

Implications of the social view of literacy for the policy and practice of adult language, literacy and numeracy

Uta Parker (2005) Adult Literacy as a Social Practice – more than skills

What this chapter is about

In Chapter 3 I began to discuss the implications of a social view of literacy for the teaching and learning of literacy, language and numeracy. In this final chapter, I want to pursue this discussion and spend more time reflecting on what difference a social practice view of literacy (numeracy and ESOL) can make with regards to policy and practice. I start with a discussion of policy: where does the social practices view of literacy stand with regard to current adult language, literacy and numeracy policy in England and elsewhere? I ask not only how researchers from the New Literacy Studies (NLS) have reacted to the current policies (see my discussion in Chapter 7), but what they have done and can do in order to inform and influence policy.

After that, I look more specifically at practice. In doing so, I address the particular concerns of teachers and curriculum developers who want to know how a social practice view of literacy can be brought into the classroom. Albeit a relatively recent phenomenon, the NLS have not developed in isolation and there are similarities between what those adhering to a social practice view suggest and what others have been doing already. Therefore, the section on practice brings in other approaches, such as participatory education and critical literacy, to show how they relate to an NLS view of literacy. I end the chapter with a few thoughts on learning, from a social practice perspective.

One of the most innovative aspects of the NLS has been its deliberate move away from educational contexts towards everyday uses of literacy and numeracy. However, the same approach – of thinking of literacy as social practice – can and indeed should also be applied to educational contexts, such as classrooms and other places where structured instruction takes place (see Hull and Schultz 2002 for a good summary of insights from recent work in this area). Thinking of classrooms as particular social and cultural contexts helps to develop conceptual links between literacies ‘outside’ – that is, in ‘real life’ and ‘inside’, meaning, within educational contexts. That the ‘outside’ bears upon the ‘inside’ – and thus should not be ignored – is one of the central arguments put forward by the NLS and thus is crucial for the discussion that follows here. To introduce this line of thought,

I begin with a brief aside on the concept of ‘schooled literacy’ as a way of talking about the specific practices of literacy and learning that characterise educational contexts.

Schooled ways of knowing: schooled ways of literacy

Earlier in this book, I suggested that there are multiple literacies and that these literacies are situated within particular social and cultural contexts, which shape both their form and their meaning. This is no different for reading and writing in educational contexts. A closer look at what is going on in schools or in adult language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) classes reveals a number of literacy practices that are commonly used. While some literacy practices are actively promoted through the processes of teaching and learning, others are not recognised or are even discouraged. The literacy practices of educational settings can be called ‘school literacies’ or ‘schooled literacies’ (Street 1995).

Schooled literacies have a lot to do with the objectification of written (and spoken) language. In schools and adult LLN classes, literacy is distanced from its ‘real-life’ social uses and turned into a set of independent and neutral skills that work according to rules, which can be taught and learned (Street 1995). The argument here is not that such skills – as, for example, the skills of coding and decoding of letters and words – are irrelevant to the processes of reading and writing. They are certainly an intrinsic part of what reading and writing is about. But literacy is about much more than the ability to employ the technology of print. Literacy is always about reading or writing something: a meaning or a message.

The purpose of literacy education should be to enable learners to ‘read’ these meanings, which implies the ability to read beyond and between the lines. Its purpose should also be to help them to participate meaningfully in events and activities that involve the use of written texts. However, what happens easily in the process of pedagogisation (the process of making an everyday activity, such as writing a letter, the subject of a lesson) is that literacies are being stripped of their social and ideological meanings, stripped of the purposes they serve and the activities they are part of, and as a result are treated as neutral and autonomous skills. Acquiring them can then turn into a mechanical and meaningless process of learning rules and techniques.

The idea of school literacies leads us to look at classrooms (adult LLN or school) as social and cultural institutions that have particular values and follow particular rules and procedures. Schools are associated with sitting in rows or around tables, and with or doing exercises from worksheets. Teacher-initiated question-and-answer sessions, grammar-based teaching, tests and assessments are among the dominant practices. Such school literacies typically see form as a matter of high importance. In the case of adult literacy learners, the main question is whether – or to what extent – adults need to be confined by the conventions and rules of school literacy, for example, when practising their own writing.

Literacies are closely connected to knowledge. School literacies are part and parcel of school ways of knowing. Schools value and promote academic (scientific) knowledge, rationality and mainstream cultural values and practices. The concept of school literacies is helpful, because it makes us aware of the narrow and specialised way in which current educational discourse defines reading and writing. School literacies are often treated as the only valuable form of literacy. In this view, minority and vernacular literacies do not count as valid literacy practices. This is not only the case for minority languages. In many adult LLN classes, the local experience and the vernacular literacy practices of local communities and subcultures are not given legitimacy. To give an example, regional dialects, such as the Scots language, are marginalised by the dominance of Standard English in the education system (Crowther and Tett 2001).

The concept of literacy that most strongly shapes current adult LLN policy in Britain is functional literacy (see Chapter 1). As with school literacy, the idea of functional literacy is part of a discourse of uniform skills and measurable levels of competence. The recent changes in adult literacy policy in England that I discussed in Chapter 6 (a national system of provision, with a national curriculum and national tests) have brought the adult language, literacy and numeracy sector closer to the conventions of formal education. As part of these changes, the language used in adult LLN has become more school-like, and typical literacy practices of schools have become more important in adult language, literacy and numeracy education (think, for example, about tests). Policies (such as Skills for Life) are designed on the basis of choices over the approach and the practices to be included. Different policies privilege different approaches and as a result different literacy practices are privileged. To give an example, in the 1970s and 1980s, student writing was an important part of adult LLN in England, but this no longer appears to be the case in the Skills for Life programme.

