

# Literacy Matters

Keeping you up to date with literacy news in Ireland and informing you of the work NALA is doing

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# Welcome



Welcome to the autumn edition of Literacy Matters.

While the country has been embroiled in debate over the economy and Lisbon, you will see in this magazine that NALA has been very busy promoting adult literacy and working to keep it on the political agenda.

Since the beginning of the year NALA has met with the Minister for Lifelong Learning, Sean Haughey twice and at every meeting the Minister has reiterated his commitment to adult literacy as his top priority and has been an active supporter of the work of NALA. During National Adult Literacy Awareness Week NALA also held a number of high level roundtable meetings with key politicians and policy makers which you can read more about on page four.

NALA has also met with Mary Harney, Minister for Health at which we discussed advancing health literacy policy in Ireland. Minister Harney subsequently supported a NALA application to the Lotto fund to enable Ireland's participation in the European Health Literacy survey.

Research continues to be a key focus in 2009 with NALA as an advisory partner on an EU project that involves partners from the UK, Germany, the Czech Republic, Switzerland, Romania and Austria. The WoLLNET project aims to develop a toolkit which employers across Europe can adapt and use to measure the impact of basic education

and training in the workplace. It is hoped that if employers are able to see the impact of basic education and training on organisational performance they would be more likely to invest in it.

NALA has also commissioned research that seeks to develop adult and children's literacy through understanding and supporting family literacy practices in the home. This is a community based study, located in 4 areas throughout the country, an inner-city area, a suburban area, a small rural town and a large rural town. In total 41 families were recruited into the research, which will be completed by December 2009.

Similarly NALA is working on a pilot research project with men with literacy difficulties. The primary aim of the research is to study men's experiences of literacy difficulties and their needs in this area, what men learn informally and what benefits the men, their families and communities from that participation.

We hope you find this edition of Literacy Matters interesting and would be delighted to hear any comments or ideas you might have for our next edition in January 2010.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Inez Bailey'.

**Inez Bailey**  
Director, National Adult Literacy Agency

# New thinking for old problems

## NALA seeks support for refreshed adult literacy strategy



John Stewart  
Literacy  
Co-ordinator,  
NALA

On Tuesday 22 September, NALA held a number of high level roundtable meetings with politicians, employer and employee representatives, and the voluntary sector. Political spokespersons that attended the meetings included Ruairi Quinn, T.D., Brian Hayes, T.D., John O'Mahony, T.D., Senator Fidelma Healy-Eames and a representative from Ulick Burke, T.D. Industry and union groups were represented by SIPTU, IMPACT, INTO, Congress Network, the Communications Workers Union and Chambers Ireland. The community and voluntary sector came out in force with members of Age Action Ireland, European Anti-Poverty Network, National Youth Council, Older Women's Network, Disability Federation Ireland, Pavi Point, Irish Travellers Movement and Social Justice Ireland all attending. The aim of the roundtable meetings was to secure agreement from attendees for a refreshed adult literacy and numeracy strategy.

### New Research

At the meetings, NALA presented a review of adult literacy policy in Ireland, as well as a cost benefit analysis of an adult literacy intervention, both completed this year by James Dorgan Associates. James Dorgan is an independent economist and policy analyst, noted in this area for his work on the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Science "Report on Adult Literacy" (May 2006). In the policy review, Dorgan identified "strategic problems" in terms of the national response to adult literacy, in 4 key areas: policy objectives, resources, management and evaluation, and concluded that "What are now needed are a destination and a road map". He noted that "the absence of evaluation of progress as result of adult literacy interventions remains a significant systemic weakness" and highlighted that "there is an urgent need for a national adult literacy survey".

The report on the cost benefit analysis of adult literacy concluded that there is a positive and rapid return on investment across the board, for participants, the companies they work for and the Exchequer. "The annual income gain for the participant improving their literacy up one level on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is €3,810 and the gain to the Exchequer is €1,531 per annum". The cost benefit analysis also found that "literacy training increases employment by about 12% per increase in NFQ level". While "at a national level, a country with a literacy rate 1% higher than the average will have a 2.5% higher than average GDP per capita". "In the context of the current economic downturn, consideration of how best to align existing structures and maximise public resources available is at the heart of policy responses to social and economic issues. Substantive public sector reform is pending which may offer an opportunity to new thinking for old problems. It is in this context that NALA is seeking a renewed effort to address the adult literacy issue in Ireland," said John Stuart, Literacy Co-ordinator, NALA.

### The way forward

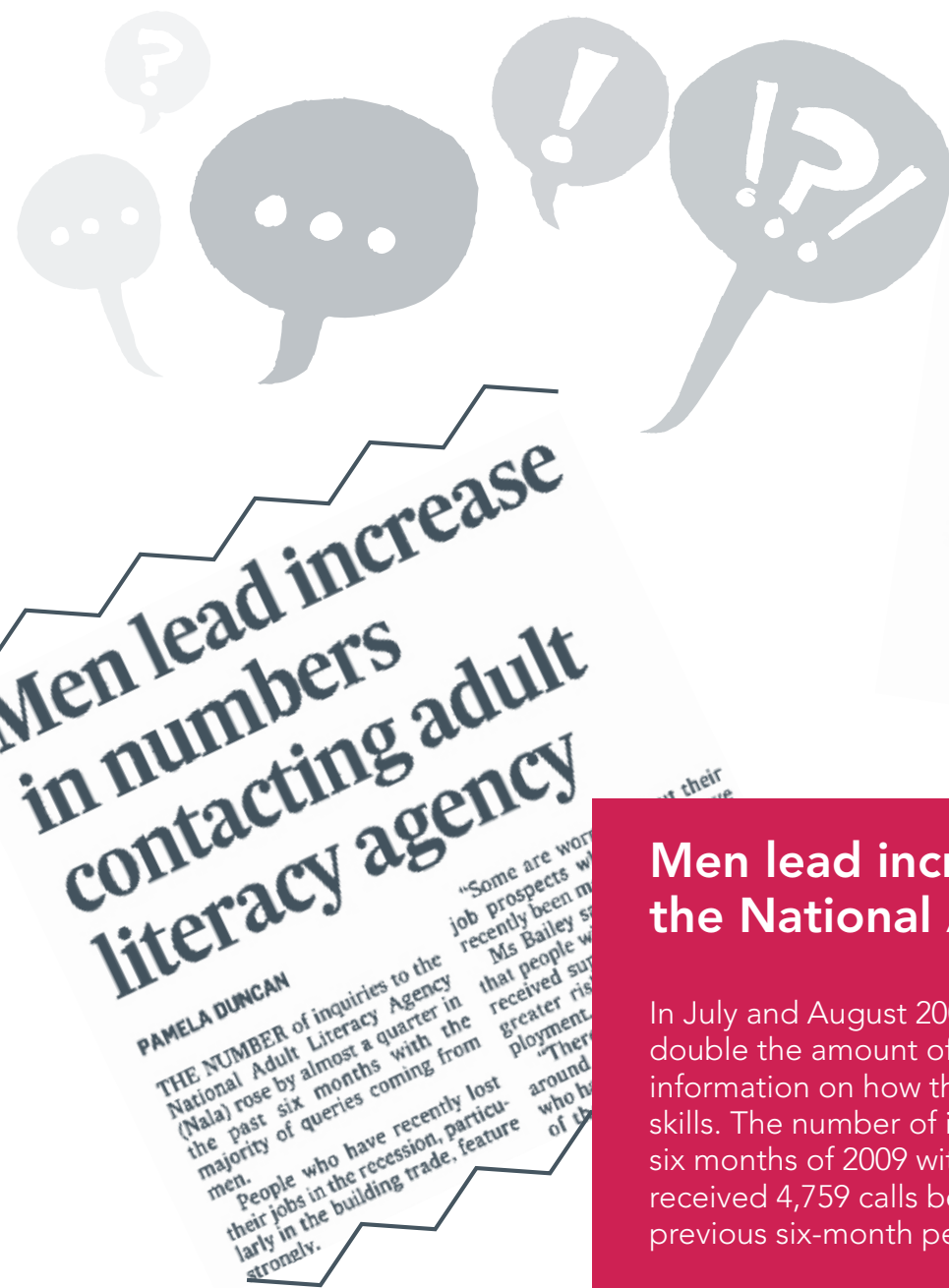
During each of the meetings NALA staff emphasized that a refreshed adult literacy strategy should straddle education and training and take account of the broader contexts of adult literacy and numeracy development. It was also highlighted that the mechanisms for its development, implementation and review are clear, and that the strategy can identify progress and refine its actions and responses on an ongoing basis with up to date data.

## Essential elements of a refreshed strategy

- 1 Continued development of workplace basic education (WBE)
- 2 Integration of literacy into publicly funded education / training programmes
- 3 Distance learning at Levels 1 – 3
- 4 Numeracy strategy implemented
- 5 Family literacy implementation plan
- 6 ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) budget separated
- 7 Intensive literacy learning opportunities
- 8 Health literacy awareness and response
- 9 Initiatives to promote literacy opportunities to increase participation
- 10 Monitoring and evaluation of all interventions

## Conclusion

The roundtable sessions reinforced the interest from all stakeholders in ongoing collaboration with NALA and provided useful suggestions for advancing joint advocacy work. All three roundtables focused on those most in need, the value of family literacy to tackling wider educational disadvantage, and exploring the statutory basis for learning development. Social partners were particularly supportive of paid learning leave. Discussion with politicians recognized advancing an integrated literacy approach as key to a range of policy areas, including vocational training and labour force development. The community and voluntary sector identified a wider leadership issue in responding to evidence that societies that are more equal do better across a range of indicators, and believed a refreshed adult literacy strategy to be a potential model for joined-up public policy responses to social inclusion or disadvantage issues.



### Men lead increase in numbers contacting the National Adult Literacy Agency

In July and August 2009 the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) recorded double the amount of calls on the same period last year from adults wanting information on how they could improve their reading, writing and maths skills. The number of inquiries to NALA rose by almost a quarter in the first six months of 2009 with the majority of queries coming from men. NALA received 4,759 calls between January and June 2009, a 23% increase on the previous six-month period when 3,867 were recorded.

“A driving factor among the increase in calls seems to be the current economic climate – a lot of people have either recently lost their jobs or are fearful that they will. It seems people particularly coming under pressure are those working in construction and manufacturing. Over 80% of callers feel that their reading and writing is holding them back and that if they could improve their literacy it would help them in their work, go for promotion or further training. While most callers initially say they want help reading or writing, about 30% of callers ask for help specifically with spelling and a further 10% want help with maths. Now more than ever it is vital that people with literacy difficulties receive support,” said Inez Bailey, Director, NALA.

Irish Times.  
Monday, July 13, 2009

# National Adult Literacy Awareness Week 2009

## Awareness week highlights critical role of literacy services

In a time when many people are being made redundant or are vulnerable in their jobs, adult literacy services have a unique part to play in the context of assisting people develop their literacy and numeracy. With this in mind the theme for National Adult Literacy Awareness Week 2009 was **'Write a new reality'**. During the week at the end of September NALA held a number of events with the aim of raising awareness of the literacy issue in Ireland and informing individuals about the benefits of brushing up on their reading, writing and maths skills.



Lorraine Markham and Joann Power, Adult Literacy Organisers in Limerick and Waterford with Stephen McCann, star of *Written Off?* at the launch of National Adult Literacy Awareness Week in the GPO

## An Post deliver leaflets on literacy services to 65,000 homes

A major new campaign, sponsored by An Post that encourages adults to 'take the first step' to improve their reading, writing and maths skills was launched on Monday 21 September in the GPO. It marked the first day of National Adult Literacy Awareness Week 2009.

