

community practice

family learning

double think

embedded literacy

collaborative activities

community engagement

literacy supports

integrating literacy

learner centred

literacy mobility

practice

participation

community

social justice

activity

active citizenship

situated learning

universal skills

**Literacy as a
social practice**

More than reading
and writing



NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency

Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

Literacy Review

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The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) was established in 1980 and is an independent membership organisation, concerned with developing policy, advocacy, research and offering advisory services in adult literacy work in Ireland. NALA has campaigned for the recognition of, and response to, the adult literacy issue in Ireland.

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Foreword

Welcome to 'Literacy Review', the new journal from the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA). The NALA journal has been redesigned as part of our work highlighting NALA's position and contribution as a leading expert in adult literacy and as a focal point for the dissemination and sharing of new thinking about literacy issues.

Since NALA was set up in 1980, the Agency has been a leading campaigning and lobbying force on adult literacy issues. We have been involved with training, service delivery, research and innovation, policy-making and campaigns to raise awareness of the causes, extent and realities of adult literacy difficulties in Ireland and to shape and deliver effective responses.

Under our current strategic plan NALA is re-focusing our efforts on four key activities: advocacy, research, developing policy and offering advisory services. Objective Five of the NALA Strategic Plan 2007-2010 aims to 'Strengthen NALA's effectiveness as an organisation'. The development of 'Literacy Review', the new NALA journal, is central to this work. The theme for this year's 'Literacy Review' is social practice. The 2008 NALA journal contains a range of articles from a cross section of contributors, each with their own unique view and experience of social practice to enrich our understanding of literacy theory, teaching and learning.

Pauline Hensey's article examines a number of perspectives on learning that emerged from papers delivered at conferences on literacy and social practice organised by NALA during 2008. The understanding of learning that emerges provides us with important insights into literacy as social practice and Pauline's article expertly weaves these perspectives together providing valuable analysis to guide the reader. Her article demonstrates that understanding learning as a social not solo endeavour, seeing it as revealed in participation and belonging and as

embedded in participation in discourse communities opens up important challenges for teaching and learning practices in language and literacy settings.

Kathy Maclachlan's article explores how understanding literacy as a set of social practices or complex capabilities opens up different ways of thinking about literacy and provides the space to consider different ideas about what actually counts as literacy. Kathy's article shows that by not limiting ourselves to a notion of 'good literacy' meaning 'correct' English we can open ourselves up to the richness of local dialects and 'non-standard' language in our work.

Liz McSkeane's article presents an overview of one element of an on-going research project exploring the initial and on-going assessment of literacy in Newbridge Youth Training and Development Centre, a youth training centre for early school leavers. Liz's work outlines tools that can help practitioners to address the literacy demands of a programme in a social practice context. Her research findings also raise interesting questions about how supports for analysis would help practitioners to strengthen the focus of the teaching and learning process to reflect literacy practices which are located in the real lives of the learners.

Kerry Lawless and Tina Byrne's article draws on research data from a recent NALA study 'It's never too late to learn' which captures how older learners experience literacy in a variety of social practice settings. The findings present a clear picture of how literacy difficulties impact on older people's lives and provide interesting insights in the priorities of older people in relation to their learning. The article seeks to explore what we can learn from the needs and aspirations of older learners and how this might contribute to the debate on the public value of adult learning.

Mary Flanagan's article outlines learning from the Clare Family Learning Project and recent reflections on their work involving Travellers. One of the main surprises in their findings was the number and range of classes provided that included both the settled and the Traveller community. In her article Mary shows how this integrated approach can happen in a very natural way when groups are formed by people who were interested in helping their children learn and developing their literacy to support this social practice.

We hope you will enjoy and benefit from the learning captured in this year's 'Literacy Review' and look forward to the debate the articles will generate.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kerry Lawless". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Kerry Lawless
Research Manager
National Adult Literacy Agency

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**Perspectives on learning
- key lessons from papers
presented at conferences on
Literacy and Social Practice
organised by the National
Adult Literacy Agency**

**Pauline Hensey, Liberties College of Further Education,
City of Dublin VEC**

The debate on social practice approaches to literacy is now well advanced and familiar to many. At its essence, a social practice view of literacy is concerned with the uses, meanings and values of reading, writing and numeracy in everyday activities, and the social relationships and institutions within which literacy is embedded (Hamilton and Hillier, 2006, p.17). What is less talked about, perhaps, within literacy circles is how adults **learn** literacy, how learning happens. This is the subject of the present article.