Policy implications: challenging dominant discourses about literacy

A socially based view of literacy provides an alternative to the functional discourse that currently dominates adult language, literacy and numeracy policy. To begin with, the social view allows us to see that there are many more literacies than the functional view acknowledges and that these literacies are central to people's lives. The current government's commitment to adult basic education has resulted in increased provision of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL classes. This is without doubt a positive development. From a social literacies point of view, we nevertheless have to ask what exactly these new programmes provide: what literacy practices are included in the Skills for Life strategy? Are these the dominant literacies of schools and workplaces only? And what are the values, norms and identities that are being imparted at the same time?

The social view argues that literacy programmes should do more than help people to be economically active and productive. Social literacy is about more than

vocationally relevant skills and making one's contribution to the nation's economic productivity; it includes literacy for active citizenship, political participation, individual development and leisure. The purpose of literacy education that is informed by a social view is to enable learners to engage widely in activities and relationships that lie inside and outside the workplace. Furthermore, the aim is to empower adults to influence decisions that affect their lives. Here, a social practices view of literacy overlaps with the concept of critical literacy and I will come back to this later in this chapter. What is important to say at this point is that the social practice view of literacy can and should be applied to examine critically all existing literacy, numeracy and ESOL programmes (using an approach similar to the one I used in Chapter 7). Here, the NLS have an important contribution to make as an 'outside' voice that can usefully add to current policy perspectives.

One of the central implications of the social view of literacy is that adults who, according to surveys such as the IALS (see Chapter 7), are regarded as having serious literacy deficiencies, are in fact not only involved in numerous literacy and numeracy events throughout their lives, but may possess a range of informally acquired literacy and numeracy skills. The social view of literacy aims to overcome the deficit view that shapes so much of current literacy policy and practice. It asks how local, non-standard and multi-lingual literacy practices and informally acquired knowledge and skills can be validated and included in any literacy teaching. I will say more on this in the next section, which deals with practice. With regards to policy, the New Literacy Studies have an important contribution to make to current debates about 'skills'. With its ethnographic approach, the NLS are ideally placed to produce the kind of in-depth accounts of people's own literacy practices that meaningfully complement the picture derived from survey-based research. Such research can document the role of literacy and numeracy in the lives of those people at whom Skills for Life and other programmes are aimed. The justification for this is that we currently know too little about what these people do already with literacy, what skills they have, what strategies they have developed to cope, where they think they have problems and what they would like to learn.

Policy-makers may dismiss the need for such knowledge, arguing that existing surveys provide enough information on the state of literacy and numeracy in the country and that many studies have convincingly demonstrated the links between low literacy and numeracy, unemployment or underemployment, low earnings, poor health and social marginalisation. But statistics can only touch at the surface of these phenomena and they tend to isolate single factors while neglecting the complex ways in which a variety of circumstances interact with each other to produce individual situations. Statistics can tell us little about how concretely – let's say, in a group of long-term unemployed – low skills relate to their difficulties in finding a job and any other problems they may face.

Yet such information is crucial to make policies more responsive to learners' needs and aspirations. The dominant approach to policy development is on the basis of 'assumed' needs (see Castleton 2001), rather than on needs expressed by learners themselves or on an analysis of needs based on in-depth consultation and

research on the ground. Knowing more about what people already do with literacy and numeracy in their lives would allow curriculum developers and teachers to develop new areas of practice that directly build on and incorporate people's existing uses of literacy and numeracy.

On a more general level, ethnographic studies of literacy have an important contribution to make to policy in that they can draw attention to the diversity of literacy in our contemporary society and challenge the dominance of standard literacies (Hamilton 2000). This includes the literacy (and numeracy) practices of non-mainstream communities and ethnic and linguistic minorities, many of which are ignored or regarded with suspicion by mainstream society and its educational institutions.

Taking account of people's own views on literacy

People with low levels of literacy not only make use of reading and writing in everyday life, but they also have views about literacy and about education generally. The term 'literacy practices' (see chapters 2 and 3) deliberately includes the uses and meanings of reading and writing, addressing people's own definitions for literacy and numeracy. Knowing about people's own discourses about literacy and numeracy helps policy-makers and planners to understand what kinds of learning programmes these people are likely to enjoy. Since the introduction of Skills for Life strategy in 2001, the government has invested heavily into its Get On campaign, a concerted effort to attract people to adult LLN classes. The enrolment figures are impressive, but some of the government's priority groups remain 'hard to reach'.

Meanwhile, the government is relentlessly pursuing its awareness-raising strategies and this begs the question how much the government understands about people's circumstances and their reasons for not joining. To say that those who do not come forward are disengaged and lack motivation – or do not recognise the problems they have – may be too easy. A social practices view of literacy suggests that we can think about non-learners in a different way. We need to find out what deters them from coming. One factor may be their negative experiences with school literacies whose predominant effect was not empowerment, but exclusion. The dominant view – that low skills cause under- or unemployment, bad health and social marginalisation – may simply not reflect their situation. Lack of literacy and numeracy, despite what the dominant discourse wants us to believe, may not be an issue for them; or they may want to do something about their skills, but may be put off by the forms of provision on offer.

The above suggests that the picture is much more complex than the public and policy-makers believe. It is true that many of those who are economically deprived, and have no access to adequate nutrition, housing, health care and education, also have little or no access to the dominant literacies of schools and workplaces. However, this does not mean that improving their reading and writing will necessarily and automatically improve their income or guarantee them access

to proper housing and health care. The conditions that contribute to people's marginal position are much more complex; literacy is only one factor among many others that may be able to help them transform their lives. A social view of literacy can contribute a different way of thinking about the 'literacy problem'. What we need to do is try to steer the debate towards a view of reading and writing that does not consider literacy to be merely a matter of educational attainment alone. Rather, such a broad view sees the 'literacy problem' as related to the social and cultural exclusion that results from the current socio-economic context and from recent technological and social changes (Hamilton and Merrifield 2000).

Influencing policy: is this possible?

