

# Self-esteem, confidence and adult learning

## Briefing Sheet

Kathryn James and Christine Nightingale

Part of a series of NIACE briefing sheets on mental health



---

## Self-esteem, confidence and adult learning

The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) gives advice and support to providers on how best to record outcomes from learning, such as raised self-esteem and confidence; or making judgements about the validity and appropriateness of a bid to set up a new project that highlights the raising of self-esteem as one of its intended outcomes. This briefing sheet aims to give some pointers to help and assist in that process and how they relate to key LSC concerns of widening participation and raising standards and achievements.

The briefing sheet looks at some definitions of self-esteem and confidence and how they might relate to adult learning. It will also look at how learning providers interpret the connection between self-esteem, confidence and adult learning, and how that interpretation is translated into provision and support. When providers seek to make an impact on self-esteem and confidence they will invariably want to capture and record those changes so finally, this briefing sheet will look at what are the most appropriate methods for doing that within a variety of learning situations.

A search on the LSC's website pulls up 29 references to self-esteem and 34 references to confidence. A more in-depth examination of those hits reveals statements such as

*By working with organisations like the LSC you can benefit not just your company's bottom line but the ability, confidence and self-esteem of the people who work for you*<sup>1</sup>

*A lot of people who have come on a one hour taster course have found that they really enjoyed the experience and this has inspired and encouraged them to go on to further courses. We find people improve their self-confidence and self-esteem as well as skills such as literacy and numeracy once they have taken the plunge!*<sup>2</sup>

In research conducted for 'The Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning', 10,000 tutors working in further education colleges were asked about their perceptions of the wider benefits of learning rather than just a qualification. Of the 2,729 responses, 92.5 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that 'through their learning my students on the whole experience improved self-esteem.'<sup>3</sup>

In these instances, raised self-esteem and confidence were seen as outcomes of participating in learning. However, low self-esteem is also seen in the context of adult learning and according to researchers Lloyd and Sullivan (2003)

*Low self-esteem is widely recognised as a factor that is associated with poor educational attainment and non-participation in education and training. Self-esteem and confidence therefore represents an important soft outcome of projects working with disadvantaged disengaged...*<sup>4</sup>

Whether you agree or not with these statements, the concepts of self-esteem have become embedded in our thinking about the purpose and outcome of learning and skills.

Self-esteem and confidence in individuals has an effect on inclusion and achievement. This is increasingly recognised in many of the key targets and initiatives that impact on the daily work of staff in local Learning and Skills Councils.

---

Low self-esteem is often seen as a barrier to people taking up learning opportunities, as identified by McGivney (1990) *Education for Other People* <sup>5</sup> and in *Fixing or Changing the Pattern* (2001).<sup>6</sup> The LSC's *Successful Participation for All: Widening Adult Participation Strategy* (2003) recognises 'lack of confidence relating to poor self-esteem' as an attitudinal barrier to learning and states that

*For many people, accessing learning will need to be a gradual process, which allows time for confidence to build.* <sup>7</sup>

Widening participation strategies could be enhanced if greater understanding and attention was paid to the role of self-esteem and confidence in attracting and sustaining adults in learning.

Raised self-esteem and confidence is also linked to achievement. Eldred et al. (2004) reported that

*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.* <sup>8</sup>

*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.* <sup>9</sup>

The Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement (RARPA) initiative has been exploring how both practitioners and learners can better identify the learners' own personal aspirations and objectives for learning, and ensuring that these goals are planned for and achieved in the teaching and learning processes. Pilot studies concluded that most learning brought about gains in confidence and some recommended that confidence building should become a planned outcome. For many learners, particularly those on first steps and leisure courses, gaining a qualification may not be their most pressing need or ambition. However, feeling confident enough to help their children with their homework, or to believe that their viewpoint is valid and worthwhile during a discussion at work could be the sort of gains that a learner wants for themselves.

For example, learners with profound learning difficulties and disabilities wanted to be more involved in presenting their achievements to the yearly review group consisting of their parents, carers, social workers and others involved in transition planning. They were enabled through various non-accredited courses to prepare PowerPoint presentations that included statements and photographic evidence of their achievements. Learners then personally presented this to their review meeting. None of the learners had participated in this way before and showed how delighted they were with this new achievement and their increased self-esteem and confidence.

Self-esteem and confidence are also linked to factors that exacerbate social exclusion. The LSC has recently made a commitment to working to support the recommendations of the Social Exclusion Unit report *Mental Health and Social Exclusion*. The report highlights loss of confidence as a consequence of stigma and discrimination and states

*Fear of stigma and discrimination can lead to severe loss of confidence or 'self-stigma'. This can lead to social exclusion, causing people to withdraw from social activities and friendships, and give up applying for jobs even when they are free from the symptoms of mental ill health.*<sup>10</sup>

---

Similarly, the learning agenda linked to Neighbourhood Renewal highlights that individuals and groups need to have confidence to engage with issues of importance for their community well-being and regeneration. The Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) report *Making an impact on individuals and communities* (2004) clearly makes this link when it says

*In terms of the government agenda for sustainable self-confidence and capacity building, the ability to use teaching methods which help learners to confidently articulate their opinions and enter constructive debates is vital.*<sup>11</sup>

It is clear that self-esteem and confidence are concepts that need to be explored in greater depth in the context of adult learning. Many providers are already making the link between adult learning and self-esteem and confidence, therefore it seems sensible to support those providers to effectively capture and record that work so that we can make greater sense of what is a complex, and at times contentious, area of work.