Developed in association with NALA, the literacy awareness drive sees An Post staff delivering information leaflets to over 65,000 homes across the country. The direct mailing campaign follows hot on the heels of An Post's hugely successful TV and radio advertising campaign, which resulted in over 10,000 people contacting NALA for help with reading and writing.

Speaking at the launch in the GPO, An Post Chief Executive, Donal Connell said "Since 2007, An Post has supported awareness of adult literacy in Ireland. We now look to our own business as an effective way of delivering the literacy message right to the front door of homes in Dublin, Cork, Galway, Limerick, Waterford, Meath and Longford."

VEC Adult Literacy Organisers, tutors and students from around the country attended the launch that included presentations from An Post and NALA, and inspirational speeches from James McCann, star of RTE's *Written Off?* and Bernie McKeivitt, Adult Literacy Organiser in Meath VEC. RTE News were also on hand to capture some of the stories from the day.



Dorothy Beamish, Resource Worker, Donal Connell, CEO, An Post, Andrew Barry, Student and Anne O' Donovan, Adult Basic Education Service Co-Coordinator, County Cork VEC at the launch of the An Post

Speaking at the launch, Kieran Harrington, Adult Literacy Organiser at City of Galway VEC, said "We are grateful to An Post for sponsoring the campaign and indeed for the support they have given us not only in Galway, but nationally, over the last few years. In this time of recession, the support is even more important. We provide courses for everyone, no matter how basic, and our tutors have years of experience and are dedicated to making people feel at home first of all, and then helping them gain the necessary confidence to stick with it and progress to

group classes. We had over 1,300 students in Galway in 2008, but know that there are many people out there who still haven't heard of us and the work that we do, that is why the campaign is so important."

The *Take the first step* information leaflets contain course options and contact details for local VEC adult literacy services. There are courses from 'complete beginners' to 'improvers' in reading, writing, spelling, maths and computers.

## Family Literacy work is key to removing barriers to education

On Wednesday 23 September, NALA held an information morning for people and agencies working with children, families and carers on the topic of family literacy. Family literacy work can help to overcome the barriers to learning felt by some adults and children who find it difficult to relate to school learning. The information morning was a huge success with presentations from a number of people involved in working in disadvantaged areas, delivering family learning programmes and also provided useful tips for people dealing with families who may have literacy difficulties. Speakers included Dr Aine Cregan, Mary Immaculate College of the University of Limerick; Mary Flanagan, Clare Family Learning Project and Tina McVeigh, Fatima Regeneration Board.

## Minister Sean Haughey launches first ever guide to family learning programmes produced by Clare Family Learning Project

Details of the first ever guide to Family Learning Programmes in Ireland and an information DVD, both produced by the Clare Family Learning Project, were launched by Mr Sean Haughey, T.D., Minister for Lifelong Learning at NALA's Family Literacy information morning.

Clare Family Learning Project's 'Guide to Family Learning Programmes in Ireland' gives an overall picture of the work being done nationally in this innovative and important area. It is intended for tutors, schools, adult education providers and anyone interested in what goes on in family learning programmes around Ireland. Clare Family Learning Project took the initiative to produce these resources in response to frequent requests from providers around the country. Funding was provided by Department of Education and Science through the Clare VEC Adult Literacy Service. It will encourage and support networking within VEC funded adult education provision, along with schools, partnerships, community groups and other organisations. The guide is also available online on [www.clarefamilylearning.org](http://www.clarefamilylearning.org) and will be updated regularly.

The Clare Family Learning Project DVD provides a useful introduction to family learning for parents or service providers. It gives a snapshot of the wide range of programmes available for parents. The DVD highlights the key messages in family learning, valuing parents as their children's first teachers and the home as an important place for learning. Both the guide and DVD are unique tools that can be used to build up expertise in the area of family learning.

## NALA students and board members take center stage at the National Ploughing Championships

Kevin O'Duffy, James McCann, Michael Power, Helen Walshe, Peggy Murphy, Alison Hickey and Breda Kavanagh worked tirelessly for three days, talking to some of the 200,000 visitors who attended the National Ploughing Championships in Athy. Each of them have experience of going back to education as an adult and during the week they took the time to share their own personal experiences with thousands of visitors.

"One question that I was constantly asked by the public was 'Is it hard to go back to education? Is the study difficult?'" said Michael Power. "They were relieved to know that you could learn one-to-one with a tutor and could work at your own pace – I think a lot of people left our stand really thinking seriously about attending literacy tuition," he said.

"There was also a huge amount of interest in the A – Z guide to financial terms and NALA's guide to the European Union. I think every person who visited our stand took a copy away with them."

Many people were interested to hear about the work of NALA and the VEC Adult Literacy Services and about the benefits of brushing up on reading, writing and maths skills.

"I was surprised and delighted at how many younger people from third year to fifth year that showed a genuine interest in our stories and gave us a lot of praise," said Michael.



Mary Flanagan, Clare Family Learning Project, Minister Sean Haughey, T.D., and Inez Bailey, Director, National Adult Literacy Agency.



Minister for the Environment John Gormley, T.D. and Inez Bailey, NALA launch a new guide to common environmental terms



## From Air Quality to Zero Emissions

### New guide explains common environmental terms in plain English

'Biomass', 'Carbon Credits' and 'Sustainable Development' are just some of the terms explained in a new handy guide that was launched during Literacy Awareness Week. Entitled: 'From Air Quality to Zero Emissions' it is hoped that the guide will explain common environmental information in a much more accessible way so that the general public can engage more in environmental issues.

"The environmental movement is relatively new and has a lot of its own terminology that has sometimes been seen as the preserve of academics and experts. The aim of this new guide is to help ordinary people understand more about the words and concepts used daily in relation to the environment so that they can make more informed choices," said Inez Bailey, Director, NALA.

Developed by NALA, the A – Z guide contains over 100 explanations of common environmental terms and was launched by Mr John Gormley T.D., Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government on Thursday 24 September in the Custom House, Dublin 1.

Speaking at the launch, Minister John Gormley said "My Department's activities affect the lives of every citizen of the state. They range from the quality of the environment in which we live to the housing, water and other services we as citizens use. However, not all environmental terms are easy to understand. Indeed with an estimated one in four adults having a significant literacy difficulty, we face particular challenges in making sure that we provide clear, jargon-free information. 'From Air Quality to Zero Emissions' is an important resource that I have no doubt will help people understand more complex terms which are used on a daily basis in relation to environmental issues."

The guide is a free resource and it will be available online at [www.nala.ie](http://www.nala.ie), in libraries, citizen information centres and free from NALA.

Sample environmental terms include:

#### BER

Short for Building Energy Rating, which says how much energy a home needs for heating, lighting and hot water. Homes are placed on a scale from A to G. A-rated homes need the least amount of energy while G-rated need the most. Since 1 January 2009, all homes being sold or rented must have a BER certificate. BER ratings are carried out by BER Assessors registered with Sustainable Energy Ireland.

#### Carbon count

A measure of the amount of carbon dioxide you produce through your lifestyle every day, for example through driving or using electrical appliances and lighting.

#### Fuel poverty

Being unable to heat a home to a safe and comfortable level because of low household income or having to spend more than 10% of household income to heat a home to a comfortable level because the home is not energy efficient.

#### Hazardous waste

Waste that poses a risk to human health or the environment and needs to be handled and disposed of carefully. Examples include oil-based paints, car batteries, weed killers, bleach and waste electrical and electronic devices.





# Gavin Duffy, star of Dragon's Den explains why it makes good business sense to address literacy in the workplace

NALA has recently launched a DVD to encourage organisations to respond to the needs of adults with literacy difficulties. Often, lack of literacy awareness can lead organisations to communicate with the public, recruit and train staff and provide customer service in ways that make it hard for adults with literacy difficulties to engage with them fully, either as employees or as customers.

Presented by broadcaster and journalist Gavin Duffy, most recently from RTE1's Dragons' Den, the DVD introduces organisations to a number of literacy-friendly approaches and their benefits. The approaches include offering workplace basic education, using plain English for written information, arranging literacy awareness training for key customer service staff, integrating literacy into staff training and development and devising appropriate policies and procedures for the whole organisation.



An Post is one organisation that has enabled employees to take part in workplace basic education. Its Return to Learning programme has operated there since 2006, enabling some of its 6,000 postal staff in particular to refresh their communications and computer skills, among others. Speaking about the benefits of the programme, An Post's Training and Development Manager, Tom Davis, says, "It's the feeling of confidence that they get. Obviously, if they feel better about themselves, they feel better about the organisation and feel better about the customer."

Other options for addressing literacy difficulties include literacy awareness training, such as that organised for trainee solicitors studying with the Law Society. Colette Reid, Course Manager there, is aware that solicitors can often make assumptions about people's ability to read and write and so may not always take small steps such as reading out a letter or contract before asking a person to sign it. She adds, "To be able to give a full service, you need to be able to recognise it [that a person may have difficulties with reading and writing] and then find a way to deliver a proper service to that person with sensitivity."

When it comes to communicating in writing – whether with the public or with staff – it's important to use plain English wherever possible. The Office for the Director of Corporate Enforcement (ODCE) decided last year to produce a series of short guides to company law in plain English, covering topics including directors' responsibilities, members and shareholders and the role of the company secretary.

Kevin Prendergast, Corporate Compliance Manager with the ODCE says, "I feel what we're doing now is actually empowering company directors and saying to them, 'Look you can actually read and understand the documents we're producing.'" Producing the guides in plain English is a basic part of the Office's activities", he adds, "because it means directors are better equipped to take personal responsibility for complying with company law rather than hand over responsibility to their accountants."

The efforts of the ODCE show that plain English in written communications is not just for adults with literacy difficulties but for all people reading their publications. The same can be said for the other responses to the needs of adults with literacy difficulties; very often they represent good practice and have wide ranging benefits for organisations as well as customers.

To get a copy of the DVD, contact  
Clare McNally on (01) 850 9109 or  
at [cmcnally@nala.ie](mailto:cmcnally@nala.ie).

# Interview with Bernie McKevitt

Adult Literacy Organiser, County Meath VEC



Bernie McKevitt speaking in the National Library of Ireland

Thanks Bernie for taking the time to talk to us and answer our questions. Perhaps you'd start by giving us a little background on what you do in County Meath VEC Adult Literacy Services.

You're welcome Tom, it's my pleasure to talk to you and answer your questions. Co. Meath VEC is one of the fastest growing VECs in the country. This is reflected in our Adult Basic Education Service, which has a total of six adult learning centres and a number of outreach centres within the county. The centres are located in Navan, Kells, Trim, Dunshauglin, Ashbourne and Mosney. The Mosney Adult Learning Centre is located in Mosney Accommodation Centre, Julianstown, which is home to several hundred Asylum Seekers and Refugees. We provide ESOL and Literacy classes to a large number of adults residing there. We offer a dynamic service that strives to meet the individual needs of the learner, encouraging them to realise their true potential. We recognise that we have to continuously adapt and change to make learning an enjoyable, relevant and meaningful experience for our learners. We offer a broad range of learning opportunities suited to the learner's abilities and current needs, for example we offer short intensive courses to address specific needs such as the four week *Spell Well* course for people who wish to improve their spelling. The *IT Matters* course is another short course aimed primarily at unemployed people who want to upskill and further their job prospects. Equally, we offer longer courses, such as the popular Back to Basics, which not only addresses the gaps in the learner's literacy and numeracy but offers the learner the opportunity to acquire new skills in the areas of self development and IT. Furthermore, we work closely with the other services within the VEC, such as the Meath Adult Education Guidance Service, the Back to Education Initiative and Community Education Service to facilitate and offer our learners' progression.