The above presents a number of ideas and viewpoints that are relevant for policy. Influencing policy-makers' views, however, is easier said than done. Without doubt, a lot of progress has been made in recent years in re-theorising literacy and in making the social practice approach better known. However, as Hamilton (2000: 2) remarks 'there is still a long way to go to make the NLS a credible approach within policy and practice'. A lot of work still needs to be done, undoubtedly, in bringing the approach closer to policy. Indeed, we need to do more than produce lists of suggestions, as I have done here.

What researchers can do and have tried to do is enter a dialogue with policy-makers. Active lobbying for a broader concept of literacy and a different way of thinking about the present 'literacy crisis', however, has been hindered by the entrenched ways in which the media report on the issue and the lack of cooperation between the government and research institutions. The Skills for Life programme has changed some of this and has provided new opportunities for research to inform policy. The work of the NRDc, funded by the government, has provided a new space for research on literacy, numeracy and ESOL to move into the mainstream.

There are currently several research initiatives that apply a social practice view of literacy to teaching and learning in a variety of contexts and settings (for more information on these projects, see <http://www.literacy.lancs.ac.uk/> and <http://www.nrdc.org.uk/>). These projects focus on learners and on all those who are targeted by current policies, the aim being to understand the links between what is happening in classes and what role literacy and numeracy play in learners' lives. The dominant methodology used by researchers from Lancaster Literacy Research Centre is ethnography. This approach deliberately and purposefully focuses on everyday life, while at the same time taking the ethnographic approach into the educational context.

Such work, as can be expected, is not without conflict and contradiction, and the fact that a lot of the research being carried out around Skills for Life is funded by the government creates its own ambiguities. The challenge for the researchers involved is twofold: to prove the credibility of the NLS, while not losing their original ethos and becoming co-opted by the dominant agenda of current times.

It is worth mentioning here that the NLS have been involved with policy even prior to the opening of the NRDCC. However, this has mostly happened abroad. Since the mid-1990s, UK-based researchers have been involved in work supported by the Department for International Development (DfID) to promote adult literacy, language and numeracy education in the so-called developing countries. A small number of innovative projects were developed, all of which explicitly drew on the social literacies approach and sought to develop new forms of learning and teaching (see Rogers et al. 1999; Millican 2004).

As a result of these initiatives and the collaboration between researchers and DfID personnel, the notion of literacy as a social practice has found its way into the department's thinking about literacy and has helped to develop a new approach that more closely embeds adult literacy, language and numeracy teaching with other community-based and development-orientated activities. The focus of such activities is to support people in their existing uses of literacy and numeracy. I will come back to one of these initiatives in the following section, where I turn to the practice implications of the social view of literacy.

Practice implications: diversifying the curriculum and working with learners' own literacy and numeracy practices

What are the implications of the social view of literacy for the practice of adult language, literacy and numeracy teaching? How can teachers use the NLS approach to develop new ways of teaching and learning with adults? Before I respond to these questions, it is important to say that the social view of literacy did not develop in isolation, and does not see itself as opposed to all other perspectives on literacy teaching. In fact, it shares many ideas with other models of literacy, notably with participatory education and critical literacy, which is why I discuss them here.

Social views of literacy and critical literacy education

Critical literacy education is based on a belief that learning to read and write, or improving one's reading and writing, goes beyond the acquisition of new skills and includes learning 'how to use literacy to examine critically one's position in life in terms of socio-economic status, gender, educational background and race' (Degener 2001: 29). Adult literacy and numeracy programmes that are developed in a critical perspective attempt to involve students in examining the factors that determine their position in society and in developing ways to change their lives (see also Chapter 1).

Many researchers and practitioners who think of literacy as a social practice would argue that a social model of reading and writing necessarily includes a critical component. They would say that a social theory of literacy is necessarily political. The ideological model of literacy (Street 1993) invites us to examine how specific literacy practices are embedded in power structures and are used to extend

institutional authority. As part of a literacy programme, learners can engage in critical discussions about the powerful literacy practices they encounter in their everyday lives, for example, bureaucratic forms (see Chapter 3). Teachers and learners together can discuss whether acquiring dominant literacy practices will really lead to the expected changes in learners' lives.

Practitioners and researchers who have sought to develop the practice implications of the social view have drawn on 'critical language awareness' (CLA) and 'critical discourse analysis' (CDA) as instruments to help learners examine particular ways of using written and spoken language (Fairclough 1992, 1995 and 2003; Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999; Wodak and Meyer 2001). The argument is that if literacy focuses on the skills of reading and writing (and numbers) only, learners are not given any opportunity to understand how some meanings are selected and preferred, while others are not.

Jessop, Lawrence and Pitt (1998) discuss how what is called 'critical literacy practice' can be applied in adult literacy, numeracy or ESOL classes. In their work with students, they draw on CDA and CLA to critically examine a variety of texts. Developing critical language awareness means trying to understand how the particular language – written and spoken – used by institutions and public figures conveys authority and disguises ideological positions behind seemingly natural and neutral words and phrases (see Ivanic 1990; Janks and Ivanic 1992; Clark and Ivanic 1998). Such critical analysis of different literacies is an important part of literacy teaching that is grounded in a social view of literacy. This kind of teaching aims to enable learners to identify the 'meaning beyond – or between the lines – and the interests behind the meaning' (Crowther and Tett 2001: 114).

The affinities of critical and social approaches should, however, not be taken for granted. It is possible to imagine the social practice approach being tainted by a liberal agenda. To guard against this, I want to take up Shore's idea of 'critical social literacy' (2003: 20). She suggests that if we are serious about treating literacy as a social practice, this implies that we always engage with the power relations that spin around learners' own literacies. This implies going beyond the text and its readings, by examining what's being done with the text, by whom, the role it plays in institutional processes and whose purposes it serves. Ewing, reflecting on his own work as a literacy teacher in Canada, suggests that the assertions of the social practice view of literacy imply that the 'realities of communities' (Ewing 2003: 17) need to be given a central place in the literacy programme. And these, in most cases, are realities of disadvantage and disempowerment.