## Defining self-esteem and confidence

Academics have, for over 100 years, tried to define self-esteem and confidence and there is a considerable body of research that can be consulted. However, for the purposes of this briefing sheet we will concentrate on the more prominent and recent thinkers.

Early research into self-esteem has tended to define self-esteem as either being about a sense of worthiness (feeling good about yourself) or about a sense of effectiveness or competence. Branden (1969) believed it was about both and defined self-esteem as

*Confidence in our ability to think, confidence in our ability to cope with the basic challenges of life*

and

*Confidence in our right to be successful and happy, the feeling of being worthy, deserving, entitled to assert our needs and wants, achieve our values.*<sup>12</sup>

He calls these two components 'self-efficacy' and 'self-respect'. Adding to this Branden also believed that there was a connection between the two components and that our actions and behaviour (self-efficacy) affected our feelings about ourselves (self-respect), which in turn affects our behaviour and actions. In short, if you feel you are a worthy and valued person you are more likely to act accordingly by joining in, undertaking new tasks and so on, and that by doing so you will increase your sense of your own worth and value.

Alexander (2001) building on the work of Branden separated out self-esteem into a number of elements or dimensions. These are:

- unconditional self-acceptance – knowing and accepting who you are, your positive attributes as well as your weaknesses;
- sense of capability or efficacy – knowing what you are capable of as well as what you find difficult;
- sense of purpose – having a goal or direction in life, and taking action to achieve that goal;
- appropriate assertiveness – feeling able to ask and take action to get what you want in life;
- experience of flow and fulfilment – a sense of satisfaction and pleasure in what you are doing, being absorbed in a task;

- 
- sense of responsibility and accountability – knowing how far you are responsible for your situation and actions;
  - sense of safety and security – a feeling of trust in yourself and others, feeling comfortable and at ease in your surroundings;
  - sense of belonging – feeling part of something, feeling included; and
  - sense of integrity – living your life according to your values, acting and behaving as you think right. <sup>13</sup>

Alexander believed that an imbalance in any of these elements could result in difficulties in maintaining positive self-esteem. For example, if a person maintained their self-esteem levels because their job gave them a sense of purpose and sense of belonging, being made redundant could adversely affect their self-esteem. In this way, Alexander stated that separating out self-esteem into these elements allows us to develop a more differentiating approach to understanding low self-esteem. Equally, it also perhaps helps us to see how adult learning can have such a positive impact on an individual's self-esteem, particularly with regard to sense of capability or efficacy, sense of purpose, experience of flow or fulfilment, sense of responsibility and accountability and sense of belonging.

However, we also know that while everyone has self-esteem, some people have higher levels while other people have lower levels. We also know that self-esteem levels can fluctuate over time. Mruk (1999) sees self-esteem as a developmental phenomenon.<sup>14</sup> Childhood experiences and upbringing form the basis on which our self-esteem is built, but experiences in adulthood and how we deal with them also affect our self-esteem levels. The demands of life are not constant, so self-esteem levels will fluctuate depending on what is happening in a person's life and how we are able to deal with them. Redundancy, bereavement, illness, studying, gaining a qualification, parenthood, poverty, being a victim of crime, divorce, promotion at work will all have an impact on our self-esteem levels. Dealing with those events will be affected by internal factors such as self-esteem levels at that time, and also external factors such as strong family and social networks, money, emotional support, access to facilities, transport and other everyday resources that are often taken for granted. Without resources we may struggle to deal with the challenges of life and it may erode self-esteem. Equally these challenges may lead to a period of growth and development that can have a positive effect on self-esteem. Self-esteem levels go up and down and can change over time.

We also know that people will behave differently in different situations, and it is in this context that we tend to talk about confidence. Definitions about confidence are limited but generally relate to an individual's beliefs about their abilities and attributes with regard to specific aspects of themselves or in specific situations, referred to as 'situational confidence' (Eldred, 2002).<sup>15</sup> For example, a person may generally have a positive level of self-esteem but have no confidence when speaking in front of a large audience.

Norman and Hyland (2003)<sup>16</sup> suggest that there are three elements to confidence: 'cognitive' – a person's knowledge of their abilities; 'performance' – their ability to do something; and 'emotional' – feeling comfortable about the former two aspects. Developing confidence needs to accommodate each aspect. Adult learning can help a person develop situational confidence, but research (Schuller et al., 2002) has also shown that gains in situational confidence through adult learning can be transferable to other areas of a person's life, therefore influencing their overall levels of confidence.<sup>17</sup>

Confidence and self-esteem are complex concepts and while they are related they are not exactly the same, despite the terms being used interchangeably. While there is no overall consensus as to the exact nature of confidence and self-esteem there are recurring features. The *Catching Confidence* research was one of the few pieces of literature to attempt to define confidence, self-esteem and the relationship between them. Research into this area in relation to adult learning is increasing, although it is still scarce overall as demonstrated by the limited literature available in the field. For this reason this briefing sheet cannot give

---

right or wrong answers regarding self-esteem and confidence, but can only give ideas and points for consideration to try and make sense of what is a very complex and contentious subject.