One of the reasons we wanted to talk to you was because you have recently started using [www.writeon.ie](http://www.writeon.ie) in conjunction with your class-based tuition. How does that work?

Co. Meath VEC has an ethos of integrating IT into the learning environment at every level. We have a laptop scheme where students and tutors can purchase a laptop through the VEC. In addition, the Adult Basic Education Service has a number of e-learning suites that are used in our outreach centres. The e-learning suite consists of approximately 8 laptops plus internet access data cards, headphones with attached microphones, a digital projector and a portable printer. Tutors are encouraged to integrate IT into their session planning. It makes learning a much more enjoyable experience for all concerned.

When [www.writeon.ie](http://www.writeon.ie) came into existence we recognised its potential and embraced the opportunity to use it. Overall we have found it a very useful learning tool. It is versatile in that it offers learners an opportunity to practice and reinforce their learning both within the classroom and at home. Added to that, is the option to complete a FETAC Level 2 assessment online, which we have found has boosted the confidence of our learners.

And how has that worked in practice for your students and tutors?

It has been a learning experience for both students and tutors alike. Traditionally, IT was viewed as a subject confined to tutors who taught IT. The majority of Maths and Literacy tutors relied mainly on the 'chalk and talk' method. However, the [www.writeon.ie](http://www.writeon.ie) website soon changed that! Tutors who were teaching Maths and Literacy had to adjust to the new technology in order to provide their learners' with the opportunity to acquire accreditation. It was difficult in the beginning getting to grips with the new website and its inevitable technical glitches; however with perseverance they succeeded much to their satisfaction and that of their learners. So much so that we have provided FETAC accredited in-house training for our tutors to increase their competency and improve their IT skills.

Accreditation seems to be very popular with these students. Are you generally finding a lot of interest in accreditation at Level 2?

It has surpassed all of our expectations. We cannot keep up with the flow of result sheets being generated. To date we have 48 learners who, between them, have successfully completed a total of 155 FETAC Level 2 modules. Some have acquired a full FETAC Level 2 Major Certificate in General Learning. Success is breeding success! The enthusiasm amongst the learners is palpable to all.

Do you see [writeon.ie](http://www.writeon.ie) and other technology as presenting any practical advantages to you in your work?

Absolutely. Technology is part of our everyday lives. We cannot ignore this fact. We have found by bringing IT into the classroom and making it less intimidating helps our learners to overcome their fears or phobias. Equally, it helps to dispel the myths and stigma associated with traditional literacy provision, literacy learners are seen to be and feel themselves to be on a par with other learners. We have found it increases their self esteem and has had a profound affect on their self confidence.



Bernie with Minister Haughey and students at an awards ceremony in Dublin

Let me give you an example of a project we ran this summer, which came about as a result of our experience using the writeon.ie website. We encouraged five Level 1 learners who had been in 1:1 tuition for some time and whose progress until then was extremely slow to come together in a group for six weeks. Up until that point, any thought of sitting in front of a computer let alone using one was viewed as an impossibility by all of the learners. There were four men and one lady in the group ranging in age from late twenties to late forties. All had very low self esteem. One of the younger men would not make eye contact when he spoke and found it difficult to engage in conversation. The tutor used computers with specialised literacy software to help introduce and reinforce new learning concepts.

At the end of the six weeks they were able to start a computer, access specific software unassisted and complete a variety of simple tasks. The most obvious improvement was to their self confidence. I visited the group in the last week of their course with an ALO from another county. The young man that I referred to previously welcomed us with a big "Hello". He was animated and enthusiastic when recounting his success in working with the computer. The entire group expressed their enjoyment and sense of achievement. All requested a continuance of the project. They are now back this term doing 4 hours 'computers' and 2 hours reading and writing.

#### So what are your plans for integrating technology into practice in the future?

At the beginning of September 2009, we ran a series of training workshops for all of our tutors within the Adult Education sector to demonstrate the advantages of using technology in the classroom. The workshops proved to be very successful, so much so that we are running repeat workshops over the coming months for those who missed out. We have recently purchased two new software packages – TTRS (Touch, Type, Read, Spell) and Sounds to Words. In addition, we use the NALA Technology at Work and Literacy Tools software. We have also purchased a digital video camera for each of our six centres.

In keeping with Co. Meath VEC's commitment to use the latest IT in both teaching and learning, our next step is to purchase a couple of Nintendo DS's. In addition, we hope to pair groups of learners from different centres within the county and get them to communicate and work on projects using Skype. Using technology certainly creates a wonderfully exciting learning environment for all.

Dublin  
Wednesday  
**02**  
December

For more information call  
NALA on **01 855 4332**

## Integrating Literacy into Further Education Conference

**Date** December 2nd  
**Time** 10.30 – 4.00pm  
**Location** The Maldron Hotel, Tallaght, Dublin

This conference is jointly organised by NALA and the Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA). It is intended for education and training policymakers and providers. In particular, VECs have been invited to send delegations that would if possible be representative of a range of programmes.

The conference will include presentations on a number of recent research projects on the question of integrating literacy in vocational education and training: Research from England on 'embedding' literacy in vocational training, illustrating that it is an effective way to raise literacy levels and increase achievement on the vocational courses;

NALA research in partnership with Newbridge Youth Training and Development Centre, on the main elements of an effective 'whole-organisation' approach to integrating literacy;

NALA research in partnership with Liberties College Dublin, exploring literacy issues in the context of vocational education courses at Level 5.

The conference will also include presentations by providers and practitioners who have been working to develop systems and practical approaches to integrating literacy development in further education and vocational training.

To book contact  
Eilis Mernagh on  
[literacy@nala.ie](mailto:literacy@nala.ie)  
or call (01) 855 4332

# Minister Haughey awards certificates to students

On Thursday 24 September 34 learners were awarded 22 Level 2 Certificates in General Learning, comprising 174 minor awards around the areas of Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking, Quantity and Number, learning to learn and computer skills.

Some of these learners featured in the Written Off? series, others worked over the phone with NALA's Distance Learning Tutors. Some of the learners worked independently online and 14 worked within County Meath VEC as part of a blended approach to learning and accreditation.

In many cases, this was the first certificate these students had received.

**Congratulations!**



Anne Aherne



Anne Boyd



Shirley McHugh



Bridie Daly



Derek Ward



Dermot McDermott



James McCann



John Hand



Marian Redmond





Patrick Hand



Raymond Barry



Martin Wall



Cathriona Clarke



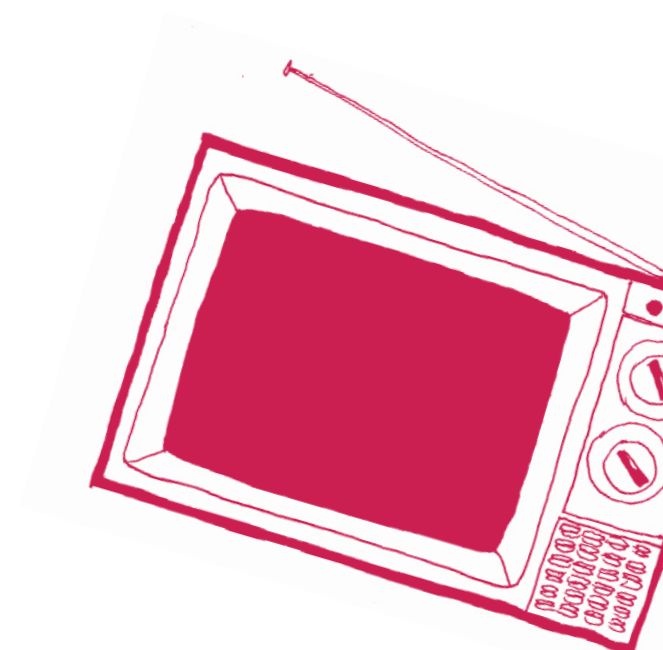
Patrick Dineen



Stephen Cullen



Archie and tutor Kate Finnegan



## Distance Learning Service Update: New TV Series in 2010

NALA in partnership with Animo TV and RTÉ have been successful in their recent application under the Sound and Vision Scheme operated by the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland. A new TV series, following on the success of 5 Read Write Now, 2 Really Useful Guides to Words and Numbers and 2 Written Off? series, will be filmed in Spring 2010. This series has a working title of 'Stuck for Words' and will be a documentary series following the lives of a small number of different literacy learners across Ireland. NALA will be in contact with more information on this before Animo TV begin their search for learners. In the meantime, we would be grateful if you would give consideration to adult learners you think would like to participate in this new series.

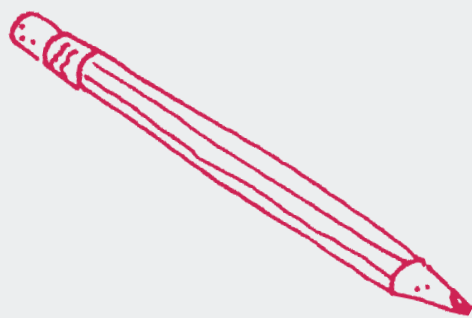
### Online Learning for Basic Learners

www.writeon.ie was launched during Literacy Awareness Week 2008. This interactive NALA Web site offering accredited learning options at FETAC Level 2 has so far enticed over 3,000 people to create online accounts, and 91 minor awards were given out in the first awards ceremony for online basic learners. NALA ran a successful training day in March 2009 and is offering a similar free opportunity in December. Further details will be published on www.nala.ie and circulated via email soon.

### Linking to www.writeon.ie

If you feel people accessing your Web sites would be interested in learning online, please feel free to include a link to www.writeon.ie Further text and information can be got by contacting distance@nala.ie.

# A word from Clodagh McCarthy



Clodagh McCarthy joined NALA in August 2003 to develop NALA's plain English service. She is currently also involved with setting up NALA's literacy advisory service and is responsible for developing NALA's internal policies and procedures and implementing a balanced scorecard for the Agency to help it measure its work.

## NALA uses review of strategic plan to adapt how it operates

NALA's four-year strategic plan runs from 2007 to the end of 2010. In early 2009, all staff took part in a review of the plan at its mid-point to:

- assess the progress of our projects,
- identify any challenges to completing our projects as we originally intended, and
- agree how we can meet those challenges and adapt how we work.

## Progress of projects

When assessing our projects, we each used a traffic light rating system to give a snapshot view of progress. 'Green' meant that the project was moving along as planned, 'amber' meant there were some delays or some elements of the project had yet to be addressed and 'red' meant that the project was in serious difficulty or had yet to start properly.

The vast majority of projects were rated as 'green', although some projects were rated as 'amber' to show that some aspects needed to involve more stakeholders or adopt a more methodical approach to make sure they were completed effectively. At the time, a small number of projects were rated as 'red'; these have since received greater attention as other projects have progressed and are now well underway towards completion by the end of 2010.

Aside from giving their ratings, staff identified what they had learned while working on the project and what steps they next needed to take to move the project along. The main areas of learning and next steps related to monitoring and reviewing our work and its impact, using a consistent approach in projects and communicating our work inside and outside the organisation more effectively.

## Challenges and responses

Not surprisingly, when we reviewed the challenges facing NALA, the main one to emerge was the speed of the downturn in the economy. This affects us not only in terms of the security of our own funding but also in gaining increased investment in adult literacy and concrete support for literacy-related policies and practices.

