

## **Adult Literacy, the discourse of deficit and social justice**

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### **Introduction**

This paper draws on a two-phased study of over six hundred literacy learners in Scotland that examined various aspects of their learning experiences and their perceptions of the impact that learning had on their lives. Participants were drawn from nine areas representing Scotland's geographical diversity and they had taken part in programmes in over a 100 different institutions including Further Education colleges, community, work, and prison based tuition. All participants had chosen to participate in the programmes on a voluntary basis. The overall aim of the research was to evaluate the Scottish Adult Literacy and Numeracy Strategy and the detailed findings are reported in Tett et al, (2006a). The findings from the project suggest that social justice is not achieved by simply providing opportunities to participate in literacy provision but instead requires an approach to learning that prioritises learners' strengths rather than their weaknesses using an accessible and appropriate curriculum that is delivered by tutors who take learners' backgrounds into account.

### **Methodology**

Face-to-face interviews lasting around one hour, using a structured questionnaire, were conducted with 613 learners in their place of tuition between September 2003 and April 2004. The questions were designed to ascertain demographic information; learners' pathways into adult literacy; any barriers to entry; experiences of learning, teaching and the curriculum; guidance received at entry, during and at the end of the programme; the effect of participation on their personal, family, public, education and working lives, degree of satisfaction with the quality of learning programmes; views of how provision can be improved; the 'social capital' of the learner; and an assessment of 'self-confidence'. A mixture of closed and open questions was used to enable the views of learners to be captured. The qualitative data derived from the open questions were analysed for 200 of the learner sample. Cases were selected using a stratified random procedure to ensure that the sample included learners from all the areas involved in the research and the demographic profile of the qualitative sample closely matched that of the total sample.

After an interval of around one year, learners were re-interviewed between September 2004 and April 2005. Three hundred and ninety three learners were interviewed a second time representing 64% of the original sample. The focus of this interview was on changes since the first interview, so generally the same questions were asked, enabling differences in learners' self-confidence and the effect of participation on their lives to be assessed. As in the first interview, the questions were both closed and open and the sample of 200 learners (just over 50%) whose open questions were analysed was drawn from people that had taken part in both rounds of interviews. The methodology was designed to access the 'distance travelled' by the respondents between the interviews, based on their perceptions of the impacts of their participation in adult literacy.

The open qualitative data on which this paper is based were analysed using the database *Filemaker*. Responses based on the interviewers' notes and extracts from mini-disc recordings were copied into the database, codified and examined under a number of thematic headings. This method provided an analysis using an *a priori* systematic conceptual framework as well as a flexible grounded approach for probing emergent issues.

It also enabled the extraction of quotations that aptly captured relevant concerns. These are used to illustrate examples of changes in the learners' own words. Before these data are considered, however, the particular context of adult literacy and the implications for learners is discussed.

### **Adult literacy and the discourse of deficit**

Being literate has become of enormous significance in the contemporary policy discourse as a means of human capital development and as a response to the effects of globalisation. Policies across the world commonly assume that lack of literacy restricts the ability of workers to adapt to new technology and leads to safety concerns and costly mistakes, prevents those without such skills from obtaining or retaining employment and has a negative effect on a country's economic performance. For example, in Scotland the Scottish Executive has suggested 'in an increasingly globalised economy, Scotland's future prosperity depends on building up the skills of her existing workforce and improving the employability of those seeking work' (Scottish Executive, 2001: 7) and the international OECD reports all strongly recommend a focus on improving literacy skills as the 'key' to unlocking the benefits of globalisation (OECD, 1997; 1999). At the individual level being literate is generally equated with success in life, with notions of a person being 'educated' and having access to the goods and trappings that are valued highly in society (e.g. DfEE, 2001; CEC, 2000a).

Literacy is treated, however, as if it was a set of unproblematic, information-processing cognitive skills that are independent of the context in which they are used. The process of acquiring these skills is conceptualised as a ladder that has to be climbed up where people are ranked from top to bottom with the emphasis on what they can't do rather than what they can. This leads to a deficit model where those on the bottom rungs are positioned as lacking the skills that others think they need. This approach has framed the terms of the debate, defined the scope and content of which groups are seen to be deficient in literacy and why, and denied the central role of culture and relationships of power in determining literacy needs and aspirations. Literacy skills are seen as neutral and objective within a discourse that takes no account of the ways in which they are used in specific communities (Appleby & Bathmaker, 2006; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Tett et al, 2006b). In this discourse, 'literacy skills are elevated; they are viewed as a set of technical skills which, once acquired, usually lead to positive employment outcomes' (Black, 2002: 2).