Seeking to understand self-esteem and confidence and to define them in relation to the learning context should help us to be clear about what we are trying to achieve when we promote positive self-esteem and confidence. When we know what we want to achieve it is easier to think about how it can be done and how it can best be captured and recorded.

### Key points

- Self-esteem and confidence, though often used interchangeably, are different.
- Self-esteem relates to our feelings of worth and to our feelings of competency and effectiveness, and importantly, to the interconnectedness between those two feelings, which will impact on how we act and behave.
- Confidence generally relates to our beliefs about our abilities and attributes about specific aspects of ourselves or in particular situations.
- Confidence and self-esteem levels change in response to situations and life events, and how we deal with them.
- Establishing a definition of self-esteem and confidence is necessary before taking any action to promote positive self-esteem and confidence, and knowing what you want those changes to lead to.

## How learning providers interpret the connection between self-esteem, confidence and adult learning

How learning providers interpret the connection between adult learning and self-esteem and confidence will influence the type of provision and support that is set up, what is to be achieved, and why these changes need to be recorded. In this section we have categorised how providers tend to interpret the link between self-esteem, confidence and adult learning, whether it is as a means to widen participation, to capture the wider benefits of learning, as subject matter or as a means to improve retention and achievement.

### ***Self-esteem and confidence building as a tool to widen participation***

Some providers see low self-esteem as being a barrier to participating in learning, and that if you engage with such learners and work with them to raise their self-esteem and confidence they will be able to progress in their learning and/or benefit in other ways as well. Finding ways to engage people who do not come forward for learning can be challenging. Responding to adverts, course brochures or open evenings is difficult if you do not believe you are capable of learning what is on offer. Providers often respond by putting on outreach provision or making guidance available in community settings; by setting up befriending or mentoring schemes; or by working closely with other agencies that may have more contact with this group of adults. Adult and community learning provision and first steps learning are often set up to widen participation. Self-esteem and confidence building is not always explicitly stated as a learning outcome. Tutors and support staff working in such provision see building confidence and self-esteem through learning as a necessary step to support people to progress. One learner on a Prescriptions for Learning project said,

*I never had that push. I often see adverts in the paper for free computing courses and I always said I would but tomorrow, tomorrow... but tomorrow never comes. I've been saying that for two years!*<sup>18</sup>

---

Another learner stated quite simply,

*You need confidence to ask for what you are entitled to.*<sup>19</sup>

This connection between self-esteem, confidence and learning is also applicable in other learning situations. One LSC pilot study stated,

*Access to learning opportunities at work had been limited for many employees. The in-depth sessions revealed that time, cost, and low self-esteem were all barriers to learning.*<sup>20</sup>

### ***Raised self-esteem and confidence as a wider benefit of learning***

Many providers believe that participation in learning leads to raised self-esteem and confidence, which extends into other areas of learners' lives. Learners may experience a growth in self-esteem as learning impacts on certain elements of self-esteem such as a greater sense of fulfilment, sense of purpose or sense of efficacy. Even if learners do not progress in their learning, it could be seen to have wider social benefits.

For example, on a women's self-development course many of the women initially stated that they had no economic ambition and that they wanted to stay at home with their children. However, during the course a few of the women began to apply for work, some taking advantage of the services of the local information and advice outreach worker to help with the application forms and CVs. Out of 18 women, five obtained employment while on the course and two of these were no longer able to attend the last few workshops because of their work commitments. Other women went on to participate voluntarily in community projects,

*If it wasn't for [this course] we would never have joined Sure Start. Now joining the partnership board for Sure Start.*<sup>21</sup>

A learner on a project involved with the *Catching Confidence* research reported,

*It helps you to teach your kids that you don't have to just sit there and be quiet... It's given you confidence and you can give that confidence to your children.*<sup>22</sup>

Providers may want to try and capture this change in self-esteem and confidence levels, particularly in non-accredited provision, or where they feel they have to justify the value of their provision in a target-driven environment and when funding is vulnerable.

### ***Self-esteem and confidence building for personal development***

This category of provision is much more explicit about the link between self-esteem, confidence and adult learning. In this type of provision, providers are clearly saying that adult education is a place to learn about self-esteem and confidence and is a means of building self-esteem and confidence. Firstly, providers may establish self-esteem as a curriculum subject by setting up self-esteem and confidence-building classes. Or secondly, they set up 'job seeker' or 'women returner' courses and seek to build on self-esteem and confidence through the process of teaching and learning and in the way that the provision is structured. This often means working with small group sizes, giving opportunities for positive feedback, and by facilitating open discussions about changes to confidence and self-esteem levels.