A number of possible responses emerged at the review, including raising awareness of literacy difficulties and their implications in times of rising unemployment. However, in any effort to encourage increased investment in adult literacy tuition, we agreed that it is important not to focus on what adults with literacy difficulties may be lacking but rather to present the benefits of learning – in other words, use the 'carrot' rather than the 'stick' approach when lobbying.

In light of the changing economic situation since our strategic plan was published, we have also devised ways of working more efficiently. For example, we now make all our publications available on our website, printing only small quantities, and have agreed that, in future, we will update and adapt our existing guides, workbooks and other materials rather than produce new materials from scratch.

We identified a small number of areas that need our particular attention and have been working since the mid-term review to address these. They include:

- making sure that we all understand the context in which NALA is now operating,
- developing a shared sense of what we need to do and be prepared for in terms of possible further cuts,
- revisiting our values to provide an anchor for our work regardless of what happens outside the Agency, and
- refocusing our approach, in particular adjusting our messages to different groups, be they policy makers, employers or public service organisations.

Indeed, the full session gave rise to a number of questions, such as whether we were measuring our impact fully, how we could stay true to our ethos while making our message relevant to the current economic climate and whether we were using team work to the best of our abilities to achieve our projects.

Since then, NALA has introduced the balanced scorecard as a way of measuring our work. We hope that using the scorecard over the coming months to report on projects within the Agency will help us to answer the questions raised at the session and identify how best to complete and assess our projects effectively by the end of 2010.

## Upcoming research to explore plain English guidelines

NALA's plain English service has recently commissioned research into the theories behind plain English guidelines. These guidelines recommend a range of techniques to make information easier to read and understand, such as:

- using the active voice,
- using an average of 15 to 20 words per sentence,
- removing wordy phrases,
- using headings and bulleted lists to break up information,
- avoiding all block capitals, italics and underlining, and
- using colour and relevant charts and images.

Many of these guidelines have been in place for so long that they appear to be a matter of common sense. However, we are interested in researching them to learn more about how they came about and, more specifically, how they help people to read, understand and remember information.

In particular, we are interested in studying the link between the plain English guidelines and how people read or scan pages, how they pick out key messages from sentences and how layout may help – or hinder - them in understanding and remembering what they read. We anticipate that the research will help us further understand the background to plain English guidelines and strengthen our arguments about why organisations should use it in their public information.

Having put the research out to tender, we awarded the small contract to DEIS, the Department of Education Development at Cork Institute of Technology. The Department has been working on the research since late June and is due to present the final research report by November 2009.

We have agreed with DEIS that the research report will be based largely on a review of literature and interviews, as needed, and will cover a number of chapters. It will initially put the plain English guidelines in context, for example by:

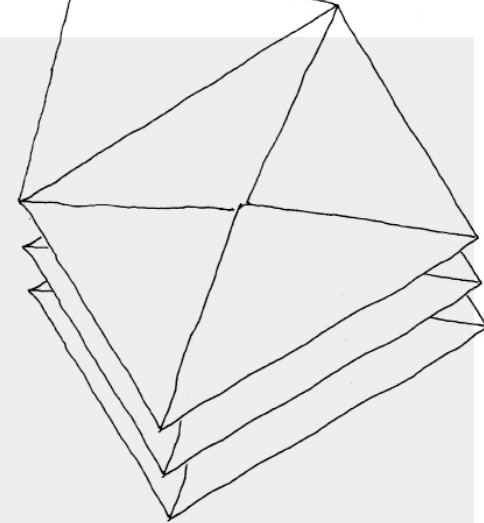
- examining existing definitions of literacy and looking at new theories on literacy and literacy practices;
- reviewing plain English and related movements, such as those dedicated to 'usability', 'accessibility' and 'information design';
- analysing theories and studies on producing information for the public from the perspective of usability, communication theory and educational psychology, among others; and
- looking at how people process information on their own and as a group.

Based on these findings, the research will aim to explain why plain English and other information guidelines might work and comment on any possible shortcomings. A final chapter will draw conclusions and recommend guidelines for developing effective information for the public across a range of media: print, audio and online.

We anticipate that the findings and recommendations from the research will enhance the quality of support that we offer organisations through our plain English service. Since 2003, we have designed and delivered group and open training courses, produced style guides and accredited a wide range of documents with a Plain English Mark. We have also produced the following resources for organisations:

*Writing and Design Tips*, plain English guides to legal, financial, political, citizenship and environmental terms, *Simply put!* – an interactive CD for information providers, and online checklists and summary tips, which are available on our website.

We plan to post some of the key findings from the research on our website and use the research findings to enhance our training materials and guidelines. More importantly, however, we intend to use the findings and recommendations from the research to enhance our arguments for the widespread use of clear language and layout, particularly for adults with literacy difficulties.



For more information on NALA's strategic plan, the balanced scorecard or research, contact Clodagh McCarthy at [cmccarthy@nala.ie](mailto:cmccarthy@nala.ie) or on (01) 850 9115.



# Literacy Awareness in Galway County Council

The Social Inclusion Unit in Galway County Council contacted NALA to discuss how to raise awareness about adult literacy. We decided to arrange three literacy awareness sessions for staff during National Adult Literacy Awareness week in September. These sessions were 2 ½ to 3 hours long. Approximately 35 County Council staff attended the sessions including Customer Services Officers, front-line staff and staff from the Social Inclusion Unit. One session was held for the Social Inclusion Measures Committee with about 10 attending.

## Content of the sessions

The awareness sessions began with looking at what is literacy with pictures used to prompt discussion. Interestingly the main feedback here was that people did not think of listening and speaking when they thought of literacy. One person commented that the use of the pictures was a good tool for this exercise as it did not require reading and writing skills per se and allowed for equal participation.

We went on then to look at the extent of the issue, highlighting that there are 456,100 people in the labour force who have less than a level 4 qualification, 7% of which have only primary level or no formal qualifications at all (Central Statistics Office, 2009). We also looked at the causes and effects of literacy.

We discussed how you can sometimes see where a customer may have difficulty with perhaps reading and understanding information or maybe filling out a form. We explored how staff and organisations should approach and respond sensitively to those customers. It is important that you don't use jargon, don't talk down to a person, don't lose patience or start filling in a form for the customer without their permission. What you can do is to offer help where possible and make time for this. You can give the customer plenty of opportunity to ask questions. And use plain English when speaking and writing.

The session spent a little time looking at plain English, some of the key features of it and tips for clear writing. We gave out a before and after example of a letter which was very well received. Some staff were going to post this example beside their photocopiers or in their workplaces where others could see it.

## VEC input

The local VEC Adult Literacy Organisers from Galway County attended each of the sessions and gave an input on what the VEC Adult Literacy Service provides in the county. This was very important so that the staff and Committee could hear from and see their local adult literacy contacts.

## Feedback

The feedback from participants was very positive as many staff commented that they would be more mindful of literacy issues both in their work and their life from now on. We gathered comments from people on what responses they would suggest to address adult literacy from a personal, practice and policy perspective. We will collate this data into the report from the training.

## Follow up

NALA will prepare a report on the awareness sessions for Galway County Council. This report will inform future work that we may partner with the Council, in particular on plain English training. All staff has been sent a follow up email with documentation from the sessions and have been asked to identify "one small change" that they may have in their work practice(s) so that we can identify the impact of the training session.



For more information contact Helen Ryan, Policy Officer, NALA  
Email: [hryan@nala.ie](mailto:hryan@nala.ie)  
Direct line 01 8509119





# Do adult literacy classes make a difference?

## Interview with Robert Traynor, Supervisor, Dublin City Council

### Tell me about your experiences in school.

Geography was my favourite subject. I wasn't mad about English. I left school when I was 15 after my Inter Cert. My results weren't great.

### After school what did you do?

The year I did my Inter cert I got a summer job in a laundrette and was offered a full time job there, so I decided to stay. I was happy to be working and my parents were happy with that arrangement. I stayed working there for 4 years. I was most interested in driving and when I got passed over for a driving job with the laundrette, I resigned. A few weeks before I resigned, my father had put my name down for Dublin City Council, so I did an interview there and got a job. I was happy with this job. I was outdoors – driving and sweeping. That was 1980.

### How did your literacy difficulties affect your home life, social life and work life?

In my work life, my literacy difficulties held me back from getting promotions. I saw colleagues who weren't as good as me getting promotions, because they were confident about their reading and writing. I knew I was better than them, but I hadn't the confidence. I had the fear of God in me about spelling and being embarrassed by it. Then when my son started school I couldn't help him with his homework and that bothered me. I had to leave him to his own devices, but he did well.

### Why did you first go to adult literacy classes?

The main thing was guys going for supervisor jobs and getting them ahead of me. They could write reports, fill in forms etc. That's what kept me back. I was thinking to myself that I'm better than these guys but they were getting the good jobs. Then one day around 2002/2003 I saw a queue forming at an office where I work. I asked what it was about and was told it was for reading, writing and spelling classes. I couldn't believe the people that were standing in the queue as I had always thought I was the only one with literacy problems. So, I joined the queue and took the plunge. I started the literacy classes with a group of my colleagues.

### What were the classes like?

The classes were great. The teacher was brilliant and it was great fun. Dublin City Council was very supportive. They gave us time off work to go to the classes and it went on from there. I did the adult literacy classes for 3 or 4 years.

### What happened when you left the literacy class?

I did an ECDL (European Computer Driving Licence) course. It was invaluable. I am very confident with a computer and use it all the time for work now. And other supervisors come into my office now to ask me questions about using the computer. I'm delighted to be able to help them.

### How is your literacy now?

Fine. I still have problems with spelling, but I have confidence and I know I will get the work done given a bit of time. I'm not afraid anymore because there's nothing to be afraid of. And I keep a dictionary in my desk drawer.

### How did the classes make a difference for you?

I am better at understanding and dealing with others who may have literacy difficulties. I am more aware and I recognise the signs. I wouldn't stick a form under a colleague's nose and say fill that in now.

### Have you changed since you took adult literacy classes?

I am much more confident. I have learned how to show and help others and how to be patient. And I wouldn't be sitting in my office now, doing a Supervisor job if I hadn't gone to literacy classes. I owe a lot to the literacy teachers and to Dublin City Council.





# Teaching students who do not have literacy in their first language

## Interview with Margaret Armstrong, ESOL tutor, Co Clare Adult Basic Education Service

### What are the main differences between teaching ESOL language and ESOL literacy students?

An ESOL language student is usually one who is already literate in their own first language, and brings transferable skills to reading and writing in the new language.

ESOL literacy learners are not a unitary or homogenous group. In our work here in Clare VEC, we have identified two fairly distinct groups. Firstly, there are learners who are complete or almost complete beginners in spoken language who are also complete beginners in literacy, having little or no literacy in their own first language. A second group is that of learners who use English fairly fluently as a second language in their home countries, but who have had little or no schooling opportunity and consequently need considerable literacy development.

There are significant differences between the tuition needs of these two ESOL literacy learner groups.

With the first of these groups oral skills development must precede a very deliberate focus on literacy. The writing element of the learning is much more limited, and the pace is quite different.

The second of these groups can progress very much more like literacy learning native speakers. However, different cultural references of the learners need to be acknowledged, and the experience of the learner as a newcomer to our country needs to be accepted and acknowledged. Learners' knowledge of Irish ways and society cannot be assumed by the tutor, even if they cope well enough in English in everyday situations.