In terms of the curriculum that is available for learning this means that adult literacy is framed as the acquisition of a body of standardised reading and writing skills that can be formally assessed and compared within and between nations. The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), for example, posits that around 23% of the Scottish population have low literacy skills and that 'another 30% may find their skills inadequate to meet the demands of the 'knowledge society' and the 'information age' (Scottish Executive 2001, p 8). Equivalent figures were produced for a range of 'developed' countries (OECD, 1997) and the resulting league tables spurred governments into channelling funds into literacy teaching aimed at remedying these 'deficiencies' and meeting pre-set targets for minimum levels of competence (e.g. ABS, 1997; Moser, 1999). Behind these initiatives lie a number of assumptions that are explored in this paper. They are:

- That the teaching of limited employment-related skills will automatically improve an individual's overall competencies in a range of situations
- That increases in formally assessed levels of literacy will enhance national economic prosperity
- That responsibility for rectifying the problem of low literacy lies with the individual.

These latter two assumptions can also be identified in EU policy documents that increasingly distinguish between the high knowledge-skilled and the low knowledge-skilled in promoting the lifelong learning agenda (Brine, 2006; CEC, 2005). The low skilled are categorised as disadvantaged people in need of training who have identifiable needs but 'often they have failed to take up what has been offered so far' (CEC, 2000b: 11). So other people prescribe learning for this group since they are regarded as incapable of choosing the opportunities that are provided without help.

The synergistic effect of these powerful policy discourses positions literacy learners as people whose deficiencies have a direct and adverse impact on the nation's economic development and therefore they pose a problem for the literate 'others'. Moreover, the discourse defines the problem as lying with the individual who has somehow failed to learn rather than with broader structural conditions. A particular aspect of this is to describe adults' literacy skills in terms of children's reading ages. For example, an article in the *Guardian* (Taylor, 5/12/06) describing new recruits to the army suggested that 'around 9% [have] the skills of a five-, six- or seven year old'. This denigrates adults and treats them as children. Such messages are internalised by those who are deemed to be lacking these skills and shape how they think about themselves and how they act in the world. As Charlesworth, (2000, 243-4) argues:

Being told that one is not clever is like being told that one is fat or ugly; it is not something about which one can achieve indifference because it is likely to play a deciding role in one's destiny, particularly in the possibility of a worthwhile life and happiness. Thus we end up with people defined ... as useless, unable, stupid; lacking in the dignities given to the privileged

The judgements and emotions that are generated about how successfully or otherwise people meet the demands of school have a particular affect on the decision to participate in post-school education and learning. This is compounded by the myth of meritocracy that implies that anyone who is brought up properly, who is supported enough by caring parents, who is loved and feels good about themselves, will rise above the hardships imposed by poverty, classism, sexism and racism (see Luttrell, 1997; Tett, 2006). This myth permeates common-sense understandings of what returning to learning implies because failing to meet the skills demands of schooling is seen as an individual problem. Bourdieu argues that:

Agents, even the most disadvantaged, tend to perceive the world as natural and to find it surprisingly acceptable, especially when one looks at the situation of the dominated through the eyes of the dominant (1990: 131).

The 'natural' attitudes of policy makers, the media and so on mean that they also incorporate and perpetuate the discourse of deficit that pervades literacy practices.

