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Improving literacy and computer skills through online learning

*A focused evaluation of the National Adult Literacy
Agency's (NALA's) Distance Learning Service in 2010*

Final Report

January 2011

Prepared for NALA

by

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1. NALA foreword

By Inez Bailey, Director of The National Adult Literacy Agency

NALA is committed to making sure people with literacy and numeracy difficulties can fully take part in society and have access to learning opportunities that meet their needs. As part of this work we have used technology to overcome barriers to participation in learning through the creation of a Distance Learning Service, initially using the media of television and radio and more recently the internet.



We live in interesting times where finally broadband rollout in Ireland is nearing a point where online learning is becoming a reality for all. With significant unemployment and a changing labour market, demand for retraining has never been greater, with many people now seeking the opportunity to go back to education to hone their skills and gain a qualification that might not have seemed as critical a couple of years back. This increasing demand coupled with greater Internet access has seen the number of learners using our elearning site, www.writeon.ie, almost double in 2010. This report then is a timely investigation into how basic education learners can use the site. But more than that, it shows just how effective blended approaches to learning can be for this cohort. The testimonies and analysis in this report are encouraging as Ireland really embarks in providing flexible learning opportunities using the Internet and NALA is proud to be at the forefront of this movement.

I would like to thank the Distance Learning Team and all the staff in NALA who have worked on this project, as well as our key stakeholders: learner representatives, IVEA, CEEOA, AEOA, ALOA, the Department of Education and Skills and RTÉ.

There are challenges ahead for NALA, learners, practitioners, providers and funders but we have only begun unlocking the potential of online learning. The future is bright, and we hope this report will both encourage those working with learners through technology to do more as well as provide guidance to others who may be hesitant, so we may embrace the challenges and opportunities together.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Inez Bailey', written over a horizontal line.

Inez Bailey

Director, National Adult Literacy Agency

2. Acknowledgements

The research team would like to thank all those who have supported and participated in the evaluation of NALA's Distance Learning Service that has focussed on the use of www.writeon.ie. A total of 92 people have participated in the evidence collection process in a series of individual face-to-face interviews, learner focus groups and telephone consultations. Each person has made a unique and important contribution.

Tom O'Mara and Gráinne Fitzpatrick of NALA have been most supportive in providing quantitative data and contacts with technical staff and practitioners. Tom O'Mara and Fergus Dolan have independently carried out site visits to 6 blended learning centres and this data is included in the research findings.

We were warmly welcomed into four adult learning centres in different parts of the country and we acknowledge the hospitality we received and the organisational arrangements that were made to accommodate our visits. Managers, tutors and learners all shared their expertise and experience with us and their voices have made the central and most important contribution to the final report.

Finally we would like to thank the learners who checked and verified our findings and attended the final focus group. You have helped ensure that the detail in this report accurately reflects the experience of online literacy learners.

Ann Hegarty

Maggie Feeley

January 2011

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4. List of acronyms

ABLE	Adult Basic and Literacy Education
ACTRaD	Adult and Community Training, Research and Development
ALIT	Adult Literacy using Information Technology
BFI	Bridges to the Future Initiative
CE	Community Employment
CEC	Commission of the European Community
COLLIT	Commonwealth of Learning Literacy Project
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DL	Distance Learning
DLS	Distance Learning Service
ERC	Educational Research Centre
ESL	English as a Second Language
EU	European Union
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
LLN	Literacy, Language and Numeracy
NALA	National Adult Literacy Agency
NELL	National E Learning Laboratory
NESF	National Economic and Social Forum
NCI	National College of Ireland
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NSS	National Skills Strategy
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SLDD	Specific Learning Difficulties/Disabilities
Ufi	University for industry
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
US	United States
VEC	Vocational Education Committee

Main Messages

- The evaluation of NALA's Distance Learning Service (DLS) for 2010 has focussed on examining the experience of users of the www.writeon.ie literacy website. Between September 2010 and December 2010, quantitative and qualitative evidence was gathered from 92 people involved in www.writeon.ie. These included literacy learners, tutors, providers and NALA staff. Their contributions are at the core of this report.
- The development of the interactive website www.writeon.ie means that NALA is now amongst the most innovative international providers of adult literacy. Learners are offered a standardised programme of learning and a range of options to gain recognised accreditation in literacy, numeracy and Information Technology (IT) at Level 2. They can do this working online independently or with tutor support. Evidence of achievement is gathered online and thereby individuals and centres have been relieved of a huge administrative burden.
- Established in late 2008, www.writeon.ie has already widened participation in adult literacy by engaging many thousands of new learners. Almost 7,000 of these learners registered in 2010. Learners are women and men of all ages and from all parts of the country. They have mostly left school without any qualification. Many are wary of returning to a system that they perceive as unwelcoming and that has failed them in the past. This study finds that NALA's www.writeon.ie provides an attractive route back to learning for previously reluctant learners.
- Evidence suggests that www.writeon.ie provides adult literacy with a fresh look and reduces the stigmatised image that is attached to early levels of literacy work. Working on a computer gives learners a sense of accomplishment and status that they sometimes do not experience with traditional approaches to literacy. In this study we found that the associations of 'pen and paper' with unhappy school memories were dispelled by the socially valued process of online learning.

- Using www.writeon.ie allows learners, with sufficient literacy and computer skills, to work autonomously and to control the time, pace and content of their learning programme. Through this process they can accredit prior learning or acquire new skills. The integration of basic skills and technology allows the simultaneous improvement of both traditional and digital literacies. In so doing it responds to the needs of learners and providers as well as to the goals set in the National Skills Strategy (2007) and European Education and Training plan – ET2020.
- The introduction of www.writeon.ie has changed the role of the tutor in a blended literacy group and the relationship between learner and tutor is also transformed. Learners have become more autonomous and have greater control of their own learning process and preferences. Consequently tutors describe their role as more facilitative than proactive. At the same time the relationship between learner and tutor or volunteer tutor is equalised as everyone learns together about the potential of www.writeon.ie.
- The data suggest that as the interest in online learning grows, tutors need to learn about the practice issues relating to using www.writeon.ie in a blended learning environment. Volunteer tutors suggest that the structured nature of www.writeon.ie is an invaluable resource for new tutors and gives them an overview of literacy at Level 2. Training would help ensure that the full potential of the site is put to best use. Tutors identified a need for facilitation and computer skills training to match the demands of their new role.
- Centres that were part of NALA's Blended Learning Project found that www.writeon.ie was central to enhanced recruitment, retention, accreditation and progression of Level 2 learners. The combination of face-to-face tuition and independent learning online increased the pace of learning and meant that learners were ready and keen to move on to Level 3 sooner than with traditional methods. Level 3 www.writeon.ie may provide both an incentive and a progression route for those who

complete FETAC Level 2 and wish to move on to a higher level of accreditation.

- The research uncovered a small number of challenges in relation to site design and the process of online learning with www.writeon.ie. Because of the manner in which the site is constantly under review, many of these have already been resolved. Most frequently discussed were the need for an introductory, induction video and learners' desire for more detailed feedback about errors. NALA was praised by learners, tutors and providers for the collaborative and responsive way in which this experimental period of working with www.writeon.ie has been managed and supported.
- Many further developments to the site were suggested. Amongst these were the inclusion of a tutor section with discussion forum and downloadable materials and a family learning section that adult learners could use with their children. The literature suggests that sites can easily be subtitled, signed or translated to include linguistic minorities and font size and colour options that are available on www.writeon.ie should be highlighted to meet diverse visual needs. Demand for other such inclusive options should be kept under review.
- NALA has a core commitment to partnership and the study reveals that www.writeon.ie had tremendous, as yet untapped, potential for making access to basic skills available to groups who can provide the required technological infrastructure. These might include those who are house-bound, disability groups and those with learning difficulties, prisoners, homeless people, youth groups, workplace learners, migrants and others wishing to upgrade their skills to Level 2 and beyond.

Recommendations

1. NALA and all literacy providers should be resourced to extend the reach of www.writeon.ie thereby contributing to the achievement of the National Skills Strategy, ET2020 and the reduction of persistent educational disadvantage.

2. Priority should be given to providing greater public access to computers for those who wish to work online to improve basic skills but do not have the means to fund this.
3. Literacy tutor and volunteer tutor training should take note of the rapid shift towards online learning. All tutor training should include exploration of the use of www.writeon.ie and prepare tutors for a more facilitative role and an equalised relationship between learner and tutor.
4. The development of www.writeon.ie should include a video induction and more focused feedback to learners about their errors. Developing tutor and family literacy dimensions to the site should be explored.
5. Because of its innovative nature, NALA should continue to monitor and investigate the use of www.writeon.ie with a range of literacy learners and other partners.
6. Provision for Level 1 learners would be a welcome extension to www.writeon.ie and mean that online learning could reach those most in need of literacy support.

6. Introduction

Since its early media beginnings with the BBC 'On the Move' TV series in the 1970s, the face of the adult literacy movement has been constantly changing in line with our evolving understandings of literacy practice and technological advances (Hamilton and Hillier, 2006). Forty years on, in the context of busy lives, care and work demands and the persistent stigma attached to unmet literacy needs, distance learning is increasingly offering additional options to the adult literacy learner (Davis and Fletcher, 2010; Hegarty and Feeley, 2010). The earliest forms of distance learning (DL) took the form of correspondence courses and these became more elaborate with the development of radio and television as learning media with more mass appeal. Subsequent advances in technology and web-based learning have rapidly overtaken early correspondence type courses although paper-based materials still have a role in much distance literacy learning. Nevertheless, twenty-first century society is now characterised by the manner in which information and knowledge are digitally produced, reproduced and disseminated. Advances in digital technology across home, learning and work environments have played a significant role in the changing literacy landscape and continue to be central to literacy developments. They impact on the way that we learn and use literacy and have become central to how literacy is currently defined and redefined (Lankshear et al, 1997; Lankshear and Knobel, 2003; Castells and Cardoso, 2006).

The manner in which e-learning programmes, in particular, can transcend the challenges of time and location makes them an attractive learning solution for many and the relative novelty of information and communication technologies (ICTs) means that being a novice user remains socially acceptable. This opens up new possibilities for literacy learners who find the social stigma attached to literacy off-putting. E-learning and social networking have opened up a whole new way of learning and practising literacy skills that are fresh and

challenging for both learners and practitioners (NALA, 2010). Digital technology and its rapidly changing formats dictate that we are all continuously learning in order to keep up to date. The balance of power in the relationship between literacy learner and tutor may also be reshaped and equalised as learners can have a more sophisticated understanding of technology than do tutors (Frank, 2001). Furthermore the proliferation of digital applications in every aspect of life: home, leisure, work and training means that ICT literacies are rapidly becoming as essential as more traditional text skills. International evidence suggests that distance literacy work, especially incorporating online applications, offers vast possibilities for integrating much needed language and literacy work across a wide range of contexts. At the same time, although often not available to the world's poorest learners, it offers some resolution to the global dearth of qualified literacy tutors available to respond to increased learner demand (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 2006).

The policy context

The need for more accessible and attractive literacy learning solutions persists in Ireland also where an estimated 500,000 adults and increasing numbers of disadvantaged young people have unmet literacy needs (Educational Research Centre (ERC), 2004; Eivers et al, 2005a; Eivers et al, 2005b; Commission of the European Communities (CEC), 2008; National Economic and Social Forum (NESF), 2009; Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2010). Less than 10% of adults estimated to have unmet literacy needs participate in quantifiable literacy learning opportunities and at this rate only small progress can be made in reducing the national literacy deficit (NALA, 2011a). The www.nala.ie website states that almost 50,000 learners typically receive two hours literacy tuition per week in 126 locally based Vocational Education Committee (VEC) Adult Literacy Schemes. On an annual basis, this is the equivalent of only two weeks' full-time education for each person, which suggests that further responses are needed to impact on a growing skills challenge. It is clear that both in the school sector and in the field of adult literacy significant challenges remain to be met.

The National Skills Strategy

The nature of this skills challenge is articulated in the National Skills Strategy (NSS) that outlines a vision for the education profile of the Irish workforce in 2020 (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2007). The report cites the centrality to such a vision of the generic skills of literacy, numeracy and using technology. It identifies 70,000 people in the workforce whose skills need to be raised from National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) Levels 1 and 2 to achieve Level 3 accreditation. A 'One-Step-Up' approach using a range of providers is recommended and the Skills Strategy suggests that priority be given in resources and access to those with 'low literacy levels':

Basic skills such as literacy, numeracy and the use of technology should be prioritised and embedded into all publicly funded education and training provision...(Ibid: 14).

Although it was seen as a specialist skill 10-15 years ago, working with technology has moved now into the category of a 'basic skill' that is essential in most fields of work and life in general. NALA's www.writeon.ie is therefore well-placed to contribute to the achievement of the National Skills Strategy (2007) that has particular emphasis on upskilling people between National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) Levels 1 and 3. With the resourcing of additional levels and content for www.writeon.ie this contribution might become even greater and extend to the substantial target of 250,000 that need to move from Level 3 to Level 4 by the year 2020.

Recognition of prior learning (RPL)

Through www.writeon.ie, NALA's distance education programme offers a self-paced route to literacy learning and accreditation. The programme is designed to provide new learning opportunities as well as ways to have existing skills recognised at the initial assessment stage. This recognition of prior learning (RPL) is all the more important now in the current economic climate, for those who left school without any qualification and who find an increasing demand from employers for evidence of achievement. Completing FETAC Level 2 and 3 online may offer a cost and time efficient way for many to verify or upgrade core skills. Greater public access to the internet through

libraries and VECs would extend the reach of such a scheme to those without home computers and internet access.

The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs points out that ‘in the absence of policy change, a significant proportion of Ireland’s workforce will remain low-skilled in 2020’ (Ibid: 2). Such calls for action have also been made in the NESF report on child literacy and social inclusion that highlighted the connection between schooling and adult basic skills (including digital literacy) and pointed to a need for a cohesive, national approach to literacy development (NESF, 2009).

ET2020

As a template for action, the member states of the European Union (EU) have agreed a *Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training* for this decade that will form the basis of each country’s internal policy development (CEC, 2009). The goal is to develop the skills that will encourage economic recovery while at the same time addressing persistent social and educational disadvantage. Known as ET2020, the strategy encompasses all sectors of education from early childhood to adult education and is focused on the development of ‘key competencies’. Eight competencies are outlined:

- 1) Communication in the mother tongue (including reading, writing and speaking with confidence);
- 2) Communication in foreign languages;
- 3) Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology;
- 4) Digital competence;
- 5) Learning to learn;
- 6) Social and civic competences;
- 7) Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship;
- 8) Cultural awareness and expression. (Council of the EU, 2010: 5)

The integration of traditional and digital literacies across learning curricula at all levels is central to the implementation of ET2020. In particular, the use of ICTs is highlighted:

As ICT use becomes more pervasive in people’s lives, these issues should be explicitly addressed in teaching and learning. The potential of new technologies for enhancing innovation and creativity, new partnerships and for personalising learning needs to be better exploited. (Ibid: 7)

ET2020 calls for new teaching strategies across the education system and for teachers to be given opportunities to update their skills particularly with regard

to digital competencies.

A draft national plan to improve literacy and numeracy in schools

In November 2010 the government launched a consultative document dealing with the challenges posed by falling standards in school and youth literacy and numeracy (DES, 2010). These lower standards are confirmed in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), 2009 (OECD, 2010) and are central to the concerns expressed in ET2020. The draft national plan arises from concerns that despite a number of initiatives, the literacy skills of Irish students, especially boys, have not improved over thirty years. It has been suggested that this may be the first generation in Ireland where literacy standards have fallen rather than risen¹. Furthermore, within already poor literacy results, those in disadvantaged communities give particular cause for concern. Unlike the comprehensive approach to literacy across the generations recommended in both NESF (2009) and ET2020 (CEC, 2009), the draft national plan's primary focus is on school-aged learners. In that regard, the draft plan suggests an integrated approach to literacy development that requires all teachers to become more skilled at language and literacy development and to be able to harness the benefits of technology in all aspects of their work.

Attention to adult literacy is on the provision of information about parents' and communities' role in promoting literacy and numeracy. It is suggested that this become the focus of an awareness campaign that will include NALA's website www.writeon.ie as a conduit for information about literacy. Strategic support with language, literacy and numeracy development will be designed and offered through leaflets and resource packs, particularly to disadvantaged parents. Again this will be done through the adult literacy services that will have a key role in raising awareness and widening participation.

Widening participation

¹ Irish Times, December 11, 2010. 'A dark Irish secret that few of us want to talk about' Fintan O'Toole.

A major issue in achieving individual, national and European literacy goals is the reluctance of adult learners to engage with adult literacy and adult education in general. NALA's current strategic plan confirms that less than 10% of those who might benefit from adult literacy support are taking part in any learning (NALA, 2011a). This reluctance has a number of root causes. It may be to do with lack of information or awareness that the culture of adult learning is more welcoming than that of prior school experiences. It may be that some people have difficulty in attending because of poor transport links, care, work and other time demands. Course requirements and learning institutions can be daunting and the state supports for disadvantaged people not sufficient to foster the optimism needed to engage in adult learning. Each of these factors, individually or together can keep people away from learning but research has shown that the most prevalent barrier to engagement with literacy is dispositional. This is when a person's outlook and attitude are embodied in feelings of low esteem, self-deprecation and the associated reluctance to be exposed to the embarrassment and stigma associated with unmet literacy needs (NALA, 2010b).

NALA has a well-documented history of developing and supporting creative and innovative projects to meet the needs of adult literacy learners (NALA, 2011b). The vision articulated in NALA's current strategic plan has an implicit commitment to widening participation in contemporary forms of literacy.

