

# Catching Confidence and learning essential skills

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## Capturing progress and achievement – what counts?

Over the many years that teachers and learners have been teaching and learning adult literacy and numeracy, questions about understanding what counts as success have been discussed and debated. In England, for decades, local and regional ways of capturing what learners gained were devised. They included tools such as learner records or Open College ([www.nocn.org.uk](http://www.nocn.org.uk)) accreditation (locally and regionally peer teacher agreed processes).<sup>i</sup> Sometimes national qualifications, designed for school-leavers, were used. In 2001, a new era began. As part of the national Skills for Life strategy for adult literacy, language (English for speakers of other languages) and numeracy, the government built upon national standards to introduce a national curriculum and a national test. Most providers had to use these national tools and instruments to access national funding. While it is fair to say that teachers and providers generally welcomed the introduction of national standards and the curricula which supported them, many teachers felt that the national test was inappropriate for many learners. However, with the government using the number of successful test outcomes as evidence to the Treasury and the electorate that their huge investments (about £9bn to date) were working, many providers and managers appeared to support the argument that success in the national test meant success in teaching and learning.

These practitioners and providers argued that the tests gave learners national recognition for the first time and opened access to other programs of learning or employment because it was easier to assess what learners brought with them. Others, however, argued that the test did not measure many of the things learners wanted to learn. It mainly assessed reading but not writing skills; it ignored speaking and listening entirely. The differences between levels of attainment were too great for most learners to move from one to another in reasonable timeframes and many of the outcomes of learning were not captured at all. Controversy, debate and discussion persisted.<sup>ii</sup>

Teachers and learners said that many of the outcomes of learning they witnessed or experienced, did not relate to the measurement of reading particular ranges of vocabulary, or to writing or spelling words of a specified complexity. They suggested that the outcomes which mattered were about “having a go” at reading or writing; feeling better about tackling a difficulty they had been unable to face in the past; applying something learned in a new or different context or being more assertive in speaking up in personal, familial or employment settings. They also suggested that many learners made progress in their learning but these gains were so small or partial that progress could not be measured using the test as an indicator of achievement.

Such discussion and experience led many practitioners to conclude that the Skills for Life strategy resulted in “...Counting the things which we can count rather than the things which really count.”

## Why Confidence?

As the Skills for Life strategy has evolved, new and different forms of accredited learning have been created, capturing wider ranges of learning, particularly in relation to ESOL and numeracy.

However, accreditation and awards still only capture some of the learning gains and, for some learners, progress against these external criteria is extremely slow. Nevertheless, conversations

with teachers and learners revealed belief that progress is made and that learning gains can be identified; they are simply difficult to measure against the national standards and qualifications. Responding to the question about what indicates success in learning in literacy and a wide range of adult and community learning activities, both learners and teachers overwhelmingly identify gains in confidence.

### **Our research**

The Catching Confidence study conducted by NIACE arose from learner and teacher feedback from the hundreds of projects supported by the Adult and Community Learning Fund (ACLF) which was concerned with widening participation, including many initiatives focused on literacy, language and numeracy (1998 – 2005). Jane Ward's and Judith Edward's study of learning journeys indicated that gains in confidence were reported by many participants (2002).<sup>iii</sup> My own work on perceptions of success in teaching and learning adult literacy reported that both learners and teachers believed gains in confidence were the most significant indicators of success (2002)<sup>iv</sup>.

My studies revealed that both learners and their teachers could identify evidence which pointed to increases in confidence. These included changes in behaviour, attitude and relationships such as going out more, engaging with people in positions of authority such as their children's teachers or with officials in public services. Learners spoke about how their families and work colleagues noted changes in behaviour relating to having a go at reading and writing. Teachers noted changes in ability to form relationships and friendships in the group as well as feedback from their learners about the difference they thought participation in literacy learning made to their daily lives. A finding of interest was that changes in confidence did not necessarily link to increases in competence. Indeed, some learners revealed that while they had been attending a literacy class for some time they had not achieved some of the skills and knowledge which the national standards and core curricula indicated they might have, at their particular level of competence. These learners, however, thought they were succeeding as they could indicate changes in their lives and in their attitudes to literacy learning.