### What are the main challenges for a student who does not have literacy in their first language?

A learner who doesn't have much or any literacy in their own first language does not have a set of transferable skills to bring to learning to read and write in this new language. There are many, many sub skills that a literate learner and their tutor can take for granted. Fine motor control in using a pen and paper is one example. By contrast, a new- to- literacy learner has to give a lot of attention to forming letters and writing words, which a literate learner can do almost 'on autopilot'. Another difference is that a learner who can read and write in their own language has a keen sense of word articulation, or word separation, and knows that a particular spoken word should match one he or she is reading in a one- to -one correspondence. A new- to -literacy learner may take some time to acquire this sense.

Most importantly, as an ESOL learner gets some foothold in reading the language, they are now in a position to 'read to learn', for example, in using a Driver

Theory preparation disk, or participation in a Family Health awareness group or a conventional ESL text. In comparison, the literacy learner is a long way away from that, given that they are still at the 'learning to read' stage.

Oral language must be given priority with a learner who is new both to the language and literacy. A learner cannot be asked to read words they have not met, heard or spoken. Progress therefore may be much slower, particularly if the learner is lacking in social confidence to speak English outside the classroom setting.

### Are there any difficulties associated with these challenges?

Additional to those sketched above, the tutor needs to take a very 'hands on' approach using real life materials as props or prompts for spoken language. You arrive with bags of regalia - literally! A bag full of typical clothes from home for example, has far greater impact than a set of photocopied images or even coloured pictures. Equally, a tray of teacups, teapot, tea, milk, sugar and spoons makes learning the vocabulary and phrases of social interaction far more dynamic and relevant with this learner group than even the best quality picture. Following on the spoken interaction, a reading and writing step in the lesson will be more achievable and focused.

Building on that, it becomes clear that the more real life activities that can be generated in the learning situation, the more opportunity there is to learn real life language, again with a focus on speaking and interacting, followed by an appropriate reading and writing task. We need to keep very clearly in mind that a learner at this level (Level One) must never be asked to read language which they have not met in listening and speaking. Such a reading or writing task might be very simple at the really early stages-for example, labelling, gap-filling, matching. The reading and writing part of the lesson, for someone who is a complete beginner in literacy must not become an over-challenging or stressful one.

This is where a blended learning approach comes into its own. A well prepared cookery class becomes an opportunity for the language tutor to collaborate with the cookery tutor. Out of this experience comes language which can be revised and reinforced in the language class. Certain amounts of this language will become available to the learner to use in other situations also. All four skills, speaking, reading, listening and writing can be activated in this way.

### What sort of materials, if any, do you use?

We use a reasonably wide selection of materials. Pictures, of course are really important, especially at the very beginning. We use FEACH for its very basic stylised pictures of house and home, the human body and also



for its coloured photos. We also use selections from our own Photopak (CABES Family Learning Resource Pack). These are photos of everyday life situations and they give a basis for the selected and focused oral language which must underpin any literacy learning.

For learners who have some foothold in the language, Joanna Williams Teaching Literacy in ESOL Classes is a most useful resource, and of course NALA's own publications, Paving the Way, the Big Picture, and the Big Picture 2. The early Read Write Now learner support book proves useful with most ESOL literacy learners, no matter what their level.

We also make use of ESL programmes, but in a very selective way. We exploit the coloured pictures, and some of the workbook material, but often radically edited to focus on a single learning objective, such as vocabulary. For editing, we use Tipp-ex and the photocopier machine, paste and scissors, mostly!

We also use interactive websites. Using the computer is particularly satisfying for beginner learners of ESOL literacy, even if it is doing something as simple as a click and drag exercise. They seem to have a sense, probably correctly, that this is one of the keys to becoming an insider to our world. (See some useful references for websites that are suitable at the very beginning of literacy learning)

As with all tutors and teachers the world over, I suppose, we are constantly on the lookout for suitable and interesting materials that we can utilise to make our language and literacy learning relevant and interesting, and hopefully effective.

**Did you draw on the experiences of your colleagues working in Family Literacy to help you with ideas or approaches for working with ESOL literacy learners?**

Last term (May and June 2009), Family Learning's Family in a Box project proved a most useful and engaging context for our ESOL literacy learners to use objects and photos to record significant episodes of family life; a kind of memoir in objects, pictures and words, as it were. These underpinned some real expressiveness on the part of the learners, who with tutor assistance, wrote and read the key narratives and captions.

The well prepared field trip also provides wonderful opportunities for all concerned to use language to interact and participate both at the planning stages and on the day. It also creates a store of shared images, both photos and memories, to call upon later, and explore again in speaking, writing, listening and reading.

**Margaret and ESOL students visiting Bunratty Castle.**

## Some useful references:

**FEACH**  
IILT

**Family Learning Resource**  
Photopak  
Clare Adult Basic Education Service

**Teaching Literacy in ESOL Classes**  
Joanna Williams  
hughes.williams@virgin.net

**Paving the Way**  
[www.nala.ie/common/download\\_file.cfm/file/esol\\_paving\\_fulldoc.pdf](http://www.nala.ie/common/download_file.cfm/file/esol_paving_fulldoc.pdf)  
NALA

**The Big Picture**  
[www.nala.ie/common/download\\_file.cfm/file/the\\_big\\_picture.pdf/](http://www.nala.ie/common/download_file.cfm/file/the_big_picture.pdf/)  
NALA

**The Big Picture 2**  
[www.nala.ie/common/download\\_file.cfm/file/big\\_picture\\_2.pdf](http://www.nala.ie/common/download_file.cfm/file/big_picture_2.pdf)  
NALA

**Adult ESOL Core Curriculum (a UK publication)**  
The Basic Skills Agency

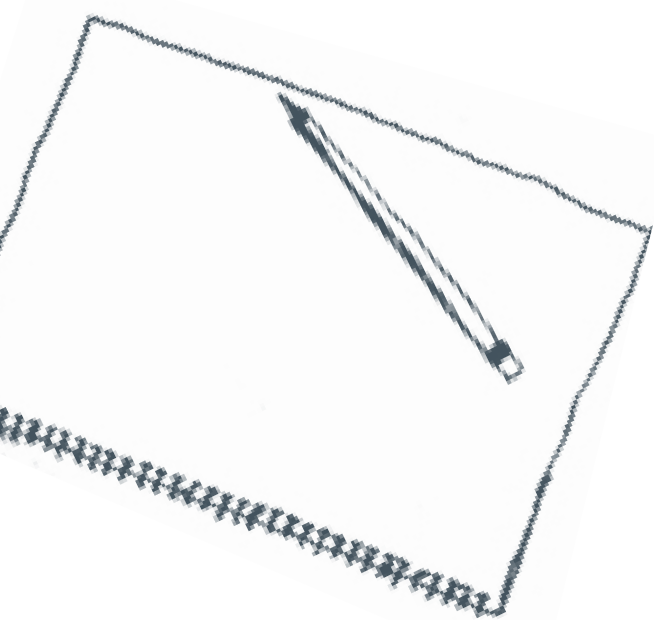
**A teachers' guide**  
teaching basic literacy to ESOL learners Marina Spiegel and Helen Sunderland ; London South Bank University  
(An essential reference for ESOL literacy tutors)

**Some useful interactive websites:**  
[www.talent.ac.uk/londononline](http://www.talent.ac.uk/londononline)  
[www.jigzone.com](http://www.jigzone.com)  
[www.hylte.se/safirenglish](http://www.hylte.se/safirenglish)  
[www.citycol.com/eso/success/front/html](http://www.citycol.com/eso/success/front/html)  
[www.oup.com/elt/globalproducts/headway](http://www.oup.com/elt/globalproducts/headway)

# Literacy and older people

In 2008 in a study supported by Age & Opportunity NALA carried out an exploratory piece of research with 24 older literacy learners in Dublin<sup>1</sup>. Following on from this initial research project with older learners, NALA identified the need for further research with older people who have not engaged with adult literacy services. Phase 2 of the research with older people involved targeting older people aged 60+ years living in both urban and rural settings with literacy difficulties who have not engaged with adult literacy services. In total 50 older people were recruited into the study and were based in Dublin, Louth, Kilkenny, Waterford, Wexford and Galway. Phases 1 and 2 of the research provided a range of data on the older peoples' previous experience of education, the impact that literacy difficulties had on their family and working lives, and the coping strategies they used to disguise their literacy difficulties. In particular phase 2 of research with older people placed an emphasis on identifying any significant barriers that may impede the return of older people to education.

Phases 1 and 2 of the NALA research projects were commissioned and undertaken against a background of the emergence of 'ageing societies' across most countries worldwide, including Ireland. According to CSO figure from 2007, in 2006, the percentage of Irish people aged 65 years and over stood at 11.2% of the overall population. By 2050 this figure will have increased to 26.3% of the population. Within this context it can be argued that lifelong learning has a role to play in assisting individuals and communities to cope with the different dimensions of an ageing society. Indeed, international research suggests that appropriate lifelong learning can play a positive role in promoting active citizenship among older learners. It can help maintain mental and physical health, increase general well being and self confidence, and help combat feelings of social isolation or exclusion (Whitnall, 2007; Tucket & McAuley, 2005; Katz, 2000). This article summarises the main findings from both phases of the research and highlights the similarities and differences between each group of older people regarding their attitude to the benefit of returning to education in later life.



## Main findings from NALA's research:

Both groups described strong negative views about their formal schooling experiences. While a small number of older people reported positive experiences of school, the general consensus among the older people was that school was difficult on both an academic and personal level.

**As soon as I was 14 I left ... there was no chance I was staying, no way, with all the stuff I had to put up with, male, aged 53, Dublin.**

The research also suggests that this negative experience of formal school had an impact on the attitude of older people towards formal learning. The main difference between the 2 groups was in relation to their attitude toward returning to education as a means of addressing their literacy difficulties. It would seem that this experience played a significant part in their decision not to engage with adult literacy services in later life.

**I got through life without it [education]. What would motivate me to go back? Nothing! Because I wouldn't want to go back, male, aged 64, Louth**

With regard to their working lives each group of older people reported that their employment histories had consisted of engaging in what they referred to as manual labour. They also gave accounts of how, due to literacy difficulties they missed out on opportunities for promotion, and training and development in the workplace.

**... my boss said 'would you like to be promoted?' ...well me legs went to jelly and I said 'no thanks, I'm happy where I am.', but I wasn't. I cried me eyes out when I went home female, aged 73, Dublin.**

A primary focus of the research projects was to investigate with the older people the coping strategies they employed throughout their lives to disguise their literacy difficulties from others. The research suggests that both groups of older people adopted similar coping strategies that were adaptable to a number of settings. For example, trivialising or pretending that they did not have literacy difficulties was a strategy common among both groups of older people. The research shows that the phrase 'I forgot my glasses' was the primary, preferred and most commonly cited strategy that the older people used.

**It's funny that whole thing 'I forgot me glasses' you see I never wore glasses ... I used to carry around me husband's empty glasses case and I'd show it to people to prove that I'd left them behind female, aged 67, Dublin.**

<sup>1</sup> The finalised research report is available to download free from the NALA website.

Dublin  
Wednesday  
**18**  
November

For more information call  
NALA on **01 855 4332**

The research demonstrates that the experiences of both groups of older people bore striking similarities on a number of issues. However, the main difference between both groups was that older people involved in the phase 2 of the research identified a number of barriers which prevented them from engaging with adult literacy service in later life. The barriers they identified include their attitude age and learning in later life. They reported that it is their belief that learning is a pursuit for the young and that they are too old to learn anything new at this point in their lives. It is their view that adult literacy learning has little relevance to their lives, that they had 'gotten this far without it' therefore, participation in adult literacy would not benefit them in any meaningful way.