We want Ireland to be a place where adult literacy is a valued right and where everyone can both develop their literacy and take part more fully in society. (NALA, 2011)

It is not always easy for people to find the time or motivation to attend a literacy group. Evidence suggests that men in particular find it more difficult than women to confront the stigma attached to unmet literacy needs and they are drawn to distance learning solutions for the privacy and confidentiality they offer (Hegarty and Feeley, 2010). In the current times of recession there are an increasing number of recently unemployed adults, men and women, who might benefit from web-based methods of improving their literacy and

numeracy so that they are prepared to avail of new work opportunities in an economic upturn.

NALA has already had considerable success with providing access to literacy and numeracy tuition through cutting edge DL options. The core aspects of the NALA Distance Learning Service (DLS) include radio and television broadcasts, a Freephone², a distant learning tutor support team, print materials delivered by post to learners' homes and website materials accessed via the internet (NALA, 2009).

Amongst NALA's tips for reducing barriers (Ibid: 7) is the potential to reduce barriers to participation through the use of technology. It is suggested that a *blended learning* approach that combines face-to-face tuition with independent learning, usually online, can help relieve the pressure on learners and offer a fresh start to those reluctant to join classes. DL using internet solutions offers the possibility of reaching more adult learners in a flexible and cost effective manner. In particular there is the additional opportunity to combine the acquisition of traditional and digital literacy for those who are most educationally disadvantaged (NALA, 2007a).

Internet learning

For 10 years now NALA has been providing opportunities through DL in partnership with Government Departments. In this time many thousands of independent learners have been supported to improve their skills and return to learning. An expanding element of the distance literacy menu is the availability of website learning materials and the use of email to exchange messages and completed items of learning. NALA's interactive website www.writeon.ie was set up in September 2008 to support learners in improving their reading, writing and number skills. It allows learners, either independently or with tutor support, to complete Level 2 minor awards as well as the FETAC Level 2 Certificate in General Learning. The site provides a wide range of interactive learning exercises, news links, games and a discussion forum for learners and tutors.

² The Freephone number is 1800 202065

In 2009 the NALA carried out a study of www.writeon.ie in practice. The research was conducted by National College of Ireland (NCI) and usability testing took place in NCI's usability laboratory: the National E-learning Laboratory (NELL). Learners were observed using the literacy website and the findings were generally very positive. A small number of potential improvements were identified that were acted upon at that point and this process of consultation and development is ongoing (NCI, 2009).

In addition to this learning opportunity at Level 2, from October 2010, the new *Write on 4 work* initiative, supported by the Department of Education and Skills through the Labour Market Activation Fund and the European Social Fund, will provide 500 free places for unemployed people to complete FETAC Level 3 online. With this new programme, the www.writeon.ie site will then innovatively allow a full range of language and literacy skills and uses to be simultaneously practised whilst storing evidence for a nationally recognised FETAC award at Level 2 and 3.

Terms of reference

The study that forms the basis of this report was carried out according to the following terms of reference:

The specific focus of the 2010 DLS evaluation will be on those learners and providers using www.writeon.ie at Level 2. The study will have two primary aims:

1. To develop a profile of learners, both individuals and groups, using www.writeon.ie with reference to identity, motivation, experience and outcomes.
2. To provide an analysis of the use of www.writeon.ie with reference to the benefits to learners and to providers of adult education.

The final report will also reflect evidence gathered during NALA's 2010 www.writeon.ie Blended Learning Project.³

Report outline

³ Details taken from NALA's tender document.

We begin with a brief review of international online literacy learning developments. This demonstrates the significance of NALA's work in an international context and may be omitted by those interested only in the Irish perspective. We then outline the research design and methodology. This is followed by the findings that highlight NALA's considerable role in the innovative arena of online literacy. Finally we propose some evidence-based conclusions and recommendations about the future direction of online literacy.

7. Online learning – www.writeon.ie in the international context

Distance learning (DL) is not new particularly in countries like Australia and Iceland, with remote communities and climactic conditions that make regular attendance at educational establishments difficult. Its use with shift workers and those with care responsibilities and limited mobility is also well documented (Askov et al, 2003; Porter and Sturm, 2006). UNESCO studies report on successful use of radio in promoting literacy development in the Cape Verde Islands and of the impact of same-language subtitling on popular TV films and song videos in India (www.unesco.org/uii/litbase). The use of online learning for adult literacy has a more recent history and NALA's (2007a) review of international internet literacy provision revealed a comparatively small number of online literacy learning sites in the US⁴, UK⁵, and Germany⁶. Of these only the UK site is linked to recognised accreditation and this is in a less direct way than NALA's www.writeon.ie. A range of current online learning is described below to allow the significant contribution of www.writeon.ie to be understood in a global context.

Canada

Research in Canada documents the flexibility of all forms of distance and blended learning and the use of AlphaRoute⁷ – a web-based learning environment for those who want to improve literacy, numeracy and computer skills (Porter and Sturm, 2006). The site is accessible to deaf adults and

⁴ www.tv411.org

⁵ www.bbc.co.uk/skillwise.

⁶ www.ich-will.de

⁷ www.alpharoute.com

contains culturally specific material for Aboriginal people and French-speaking learners. The study found that online learning had potential to engage a wide range of adults with unmet literacy needs and the technology made the inclusion of sign language and alternative languages relatively straightforward.

Other Canadian research discusses the potential adult applications of web-based approach to reading designed for schools and finds that the idea has some merit (Savage and Abrami, 2006). The Canadian study suggests that the scope opened up by internet learning is only beginning to be recognised in the literacy field and the success of such approaches still needs to be empirically proven.

New Zealand

On-line literacy learning opportunities are a relatively recent development in New Zealand and research there identified very few well-established programmes nationally or internationally (Davis and Fletcher, 2010). The digital technologies and practices that underpin e-learning are themselves identified as essential literacies for the 21st century and so for adult literacy learners' proficiency in ICTs becomes both a goal and a means of achieving that goal. This was particularly the case in relation to work practices that are becoming increasingly demanding of digital skills. However, the research highlights a resource issue in relation to computer access. Those who are disadvantaged are more likely to have unmet literacy needs and at the same time less likely to be able to afford (or access) costly and rapidly changing technological devices and the additional ongoing charges for internet access. Without state support, then, those who are disadvantaged face added barriers in accessing and practising the skills needed for work and enjoying the ensuing economic benefits. As well as access to technology, the New Zealand study identified the learner's organisational skills as a key factor in the successful learner profile. This capacity to manage learning independently also emerged as a pivotal factor in US and Irish studies of DL (Askov et al, 2003; Hegarty and Feeley, 2010)

Despite its relative novelty, the New Zealand study found evidence that e-learning offers considerable potential in the language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) context and with a diverse range of learners. There was evidence of considerable growth in the area of online learning in the workplace although most programmes at foundation level had only been established in the previous year. As in the Canadian context, ethnic groups, speakers of other languages and those with disabilities were seen to benefit from culturally appropriate adaptations of e-learning programmes. In particular mobile learning⁸ - the use of mobile digital technologies was seen to increase the flexibility of provision that could be offered to disparate and diverse communities.

Success in e-learning was found to be enhanced when it was blended with face-to-face LLN training and when staff had completed professional development and organisations had developed infrastructure to accommodate this type of learning (Means et al, 2009; Davis and Fletcher, 2010). The successful learner was found to be motivated, organised and had access to family support and encouragement. Blended learning is now a feature of academic literacy development in the New Zealand universities where online materials and tutor support are found to be effective with a wide range of language and literacy issues (Gilliver-Bown and Johnson, 2009).

Lebanon

Lebanon's youth and adult literacy rates are amongst the highest in the Middle East with an acclaimed, if gendered, 92% male and 83% female literate population. Nevertheless the increasing relevance of ICTs in family and work life has prompted the American University of Beirut to organise ALIT⁹ (Adult Literacy using Information Technology) with the goal of simultaneously improving traditional and technological literacies.

ALIT was designed to circumvent the challenge of a dearth of trained adult literacy tutors however the implementation revealed that the experience of

⁸ Mobile learning describes learning activities made possible through the use of lightweight hand-held devices including mobile phones and portable audio and video players and recorders.

⁹ <http://www.unesco.org/uil/litbase/?menu=4&programme=30>

tutors is not fully replaced by technology and the most effective programmes combined tutor support and the flexibility of online learning. The most successful features of ALIT were its interactivity, the capacity it offered for learners pacing their own engagement with learning and the sense of learning becoming a leisure activity that emerges from using the computer for 'games', albeit of an educational nature.

The ALIT programme has proved to be highly motivational with adult learners and many asked for access to be made available to their children prompting the parallel expansion of interest in online primary literacy. This suggests that online literacy learning has universal appeal and that investment in parents' skills provides benefits that are rapidly passed on to children.

US

Many US states have provided online literacy programmes although they are criticised for merely adapting existing school programmes to the distance context without creating material specifically for the new medium (Askov et al, 2003). One of the earliest online literacy programmes was in California¹⁰ where since 1995, the California Distance Learning Project has offered online literacy services focussed around news stories, videos and issues of adult interest. When Askov et al completed their study in 2003 at least 19 states were using online approaches to literacy. One of the most promising projects at the time was the ABLE (Adult Basic and Literacy Education) programme that has now become part of a comprehensive online learning provision for the state of Pennsylvania.¹¹ The ABLE project was experimental in nature and aimed to explore the potential and challenges of online learning in the literacy context. It recommended a range of measures to support online literacy learning that hinged on improved planning, induction, communication and learning relationships.

ABLE succeeded in reaching adult learners who had not previously been involved in educational programmes. 60% of participants stated they would not have enrolled in traditional face-to-face literacy projects, thus providing

¹⁰ <http://www.cdlponline.org>

¹¹ <http://www.paadulted.org>.

strong evidence that online learning might be used successfully to attract new adult literacy learners. The contemporary ABLE site responds to the development needs of both learners and tutors. It addresses family and workplace literacy learning as well as providing accreditation routes and information about grants and other administrative issues relating to learning.

As elsewhere, reviews of US online literacy programmes suggest that learners require specific characteristics and skills of self-motivation, a significant degree of comfort with working independently and strong study and organisational skills. Success is also dependent on a similar set of tutor skills and both learner and tutor may need induction into this way of working.

UK

learndirect was launched in 2000 by Ufi – the University for Industry. The UK government had created Ufi two years earlier, in 1998, in response to the New Labour concept of a University for Industry. Ufi was given a remit to use new technology to transform the delivery of learning and skills across England, Wales and Northern Ireland with literacy, numeracy and ICT as foundation stones of skills development. The focus of **learndirect** remains on skills for work although this incorporates literacy, numeracy and ICT for personal and family use. Online family literacy makes available interactive storybooks for parents and children to share and other courses advise parents about improving their skills to support their children's literacy. Of all **learndirect** learners, 90% are qualified below (UK) Level 2 or are assessed as having a basic skills need. The **learndirect** mission is rooted in a belief in the potential of online learning:

We know that the internet is a learning enabler, and armed with that knowledge, our vision is to bring technology, life and learning closer together to liberate the learning experience.¹²

Basic skills courses are marketed as 'fast, flexible and free' and learners can learn online at home, at work or in a designated **learndirect** centre. An initial assessment precedes each course and learners are helped select the most appropriate level for their needs. Three months is the estimated time needed to complete a recognised literacy award and a tutor supports learners in a

¹² www.learndirect.co.uk

centre, by phone or email. Ten years after it was set up, 433,000 online Skills for Life test passes have been achieved by **learnirect** users working independently or in centres around the country.

While **learnirect** offers online learning across a range of academic levels, BBC Skillswise is a site dedicated to literacy and numeracy that has been in existence since Spring 2002. The Skillswise site continues to be developed and created by BBC Interactive Factual and Learning – a mix of BBC and Basic Skills Agency staff working in collaboration with qualified literacy tutors. The tutors have helped create the site through developing ideas based around the national curriculum. They also write all the quizzes, factsheets and worksheets. Skillswise addresses the needs of both learners and tutors and provides accreditation supports for tutors in the qualifications required nationally to be employed in this area of work.

UNESCO

The use of ICTs and online learning has become an important feature of literacy in many of the world's poorest and most educationally disadvantaged countries. UNESCO (2006) reports that substantial progress has been made possible by the mass media. In India radio lessons built functional literacy with women in rural areas. In India, Mexico, Ghana and South Africa the *Bridges to the Future Initiative* (BFI) aims to positively address the literacy divide between rich and poor using computer software tools to improve literacy, teacher training and provide community learning and technology centres (CLTCs) and ICT support for disadvantaged regions. In Mexico a government initiative (MEVyT)¹³ seeks to provide free access to online learning for anyone over 15 who has not completed their basic education. A *Commonwealth of Learning Literacy Project* (COLLIT) in Zambia and India tested the usefulness of various ICT applications in expanding access to literacy. They found that ICTs could be used creatively to produce locally relevant materials and that learning to use computers was both easy and motivating for learners. Communities took responsibility for local e-learning centres and this meant that provision evolved with community need.

¹³ <http://mevytenlinea.inea.gob.mx>

From a wide range of ICT initiatives, UNESCO (2006) reports on best practice in seven countries: Bangladesh, Brazil, Egypt, India, Mexico, Pakistan and the People's Republic of China. The common issues in relation to literacy learning and the lessons learned about the use of ICTs were distilled and in many ways reflect the context closer to home. Learner motivation and retention were an issue in most countries with many failing to see the relevance of literacy in their day-to-day lives. A dearth of trained tutors, and a lack of policy, funding and infrastructure were amongst challenges faced. Although ICTs did not provide a cure-all in every context, the use of available technology was seen to enhance motivation and retention. The combination of low-tech options like radio and television had greater potential when combined with online learning, especially in remote areas of the countries studied. Online learning options were found to provide motivation, fun, and immediacy in the individualised feedback they delivered. Colourful, exciting, animated material allowed opportunities for repetition, trial and error and the chance for learners to compete with themselves without fear of embarrassment. Programmes were found to be cost effective, broad in their appeal and useful in relieving pressure from over-stretched tutors.

The best examples of online literacy learning were those that took an integrated approach in that they were concerned with learner and tutor development and material design across a range of media. Successful projects stressed the opportunity to make material culturally relevant and the importance of partnerships forged between programme providers and local agencies. Consultation and responsiveness to user feedback were key to development in this innovative field where everyone is discovering what works through ongoing experimentation.

Conclusions from international experience

Despite inevitable cultural differences, some common threads emerge from an overview of international experiences of online literacy learning. In a global context where literacy is unequally distributed and trained tutor support is not always available, online learning solutions present new hope for adults and children alike. The costs of web-based learning options may be prohibitive in some cases as may be the levels of connectivity and as ever it is the most

disadvantaged who are likely to be excluded. At the same time as offering a solution, digital literacy is also rapidly becoming an essential literacy in its own right. It is therefore both a goal and a means of achieving that goal.

As in other areas of distance learning, online learning requires learners to be self-motivating, organised and comfortable with technology as a medium. Research suggests that online literacy works best when learners have support either from extended family members or from a tutor and peers in a blended learning situation. Tutors and organisations also need to bring their ICT skills and infrastructure up to speed and there is much evidence that tutor training is a pivotal factor in provision of successful web-based literacy.

The flexibility and mobility of the technology is such that programmes can easily be adapted to include minority groups like deaf people, linguistic minorities and those in isolated and disparate communities. At a range of language and literacy levels from basic to academic, online learning offers interactive, self-paced opportunities to build up skills for those working independently, as part of a group or in the context of intergenerational family literacy.

The fact that computers are associated with leisure and game-playing means that learning literacy can become a more enjoyable, colourful and self-paced experience. The fear of human disapproval is radically reduced as individuals compete only with themselves and can repeat items of learning until they are confident that learning is complete. The evidence suggests that once the infrastructural costs and connectivity are provided, online learning can be an effective and efficient way of attracting reluctant literacy learners.

In the conclusions to the report we will discuss how NALA's www.writeon.ie contributes to the international field of online literacy learning.

8. Research design and methodology

The evaluation of the NALA DLS 2010 focuses on the motivation, experience and outcomes for adult literacy learners using www.writeon.ie. The evaluation is confined to the FETAC Level 2 aspects of the site although at the time of writing the Level 3 element of the site has been launched.¹⁴

The empirical aspect of the research is set against an overview of the development of www.writeon.ie and comparative international experience. Our impetus is to maximise the quality and availability of literacy learning opportunities based on the views and perspectives of adult literacy learners and those who support them and advocate for improved services.

Data collection and organisation

Through the NALA/VEC Blended Learning (BL) project and the DLS database of Freephone callers for the period January 2010 – December 2010, a number of research participants were identified. A total of ninety-two people contributed to the data collection process. These included:

- Relevant NALA staff: the DLS co-ordinator, the DLS tutor co-ordinator, the Freephone administrator and a DLS tutor with expertise in online learning. Written comments were also received from 3 DLS tutors with a particular interest in www.writeon.ie.
- Four BL centres: one community-based inner city adult learning centre, a community-based urban family learning centre, a western rural VEC and a northern rural VEC. In each centre we interviewed¹⁵ the www.writeon.ie co-ordinator (n=4), at least one tutor (n=5) and a focus group of current learners (n=25)¹⁶. A number of volunteer tutors were present in the centres and they also contributed to the discussions (n=7).

¹⁴ Writeon4work with accreditation at FETAC Level 3 was launched on 24 November 2010

¹⁵ Appendix a Generic interview schedule

¹⁶ Appendix b Profile of blended learners

- A purposive sample of 40 callers who enquired about www.writeon.ie was constructed from NALA's Freephone database. These were telephoned and a questionnaire was completed with 87.5% who were available (n=35).¹⁷
- Reports completed by NALA staff to BL projects were coded, analysed and included in the findings of the final report (n=6).
- All BL centres received a detailed questionnaire¹⁸ that complements the data already gathered in the site visits completed by NALA staff (n=12). A return rate of 75% was achieved (n=9). Two of the three unreturned questionnaires are among the BL centres visited by the research team and so relevant data was collected on site.
- A focus group of 4 learners and one BL co-ordinator took place in early January when initial findings were discussed and agreed (n=5).

