

Catching confidence

The nature and role of confidence – ways of developing and recording changes in the learning context



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Summary Report

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Introduction

This report describes the background, research processes and findings of a small-scale action research study conducted to carry out qualitative research into learners' and practitioners' views on the development of confidence in relation to learning. It set out to examine the nature of confidence, what seemed to influence changes in confidence and whether any changes could be evidenced during episodes of learning. The research took place between September 2003 and March 2004.

Eight Adult and Community Learning Fund (ACLF) supported projects and one other associated programme took part in the research which involved 93 learners. The projects came from different geographical areas of England, the further education, adult and community learning and voluntary and community sectors and worked with a range of different learners. These included refugees and asylum seekers, women-only groups, people with learning difficulties, those living in particular neighbourhoods and people experiencing mental health difficulties and/or drug and alcohol difficulties. Many learners were vulnerable and often isolated and the majority had undertaken little or no learning for many years.

One of the key learning outcomes reported by many ACLF projects was a growth in confidence and self-esteem among learners. Confidence and self-esteem therefore appeared to be highly significant to learners returning to study after a long time and/or who felt that their experiences in initial education had been unfulfilling. However, further investigation and discussion revealed that the outcomes were based upon anecdotal evidence and little systematic gathering of indicators or knowledge of what difference increased confidence made to learners, and which learning processes were most effective to develop confidence. The research team set out to undertake a systematic exploration of the role of confidence in learning to discover more about these issues.

Why does confidence matter?

Identifying learning gains and achievements are vital parts of the learning process. In non-accredited learning, the challenge is to clearly capture individual and group achievements, in order to demonstrate to learners, tutors and funders what has been gained. If gains in confidence

are as significant as many learners and tutors appear to suggest, ways of evidencing them seem to be important.

Gains in confidence are important to fulfil government policies too. Development of confidence seems to be one of the keys to the successful development of literacy, language and numeracy skills through the *Skills for Life* strategy. Similarly, the learning agenda linked to neighbourhood renewal demands that individuals and groups gain confidence to engage with issues of importance for their community well-being and regeneration. The national Learning and Skills Council's (LSC) widening participation strategy would also be enhanced and enriched with greater insight into the role of confidence in attracting and sustaining involvement in learning. Links into the skills strategy, *Realising Potential; Skills for the 21st Century* could also be made where targets are set to encourage people with few or no qualifications to achieve a level 2 qualification. The relevance of the study appeared clear and timely.

However, before it is possible to record gains or losses in confidence, attempts must be made to understand the nature of confidence and its significance in learning activities. This study set out to examine confidence in relation to learning and ways of catching changes in confidence during episodes of learning. It also attempted to identify those things that help to build confidence in teaching and learning.

The nature of confidence

The following working definition of confidence was developed to inform the research:

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.

There is no one agreed definition of confidence but it is usually seen as relating to an individual's feelings about their knowledge and ability to do things. An important feature of confidence is that it can vary at different times and in different situations.

Confidence is not the same as self-esteem but is closely related to it. There is no common definition of self-esteem but there is consensus that it is to do with identity, feelings of self-worth and value and relationships with others. Confidence contributes to self-esteem; being able to participate and form relationships can increase a person's self-value. Many writers refer to confidence and self-esteem interchangeably when relating them to learning but we used the differences identified above as this enabled us to focus on confidence.

Research methods

We aimed to explore the perceptions, opinions and experiences of tutors and learners in-depth, as we believed that these would yield valuable information on perceptions of confidence, the connections between learning and confidence acquisition and loss, and ways in which these changes are manifested in real-life situations.

A visual and interactive tool was designed to form a basis for discussion and dialogue with and between learners. This was a grid containing statements relating to confidence for different life situations. Learners used the grid to reflect on and record their levels of confidence. It was a useful

tool for learners to assess and recognise any changes. For some learners and tutors it was also a powerful tool for recognising changes in confidence beyond learning situations. We also carried out in-depth one-to-one interviews and focus groups with learners and tutors. The interviews explored experiences, feelings, reflections and evidence of changes in confidence, as well as differences between self-esteem and confidence.