**I'd say to meself 'sure look at the age of ye now' and if you couldn't get it to sink in when you were a youngster ... how in the name of God will it go in now** female, aged 64, Kilkenny

In contrast, the findings from the research with older learners demonstrated the positive impact that engaging in literacy learning had for them. They reported that taking part in literacy classes had played a significant role in improving their personal, family and social lives and had brought them long term and sustainable benefits.

**Oh the enjoyment of it ... I can't believe it ... I used to think I was stupid you see. Now I'm reading, writing and learning poetry ... and I think God, this is great, great. I wish I was able to do it years ago** female, aged 76, Dublin

While the research projects show a degree of commonalities between the 2 groups of older people, including negative experiences of formal education and devising coping strategies that disguised their literacy difficulties, the main difference between them is in their attitude to returning to education. Among the older people who did not engage with literacy services there was belief that they were 'too old' to return to learning and that they had developed other skills throughout their lives to compensate for their literacy difficulties. The research shows that there is a lot to be learnt from the accounts of the older people in phases 1 and 2 of the research. The research highlights the importance of making every effort to support older people to access literacy services as well as take up opportunities to develop their literacy and numeracy skills should they wish to do so. We here in NALA hope that the research we have conducted with older people will contribute to a more holistic and grounded understanding of the needs of older people in Ireland.



## Policy conference How to address adult literacy needs in Ireland

**Date** 18 November 2009  
**Time** 9am – 1pm  
**Location** Newman House, St Stephen's Green, Dublin

NALA is holding a policy conference in November to explore the case and benefits of a refreshed strategy to address adult literacy needs in Ireland. The conference will outline the rationale for a new strategy, present an international strategy, and explore the links between adult literacy and other key policy areas, and from discussion, conclude the elements of a refreshed strategy.

The conference is intended to inform policy makers and policy influencers from a range of sectors, including education, training, labour and skills development.

Speakers include Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, Mr. Sean Haughey, T.D., John Landeryou, Director, Learning, Quality and Systems Directorate, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), UK, Professor John Monaghan (St. Vincent de Paul) and Inez Bailey, Director, NALA.

**To book contact Eilis Mernagh on [literacy@nala.ie](mailto:literacy@nala.ie) or call (01) 855 4332**



# Communications Technology

## Interview with Colin Cummins, ALO, City of Limerick VEC



### How would you define Information Communications Technology?

For me, Information Communications Technology is any piece of technology we use to communicate with each other and share information. I suppose it all started with the telephone and in 2009 has grown to include computers, mobile phones, the Internet, television etc. A lot of people will have heard of Web 2.0 which is simply a phrase coined to refer to the second generation of the Internet. It's common now for people to use Web 2.0 tools such as Skype, Flickr, blogs and social networking sites.

### What communications technology do you use in work and in your personal life?

I have to say I love technology and so get excited by new developments in computers, mobile phone technology and the Internet. Of course I have a laptop at work and use email for most communication, particularly with staff. We're developing a new website at the moment for the Adult Education Service and so that will be an important way for us to communicate with people outside the Service. We have started to use some Web 2.0 tools on a regular basis and most meetings are now planned using [www.doodle.com](http://www.doodle.com). We also use blogs a lot as a way to encourage 2-way communication with staff on issues like curriculum development and FETAC. On a personal level I love social networking sites and am just starting to use Twitter at the moment.

### If you had to recommend your top three uses of technology for literacy practitioners, what would they be?

Hmmm – that's a tough question. You see I firmly believe that understanding technology and how to use it is a core literacy in itself so I think as literacy practitioners it is important we engage with developing technologies. To answer the question though I think social networking offers a lot of potential for professional development. A number of our tutors have signed up to ALTI (Adult Literacy Tutors of Ireland - the social network site set up by Adult Literacy tutors in South Tipperary). ALTI is a great example of how tutors can come together from all over the country and share best practice, resources and opinions in a virtual environment. You can take a look and maybe even join on <http://altiweb.ning.com/>.

YouTube ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)) is a personal favourite because of its potential professionally and personally. I've used the site for everything from learning how to cook a mean chicken curry to viewing demonstrations of new technologies. You can find video content on all sorts of interesting topics which can be fun but also provides a huge resource of material that can be used in class. As a huge Munster rugby fan I've also been known to download clips of the team's many successes.

Another emerging technology that I think will be important for those of us involved in adult basic education is Moodle ([www.moodle.com](http://www.moodle.com)). More a little later.

### Do you use Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP or Skype for instance) for communication?

Yes I do. I'm a really big fan of Skype. I was out of the country recently and used Skype to call home.....for free! It was great! From a work point of view I haven't been able to use it quite as much as I would like mainly because the use of VOIP hasn't fully taken off with people yet – but I use it where I can.

### What is a blog and how could it be used by an ALO, tutor or student?

Well, blogs are basically websites that allow users to post comments and opinions. Blogs differ to websites in that the content is posted by those who use the site (as opposed to exclusively by those who own or run the site). In a way a blog is like a notice board and a comment box combined. I believe that blogs are becoming more and more important for us because they offer an opportunity for two-way communication on topics that relate specifically to us as providers of basic education or for our learners. In our Service we have used blogs as a means of communicating with our volunteer tutors who rarely get to meet as a group and we have also used blogs to share information on FETAC and curriculum development. I think the biggest advantage to using blogs is that you can get immediate feedback from both staff and learners. You can see what I mean by taking a look at our Curriculum Development blog at: [www.clveccurricdev.blogspot.com/](http://www.clveccurricdev.blogspot.com/)



### What type of informal learning opportunities has technology opened for adult literacy students?

I truly believe that technology opens many doors for literacy or basic education learners. We all know that it is difficult to recruit learners with low literacy skills back into education but technology provides a way to do this. A lot of the time we have problems filling literacy classes but no shortage of those who would like to learn about technology, in particular computers. So I honestly feel that technology provides a mechanism to make our courses relevant and meaningful for learners.

I also feel that technology provides an opportunity to promote self-managed learning with basic-education students. We have such little time with learners in class that it is becoming more and more important that they have access to learning opportunities outside class to build on the skills they learn with the tutor. In Limerick, we recently opened a "Self Access Centre" which is a place within our centre where our learners can go, access new technologies in a supported environment (there are computers available and someone on hand to assist learners) and take advantage of online learning opportunities that they can manage themselves. The centre has been very successful and we hope to integrate more and more self-managed learning into the programmes we deliver this year.

### Do you find today's students are more interested in technology than before?

Absolutely –we have moved away from providing "computer classes" to providing "Surf-to-Learn", Digital Skills (learning to use your mobile phone, digital camera and other technologies), Simple IT (courses designed around using Web 2.0 technologies) etc. Our learners are interacting with a much wider range of technologies in their daily lives than ever before.

### Some people feel that their students don't have the required computer skills to use media like the Internet in learning. What's your view on this?

I don't buy this argument at all. In my view this is similar to arguing that our learner's skills are too basic to use ATM machines or mobile phones. The world in which we all live, our

learners included, demands interaction with new technologies on a daily basis. I have found that rather than not having the skills to use technology like the Internet, technology can provide a huge motivation for learners. Often it is just the case of getting over the fear or misgivings learners feel towards technology. We recently had a learner with us who, while still taking classes with us to improve his reading and writing, successfully launched his own website. His site was so successful that he was invited to a reception with the City Mayor.

### What is Moodle and how could it be used by an ALO, tutor or student?

In Limerick we are beginning to use Moodle as a content management system (abbreviated to CMS) for course development and planning. Moodle is really an online learning environment where tutors can post course outlines and resources that can be accessed by learners. You can in effect create online classrooms where learners can interact virtually with both the tutor and other learners.

The real strength of Moodle is that it allows learning to continue for learners well after the class is over. While the technology is well established in formal education its use in basic education is new and unchartered but we need to engage with it so that we give our learners every opportunity to interact with the kind of technology learners in other sectors of education are using every day.

Finally, is it always necessary to get training first before using any new technology methods, approaches or tools?

Definitely not! Many of the technologies and tools we hear about every day like Twitter, Flickr, YouTube are completely intuitive. You don't need training; all you need is a willingness to give it a go and a certain sense of curiosity. The first rule of learning new technologies is not to let fear get in the way and to have fun. Remember you can't break the Internet – at least I'm nearly sure you can't!

# Hearing the views of adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties: progress on the NALA Voice Strategy



One of the strategies we in NALA are using in our Strategic Plan is the Voice Strategy. The Voice Strategy is about making sure the views and experiences of adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties give NALA further insights into literacy issues, guide and inform the quality of our work, and are heard and taken into account by politicians and policy makers. Below is an outline of ways the Agency is gathering and sharing the views of adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties.

#### Through student representatives:

- On NALA's Executive Committee – 5 of the Executive are students and the current chairperson of NALA's Executive, Michael Power is a student
- On Student Sub-committee of the Executive – 12 students altogether who give ideas, help organise student events, input into other NALA work such as the An Post television campaign and listen to concerns from students
- On NALA working groups such as the media advisory group and the quality assurance and accreditation panels of the distance learning service
- At NALA Conferences and events where students are on the panel of speakers or sometimes chair the event
- Speaking to the media (television, radio and print media) about their experiences. NALA provided media training in 2008 to the Student Sub-committee
- Representing NALA at outside events such as the Ploughing Championships 2008 and 2009 and at the IVEA Conference
- Talking about their experiences and recording them so as to promote the benefits of learning or to highlight literacy issues to a particular sector (for example health). The recordings (the television programmes and DVDs) can be reused.

#### Requesting student / learner views:

- NALA organises Student Days each year. Here students get a chance to meet other students and discuss issues in small groups as well as in a large group. NALA Staff write a report on these events and share student feedback with other people who are working in literacy or who may be able to respond to issues raised
- Through NALA's Student Development Fund the Agency requests feedback from students on topics. Centres where literacy work takes place can apply to NALA for the Student Fund (usually €650). This fund is to support local or regional social and networking events for students. NALA gathers this feedback in a short report and uses it to inform Agency work and view emerging trends amongst students. NALA collected feedback in 2008 from independent learners using the distance education service. This led directly to changes being made to the service in 2009
- NALA carried out a usability study (with adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties) of [www.writeon.ie](http://www.writeon.ie) in January 2009. This informed changes to the website
- In developing guidelines, materials and research NALA consults and involves students in relevant centres in trying out new materials and influencing the direction of the work
- The Agency promotes NALA membership at student days as a way of student views being heard in the Agency

#### Ensuring politicians and policymakers hear their views:

- The Minister for Education and Science nominated adult literacy student Bridie Daly as the learner represent on the FETAC Council. Bridie Daly is a student who has served on the Student Sub-committee and NALA's Executive Committee.
- The Agency actively passes on information about opportunities where student views could be heard. For example members of the Student Sub-committee were informed that the National Consumer Agency was looking for a consumer representative.
- NALA Staff write reports on issues raised by students through the NALA student days and the NALA Student Development Fund. Reports are then shared with NALA's Executive, put on our website and shared with people working in literacy. The Student Sub-committee works to follow up on key issues raised by students with NALA's Executive Committee.
- The body of student feedback the Agency gathers informs discussions that the Agency has with politicians and policymakers.