Our initial data collection and organisation has been within a four-part experiential framework:

- ✓ Motivation
- ✓ Experience
- ✓ Outcomes
- ✓ Recommendations for change and development

Interviews carried out by ACTRaD have all been transcribed and returned to BL centres for verification. They were then coded using the qualitative software tool - MAXqda and thematically analysed within the framework described above. Codes were weighted in terms of frequency and importance and this is reflected in the findings. These will be used to produce evidence-based recommendations for the future of online literacy learning.

Research approach

As literacy practitioners we have an understanding of adult learners and respect for the context within which literacy work occurs. Our research

¹⁷ Appendix c Sample summary

¹⁸ Appendix d Blended learning centre questionnaire

approach is rooted in a desire to contribute to the meaningful development of Irish literacy provision with evidence based on the views and experience of literacy learners and practitioners. Where possible we have used text free approaches to data collection and fed back transcribed interviews through course tutors.

Care was taken with the research relationships and all centres were contacted several times prior to visits to ensure a full exchange of information about the research objectives and the detail of the data collection process. All transcribed notes were returned to centres and any queries raised during visits were followed up.

In line with ethical research practice, all interviewees have completed consent forms¹⁹ that verify their understanding of the research and assure confidentiality and anonymity. Consent forms were read to participants in BL centres and the consent process was completed verbally and recorded with all telephone interviewees.

¹⁹ Appendix e Consent form

9. Findings – introduction

For over a decade Ireland's National Adult Literacy Agency has provided literacy learning opportunities and resources for practitioners through a range of distance learning formats. These include radio, television, DVDs, CD Roms, a team of telephone tutors, web-based information and more recently an interactive learning website - www.writeon.ie - established in September 2008.

The interactive website www.writeon.ie has a host of possible applications. It may be used by independent users in their own home or wherever they can access the internet. It may be used with individual learners as part of the NALA's DL telephone tutor support system and it may form the basis of a *blended learning* approach to basic skills.

The www.writeon.ie site offers the option to follow a structured learning programme leading to a FETAC Level 2 Certificate in General Learning. This is achieved by completing selected modules in literacy, numeracy, technology and learning to learn. Learners may opt for full accreditation, minor awards for individual modules or they may forego the option of accreditation and use the site solely for skills practice.

The opportunity exists with www.writeon.ie for initial assessment of existing skills, recognising learners' strengths in each area of study and directing them to areas that require further practice. Subsequently, a summative assessment section confirms that learning has taken place. As such the site has an RPL function as well as facilitating learning and nationally recognised accreditation. Progress is clearly visually displayed as learners complete exercises. Correct and incorrect answers are shown with opportunities to 'try again' and save difficult items to a learning journal for more practice.

Other features of www.writeon.ie are that from the outset, learners can select contextual topics of interest as a basis for their learning. So for example a learner may choose to work on maths or literacy through the topic of family or employment or a range of other themes. The site has text to speech software

to support beginner readers and is linked to a Freephone number for help with any difficulties. In addition to the structured learning programmes there are a host of opportunities to practise skills through games, links to national news items, video clips and live links to national television. Learners may ask questions or post comments on the site forum, and practise sending emails using a stock of phrases for different situations.

The site constantly displays the number of other learners online and their user names. This allows interaction in a 'chat' area and encourages a certain sense of solidarity for those who are learning alone. There is the potential to build confidence through connection with other users as well as through completion of the core learning tasks.

Each learner has a unique site identity: a username and a *password* that is in effect an ID number that allows their work to be stored and retrieved at will. At the same time these identity features allow unique visitor data to be gathered for analysis. Some of this information will be used to create snapshots of site users, in the findings section below (9a).

At the time of writing (January, 2011) www.writeon.ie had 10,186 current learners, 6,794 of which had registered during the evaluation period of 2010. A total of 359 major awards had been achieved and 1478 minor awards. Learners are given frequent advice online about next steps as they proceed through the exercises. Ultimately, when Level 2 is accomplished there is a clear progression route to Level 3.

NALA Blended learning project

In the context of this evaluation blended learning has meant using a mix of face-to-face learning and web-based online resources. NALA speak more expansively about blended learning as 'encouraging adult literacy practitioners and learners to blend different learning resources using a variety of media and in different learning settings.'²⁰ This changes not only the methods of learning but also the relationships that support them.

²⁰ Definition of blended learning used in NALA Blended Learning Project 2010: Interim Report.

New types of learning activities challenge our thinking as to how learning might be facilitated, creating new etiquettes of learning and teaching, and shifting the locus of control from the teacher to the learner. (Littlejohn and Pegler, 2006: 4)

In 2010 NALA's www.writeon.ie formed the basis of an exploratory blended learning project with 12 adult literacy centres in a range of locations around Ireland. NALA wanted to closely observe the usefulness of www.writeon.ie in a blended learning environment and to gather feedback about the benefits and challenges of this approach. Questionnaires were distributed and site visits were made during which NALA staff gathered data from learners, tutors and centre organisers about their experiences and perceptions of www.writeon.ie as a literacy learning tool. Most of these visits have now been completed and the data collected has been shared with the research team for inclusion here in the coding and analysis process.

Guided by the initial terms of reference, the findings from the empirical aspect of the evaluation of www.writeon.ie are presented in five sections that examine the data gathered and present evidence of:

- a. The profile of www.writeon.ie users
- b. What motivates individuals and centres to use www.writeon.ie
- c. The experience of using www.writeon.ie
- d. The outcomes for individuals and blended learning centres of using www.writeon.ie
- e. Changes and developments in www.writeon.ie that have been suggested by individuals and blended learning centres

There is inevitable overlap between these sections as cross-cutting issues are looked at from slightly different perspectives. For example, the opportunity for accreditation arises as a motivating factor, as part of the learning experience and as an important outcome of using www.writeon.ie. Similarly, the shifting relationship between learner and tutor is experienced as both a benefit and a challenge and also discussed as an outcome resulting from use of www.writeon.ie. Many of the challenges identified by learners, tutors and centre co-ordinators were accompanied by proposed resolutions and so these are explored both as part of the experience of online learning and the

suggested changes and developments. Rather than seeing this as repetitive, we present this as demonstrating the interwoven nature of certain themes that are core to the introduction and development of using an interactive web-based approach to learning literacy.

All of the research participants engaged vigorously in the discussions about online learning with www.writeon.ie. We saw this as evidence of the degree to which everyone has been positively drawn to the experience of learning in this innovative way. Because of its success, learners, tutors and blended learning projects all cared about how the site worked and how it might be extended and improved.

We are aware that many of the suggestions made about site development have already been acted upon but these are included as evidence of what matters to users and what is central to the experience of online literacy.

We begin by examining the evidence about who uses www.writeon.ie.

9a Profile of www.writeon.ie users

Both learners and tutors use the www.writeon.ie and each user has a unique and anonymous *password*: an identification number that is needed to sign into the site. Users also select a username that is displayed only when using social networking areas of the site or communicating with NALA. From a technological viewpoint site moderators and Google Analytics²¹ are able to produce data that can contribute to a profile of site use in terms of visit timing, duration and frequency. Information about 'visitor loyalty' is also available. User anonymity ensures privacy for users but also means that extracting precise data about learners from (multi-user) site data alone is a complex matter. Quantitative data in relation to online learning is also constantly changing and so rather than presenting definitive numbers for a particular period, that become instantly obsolete, we will present some snapshots of different aspects of website use. These may provide useful benchmarks for future comparison.

²¹ Google analytics provides detailed analysis of the traffic on a website and allows targeted strategies based on current data.

As website users have a number of ways of accessing www.writeon.ie, the nature of internet learning means that some remain anonymous, identified only by location (and presumably email address) by Google. Other factors like gender or age remain unknown. This is true unless, or until such time as they either register their full details with NALA or submit completed work for verification. At the point of accreditation FETAC allows a review of the number of learners completing minor and major awards and their chosen preferences. Registration for awards also records more detailed identity details. Those who participate in blended learning or have tutor support are recorded through these systems. What follows presents snapshots of all of these traceable user groups at points during the evaluation period of 2010.

An overview of www.writeon.ie site use

The nature of the internet is that people browse sites and may, or may not become regular visitors. Furthermore, any pattern of use must be seen in the context of a sizeable number of visitors who may have only beginner levels of both computer and text literacy. These factors aside, we can say that between 1 January and 1 December 2010 www.writeon.ie had 21,487 visits from 6,794 different users. This means in practice that there were an average of 64.14 visits per day. Most traffic during this period was between 9am and 3pm and the average time onsite ranged between 55 seconds and nine minutes. Google analytics revealed that just under 50% of visitors used the site three times or less yet even this may be misleading in that those who misplace their *password* can readily create a new one and so may in fact return with a new identity.

A review of 5,609 users at one moment in time during 2010 produced the following picture of visitor loyalty. These show a large number of people using the site for the first time and also a consistent number of repeat and regular visits.

Box 1: A snapshot of visitor loyalty

Count of visits from this visitor including current visit	Visits that were the visitor's nth visit	% of all visits
1 time	1,452	25.89%
2 times	669	11.93%
3 times	412	7.35%
4 times	318	5.67%
5 times	257	4.58%
6 times	211	3.76%
7 times	183	3.26%
8 times	156	2.78%
9-14 times	666	11.87%
15-25 times	596	10.63%
26-50 times	416	7.42%
51-100 times	244	4.35%
101-200 times	27	0.48%
201+ times	2	0.04%

Independent www.writeon.ie users

As outlined above, entirely independent use of www.writeon.ie is an option that allows users to gain direct access to the site on their own initiative. At the same time a large number of learners seek advice from NALA each year through the widely advertised Freephone number. By the beginning of December 2010, 4176 calls had been made to the Freephone and 164 people had expressed an interest in using www.writeon.ie. Of this number 101 were male and 63 were female. This reinforces the findings from the 2009 DLS evaluation that revealed that DL had a particular appeal for male learners (Hegarty and Feeley, 2009)

We were keen to make contact with learners who were working entirely independently on www.writeon.ie in order to gather evidence of the experience of autonomous online learners at FETAC Level 2. With this in

mind we constructed a purposive sample (n=40) of those whose calls to the Freephone had recorded an interest in www.writeon.ie. The sample was representative in terms of gender, and of location identified in terms of province. We made contact with 35 individuals with whom we completed a telephone interview (see Sample of phone enquiries at Appendix c). The database did not differentiate between learners, tutors and providers and so we spoke to a range of potential users of www.writeon.ie. These included enquiries from organisations (n=3), tutors and volunteer tutors (n=12) and learners or their family members (n=20).

Of the three organisations contacted one was statutory (VEC) and the others voluntary groups working respectively with homeless people and those with addictions. The homeless group had no computer access although they felt www.writeon.ie would be valuable for their clients. The addiction group had become part of the Blended Learning Project through a local provider and were very positive about the experience for their members.

Of the tutors who had expressed an interest in www.writeon.ie, one was working with people with specific learning difficulties/disabilities (SLDD). She felt that all special needs tutors should have training in the use of www.writeon.ie as it was appropriate to the needs of many of their client group. The second working tutor had used the site to gauge the level in relation to a particular learner. She had concluded that the learner would need a more advanced programme and was awaiting the launch of www.writeon.ie Level 3. The remaining ten tutors were volunteers either awaiting or completing training. The majority had not yet used the site but of those that had, one felt that www.writeon.ie should be included as a matter of course in tutor training programmes and another found it a useful introduction for new tutors. The site gave a clear idea of the level of work at Level 2 and also modelled resources and a structured approach to literacy learning for those taking up a tutoring role.

We spoke to twenty learners who had initially expressed interest in www.writeon.ie. Three had not used the site. Two people were interested in improving their maths. One had done so successfully and the other had not

yet used the site. One person using the site to improve English as a second language (ESL) had found it useful but lost her password and was unaware she could create a new one. One woman and one man had tried to use www.writeon.ie and found that they did not have sufficient computer skills. The woman felt that she needed much more indication of how to get started in 'very, very small steps'. She suggested that a video introduction/demonstration would be useful for hesitant beginners. All of these people would have benefited from a reminder about the Freephone helpline number.

Three women had phoned on behalf of their husbands, one had phoned for her son and another on behalf of a school-aged daughter. One man was now in a literacy class, another was awaiting assessment for dyslexia and the third is using the site with enthusiasm but needs support with computer skills to become an autonomous learner. The woman who phoned for her son had passed on the information and did not know what progress her son had made. The young woman (aged 16 years) had worked independently on www.writeon.ie. She improved her skills enough to pass her Junior Cert English and as a result of the confidence gained from the www.writeon.ie experience she is coping happily with her Leaving Cert course. At a time of crises, use of www.writeon.ie had significantly raised levels of wellbeing both for the girl and her mother.

The remaining seven learners - six men and one woman, were aged between 22 and 64. They had successfully completed major awards at Level 2 and wished to progress to Level 3. The detailed experiences of all of these learners are included in the findings sections below.

DLS www.writeon.ie users

Callers to NALA's Freephone operator have an induction period, called *learning support*, during which time they work with a tutor to identify their learning styles and preferences. Learning support gathers information about computer skills and access and for example from a total of 650 learners, 227 said they could surf the net, 114 said they could write a letter using Microsoft Word, and 119 could book a flight online. As part of this learning support

process 164 people recorded an interest in www.writeon.ie and 32 are currently using www.writeon.ie with telephone tutor support. This might be described as a form of virtual blended learning. A snapshot of these learners reveals that the majority are male, unemployed and aged between 26 and 54. Marital status does not emerge as significant and more learners come from Dublin (16) or Cork (5) than any other area. The vast majority of learners left school without any qualification.

Blended www.writeon.ie learners

A total of 25 learners took part in discussion groups in four blended learning centres. The four blended learning centres were selected to be representative of geographic location and statutory and community-based provision. In addition to their contribution to the group discussions, each person completed a short profile questionnaire (see Appendix b) to provide another snapshot of current www.writeon.ie learners. The information is summarised in table form at Appendix c.

The centres visited selected the blended learners who took part in the focus group discussions and so in terms of the research process they represented a random sample. Nevertheless they were representative in terms of gender and age with 12 men and 13 women. The women were aged between 24 and 63 and the men between 32 and 67. Only 20% had remained at school after the age of 15 years (n=5). Three people (12%) had some form of work and a further three (12%) were on government training scheme. One man drove a taxi; one woman worked part-time as a healer and counsellor and another woman did occasional work in a charity shop. Three men were on a FÁS course and one man and two women were on Community Employment (CE) schemes. Only the two women on CE schemes required computer skills for their work, which involved internet research as part of a community heritage programme. One man was retired and the remainder (60%) were unemployed. Prior to completing FETAC Level 2, three blended learners had a Junior or Intermediate Certificate and the remainder (88%) had a Primary Certificate or did not have any accreditation.

Computer use

Answers to an enquiry about prior computer use were divided between 11 people (five women and six men) who had some knowledge of computers and 14 who were beginners with IT. In one centre the learners had introductory computer classes before beginning work on www.writeon.ie and so these men all responded positively to this question. The majority (n=18) had home computers and 16 had internet access. They used these computers for a varied amount of time ranging between one hour and 14 hours a week. Of those with computers at home the majority had to compete with other family members, usually children, for access. Seven learners (28%) did not have a home computer.

Besides literacy work and IT practice, computers were used for a range of purposes: social networking, emails, downloading and listening to music, playing games and cards, booking flights and hotels, finding cookery recipes, looking at motorbike sites, looking at places of interest, pursuing an interest in history and finding general information on a range of topics.

The vast majority of blended learners (84%) wanted the opportunity to do further online courses with many specifying an interest in FETAC Level 3.

FETAC accredited www.writeon.ie learners

One definitive source of information about online literacy learners emerges from the statistical information gathered at the point of registration for completed minor or major awards. In 2010 a total of 293 unique learners completed FETAC accreditation at Level 2 using www.writeon.ie. Of these 137 (47%) were male and 156 (53%) were female. A total of 136 major awards and 1381 minor awards were completed at a range of locations. County Meath VEC has been particularly active in introducing www.writeon.ie into their provision and this is evident in the outcomes of learners from that area. A total of 193 awards, 66% of the national total achieved via www.writeon.ie were in County Meath. It is clear from the breakdown of modules selected by online learners (Fig.4) that using technology and computer skills are a powerful lure back into literacy for contemporary adult learners.