### **Developing a different discourse**

The impact of this discourse on people who feel that their literacy skills are deficient was evident from the qualitative data from the research project discussed earlier (Tett et al, 2006a). Many of the learners in their first interview reported that they had been labeled as deficient at school because of their difficulties with formal literacies and these labels had stuck with them, creating a negative sense of themselves as learners. For example, one learner suggested: '*I thought it would be like school and didn't want to go through all that again*'. Another reflected: '*they're bad memories, and it puts you off learning because it*

*makes you feel such a failure, and you don't want that again*'. In addition the discourse of individual deficit gets internalized. As one learner said, *'I was ashamed. I couldn't see myself going back to school as a grown man, fifty years old, sitting in a class'*. Another said of themselves, *'I used to feel like I was a nobody at work because I just kept thinking about all the things I couldn't do and having to hide them from my workmates'*. For so many of these learners, the world had told them that they were not capable people or capable learners because their mastery of formal literacy skills was not high. They had internalized what the world had said, and consequently constructed themselves as people who 'can't do' rather than the capable adults that they undoubtedly were. *'I just saw what I couldn't do and couldn't see anything that I could do'*, one man said of himself, and others frequently referred to feeling *'thick', 'stupid'* and *'not very bright'* human beings.

The quotes above suggest that the nature of the learning that people engage in will make a real difference to how they feel about themselves, especially when the nature of their past learning had created negative self images. As Taylor has argued (1992: 25):

Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *misrecognition* of others, so a person or a group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.

So it is important that people have a positive educational experience and feel that their issues and concerns are valued, because in valuing these, we also value them as people. This has implications for the curriculum if the power imbalances that pervade literacy practices are to change. One way to do this is to build on what learners already know and do and a variety of ethnographic studies, (e.g. Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Barton et al, 2006; Fowler and Mace, 2005) demonstrate the significance, pervasiveness, richness and positive diversity of everyday practice that people draw on to live their lives. These studies also show that expertise and support are offered within reciprocal relationships and exchanges of skills and services outside of any formal education or training. As Hamilton (2006) points out:

This involves shared activities around written texts, opportunities for give and take between people with different attributes, supporting different kinds of identities. In particular, there is a large amount of intergenerational learning especially around ICT and in contexts of cultural displacement where new languages have to be learnt (2006: 131).

Moreover, Hull and Schultz (2002) argue that there is an accumulating body of evidence that demonstrates the close connection between literacy practices, identities and discourses. Their research shows how literacy practices in and out of formal education are shaped by power and ideology so that literacy is configured differently in different settings. Illeris (2004) maintains that this multiplicity of complex issues affecting learning, coalesce into three dimensions, the cognitive, the social and the emotional which, he argues, are always integral to any learning experience. He suggests that education should therefore take cognizance of all three dimensions if learners are to have positive, successful experiences of literacies learning. However, adult learning practices all too frequently foreground the cognitive at the expense of the social and emotional dimensions and focus on skills for employment rather than learning for the whole of life.

Tutors need to become better informed about the communicative competences, discursive and rhetorical repertoires of their learners, in order to acknowledge these within formal

learning and create opportunities for adults to demonstrate what they know. This requires enabling learners to gain a sense of control and identity when they enter an educational setting that is also a new field of social relations. As Hodge suggests in her review of ethnographies of literacy, 'we need to draw on people's insights into how they learn, their theories about literacy and education and the vernacular and informal strategies they use to learn new literacies in order to make the crucial links between people's literacy practices and their education' (2003: 6). Adults, often with negative experiences of their earlier schooling, require learning opportunities that acknowledge the context of their lives. Where learning is successful it is often achieved over time and is embedded within learning skills for survival – not simply for productivity. As Appleby and Bathmaker argue, (2006: 715) 'people do transfer literacy skills from one domain to another, adding to their family networks and communities, outside of employment'. Building on the range of literacy activities that people already engage in and feel comfortable about, by taking a responsive approach to curriculum development, is one way in which their everyday culture and practices can be valued rather than denigrated.

Steve Reder (1994) has argued that there are three aspects of literacies practices that all need to be brought together if we are to think clearly about learning to be literate. These aspects are the technologies of reading, calculating and writing, the functions of these activities and the social meanings carried by them, and people engage with all three aspects in shifting, unequal ways. Being literate is not 'simply a cognitive matter but it simultaneously involves other modes of engaging with the world' (Hamilton, 2002: 183), so people engage in these practices in many ways. Brian Street (1995) describes this as a shift from seeing literacy as an autonomous gift to be given to people to an ideological understanding of literacy that places it in the wider context of institutional purposes and power relationships. 'Thus education becomes a central terrain where power and politics operate out of the lived culture of individuals and groups situated in asymmetrical social and political positions' (Mohanty, 1994:147).