## The Write Stuff

### New book captures personal stories of people with literacy difficulties

'School Days', 'A long way from home' and 'Celtic Education' are just some of the stories that feature in a new book compiled by the National Adult Literacy Agency. Called 'Written Off?', and based on the TV series of the same name, the book captures the personal stories of 14 Irish people who recently came together to learn to read and write. The book is an inspiring collection of some of their childhood memories, thoughts and poems, and also contains contributions from three of Ireland's most prominent authors: Patricia Scanlon, Mary Stanley and Dermot Bolger. Going back to education as an adult isn't easy but this book proves that the benefits are great and that everybody has the right to read and be read.

One such person is 35 year old James McCann from Kinnegad who left school at 14 to become a mechanic. When the garage he worked in had to close, he found that despite the fact that he knew everything about how to fix cars, he couldn't get a mechanic's qualification because he couldn't read or write. Since completing an adult literacy course James is now back working as a mechanic and studying to get his qualification. In the new book he recalls his childhood memories fixing cars with his father in his story 'Fiat 127'.

Olive Phelan from Tallaght has written three poems for the new book. Like many women her own age, Olive left school at 13 and spent most of her life caring for others. It was only when her youngest finally flew the nest that she realised that she needed some 'me time'. Since completing an adult literacy course Olive feels like she has been given a new lease of life and she has been able to break down the barriers that have prevented her from living a fuller life. In her poem 'Celtic Education' she says that she would like to see education be given priority so that no young children fall through the net.

Ann Boyd from Sligo is another contributor to 'Written Off?' Known as 'Nanny 911' in the local family resource centre where she works, Ann left school at 13 to stay at home and help her mother. However now with eight grandchildren of her own, she got tired of making excuses for not being able to help them with their homework because she had difficulties reading and writing. Since starting an adult literacy course she has begun reading them stories and has even started a new journey into further education to get the qualifications that will allow her to work professionally with people with special needs. In her story 'Memories of my parents' she movingly describes her life growing up in a small town in Sligo.

"This book is a collection of the writings of 14 brave adults who made the decision to go back to education. Their work should be an inspiration to us all and show us what is possible when people put their thoughts and stories down on paper," said Patricia Scanlon.

'Written Off?' was produced by NALA in association with New Island and is available free of charge from the National Adult Literacy Agency by calling 1800 20 20 65.

Dublin  
Saturday  
**30**  
January

For more information call  
NALA on **01 855 4332**

## Developing curriculum with students in adult literacy National Forum for Adult Literacy Tutors 2010

**Date** Saturday 30th January 2010  
**Time** 10.30 am to 4.00 pm  
**Location** All Hallows College, Grace Park Road,  
Drumcondra, Dublin 9

The event will look at:

- the NALA evolving model of curriculum development
- what curriculum means for tutors
- how students and tutors together plan their curriculum
- valuing learners' language and understanding different literacies
- how you can help learners to identify the prior knowledge, experience and meanings they bring to a learning situation

how to do curriculum development in the context of  
FETAC building everyday numeracy into curriculum

**This event is free for all Adult Literacy Tutors!!!**

**To book: contact Margaret Maher in NALA on  
mmaher@nala.ie or call (01) 850 9114**

# Curriculum development: An evolving model for adult literacy and numeracy education

NALA's evolving model of curriculum development is now available. It is explained in a booklet that you can find on the NALA website.

The model tries to show how NALA's Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work (NALA, 2005a) apply to curriculum development. It does not describe the content of a curriculum or of a literacy programme. Instead it describes a process for developing curriculum. This is a participative process carried out by learning partners, such as tutors and learners, with support from organisers, managers and others involved.

The emphasis is on how the learning partners work together in deciding how and what to learn. This understanding of curriculum is in tune with learner-directed approaches, which are core features of adult literacy work. It is also a learning-centred curriculum, in that everyone involved learns through taking part in the process.

The model starts with the learner, their goals, interests and contexts. It has four dimensions, starting with the context of the learner and of the programme, and from there considering planning, teaching and learning, and evaluation.

The model is underpinned by four key themes that it asks practitioners and students to keep in mind at all phases of curriculum development:

- Literacy as social practice
- Critical awareness
- Learning
- Change

### Who is it for?

The model is relevant to many different contexts and programmes where literacy work takes place, such as: workplace literacy, family literacy, education services in prisons, and the full range of programmes offered in the local adult literacy centres.

**To find the booklet and see the curriculum model,  
go to [www.nala.ie](http://www.nala.ie)**

# Students brought together in Co. Wicklow VEC

In October 2008, students from County Wicklow VEC's six Adult Learning Centres in Blessington, Baltinglass, Arklow, Carnew, Bray and Wicklow town met together for a student seminar for the first time. Funded through the 2008 NALA Student Fund, the seminar was titled "Looking to the future" and 47 students took part. An important factor in making the day a success was that transport was provided from each centre to a central point. A good atmosphere and rapport was generated on the bus trip.

## What happened on the day?

Researcher and lecturer, Jacinta Kitt, gave a motivational talk on building self confidence, self esteem and emotional intelligence. There were 2 facilitated discussions – one on the key things that help to keep improving literacy skills - the other on setting up a student committee. The groups worked extremely well together especially considering that most were meeting for the first time. Students participated in an evaluation session at the end of the day that resulted in very positive feedback.

## Students' feedback on the 5 key things that help to keep improving literacy skills:

- **Reading** – the focus was on everyday items for example, road signs, place names, poetry, teletext, cereal boxes, books such as gardening, using a thesaurus, signs when traveling on the Luas and Dart
- **Listening** – to radio, television, current affairs programmes, story tapes, other people and song lyrics
- **Writing** – practice what you learn for example, puzzles in newspapers, word games, superspell, shopping lists, filling in forms, write down meanings of words when reading, recipes, compile a book of home hints, make cards, make a word book, keep a diary, write letters, play board games, texting, help children with homework. The need to "use it or lose it!" was highlighted by students
- **Using computers** – outside class, play computer games, make banners on computer, book flights, use Mavis Beacon typing programme
- **Participate in a group** – join a 1:1 class or a formal group, meet other people and discuss hobbies, take extra classes, join another course such as First Aid, invite group members for coffee

During the discussion on setting up a student committee students explored the reasons for forming a student committee and the difficulties that might arise. They discussed things the committee could do and what skills were needed. They also teased out who should be on the committee, how often it should meet and how they would encourage other students to join.

## Students getting involved

Student committees are now in place in Blessington, Baltinglass, Arklow, Bray and Wicklow Adult Learning Centres. These committees have focused on social and support functions for students, have been involved in publicity and promotion of centres, and have also been very active in end of term social events.

Co. Wicklow VEC's Adult Learning Centres in Blessington, Baltinglass and Bray were again successful in their application for the NALA Student Fund in 2009. In October there will be a combined event in West Wicklow to foster relationships between students in Blessington and Baltinglass. The event will be a personal development day based around a facilitated arts workshop. It will be about learning by doing and trying out new things, emphasizing that learning can be fun. The group will give feedback to NALA on how the learning programme has made a difference to people's lives and on the [www.writeon.ie](http://www.writeon.ie) distance learning website. Students from Bray attended the NALA Conference "Literacy leading to change" in March 2009. Ideas from that conference influenced Bray's successful application and Bray will hold a student development day in early October with a focus on training in committee skills, which will also include ideas, suggestions and a plan on how to contact and meet with other student committees.

If you would like to hear more about these projects you can contact Annette Mangan, ALO, Co. Wicklow VEC in Baltinglass [baltinglass@wicklowlearners.ie](mailto:baltinglass@wicklowlearners.ie) and/or in Blessington [blessington@wicklowlearners.ie](mailto:blessington@wicklowlearners.ie) and Niamh Maguire, ALO, Co. Wicklow VEC in Bray [bray@wicklowlearners.ie](mailto:bray@wicklowlearners.ie)



Students at Blessington

# 32 centres give student feedback to NALA

32 centres and an estimated 600 students benefited from the NALA Student Development Fund in 2008. Centres used the Fund to bring students on trips to places of local or national interest, or to visit other groups. In order to receive the funding, students were to discuss at least one of the topics set by NALA. In this way the Agency was able to gather student feedback on the particular topics. This contributes to the voice strategy of NALA's Strategic Plan and the feedback is outlined in this article.

This feedback will be of interest to service providers and tutors as well as students. In 2008 the discussion topics set by NALA were quite general. While many of the answers students gave will not be a surprise to people working in literacy, the answers students gave most frequently are very interesting. For example, not knowing how the service works was the most common reason that made it difficult for people to go back to education. Using computers was rated as the second key thing that helped students to keep improving their literacy skills. 5 of the 32 centres work with young people. In common with the other students, younger students mentioned that lack of childcare as a barrier to going back to education. Lack of encouragement from home was also mentioned as a barrier. NALA would welcome your comments on this feedback.

## **NALA Topic 1: What made it difficult for people to go back to education to improve literacy?**

**Students' feedback:** The most common answer was that people did not know how the service worked. People said they did not know who was running the service or who to contact. They thought they would have to pay a lot of money or were not aware that classes were going on at night. One person said they thought that there might be kids in the class. The second reason that made it difficult for people to go back was being frightened about whether you would be able to keep up with class. The third thing that made it difficult to go back to education was childcare and transport issues. This was followed by a fear of looking stupid. Embarrassment and fear of others finding out that they were attending a literacy centre was next followed by memories of previous experiences of school. Lack of confidence was mentioned as was lack of encouragement from home and peers. "No one gets up in my house, school is not important". Family commitments impinging on time was next. Also mentioned was the loss of a support person, physical disabilities and generally finding time.

## **NALA Topic 2: Ways employers helped in the past or ways they could help people in the future to improve your literacy and numeracy skills**

**Students' feedback:** Just one centre gave feedback on ways employers had helped in the past. This included providing information on courses, sending a person on a course and giving encouragement. The other centres did not specify whether their feedback was about how employers had helped in the past or could help in the future. The most frequent way employers could help was by giving people time off work to attend classes. The second way was to encourage people to improve their skills. The third was to provide in-house training at work. The fourth way was by providing information on courses. The fifth way was to build awareness of literacy issues within the company. Other ways mentioned were to value people's experiences (despite having a literacy difficulty), providing technology aids and giving financial support for courses relevant to work.

## **NALA Topic 3: Name 5 key things that help you to keep improving your literacy skills**

**Students' feedback:** The most frequent response to key things that help you to keep improving your literacy skills was practicing what you had learned. This included reading, doing homework, writing, repeating what was done in class regularly and other things like using a dictionary, keeping a personal diary, taking time to learn and learning to listen more. The second most frequent answer was using computers. Doing computer classes and using particular programmes was helpful (interactive websites such as NALA's [www.literacytools.ie](http://www.literacytools.ie), [www.readwritenow.ie](http://www.readwritenow.ie) as well as spelling programmes such as Superspell). One student said "Learn to use the computer and as the words are typed in you are subconsciously learning the spellings of words". The third thing that helped to keep improving literacy skills was learning from others in the group. Fourth was attending class regularly. Fifth was having a good tutor. Joint sixth was using your surroundings to learn and being motivated and building confidence. Joint seventh was three things: receiving support from family and friends; being encouraged to try new things and being challenged in a positive way; and using materials that are relevant and made applicable to everyday life. Also mentioned was: having a variety of topics and using different teaching methods; going to organised social interactions and discussion opportunities outside the classroom; using the library; watching TV programmes on literacy; being part of developing the curriculum and seeing that there is progress.