Practitioner researchers were valuable and constructive partners who made an important contribution to the research. Their knowledge and insight informed the research design and analysis and they conducted the confidence grid activity and one-to-one interviews with learners. Training days and feedback sessions were organised to equip them to take part, but capacity issues sometimes limited their participation. Despite this, their contributions enhanced the study and they gained new insights into their work from their participation.

Characteristics of confidence

Both tutors and learners tried to define confidence. No single definition was offered but feelings and behaviours were drawn on to describe its characteristics. Predominantly, references were to positive indicators of confidence and confidence gains but low confidence was also described.

Defining confidence

Learners suggested that confidence is related to positive feelings about a particular situation or activity. They reported that it is having a belief in yourself and being at ease; it's also about how you feel about coping. The word 'positive' occurred frequently. Tutors said similar things, suggesting that confidence is about being in control of a situation, feeling valued and knowing that goals can be achieved. Several interviewees said that confidence is complex and difficult to define.

Doing things and speaking up

Many learners felt unable to define confidence but were able to describe its manifestation in relation to doing things, particularly in new situations with new people or experiences. Tutors also reported that confidence is related to actions but added that it is something which helps you to tackle situations about which you might have been uncertain. Tutors did not include speaking up as evidence of confidence but many learners did. For them, talking seemed to be a significant characteristic of confidence.

Before and after

The words 'before' and 'after' or 'then' and 'now' arose frequently, suggesting that confidence is something which changes. Learners spoke about how, in the past, they felt unable to do things, go to places or meet particular people; the growth in confidence was evidenced by a different attitude, behaviour and feeling. They suggested that confidence is defined by comparisons and moving on.

Situated

The sense of change was endorsed by both tutors and learners, by suggesting that confidence is not fixed; it varies according to the situation. They reported that confidence is not something that you have constantly; it varies for different people according to the situations in which they find themselves. Interviewees were able to indicate examples of where they felt they lacked confidence, where they felt confident as well as where they felt positive changes had been made.

Confidence and learning

As we explored ways in which learners' confidence related to their learning experiences three significant themes emerged:

- The relationship between learning and confidence.
- The indicators of changes in confidence.
- The impact of increased confidence.

The relationship between learning and confidence

Participation in learning did increase most learners' confidence. We found that confidence gain was not static but developed at different rates. Confidence levels were not constant but rose and fell. People's confidence varied in different types of situation and when interacting with different people. External events or relationships outside the influence of the learning environment had positive and negative effects on confidence.

The indicators of changes in confidence

There was consensus on the ways in which changes in confidence were manifested. Learners' feelings of self-worth, self-assurance, happiness and well-being increased. This was reflected in changes in body language as their movements and posture became less timid and self-effacing. One of the most notable changes was new or enhanced abilities to 'speak out' in many different ways and circumstances. Learners also began to view themselves as able to take on new challenges in different real-life situations.



The impact of increased confidence

Increased confidence, often combined with new knowledge and skills, brought about changes in many learners' lives which included new dreams and aspirations.

Learning

Successful learning increased confidence and this in turn supported further successes in learning. Ambitions and therefore progression aims were raised as enhanced confidence made progression seem possible for many learners. Varied levels alongside the situated nature of confidence led to different support needs to enable learners to progress. Some were able to move on to different establishments but needed varied amounts of support to enable them to bridge this transition. Others needed to remain in their 'safe' learning environment for a longer period.

Family and friends

Some learners were living in supportive family environments, whereas others had more negative home and social lives. Changes in confidence had an impact on, and were affected by, relationships with family and friends as individuals became more assertive and independent in their home environments. Parents and grandparents became more confident to support their children at school. Some started to confront oppressive or abusive situations. Enhanced confidence enabled people to build new friendships more easily, often at the learning centre. A number of learners experienced relationship difficulties or lost old friendships as they moved on.



Community involvement

Enhanced confidence appeared to have a key role in increased levels of community involvement on a spectrum that ranged from accessing amenities, such as local libraries, to becoming active in campaigning for change. This involvement represented a major shift in lifestyle for learners who had been experiencing social isolation resulting from low self-esteem, illness, caring responsibilities, cultural expectations or lack of money.