Fig. 1: Gender of accredited www.writeon.ie learners:

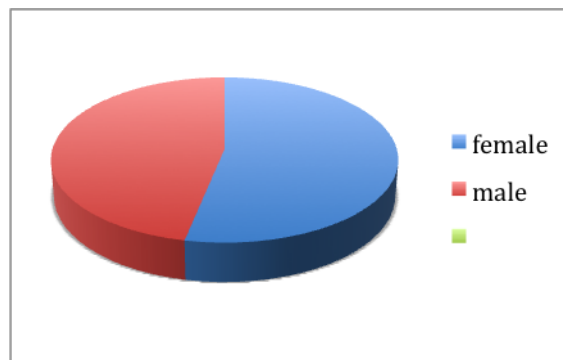


Fig 2: Type of accredited www.writeon.ie learner:

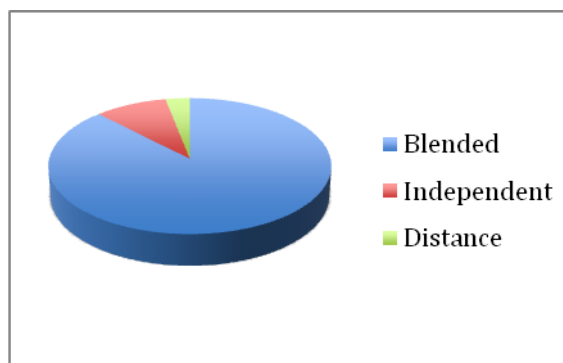


Fig 3: Accredited learner location:

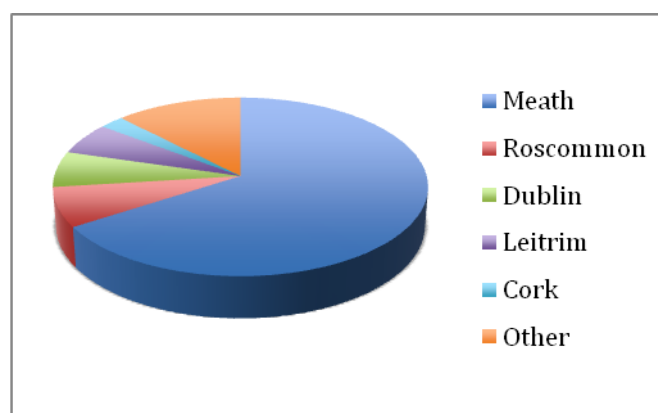
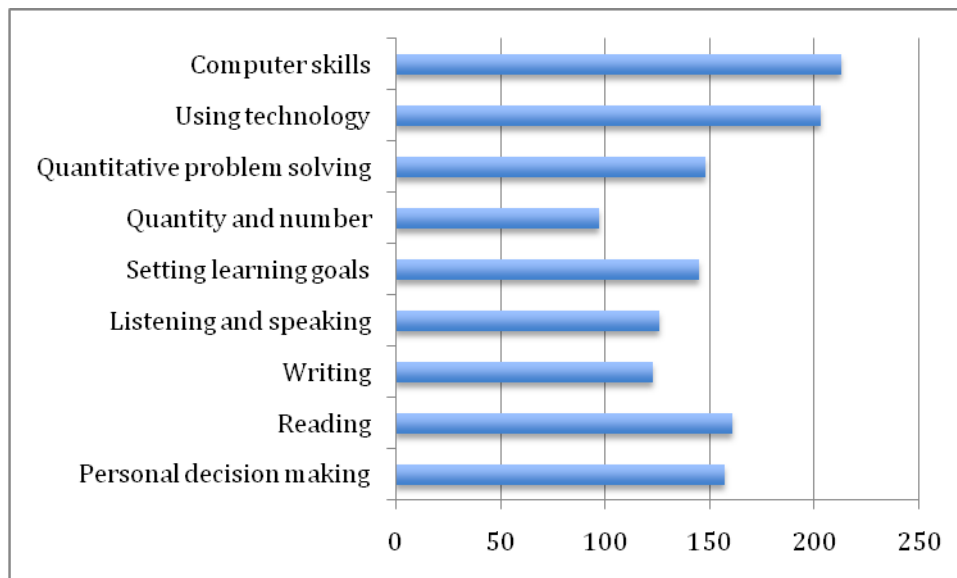


Fig. 4: Modules selected by www.writeon.ie accredited learners



A final source of insight about the www.writeon.ie learner profile emerged from the coded interview data. This confirms that learning online is attractive to adult literacy learners across the range of ages, urban and rural locations, employment and family status. As the detail at Fig. 4 confirms, learners were interested in Literacy and Maths to fairly equal degrees and drawn by the possibility of becoming part of the digital age. Most of the learners we met have had unhappy and unsatisfactory schooling experiences and were able to embrace the fresh start offered by www.writeon.ie. Many had left school early to go straight into apprenticeships or jobs where high levels of basic skills were not required. The changing demands of the workplace have led to a parallel change in the skills needed for work.

I left school because I had an apprenticeship to go to – as a butcher. I didn't need maths there and then to the textile trade and then to building. My reading and writing was OK but my maths was poor really.
Independent learner

Before beginning online learning some learners had struggled to improve their literacy in a range of adult learning provision. For others www.writeon.ie was their first step back to learning since leaving school.

This is my first time working on my literacy. I'd never used a computer before. It's a big step. *Blended learner*

The writeon market

The www.writeon.ie site was originally designed with independent, individual learners in mind. At a time when people from other countries were moving to Ireland in greater numbers, it was projected that some whose mother tongue was not English might use the site to acquire and polish their language skills. Economic migrants use IT to keep in touch with family and friends at home and it was thought this digital skill might easily be applied to improving written and spoken English. In fact there has been comparatively little English as a Second Language (ESL) site traffic although this may be an information and awareness issue. Similarly, more learning centres than anticipated have embraced www.writeon.ie as a central learning tool meaning that the learner profile is not only that of autonomous, solitary individuals. It is clear learners across the full range of literacy programmes, as well as independent learners, are using www.writeon.ie.

The experiences of learners and tutors suggest that the independent www.writeon.ie learner at FETAC Level 2 is not a complete beginner either in terms of literacy or IT. Evidence suggests that those who can use www.writeon.ie autonomously with greatest ease have some basic reading skills, familiarity with computer use and the confidence to use the Freephone helpline when they encounter a problem. Inevitably as levels of support rose so the demand on an individual's skills were reduced. Blended learners with telephone tutor support had regular help with difficulties they encountered although they still needed a certain level of digital language and understanding to request and process that help. The data suggest that telephone tutors do not always feel that www.writeon.ie is appropriate for their learning context in that talking learners through computer tasks poses challenges that may be off-putting for learners. Those who learned in the presence of peers and tutors in a centre were able to pick up the necessary computer skills without any prior knowledge. As the outcomes at Fig. 2 (above) suggest so far in the limited history of digital literacy in Ireland,

blended learners have the greatest success in terms of accredited outcomes. The broader experiences of diverse online learners are elaborated below (9c).

Conclusions about www.writeon.ie user profile

The guidance about learner level is best captured by the character who introduces Level 2 on www.writeon.ie.

I have no qualifications. I find it hard to write full sentences and it takes me a while to read things. If you are like me and would like to get a Level 2 award... *writeon website introductory page*

The quantitative and qualitative evidence about www.writeon.ie learner identity suggest that a digital approach to literacy attracts male and female learners of all ages and locations who have been disappointed by the outcomes of their earlier schooling. Parents, employed and unemployed people, school age and retired people and those with disabilities were drawn to using www.writeon.ie to upgrade their skills. Those for whom English is a second language also used the site and some people with dyslexia found the structured nature of www.writeon.ie helpful.

The ideal learner profile for an independent learner at Level 2 emerged as one who has a basic level of reading, computer skills and the self-assurance to request support or clarification through the Freephone helpline when needed. Others may need an introduction to computers and a guided tour of www.writeon.ie before getting started but where consistent support is available they do not need the same levels of self-reliance.

Although they are the primary target group, the profile of callers to the Freephone was not restricted to learners. Tutors, volunteer tutors and organisations working with adults with unmet literacy needs also requested information about www.writeon.ie and were interested to incorporate it into their work. Women made enquiries on behalf of their husbands and partners while parents called on behalf of teenage and adult children. It is clear that the profile of the www.writeon.ie user is broad and varied and that as the site becomes more widely recognised that profile will develop still further.

9b Motivation

Introduction

This section presents findings from the data in relation to the motivation for learner, blended learning organisations and NALA's involvement in www.writeon.ie. Whilst the background context for the website is essentially one of improving literacy, much of the data collected about motivation for engaging reflects an underlying fascination with the dual learning opportunities presented by ICT. Indeed this interest in computers was the initial draw for many of the learners we spoke with. In some centres we found that learners had enrolled in computer classes and these classes were using the www.writeon.ie site as the conduit for learning ICT skills with those who had unmet literacy needs.

Learner motivation

Inclusion

A desire to be included in the digital world was a strong motivator for those interviewed. Learners wanted to be 'able to do what others can do'.

They are everywhere now really. Even if you ring for a pizza they put your details into a computer. You feel very left out if you can't use them. *Blended learner*

Being involved in learning computers was also seen to be preparation for a future when computers would be even more prevalent in everyday life.

Learners hoped that lingering school memories of exclusion would be left behind through successful engagement with what was perceived as high status computer learning. This would in turn leave the way open for new beginnings, for a re-freshed learner identity to emerge.

It is a new literacy, a new chance. I'm not getting left behind like the last time. *Blended learner*

Exciting way of learning

ICT proficiency was seen by learners as a new opportunity to achieve their nascent learning potential. Using computers to help meet unmet literacy needs was an exciting prospect.

It's like a fresh start. A new beginning. I want to learn more and computers hold a lot of knowledge. *Blended learner*

The 'pen free' aspect of developing literacy was also appealing. Memories of anxiety filled situations involving pen and paper could be laid aside through working on a keyboard and learners were freed up to focus on their learning.

The independence offered by computer learning was attractive to learners. They would be in charge of their own learning. They would direct it.

I could do it myself and get a qualification. *Independent learner*

Enhanced opportunities

Additionally those interviewed told us they wanted to acquire computer and literacy skills to enhance their work life. Some believed that computer literacy was now an essential work skill and one that would allow for more rewarding choice in terms of employment opportunities. It would 'open doors' to new possibilities and they did not want to get left behind this time around.

If you want to get a job now you have to know how to use a computer. *Blended learner*

Family

Parents wanted to be able to help their children with their school-work and being able to use a computer was believed to be central to this task.

I went back for my job and for my kids. They are in primary school and they use them [computers] and I want to be able to give them a hand. *Blended learner*

Some of those we spoke to felt that they would be 'left behind' within their own families where the perception was that everyone could use the computer. They wanted to be able to participate in what seemed so easy and natural for others in their intimate family circles.

Accreditation

For those who left school without any formal qualifications www.writeon.ie offered an accreditation opportunity and this was an important motivating factor.

I got all the certs I needed on my own. All I'm doing is refreshing. I never got any qualifications from school. *Independent learner*

One centre manager told us that she believed that some learners were using the site to refresh their learning, to 'back pedal' to achieve accreditation of prior learning. One independent learner verified this when he told us that even though he was in advance of Level 2 in terms of his literacy he had worked his way through the website in order to get the certificate.

Other learners revealed an interest in gaining formal recognition for the learning work they were involved in. Being able to work online to achieve recognised accreditation was highly motivating for them.

Learning Centre Motivation

*Synchronicity*²²

Centre managers said that there was a certain synchronicity involved in the motivation for learning centre's involvement with www.writeon.ie. ICT facilities were in place in many of the centres and where such infrastructure existed there was a readiness to begin. One centre had included the development of an Open Learning Centre where the integration of literacy and ICT was a priority in their strategic plan and www.writeon.ie fitted neatly with this.

Another centre had just completed a restructuring of groups which had resulted in the emergence of learning clusters with similar literacy levels. A number of these were believed to be ready for FETAC Level 2 and the centre was beginning to look at developing blended learning and the integration of literacy across the curriculum. Alongside this, tutors had begun to use computers with literacy learners and there was a general openness to the idea of integrating ICT and literacy. Just at that time the www.writeon.ie site was launched and the centre subsequently became involved.

The discussion of creating a customised FETAC Level 2 course was beginning in a third centre at the same time as the NALA website was launched. This prompted the centre to get involved in the pilot stage of the project. The centre hoped that the structured approach taken by the website

²² Synchronicity refers to a timely and unplanned coincidence of events

would help learners to see that there was a clear progression path available and that this would in turn encourage learners to move on and help stop learners getting 'stuck' at one level.

Expanded provision

Learning centre managers saw the site as an exciting opportunity to expand provision and the fact that it provided a smooth accreditation process was also an attractive facet to their engagement.

It seemed to present an opportunity to expand the learning opportunities of students. It was also an innovative project. Exciting and interesting with lots of possibilities. *Blended learning centre co-ordinator*

I could see that it would be useful to my learners. It allows them to work on a range of skills, at their own pace and gain accreditation. A new methodology is always welcome. *Blended learning centre questionnaire*

Data from the Centres also reveal that there had been an increased demand for computer skills. Signing learners up to the www.writeon.ie website was a timely and useful response to those needs. Learners could develop their literacy and computer skills in tandem.

NALA's motivation

When the www.writeon.ie website was first launched in 2008, NALA was firstly responding to the needs of people who were presenting with robust Level 2 skills in a number of learning contexts. They hoped at that time that the website would provide a support for learners with spikey profiles to work speedily and effectively on accruing accreditation.

The second impetus for the website was a desire to standardise and streamline content. At that time NALA was annually producing up to fourteen different workbooks for learners and their tutors. With the development of the website a standardised learning programme would be created that did not require constant updating and reprinting. It was hoped that this resource would also be of benefit to tutors.

Underpinning these motives was recognition that technology permeates many areas of our lives today and that ICT is an essential literacy that can be harnessed to help develop people's literacy skills. In so doing ICT skills are also enhanced.

The things we read, the things we do involve technology. So surely we should be improving people's reading and writing skills in the context of ICT. The website was the perfect vehicle for that. You are not overtly teaching people how to click on something or use a browser in order to complete a reading exercise. *DLS co-ordinator*

More recently motivation for further development and investment in the website has been driven by the increased numbers of learners who are successfully using the site and by the positive and useful constructive feedback from learners, tutors and learning centres.

Conclusion

Learners' motivation for using the www.writeon.ie website is driven by the desire to participate more fully in the world around them. They have a deeply held desire to be included in the digital landscape. They are preparing for the future.

Developing up to date literacy skills through the use of the site is perceived to be an attractive, exciting and new way to learn. Learners believe that it provides opportunities to support children in their learning thus contributing to the development of family literacy.

Those who use the site are highly motivated by the possibility of the nationally recognised accreditation that is offered through the website. For those learners who left school early with no formal qualifications the www.writeon.ie website provides a smooth route to accreditation. Many believe that this accreditation is the currency which can eventually lead to more rewarding career opportunities.

The motivation for involvement of the blended learning centres is rooted in the desire to provide interesting, effective and responsive programmes for learners with unmet literacy needs. The website came along at 'just the right time' for many centres. An openness and indeed enthusiasm already existed amongst some centre staff for integrating ICT and literacy.

NALA's motivation can be said to be embedded in their mission to raise adult literacy levels in order that people can participate more fully in society (NALA, 2010).

9c Experiences of using www.writeon.ie

We gathered data from a full range of users about the experience of using www.writeon.ie. Learners, tutors and centre organisers have all had their learning experience altered by the introduction of online learning. Below we examine those changes, both in terms of what was positive and what was more challenging.

Independent learners

Benefits

The privacy, anonymity and autonomy afforded to independent learners emerged as the most important aspects of learning with www.writeon.ie. This was related to the comfort and control involved in managing the whole learning process and the absence of external judgement.

When I got something wrong I felt frustrated but if there had been another person involved I would have been embarrassed. I was only competing with myself. *Independent learner*

Many adults with unmet literacy needs are unwilling to face the public gaze associated with joining a literacy group or attending face-to-face provision. Learning independently online removes these anxieties and yet allows for support from the Freephone and solidarity from the anonymous online social networking features of the site. Not all independent learners use these features but they do offer the potential for a rounded learning experience.

As well as privacy, independence, cost and the absence of time pressure were high on the list of preferences associated with www.writeon.ie for independent learners. Learners did not have to consider the needs or demands of a group and once they had a computer and internet access other costs were minimal. Independent learners frequently mentioned their sense of freedom around the timing and duration of their learning.

It being free is fantastic for people. That was a good thing for me – it being free. *Independent learner*

You can take breaks from it if you are losing concentration or things. You can switch off when you want if you are getting fed up with it. *Independent learner*

There is recurring evidence in the data that the very fact that learners undertook their learning independently added weight to the degree of satisfaction they had with their achievements.

I have been dipping in and out of it for a year or more. I have done it myself and I feel great. *Independent learner*

Learners who were able to independently manage their online learning found www.writeon.ie an enjoyable way of upgrading both literacy and IT skills. The immediacy of learning and reward kept people engaged and motivated and the thrill of mastering technology was ever-present. For many, the use of technology contributed to a sense of being involved in a leisure activity rather than returning to an environment with echoes of past learning. There was also a pleasure in the finished written work produced on the computer.

I like the interactive. I hate writing with my hand because it looks clearer on the computer. *Independent learner*

It's more like a game for me. I do brain games on the computer. *Independent learner*

One woman who completed the full award at Level 2 found the audio element invaluable. Opinions about the voice quality recur in various sections below however for those working independently it was a vital way of supplementing and developing the learner's reading level.

The speech was very good and helpful. *Independent learner*

Challenges

The challenges for independent learners involved getting started, getting stuck and uncertainty about certain errors. Some were unaware of the Freephone number that might have answered all these queries and this might be more clearly flagged. A number of people found that getting started was a little daunting. Some that we spoke to did not persevere and there is always the danger that vulnerable learners will be put off by their inability to navigate the site.

I found difficulty at the beginning finding out how to open up the page and get started. I thought it would be good if there was a little youtube video at the beginning that showed you how to use the site. It would help a person who has never done it before to understand step by step how to use it. *Independent learner*

All types of learners mentioned this idea of some type of an online induction to introduce independent learners to aspects of the site. They felt that it could highlight the Freephone number and ensure that people knew what to do if they got stuck. One Ghanaian woman who used the site to improve her written English lost her password and did not know that she could create another one. Based on first impressions, another independent learner did not think he would be able to use the site on his own and so did not return.

For independent learners there was a difficulty in not understanding errors or how to remedy them in a meaningful way. People could find the right answer by process of elimination but they did not know how to independently manage a new learning point. Perhaps this is an occasion when they should use the Freephone but this possibility needs to be made clear at the beginning.