## **NALA Topic 4: Name 5 ways information technology could help you with your learning**

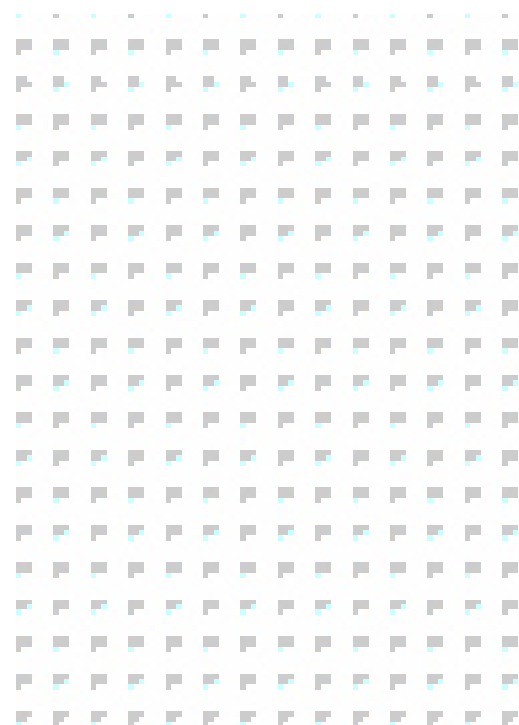
**Students' feedback:** Using word processing and spelling programmes on the computer to help build vocabulary was the most frequently way students felt information technology could help with learning. Secondly students found information technology was a great motivator and an enjoyable way to expand knowledge. The third way information technology could help as identified by students was by complimenting regular classes. Fourth was that the interactive nature of the Internet is good

for communication and access to information. Fifth was being able to learn at your own pace. Other ways information technology could help: making it easier to do presentations and programmes with visual images help.

#### **NALA Topic 5: Name 5 ways students can become more involved in research in NALA**

**Students' feedback:** Just three centres gave feedback on this topic. The suggestions made by students were that NALA could inform students about what it wants to know. Students could share experiences and take part in questionnaires and research. NALA could circulate questionnaires and students could work with their tutor on them. Students could contribute to the NALA website and could report on literacy learning activities and experiences to NALA. Students could become members of NALA. Centres could have more educational outings such as those funded under the NALA Student Fund. Outings provide opportunities to share ideas, become clearer on literacy issues and support students to speak out. There were suggestions made about the importance of having website material available on DVD so students could do it offline and that courses could be made accessible for people with disabilities so the literacy service is reaching more people.

In conclusion this feedback from students from the 2008 NALA Student Fund reinforces much of the work that NALA is doing in raising awareness, developing distance education, mainstreaming family and workplace programmes and through the Literacy Advisory Service. We hope the An Post / NALA television campaign will have an impact on raising awareness for adults that there is a free and confidential literacy service available and a number they can contact. An Post and NALA are doing a further leaflet drop campaign in 7 areas around the country and measuring the impact of that on people coming forward for tuition. NALA will pass on this feedback to the Adult Literacy Organisers' Association and to centre managers in other literacy settings. NALA Staff meeting with politicians and policymakers will also echo the themes arising out of this feedback in discussions.



Events in the student calendar:

**Dublin**  
Saturday  
**27**  
February

**Cork**  
Saturday  
**13**  
March

For more information call  
NALA on **01 855 4332**

## **Information for Student Members**

### **Date for your diary - Saturday 27 February and Saturday 13 March 2010**

NALA's Student Days are set to take place on Saturday 27 February and Saturday 13 March 2010. Student Days give people a chance to meet other students and gives NALA a chance to get feedback from students.

#### **NALA's Student Sub-committee is looking for new members**

NALA's Student Sub-committee is now looking for more student members. To find out more about what NALA's Student Sub-committee is about, see our website [www.nala.ie](http://www.nala.ie) under NALA's Work, Hearing Students' Views and Student Sub-committee.

#### **Student Feedback from 2 NALA Student Days in 2009 in Dublin and Cork**

- Students would like to see a plain English guide to voting. There needs to be more education showing people how to vote
- The "Written Off?" TV programme DVDs could be shown to Transition Year students in schools and in local community centres. Local literacy centres could follow up on this and let people know in dole offices that there is help available for literacy
- It seemed many students are not aware of accreditation and accreditation options
- There was great praise for NALA and for the work of local literacy centres.

If you have any comments on the feedback above please contact NALA's Student and Membership Officer, Margaret by email [mmurray@nala.ie](mailto:mmurray@nala.ie) or by telephone on 021 4278655.

# Student writings

## Railway Square

Railway Square is a place where you belong,  
they help you grow, be positive, confident and strong.  
It's not like past Systems, that force you to go Wrong,  
Adult Education is where 'You' belong.

No Two days in the Centre is ever the same,  
You are encouraged to learn, forget past shame.  
We are all encouraged to learn at our own pace,  
To be positive strong, to join the huge rat race.

Now as an adult I have a strong desire to learn,  
To help future generations is a major concern.  
You are not alone but you must take the First step,  
It will be one move you will never regret.

When the time is right 'The Teacher will appear'  
Their knowledge will strengthen you for many a year.  
Behind each new door, Someone is waiting for you,  
To build your broken confidence to see you through.

Don't be afraid, Walk towards that guiding light,  
Make your dark life exciting and so bright.  
Now is the time to make your life feel right,  
Adult Education is painless a real delight.

Alice Devereux

## Go on, Open the Door.

It's easier to hide  
When fear holds us back  
Take a look outside.  
Things aren't so black.  
Go on, open the door.

As we go through this life  
We all make mistakes.  
Fear, worry and strife,  
Hard decisions to make.  
Go on, open the door.

Keep the door open.  
Your mind open too.  
Don't shut yourself off.  
Life is waiting for you.  
Go on, open the door.

A handshake, a smile.  
A friendly word.  
You've gone your first mile.  
Your voice has been heard.  
Well done, you've opened the door!

By Doreen Nolan

## University of Life.

What do we get from life itself.  
What we put in is what we get.  
To see our world in a different light.  
Ah by no means now its called the  
University of life.

We learned to read, write and spell  
When we went to school.  
And we probably broke a few golden  
Rules.

But it helped us to learn along  
The way.  
And now we know what way we  
Our going each and everyday,

So get the most out of life.  
And you can achieve knowledge.  
Goals, and Power from the  
University of your life.

By Ellen Cleary

# My Friend Carrie Walsh

By Pat Bennett

On Saturday morning, 4th July 2009, I got a telephone call to say Carrie was very low in St. James' Hospital. Later that evening I got a text to say she was much improved. Of course, I was delighted at first but then thought "No", this is Carrie rallying the last of her strength to say "Goodbye" to those closest to her and to say "My work is done". The following morning, Sunday 5th July, I got the call to say Carrie had passed away. Her work was done!

I met Carrie about 26 years ago through the Adult Basic Education service in Co. Kildare VEC (then known as the literacy scheme). The service was in its infancy and, as yet, not restricted by bureaucratic limitations. We shared a belief in everyone's right to be literate in their own language. On the ten year celebration of the Kildare town Adult Learning Unit Carrie wrote *"...we are celebrating a voyage of discovery for all of us, this quiet progress toward freedom, power and knowledge which comes with confidence in dealing with a world where almost every activity involves reading and writing"*. This epitomises her approach to her work in ABE for over 20 years. During that time Carrie's work spread way beyond the confines of Kildare. She was instrumental in the development of several initiatives which form the basis of our work today. She worked on secondment with NALA for 3 years, in the Curragh and Portlaoise prisons and with NCVA (FETAC) on the development of certification courses. I worked with Carrie on the first literacy programme for radio for TippFM and on the development and delivery of Integrating Literacy for Teagasc teachers. Through the Teagasc course we formed a great friendship with Rita (Keane) who sadly died very prematurely in December 1999.

Carrie was always the ideas' person. She would ring me in the office or call to my house on a Sunday afternoon, full of ideas of how we could improve our service and reach out to more potential learners. She had a 'can do' attitude; if it is right for the learner we will make it happen. We all aim to have a student centred approach; Carrie was totally student focussed. This little verse from a poem entitled "Carrie's Room" better expresses her relationship with learners:

**"They learn to read and write, but something more  
A comradeship they never had before,  
They feel renewed in spirit and in mind  
With Carrie and her tutors, ever kind"**

## Darren – an inspiration to us all

It was with great sadness that we heard of Darren Sutherland's untimely death. The Written off students will never forget the time and advice he so generously gave to them during filming this year. His words of encouragement and genuine interest in their lives will always be an inspiration to them.

We all offer our sincere condolences to his family.

All of the Written Off participants  
in the boxing ring.



Kind of spirit, kind by nature, full of wisdom and a truly altruistic person!

Carrie's other great devotion in life was to her family - her husband Paddy, sons Michael and Barry, and grandsons David and Jack. Her younger son, Barry, got married on the 9th September last. As Carrie had prepared the mass booklet, readings and hymns there was a great sense of her presence in the church. It was a day of mixed emotions, happy yet sad, and I was privileged to be part of it. When I awoke that morning to beautiful sunshine (the first dry day in weeks!) I felt Carrie was still working for her family and she had succeeded in doing something from above that she couldn't do on earth!

My friendship with Carrie went way beyond our work in ABE. We shared a friendship through life's ups and downs! Sitting here writing this now (Sunday afternoon) reminds me of the six years we shared studying with the Open University.

The painful loss of Carrie's friendship, loyalty, wisdom and integrity is softened somewhat by the sense of privilege I feel to have shared a small part in the life of the wonderful person Carrie was (*of course, she would hate me to say that, she was far too humble!*). Shakespeare better describes the maxim Carrie lived up to and I will strive to do the same in her honour:

**"To thine own self be true,  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man"**  
- William Shakespeare





## Special Membership Offer

NALA Membership is from 1 January to 31 December each year. We now have a special offer. You can join now and become a member for the remaining part of 2009 and for all of 2010. The rates for this offer are:

Individual members:	€30
Unwaged individual member	€6
Discounted rate for 10 or more individuals joining together	(per person) €18
Associate & overseas individual members*	€60
Group members:	
Statutory & corporate organisations	€360
Non-profit organisations	€120
Local literacy centres	€60
Associate & overseas organisations*	€180

\*Associate (and overseas) membership will suit people and organisations who wish to show their support to NALA but who wish to receive only minimal information. Associate and overseas members do not have a vote at our AGM.

## What are the benefits of NALA membership?

Members are entitled to:

- 10% discount on Irish publications in NALA's resource room
- Hear first about events, new publications and be given first preference with bookings
- Receive discounts for NALA publications, conferences and events
- Be sent a complimentary copy of certain NALA resources
- Be kept up to date on key policy decisions relating to the direction and work of NALA
- Receive NALA's Annual Report, journal and magazine and information on developments in literacy.

Members also have access to an exclusive member's area on NALA's website [www.nala.ie](http://www.nala.ie) Here members are able to:

- Access member-only information and news
- Discuss literacy issues with other members in a private forum
- Take part in member-only online surveys and polls
- Book events online before the general public and benefit from a 50% discount
- Take advantage of exclusive member discounts on specific resources
- Gain access to and share literacy resources with other members.

**National Adult Literacy Agency**  
 76 Lower Gardiner Street,  
 Dublin 1.

01 855 4332  
[literacy@nala.ie](mailto:literacy@nala.ie)

For more information about becoming a member of NALA call our freephone 1800 20 20 65 or log onto [www.nala.ie](http://www.nala.ie)