NALA is currently exploring aspects of its publication 'Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work' (2005) in order to deepen understanding of key issues and principles in adult literacy work. During 2008 the theme selected from the Guidelines was literacy as social practice. This article will examine a number of perspectives on learning that emerged from papers delivered at conferences on literacy and social practice organised by NALA during the year 2008. It will also look at the implications these perspectives might have on how learning is supported in language and literacy settings. NALA conferences and forums during the year which examined aspects of this theme were: the tutor forum; a national conference in March; the Adult Literacy Organisers' forum; regional student forums; the Family Literacy Development Day and the English as a Second Language (ESOL) conference in June. The article draws on papers presented by:

- Rose Brownen, Adult Literacy Organiser, KLEAR Kilbarrack Adult Literacy Service;
- Victoria Purcell-Gates, Canada Research Chair in Early Childhood Literacy, University of British Columbia;
- Moira Greene, Adult Literacy Organiser, Co. Clare Reading and Writing Scheme;
- Mandy Kennedy, Northside Reading and Writing Centre, Coolock;

- Kathy Maclachlan, Senior Lecturer, Department of Adult and Continuing Education, University of Glasgow;
- Mary Maher, Director, Dublin Adult Learning Centre;
- Uta Papen, Lecturer in Literacy Studies, Lancaster University;
- Lynn Tett, Professor of Community Education and Lifelong Learning, University of Edinburgh;
- Heide Spruck Wrigley, Senior Researcher for Language Literacy and Learning, Literacywork International.

The views of learning that emerged, while not offering a full explanation, present us with important insights into how learning occurs. Firstly, a number of the contributors saw learning as fundamentally a social process. Lynn Tett, for instance, argued that learning always takes place in interaction with other people in one way or another. Kathy Maclachlan emphasised the place of talk and collaboration in her paper. We learn, she explained, by talking to each other in collaborative activities with other people. These perspectives are interesting. They offset more traditional learning theories which focus on learning as an individual activity in which the learner is relatively passive. They suggest that learning is an active process in which learners are involved together in the creation of new understandings and knowledge.

Contributors were also keen to stress the situated nature of learning. Learning, as Lynn Tett saw it, always takes place in the context of a particular culture and society. People, she argued, are complex and their learning is influenced not only by their past experiences, current circumstances and how they imagine their future, but also by their family, friends, colleagues and the norms and values of their communities. Heide Wrigley echoed this idea when she argued that to validate learners' experiences we need to understand the broader context of their lives. Contributors saw the effects of the social and cultural context on learning as far from neutral. As Tett put it, "Specific societies set the basic conditions for what it is possible to learn".

In this way, society and culture both define and at the same time limit what is available to be learnt.

Maclachlan, in her paper, was particularly concerned with revealing the forms of learning that happen in 'real life', outside of the classroom. Lave and Wenger are two theorists who have developed a framework for understanding the nature of learning that takes place outside formal learning contexts. From their perspective the learning group is understood as a community of practice (Fowler and Mace, 2005; Lave and Wenger, 1999; Wenger, 1998) and learning involves a process of gaining increased access to understanding through growing involvement in such communities. Learning, from a community of practice perspective, presupposes participation and doing (Fowler and Mace, 2005 p.101; Illeris, 2002, p.142). It involves changes in a person's ability to take part or participate. For example, from a literacy perspective, it would entail changes in a person's ability to participate in literacy events. It would also involve participants moving from a marginal position to being centrally involved in such literacy events (Papen, 2005, p.139).

The idea that learning involves participation was reflected in Michael Power's account of his learning journey during the Tutor Forum. As he described it,

“From my point [of view] going back to literacy, going back to education has now given me a chance to **participate in [helping my kids to read and write]. One time I was standing outside the square, I wasn't able to just move... my wife was helping my kids, now I am able to sit down at the table.”**

Michael's account also reveals a further understanding of what it is to learn. Here learning is tied to 'belonging', belonging as he saw it "inside the square".