One problem is that the site doesn't tell you where you've gone wrong. It shows you a little icon on a draughtboard but doesn't tell you exactly where you've gone wrong. There is nothing that tells you what you have to learn. *Independent learner*

When working alone any uncertainty can be a cause for anxiety. One man talked at length about how he dealt with one answer that he felt was correct but repeatedly was marked as an error.

I couldn't understand why sometimes I was told I was wrong when the answer was right. I thought maybe I was being tested to see what I would do. *Independent learner*

The audio on www.writeon.ie was both useful and at the same time challenging. NALA explain that the 'text to speech' was used on the site rather than real voiceover because of costs and production reasons. Text to speech means that when content is changed or added it does not need to be rerecorded and this method does not slow computer performance in the way that real voiceover can. Nonetheless opinion of independent learners was divided about 'the voice'.

The only problem I found was that the speaker wasn't clear enough. I had to try three or four times to understand it and I found that annoying. It sounds like a robot's voice. *Independent learner*

Independent learner skills

The consensus of opinion amongst independent learners was that at Level 2 they needed some basic computer skills, reading skills and a degree of self-confidence to work autonomously. In terms of other coping skills learners had developed strategies for dealing with getting stuck or losing concentration which usually involved switching off and coming back to it all with a fresher eye.

Distance learners

All those who contact the Freephone are offered the possibility of using www.writeon.ie. There were 164 people in 2010 that expressed an interest in learning online and of these 32 opted to learn with a telephone tutor using a blend of www.writeon.ie and telephone support. For DL users, tutors mediate their experiences of www.writeon.ie in this virtual form of blended learning. We spoke to one man in his 60s who had completed a major award at Level 2 through distance learning. He had used the www.writeon.ie structure and materials but exchanged these with his tutor by post, in paper form, to complete the course. She then submitted his portfolio in the traditional manner. Having used www.writeon.ie as a form of introduction, he has now progressed to face-to-face blended learning and has embarked on Level 3.

The evidence from the distance learning arena is that www.writeon.ie can form the useful structure around which a distance literacy programme can be built with the option then of accreditation at the end.

From my experience, students at Level 2 gain a lot from www.writeon.ie as a reinforcement of skills they will have been tutored on. In other words, I think the basics of spelling and writing etc. need to be taught or refreshed with people at this level and then they can use or refine them on the website. *Distance learning tutor*

Tutors describe that they and their learners have the site open at the same page and they discuss the content and responses together, with the tutor noting issues for further attention.

I had three learners and I would just let them work away on it. If they had a question I would tell them to get back to me. They would just do it at home. I would contact them once a week and the website would be part of the discussion. I'd ask them how they were getting on with it. Alongside that I'd do the other distance learning work. *Distance learning tutor*

Distance learning tutors gauge the skills of learners and assess when they are ready to use the interactive website. There is a concern about the vulnerability of some learners and a fear that they may be 'knocked back' by using www.writeon.ie too soon. In other cases tutors manage the learner's use of the site in accordance with their assessment of their need and capacity. The independent element of the learning process is therefore preserved but supported.

I had someone who was a bit weak at maths but he went ahead with the other screens and we did the maths together. He wouldn't be ready yet to go through the maths module. *Distance learning tutor*

As with independent learners it was felt that distance learners needed a basic level of reading and computer skills in order to use www.writeon.ie. Distance learning tutors work inside tight time parameters and so felt that explaining the basics of computer use by phone was not desirable or productive.

The big difficulty is if there is a problem. The tutor will be working on the same page as the learner but cannot see exactly what is happening on the screen. It takes a lot of talking to sort it out. The time really gets eaten up there. *Distance learning tutor*

A relatively small number of people use www.writeon.ie as part of distance learning and it may be that the need for tutor support and confidence building is the most pressing issue for most distance learners.

Blended learners experience of www.writeon.ie

Benefits

The reported experience of blended literacy learners is, without reservation, a narrative of positivity, excitement and transformation. The winning combination of face-to-face learning and independent online work on www.writeon.ie really has delivered results in terms of literacy, numeracy and computer skills. Such is learners sense of enjoyment that they are constantly surprised by the progress they have made. Once started, they are spurred on by the programme design and motivated to keep learning.

Control and ownership

The www.writeon.ie website is versatile and offers a range of subjects and topics that engage learners' attention. Learners are using communication, numeracy and computer skills and have lots of opportunity for practice. They can pick and choose and construct a different programme of study than that of others around them. They are independent within the group.

For some reason it gives more control to the learner. They are making choices with the mouse. *Blended learning tutor*

The shift of power in the direction of learners has utterly changed the learning experience within blended learning centres. Even within the blended learning group, learners work autonomously and privately. Their use of the audio feature to read difficult words goes unheard by others. Any errors can be revised and corrected without any fuss or emotional flack.

I asked learners: 'How is it for you interacting with a computer rather than a person?' They said, 'It's great. A computer can tell us we are wrong 20 times. It's patient. It doesn't get angry with us and we don't feel we are imposing on it'. *DLS co-ordinator*

Computers are non-judgemental and dispassionate and that is empowering for learners. If something is puzzling they can practise over and over again without pressure and all of this is contained within the realm of their own, private online learning experience.

It has been wonderful for learners. It has given them personal ownership of their own learning. They are working on their own individual thing but still they are working as a part of a group too. That has been very nice to see and it has really driven the idea of independent learning which is what it is all about. *Blended learning centre co-ordinator*

They use the loudspeaker. They don't have to ask anyone. *Blended learning questionnaire*

A large number of blended learners appreciated the audio element of www.writeon.ie.

I like that it asks me questions and I can answer. *Blended learner*

It is like someone talking directly to you. *Blended learner*

I am a visual and auditory learner so the fact that www.writeon.ie has speech really suits me. *Blended learner*

Even the way in which www.writeon.ie content is organised gave learners a sense of security. The multiple-choice design of many questions suited those who can read a word but may struggle to spell it. One man said that he was sure now he would never have to make a fool of himself again.

The pace and time of learning is also in the learners' control. They can work on at home as well as in class. They can work according to their own learning clock.

The big thing is that it gives the learner something they can go on and work on between sessions. They have a tutor in the background that they can have access to when they need to. They can work whenever they want at their own pace. It gives them great freedom. *DL tutor coordinator*

Whereas independent learners found some difficulty in understanding their errors, blended learners had the option to seek clarification from a tutor. This did not dilute their independence but rather allowed them to manage demands for support.

If I get stuck I just let it go wrong and then I go back to it. I just keep redoing it. Sometimes it gives you the answers. If I don't understand why a particular answer is right I wait until I am in the group and I ask the tutor. You could use a 'pot luck' approach but it's better to check with the tutor so you understand why. *Final focus group*

The flexibility of availability of www.writeon.ie means that learners have great freedom and choice. Those who are housebound or isolated, adults with busy lives have choice about when to learn. One man told us that he gets up in the middle of the night to work on www.writeon.ie when he cannot sleep. As long as there is connectivity there is endless access however it is not just availability that motivates learners. It is also success. Learners do not just feel good but they have also improved their literacy and other skills.

Removing barriers

The departure from 'pen and paper' that the computer enables was important to learners. They described the relief that came with not having to write.

There is a barrier gone! *Blended learner*

The joy of 'neatly printed work' compared favourably with unsatisfactory handwriting. Dyslexic learners reported making progress on www.writeon.ie

and this merits closer scrutiny. Kinaesthetic learners too responded well to the agentic nature of the computer.

Using the keys and that – the spellings seem to sink in quicker. You have to physically do them. *Blended learners*

Many learners felt that the online process helped them retain new aspects of their work. The way that work is processed online speeded up the learning process for those whose own natural writing pace might be fairly slow. Learners delighted in the pace at which they could complete tasks. They also felt more relaxed by the manner in which, at the touch of a button, mistakes can be undone.

I think you learn quicker and it sinks in better than paper. *Blended learner*

My reading and writing has come on in leaps and bounds in a very short space of time. *Blended learner*

Blended learners felt they were learning rapidly and those who could compare online learning with traditional group work felt their pace had accelerated with www.writeon.ie. Literacy work has often been characterised by the slow progress that can be made in two hours of tuition per week and the experience of online learning has changed this fundamentally.

The whole thrill of using computers is an integral part of the ease with which people take to this new form of learning literacy.

I've heard another student say they feel absolutely wonderful when they are at the computer with their earphones on. The whole image of 'I'm in business now'. That was confidence boosting in itself. They love getting on it. I might say we will take a break now and they'd say 'No!' I do think it is a bit much to be sitting in front of a computer for two hours but they seem to enjoy it. *Blended learning tutor*

The negative image of literacy has been transformed by www.writeon.ie. Being identified with attending a computer class is more acceptable to learners than confronting the stigma attached to learning literacy and this frees them emotionally to focus on the business of learning. Both learners and tutors describe a liberating, positive learning experience that is different to the past.

In many ways blended learning has all the advantages for those who like the social, relational side of learning. It gives access to a peer group and a

supportive tutor and yet it allows the privacy of autonomous learning. Groups talked about comparing progress with peers but competing with themselves to complete sections of work for the satisfaction of accruing points towards their accreditation or personal goal.

Challenges

Computer access

Not all blended learners are able to work independently outside the learning centre because they do not have a home computer. Others are in competition with other family members, in particular their children, for time online. Some of those who could afford to do so had bought personal laptops so that they could work on www.writeon.ie without creating family conflict. As is the case in many areas of education, there is an inequality in access to online learning and it is those with least resources who are excluded. This in turn means that they are unable to progress at the same pace as peers who can work on independently between sessions.

A number of learners gave up using www.writeon.ie at home because of poor connectivity while others are limited by financial reasons. Cost of internet access was raised by a number of learners. One man who has a monthly credit limit from his provider recounted how, in his enthusiasm for www.writeon.ie, he exceeded this and incurred a debt.

When I am on the internet doing the programme the amount of credit it eats up is unbelievable. I used to do it a lot in the centre and then I would work on at home. I am on a monthly credit for the internet and once or twice I went over the limit and I got a bill for 50 euro. I just got caught up in it and I was glued to it and couldn't turn I off. I have something now that won't allow me to do that again. It will just automatically stop me. *Blended learner*

Computer skills

Many literacy learners at Level 2 are also beginners in computer use. There was a perception amongst tutors that younger learners were more adept with using technology but this advantage appears to be equalised once www.writeon.ie is used for even a small amount of time.

Fear of technology holds some people back at first and suggests that an introductory computer module may help some to get started. It is not within the realm of expectation for some learners with unmet literacy needs, that they might be able to use a computer. The data suggest that this initial fear is a substantial challenge but one that is rapidly overcome.

First time I sat at it, it was like the electric chair. *Blended learner*

I'm a bit afraid of using it on my own at home. I'm not sure of it yet. I'm afraid of touching a button and doing something wrong – of breaking it. *Blended learner*

I was afraid of the computer at first and then I couldn't believe the things on it. I couldn't believe that I could do it. *Blended learner*

Initially, those who are new to computers lack the confidence to work at home independently. The double demands of literacy and technology seem overwhelming until they cross the Rubicon into the digital age and become equally amazed at their ability to master technology. We heard a number of suggestions that basic computer skills need to be part of the induction to www.writeon.ie. This is how a number of blended learning centres work and they are convinced by its merit in practice.

Getting started

Getting started initially and for each session were both raised by blended learners. The case for an introductory video is made above and was also made by blended learners.

I think the system needs to explain how it works at the beginning. I am still not clear how things get into my journal. *Blended learner*

For less frequent learners the challenge was to remember what they had done in the previous session.

Maybe there should be an explanation about where you should begin. Something to remind you what you had done last week. I only get to use it once a week and so I forget what I have done when I come back to it. *Blended learner*

Site navigation

Linked to the issue of computer skills is site navigation. Those with little or no computer experience were challenged to navigate back and forward between screens, to scroll, drag and drop or use the drop-down arrows. Tasks that required using the eraser or highlighter were also puzzling for some. An

induction would clarify some of these issues but they also indicate some requirement for Level 1 computer skills.

The most frequent difficulties with the site were in relation to understanding what errors had been made and how to save work. Learners want to know that they are wrong but they also want feedback about why they were wrong. In most cases tutors can provide blended learners with guidance on this but in a few cases the reason is unclear even to them. This may mean that opportunities to embed learning are missed.

Learners and tutors both seemed mystified about the issue of saving work and there was some frustration about having to complete work on a number of occasions because of this. Again this might be addressed in an induction video.

The recurring discussion of the audio on www.writeon.ie also engaged blended learners and although the speech facility was welcomed the camps were divided about the quality of voice.

I find the speech is very poor on the computer. She's too slow with the words. You have to listen a few times to catch what she is saying. I think that she has very bad English whoever she is. *Blended learner*

Learner support

Although www.writeon.ie is designed as an independent, interactive learning application there are different ways to use the site that have varying degrees of support. Independent learners have access to the Freephone helpline as well as to the support of family members and friends. Distance learners can work independently in their own time and access advice and guidance from their weekly telephone tutor. Distance learners can also access the Freephone between their scheduled sessions. Finally, blended learners have access to the Freephone as well as the input of the blended learning tutor and the group of peer learners. Blended learning tutors have noted that a collective approach to online learning support is a feature of blended learning groups and this is part of a changing face of literacy group learning.

It has definitely given them better group skills. They will ask one another for help now. There is no fear in asking as they are all learning. They are more open to asking one another. Nobody feels that anybody knows more than they do. *Blended learning tutor*

We help one another if we get stuck. Some of us would be stronger in different areas. I'm OK at the maths end of it but then someone else is brilliant at reading. *Blended learner*

The tutor still emerges in the data as the most cited form of support and although they are overwhelmingly positive about the experience of learning online, the majority of learners like the security that comes from the background presence of the tutor.

Blended learning tutors experience of www.writeon.ie

The blended learning tutors that we consulted were enthusiastic about their experiences of using www.writeon.ie and could see vast benefits for learners in terms of their personal development and rapid progress with learning. They observed learners becoming more engaged in their work and having more enjoyment in the process. Tutors too had been on a rapid learning curve with the introduction of www.writeon.ie and as well as the changes for their learners, they faced a parallel evolution in their own role. Tutors could see learners become more autonomous in their learning, pooling learning with peers and consulting tutors only when they decided they needed support.

They are not relying on you in class. You are going around keeping an eye and helping them when they need it. But it is not all centred on you. Your role has changed. It is a helping role. It is more of a facilitative role really. It's not like here is the class today and I am giving you all the stuff. The site is presenting the questions and the possible answers and if they need you they call you. If you see them stuck you go to them. So it is a more supportive role than a teaching role. *Blended learning tutor*

Just as learners need particular skills for www.writeon.ie Level 2 so also do tutors. Tutors identified these new skills as group facilitation and computer skills. They were no longer proactively teaching but rather facilitating a group of individual independent learners. A major part of that role involved one-to-one support as it was required, and that is unpredictable.

I suppose you have to relinquish control. Before you were the person, I suppose, making up the recipe for what they would do. I'm not really choosing anymore. *Blended learning tutor*

One centre that used volunteer tutors found that they needed IT training to use www.writeon.ie and in some cases were learning from the literacy learner. In another centre all tutors had been required to do Level 3 computer skills

and they were then offered the chance to progress to Level 4 if they wished. It was suggested that www.writeon.ie should be part of all literacy tutor training so that learners are not restricted by a tutor's lack of digital awareness and skills.

In some centres there had been extensive preparation prior to using www.writeon.ie with learners. Tutors had worked through the programme themselves and in most cases they had prepared supplementary practice materials for teaching points throughout www.writeon.ie. A learner described one example as a helpful introduction to using www.writeon.ie.

The tutor gave us a list of words before we started. Ones we might come across on the site and that was good. It gave you the basics before you began. The sheets she gave us were quite challenging but they did help you when you went onto the website. *Blended learner*

A number of tutors mentioned the need for paper-based materials to use alongside www.writeon.ie. Many centres had developed these and were happy to share them with others to create a manual of resources for tutors or a workbook for those who needed additional work in some areas. In one centre this material was the basis of a teaching programme used prior to learners going onto www.writeon.ie. Use of the site then became a way of affirming learning and gaining accreditation.

I'm still using pen and paper too. Working on the basics of spellings and sentence structure. On the computer you are not really taking the time. You are picking options and clicking things really. I can see its advantages in that you get through a lot and there is great satisfaction in that, but you have to pull back to the basics too. *Blended learning tutor*

Given learners delight at escaping from pen and paper there is a delicate balance, between IT and traditional text methods, to be negotiated in blended learning groups.

Benefits

Tutors saw a host of benefits to using www.writeon.ie both for learners and for their own role. The structure of www.writeon.ie provided a resource for tutors and relieved them of much onerous preparation work. Some used it as an assessment tool to establish the level of learners and as an introduction to Level 3. Accreditation at Level 2 may offer a form of RPL and a confidence

boost for those returning to learn. Tutors appreciated the fact that www.writeon.ie removed the burden of portfolio administration and streamlined the accreditation process.

For others, www.writeon.ie provided a programme of standardised content and allowed groups to be organised around particular levels with clear progression to Level 3 in literacy, numeracy and computers. Use of www.writeon.ie had revitalised literacy groups and provided a library of vital, visual resources for use with groups.

If they had difficulties the tutors found NALA staff helpful and responsive. Many had excellent support within their own organisations and found that new tutors were increasingly covering online literacy as part of their training. It was clear in the centres we visited that www.writeon.ie had been embraced and integrated into the provision on offer to learners. Although still in the relatively exploratory stage www.writeon.ie emerged from this study as a positive step forward for literacy tutors and one that extends much promise for wider use.