*"I feel more pleased and happier in myself and more relaxed in myself; I think, 'Yes, I can do it'. And now, I feel I can ask for help as well because I used to think, 'Oh no, I think it's wrong...' 'cos I felt stupid. And now I can do my work better so it's given me more confidence. More confidence is coming out all the time. I'll have a go if they're only small forms but if they're right big ones my husband does them. So we can help each other and he helps me, which has given me a lot more confidence, but I do try and have a go now on my own, whereas before I didn't. I was scared of getting them wrong. Well I'm finding now that I've got a lot more confidence in myself whereas before I never did." (Carol)<sup>v</sup>*

Such changes and progress in individuals' lives would not be captured through "usual" assessment processes or necessarily through records of learning and achievement and certainly not through a national test. They do, however, seem important outcomes for individuals. In asking questions about what we really want from investment of public funds in literacy and numeracy learning, these sorts of outcomes, related to autonomy, self-realization and greater independence, surely, are what we hope for. These thoughts urged us to further pursue the concept of confidence in relation to learning.

With support from the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES), we at NIACE designed a small study to try to understand more about the nature of confidence, its significance in the

learning situation and how we might capture changes so that these learning gains could be recorded. We conducted a literature search on confidence and self-esteem in relation to learning to distinguish any differences between these terms, which are often used interchangeably. We created a research tool, working with learners and teachers, to identify changes in confidence during a period of learning. We developed an approach which involved practitioner-researchers in identifying the significance of confidence and what aids its growth in the learning process.

During the research process, some of the practitioners became so involved and convinced of the value of the research tools that they began to adapt them to use in their teaching and learning activities. We were concerned about their fitness for this purpose. Following the publication of the report we conducted a further development study involving different teachers, groups and learners to determine the most appropriate ways of recognizing and recording changes in confidence in the learning situation. This led to the publication of the Catching Confidence pack.<sup>vi</sup>

### **What did we find?**

We concluded from our literature search that self-esteem and confidence are complex concepts and there is little consensus as to their exact nature. However, there were some recurring themes in the study suggesting that confidence relates to the ability to do things. This ability can depend on possessing the knowledge or skills to do something, believing that it is possible to do it with some degree of comfort. Confidence can vary from context to context and can therefore be described as a situated concept. Self-esteem appears to relate to how people see themselves from a more holistic perspective and links to feelings of self-worth as well as ability to do things. We believe that confidence is linked to self-esteem but that it is not the same, even though many learners, teachers and writers seem to use the words interchangeably.

We agreed on a working definition of self-esteem as:

*Self-esteem is more than feeling good about yourself. It is about being aware of your abilities. It is about who you are, being able to acknowledge positive and negative aspects and still feel good about yourself. It's about having a positive sense of identity.*<sup>vii</sup>

Our working definition of confidence was agreed as:

*Confidence is a belief in one's own abilities to do something in a specific situation. This belief includes feeling accepted and on equal terms with others in that situation.*<sup>viii</sup>

Our two definitions were tested throughout the study. We worked with eight different organizations, forty-one learner groups and 350 learners. Some of these were from minority ethnic backgrounds.

We found that learners and teachers could describe features of confidence. Learners in particular, were able to indicate its importance in learning situations as well as cite the teaching and learning activities that seem to help confidence to grow.

Our findings were published and can be found on the NIACE website at [www.niace.org.uk](http://www.niace.org.uk) key word search: Catching Confidence.

### **What did learners and teachers say?**

The different perspectives of learners and teachers were captured in the study and are important to note. Learners reported on their experiences and feelings, whereas teachers reported their observations and evidence. Such differences offered greater insights into the characteristics and nature of confidence.