Either of these ways can be very effective. Both make the subject of self-esteem obvious and explicit – they will have certainly been advertised as courses that seek to raise self-esteem and confidence, and it is likely

---

that will be one of the primary learning outcomes of this kind of provision. There may even be accreditation attached to the course. In this kind of provision self-esteem is often seen as wider than confidence to participate in learning, the intention will be to enable learners to build their self-esteem and confidence so that they are more effective in all areas of their lives. Adult learners may well apply to courses such as these because they feel at that time in their lives they need to understand what is happening to them and why they feel, act or behave in such a way. They may feel that they want to handle situations and events more appropriately or confidently. For example, a woman on a self-development course said,

*I started this course to become a more confident person. I feel that I have come some way as [this course] has made me think more about what I would like to do and has made me think more about me.* <sup>23</sup>

Wanting to learn about self-esteem and confidence represents a need to understand what makes us tick as individuals, to make some kind of sense of the human experience and to be more effective and to move on from whatever has given us cause to doubt our efficacy and worth in the first place. These courses can therefore be seen as personal development courses.

There is a difficulty inherent in this type of provision when it is offered to certain groups of learners, for example, people experiencing mental health difficulties, because it is seen as having a therapeutic value. This is a very problematic area because, although raising self-esteem should make an individual feel better about themselves, to say that it is therapy implies that there was something 'wrong' with the person in the first place. Therapy means to heal or to cure and therefore we have to be careful about making assumptions about who is offered this type of provision and why and for what reason. There can be a blurring of the lines between personal development and therapy. Provision based on a therapeutic rationale is based on a deficit model and should be avoided.

### ***Self-esteem and confidence building as a means to improve retention and achievement***

Another way in which providers relate self-esteem to adult learning is because they see it as a way to improve performance and achievement. Although there has been no long-term and in-depth research into this area it is generally believed that learners who feel confident and positive about their skills are more likely to rise to new challenges and to have higher aspirations for themselves. Equally, learners with positive self-acceptance and who know their weaknesses and areas of difficulty as well as their strengths, and who have appropriate assertiveness are more likely to ask for help and support when learning becomes more difficult and challenging because they believe they have the right to their sense of purpose. Thinking about self-esteem and confidence in this way leads us to consider whether it should apply to all learners and should be embedded into the everyday practices of teaching and learning. This way of linking self-esteem and confidence to adult learning is closely associated with quality standards in learning, because what promotes positive self-esteem and confidence in adult education is good teaching and learning. It is about adopting learner-centred approaches, about providing appropriate support and about respecting and valuing learners. In this sense, it could be seen as an 'entitlement' for all learners.

---

## Key points

- The link between adult learning and self-esteem and confidence is often interpreted in a number of ways. Low self-esteem and confidence as a barrier to learning, self-esteem and confidence as a wider benefit of learning, self-esteem and confidence as a curriculum subject or explicitly stated learning outcome, and positive self-esteem as a means to improve retention and achievement.
- Where low self-esteem is seen as a barrier to participating in learning, promoting positive self-esteem and confidence should result in greater situational confidence in learning, and transferred confidence in other areas of life and raised self-esteem if participation in learning addresses imbalances in self-esteem.
- Promotion of positive self-esteem and confidence can be seen as a wider benefit to learning. As learners gain confidence in learning, it flows into other aspects of their lives, or it addresses imbalances in the components of self-esteem.
- Learning about self-esteem and confidence, or where raised self-esteem and confidence are explicit learning outcomes, should promote self-esteem and confidence across all areas of a learner's life.
- Positive self-esteem as a means to improve retention and achievement is closely aligned to quality standards and could be seen to be an 'entitlement' for all learners. Its effectiveness in this sense is untested and only speculative.
- Good teaching and learning uses strategies which encourage growth in confidence and self-esteem, regardless of subject or context.

## Findings

To write this paper a request was put out to providers of further, adult and community education asking them to send examples of how they captured and recorded changes in self-esteem and confidence. A total of 11 responses were made. The responses were varied and illustrated the range of provision on offer where self-esteem and confidence was identified as a concern for the learners or as something that the providers wanted to address.

Many of the examples of methods for collecting data on self-esteem and confidence that were sent to us were still under development. Providers were grappling with complex issues – trying to clarify what was evidence of confidence and self-esteem and what were the best ways to capture any changes. As one provider wrote,

*Noticing an increase in self-esteem and confidence is one thing, measuring it is quite another<sup>24</sup>*

It was evident from the responses that providers were working with learners in different settings, often for a number of reasons within one learning situation. Some providers were running projects such as Prescriptions for Learning that are designed to widen participation in learning and to explore the health impacts and wider benefits of participation in learning. In attempting to capture changes in confidence, participants in the Prescriptions for Learning project at a college were asked to grade themselves from 1 (not at all) to 6 (very) as to how confident they felt. They were asked this at the start and at the end of the project. A similar project in Leicester, Learning for Better Health, chose to explore the changes in self-esteem by conducting in-depth one-to-one interviews with project participants and by using Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Inventory as a validated method to capture changes in self-esteem levels, but also to provide quantitative data to put alongside the qualitative data collected during interviews. These projects are concerned to capture changes in confidence and self-esteem, to see what impact those changes have on participation in learning as well as wider benefits such as improved health and well-being.