As an example, he refers to his own work in a neighbourhood of Toronto, where the learning of written language developed around issues of health and housing. The literacy practices that learners worked with were selected from the uses of written language in their community. Crucially, working around these practices provided space for open discussion of the issues that mattered to learners, but at the same time allowed the group to tackle the technical aspects of coding and decoding written language. Without doubt, as these and other examples show, such an integrated and critical approach to the teaching of language, literacy and

numeracy can be highly stimulating and it need not descend into a liberal or even a functional approach.

Social views of literacy and participatory education

Participatory approaches to adult education have had a central place in literacy and numeracy education since the Right to Read campaign in the 1970s. The main principle of participatory adult literacy education is learner-centredness. Ideally, learners are actively involved in all stages of planning and implementation of the programme. This is most important regarding the curriculum and the expected outcomes of programmes (Auerbach 1999).

As with critical literacy education, participatory approaches have much to share with a social view of literacy. Both challenge the teacher-led and curriculum-centred ways that characterise much of current literacy education. To be participatory means to develop the curriculum based on learners' own lived realities and their own needs and aspirations. In terms of literacy practices, the implication is that literacy work starts from the purposes that literacy fulfils in learners' lives. In practice this means that learners will decide which literacies they want to be part of their learning.

If learners' everyday uses and meanings of literacy and learners' own literacy-related needs are to become the core of literacy education, we first need to find out what these literacies are. Hamilton (1999; see Reading 1, p. 141) has suggested that ethnographic research into everyday literacies – similar to the studies by researchers from the NLS – can be used as a curriculum resource. The idea is that teachers and learners engage in studying literacy practices of everyday life. An example of such work is given in Reading 2. The paper describes the experiences of a literacy group that used soap operas to discuss examples of the literacies of everyday life and the roles they played in learners' lives. This is an example of how student-led research can be used in adult language, literacy and numeracy classes.

As a teacher, you may still wonder how to make such research part of your own work. After all, ethnography is a research methodology that was developed and is mostly used by academics. In Chapter 4, I suggested that you carry out your own ethnographic study of literacy practices of your own choice. Part of the reason for doing so was to invite you to experience for yourself how the method works. Ethnography is a very flexible approach that can be used to greater or lesser degrees of intensity and depth and this helps to make it such a good tool for work with students. Furthermore, it does not rely on sophisticated research techniques.

Participant observation as a method does not require the researcher to behave in ways that are completely different to everyday normal social interaction. What it requires is a different frame of thinking, a different perspective from which to look at everyday activities. Some tools, however, are good to help get the process started. Pen and notebook are the most common ones, but more interesting perhaps is the use of cameras that allow students to take pictures of the literacy events they

observe. It is also a good idea to collect literacy artefacts and to use these as a starting point for later discussions in class.

I want now to move on to the analysis of the literacy practices that students have identified and how such an analysis can be done jointly in class. To begin with, it is useful to simply list all the literacy events that students found and the texts these involved. A second step would be to identify the domains of social life these were part of. Producing such a list is likely to provoke lively debate and unexpected surprises as to the wide presence of texts in our daily lives. We live, as Dorothy Smith (1990) has suggested, in a textually mediated world. However, common notions of literacy and taken-for-granted ideas about what constitutes reading and writing (see Chapter 2) mean that many daily literacy activities are not recognised, not even by ourselves. We are not aware of the many ways in which we use texts to fulfil such mundane activities as preparing our breakfast, buying a train ticket or deciding how to spend the coming weekend.

Becoming aware of the diversity of everyday literacy practices can help learners to see their own practices in a more positive light and thereby to overcome the deficit notion that many are likely to have internalised. At a more general level, working with students' own literacy practices can pave the way towards a critical analysis of the way mainstream society and educational institutions restrict what is accepted and valued as literacy. This is particularly important when working with learners from non-mainstream backgrounds and those whose first language is not Standard English, be it working-class families from Glasgow whose home language is Scots or immigrants from West Africa whose mother tongue nobody in England has ever heard of.

Further steps in analysing the events found could follow the framework suggested in Chapter 4, looking at participants, settings, norms, behaviours and so on. When following this approach, it is a good idea for the teacher and the students to think carefully about who takes part in different literacy practices. What roles do different participants take on? Who is actively involved in the event and who is a peripheral participant or just a bystander? Whose purposes does the event serve? Who has prepared or is preparing any texts that are involved and who controls how they are read, interpreted and used? Addressing these questions can allow teachers and learners to develop a clearer picture of what actually happens in a literacy event and what precisely it is that creates difficulties for learners.

Take as an example the kind of bureaucratic forms I discussed in Chapter 3. A skills view of literacy assumes that if applicants struggle to complete the form this is because they do not understand the words used, they find the layout confusing, or they do not know how to put their answers. While I agree that all these can present difficulties, I have already suggested earlier in this book (see Chapter 3) that the reasons why people struggle are much more complex. Much has to do for example with understanding the system and procedures of which the text is part, and the nature of the applicant's rights and obligations.

Another aspect that could be brought into the discussion of learners' everyday literacies is the relationship between a text, the language it uses and the knowledge

it contains. Often what results in vernacular literacies not being accepted is not only the language and style they use, but the knowledge they contain. The question not only is what do people read, but also does what they read count.

With the above, I have tried to show how research into everyday literacies can be used by learners and teachers in a variety of ways and that it can lead to a range of curriculum innovations. The ultimate purpose of this kind of work is for teachers and learners to explore ways to re-examine and re-value their own literacy practices and to create a space within the educational context for these literacies and for the knowledge they contain. The ethnographic approach of the NLS is a particularly suitable tool to unpack what is happening in literacy events and to understand what roles different people take in it. One particular suggestion that has derived from the social practice view of literacy is the use of 'real literacy texts' such as letters, invoices or forms (see Rogers et al. 1999). Rather than using these for the teaching of coding and decoding skills, the idea would be to make these part of the kind of critical analysis I suggested above.