Work

In relation to work there were changes in aspirations as well as relationships and achievements at work. Individuals who had been out of the labour market for some time started to aspire to paid employment or voluntary work as they began to realise that they had something of value to offer. Similarly people in work that dissatisfied them were stimulated to seek more interesting or challenging work opportunities. Others in work reported greater independence, enhanced ability to carry out tasks and relate to managers and colleagues in both formal and informal situations, as well as a heightened sense of achievement at work.

Helping confidence to grow

Both learners and tutors were able to identify what helps confidence to grow. Their evidence related to three areas: the tutor, teaching and learning approaches and support for learning.

The role of the tutor emerged as vital in developing confidence. Learners cited how values and attitudes helped them to feel confident. Most of the learners were able to identify teaching and learning approaches that helped them to gain confidence. Many activities and approaches were identified. Learners cited studying or becoming involved in drama, talking, having time to answer questions, repeating things in case they were not understood, sharing ideas, doing things, especially problem-solving, with others and volunteering. The role of talking was particularly significant.

Tutors talked about how they planned to build confidence. They spoke of strategies such as demonstrating what learners can do, accentuating achievements, encouraging a positive outlook and removing the barriers they felt stopped learners being successful. They spoke about reflecting on what has been achieved in the past or in previous sessions, the importance of talking, including everyone and helping them to share.

Support for learning came from several sources with little reference being made to such things as childcare or travel. The most significant support seemed to come from the learning group itself. Sharing difficulties, problems, solutions and offering friendship both within and without the learning session were valued by both learners and tutors. Feeling that others had similar experiences, were from similar backgrounds and had sympathy and empathy, “*we’re all in the same boat*”, was also very important. Some outside help came from families and friends as well as other staff in the organisation.

Conclusion

This research provided powerful evidence that there is a strong connection between learning and confidence. Catching changes in confidence means defining first of all what is being caught and then recording its growth or loss as evidence. Confidence was an outcome of learning which had wide-ranging benefits; an important one was that it enhanced ability to learn and inclination to take up further learning opportunities.

Implications for the field of adult learning

Teacher development

As there appeared to be such clarity about what helps confidence to grow in a learning situation, an underlying theme of all learning programmes should be to build confidence. Clarity of what affects and effects growth in confidence will help teachers to include it in their planning and delivery strategies. The greatest implications are therefore for teacher development.

Confidence as a learning outcome

If enhanced confidence has such a significant effect on both learning and learners' lives it could be cited as an intended outcome of learning programmes. One problem with planning learning outcomes relating to areas such as confidence is that they are viewed as intangible and subjective and are therefore difficult to record. This study has demonstrated that while confidence is difficult to view in terms of absolute measures, it is possible to catch and articulate changes in confidence.

Guidance and sign-posting

Growth in confidence seems to be a significant pre-cursor to progression. Once evidence of confidence can be identified and learners acknowledge its growth and benefits, guidance about other learning activities can be introduced.

Recommendations

It is important that the research findings are given a national perspective in order to be developed further and the recommendations outlined below aim to further this development.

- The methods of building confidence in the adult learning environment identified in this research should be built into adult learning programmes and managers should work with staff to develop strategies for integration within curricula and learning programmes.
- Further research should be carried out to enhance our knowledge of what works in this area.
- Work should be carried out to develop best practice in framing confidence growth as a learning outcome and methods of recognising and recording progress in this area. The RARPA initiative is already considering this area and would be an appropriate site for further development.
- Developing confidence should become an integral aspect of initial tutor training and continuing professional development opportunities should include strategies and approaches to developing confidence as an essential part of adult pedagogy.
- Growth in confidence should be recognised by funding bodies and the Adult Learning Inspectorate as a valid and desirable outcome of adult learning.
- The tool could be used as a way to record changes in confidence in a learning situation but as it was used in a limited way and only with ACLF projects in this research, further broader, rigorous testing of the tool should be applied in LEA and FE settings. (This has now been completed, resulting in this pack.)
- Development of other tools for recording confidence should also be considered.