Belonging as a dimension of learning is characterised by not only knowing how to carry out the particular tasks involved

in an area of expertise but also knowing how to behave in the situation, knowing how to engage with others and understanding why they do what they do (McSkeen, 2008, p.42; Wenger, 1998). Wrigley echoed this dimension of learning in her description of a woman who wanted to learn how to read the paper on the subway. Wrigley described how, rather than needing to learn the skills of reading a newspaper, the learner simply wanted to know how to fold the paper as others did. As she explained,

// She wanted to be part of 'the literacy club', part of the people who read, so if she could just sit there and fold [the paper] in the right way then she could be part of that literacy club. //

Here belonging was not characterised by knowing how to read the paper but more with understanding how readers of this particular paper behaved.

A further understanding of learning that emerged during the conferences is one which conceptualised learning is coming to know how to participate in the language, discourse and practices of particular communities of practice. This theme resonated in many of the conference papers. Rose Brownen, for instance, showed how the workplace was one such community that has its own particular types of talk and language. Mandy Kennedy, in her description of her schooling days, showed how schools typically have particular types of literacy practices, such as spelling tests.

The idea that life in communities is generated and sustained by particular ways of talking and using language and that learning is about coming to know how to participate in the language and discourse of such communities is a useful one for those involved in the adult literacy project. Participants at the conference showed some acknowledgement of this. Moira Greene, for example, suggested that part of the learning project for those

involved in adult literacy was to develop '**literacy mobility**', the ability to move comfortably between different types of social practice. Wrigley, echoing the idea of mobility, saw literacy as a way of 'moving to new places'. Arguably, these definitions would involve the ability to interpret, understand and engage in the literacy practices and discourses of different contexts and communities.

Contributors also highlighted the problematic nature of discourse communities where, for example, the powerful or dominant discourses are often privileged, with the use of other scripts from everyday life devalued and less visible. As Tett put it,

“Some practices are valued and some aren't and we need to think about what the dominant ones are and how we can access them.”

Greene, expanding on this point, saw learning as not only understanding that there are many different literacy practices, but also that these practices are valued differently.

Viewing learning as participation in discourse communities is useful. As illustrated, it brings to the discussion wider questions of power, privilege and marginalisation that are largely absent from other accounts of learning (Harrison et al, 2002, p.3). It also extends the discussion to looking at the effects such disparities might have on learners. As Greene pointed out, learners don't value their own literacy practices to such an extent that they don't tell tutors or other learners about them. It only emerges over time what literacy practices they engage in.

Metaphors for learning

This paper set out to reveal some of the key ideas on learning that emerged from a set of conferences on social practice. Learning is a complex subject. There are many different

understandings as to how it occurs, each reflecting different assumptions about the nature of knowing and what it is to learn. A useful way of examining the ideas or assumptions about learning in this article is to draw on the work of researchers who reveal different metaphors that surround the concept of learning. The work of Sfard (1998) is particularly useful in this respect. Sfard argues that two metaphors underlie theories of learning – the acquisition metaphor and the participation metaphor.

The acquisition metaphor is evident when we think about learning as bringing about the possibility for learners to accumulate knowledge, whether this is done through social interaction or on one's own. Here the goal of learning is individual enrichment; knowledge is accumulated by the individual and becomes individual property (Open University, 1999, p.126). Words used to display this metaphor are knowledge, skills, techniques, acquire, idea, grasp, content, goal.

The participation metaphor is evident when learning is revealed by doing, when knowledge is judged in terms of belonging and participation and where the goal of learning is community building. Taking part is important here, not the gathering of knowledge, becoming a member replaces learning a subject or skill (Open University, 1999, p.127). Words used to display this metaphor are: doing, participation, community, becoming, belonging.

The participation metaphor was displayed in many of the papers and talks delivered at the conferences. At first glance, it might seem more appealing for those involved in the literacy project. With its emphasis on 'doing', 'taking part' and belonging, for example, it seems to dovetail well with how a social practice view of literacy is understood. The vocabulary of participation also emphasises the message of togetherness,

shared learning and collaboration as integral to the learning process. This emphasis arguably provides a counterbalance at a time when the literacy movement can seem overly concerned with individualised learning programmes and the accreditation of individual competences and skills.