Another option is to integrate the teaching of reading and writing with the activities of community groups and thereby to dispense with 'isolated' literacy or numeracy classes. This approach, which has affinities with current work in England on 'embedded' literacy and numeracy provision, was tried out in an innovative project in Nepal. The Community Literacy Project in Nepal (CLPN; see their website at <http://www.clpn.org>) was developed with the explicit aim of using the concept of literacy as a social practice. The project, which was supported by the British Department for International Development (DfID), used ethnographic studies of community literacy practices as the basis for developing the curriculum. From this, a range of activities were set up with the aim of helping communities to broaden their engagement with literacy practices and use these for their own purposes and desires.

On learning

The attentive reader will not have failed to notice that although much of this book has been concerned with the uses of reading and writing in everyday life, and with the politics and practices of teaching adults to improve their reading and writing, I have said very little about learning. What has been missing is a discussion of what a social practice approach to literacy (and numeracy) means in terms of learning. The skills view of literacy has a clear idea of what the learning of literacy is about: it means learning to code and decode letters, words and sentences, learning the rules of grammar and spelling, and so on. But how does the social practice view of literacy conceptualise learning? How do we describe what learning is? Keeping in line with the NLS focus on everyday life, the central question is: how do adults learn literacy in everyday life?

To be frank, the social practice view of literacy has not yet developed a theory of learning that would fit its understanding of literacy as social practice, although some work has been done recently (see, for example, Gee 2004). This is not to say

that researchers in the NLS have no interest in learning and that they have not studied how people learn. Many of the ethnographies of literacy that are published contain data on learning. However, the insights to be gained from these have not yet been put together in any systematic way.

In their book *Local Literacies*, Barton and Hamilton (1998) describe the lives of several individuals who entered new spheres of activities, became part of new groups and networks and engaged in new activities. These new activities resulted from changes in their life circumstances – a divorce, a move to a new town or district, an illness or financial difficulty. Strikingly, such changes required people to develop new forms of expertise and to engage with new literacy practices. And they triggered people's interest in learning.

When her son was diagnosed as dyslexic, Shirley, one of Barton and Hamilton's informants, began to read books and magazine articles about dyslexia. When she became the editor of the local residents' association, she learned how to write editorials. Cliff, another of Barton and Hamilton's informants, used literacy to increase his knowledge about tinnitus, a condition he suffered from. For example, he read medical charts about hearing tests. At some point in his life, Harry, whom you may remember from Chapter 2, began to write his own book about his wartime experiences. Becoming a writer had been a gradual process for him, from carefully drafted letters to his first story (which he asked his son 'to flower up') and finally to the book. In the process, Harry learned new literacy practices.

Examples such as these suggest that learning could be conceptualised in the following way. First of all, learning entails a change in a person's ability to participate in a literacy event. By this I mean, for example, a move from being a peripheral participant who has little control over the event and little ability to use it for their own ends, to becoming a more central, more active agent in the event. And this includes using literacy, using text in this context in a way that satisfies the learner's own desires and needs. It also involves learning the discourses that shape the particular practice and becoming a member of a new discourse community (see Barton 1994).

Literacy is often a key instrument in access to and benefit from knowledge and from services and this requires people to engage with institutions and settings they may not be familiar with (Hamilton 2000). The ability to control the literacy events that are part of such encounters can be crucial to making these encounters meaningful and successful in the eyes of the user. In these contexts learning takes place in the way suggested above, by moving from a marginal position to being centrally involved in the literacy event and in control of it.

Secondly, learning could mean expanding one's own literacy repertoire, engaging with new forms of texts, discovering new ways of writing, exploring new ways of using print for various activities. In a recent paper, Ewing (2003) suggests that adult literacy learners develop their own strategies to make meaning from literacies that extend beyond their current abilities to process written language. This happens in classrooms, as part of structured teaching and learning. But the same happens in everyday life and it is a phenomenon not limited to the uneducated.

Another issue that emerges from existing studies of literacy in everyday life is the collaborative nature of much reading and writing, and much learning of new literacies. It is reasonable to assume that in everyday life we not only use literacy together but we also learn new literacies collaboratively. If learning in 'real life' is often collaborative, how does that fit with the more individual approach taken in many adult language, literacy and numeracy programmes? A further question concerns assessment. If learning means expanding one's own literacy repertoire and/or becoming a more active participant in literacy events, how can such learning be measured? The tests currently used in England are unlikely to capture such changes.

A final point that I would like to make is that, in settings where new powerful literacies were brought in from outside and imposed on people, researchers found that those at the recipient end did not passively accept these, but actively 'took hold' of them (Kulick and Stroud 1993). In the process they appropriated new literacies for their own purposes and incorporated them into their own cultural ways of knowing and communicating. This, in my view, is an important point to end on: adults are not passive; their learning is a process of actively engaging with new ideas and new techniques. Expanding one's own literacy repertoire always entails an element of transformation – at the end of which neither the learners' old practices nor the new ones they have absorbed remain completely the same.

Reading 1

Hamilton, M. (1999) Ethnography for classrooms: constructing a reflective curriculum for literacy', *Curriculum Inquiry*, pp. 437–439.

In this short extract from a paper by Mary Hamilton, she discusses the role of ethnography as a curricular resource for literacy teaching. Hamilton suggests that ethnography 'has potential as a learning resource, encouraging reflection, and theorising about literacy and critical engagement with questions about what literacy really is: how it is changing; how it is distributed around our neighbourhoods and communities; how we do it; and, perhaps, most importantly of all, what it is for' (pp. 430–431).

Practical Examples of Ethnography for the Literacy Classroom

have argued above that ethnography is about self-reflection, and observing closely the everyday practices going on around us. It is a stance from which the world is viewed, as much as a method or technique. It can be doing research focused on everyday practices, either inside or outside of the classroom. It can also be used as a method of professional development. This section offers a variety of examples where people have creatively merged the boundaries between research, teaching and learning.