Challenges

Managing and integrating online literacy into their practice is challenging for tutors and volunteer tutors. Some acknowledge that their own computer skills are limited and to a certain extent they are learning alongside their learners. Some are conscious that they are only beginning to explore the wider applications of www.writeon.ie and the potential it offers for literacy practice as well as accreditation.

Some tutors are wary that learners may satisfy the requirements of the awarding body and yet not have acquired a degree of functional competence in the areas accredited. They struggle to find a balance between learners' desire to complete the modules of www.writeon.ie and their genuine sense of responsibility for doing the right thing for learners.

It meets the requirements for accreditation but that does not mean that someone is competent or fluent in a skill. We would always be watchful that we are supporting and enabling learners to be confident and fluent readers, able to write and spell, do maths and use computers. You keep an eye to the big picture very much. *Blended learning centre co-ordinator*

Some tutors are also struggling with aspects of their new role. They have not been trained as group facilitators and describe a fear of the chaos that may ensue as learners take control of their own learning and they assume a support role. Both this facilitation role and the new demands on computer skills are significant training needs as online learning expands and new levels become available.

Blended learning centres experience of www.writeon.ie

Benefits

Between the NALA reports from the Blended Learning project and our own fieldwork we gathered information from all 12 centres involved in the project. They welcomed the provision of 'a decent resource' for Level 2 learners and were most positive about being able to offer learners a computer-based programme at this level. In one case www.writeon.ie was central to a reorganisation of the entire provision around a whole county blended and integrated approach to literacy. This area also used an intensive approach to literacy learning and tried to have all learners attend for six hours per week. The combination of both of these factors has produced excellent results.

The ease with which accreditation could be processed was a bonus for centres who were relieved of weighty and time-consuming administrative task in this regard. In one area where a large number of learners had completed minor and major awards there was a rise in uptake of courses as the success of peers became widely celebrated. Centres felt that www.writeon.ie helped maintain learners' interest and contributed to improved retention rates and accredited outcomes in centres. One centre spoke of being 'inundated with learners' as the success of www.writeon.ie became more widely known. Not only are more learners reported to be completing courses but they are also progressing in greater number to further levels of study at Level 3.

Centres were extremely satisfied with the training provided by NALA and the ongoing support offered through the Freephone and directly from DLS staff. They felt that their participation in the Blended Learning Project had been beneficial to the centre in terms of the access it gave to new laptops and to an

innovative resource. More significantly they felt that they had been given the opportunity to be at the forefront of an important development in adult literacy.

Challenges

As centres become more involved in online literacy learning so the pressure mounts on available digital infrastructure and connectivity at centre level. Many are stretched to make computers available to literacy classes as they are shared with other course co-ordinators and demand exceeds supply. As funding in all areas of education is squeezed there are not always solutions to these resource issues. Technical support for centres is one such aspect of resource demand that grows as centres become more involved with blended learning.

The more we use the Open Learning Centre and the laptops the more apparent our lack of technical support becomes. We don't have a technical person and so that can become a bit of a nightmare. Even if you get laptops donated they still have to be maintained, linked to servers and all those technical things need to happen. The more that the systems are used the more open they are to viruses, the more times they go down. It's really bad if you have people coming in and they have a bad experience because the system is down or they can't log in or there is something wrong. *Blended learning centre co-ordinator*

Similar resource questions arise in relation to making training available to a greater number of tutors and extending the contact hours of existing tutors to match increased demand from learners. It seems as if www.writeon.ie is set to resolve the challenge of widening participation at a time when budgets seem set to remain relatively limited. These are ultimately political challenges that will test the commitment to adult literacy and the willingness to act in redressing educational disadvantage.

Conclusions about experiences of www.writeon.ie

Learners, tutors and blended learning centres have enthusiastically welcomed www.writeon.ie as having transformed the experiences of literacy learners, practitioners and providers. Learners have a range of choices about how to work towards accreditation at Level 2 in literacy, numeracy and technology. Independent learners can work at their own pace with access to NALA Freephone support when needed. Distance learners have integrated use of www.writeon.ie into their telephone tutoring and the challenges of this

innovative approach are becoming clearer. Most successfully, the NALA Blended Learning Project has resulted in a rise in recruitment, retention, accreditation and progression of literacy learners at Level 2.

Learners are surprised and excited about this new learning process. As a result they have new levels of self-belief and raised learning aspirations. Online learning allows learners to work autonomously at their own pace and this has changed the tutor role and the relationship between tutor and learners. There is a need for some reflection about these changes so that they can be included in more appropriate training for tutors and volunteers.

Centres have noticed increased demands on their resources that have a welcome element but an associated cost that they will struggle to meet. Literacy has waited a long time to discover an approach to learning that negates the stigma attached to participation in provision. At one and the same time www.writeon.ie facilitates accredited learning in both basic skills and technology and is congruent with national and EU skills strategies. As NALA works to meet the small number of challenges uncovered in this research it is hoped that the resources can be found to ensure that others get access to the same enjoyable literacy learning experiences described here.

9d Outcomes for www.writeon.ie users

This section provides evidence of learners', tutors' and organisational outcomes from using www.writeon.ie. As well as the impact of online learning on literacy, numeracy and ICT, we examine the wider personal changes for learners, their families and their learning aspirations. As mentioned above, using www.writeon.ie is also transforming how literacy tutors and adult learning centres provide literacy learning opportunities and we examine further these outcomes and their impact on learning relationships and day-to-day literacy work.

Learner outcomes – Strengthened learner identities

The data is replete with surprise and excitement about the learner outcomes through www.writeon.ie and the discovery of a new literacy learning process. Those who are not independent learners at the beginning can become

progressively so with family or tutor support. Both tutors and learners alike welcomed the sense of learner control and autonomy given by www.writeon.ie and their learner identity was strengthened.

For someone with writing problems it is a high leap for them to be in control of the screen and pick things and choose things and look for letters on the keyboard. It is just a little bit more active or something for the person themselves. *Blended learning tutor*

Course co-ordinators spoke of learners 'blossoming' as a result of online learning. They were highly motivated by the structured and measured approach to learning and consequently eager for each session to begin and keen to work on independently at home. Autonomous learners talked about feeling a great 'sense of independence' and achievement at the instantaneous sense of progression with each step taken. A number of learners compared the experience of traditional 'pen and paper' literacy with active, responsive online learning and found the process of using a computer more engaging and satisfactory.

It's an exciting way to learn compared to sitting with pen and paper. When you sit in front of the screen you just tap in the words and it tells you you've got the right answer – yes, no. It builds your confidence. You have more control over it. It gives you a lift and an incentive to keep going. *Blended learner*

The pace at which learning outcomes are produced with digital literacy was also pleasing for learners who can struggle to remain engaged in a slow-moving, more traditional process.

I have only been here a few weeks now. The shame was dreadful for me. I felt about six and was afraid of looking stupid. I was hesitant at first but after only four weeks I can use the computer. *Blended learner*

The fairly rapid pace of learning to use the computer sustained the learner's interest in the comparatively more measured progress that can be made with learning literacy. Centres reported on new learners being inspired by their peers' success with www.writeon.ie. One man who had just received his first ever certificate explained that he had immediately gone back to encourage those coming onto the FÁS course after him to use the www.writeon.ie site. Not only did individuals experience a 'boost' in their own learning but they felt moved to become champions of this new way of learning.

Reduced stigma

The social stigma attached to not having sufficient literacy to cope with the demands of everyday living has not diminished.

Using www.writeon.ie I wouldn't be as embarrassed as going to a group. You know how bad people can be – you are dumb, or stupid and it can hurt people. *Independent learner*

Although there is more widespread recognition that educational disadvantage is at the root of unmet literacy needs, a negative response still attaches to the individual who has been short-changed by the system. This can mean that people are fearful of letting others know about their literacy issues or coming forward for courses. The data suggest that online learning is transforming this trenchant stigma and opening doors for learners that have long been tightly shut. The status of online learners has been raised and the respect for computers has been transferred to the www.writeon.ie learners.

There is definitely a buzz around the centre about it. They are not looked upon anymore as 'just' the basic English class. I think they are holding their heads higher. It's not a big worry to them anymore. They are not sneaking in and out of class. We're now doing computers and it's great. A whole new language and whole new learning and it doesn't put you down anymore. You're the same as anyone else around here. There's lots of people here who are in 'higher' classes who need to learn computers. It brings the level up for those who felt 'I can't do this' to feel now 'I can do this. I can use a computer. I know what they are talking about when people are talking about the internet, the websites and google this and google that'. *Blended learning tutor*

Learners felt enthused by the idea that they were now viewed as students of computers rather than stigmatised by negative associations with literacy. This has positive implications for engaging others who are looking for ways to improve their literacy skills.

Literacy and numeracy learning

Both literacy and numeracy had been measurably improved by use of www.writeon.ie. One blended learner had gone from being unable to write his children's names to having 'a couple of minor awards'. One woman described her reading and writing as having 'come on in leaps and bounds in a very short space of time'. Learner after learner recounted how the combination of digital and traditional literacy really worked for them. A tutor stated that she felt that www.writeon.ie had been very effective with a dyslexic learner who

had little success with traditional learning approaches. For many, a reluctance to use pen and paper, to make irreparable mistakes on a page is replaced with a certainty that with www.writeon.ie the 'try again' button the memory of an error can be erased forever.

I would have thrown the pen and paper out the window years ago. This way is really of benefit to me. *Blended learner*

The pen and paper remind you of something you can't do. It reminds you of the red pen and the scribbles on your copy book. The computer is all new. *Final focus group*

Learners felt that eventually they would feel confident enough to return to pen and paper when necessary. For the moment, the calm that resulted from losing the fear of mistakes allowed a new learner identity to emerge.

Mistakes can be undone now. Before the anxiety would stop me writing. I'd get stuck and think 'it's gone'. You can't get the word and you feel like you can't go on or you have to think of something different to say to put in. Now I say it doesn't matter. I can go back and fix it later. I am freer to learn. *Blended learner*

Many learners described a new learning journey imbued with hope and with life-changing outcomes both in terms of literacy and wider perspectives on life.

My spelling has improved an awful lot. I was just thinking about it yesterday and realised that a few years ago I could barely write my name. Working on www.writeon.ie has made a massive difference to me. I can talk to people better than I ever could before. It has really changed my life. I used to spend my time worrying about medication and my sickness and all that and now I haven't time to think about those things. My life is full. It is a great confidence builder. *Distance learner*

Learners had developed ways of learning spellings that were new to them and were not content to simply get the correct answer. They were clear that they wanted a learning outcome rather than simply a correct answer. In the blended learning setting there was evidence that www.writeon.ie had encouraged a new learning relationship between tutor and learner.

Even tutors who are not great at IT are keen to use it. They are learning alongside the learners and the dynamic changes a little bit then. One learner is very keen and he goes off and tries it himself and he says he is helping his tutor. There is more of a blurring of who is the tutor. You wouldn't get that if someone was looking at a book. It creates a common bond really. *Blended learning centre co-ordinator*

Accreditation

Some individual learners and centres used www.writeon.ie to provide a structured learning programme at Level 2 but put little emphasis on the accredited aspect. For many others the access to accreditation was a major attraction. It was an incentive for learners that boosted confidence and encouraged progression. Learners were spurred on by the progressive acquisition of points and in one centre there was a reported acceleration of the pace of learning with people working on at home independently in order to complete a module. For a large number of learners gaining a certificate for literacy, numeracy or ICT had been beyond their aspirations.

My tutor sent off all the forms for me and I got my FETAC Cert just last week. Words couldn't describe how I felt. It's something that I have never achieved before. I met the principal of my National school the other day and I said to him and you wouldn't have believed the expression on his face when I told him. He was absolutely lovely; delighted for me. *Blended learner*

The staged nature of accreditation is encouraging for learners who describe a persistence and determination to complete what they have started.

With every hurdle I feel – I've come this far. I might as well keep going. I will probably go on to do Level 3 afterwards. *Independent learner*

ICT - literacy

For many learners www.writeon.ie has introduced them to a way of learning that is enthralling. From having a fear of technology they have become captivated.

I never thought I would ever go near a computer. Now I think I am getting addicted to them. Last week I didn't even notice that the class had left and gone to tea. *Blended learner*

Using www.writeon.ie has improved learners' confidence and capacity with ICT. In the same way that ICT allows literacy to be used and upgraded almost incidentally so also a focus on literacy enhances ICT skills unobtrusively.

Because they are concentrating so hard on getting to the next www.writeon.ie screen their mouse coordination improves really quickly, unbeknownst to themselves. *Distance learning tutor*

Through use of the www.writeon.ie site learners are astounded at the ease with which they overcome their fear of technology and become digitally

literate. The quote below describes how one man crossed the cusp into icon recognition and comprehension and the accompanying confidence boost.

For me the main thing is that I'm not afraid of it. I realise that there are lots of other things I can do. Last night I was able to download pictures... to follow the instructions. Normally it would just look like a lot of symbols and boxes but now I am able to read it and follow it. And I know that I can fix it if I need to. The panic is gone. I wouldn't have been able to do that before. I realise there's loads of things there for me. I know it's just a matter of practice now. *Blended learner*

Spurred on by their newly acquired digital literacy skills and confidence many learners have bought home computers and laptops and use these regularly for leisure and learning. Progression to Level 3 on www.writeon.ie is a common goal. Ultimately the outcome of computer literacy is inclusion in the whole burgeoning digital world.

Inclusion in the digital world

Everyone we interviewed was excited and proud about the idea and the reality of inclusion in the digital world. Learners used digital terminology and the language of computers with ease. They talked about icons, skype, facebook and searching for information. The boost of inclusion in the digital landscape was both real and symbolic. People really took great delight in the range of things they could do online: booking seats and flights, doing crosswords, reading the paper, dating, gambling, shopping, contacting friends and family, ordering pizzas, dealing with banks and a host of other activities. In many instances this allowed people to access bargains and special offers that previously would not have been open to them. They also had moved symbolically from a position of exclusion because of their unmet literacy needs to the status of insider, of subject in the digital world to which they had now been given the key.

I would be on the computer a lot. I keep photos there that I look at every day. I check my emails and facebook account everyday. I have the link for the two local papers and I read those online. It has become a way of life for me. I wouldn't say I am 100% yet but I am getting there. This time last year I wouldn't have been able to do those things but my computer skills have come up an awful lot. *Independent learner*

The integration of literacy and numeracy skills into all these various activities often went unremarked. Learners recounted lists of ways in which they were

using literacy skills without any of the angst or preoccupation this would traditionally bring up. It was as if the acquisition of digital literacy has in some way negated or changed learners' perspectives on their traditional literacy skills. This in turn removed many of the barriers that hold learners back from learning.

It's really exciting. I think it is just terrific too. It's a real confidence builder. 'OK so I'm not really great at reading or writing or spelling but I can use the computer. Everyone can use the computer nowadays. I can use it too.' That's really priceless you know. That opens up other areas then and allows you to go further. *Blended learning tutor*

With the added confidence that improved skills and accreditation bring so adult literacy learners are better able, in a Freirean sense, to read their own world and become involved in literacy activism.

Because my confidence has grown I have got involved in the NALA student group. I couldn't believe how many people have literacy issues. I am no longer feeling outside. It is as if I have come in and feel part of everyone else. *Final focus group*

Similarly, the benefits of www.writeon.ie extended beyond the individual to encompass family literacy and numeracy development.

Family literacy

Participation in www.writeon.ie had also resulted in parents being more involved in their children's learning. Hence the adult's outcomes from www.writeon.ie were shared with other family members.

One of the mothers said herself and her son are working to see who will get the most right and she said it is fantastic and he is really improving. It's great. *Blended learning tutor*

My kids primary school has a website that has maths games on it and I can use it with my seven year-old twins. I am using it at home with them. I am getting really fast at the computer and I see other people are impressed by that. My kids are coming home with ten out of ten in their maths and 12 out of 12 in their spelling. I am making them do it even when they don't want to. I have changed something in my family. *Final focus group*

Throughout the research process there was evidence that digital literacy was a family affair. Parents felt they could ask children for help with computer issues without losing face. One grandparent marvelled at her six year-old using a laptop and eagerly made note of educational websites that they could

share. Parents whose children were having literacy difficulties repeated completed sections of www.writeon.ie with them at home. In a sense they had safely rehearsed the content prior to doing it with the child. Hence, they felt they were empowered to contribute to their children's literacy in a way that was 'fun' and 'not like school' because it involved use of the computer.

Learner progression

With the confidence gained on www.writeon.ie at Level 2 many talked about progression to Level 3 and some had already made this step. From often fearful and hesitant beginnings, learners had gained upgraded skills and greater self-belief.

I have gained a better understanding of the basics and great confidence. It has helped me to turn a bit of a corner and given me hope. *Independent learner*

Tutor outcomes

As outlined above the tutor's role was altered in ways by the advent of online learning and the structure offered by www.writeon.ie. Although some tutors were reluctant to accept that learners might become independent while working at Level 2, others had embraced the potential of the site to provide new ways of learning literacy and ICT. For less digitally literate tutors www.writeon.ie had meant additional training and the realisation that in the digital world sometimes literacy learners are equally or more adept than their tutor.

Some tutors described a shift in their role towards a support role rather than a proactive director of learning. With www.writeon.ie they responded to learners requests for help and intervened with teaching moments when an issue was unclear. This reduced the level of preparation for tutors and meant that a structured programme with accompanying resources at Level 2 was at their fingertips.