However, it also poses certain dilemmas for literacy practice. Firstly, it poses major challenges for assessment practices. Current assessment instruments, whether formative or summative, focus largely on the measurement of individual competencies and skills. It is difficult to conceive how the 'doing', the 'taking part', the 'shared understanding' evident in the participation metaphor could be captured or acknowledged in assessment practices. Secondly, theorists who conceive of learning as participation eschew the notion that learning or knowledge can be carried or transferred across situations. This stance creates problems for the notion of literacy mobility or the idea that what learners learn in classrooms should be applicable to a range of situations (NALA, 2005). Furthermore, such analysis also jars with some of the contributions at the conferences which claimed a space for individual skills development and acquisition.

The tension between the two metaphors often produces a kind of 'double think', in which learning is viewed as an active, social process, where doing and participating are salient dimensions of practice. While at the same time the acquisition of individual knowledge, understanding and skill, which can be transferred across communities, is also part of the picture. This approach was certainly evident in the contributions and discussions during the conferences.

Implications for practice

A social view of learning recasts the roles of learners and teachers in a new light. It moves away from a focus on teaching to a focus on supporting learners and learning. Speakers at the conference reflected this shift of emphasis in different ways. Wrigley saw the teacher supporting learning through cognitive apprenticeship. Cognitive apprenticeship develops structures in the classroom to help learners learn from observing how tutors identify problems and develop their own solutions (Open University, 2002, p.44). Wrigley, for example, in describing how learners learned the literacy practices involved in doing up a patio, showed how the tutor modelled the cognitive processes involved in working out how to do up a patio: 'Here's my patio, let me look at what's wrong, let me look at what tools I need, lets make a list'. Learners, as she described, used the language and thinking processes, modelled by the tutor, to get similar things done in their own lives and with larger projects.

Researchers working to develop a social theory of learning also envisage a different type of classroom. Maclachlan saw the teacher supporting learning by creating the conditions in classrooms whereby learners and tutors are able to learn from each other 'as it is done in the real world'. This, she argues, is done best when what we already know is valued by everybody. The role of the tutor as a creator of such learning environments is echoed in the work of Bruner (1999). He posits that the classroom needs to be configured as a community of learners, where learners help each other learn. This, he argues, does not exclude the presence of someone serving in the role of teacher. It simply implies that the role is shared, that learners 'scaffold' for each other as well. The creation of such collaborative learning environments is particularly salient if we assume that learning presupposes participation.

Maclachlan suggested that within such environments learning often happens by people working with a more skilled and knowledgeable partner in a collaborative process. This process is often referred to in the research literature as 'scaffolding'. Scaffolding is a process of supplying a structure that supports learners in their learning while they are working at tasks slightly more difficult than they can manage on their own and therefore requiring the aid of their peers or tutor to succeed. It involves the tutor or a more knowledgeable peer in building bridges from the learner's present understanding and skills so that they reach a new level of knowledge. It also involves gradually removing the support system, so that the learner is able to perform the task without help (Brill et al, 2001).

The role of the tutor here is two pronged. Firstly, it is to structure the task and the learning environment so that the demands on the learner are at an appropriately challenging level (Scottish Executive, 2005, p.17). Tutors should continually adjust the amount of intervention and the range of tasks to the learner's level of independence and fluency. Secondly, if peers are to scaffold for each other, the role of the tutor is to design learning environments which emphasise communication and shared problem solving so that expertise can be drawn on.

Other contributors emphasised the situational or contextual dimensions of social theories of learning and called for teachers to support learning by creating tasks that are as authentic as possible. This involves not only using material for real life purposes, for example driving lessons, but also involving learners in activities which give them a greater understanding of their own literacy practices. Papen, for instance, suggested that tutors and learners can become involved in researching their own literacy and numeracy practices. She also suggested that learners can examine particular texts and identify the meanings these texts hold for different people involved in the context. Learners, she argued, can also take part in role playing

situations from real life contexts and look at who controls the conversation, what language is used, who speaks, who listens, and who decides. Learners can also create their own authentic materials.