The first set of examples is concerned with research on everyday practices in local communities outside of formal educational settings. This research involves close observation, detailed interviewing and analysis of texts, and is carried out in the form of ethnographic work in specific, bounded communities. There is a growing body of such data now within the UK: my own work has been the Literacy in the Community study (see Barton & Hamilton, 1998). In this we have been documenting the reading and writing which people do in their everyday lives in Lancaster, England, including what goes on in people's homes and how this is different from the media stereotypes.

The sense of there being different literacies is very clear in multilingual communities where different literacy practices can be associated with different languages (see for example, Hodge & Jones (1996, working in Blackburn and in North Wales), Bhatt (1995, working in Leicester) and Saxena (1994, in London). Eve Gregory is currently looking at roles of siblings in supporting literacy learning in the Bangladeshi community in East London (Gregory, 1998, 1999). Gemma Moss, who is working in primary school classrooms to explore how gender differences in literacy learning emerge, has given the children cameras which they use to take pictures of their home environment for later discussion.

Summary and conclusions

In this final chapter, I have discussed the policy and practice implications that derive from a social practice view of literacy. Some of these suggestions, such as the idea of asking learners to research their own literacy practices, have already been successfully implemented by adult LLN teachers. Several literacy projects exist that have developed detailed strategies to work with a social model of literacy, and the experiences of these initiatives have helped to further develop the practical side of the NLS.

Much more needs to be done, however, to develop workable models and strategies of how to use the social practice model for teaching. One area that requires more attention is notions of learning in everyday life and how everyday strategies of learning can be taken into educational settings. Much more also needs to be done in terms of carrying forward a dialogue between policy, practice and research with regard to the role the NLS can play in the current climate of adult language, literacy and numeracy. The challenge for the NLS is on the one hand to engage more directly with policy-makers' concerns (for example their focus on vocational skills), while on the other hand not to lose sight of the learners, and their priorities and perspectives.

A further set of examples come from institutional contexts which are neither everyday nor educational in the traditional sense of the term. For example, Anita Wilson has carried out a detailed ethnographic study of prison literacy (Wilson, 1996). This is an institutional setting where there are extremely strong public stereotypes of illiteracy and of problems with reading and writing. To take one example, she has investigated the amount of letter writing that goes on. Away from the education wing of prisons and within a group that you would expect using little reading and writing — young males — there is a tremendous amount of letter writing and it has great social significance.

Working in a therapeutic setting Susie Parr has adapted an ethnographic approach in her work with stroke patients suffering from aphasia who typically lose many of their literacy skills (Parr, 1995). She describes her dissatisfaction with the assessment methods traditionally available — functional assessments based on a fixed list of tasks and skills, and cognitive neuropsychological assessments that led to overly mechanistic and reductionist therapies. She set about interviewing aphasic patients about how their literacy practices had changed as a result of their stroke, about their strategies for coping with these changes and how they perceived their situation. She found that people respond in a variety of ways to the loss of previous skills, developing complex support and back-up systems with the help of friends and family, and not always wanting to regain previous levels of literacy skill, preferring to withdraw from certain roles or move into different areas of activity. These responses were key to deciding what kind of therapeutic programme would be appropriate for a given person.

The third example is a different kind of approach, inspired by ideas from community writing and publishing. The Workplace Basic Skills project organised by Fiona Frank has set up residential weekends which bring together participants to compare their practices in the workplace, and the role of literacy and basic skills courses in their working lives, and how these relate to changing technologies and practices in the workplace. Participants from a range of different workplaces have been offered the opportunity to research and document their experiences with this particular focus in mind (see Frank, 1992).

The translation of such research into educational settings is just a small step. As an example within adult education, Nora Hughes, who was a member of the Diploma in Literacy course at Goldsmiths College, London took Mukul Saxena's (1994) description of the literacy practices of members of a multilingual Punjabi community in Southall and used it to design a set of activities for her ESOL classes, transforming her students into ethnographers, researching their own communities and generating new curriculum materials and methods in the process (Hughes, 1992).

A second example is the 'Connect' Family literacy project in Lothian in which teachers and parents co-research home practices and use the information to inform curricula for family literacy courses (see Keen, 1995). In this case, a clearly thought through stance on family literacy drew on Elsa Auerbach's (1982) discussion of the

relationship between home and school in family literacy programmes in the USA, and has led to a practical strategy. Activities involve interviews, parents keeping literacy diaries and 'local investigations' that document the ways the reading and writing are used in the local community, including the variety of print that can be seen around the environment in which people conduct their lives. Roz Ivanić at Lancaster is currently engaged in co-research between primary school teachers and parents of children at Key Stage 2, to explore the ways in which children carrying out school projects, draw on the resources of home and neighbourhood.

Research

In Chapter 4, I invited you to carry out your own study of everyday literacies. What did you learn from this exercise about the nature of literacy and numeracy in everyday life? What do your findings reveal of the social and situated nature of literacy and numeracy practices?

Now think about how you carried out the study and discuss whether a similar exercise could be used with students in an adult literacy, numeracy or ESOL class. How could you, as Hamilton suggests, use such studies as a curriculum resource?

Reading 2

Roberts, G. and Prowse, J. (1999) 'Reporting soaps', *RaPAL Bulletin* 38: 26–29.

Gary Roberts and Jane Prowse are Community Education Workers who were lucky enough to be working for Connect at the time the events described in this article took place. They are both 'adult returners'. Gary is now based in Gracemount High School, Edinburgh, focusing on family literacy, where Jane also works part time.

We came to Sheffield with this research because we wanted to show that research can be fun in spite of practical limitations (money and time). We wanted to share practice and the educational opportunities of co-research and to enthuse others with the research 'bug'.

By October 1997 soaps had become 'a sexy educational issue' and we had already used them. This article is the report of the soap research carried out by the Family Literacy Project, known as Connect, based in the Pilton (of *Trainspotting* fame) area of Edinburgh. The project, in January 1997, unwittingly, pre-empted the Government's employment of soap operas and used the medium as a basis for investigating literacy events and practices.¹

¹ Ivanić, Barton (eds), *Writing in the community* (London: Sage, 1991).