---

Through the *Catching Confidence* research, many adult and community learning providers were able to trial a methodology using a grid designed to capture changes in confidence acquired as a result of learning, often in non-accredited provision. Consequently, providers could identify some of the wider benefits of learning. Learners graded themselves as 'highly confident', 'confident', 'not confident' or 'very low confidence' across ten situations in four different environments. For example, learners assessed their own confidence in a situation 'I am confident that I have valuable skills to offer', in four different settings: 'At a learning centre'; 'At home'; 'Socially/with friends'; and 'At work/out and about'. Using the grid at various stages of the learning opportunity allowed learners to reflect upon their achievements, and for tutors to capture, and potentially, to adapt learning strategies as they went along. The research is continuing with a further nine new sites, including *Skills for Life* providers, to test adaptability, applicability and ways of capturing the evidence.

One Adult and Community Learning Service inserted questions on confidence into the course evaluation form, asking learners to tick boxes if they agreed that, 'I feel more confident about the subject', and 'I feel more confident generally about myself'. This method may be less integrated into learning process than the *Catching Confidence* method, but it has the advantage of reaching all learners and provides quick and easy data on some of the wider benefits to learning.

Another finding was the importance of making the methodology fit for purpose – the way self-esteem and confidence is captured has to be appropriate for the learners and those undertaking the research have to have the skills to use the chosen methodology. Three of the examples sent to us were from providers working with learners with learning difficulties, but each had developed a different way of capturing changes to self-esteem and confidence. Two providers used tutor assessment to identify changes in confidence and self-esteem within the learning situation to gauge any progress and achievement made by learners. Another project borrowed the idea of a 'learning journey' but are using it as a

*metaphor for reviewing learning which has already taken place, learners are using it to record their own 'milestones', using A3 'maps' and lots of drawings/photos. On one side of the road they are recording progress towards qualifications, and on the other side their personal achievements, and a couple of people have recorded feeling more confident, or that other people have noticed that they are.*<sup>25</sup>

Developing methodologies for capturing and recording changes in self-esteem and confidence should be concerned with asking questions not just about how we feel and think about ourselves, but also about how we act and behave. Consequently, there may be ways in which you can cross-correlate changes in behaviour and actions with regard to learning. For example, if you want to build confidence and self-esteem to widen participation in learning it can be useful to look at progression data as well as feedback from learners on how they feel as learners.

### ***How and when to capture and record changes in self-esteem and confidence in learners***

Having decided which learners and why you might want to capture and record changes in self-esteem and confidence, the next step is to decide how you will do this. How and when you do this will be determined by who you work with and how many learners you work with, and for what purpose you wish to show changes in self-esteem and confidence.

Before we start to look at this in any depth there are some important considerations and it is necessary to approach this area of work with great caution. It is very hard to 'measure' self-esteem because it is very

---

personal and open to subjective interpretations. You cannot compare changes in self-esteem levels between different learners because it is all about personal growth. To 'measure' self-esteem suggests that you can quantify the incremental growth or change in self-esteem levels. Capturing and recording changes to self-esteem and confidence is a more achievable and a truer account of the process.

It should be remembered that other life events and outside influences will also impact on self-esteem and confidence levels. A person may not be very engaged in their learning and gaining very little from it, but a new relationship, new job, or achievement in another area of their life may make them feel very positive about themselves.

### ***How to capture and record changes in self-esteem and confidence levels***

This section gives some ideas about different methods for capturing and recording self-esteem and confidence levels and when to use them. However, it is necessary to think about some of the protocols associated with capturing and recording self-esteem and confidence.

Firstly, if a provider wants to collect this kind of data then learners should be informed why and what the data gathered will be used for. For example, an explanatory sentence or two preceding a question on a survey may be appropriate, or it may require a verbal explanation giving the learner the opportunity to ask questions and opt out if necessary.

Providers should seek to define what they mean by self-esteem and confidence before they start to attempt to collect data. They will need to make these definitions clear to learners so that there is a shared understanding of what is being talked about and how it relates to the learning situation. Depending upon from whom and why the provider is hoping to collect data will determine how in-depth this explanation and dialogue will need to be.

Depending on the chosen method for capturing data, consideration will need to be given to who will carry it out. A tutor may have a closer relationship with the learner and, if promoting positive self-esteem and confidence is an explicit part of the learning opportunity, talking about self-esteem and confidence levels and giving learners time to reflect on any changes can be an important part of the learning process. In that situation, it may be more appropriate for the tutor to work with the learner. On the other hand, an independent researcher or evaluator may ensure greater impartiality, though there may be cost implications.

Questionnaires are widely used to collect this kind of data because they are thought to be easy to organise, analyse and manage. However, it is important that those designing questionnaires understand what information they are seeking and what sort of data they want to receive back from respondents. Questions should be designed to be clear and concise in their meaning and appropriate to the task in hand. Questions can be closed questions with yes/no answers; they can be graded (eg. 1 to 5, or 'very much' to 'not at all'); or they can be open questions (eg. In what ways has your confidence increased?) Such questions will give more qualitative data.

There are validated questionnaires that have been tried and tested and will give evidence that will stand up within research, such as Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Inventory, as well as validated questionnaires that can be downloaded from the internet. Caution needs to be taken before using such methods as to its appropriateness to the learning situations, and to the skills of the person doing the research.