Some contributors called on tutors to support learning by explicitly drawing attention to the cultural and societal context within which learning takes place and how this might influence the project. Wrigley, for example, emphasised the importance of breaking down some of the myths surrounding literacy and learning; myths that perpetuate the belief that, for example, 'anybody can become president of the United States', and 'that if you just studied hard enough you too can make it'. Learners need to understand, she argued, that there are things getting in the way. There are structural, economic and political barriers; there is poverty, sexism and classism, all which limit the endeavour.

The call for the development of literacy mobility presents us with a new set of questions which have implications for our practice. Literacy mobility allows learners to transfer the learning that takes place from one setting to another. Transfer is a term used to explain knowledge use across situations. As alluded to, it is a highly contested notion. However, if we believe that learning and knowledge can be transferred across settings or communities, and that learners, as Brown described, can

//accumulate learning moments and literacy skills, fold them up and unpack them when moving between communities of practice //

then we need to think about how best this transfer can be supported.

A number of ideas have emerged from research (Gruber et al, 1999; Scottish Executive, 2005). One suggestion is that bridging is provided between old and new learning situations and contexts. A second idea involves the tutor or peer group in helping learners to think about their learning processes, the strategies they use when they learn and how these strategies can be transferred to other kinds of tasks. For example, learners often have implicit knowledge of how they learn to do new things gained from experience of doing new tasks such as using a mobile phone. Thinking about what strategies were used can then help learners transfer these strategies to new situations (Scottish Executive, 2005, p.15). Another suggestion is that analogies or comparisons are made to identify similarities between situations (Gruber et al, 1999).

The call for literacy mobility also raises questions about the kind of discourse communities to establish in literacy courses. On the one hand contributors emphasised the importance of not denying 'people's own tongue'; of valuing and using people's everyday literacy and numeracy practices as the core of the literacy curriculum. On the other hand, it was pointed out, that learners also need to be empowered to take up the dominant discourses associated with institutional or academic learning and by doing so widen their access to such communities. As Wrigley put it,

“If we don't teach the kind of literacy skills society values, the kind society expects us to 'speak', we are in essence patronising learners.”

Conclusion

The understandings of learning that emerged during the NALA conferences on literacy as social practice, while as indicated not offering a total explanation, do present us with important insights into the subject. Understanding learning as a social

not solo endeavour, seeing it as revealed in participation and belonging and as embedded in participation in discourse communities opens up important challenges for teaching and learning practices in language and literacy settings. Furthermore such insights, in revealing forms of learning that happen in 'real life' with or without the existence of a tutor or curricula, also help us to reappraise where we might find learning, for example in the workplace, home or community – a view that fits well with the notion of literacy as social practice.

Much debate in literacy circles in recent times has focused on the nature of language and literacy and what should be taught. These discussions are important. However, what the recent conferences on literacy as social practice have shown is that an equally important discussion, although one that receives less attention, is how we understand learning to occur. This debate is important because it informs what we pay attention to and therefore influences how we develop our literacy curriculum and practices. This article seeks to contribute to that debate.

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**'If you really want to hurt
me, talk badly about my
language': Social practices
and critical literacy**

Kathy Maclachlan, University of Glasgow

Introduction

The unquestioned mantra frequently chanted at gatherings of literacies practitioners, managers and researchers in the western world is that of course literacies is about social practices, and of course our teaching embraces a social practice's model. But do we all completely understand what literacies as social practices means in its fullest sense? And to what extent do we incorporate the totality of this philosophy into our teaching of literacies? This paper will begin by examining the concept of social practices, then it will consider both what the concept of social practices implies for literacies teaching and some of the issues that this raises for practitioners working within educational cultures that are increasingly target driven.