The catalyst for the use of soap operas in the research came about because 'soaps' were talked about at length before many group sessions started and several parent/carers bought magazines which gave the story-lines for the next few months. Parents/carers would express opinions about how good or bad the story-line was especially if it involved a 'life issue' that had relevance to the groups.... It became apparent that the majority of family literacy groups were interested in and regularly followed soap opera story-lines. Connect staff believed that this interest and knowledge of soap operas could be built on and used as the starting point for an investigation into literacy events and practices because the majority of soaps tend to focus more on the home and community domains. This, it was felt, would allow an opportunity to critically analyse traditional 'school literacy' and the values placed on it.

In addition, the co-researchers would be put in the position of 'expert', whereby their opinion was accepted as knowledgeable, valued and enabled them to take up ownership of the research.

The co-researchers (parent/carers) were asked to watch and record the literacy events they observed in a soap opera of their choice and collect any newspaper or magazine articles about that soap during the 'watching' period. These findings would then be used to create a checklist of the 'soap' events identified together with frequency of their use. The checklist would then be utilised as a 'tool' to identify the events in the homes and community of Pilton. This would then allow a comparison between the already established media portrayal of literacy events with the every day events and practices of the co-researchers.

One of the existing Connect groups decided to develop their checklist for the research component of 'An Introduction to People & Society' a Scotvec Module that they were studying for at the time.

The total number of co-researchers involved in 'watching' the soaps for literacy events, practices and frequency was fifty-three. Of these twenty-seven continued with the research and completed the identification of their home and community literacy events and practices. These co-researchers were members of the three existing, two new and one non-Connect group.

Results from the soaps were both interesting and informative. It became apparent from the figures collated that as the co-researchers progressed from soap watching to look at events in their own homes and community lives, they became more aware of the many literacies they practised and how these are inter-related. (This could be because the primary focus of the research was on their own events and practices or because of the way non-school literacy is portrayed by soaps).

This can be evidenced by the doubling of noted literacy events recognised by the co-researchers in their homes as compared to those identified in the 'soap' home. The most frequently noted literacy event was reading the newspaper. This evidences the value that the co-researchers place on 'non-book' literacy and how their understanding of 'different' literacies had evolved. If newspapers do play such an integral

part in Pilton life, then further research into what and how this form of the media could be utilised could be very useful to schools, especially in the way they communicate with parents.

The diversity of events was much wider in all Pilton findings. There were also several interesting literacy events identified in the soaps e.g. the use of bleepers which led to a discussion about the numeracy and reading involved in their use. "Choosing horses for the Derby", was considered very much a home activity, and using "a Bookies" the community follow-on event.

Interesting to many of the co-researchers was identification of 'oral literacy', or as one co-researcher referred to as 'just talking'. This 'discovery' was considered by the co-researchers important and was first identified by a group who were discussing events shown in 'The Bill' where tape recordings of witnesses being interviewed were later transcribed. The co-researchers understanding of 'oral literacy' developed as their research progressed to identify that soap operas themselves are scripted pieces of work.

The buying of Lottery tickets, scratch cards, and the reading of weekly winning numbers in outlets (local shops) has impacted on events and practices since its inception three years ago. Over three quarters of the co-researchers associated events relating to these lottery activities.

A long list of literacy events involved in the domestic life of cooking, cleaning and child rearing were generated by the findings; these included the more obvious examples of reading and writing recipes to the reading and numeracy involved in using appliances, reading/checking meters and using cooking equipment.

One of the non-Connect group members produced his own survey of literacy events seen or heard on a variety of TV and radio programmes from the News at 10 to Masters Snooker. He was so disappointed by the lack of what he described as 'representative literacy' that he requested the research project write a letter of complaint to the BBC and ITV companies about the poor example they were giving! All these events identified by the co-researchers show how the research process encouraged the recognition of different 'literacies' but more importantly, generated discussion within the groups about these 'different literacies'.

The co-researchers from the non-Connect group initially experienced problems with the term 'anything to do with literacy'. They had been asked, like all other participating groups, to watch and note 'anything to do with reading, writing or number' and from this they took the meaning to be 'looking for signs of literacy'. They expressed the view that "at their age they were not involved in education". In spite of the fact some had grandchildren who were at nursery/school and they themselves attended a class at their local community high school. They concluded that they "could be of no help to Connect as a group because some of them did not watch soaps".

Overall this research enabled the co-researchers to identify their home, school, community literacies and frequencies. It allowed them to begin to value these

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literacies while critically challenging their understanding of literacy in society. Finally it allowed the project to develop a responsive curriculum that built on these home and community literacies and new ways of discussing them. Thanks must be given to the co-researchers for participating, without them there would have been nothing to write about and for Jim Crowther (Moray House, Edinburgh) for his theoretical expertise.

Reflection

Reading 2 describes an exercise in researching students' own literacy practices. In this case, it seems that research into students' own literacies led to useful and important discussions in the group. The authors claim that this helped students to begin to value their own literacies. But can this be achieved so easily, if in public life and work certain literacies – different from people's own literacies – dominate?

Additional reading

- Crowther, J. and Tett, L. (2001) Democracy as a way of life: literacy for citizenship', in J. Crowther, M. Hamilton and L. Tett (eds) *Powerful Literacies*, Leicester: NIACE, pp. 108–121.
 Street, B.V. (1997) The implications of the "New Literacy Studies" for literacy education', *English in Education* 31 (3): 45–59.

With this book, I have tried to achieve two purposes: first, to introduce readers to a social practice view of literacy and its implications for the policy and practice of adult language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) and, second, to offer a critical discussion of current adult LLN policies in Britain and elsewhere.