Learners said that confidence is a feeling:

*...it's having a positive attitude...  
...it's not feeling a tip...  
...it's self-belief...  
...confidence is not being wary, being at ease in yourself and others.*

They said that confidence is about doing things:

*...doing things in front of others...  
...doing something off your own back...  
...it's doing new things...gaining new skills...  
...trying new things.*

Many learners suggested that a feature of confidence is talking or speaking up. They said:

*Confidence is speaking up for yourself and...about talking to new and different people.*

They indicated changes by comparing themselves before, or at the beginning of, learning and later:

*I'm not scared now...before I wasn't very confident... but now...  
I used to sit quietly...I always used to sit next to the people that gave better answers...  
standing up in a group in front of people, I could never do that... but now, I just get up  
and say, come on!*

Teachers suggested:

*...it's doing something with which you are comfortable; you don't have to be good at it.  
...it's feeling good and comfortable about yourself...it's feeling in control.*

One teacher said that confidence is concerned with issues of self-belief and feelings. Another said that confidence is what helps to overcome difficulties, while another said it was about feeling sure of one's self.

A significant difference between teachers and learners was the identification of speaking up as a characteristic of confidence. Learners repeatedly reported that confidence was related to talking whereas teachers did not appear to observe this significance.

### **Speaking out**

Every learner in the research suggested that speaking out was a strong indicator of gains in confidence. Many learners also said this was a significant achievement as they spoke about having been silenced for years. Reasons for this included power and control by others,

experience of interactions with people seen as powerful professionals; gender factors such as women's roles and place, isolation, illness and often, simply a belief that they had nothing to say. Such a complex range of inhibitions may be compounded for learners for whom English is not the first language. A lack of initial education, poor or fragmented learning experiences and gender issues may feature, along with possible traumas for asylum seekers and refugees. (The hypothesis about ESOL is an assumption and was not part of our research.)

Learners reported how speaking out was a powerful and empowering gain as it enabled them to operate, day-to-day, more effectively, assertively and independently. This in turn led to further enhanced levels of confidence. Speaking out meant that learners developed more knowledge and clarity about what they wanted to say and were able to say it. They cited specific contexts such as one-to-one conversations, talking in a group, and expressing themselves in difficult situations and interactions. Speaking and listening are the very fibre of learning of all kinds; they are the skills we use to enquire, question, respond, discuss and debate.

The study revealed that:

- *their increased belief in their own value convinced them, often for the first time, that they had something worth saying.*
- *their increased confidence enabled them to say it.*
- *their learning had equipped them with the skills and knowledge to know how to say it.*<sup>ix</sup>

Responding to this finding, one of the sites which developed and piloted the tools for Catching Confidence mapped them to speaking and listening elements of the Skills for Life national core curriculum.<sup>x</sup> As a result, the process of developing confidence through speaking and listening can be recognized and recorded. This reinforces the concept that speaking and listening are both among the vehicles which help develop confidence as well as the outcomes and evidence of increased confidence.

In spite of an early recognition that literacy involves the four key skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, research came late on the agenda of the Skills for Life strategy. Associating speaking and listening only with English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) might have blinkered the views of the research community. The long history of ESOL teachers in encouraging, supporting and challenging learners to develop their oral skills can contribute insight, knowledge and understanding to such research and practice. Speaking and listening are crucial to the development of understanding and skill development, so are also vital parts of vocational preparation and integrated or embedded approaches to literacy, language and numeracy learning. They underpin the development of thinking and analytical and critical responses, our ability to question, gain knowledge, make comments and contribute feedback. Our study suggested that speaking and listening are closely associated with confidence, also crucial to successful learning.