Literacies as social practices

The recognition of literacies as social practices, or complex capabilities, is far from new. Street's (1984) seminal writing two decades ago and the New Literacy Studies which emerged in its wake have consistently and insistently challenged what Street termed the 'autonomous' model of adult literacies (Street, 1995; Rogers, 1999, 2000; Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic, 1998; Crowther, Hamilton and Tett, 2001; Papien, 2005). This autonomous model constructs literacy as a set of fixed, unproblematic technical skills that are neutral, that are detached from the social contexts in which they are used and that are constant over time and place. It conceives literacies learning therefore as the structured acquisition of these hierarchical skills, as an educational ladder that adults should climb and reach specified rungs before they are deemed to be adequately or fully literate. It also defines adult learners by the perceived limits of their literacies abilities in relation to these technical skills, and not by their existing diverse literacies capabilities. And though this is a deficit model of literacies, it is nevertheless a very powerful one that still impacts on policy

practice and the sort of literacy target setting that we see all over the world. For as Archer (2003, p.45) affirms,

// The biggest problem with literacy lies with the very discourse around literacy and this is reinforced greatly when we imagine that it is something that can be measured in standardised forms across countries.....To define a literacies norm is to condemn others to be abnormal. //

Viewed from a different perspective, we know that such a simplistic definition of literacies is suspect because language has always changed, and will always change over time and over place. To take a very simple example, after the Norman Conquest Anglo Saxon servants brought cow, sheep and pig to the tables of the French lords who identified them as 'beuf', 'mouton' and 'porc', and so the names of the cooked version of these animals became beef, mutton and pork. More recent shifts include words such as 'cool' (nothing to do with being chilly), 'mouse' (not an animal that scampers around fields and kitchens) or 'mobile' (no longer that which we hang over a child's cot). And this has not even begun to address the linguistic changes that texts and emails are heralding with great rapidity. An example of geographic variations can be seen in the word 'drunk' which in Scotland can be expressed as 'fou', 'steamin', 'bluttered', 'stocious', 'drucken', 'reekin', 'mingin', 'plaistert' or 'rairie' to name but a few. So the assumption of a standard, unchanged norm always has and always will be questionable.

In contrast to this outdated perception of literacy, understanding literacy as a set of social practices or complex capabilities opens up different ways of thinking about it, different ideas about what counts as literacy, and different perceptions about the literacies' capabilities of adults who may struggle with the formalities of that which is seen as 'correct' English.

However what does it really mean when we talk of literacies (not literacy) as social practices? Barton (1994) explains that it implies:

- Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices, i.e. events around or including written texts, and they only have meaning in use.
- There are different literacies associated with different domains of life.
- Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies are more dominant, visible and powerful than others.
- Literacy always includes values, emotions, prior knowledge and perspectives.
- Literacy practices change and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making.

But what do these statements mean in practice? The first, as Barton says, suggests that in order to understand what literacies is, we have to understand how people use it. We always use literacies **for** something, for a purpose, as a means to an end, and there are always others involved in it, so there is always a social dimension. It could be that we are using it in the company of other people, talking around a text, a timetable, a letter, a notice, a book we've read, or an instruction or paper associated with work. Even if we read or write on our own, it connects people, from the close connection of a letter or an email, to the more tenuous connections that circulars or junk mail hope to make between us and the product on offer. There are always social connections, so using literacy is always a social practice. Consider, for example, all the things we put up on our kitchen notice boards – postcards, messages, photos, business cards, plumber's addresses, calendars, etc. They too are all making some form of social connections, conveying messages and information from those who write to those who read them.

That there are different literacies associated with different domains of our lives needs little explanation because we all know that the ways we communicate, whether orally or in writing, in the home, in social gatherings, the classroom, church or courtroom vary enormously. The point here however is that these variations are not equally valued in our worlds that still cling to one 'correct' version of literacy. How often do people associate local dialects or 'non-standard' language with slang or bad English because it does not conform to text book criteria and what messages does this send to variant users about themselves?

Two examples from research conducted by Crowther and Tett (1998) in Scotland illustrate ordinary people's understanding of the power relations between 'correct' and local English. They are extracts from conversations about language between women in an adult literacies group.

“ [My daughter says] Can I say trussers? I say 'no it's trousers' but my friend says, 'no, she's Scottish, let her speak as she wants' – but I try to teach her to speak properly. She'll learn more that way. ”

“ When they [children] grow up they need to know there is a right time and place to speak. When my girl goes for an interview I'd like to think she'd speak the way the person expects her to speak. That she doesn't go in and speak all slang. But if she comes back and speaks slang that's fine. ”

The idea that literacies always includes values, emotions, prior knowledge and experience is a more difficult one to grasp so an example might help to explain it. A week or two ago a circular letter was pinned to the doors in my street. In plain, non-emotive language, it simply asked that the street be emptied of cars on a specified day for repairs to a water main. Where, you might ask, are the emotions, values and prior knowledge in this basic statement?

