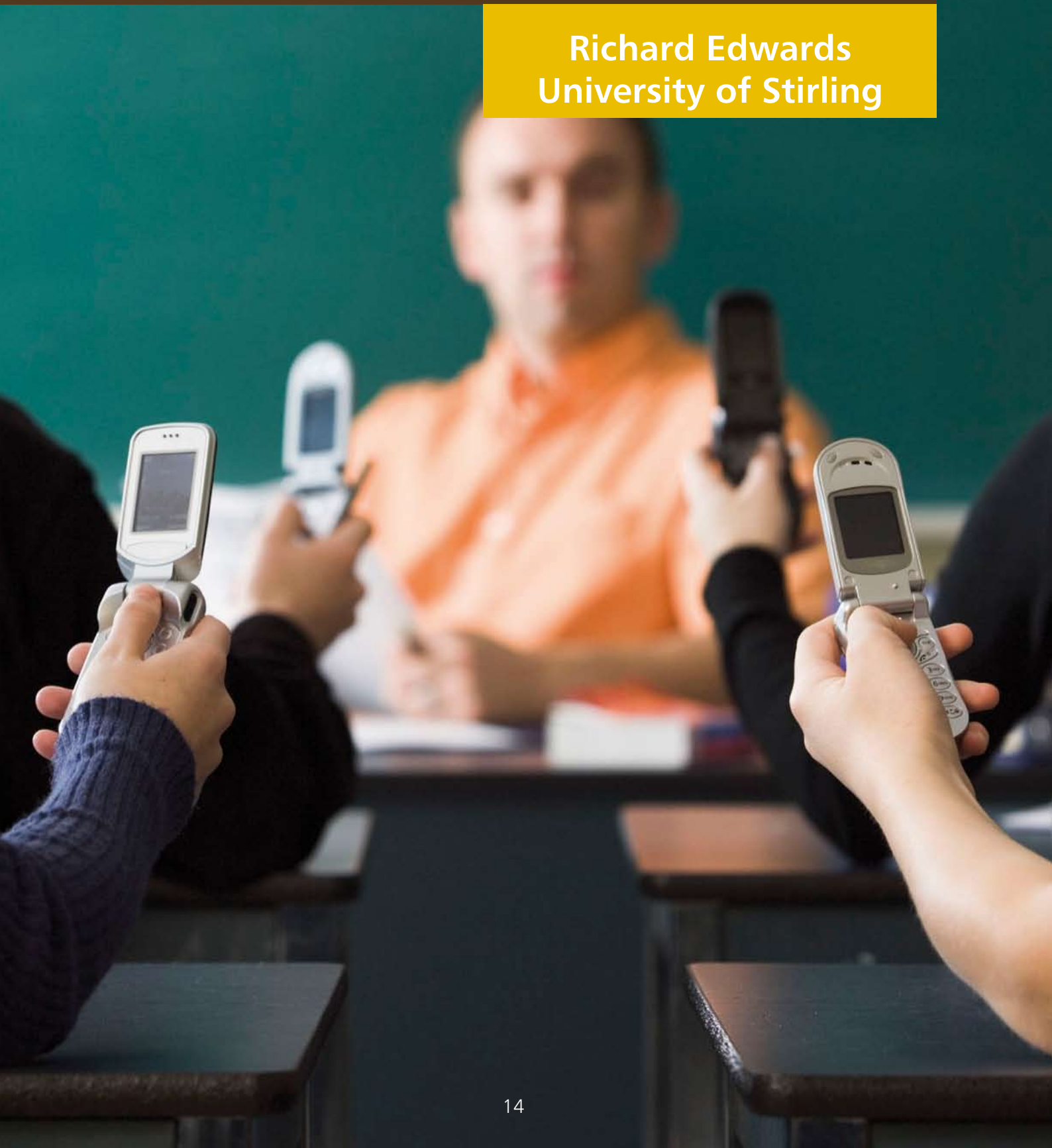


It ain't (simply) what you know,  
it's the way you communicate it:

# Curriculum knowledge and communication

Richard Edwards  
University of Stirling



## Introduction

Since 2004, the Literacies for Learning in Further Education project has been exploring the literacy practices involved in study within thirteen curriculum areas in England and Scotland (for more information see the project website at [www.lancaster.ac.uk/lffe](http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/lffe)). The project has involved two universities working with four Further Education colleges and its aim is to develop strategies that will enable students to draw upon the literacies developed in their everyday lives, on their courses, as a basis for more successful study. The project specifically works with the notion that literacies are not a disembodied set of skills that can be learnt in isolation from contexts of use, but are developed within meaningful and purposive activity. Thus the use of the term literacy practices rather than literacy. We also view literacy practices broadly as embracing icon and screen as well as text and page, and the many multimodal artefacts and genres of communication which are to be found in colleges and everyday life, including computers, mobile phones, etc.

Given that the teaching of literacy has sometimes been promoted outside meaningful contexts of use, our study works within the grain of what is a wider critique for formal educational provision. This is that it is abstracted from contexts of use, out of touch, decontextualised, inauthentic, not relevant, etc. Over the years many such critiques of the curriculum in general have been offered and indeed, one of the rationales for the development of a competence-based approach to the vocational curriculum was that it would make it more relevant to the end contexts of use i.e. the workplace. The fact that employers, students and others still point to the gaps between learning a subject and work suggests that there is more to the problem than simply a focus on performance in the curriculum.

The past two years of research in colleges has resulted in the collection of large amounts of data through interviews and other interactions with students and staff, through the participation of Further Education staff in the project, and through observation. We have also collected together a large number of documents to do with teaching and assessment in the various curriculum areas. While the focus of our study has been on literacy practices, this data has provided us with many insights into curriculum issues within Further Education.

This article attempts to sketch some of these issues as a contribution to the debate that already exists around the current position and future possibilities for developing the curriculum within Further Education.

Central to the debate, although not the sole message, is the point that we cannot separate what is to be learnt from the forms of interaction and communication through which the curriculum is enacted. And here it is important to recognise that there can be some distance between how the curriculum *is* enacted and how it is described by lecturers and students. What has been clear in our project is that in a lot of cases interaction and communication, including literacy practices, are a part of the hidden curriculum in Further Education. As a result, the capacities which students bring with them to their studies are in many cases overlooked, marginalised or not utilised as much as they might be. This impacts upon retention and outcomes.