This approach to literacy learning, known as the social practices approach, emphasises that learners are diverse both in their learning preferences and how these are expressed through different technologies. Literacy is almost always employed for a purpose – such as making decisions or solving problems – and in a particular social context. The use of literacy in everyday life is closely linked with social practices that have their own social purpose and meaning. The incidental learning that happens in such contexts is as important as planned and deliberate learning within the learning programme so learners not only develop skills in the 'classroom' context but also become proficient in other contexts in order to broaden and transfer their learning. This approach also emphasises that literacy is more than individual skills, it is a communal resource, integral to the social interactions, relationships and institutions within which it is used and developed. So the everyday uses and activities of literacy, and what these mean to people, blur the boundaries between, in, and out of, education and in social relationships and these vary across the different institutional contexts that give them their meaning. This means that rather than seeing literacy as the decontextualised, mechanical manipulation of letters, words and figures, literacies and literacies learning are located within the social, emotional and linguistic contexts that give them meaning. From this perspective, reading and writing using a variety of technologies including ICT are complex cognitive activities that integrate feelings, values, routines, skills, understandings, and activities and depend on a great deal of contextual (i.e. social) knowledge and intention (see Billet, 1999; Mace, 1992; Tett et al, 2006b).

This means that teaching has to take account of the different contexts in which learners are operating and should not start from the perceived weaknesses of the adult learner but

instead should emerge from the real life situations in which the skills, knowledge and understandings are used. This is what Rogers (2000) calls a 'literacies comes second' approach that is responsive and organic. Learning from this perspective is situated in concrete social practices and as a result it can only be understood by making reference to those knowledge structures, discourses and practices that reflect particular time and space bound concerns of individuals and their communities (see Scott, 2001).

### **The impact of participation**

In this section the impact that learners identified from their participation in literacy programmes is reported on. Respondents were asked 'what impact has your participation in the literacy programme had on your personal, work, family and community life' and the differences between the first interview that had taken place near the beginning of their programme and the second one a year later were analysed. Overwhelmingly the role of confidence was emphasised by learners but confidence is a quite generalised concept, so the responses were analysed to identify 'confidence in what', i.e. how the respondents expected that their increased confidence would affect various aspects of their lives. The data show that increased self-confidence acted as a key to opening up a wide range of other changes that clustered into three broad groupings, - psychological, skills and activity related and also included the impact on family, employment and education.

The *psychological* differences that learners spoke of included increased self-esteem, a growing sense of their potential, ability and achievements, more independence, being happier as a person, being more able to voice their own opinions, openly talking about their literacy difficulties, improved health and an enhanced awareness and understanding of aspects of the world around them. The number of learners citing enhanced confidence in their own abilities rose from 19% to 30% (38 to 46) between the two interviews. So 19% saw themselves as already confident but this had increased by 11% at the end of the learning experience. For example:

- I believe in myself now that I can achieve things.
- It's boosted my confidence because I don't feel as thick as I did before
- I'm doing things I didn't think I was capable of doing.
- I can speak out more because I know I can be educated. It's made a difference to the way I feel about everything.
- I feel better, read books, have achieved that. It's given me plenty of confidence.
- I'm not 'crabbit' [bad tempered] anymore because ... I'm not avoiding problems - I'm tackling them head on.'
- I can get out of bed, take more care of myself and get a haircut
- I am now confident about sharing the fact that I had this problem and am seeking help

The confidence *to do things* related to skills that were both literacy specific and that had developed as a consequence of participants' enhanced skills. One of the most evident differences in the learners between the interviews was a sense of their achievement in learning. They had come to recognise that they were capable learners; their learner identity had changed, had become more positive, and this confidence in learning had in turn affected other areas of their lives. Thirty-two percent in the first interview referred to themselves as *beginning* to achieve things, however 48% in the second interview talked of their pride in what they *had* achieved. For example:

- I'm more confident in speaking to others so I'm not scared to go to interviews now

- It has helped me to use the computer and I need it for work. I can also interact with friends better because of the computer, because I know what they're talking about.
- I can tackle things like reading newspapers and books.'
- I will now fill in forms which before I would have left to my husband.
- I feel more confident in myself at work. I can also make enquiries over the phone, for example if the car insurance is due.
- I'm more confident particularly in shopping because I can work out percentage reductions
- All sorts of things are open to me now. My life would have been so different if I hadn't done this, and my children's lives would also have been different.

