

“Prescribing Learning” – The impact of learning on health



by Dr. Peter Lavender, NIACE

“It’s visionary because health is bigger than medicine.”
– Health care provider (UK)

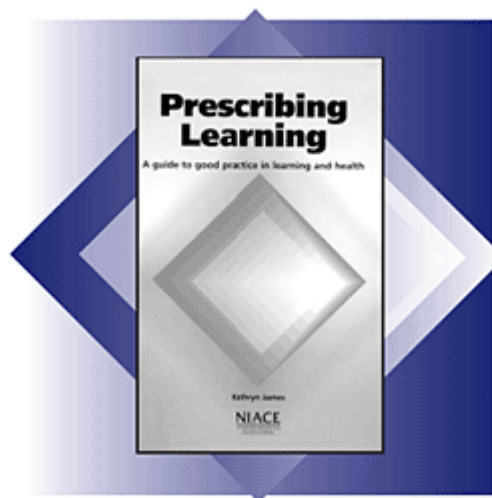
Context for this project

“Saving Lives”, White Paper from National Health Service (NHS), 1999

“Education is vital for health. People with low levels of educational achievement are more likely to have poor health as adults. By improving education for all we will tackle one of the main causes of inequality in health”. (16)

“The Impact of Learning on Health” NIACE, 1999, based on interviews with adult learners

- 89% said returning to learning had a positive impact on their mental health (self-esteem, lifted mood, improved sleeping, provided distraction from dwelling on problems).
- 87% said returning to learning had a positive impact on their physical health.



“Prescriptions for Learning” was developed by NIACE to place a learning adviser [See [role](#)] in GP surgeries and evaluate the outcomes. In February 2003, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) gave NIACE funding to facilitate a Consortium of “Prescriptions for Learning” projects with 60 members from different organizations. The aims were to:

- Provide support to learning advisers engaged on projects
- Provide networking opportunities for learning advisers
- Share ideas, strategies and good practice
- Discuss concerns, difficulties and barriers
- Disseminate good practice and findings

The role of the learning adviser (self-described)

- to take referrals from healthcare staff and self referrals from individuals interested in learning
- to work with the individuals to help them identify what learning they are interested in and how best to access it
- to provide guidance and support necessary to help the individual access an appropriate and chosen learning opportunity
- to recognize that the guidance process can be a learning process; people in these situations and with health difficulties are likely to have poor self-esteem and low levels of confidence.

Challenges

- Education is rarely uppermost in the mind of the GP or other healthcare staff when they are seeing a patient.
- The role of the Practice Manager is therefore crucial – can remind clinic staff of the service – can help with practical details, e.g. finding a private interviewing space

Findings

In a six-month period

- 116 people were referred
- 26 failed to keep their appointment
- 90 people attended
- At the time of writing, 68 people were still attending some form of learning.

Types of Learning accessed

- Generally what the learners want rather than fitting them into an existing course
- Courses included: Tai Chi, Yoga, Computers, Art, Craft, Confidence Building, Childcare, Aromatherapy, Voluntary Work, literacy, numeracy and ESOL

Health impacts reported from involvement in learning opportunities

- increased confidence in abilities
- sense of purpose
- sense of achievement
- generally feeling happier
- distraction from pain and problems
- being more active – inside and outside home
- improved sleeping
- new friendships and social contacts
- benefits to relationships and family
- having fun

- improved job prospects

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Impact on health and well-being

- mental health benefits – increased confidence and self-worth, positive outlook, lifted mood
- physical benefits – improved sleep, being more active
- dealing with pain more effectively
- feeling more able to cope
- feeling more in control
- distraction from dwelling on problems
- less frequent visits to doctors’ offices
- reduction in taking some medications

Feedback from health care staff

- another service to refer people to
- “It has helped to provide something positive for “heart-sink” patients, and that feels good for me.”
- “The effect on some patients is dramatic.”
- “Very effective to use in conjunction with medical treatments.”
- “It’s visionary because health is bigger than medicine.”

With Alex Braddell, Peter also presented a brief overview of the NHSU and its priorities, and discussion of the issues faced in developing a countrywide program for improving the literacy, language and numeracy of staff who work in and for the National Health Service.

Peter Lavender is Director for Research and Development at the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), the national organization for adult learning in England and Wales that advocates for more and different adult learners in every sector of education and training. Peter also works for the National Health Service University (NHSU), the corporate university for the NHS in England and Wales, where he heads programs for adult literacy, language and numeracy.

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