### **The Catching Confidence tool and process**

It appears, therefore, that if recognizing changes in confidence can help learners overcome some of the barriers to full participation in society then this should be added to the recording of learning process. In addition, identifying what teachers can do to foster the growth of confidence should also be part of the usual teaching and learning approaches. The Catching Confidence tool and processes have been trialled (applied in several different contexts and settings and with

different learners, in order to test reliability and replicability) and offer flexible vehicles to start to do this.

As the title suggests, the tool we developed to capture changes in confidence, does not **measure** changes in confidence. Measurement suggests calculated, regular, incremental, intervals which have been standardized. The tool captures (or catches) levels of confidence as defined by the learners (or participants) at the beginning of learning and then captures whether movements have taken place following a period of learning.

The process of Catching Confidence is designed to complement and fit with existing teaching and learning practices. It appears to be compatible with many learning programs although very short courses, (e.g. one two-hour session per week for six weeks) may find the process too time-consuming. Teachers advised that Catching Confidence could be integrated into teaching time, self-assessment activities and introductions to, as well as reviews of, learning.

The **Catching Confidence tool** or format is a grid (or a mind-map), which uses the literacy and language levels appropriate to the particular groups of learners. It can be adapted to reflect a specific learning context, such as catering, horticulture or literacy or in work programs, by changing the statements used to highlight specific activities associated with the learning. Symbols are adopted which relate to different levels of confidence and which are placed on the format; these can be stickers, cards, hand-drawings or computer-generated shapes.

**The process** involves defining four levels of confidence, agreed either with an individual (in the case of 1:1 tuition) or a group. These levels are: highly confident; confident; not confident and very low confidence. The defining process is an important element as it forms the basis for self-assessment and for future reflections as well as the recording of any changes. Definitions of confidence are not pre-set by an external body or the teacher; they are agreed with each different learning group or individual. The definitions are based upon agreed descriptions placed by the participants on four large pieces of paper or flip charts, and which can use metaphors or draw upon life experiences and feelings. Symbols – as above – are agreed, which relate to the different, defined levels. For example a circle could reflect the “confident” level while a rectangle could reflect the “not confident” level. The first stage of reflection happens near or at the beginning of the learning program or activity and each statement discussed or reflected upon by the learners. Once the reflection is completed a symbol is placed beside each statement, on the tool, to reflect the level of confidence at that time. There may be a few or many statements, depending upon the type and duration of the learning program. They can be considered together or a few at a time. The tool is re-visited at periodic intervals for further reflection and placement of symbols. At each stage of reflection the tool is photographed – or saved on the computer – in order to see pre- and post-learning changes in the placement of the symbols against the statements. Similarly, learner statements are recorded either orally (using audio methods) or in writing, to support the changes – or not – providing additional qualitative data for learners to further reflect upon and as evidence for teachers, managers and inspectors.

### **Opportunities and issues**

Many teachers have told us that they found the tools and process very helpful. We believe that it has worked best when teachers adapted the tool to meet the particular needs of learners and their programs of learning. Learners and teachers reported such things as:

*“I enjoyed doing the grid as it made me think about myself and how I have changed since coming here.” (Learner)<sup>xi</sup>*

*“When I first came here my confidence was really low. When I walked in my instinct was, ‘You won’t be able to do it because that’s what you’ve been told in life.’ The people that I’ve met and the people that I’ve worked with have made my confidence in coming here really good. I can see it.” (Learner)*

*“As a tool we have found it to be useful, but more importantly the learners found it to be a useful exercise to gauge their own development of confidence.” (Teacher)*

*“The grid is excellent because in some courses, like ours, increasing confidence is both a chief aim and a chief outcome, and other assessment tools do not take account of this.” (Teacher)*

However, as in any area of development, questions and issues arise.

One question relates to **over-confidence**. Teachers and researchers recognized that some learners can be over-confident in their self-assessment and others can appear so confident that they are “blind” to their developmental needs. Over-confidence can appear as arrogance, an inability to listen and a barrier to learning. Equally, other learners appear to be so lacking in confidence that they under-estimate their skills and abilities; feelings of self-doubt and psychological barriers to learning continue.