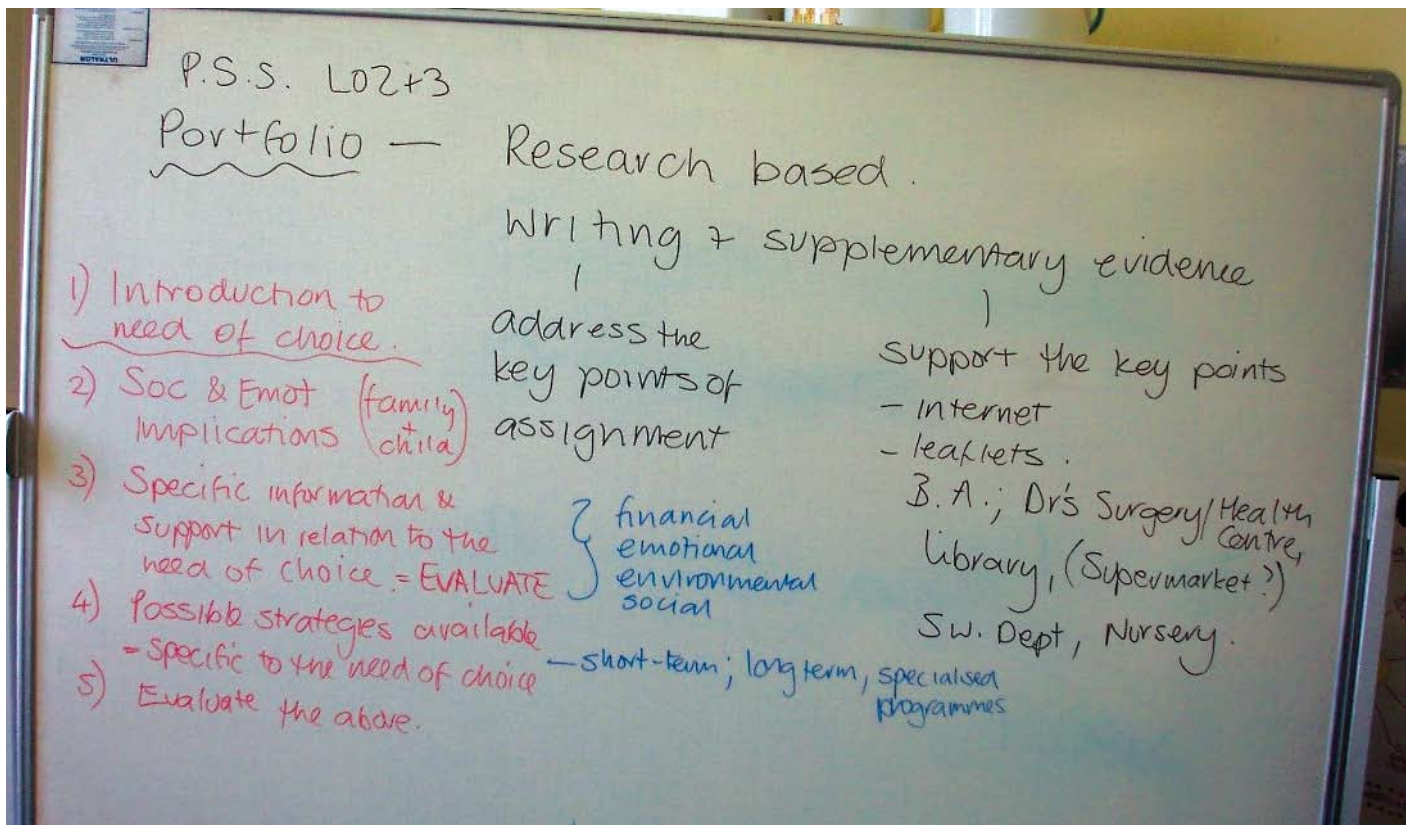
## Issues

The issues identified here are outlined in no particular order.

Further Education has often been criticised for having developed an assessment driven curriculum. This is something that we have certainly found in our own study. The data suggests that the writing students do at all levels seems, to a great extent, to be about preparing for and producing assessments. Building up knowledge, understanding and capacity beyond that required by assessment is often seen as necessary by lecturers, but the twin constraints of curriculum organisation and pressure to ensure student achievement do not always make that possible.

This points to a second issue, which we might refer to as the literacy careers of students. The lower and intermediate level units tend to use a wider range of text and require more diverse practices of reading and writing than the higher ones. This is often done to make units more interesting and stimulating for students. However, it requires students to engage in a wide range of literacy practices. They therefore receive complex messages about what is necessary for them to succeed. As they progress to higher level units, the literacy practices become more academic, and there is a more consistent message about appropriate forms of reading and writing. They therefore receive a clearer trajectory for their literacy careers. There is a definite difference in emphasis between the levels. If not made explicit and worked with, this shift may impact upon progression.

The lower down the levels we are the more practical the activities that are built in to the programmes and the more varied the literacy demands; whereas at the higher levels, the students are provided with a restricted access to different literacy practices in



the classroom. They are treated more formally and expected to do more homework. This oversimplifies, but it points to the ways in which lower level courses may be more complex from a literacy perspective than higher level courses, as they require a more diverse range of artefacts and genres for students to engage with and produce. This seems, however, to challenge common sense understanding.