The third cluster of confidence indicators relates to a range of *activities* in learners' lives that they now participate in, or can do so with more confidence. Thirty-one percent of the learners (up 11%) talked of things they now do *because* of their enhanced literacies skills. For example:

- I can help myself. I don't need to depend on others and have changed my mind to be very hopeful and helpful.
- I'm more confident approaching strangers for information,
- It's much easier to live, and I feel safer.
- If a conflict came up, I used to cry, but now I don't.. because I can say what I think.
- I don't need an interpreter when I go to the hospital

Twelve percent (up 3%) said that they socialised more than previously and were more comfortable doing so. They talked about meeting new friends, particularly from their programmes, going out with friends more, starting new leisure activities and not being afraid of meeting new people. They had grown in confidence and this was manifest in an increasingly positive sense of self and ability to tackle a whole range of things in their life, including learning.

Many learners' responses related to changes in the nature of *familial relationships*. These included relationships between parents and children (37% in both interviews), general relationships amongst family members (35% to 38%) between partners (9% to 6%) grandparents and their grandchildren (6% to 3%) and other relatives (6% to 8%). Although there was little quantitative difference in the volume of responses, there was a noticeable shift in emphasis in the comments. On the whole, learners in interview two were less tentative about changes in their families, and more specific about the precise nature of these changes. For example:

- There's no more fighting with my daughter when it's homework time because I can help her with it, which I couldn't do in the past.
- I'm helping the children with their homework, reading 'Harry Potter' to my son and helping my daughter who has learning difficulties.
- I'm a bit more patient with my Dad when we go out. I learned from seeing the patience of the tutors.
- It saves my wife doing everything all the time and I don't want to have to rely on her.

The responses to both rounds of interviews show the considerable impact that literacy learning has had on relationships and activities within the family. The greatest changes related to improved relationships, primarily between parents and children, with the main focus here being in parents' enhanced confidence and skills in supporting their children's

education. This in turn gave them more in common to do together and to talk about, thus engendering all round better relationships.

Learners were positive about the likelihood of their literacy involvement improving their *employment situation* in both interviews. In the second interview 102 learners (51%) made additional comments regarding their working lives that included improved job/promotional prospects and confidence to perform tasks at work. Moreover, it was clear from their comments that they regarded their literacy involvement as an important factor in this. For example:

- I am now working with a team of gardeners as a direct result of the college [FE] course.
- I have moved on to 2 more part-time jobs, helped by having more confidence.
- I am recently promoted, would not have been possible before, I would not even have thought of trying for it.
- I have more responsibility at work - it [literacy] has made work easier.
- I am more confident using the written work, write a lot more, which is required at work.
- I am more confident about filling in applications... my brother used to do it for me.

The proportion of those also reporting an increase in their confidence in their role as workers had risen from 13% to 26%.

One hundred and thirty-two learners (66%) from the first round of interviews spoke about the impact of involvement in literacy programmes on their educational aspirations. At this stage the overwhelming majority of informants were keen to continue with some form of education after their programme. For example:

- I'm much more positive about doing further courses.
- I intend to go back and finish the classroom assistant course.
- Would also like to learn basic accountancy skills to help with the Café project.

By the second interview learners have gone on to study a wide range of topics at various levels including computing/IT, communications, social and health care and gardening. What comes across strongly from the learners was the importance of literacy in building their confidence in their learning potential and therefore self in general, and in providing them with positive educational experiences that encouraged them to undertake further study.

It appears that confidence, developing trusting relationships and social engagement affect and are affected by learning. The evidence from this research suggests that there was a change in learner identity as participants realised that they were not, as the world had hitherto labelled them, - 'thick' or 'stupid', but were in fact, capable, competent learners. They had consequently grown in confidence and it was impacting on familial, social and work relationships. The data also show that learning produces multiple outcomes, some of which are anticipated, and others that are not, which collectively also have had a positive impact on the participants' identities as learners.