Teachers reported that engaging learners in conversation and prompting them with questions, both individually and with other learners, can help both of these scenarios and encourage learners to be more realistic in their self-assessment.

Using **symbols and statements** appropriate to the learners and their learning programs were vital aspects of the pilot activities; few of the trial sites used the “original” grid or tool and those who found Catching Confidence most useful thought carefully about adapting the use of the tool and the process to be undertaken. This seems to be a key to success.

Some colleagues have challenged the understanding of the nature of confidence, **claiming that confidence is closely linked to competence** and if increased knowledge, understanding and skill are the focus of learning, competence will increase and so will confidence. While it cannot be denied that learners drew links between increases in competence and greater confidence, there were many learners in our studies whose progress in learning was very small and yet reported increases in confidence and evidence to support it. One might also argue that increasing confidence can also lead to increases in competence; for each learner the balance between the two will be different. I would argue that both aspects must be supported in the teaching and learning process.

Other issues relate to counting. Why should teachers and learners engage in recording and capturing changes in confidence at all when funding, in England, is predominantly linked to qualification and award outcomes and quality inspection regimes focus on data gathered about retention and achievement? The **recognition of so-called “soft outcomes”** continues to be debated. While few people deny their importance and many employers look for confidence in their employees and potential employees, producing evidence is problematic. It could be argued,

however, that capturing the development of confidence and the accompanying reflections does provide evidence of one of the greatest keys to success and should be one of a range of outputs of engagement in the learning process. As our research indicates that a growth in confidence is a vital indicator of successful learning, capturing its growth and development should be an integral part of learning records.

### **Teaching and learning approaches**

If, therefore, the development of confidence is an indicator that learning is taking place as well as an outcome of learning, teachers should not only be involved in capturing changes in confidence, but also in planning to build confidence amongst their learners. If teachers are going to catch confidence among their learners, they should also consciously teach to build it.

During the study and the subsequent training workshops, we gathered some of the approaches which teachers and learners believe help build confidence. Including such approaches in any learning activity could assist with increasing the confidence of learners and contribute to successful outcomes in their learning. While much of what follows is not new and is often what good teachers do, raising awareness that they lead to confident learners could be helpful. Since speaking and listening were seen as indicators of increased confidence, including ways to develop these two literacy skills are probably among the most significant things teachers can do.

Approaches include:

- Bringing together people who have some shared background or experience. This seems to help in building peer support and sharing helpful learning strategies.
- Involving learners in planning learning and making sure everyone is aware of the plans. Predictable patterns of activity seem to be helpful.
- Including discussions and dialogue that reflect shared experiences, build the group and develop trust as well as use speaking and listening skills.
- Acknowledging that learners may bring negative experiences of learning. This helps them to understand anxiety and attitudinal barriers, which might influence their learning.
- Personalizing learning wherever possible to demonstrate that learners are working towards their own aims and aspirations.
- Providing as many opportunities as possible to develop skills in discussions, speaking up, role play and making presentations.
- Using practical activities as often as possible; these seem to offer opportunities to do things, make mistakes, amend and change; they also promote opportunities to demonstrate developing competency.
- Monitoring social groups and friendships and building on them where possible.
- Using small groups, paired working and building on friendships and relationships. These seem vital in building confidence.



- Reflecting regularly on activities, behaviours and learning in tutorials. Include activities outside the learning situation, at home and at work, in this process. Highlight and celebrate the positives to promote a 'can do' attitude. Teachers felt that reflections offer opportunities to identify positives and changes that may otherwise remain hidden.
- Offering regular feedback orally and written, confidentially as well as in front of the group.
- Ensure that praise and encouragement are genuine and not patronizing. Feedback from peers is valuable and helps learners feel good about themselves.
- Being non-judgmental; being inclusive.
- Making learning fun!