It's a little library, I think, of materials. Rather than having to go photocopying every week, it's just there at a click. It's so accessible really. *Blended learning tutor*

Centre outcomes

Blended learning centres found the interactive website a flexible and innovative addition to their repertoire of provision. They report that www.writeon.ie gave clear direction for learning at Level 2 and so increased the confidence of tutors and the cohesiveness of provision. It has expanded the landscape of learning and teaching literacy. Centres spoke of a new energy around learning literacy, a buzz, a boost. They talked about excitement and a 'brilliant shift in the dynamic of the class'.

www.writeon.ie is a positive and forward thinking addition to the services we can provide making teaching and learning varied and fun. *Blended learning centre questionnaire*

There was a welcome from centres that felt they now had a comprehensive resource for learners with greater literacy needs that allows systematic movement through the learning levels. This in turn was increasing retention, giving more opportunities for marking achievement of learners and consequently encouraging progression. Learners reportedly made more rapid progress because, having taken control of the online process, they were motivated to work on independently at home.

Centres in the NALA Blended Learning Project received additional resources in the form of laptops and access to a structured programme. Because data is compiled online, centres are spared the administrative tasks associated with preparing and verifying portfolios of evidence for FETAC accreditation. In one area, a whole organisation approach to online literacy has been implemented that integrates www.writeon.ie into every aspect of the work from assessment to accreditation.

I do find that blended learning really is the way to go. At that level people need as much reinforcement as possible. They need relationships and they need time. I find that www.writeon.ie is good as the reinforcement tool, as the assessment tool and as the tool that they can access independently and practise. The whole core is the stuff that you would be doing in the classroom. It complemented that perfectly and I really think that online assessment is the way to go. *Blended learning centre co-ordinator*

Operating an integrated online literacy service requires an initial investment in resources and staff development and a leadership that has the vision to see where that investment will lead. This particular county has massively

increased the number of learners achieving accreditation and progressing to other learning both in literacy and technology.

As a result of www.writeon.ie we have invested heavily in e-learning suites in each of six centres. This includes a set of laptops, portable printer, portable projector and headphones, internet data cards. We also have internet access points where they can drop in and use IT. As part of the refurbishment of all centres we have put in open access points for learners and www.writeon.ie has been central to those developments.
Blended learning centre co-ordinator

Ultimately, www.writeon.ie opens doors to accreditation that were previously unimagined by learners and their tutors. This is very much in line with the National Skills Strategy but more importantly it is transforming for individuals for whom it marks a positive and enjoyable first step back into learning.

We now have a number of people on the NQF where that was an alien thing that had nothing to do with them. It wasn't in their range of goals to have originally because it wasn't in their world. Now they are racking them up and thinking, 'what next?'. *Blended learning centre co-ordinator*

As the providers of www.writeon.ie and the administrators of the accreditation process, NALA has earned a great deal of respect for the attentive and responsive manner in which they deal with requests for help or information. The feedback about NALA from learners and providers is universally positive and praiseworthy.

A partnership approach

Partnership is a key word in national and European policy statements for education and training and is also a key strategy for NALA in achieving its current objectives (NALA, 2011). An important outcome from the www.writeon.ie initiative has been the number of partnerships that NALA has cemented with individual learners, providers of literacy including VECs, FÁS and CE schemes, libraries and community development groups. Good learning relationships benefit everyone and there is tremendous scope for further developments of this kind.

Hopefully we will see even more VECs using the www.writeon.ie in future. I have been saying to VECs all over the country to use it. They don't need to reinvent the wheel. It's there for them to use. *NALA DLS Co-ordinator*

In disseminating information about www.writeon.ie, NALA has organised a number of national training days that have been very well subscribed. Those

attending have come from a range of organisations and included tutors, organisers, VEC and FÁS staff, librarians and community development workers. As a result of one such day the Dublin City libraries have placed an icon linking to www.writeon.ie on all the public computers in their buildings. This partnership facilitates access for those who wish to use www.writeon.ie independently but have no personal computer.

The enthusiasm of NALA DLS staff for www.writeon.ie is inspiring and it is clear that we are only beginning to see the impact that digital approaches to literacy learning can deliver.

We have given out a lot more qualifications and the numbers are going up. They are coming from all over the country. It's great to see so many learners coming through the system. It's great to get phone calls from people who have just come across the website. It's great to see the awareness raising. *NALA DLS Co-ordinator*

Conclusions about outcomes

Although it is a relatively new approach to literacy learning, www.writeon.ie has produced impressive outcomes for learners, tutors and organisations. Independent learners, those learning with a telephone tutor and in a blended learning centre all have enthusiastic reports of outcomes that have surpassed expectations. Inevitably learners and tutors level of skills is important and centres need to have appropriate resources but when these requirements are met the results are transformative for all concerned.

In its strategic plan, NALA's 'is committed to raising adult literacy levels' (NALA, 2010: 5). It is evident in the findings from this study that www.writeon.ie already makes a considerable contribution to achieving this goal and that it holds the potential to greatly increase that achievement.

9e Suggestions for change and development

This final section of the outcomes presents suggestions for changes and developments to the www.writeon.ie website. Ideas of learners, tutors, centre managers and NALA staff are outlined below. During the course of gathering the data for this evaluation (September – December 2010) NALA has been consistently communicating with the blended learning centres to gather feedback. Tutors and learners alike told us that when any micro issues arise

with the site that they have been encouraged to be in contact with NALA. This has resulted in ongoing and responsive development of the site during the lifespan of this evaluation and many of the recommendations outlined below have already been acted upon by NALA. The range of ideas indicates the level of engagement users have with www.writeon.ie and their desire to see it further develop.

Learner suggestions

Starting out

Learners felt that the early engagement with the website was a critical time. The first instant the learner opens the site is hopeful yet 'daunting' for many. For this reason, it is important that the process is clearly explained from the outset. This was particularly important for the independent learners we spoke to.

Several learners recommended an introductory video for the site and 'real live people' were favoured over cartoon characters.

An introductory video would be good that gives clear step-by-step instructions and takes nothing for granted. *Blended learner*

It would be good to have pictures of real people. Even at the front. When you have cartoon images it is more like for children. You are not sure if it is for adults. *Final focus group*

It was suggested that during the early engagement phase there should be more emphasis given to the availability of Freephone support.

If someone is repeatedly having a problem the helpline number could flash to remind them they can phone for help. You can forget there is help and get frustrated and just switch off. *Final focus group*

One online learner suggested that a reminder be available to site users of where they had ended their last session. This would help reengage learners who were infrequent users of the site and review the learning that had already been covered.

Website design

Learners generally were enthusiastic in their praise of the website design and layout. A number of small recommendations were made to make certain

aspects more user friendly and some of these have already been acted upon by NALA.

I would like if there was some way where you could go back to where you left off. *Blended learner*

A number of learners described confusion over the log in process between 'username' and 'password'. They suggested that one number should be used for access to the site and to the Freephone number. This could be a single 'pin number' or alternatively users could use their PPS number for all interaction with the site.

Another learner thought that the log off button might be better in a more vibrant colour. She felt this would save time spent searching the screen for the command button.

I would like the log out part to be in a different colour. We were looking at how to log off and we had to look all over the page. If it was done out in a different colour it would be easier to see. *Blended learner*

Feedback

Of great importance for learners was the need for feedback from the site. They were concerned about their progress and needed reassurance that they were on the right track. This was of particular importance for those working alone on the website.

I think it would be useful to have some kind of indicator on the page to let you know if you are doing something right or not. For example a red and green light that lets you know if you are on the right track. At the moment you have to go through all the questions and you get a global number at the end but it doesn't let you know where you have gone wrong. I don't mind being told that I have gone wrong as long as I know what I have done wrong. That way I can go back to it and try and improve it. If you are constantly making the same mistake then you are just going around in circles. *Independent learner*

You could do something wrong three times and it doesn't tell you what the mistake was or how to learn that point. *Blended learner*

Generally learners want to know why - as well as if they 'go wrong'. They would like clearer feedback from the site that would identify areas that they need to work on.

New developments

Interviewees were generally happy with the selection of topics available to them. However there were two noteworthy suggestions in relation to family literacy and the gendered nature of some topics.

I think it would be good if there was a family literacy section for using with children or grandchildren. It's a way of bringing them into what you are doing. For me it would be good because I could practise my reading as well. *Final focus group*

I found sometimes that the balance in the content was towards men's interests. Like football and goal scoring, even though I had selected 'family' as a category of interest. I would like to see something more for women. *Independent learner*

During the focus group discussion on future developments of the site, one learner suggested a very practical way of increasing the profile and use of the website.

Employees in libraries should be trained to help literacy learners with www.writeon.ie. They could wear a NALA badge or something so that learners could identify them as someone who could help. *Final focus group*

Suggestions from Tutors

Resources

Tutors welcomed the website as an innovative and useful addition to the choices available to literacy learners. A number of those interviewed suggested that learner experience would be greatly enhanced by additional and complimentary paper based resources.

...some kind of support material. Maybe some simple worksheets that could be used alongside it would be good. *Blended learning tutor*

Some of the Blended Learning Centres visited had already begun to develop such resources and they told us that they would be happy to share these with other centres.

In one centre it was suggested that a support manual outlining the different screen pages of the website would be useful for tutors. This could help tutors prepare complimentary resources in advance to support learners in their progression through the site. Tutors felt these additional resources would help to expand and deepen the literacy learning experience of students.

Site development

The idea of a video introduction to the site was also suggested by tutors. They were conscious of some learners' lack of confidence and vulnerability when beginning a new project.

As an alternative to paper based resources other tutors suggested that additional screens or learning spaces could be added to the site. These could serve to provide extra exercises for learners to reinforce learning and further practise their skills.

Tutors echoed learners' recommendation that there be more feedback opportunities built into the website.

I would like to see that as they move on in the programme that there would be feedback about how they are doing. Maybe a stop off, an evaluation of how they are doing. *Blended learning tutor*

So that they could contact NALA directly where errors or issues with the website occurred, tutors suggested having page numbers on the site screens that would allow them to clearly identify the screen in question.

Finally there was a recommendation from tutors in relation to the maths module of the website. In their experience they found that some of the language that accompanied exercises was too difficult for Level 2 learners and they suggested that it might be improved and made clearer.

Blended Learning Centre Co-ordinator Suggestions

Blended learning centre co-ordinators were effusive in their praise for the website and the positive impact it was having on the recruitment, retention and experience of students. They were committed to a blended learning approach which fully integrated ICT with learning literacy and numeracy.

It should be part of a natural thing, the computers interwoven into any class. *Blended learning centre co-ordinator*

Additional resources

Echoing the suggestions of tutors, blended learning centre co-ordinators believed that there was further scope in 'packing out' the website with additional resources for both tutors and learners. Ideas included extra worksheets linked to and extending different website exercises. These

worksheets could be separate from accreditation requirements and available to extend resources.

It should give tips and ideas and downloadable activity sheets and things like that. *Blended learning centre co-ordinator*

It was felt that there was scope to develop the resources for tutors on writeon.ie. One co-ordinator suggested that micro teaching videos could be added demonstrating how tutors approached different teaching points and a range of teaching and facilitation strategies. The tutor section could also include background information on the course layout, thus preparing tutors for the programme ahead.

I do feel that at Level 2 that we need to have a tutor section that the tutor can go into and familiarise themselves with what is coming up and maybe build out and expand more. *Blended learning centre co-ordinator*

Maybe there could be video teaching points. Like youtube clips. Because a lot of the tutors are very enthusiastic and anxious to do the best for learners but we don't know it all. You would gain so much from listening to everyone else's ideas and maybe it sparks something because you see something. *Blended learning centre co-ordinator*

Blended learning centre co-ordinators suggested that funding be made available to equip centres with up to date computers, software packages and efficient connectivity to support learners engagement with blended learning. When connectivity or ICT glitches interrupted learning sessions it impacted on learners experience.

Site design and navigation

Making the site more accessible, efficient and user friendly underpinned the suggestions made by blended learning centre co-ordinators. One co-ordinator suggested that learners should be given some taster screens to experiment with before signing up for the site. This she thought would be a way of attracting more learners.

I think you should be able to browse the site without getting a password. People might be put off by this 'locked door' approach. Why not have some sample exercises that people might look at or work through to see if this approach suits them? *Blended learning centre co-ordinator*

It was suggested that the taster screens could proceed to offer some basic computer skills training similar to those found on BBC RAW.²³

It could include mouse use etc. and a training section on how to navigate www.writeon.ie with video or voiceover prompts on where the buttons are. *Blended learning centre questionnaire*

In order to save the frustration that learners sometimes experienced when they had to repeat exercises it was suggested that a facility be developed which would save work already completed.

It would help to make the pre-assessment shorter or be able to save it so if students need to take a break they can without having to start back at the beginning again. *Blended learning centre questionnaire*

In relation to the appearance of the website a number of co-ordinators suggested a more vivid colour scheme be used on the site and that some of the site buttons could benefit from more prominence, either in size or colour.

I think the buttons could be made bigger because I find people are looking to see where do they click next. It's all hidden away. I would be looking for more coloured, in your face big buttons. Easy steps. Fun. Colourful. *Blended learning centre co-ordinator*

New topics

A host of new website topics or themes were suggested by blended learning centre co-ordinators. These included the development of a Level 1 site for 'beginning learners'. Many of the centres had Level 1 learners and felt that the provision of evidently attractive on-line learning would help to engage these learners.

Specific topics suggested for the Level 2 site ranged from online spelling and grammar courses; a stand alone module focussing on using mobile phones ; familiarising learners with the language associated with technology and modules on civic awareness and women's contribution to universal suffrage. Horticulture and cookery modules were also proposed, with practical elements on video or hosted in individual learning centres.

One co-ordinator thought a stand-alone online numeracy programme would help attract reluctant learners who had specific needs around maths. They

²³ www.bbc.co.uk/raw/

had found it difficult to get maths initiatives off the ground and described efforts as 'hitting a brick wall'.

Training

Centres were very positive about the website and they intended to continue to provide and further develop blended learning opportunities into the future. They suggested that all future tutor training courses would include a focus on the www.writeon.ie website.

NALA staff

The Freephone co-ordinator who deals with both tutor and learner calls has front line experience of website issues which most commonly arise. Issues typically involve website design rather than content. The most common calls are related to the saving of work completed by students. She recommends the importance of emphasising from the outset that unless a section is complete, work will not be saved automatically by the website.

The main issue from students is 'I thought I had done all the modules'. But maybe they left half way through and didn't realise it didn't save. They were unaware that it only saves when you get to the last screen.
Freephone co-ordinator

Such commonly arising issues could be addressed by the addition of a frequently asked questions page on the site.

The DL Tutor Co-ordinator explained some ways in which the website further expand and provide additional learning opportunities for students.

I am trying to pull together a bit more of the collaborative learning through setting up a learner forum or a chatroom between tutors and learners. I am trying to encourage tutors to pull learners together in a forum because there would be an extra bit of learning in that. *Distance Learning tutor co-ordinator*

I would love us to put up a suite of videos about the real basic bread and butter stuff of literacy work, of spelling, of grammar and of phonemic awareness. You know *i before e, plurals* all of those types of things. Learners could look at them as often as they like and come back to it as often as they need to. It would be great to have that there to rescue people if they got stuck. *Distance Learning tutor co-ordinator*

She believes that rapidly developing technology offers exciting scope for the development of online literacy learning.

Conclusions

Developing literacy skills online through working on the www.writeon.ie website is still in its early stages. It is clear that learners, tutors and blended learning centres alike find it an exciting and enticing way to learn. It changes fundamentally the relationship between learner and tutor and requires a shift from the often familiar comfort zone of the traditional tutor-learner relationship. This once exclusive relationship has now to take into account a major new element in technology and all that has to offer to the experience of online learning. Positive feedback, reassurance and confidence building are the bedrock on which successful learning relationships rely. Many of the suggestions made for developments of the website are rooted in these key areas.

Whilst tutors undoubtedly see the potential of this new way of learning they, like learners, have to unfetter themselves from old and familiar ways of working. The relationship with pen and paper so often referred to during data collection is not only significant for learners. Tutors are also deeply attached to paper based resources and this is expressed in the data as a desire for accompanying manuals and worksheets.

Learner's first impressions of the www.writeon.ie site are crucial to their ongoing engagement with on-line literacy learning. 'Capturing' learners' early interest is dependent on the clarity, attractiveness and vibrancy of the first screens. Introductory videos for tutors and learners could greatly support smooth entry and progress through the site.

The data contains many suggestions for further modules to be added to the existing www.writeon.ie menu and this signifies learner and tutor engagement with the site and their desire to see it develop.

10. Conclusions and recommendations

Introduction

This section presents the conclusions that can be drawn from the research findings about the experiences of users of NALA's interactive learning website www.writeon.ie. We gathered rich data from online learners, tutors, centre co-ordinators and NALA DLS staff and so these voices have been the compass that guided the study. The evidence provided by the research participants has led us to the deductions that we outline below. The underpinning detail can be reviewed in the preceding sections about learner profiles, motivation, experiences, outcomes and suggestions for change and development. Finally we make five evidence-based recommendations for how www.writeon.ie might be extended and developed to further meet the needs of users and the relevant policy objectives.

Evaluation of DLS 2010

This review of DLS for the 2010 period has focussed on www.writeon.ie. It has gathered both quantitative and qualitative data from learners, practitioners and providers during the period September to December 2010. Face-to-face interviews and focus groups, telephone interviews and questionnaires were the primary research methods and these were carried out in a participative and literacy-friendly manner. In early January 2011, we fed back the findings to a final focus group of learners and one tutor / co-ordinator for verification.

Online literacy and the policy context

The Irish National Skills Strategy, the new Draft National Literacy Strategy and the EU strategy on education and training – ET2020 all highlight the urgent need to address falling literacy standards. Educational disadvantage is singled out as a priority in the various documents. This is based on the understanding that the task of upgrading skills is vast and principles of equity need to be deployed. The current strategy documents also suggest that digital literacy is an essential part of that agenda and so www.writeon.ie is well placed to provide a resolution to the need to upgrade skills to Level 2 (and Level 3).