Using questionnaires to collect evidence is dependent upon the respondents having sufficient literacy skills to understand the written questions. The methodology chosen to capture and record changes in self-esteem and confidence should not dent the confidence and self-esteem of the respondents.

---

Other evidence of changes in self-esteem and confidence levels can be gathered during in-depth interviews, tutorials, or group sessions. This can be a useful way for learners to reflect on the changes they may be experiencing and to learn from each other. Learners can be asked to complete log books or learning plans as part of their reflection and to show the learning they have acquired. Recording this type of evidence is likely to give rich qualitative data but it can be hard to quantify precisely what changes have been made. It allows us to hear the learner's voice, and therefore to learn from it, but it is less likely to produce factual data.

Emphasis has been put on questionnaires and other written means to capture and record changes in self-esteem and confidence. However, other methods may be more appropriate for some learners. A number of providers have experimented with using pictures to illustrate the changes in learners actions and to show their growth and development.

### ***When to capture and record changes in self-esteem and confidence levels***

Ideally, it would be best to record self-esteem and confidence levels before a learner begins a course so that comparisons can be made at the end of a course. However, unless the learner has signed up to do a course designed to boost confidence and self-esteem, engaging them in a dialogue about their confidence and self-esteem before they have formed any relationship with the tutor or developed any trust in them could be very off-putting and inappropriate. If comparisons in self-esteem and confidence levels are to be made then it will be necessary to raise the subject with learners early on, explaining why you need the information, so that they are aware of the feedback they will be expected to give.

Depending on the length of the course it would be useful to evaluate self-esteem and confidence levels during the course. In this way it will seem less like a 'bolt-on' at the end of the course, and the feedback may help a tutor to reflect on what is happening within the learning environment and make any necessary changes to practice.

The most obvious time to get feedback is at the end of the course. Usually this happens during the last session, so that you assess the full impact of the learning opportunity on self-esteem and confidence levels. If resources allow, gaining feedback at the end of a course helps a provider to assess the longer-term impact of their work and to see what progression has occurred for the learner.

Retrospective data collection can never hope to capture the true experience. Learners whose self-esteem or confidence has improved at the end of a course may not be able to describe as graphically and accurately how they felt at the beginning. However, resources do not always allow the gathering of this type of information and indeed learners with low self-esteem and poor confidence may also feel reluctant to share these feelings with strangers.

## **Considerations**

- The method chosen to capture and record changes in self-esteem and confidence must be fit for purpose – is it the right method for the group of learners and for collecting the data you require?
- There are cultural implications to capturing and recording self-esteem and confidence data. Before any research can be done it may be necessary to discuss with learners what they think concepts like self-esteem and confidence mean to them, and how they would expect to experience positive self-esteem and confidence.
- Think carefully about the language used in questionnaires and discussions. Words like 'self-efficacy' and 'self-worth' can be off-putting.
- Staff involved in collecting data on self-esteem and confidence need to be engaged with the process and fully aware of why and how they go about it.

- 
- Staff need to be skilled to do this kind of work, to make sure that the issues such as self-esteem and confidence and how they manifest themselves are dealt with sensitively and respectfully. Learners should not feel judged, or that their personal stories are being plundered for somebody else's use or benefit.
  - When collecting data check whose opinions you are getting – is it the opinions of tutors that learners have more confidence and positive self-esteem, or is it the opinion of the learners themselves?
  - Can you prove the changes in confidence and self-esteem would not have happened in any case – if the provider says they are doing something specific to raise self-esteem and confidence, how can it be proved?

### **Key points**

- Be clear about what changes you are attempting to capture and record before you decide on a methodology.
- Think about the group of learners you want to work with and the learning situations.
- Consider the skill, time and resources available to the tutor or person doing the research.
- Ensure that the method chosen for capturing and recording changes to learners' self-esteem and confidence is fit for purpose.
- Give consideration to when you collect data. Retrospective data collection can be less accurate.
- There are considerations to be taken into account, such as language and culture.
- Ensure that it is the learners opinions and views that are collected rather than the opinions of tutors.

## **Making it matter**

We are required to collect more and more data to justify this area of research. We have to try to capture and record changes in self-esteem and confidence because we have to prove that the provision has benefits for learners and is worth funding, or because it is an audit requirement for the project funding. This section looks at how providers can use the data collected to benefit learners, tutors and the whole organisation.

### **1. Benefiting learners**

Data on self-esteem and confidence can be used to adapt practice and provision which should benefit learners overall. However, collecting evidence of changes in self-esteem and confidence in learners can also benefit individual learners when they are given the space to explore these issues openly. Learners can benefit from having their increased self-esteem and confidence recognised as an achievement by their learning providers. The Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement (RARPA) process encourages learners to list their aspirations and to be active in recognising the progress made in achieving these.

### **2. Benefiting tutors**

Collecting evidence that learning impacts on confidence and self-esteem can be very beneficial for tutors (and for their own self-esteem and confidence) if it is positive. Tutors should also have the opportunity to use the evidence collected to reflect on their practice and the provision available, and how it might be adapted if necessary. Support for staff to develop their skills might be necessary.