These strategies could already be part of essential skills teaching and learning; many good teachers adopt such strategies. However, by using them consciously, they know that they will not only develop effective literacy, language and numeracy learning but build confidence too.

#### **In addition...**

The Catching Confidence pack was intended to be used in conjunction with other ways of recognizing and recording learning in a wide number of settings and contexts. It works well with such processes as Recognizing and Recording Progress and Achievement (RARPA) and Planning Learning and Recording Progress and Achievement (PLRA), see [www.excellencegateway.org.uk](http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk). As in all forms of adult learning, capturing a wide range of achievements can help cautious learners to become confident learners. The Catching Confidence pack includes a summary of the research report, examples of tools developed by practitioners and guidance for teachers. It is available free of charge on the NIACE website: [www.niace.org.uk](http://www.niace.org.uk).

#### **Catching Confidence in Mathematics**

In the Skills for Life Strategy a great deal of emphasis was placed on developing research, resources and materials to support teaching and learning adult literacy, but numeracy received less attention. This is in spite of the fact that far more people in the UK find mathematics more difficult than literacy. The National Centre for Excellence in Teaching Mathematics was established to remedy this neglect. Colleagues in NIACE saw the opportunity to adapt the Catching Confidence tool specifically for learning mathematics. We believe that a lack of confidence in individuals' ability to engage in mathematics for daily life and work is a significant challenge around this essential skill. Using the Catching Confidence tool to record and capture changes in confidence could help support people to attempt and succeed in every day mathematical processes as well as lead to increased competence. This tool is available on the NIACE website ([www.niace.org.uk](http://www.niace.org.uk)). Visit publications, bookshop and search for *Catching Confidence in Maths*.

## Janine Eldred

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<sup>i</sup>The networks of Open College members operate regionally and nationally. The Open College process is a nationally acknowledged form of accreditation developed by teachers who create learning outcomes and a supporting curriculum and form a proposal which indicates not only the content and duration, but also the teaching and learning methods and quality assurance processes. The proposal is then assessed in various stages and involves other practitioners in the same curriculum area – hence the “peer” element. It operates as a network. There is a national body – National Open College Network and regional bodies, e.g. South Yorkshire Open College Network. There is a huge database of Open College accreditation ranging from single modules of learning to whole awards.

<sup>ii</sup> Brooks, B; Derrick, J; Lavender, P, 2004, Testing, Testing, 123. Assessment in adult literacy, language and numeracy, Leicester, NIACE

<sup>iii</sup> Ward, J and Edwards, J, 2002, Learning Journeys: learners' voices. Learners' views on progress and achievement in literacy and numeracy, LSDA

<sup>iv</sup> Eldred, J 2002 Perceptions of success in teaching and learning adult literacy (unpublished thesis), University of Sheffield

<sup>v</sup> Eldred, J, 2002, Moving on with confidence, Leicester, NIACE

<sup>vi</sup> Eldred, J, Ward, J, Snowdon, K and Dutton, N, 2005, Catching Confidence Pack, Leicester, NIACE

<sup>vii</sup> Eldred, J, Ward, J, Snowdon, K and Dutton, N, 2004, Catching Confidence Report, Leicester, NIACE

<sup>viii</sup> Eldred, J, Ward, J, Snowdon, K and Dutton, N, 2004, Catching Confidence Report, Leicester, NIACE

<sup>ix</sup> Eldred, J, Ward, J, Snowdon, K and Dutton, N, 2004, Catching Confidence Report, p35, Leicester, NIACE

<sup>x</sup> Eldred, J, Ward, J, Snowdon, K and Dutton, N, 2005, Catching Confidence Pack, p6, Leicester, NIACE

<sup>xi</sup> Eldred, J, Ward, J, Snowdon, K and Dutton, N, 2005, Catching Confidence Pack, p19, Leicester, NIACE