The principal argument that I put forward in this book is that literacy is more than an abstract set of skills. It is more appropriate to think about literacy as social and situated practice. It is social, because reading and writing always involve people communicating and interacting with each other. It is social also because literacy is part of what determines relationships between people. Literacy is situated, because it is always embedded in a broader social practice and, within it, literacy itself is bound to other structures and institutions. The above also suggests that literacy is cultural, and when we speak about literacy as social practice we commonly imply this to include the 'cultural', that is, the values, ideas, conventions, identities and worldviews that shape the event of which literacy is part.

If literacy is not just a skill, but a social practice, this has important implications for how we study reading and writing, and how we learn and teach new literacies. Part of this book was devoted to exploring these new ways of studying literacy and as the reader you may have spent some time exploring for yourself what it means to carry out a study of literacy in everyday life. In the process, you may have reviewed some of your own literacy practices, or you may have examined with a fresh perspective the literacy practices of others, perhaps including those commonly labelled as lacking basic reading and writing skills. In a further step, I suggested ways of using the same ethnographic approach both to inform policy as well as to develop activities that can be carried out with literacy learners. With regard to policy, ethnography can provide detailed pictures of the role of literacy in learners' lives. Such ethnographies can go a long way in refuting the deficit views that underline current policy discourses about literacy and in making policy-makers aware of learners' 'real' needs. As for practice, I illustrated how ethnography can be used as a curriculum resource, getting students involved in researching their own literacy (numeracy and language) practices and helping to stimulate discussion and reflection on the various practices that are important to them and that they may want to acquire.

Throughout the book, I have tried to keep an eye on issues of power in relation to literacy (numeracy and ESOL) who possesses what literacies and what do these allow people to do; who is excluded from which literacies and how do particular literacy practices (e.g., certain institutional practices) disempower some and privilege others. I have also asked how certain discourses about literacy (and numeracy and ESOL) have become prominent in policy and have dominated the agenda of governments and education providers. In regard to current policy, I raised questions about the status of people's own literacy and language practices in the curriculum and the assumptions Skills for Life makes about which literacy practices students most urgently want to acquire. A further issue I raised is to what extent the new curricula take into account students' own ways of learning and their own ways of knowing (a point that may be particularly important for ESOL learners). In Chapter 8, I suggested that as researchers and practitioners we need to pursue a critical social approach to literacy, numeracy and ESOL and I pointed out ways we can apply this perspective. The question that remains is how realistic it is to believe in the possibilities for such work to be done, given the narrow terms of the current policy framework. The aim of current literacy policy in England appears to be to create a skilled workforce rather than an informed and active citizenry (Hamilton and Merrifield 2000). If this is so, is there space for a critical social approach? And, in promoting such an approach, are we not pursuing a romantic ideal?

Critics of the social practice view of literacy (see McCabe 1998) accuse it of promoting vernacular literacies that in the current climate are irrelevant to people's position in the world. They argue that to promote vernacular literacies means that as educators we perpetuate learners' exclusion from the dominant literacy practice they desire to access. Much can be said in response to this accusation and I want to make a few points here. Firstly, promoting vernacular literacies does not equal denying people access to the powerful literacies of workplaces and public institutions. Secondly, encouraging critical reflection on people's own literacy practices does not mean a descent into romanticism. The critical approach implies that all practices – including one's own – need to be examined. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the above criticism emanates from the view that access to the dominant literacy practices of formal institutions and workplaces is the only goal of adult LLN. A critical social approach to adult LLN does not share this view. Access to dominant literacies is crucial and it would be wrong to deny learners such access. But it perpetuates the status quo.

Ultimately, the goal of a critical social approach is to challenge the current configuration of dominant and marginal literacies. Languages are changing and so are literacies and our current world is full of examples of these changing language and literacy practices – from new e-literacies and 'textese', to experimental forms of writing and new creoles, to new multimodal forms of expression. Where does school literacy stand in relation to all these literacies? How can those who promote the 'standard' continue to ignore the fact that what is 'really useful literacy' (Martin and Rahman 2001) can only be decided by individuals and communities themselves?

The dominant discourse of work and skills not only remains powerful, but it is also strikingly narrow. With regard to workplace literacies in particular, one wonders whether the dominant discourse of human resource development has acknowledged that what are 'marketable' skills is itself subject to continuous change and diversification. To give an example, what many may regard as the playful and pointless games of teenage online surfing and video gaming are in fact highly likely to equip these youngsters with skills and experiences that many employers are looking to find amongst their staff (Merchant 2001). And yet, we are being told over and over again that as workers and employees we need to train and retrain, in order to keep up with the changing nature of work, to be efficient and competitive. How much do policy-makers know about the many highly useful and relevant literacy skills that people acquire through their own self-controlled literacy practices?

Within the discourse of the knowledge economy and its 'new work order' (Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996), lack of literacy and numeracy is a dark spot that governments are eager to erase. Many of the recent policy developments in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL, as I have argued in this book, are motivated by this desire. Hence the dominance of the vocational agenda over older, more liberal or more critical models of adult LLN. But despite the hegemony of economic concerns, what content and what values dominate adult LLN in England is still a matter of debate. There are still adult literacy initiatives in the UK that explicitly pursue a broad humanistic and a politically informed agenda. Such initiatives are informed by critical and social views of literacy.

A social practice approach to literacy has much to contribute to such initiatives and it can support the work of all those who aim towards challenging and reversing the dominant understandings of what counts as useful literacy and the narrow terms under which the debates around the 'literacy crisis' is being construed. The goal of such endeavours is to bring to the fore new 'powerful' literacies, be they the marginalised literacies of working class communities in the North-West of England or the literacy practices of immigrants from Somali. The agenda for promoting such literacies, as Crowther, Hamilton and Tett (2001:3) point out, 'has to be informed by issues of social justice, equality and democracy in everyday life' thereby locating literacy within the struggles for active citizenship, social inclusion (in a broad sense) and cultural diversity, rather than treating it abstractly as an issue of skills and individual competence.