### **3. Benefiting the organisation**

Data is useful for presenting evidence for inspection or self-assessment, but it is important not to feel that that is the only reason for collecting data. Evidence can be used to adapt provision or procedures, or even to secure resources. The collection of evidence needs to be embedded into other systems for collecting data and subject to the same process of review. In this way the organisation will benefit most from the process of

---

capturing and recording changes in self-esteem and will learn most from it. For example, one college uses a Statement of Learning completed by every learner as part of the college quality improvement tool. While no specific mention is made of self-esteem and confidence, learners are encouraged to think about personal development goals when considering their intended learning outcomes. Tutors help learners to review their progress towards these learning outcomes during their course. The reasons for gathering the data are made clear to learners. It provides evidence of achievement and assists learners to reflect upon their progress and achievement. Tutors are required to read the Statements of Learning and Course Evaluation Forms and to reflect upon the findings when completing their Tutor Course Review and Evaluation. The forms are then processed within each department as part of the Departmental Review.

### **Key points**

- Collecting data on self-esteem and confidence can be counter-productive if the only reason is for audit or inspection purpose.
- Capturing and recording changes in self-esteem and confidence levels in learners can be beneficial to learners, tutors and the organisation if time is given to reflect on the findings and the significance of any changes.

## **Self-esteem and confidence levels of staff working in adult education**

When self-esteem and confidence are talked about in relation to adult education it often refers to learners only. When tutors and other staff are mentioned it tends to be in their role as facilitators in the growth of self-esteem and confidence and those who capture and record changes. This creates a ‘them and us’ situation, that implies that low self-esteem or confidence, or the need to promote and maintain positive self-esteem does not apply to staff. If we believe that positive self-esteem and confidence makes learners more effective, then we have to believe that our own self-esteem and confidence affects our effectiveness as teachers, support workers, learning managers, strategic managers and administrators or any other member of staff working in adult education.

Lindenfield stated that to be a self-esteem builder, or to promote confidence in other people, it is necessary to display certain qualities or attitudes. She lists these as:

- being aware of your own self-esteem, and the need to maintain positive self-esteem and confidence by looking after yourself;
- being happy with your own achievements and optimistic for the future, but without forgetting the difficulties of the past and using this to empathise with others;
- being open-minded and interested in new ideas, and in meeting and understanding new people, but mindful of the right to maintain ethical boundaries, and be protective of their workload;
- believing in the ability of people and organisations to change, but respectful of other people’s anxieties about change;
- taking pleasure in getting to know and nurture the potential of each person, but do not lose sight of the needs of everyone as a whole;
- being generous with time, expertise and knowledge, but also knowing when to say ‘no’; and
- being generally calm, patient and trustful, but not allowing yourself (or those you protect) to be abused or taken for granted.<sup>26</sup>

---

These are the qualities and attitudes that allow a person to support positive self-esteem and confidence in others. Conversely, people who don't possess these qualities or attitudes because they are experiencing low self-esteem or confidence will find it difficult to promote positive self-esteem and confidence in others. Low self-esteem and confidence at work may be the result of factors such as lack of appropriate training, constant change and anxiety about future employment, lack of consultation or feedback, working in isolation, bullying from other colleagues or managers, overwork or lack of professional development opportunities. It is worth reflecting on how these factors will affect performance and effectiveness in staff who are expected to promote positive self-esteem and confidence in others.

### **Key points**

- Building and maintaining positive self-esteem and confidence is not a 'them and us' subject, but relates to all staff working in adult education as well as learners.
- Building and maintaining positive self-esteem and confidence in others is easier if the person has positive self-esteem and confidence themselves.

## **Conclusion**

Self-esteem and confidence are increasingly part of the language we use to describe why we think adult learning is important and what we hope and expect that learners will gain from participation. Yet despite this the language that is used doesn't always make it clear what we mean by it, why we feel it is relevant and what we hope to achieve by effecting changes in self-esteem and confidence. Until we clarify this we cannot clear up the complexities and differences of opinion surrounding this subject, but neither can we be specific in what we are trying to influence and change. Only when we get to that point can we begin to effectively capture and record what has happened and changed, and then to learn and make sense of the information we have gathered. Supporting this process has to be a key part in furthering our understanding and in developing this work.

## **Summary**

- Define what it is you want to capture and record – what do you mean by self-esteem and confidence? Agree on working definitions and state how you think that self-esteem and confidence impacts on individuals lives and learning.
- Think about the situation where you want to capture and record changes in self-esteem and confidence and select a methodology that is fit for purpose.
- Think about the time, resources and skills you have to do this.
- Think how you will use the data and how you can make it meaningful.

---

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following providers who responded to our call for information and examples of how they linked self-esteem, confidence and adult learning.