These outcomes are partly attributable to particular approaches to learning in many literacy programmes that place the participant at the centre of practice where learning activities are chosen or adapted to learners' individual goals, personal interests or immediate lives (see Balatti et al, 2006; Tett et al, 2006b). In addition a major part of providing successful learning opportunities was through tutors 'creating a supportive atmosphere where learners



were treated with respect and equality within relationships of warmth and trust in the classroom' (Ivanic et al, 2006:41).

Tutors have an important role in making sure that the complexity of the intellectual, emotional, practical, pleasurable and political possibilities of learning is not reduced to the apparent simplicity of targets, standards and skills. Finding a voice to do this can happen through being part of a social, mutually supportive group that is engaged in learning. Such learning is a political, as well as an educational, activity because spaces are opened up for the public discussion of the issues with which people are concerned. For example, one learner reported '*I speak up a lot more now. Before I came to the programme I would never have done that because I didn't want to make trouble*'. Another said '*at work I managed to say I didn't do something I was falsely accused of doing, and I can stand up for myself more now*'. When people create their own knowledge and have their voices heard, narrow definitions of what is thought to be 'educated knowledge' and who it is that makes it, are thrown into question and changes how people think about themselves. This involves valuing difference and building a curriculum that starts from people's everyday uses, meanings and purposes for reading, calculating and writing and developing authentic texts that build on the knowledge, skills and understanding people bring from their everyday lives.

## Conclusion

There is an extensive research literature that demonstrates the link between having low literacy skills and economic and social status with adults in this category being more likely to be unemployed, living on low incomes in socio-economically-excluded geographical areas, experiencing poor health and early morbidity (Brynnner and Parsons, 2001; Chisman and Campbell, 1990; Hammond, 2004; Raudenbush and Kasim, 2003; Schuller *et al.*, 2004; Willms, 2003). This is clearly a social justice issue, defined by the Scottish Executive (2002) as about:

Every one of us having the chances and opportunities that will allow us to make the most of our lives and to use our talents to the full...We want to stamp out inequalities – where you live should not determine your health, wellbeing and employment chances for your whole life. We want to close the opportunity gap between those who succeed in life and those who fall behind.

The above statement suggests that the government's view is that social justice is to be achieved through equalizing opportunities but I have argued here that what is necessary goes beyond providing opportunities and instead is about making provision that prioritises equality of outcomes. One aspect of this involves ensuring that provision is both accessible and appropriate and focuses on developing a discourse that helps to challenge the 'common sense' of everyday assumptions about experience and its relationship to knowledge production. The research reported here clearly demonstrates that an accessible and appropriate curriculum delivered by tutors who take learners' backgrounds into account can have a real impact on an individual's personal, social and working lives. This allows new claims to be made for the legitimacy of reflexive experience leading to 'really useful knowledge' (Johnson, 1988) for those who are involved in generating it. By questioning the discourses that frame the ways of thinking about the literacy problems and practices that are regarded as legitimate, it begins to be possible for people to open up new ways of reflexively thinking about the social construction of their knowledge. In this way the experiences and stories that have been excluded, and the mystification caused by what is regarded as appropriate knowledge, can be interrogated as a way of articulating views that come from below rather than above. This is important 'because, in identifying and making spaces where

alternative ways of thinking and being can be worked up, such practices increase the possibilities of knowledge — that is knowledge that is useful to those who generate it' (Barr, 1999: 82). Embarking on this approach to the curriculum is a risky business because it requires courage and spirited conviction for tutors to educate against the view that some people and some kinds of knowledge are worth more than others. However, such an approach can foster a desire to know more and a willingness to take risks as part of the ongoing struggle for change. As Freire (1972: 126) argues it is not possible to 'think *without* the people, nor *for* the people [but] only *with* the people' (emphasis added).

Engaging with others in mutual learning is both a source for and potential outcome of hope, and hope is closely bound up with the willingness to experiment, to make choices, to be adventurous (Halpin, 2003). So hope has a creative role in encouraging the development of imaginative and transgressive solutions to seemingly intractable difficulties. For literacy tutors this vision is about fostering a desire to know more, and a belief, however tenuous, in the possibility of doing so. It is about education that moves away from inequitable, individualized, deficit models of learning and brings about change in understanding both self and society that leads on to a more democratic, equitable life and hence to greater social justice.

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