor verification

(*Note: level award outcomes are summarised with firstly the initial(s) of the award and then the order the outcome appears in the award specification. So, R1 refers to the first outcome in the Reading award, W4 refers to the fourth outcome in the Writing award, and so on).

Surprisingly, the collection of evidence of standards can be relatively straightforward at Levels 1 and 2. Providing the option of certification in such instances requires some purposeful planning and rigorous recording, but does not need to involve a significant additional workload. The vast majority of the learning, planning and development required for certification purposes already occurs in the organisation of student reading nights, or in the preparation for a students' input into a volunteer training course. Additional planned inputs are clearly required for assessment purposes. For example, providing information about certification and agreeing with interested learners what can be recognised and how. The assessment

instrument can include digital or audio recording parts of the reading night for a specific group of readers, but it can be sufficient to rely on verification by the tutor or internal verifier. (Indeed, if the recording is carried out by a student it may be possible to recognise this practice as part of the Digital Media or Digital Photography awards.) For presentations to groups of trainee volunteers, the participant evaluations and the verification of the tutor trainer can provide ample evidence of achievement.

Practitioners need to be mindful of introducing additional elements in a way which is non-threatening and does not increase pressure on a participant. Equally practitioners should not decide unilaterally that adding additional planning elements would be too much for the adults concerned – they are usually well able to judge for themselves.

NALA used this approach in the initial delivery of its Level 2 programme. The assessment instrument was a presentation of the learning achieved by participants on a learning programme covered by the TV series "Written Off?". So far so good – however we set the bar too high. The presentation was to the President of Ireland, and was carried out on the TV set. Fortunately, the extra pressures did not deter the learners. They demonstrated and often exceeded standards of listening and speaking and personal decision making at Level 2.

Integrated assessment is an especially useful concept at Levels 1 and 2, where over assessment is a significant risk due to the smaller volume of learning. Here, integrated assessment means providing an assessment task that allows the student to demonstrate a range of standards from several award areas. The NALA Distance Learning Service has used integrated assessment briefs at Level 2 in this way. For example, one particular distance learner had identified an interest in reading about the history of Ireland in the early 20th century. When the programmes' formative assessment process identified the learner as 'accreditation ready', a customised assessment brief was designed. The brief required the student to plan a trip, browse in a bookshop, join a library, find a book appropriate to their interests, read a section of it and describe it to their tutor, and submit a description of this learning experience by post. The evidence included tutor verification and allowed the student to meet many of the learning outcomes across a number of awards at Level 2 including reading, listening and speaking, personal decision making and writing.

There are other opportunities within the life of an adult education centre to recognise achievement. The NALA student development committee is a very

active group and members organize a range of events including National Student Days and promotions at the National Ploughing Championships. The literacy and numeracy practices that the members demonstrate putting on these events so successfully could also be recognised. The sets of knowledge, skills and competencies practiced by students on this committee can be identified and matched to particular standards and outcomes in a range of minor awards. Participation on a committee provides a rich source of evidencing achievement of literacy practices in relation to the array of reading, personal decision making and listening and speaking that typically goes on. There are awards at Level 2 in each of these areas, as well as awards at Level 3 such as Self Advocacy and Event Participation. The key is firstly to design opportunities to capture literacy practices into learning programmes and assessment processes. Secondly the exercise of quality assurances procedures must confirm that the assessment is appropriate, valid, reliable and fair.

The literacy practices involved in the reading night can be exercised in different contexts. The activities of a student committee can be mirrored by engagement in a residents committee or organisation of a fundraising event. Presentations that students might make in work, or a speech at a family wedding, can equally be benchmarked against standards. These real life literacy practices can be matched to national standards to recognise literacy practice, in such areas as managing diabetes, planning a holiday, or in work (think of a painter and numeracy). Again, this approach can only be adopted when it is incorporated into learning programmes, and is consistent with quality assurance agreements made with FETAC. In each case the purposeful planning will require a specific assessment brief that identifies the inherent literacy and numeracy outcomes in specific awards to be demonstrated, and the assessment and verification requirements. However, once the learning programme incorporates this approach, the collection of evidence is not necessarily problematic. Speeches can be recorded. Journals and portfolios can be kept. A job search with identified literacy events can be logged and supported by documentation and report.

Although, this approach is challenging for adult literacy providers and practitioners, it remains eminently possible. While the practitioner may be the expert in terms of teaching methodology and assessment procedures, the student is the expert in their use of literacy. Providing assessment processes that build on both of these skill sets can provide national awards for learners' goals that are evidenced in the social practices and the real world contexts of the learner.

A Summary Guideline

The approach to the assessment of literacy as social practice must be built into the learning programme from the beginning, and it would be useful to reference the approach at the programme validation stage.

The process starts by identifying what the learner would like to be able to do in different contexts. It involves an analysis of the literacy and numeracy practices involved, as well as the steps along the way to achieving the goals set out. This will help match literacy and numeracy practices to specific standards. It is vital to explore how specific sets of literacy practices or standards can be evidenced and captured in the practice and contexts the student is comfortable with, before building assessment processes around it.

Planning is the key.

- Think about the learning plan and learning objectives of the individuals.
- Identify the inherent literacy and numeracy practices involved in achieving these goals.
- Match the student's involvement in the life of the centre, and available real life events and practices, to the criterion referenced standards in the relevant awards.
- Agree the contexts for assessment with the student.
- Ask how you will know the standard has been achieved for the particular practice.
- Identify the assessment technique, and evidence required.
- Provide an assessment brief.
- Reinforce and prepare.

Conclusion

It is important to stress that achievement for adult literacy learners is not primarily about certification. It is more about fluency and independence, and about confidence in doing things that involve literacy and numeracy practices. However the option of accreditation should be provided to learners that want

it. This means that accreditation is not optional for providers. To date, adult basic education providers and accreditation systems have not found it easy to recognize literacy achievements. With the implementation of the CAS, there is now a greater facility to do so. There is also an opportunity to build on the ethos of adult literacy development in Ireland, which recognises that literacy cannot be disconnected from the contexts and purposes of its use, and to reinforce this ethos through the emergent assessment processes. The evidence so far suggests that there is an access issue with the take up of Level 1 and 2 that may need to be addressed at national level. There is no doubt that the design, review and development of assessment processes under the FETAC CAS are new and challenging. Nevertheless, the CAS offers a current and fundamental opportunity to provide certification in ways that reflect the diverse needs of adult learners and facilitate their interests.

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