The Skills Strategy sets ambitious targets for upgrading skills and in a time of recession the associated costs are important. So too is the issue of attracting adults back to learning and it seems, from the findings of this study, as if www.writeon.ie can positively address both of these factors. There are efficiencies to be gained from online literacy provision that allows the use of online accreditation as a form of RPL for those whose skills are strong but who lack the necessary evidence. At the same time, the research findings robustly suggest that the challenge of widening participation may be lessened by integrating basic skills and IT. Learners told us that they felt excited and motivated to learn in this way. Centres saw numbers rise and accredited outcomes were impressive. It seems likely then that with appropriate resources, www.writeon.ie could have a central part to play in the achievement of skills targets at Levels 2 and 3.

NALA's www.writeon.ie in an international context

As a basis for this research project we explored the evidence about web-based literacy learning in a number of countries in both the northern and southern hemisphere. This literature review revealed that online literacy is rapidly growing across the globe where it is viewed as a solution to the dearth of trained tutors and the vast numbers of people in need of skills upgrading. As well as helping to address the size of the literacy gap, digital literacy is now recognised as an essential literacy in its own right. For this reason, countries that are determined to raise their skills base are putting technology at the forefront of their skills strategies.

In a number of countries, online literacy programmes are criticised for merely replicating school curricula with uninspiring and ineffective results. They make no effort to engage with the possibilities offered by the new technology and so do not engage learners. Evidence also suggests that some form of supported or blended learning is the most successful way to maximise online learning results. Few programmes are accredited and where they are often it is merely a replication of school-age courses.

NALA's www.writeon.ie is therefore at the cutting edge of online literacy developments in that it is designed to make substantial use of interactivity and

leads with relative ease to full nationally recognised accreditation. The advent of Level 3 adds the further advantage of a progression route for learners.

Others have also suggested that good online learning depends on appropriate tutor training, rigorous collaboration with learners and providers and on-going experimentation. NALA's open and dynamic relationship with learners, tutors and providers therefore contributes to the assurance of the website's relevance and quality.

A new learning experience

Adult literacy learners who had used www.writeon.ie spoke enthusiastically about the enjoyment of learning using computers. The negative associations with schooling were erased for them and they felt liberated by this to focus on upgrading their skills. Many described learning on www.writeon.ie as being fun and engaging their interest and motivation. Those who had never even dared to consider that they might become computer literate were surprised with the rapid progress they made, sometimes in a matter of weeks. They were spurred on to complete Level 2 accreditation and continue learning beyond that point.

Traditional literacy has often struggled to retain learners who find the pace of progress slow and the associations with 'pen and paper' reminiscent of school. Using a computer has novelty and status and learners were able to take control of their learning process and content. Many were motivated to work independently at home and this too contributed to the pace of progress. Where blended learning programmes worked more intensively (for 6 hours a week rather than the usual 2 hours) then outcomes rose accordingly. NALA's www.writeon.ie clearly has the potential to attract more adults back to literacy and satisfy personal as well as national skills goals. Inevitably this has resource implications but the effectiveness of the web-based approach makes this an intelligent investment.

Changes for tutors

The study showed that the tutor's role has changed, as learners become more autonomous and the complexity of working with multi-level groups is reduced.

Many tutors felt that they were still required to respond to teaching points as they arose and had prepared www.writeon.ie support materials for this purpose. Nevertheless they described their role as more facilitative than proactive and some felt that they needed training to manage this and the increased demand on IT skills. The findings suggest the need for a shift in tutor training to put digital literacy and online learning options at the centre of preparation for literacy tutors. This is a relatively new and rapidly changing area of pedagogy and tutor educators will need to be resourced to keep training up to speed.

The shift in the tutor-learner relationship towards greater equality of power is to be welcomed. Tutors' anxiety that growing numbers of independent learners will make their role obsolete is unfounded as all the literature, and this empirical study, confirms that blended learning is the best way of maximising the impact of online learning.

Challenges for www.writeon.ie

The development of www.writeon.ie since 2008 has been impressive and some initial design issues are gradually being tackled. Learners, tutors and providers spoke positively about the open way in which DLS staff deals with comments about the site and requests for support. Independent learners who lack confidence in reading and computer skills need some form of introduction to the way that www.writeon.ie is organised. This may take the form of an induction video that also includes advice about managing learning independently. Learners and tutors both asked about the possibility of clearer feedback about errors made and suggested guidance to related 'teaching points' if errors occurred repeatedly.

It was clear that some aspects of the site are less used than the 'lessons' and yet these have a lot to contribute to a rounded learning programme. It would be useful to highlight the texts and the social networking aspects of the site as these allow people to practise reading and writing skills and to collaborate with other learners.

Not all learners use the Freephone helpline even when they are experiencing difficulties. Learners told us they switch off when they 'get stuck' and don't always remember that the Freephone is an option. Giving more prominence to the availability of support may ensure that problems are quickly overcome. Ultimately, maintaining good communications about usability and acting on this feedback is crucial to the maintenance and development of the site.

The evidence about the audio aspect of the site was that while it was helpful and welcomed by most learners at the same time it could also be irritating. Both the voice and the visuals on the opening page were too robotic for some and they would like more images of 'real' people that give a definite adult image to the site. Others were happy with things as they are.

Only a small number of challenges were mentioned in relation to use of www.writeon.ie and NALA is already aware of these and actively addressing them.

Future developments

Interactive online learning with www.writeon.ie has been shown in this study to have a tremendous impact on adults who have used it with positive outcomes in literacy and IT. The evidence suggests strongly that www.writeon.ie should become a central tool in literacy delivery and that available resources should be harnessed to enable this to happen. IT access in libraries, schools and colleges could be made available to those who have no home computer and support staff trained to support literacy users.

The progression available between FETAC Levels 2 and 3 might be extended to include Level 1 and support for those with literacy issues working at higher levels of accreditation. The development of a tutor area on the site would allow an integrated approach to literacy across the education sectors to be addressed.

The potential for a family literacy area on www.writeon.ie was also discussed by a number of learners who were already sharing their enthusiasm for online learning with their children. Stories, games and creative ways of promoting

language, numeracy and IT skills would satisfy parents desire to help their children, further develop their skills and contribute to the national literacy plan.

As technology evolves so the learning needs of everyone will need to be constantly updated. There is no stigma attached to learning something new and working online allows people access to the digital world and to endless future learning opportunities. Integrating IT and literacy emerges from this study as a winning partnership for connecting people to new levels of literacy, numeracy and IT. It both opens access to vital basic skills and at the same time gives a taste of the success that breeds success and the incentive to keep on learning.

Recommendations

1. NALA and the VECs should be resourced to extend the reach of www.writeon.ie thereby contributing to the achievement of the National Skills Strategy, ET2020 and the reduction of persistent educational disadvantage.
2. Priority should be given to providing public access to computers for those who wish to work online to improve basic skills but do not have the means to fund this.
3. Literacy tutor and volunteer tutor training should take cognisance of the rapid shift toward online learning. All tutor training should include exploration of the use of www.writeon.ie and prepare tutors for a more facilitative role and an equalised relationship between learner and tutor.
4. The development of www.writeon.ie should include an introductory video induction and attention to the feedback given to learners about their errors. Developing tutor and family literacy dimensions to the site should be explored.
5. Because of its innovative nature, NALA should continue to monitor and investigate the use of www.writeon.ie with a range of literacy learners and other partners.
6. Provision for Level 1 learners would be a welcome extension to www.writeon.ie and mean that online learning could reach those most in need of literacy support.

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12. Appendices

Appendix a. – Generic interview schedule

<p style="text-align: center;">Evaluation of the www.writeon.ie website</p> <p style="text-align: center;">October 2010</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Semi- structured interview</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Centre co-ordinators</p>

Motivation

1. How did the centre first get involved in using the *writeon.ie* website?
2. What attracted the centre to this way of working on literacy with learners?
3. How did you attract learners to the course?

Experience

1. From your experience what have been the benefits for the **centre** of using the *writeon.ie* website as a means of supporting learners in their literacy work?

What have been the challenges?

How did the centre overcome them?
2. What would you say have been the benefits for **tutors** in using this way of learning with students?

What have been the challenges for tutors?
3. What would you say have been the benefits for **learners** in working this way with students?

What have been the challenges?
4. Was there an induction to ICT needed for tutors? How was it?

Was there an induction to ICT needed for learners? How was it?

Outcomes

1. How many learners have been involved in this work this year?
2. How many are working towards accreditation?
3. Have you seen an increase in enrolments as a result of running the course?

4. How does student retention on this course compare to other literacy courses?
5. What would you say that being involved in writeon.ie has meant for the organisation?

Future Development

1. Are there any improvements to the website you can recommend to NALA ?
2. How would you see the *writeon.ie* website developing in the future?

Appendix b Profile of www.writeon.ie blended learners

	Age now	Gender	Age leaving school	Employed?	Prior computer Skills?	Home computer? Internet access?	Time online outside class per week	Completed accreditation through www.writeon.ie?	More online courses?
1	37	Male	15	No	No	Yes/yes	No	Yes	No
2	24	Female	18	No	Yes	Yes/yes	4 hours	Yes	Yes
3	38	Male	15	Taxi driver	Yes	Yes/yes	7 hours	Yes	Yes
4	60	Female	14	No	No	Yes/yes	3 hours	No	Yes
5	59	Female	14	No	No	No/no	No	No	No
6	60	Male	13	FÁS	Yes	No/no	No	No	Yes
7	52	Male	16	FÁS	Yes	No/no	2 hours	No	No
8	45	Male	16	FÁS	Yes	Yes/yes	7 hours	No	Yes
9	55	Male	12	No	No	Yes/no	4 hours	Yes	Yes
10	58	Female	13	No	No	Yes/yes	2 hours	Yes	Yes
11	53	Female	13	No	No	Yes/yes	2 hours	Yes	Yes

12	59	Female	14	No	No	Yes/yes	No	No	Yes
13	50	Female	16	No	Yes	No/no	No	No	Yes
14	25	Female	16	Volunteer	Yes	Yes/yes	7 hours	Yes	No
15	63	Female	14	Counselling	Yes	Yes/yes	8 hours	No	Yes
16	67	Male	14	No	No	Yes/no	No	No	Yes
17	35	Male	14	CE scheme	No	Yes/yes	No	No	Yes
18	62	Female	14	No	No	No/no	No	No	Yes
19	26	Female	14	CE scheme	No	Yes/yes	4 hours	Yes	Yes
20	42	Female	15	CE scheme	Yes	No/no	1 hour	Yes	Yes
21	N/A	Male	N/A	Retired	No	No/no	No	No	Yes
22	52	Female	12	No	No	Yes/yes	No	No	Yes
23	61	Male	15	No	Yes	Yes/yes	14 hours	No	Yes
24	32	Male	14	No	Yes	Yes/yes	10 hours	Yes	Yes
25	46	Male	13	No	No	Yes/yes	14 hours	No	Yes

Appendix c DLS 2010 Sample of phone enquiries about www.writeon.ie

No.	DIs Id	Region	Gender	www.writeon.ie experiences
1.	10/48	Munster	Female	Learner - has not used www.writeon.ie
2.	10/62	Leinster	Male	unavailable
3.	10/66	Leinster	Female	unavailable
4.	10/102	Leinster	Female	Rang for daughter 16yrs/positive experience. Gained great confidence from www.writeon.ie and passed junior cert as a result.
5.	10/213	Munster	Female	Volunteer tutor – has not used www.writeon.ie
6.	10/376	Leinster	Female	Learner – has not used www.writeon.ie . Centre funds cut so can no longer attend.
7.	10/428	Connaught	Female	ESL learner – used www.writeon.ie once – found helpful but lost password. Time an issue.
8.	10/434	Connaught	Male	unavailable
9.	10/728	Leinster	Female	VEC information officer – queries use of password – obstacle for learners from offset.
10.	10/838	Munster	Female	Volunteer tutor – has not used www.writeon.ie
11.	10/911	Leinster	Male	Volunteer tutor who did not complete the course. Has not used www.writeon.ie .
12.	10/917	Leinster	Female	Volunteer tutor www.writeon.ie
13.	10/919	Munster	Male	Volunteer tutor – has not used www.writeon.ie
14.	10/1051	Leinster	Female	Volunteer tutor – has not used www.writeon.ie
15.	10/1076	Munster	Female	Tutor - www.writeon.ie too basic for current learner. Would use with appropriate student who had ICT skills.
16.	10/1095	Leinster	Female	Homeless organisation – no computer access.
17.	10/1333	Leinster	Female	Volunteer tutor – has not used www.writeon.ie .
18.	10/1335	Leinster	Male	Volunteer tutor – has not used www.writeon.ie .
19.	10/1340	Ulster	Male	Volunteer tutor – awaiting student. www.writeon.ie should be included in tutor training.
20.	10/1381	Connaught	Female	Phoned for husband. He used www.writeon.ie with enthusiasm at first but needs support with computer skills to be autonomous learner.
21.	10/1634	Leinster	Female	Volunteer tutor awaiting training. Has not used www.writeon.ie .
22.	10/1657	Leinster	Male	Phoned on behalf of addiction organisation – now part of blended learning programme.
23.	10/1671	Munster	Female	Phoned for dyslexic husband – now awaiting assessment. She will be his support.
24.	10/1683	Leinster	Female	Learner. Survivor of Institutional abuse –

				tried once but busy since and no time. Scary to start something new. Need very, very small steps. Maybe video introduction. Afraid to knock out computer for son.
25.	10/1726	Munster	Male	unavailable
26.	10/1727	Munster	Female	Phoned for husband now in literacy class. Noted details of www.writeon.ie to try on friend's computer.
27.	10/1734	Leinster	Male	Beginner learner – needs introductory computer skills. Would like 1:1 tutor. Has computer access.
28.	10/1908	Munster	Male	unavailable
29.	10/1973	Leinster	Female	Learner interested in maths. Has not used www.writeon.ie . Has computer access.
30.	10/2050	Leinster	Female	Phoned for son. Does not know outcome of call.
31.	10/2099	Leinster	Female	Slid/d tutor. Tutors need training in www.writeon.ie . Would be great for slid/d - visual learners
32.	10/2255	Leinster	Female	Independent learner – completed FETAC Level 2 accreditation
33.	10/3125	Leinster	Male	Independent learner - completed FETAC Level 2 accreditation
34.	10/4779	Munster	Male	Blended learner – completed FETAC Level 2 accreditation
35.	10/6176	Connaught	Female	Training as adult educator and wanted to improve skills in maths. Has completed Levels 2&3. Has not applied for accreditation
36.	N/A	Leinster	Male	Has not used www.writeon.ie
37.	N/A	Leinster	Male	Trainee plumber. Used www.writeon.ie to improve skills. Did not apply for accreditation
38.	10/6866	Ulster	Male	Independent learner – completed FETAC Level 2 accreditation
39.	10/7438	Munster	Male	Independent learner – Progressed to Level 3 online
40.	pd	Munster	Male	Blended learner - – completed FETAC Level 2 accreditation

Appendix d. Blended learning centre questionnaire

Evaluation of the www.writeon.ie website

October 2010

Dear _____,

In their ongoing commitment to developing and improving their Distance Learning Service NALA have employed ACTRaD to evaluate the www.writeon.ie learning website.

We know you have already submitted quantitative data to NALA. This short questionnaire focuses more on qualitative information about your centre's experience of using the site in literacy learning.

If you could return the questionnaire to us it would greatly facilitate the completion of the evaluation!

Thanks again for taking the time to complete this questionnaire, we are looking forward to hearing your views. If you need to discuss any aspect of it please contact me at annhegarty@gmail.com or on my mobile 087 239 8895.

Ann Hegarty

Section A. Motivation

1. How did the centre first get involved in using *writeon.ie*?
2. Why did the centre decide to get involved?

Section B. Recruitment

1. How have you been attracting people to the BL project and *writeon.ie*?
2. What has worked best?

Section C. Experience

1. What feedback are you hearing about *writeon.ie* ?
2. Are there improvements to the website that might be made?
3. What would you say have been the benefits for the **learners** of using the site at a **personal level**?
4. What would you say have been the benefits for the **learners** in relation to their literacy skills?
5. What have been the challenges for **learners**?
6. What have been the benefits for the **centre**?
7. What have been the challenges for the **centre** in providing the

programme?
8. Are there resource or technological issues in relation to hosting the programme?
9. Can learners access learning facilities outside of class time?
Section D. Impact
1. What has been the overall impact of being involved in <i>writeon.ie</i> on the centre?
2. How would you describe your partnership with NALA on this project?
3. Are there any other supports you would like from NALA??
4. Can you recount any examples of a typical success story in relation to the use of <i>writeon.ie</i> ?
Section E. Future Developments
1. Can you suggest any potential developments of this programme into the future?
2. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thanks again for completing the questionnaire.

Appendix e Consent form

Evaluation of the writeon.ie website 2010

In their ongoing commitment to developing and improving their Distance Learning Service NALA have employed ACTRaD to evaluate the www.writeon.ie learning website.

NALA hopes that the information gathered from the evaluation project will help them to further develop the website in line with your needs and suggestions.

I, (full name).....received information on the research and I understand what the research is about. I understand that I will be taking part in a discussion with the ACTRaD researchers. I understand that the information I have given will be written up in a report and included in other published materials. However, my real name will not be used and other details that identify me will be changed.

I understand that I can withdraw from the research at any time. I can also decide what questions I want to answer. If I decide at any time that I do not want the information I have given to be used, I am free to opt out, but this decision must be communicated to NALA before the research findings are published.

If you have any further questions about the research please contact either Ann Hegarty (087 239 8895) or Tom O'Mara at NALA (021 427 8669)

Full Name: _____

Today's Date: _____

Day/Month/Year