Ark project – Bracknell Forest LEA, Berkshire  
Blackburn and Darwen LEA Lifelong Learning Service  
Chrissie Hawkes, Community Tutor, Cambridge, Essex and Suffolk  
*Catching Confidence*, NIACE  
CSV Avon – Whole-baked café  
David Preston, Bournemouth  
Learning for Better Health, NIACE  
'Prescriptions for Learning', St Austell College, Cornwall College  
New College Durham  
Shropshire IAG (Information, Advice and Guidance)  
Telford College of Arts and Technology  
The City Lit College

We would also like to thank:

Alison Rowlands, National Office LSC  
Judith Kay, Cambridgeshire LSC  
Julie Bellm, Leicestershire LSC  
Letitia Mason, Berkshire LSC  
Lynette Chettle, Nottinghamshire LSC  
Lynn Saether, Humberside LSC  
Pamela Reay, Birmingham and Solihull LSC  
Sarah Carter, Bournemouth, Poole and Dorset LSC  
Shirley Simpkins, Hampshire and Isle and Wight LSC  
Sue Yeomans, National Office LSC

who were part of the local Learning and Skills Council working group for their comments, support and advice in helping us develop this briefing sheet.

Also thanks to colleagues Veronica McGivney, Jan Eldred, Yanina Dutton and Sue Rees for their support.

## References

1. Cambridgeshire Learning and Skills Council (2004), *Basic Skills in the Workplace* [www.lsc.gov.uk](http://www.lsc.gov.uk)
2. 'Special Scheme Champions Learning in the Community' (04.07.05) Posted on Herts LSC website 16.08.05. [www.lsc.gov.uk/herts/Media/PressReleases/default.htm](http://www.lsc.gov.uk/herts/Media/PressReleases/default.htm)
3. Preston, J. and Hammond, C. (2002), *The Wider Benefits of Learning: Practitioners Views*. Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning. Research Reports March 2002
4. Lloyd, R. and O'Sullivan, F. (2003), *Measuring Soft Outcomes and Distance Travelled. A methodology for developing a guidance document*. Department of Work and Pensions.
5. McGivney, V. (1990), *Education for Other People*. NIACE. [www.niace.org.uk](http://www.niace.org.uk)

- 
6. McGivney, V. (2001), *Fixing or Changing the Pattern*. NIACE. [www.niace.org.uk](http://www.niace.org.uk)
  7. Learning and Skills Council.(2003) *Successful Participation for All: Widening Adult Participation Strategy*,
  8. Eldred, J. et al. (2004). *Catching Confidence*. NIACE [www.niace.org.uk](http://www.niace.org.uk)
  9. *ibid.*
  10. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. (2004). *Social Exclusion Report, Mental Health and Social Exclusion*. ODPM.
  11. Adult Learning Inspectorate (2004). *Making an impact on individuals and communities*.
  12. Branden, N. (1994), *Six Pillars of Self-esteem*. The definitive work on self-esteem by the leading pioneer in the field. Bantam.
  13. Alexander, T. (2001), 'Defining self-esteem. What is self-esteem and why does it matter? Self-esteem as an aid to understanding and recovery'. *Mental Healthcare*, Vol. 4, No 10, pp. 332-335
  14. Mruk, C. (1999), *Self-esteem research, theory and practice*. Free Association Books.
  15. Eldred, J. (2002), *Moving on with Confidence – Perceptions of success in Teaching and Learning in Adult Literacy*. NIACE. [www.niace.org.uk](http://www.niace.org.uk)
  16. Norman, M. and Hyland, L. (2003), 'The Role of Confidence in Lifelong Learning'. *Educational Studies*, Vol 29, No 2/3, pp. 264-270
  17. Schuller, T. et al. (2002), *Continuity and Change in Adult Life*. The Centre for Research and the Wider Benefits of Learning.
  18. James, K. (2003), *2<sup>nd</sup> Evaluation of Nottingham Prescriptions for Learning Project*, NIACE [www.niace.org.uk](http://www.niace.org.uk)
  19. *ibid.*
  20. Somerset Learning and Skills Council – Pilot studies. *Mapping of Learning and Training from the Individual Perspectives (1) and individual learners' histories (3)* (Round 1, 2002). Report to LSC Somerset [www.lsc.gov.uk](http://www.lsc.gov.uk)
  21. Nightingale, C. (2005), *Learning for Better Health*. NIACE, University of Leicester and Leicester City Health Action Zone, not available for general circulation.
  22. Eldred, J. et al. (2004), *Catching Confidence*. NIACE [www.niace.org.uk](http://www.niace.org.uk)
  23. Nightingale, C. (2005), *Learning for Better Health*. NIACE, University of Leicester and Leicester City Health Action Zone, not available for general circulation.
  24. Community Service Volunteers, Avon
  25. *ibid.*
  26. Lindenfield, G. (1995), *Self Esteem*, Thorsons.





NIACE

21 De Montfort Street, Leicester LE1 7GE

Tel: +44 (0)116 204 4200

Fax: +44 (0)116 285 4514

Minicom: +44 (0)116 255 6049

Email: [enquiries@niace.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@niace.org.uk)

Website: [www.niace.org.uk](http://www.niace.org.uk)

Typeset and designed by Creative, Langbank.

Printed in Great Britain by Colortech, Leicester

© copyright 2005 National Institute of Adult Continuing Education  
(England and Wales)

Company registration no. 2603322

Charity registration no. 1002775

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without the written permission of the publishers, save in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, or under the terms of any license permitting copying issue by the Copyright Licensing Agency.