

Topic Group A

An adjustment of course: research and practice for a different economic climate

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At ALM-14 and ALM-15 the topic group focused on research projects and opportunities for international collaboration. The intervening year has seen a sea change in global economic conditions. The significance of financial literacy and workforce education has become clear. Funding for research is being re-examined and will, in all likelihood, change emphasis. While some doors have closed new ones are opening.

The first session of Topic Group A reviewed the research identified in Limerick and Philadelphia. Participants were invited to discuss the themes identified last year and re-focus the work of ALM in light of the recession. At the second session we sketched a plan for the role of ALM as a point of convergence for international collaboration and dissemination of research results.

Session One

In this first session, the participants spoke about the impact of the recession on adult education efforts in their country and the changes that occurred in funding. It was reported that New Zealand had put a lot of money into education. Clarification was sought on whether the money was aimed at education in the broadest sense or was it oriented towards work as most of the money available in the United States (US) was tied to employability such as “Welfare to Work” projects. Another participant agreed that this was an emerging trend in the United Kingdom (UK) with programs like “Train to Gain” for teacher training of adult educators and that redundancies in industry tend to increase enrollments in adult education.

In the US, intensive adult teacher training efforts aimed at fast-tracking individuals into the classroom by preparing classroom teachers in three months, “Ninety Day Wonders”. In the UK, there are similar processes being repeated with between £6000 and £9000 bursaries being allocated to produce new teachers. An example given was the ‘Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector’ (PTLLS) qualification http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/corporate/migratedD/publications/G/guide_to_FE_teachers_regs_2264. An Australian participant spoke of a shift in government emphasis since 2007. At a conference entitled the “Big Skills Conference” <http://trove.nla.gov.au/work/31849378?selectedversion=NBD44462035> the focus of funding move towards vocational learning rather than “inclusiveness.” Teaching workforce skills was increasingly casualized aiming at minimum qualifications for employment. The broader goals of literacy and numeracy were being marginalized. The

following questions were posed. “What is the knowledge about work that is being transmitted? Is it compliancy?”

The picture appeared much brighter in the UK. Recent numeracy projects had included multiple prongs: 14-19 Diploma programs, support for numeracy teachers, Level 3 qualifications, colleges willing to train staff, and links to numeracy work in developing countries such as Ghana.

The topic of financial literacy/financial numeracy was introduced into the discussion at this point. Participants were directed towards qualifications in ‘Teaching and Delivering Literacy, Language and Numeracy in the Context of Finance at Level 2 and 3’ <https://www.niace.org.uk/current-work/teaching-and-delivering-lln-finance> which had been developed in the UK. The work of organisations such as the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) <http://www.niace.org.uk/current-work/area/financial-learning> and Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB) Financial Skills for Life <http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/index/partnerships/financialskillsforlife.htm> were noted. Reference was also made to the Financial Services Authority (FSA) baseline survey of financial capability in the UK <http://www.fsa.gov.uk/pubs/consumer-research/crpr47a.pdf>.

The question of being “educated but can’t count” was raised with reference to millionaires who had lost money in the recent financial scams. There was some consideration of whether educating for financial literacy stretched to facilitating learning about the purchase of financial products. It was suggested that Level 2 and 3 teacher training has to be expanded to include an understanding of financial complexities. The discussion broadened to include a number of additional issues: that there needs to be an awareness that house buying is not open to all; that tipping is not an issue for those people on a low income who do not have the luxury of dining in restaurants; and that learners need a critical understanding of how the economy works and the impact of deficits on national budgets.

The debate on personal finance continued with further contributions: that individuals need to understand the difference between borrowing money from a Credit Union (see <http://www.woccu.org/>) versus a loan shark; that there is exploitation of illegal workers in the United States who do not have recourse to standard financial services; both legal and illegal workers may have difficulty tracking where their money is spent rendering a budget elusive; many do not understand the outrageous expense of credit card interest; and that, in the UK (at least), ex-debtors, those who have declared bankruptcy, are not allowed the full range of banking services available to the general public.

Diana Coben introduced the group to several resources available or upcoming in the United Kingdom. She spoke of the materials produced by the National Centre for Excellence in Teaching Mathematics (NCETM) <https://www.ncetm.org.uk/resources/> and the Nuffield Mathematics post-16 resources <http://www.fsmq.org/>. In terms of benefits, Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) offers a handbook for benefit recipients and advisors <http://onlineservices.cpag.org.uk/>. The session closed with two questions to be considered at the second session of Thursday:

- Should we re-prioritize our research goals in light of the recession?
- Twenty years ago Roseanne Benn wrote of “numeracy for empowerment,” what are the parameters now?

Session Two

The second meeting of the topic group functioned as a “brain storming” session guided loosely by the questions posed at the end of Session One. The first suggestion was to return to organizational roots and strengthen the researcher-practitioner links of early ALM days. Outreach to our students was emphasized. It was suggested that more countries follow the example of Portugal by including students at the ALM conference as attendees and presenters. While the costs of transport over long distances could be prohibitive, it is not unreasonable to include the local students of conference organizers or adult education services on the program. This would also provide an opportunity to encourage students to be researchers.

Publicity was another issue raised in the second session. Attendees felt that we need to promote the annual conference and solicit funding to underwrite conference costs. Technology was a focal point. Someone suggested that the website be re-thought with practitioners in mind. Video clips with personal stories might be included or webcasts of conference plenaries or sessions could be broadcast.

Given the expense of travel to the annual conference it was proposed that national subgroups try to gather during the year. For example, ALM London has held conferences intermittently over the years. Returning to models from earlier ALM conferences, it was pointed out the sessions were coordinated with the Australian members and broadcast live to the assembled group. Finally, some of the early ALM Proceedings contained Spanish translations of the abstracts. It was proposed that abstracts and perhaps summaries of talks be translated into the language of the host country. Participants felt that this was important enough to hire a translator if necessary.