There is also greater consistency of literacy practices for students doing more traditionally academic courses than those doing vocational programmes. They learn that 'success' is to be had in extended academic writing and reading similar types of text. By contrast vocational students can get a range of possibly confusing messages, as they are asked to engage with and produce a far greater range of artefacts and use a more diverse range of genres.

This may be further added to when the curriculum focuses on the unit, rather than the overall programme of study, as individual units may involve different practices, which do not readily articulate with one another. The literacy demands on the vocational students may therefore be interpreted as greater than those on academic students, once again challenging stereotypical ways of viewing the issue. This too may impact upon progression, unless the curriculum is looked at and taught within an overarching framework.

The issues is further complicated by the ambiguity of

terms for both tutors and students of the genres of writing required by specific assessments. Terms such as essay, report and article are used interchangeably and in different ways from unit to unit. Research is used as a generic task with often implicit clarity over what is required. NC assessments can require a variety of tasks to present relatively simple information. At HNC fewer literacy practices are used to present more complex information. Yet the terms used to describe the tasks are often the same.

It also seems that the reading and writing that the students do as part of the learning within the classroom is very different from that which they have to do in the assessments. Some tutors seem to believe that if we give students the right information in an effective and interesting way then they will be able to do anything with it. Yet transfer is not a straightforward practices and talk around texts is crucial for this to occur. The use of a text is therefore more important than the complexity of its content. This involves diverse tasks, making links between the curriculum and the task, for example, and relating back to practice to give purpose and to encourage ownership.

The use of texts that the students can relate to from their own experience seem to help them engage with the reading tasks more enthusiastically. These are mostly utilised in the lower level courses. However, such texts would probably be deemed inappropriate at higher level units, as the literacy practices take on a more 'standard' academic form



This raises issues of authority, ownership and value at two levels: the pedagogic and contextual. At the pedagogical level, for instance, different tutors' opinions of whether students should copy down exactly what the tutor says or whether they should write things in their own words reflect different stances. This also relates to issues of academic referencing. One of the issues for many students was how to quote other sources, a demand which they will probably not have in their workplaces. At the contextual level, there is the question of who decides which literacy demands are valuable? This comparison suggests that there is a hierarchy of demand particularly prioritising the academic, but it might be interesting to see where these values come from. We might relate these partially to the philosophy of the specific institution. There are also value issues coming from the SQA and other awarding bodies, teacher training courses and dominant pedagogies. Of particular interest might be whether the values of the intended workplace are heard in relation to literacy demands. So the policy prioritises certain literacy demands rather than the workplace, even as it ostensibly positions employability and the workplace as a central concern. There are tensions here within educational policy.

Finally, from the data, there is a tension between educational (academic) imperatives and occupational (vocational) imperatives in terms of literacy practices, types of texts and types of engagement with texts required by students, especially as they progress in terms of level.. Thus the same unit can be taught differently and therefore entail a different curriculum according to whether it is primarily perceived to be for preparing students for the workplace or for academic



progression. This raises the most fundamental of curriculum questions. Is the purpose of the programme to extend education or to fit vocational context? Each has implications for the literacy practices in which people participate, both students and tutors. If it is to do both, then the issues of what is valued as literacy and the resources necessary for the multimodality of the world will need seriously to be addressed in the curriculum expectations and pedagogic practices of courses.

### Further thinking

Each of the above issues could be expanded and extended. They play out in different curriculum areas in different ways and vary according to college and even individual lecturer. However, there are also common threads. One thing for certain is that they can only be addressed through a more extended discussion of curriculum, which focuses on the purposes and practices associated with the subject as a totality, as part of the core of the educational practices in Further Education.

### Note

This article arises from work done within the *Literacies for Learning in Further Education* research project, funded by the ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme (grant number RES-139-25-0117 ).