First, this was a day that I had not intended to use the car, so I was irked that I would have to move it in an area where parking spaces are at a premium. Second, I was concerned about a disabled neighbour who would find the arrangements problematic. And third, I was relieved and pleased that the leakage from the burst pipe would eventually be stemmed. My prior knowledge and experience however told me that the repairs might not be carried out or completed on the day, and the disruption might therefore continue for some time, which it did, so one simple paragraph evoked for me, and no doubt all my neighbours, a whole range of emotional responses.

The final point that Barton (op. cit.) makes relates to the way that we engage in new literacies practices and acquire new skills through informal learning that we frequently neither recognise nor validate as real learning. How often, I wonder, have our children or friends steered us through the complexities of texting, mobile phone features or computer programmes? And how have we learned these? I suspect that we did not learn them by ploughing methodically through instruction booklets, ensuring that we knew the operational 'rules' then trying them out on our equipment. We probably learned them by chatting about what we need to do and why, experimenting by a mix of showing what we can already do, being shown what else we need to do and doing it ourselves, but not necessarily in a logical, ordered sequence. Instead we almost certainly veered responsively back and forth between instructional chat, experimentation and demonstration with those who were more knowledgeable than us, because this is the way that most of our learning in life is acted out.

In summary then, the key tenets underpinning literacies as social practices emphasise:

- a) Different literacies in different social situations as well as people's different expertise in them.

- b) The power relations embedded in them which value expertise in formal literacies, but rarely so in local or vernacular literacies.
- c) The need to understand how and why literacies are acquired and used in ordinary, every day situations.

Putting theory into practice

If this is what literacies as social practices encompasses, what then does it mean for the teaching and learning of literacies? Practitioners frequently describe adopting a social practices model of teaching because they are learner centred; they start from where learners are at, build on their existing skills and aspirations, and use real, authentic texts in the classroom. It is not my intention to be critical of such practices because they do embody good approaches to teaching. But I do question whether they embrace all that we understand as social practices, for whilst being learner centred and starting where learners are at are commendable (and good adult education practice for all learners), they do not **on their own** constitute a social practices model. They represent a good starting point only. Similarly though developing contextualised communicative skills is equally commendable and a part of what social practices implies, it too represents only part of the picture. They incorporate only the first and third elements of the above summary, but not the second. It is rare, for example, to hear people talking about their literacies work as critical, and as a 'resource for acting back' against the world (Crowther, Hamilton and Tett, 2001). But if we recognise that literacies is always embedded in power relations, should we not make that power visible and address it in our teaching? And can we really assert that we adopt a social practices model of literacies teaching if we fail to incorporate the critical into it?

Barton (1994) says that being critical can mean several things covering a spectrum from 'teaching people to reason, evaluate and think clearly' (p.27), which is what all education should be about, to a linking with critical theory 'which emphasise[s] how social structure affect[s] individuals, and describe[s] the inequalities in access and power which constrain what people can do in their lives' (p.27-28). It is this latter interpretation that I believe is absent from much literacies teaching, yet is so important in enabling learners to develop confidence in themselves, their voice and their identity.

Our language is part of our identity. How we use it and who we use it with names who we are and how others see us in our world, as the women's quotes above affirm. But language is not neutral; neither is the status of different languages natural, or God given. As writers over decades have shown (see for example, Street, 1984, 1995; Archer, 2003; Barton, 1994; Crowther and Tett, 1998, 1999; hooks, 1994) the dominant language of the powerful has, over centuries, been used as a hegemonic means of establishing and maintaining power, separation and social inequality, and in doing so, has silenced and denigrated other, non-dominant languages in our societies. And in denigrating non-dominant or vernacular languages, it also denigrates the speakers of them because, as Barton (1994, p.48) affirms, 'We assert our identity through literacy.' Bell Hooks (1994, p.168) shows the effect this can have through the line of a poem that says, 'So, if you really want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language.' How many literacies learners hurt because we as a society 'talk badly' about their language, and how many tutors, I wonder, address the hurt, or the talking badly in their literacies teaching?

In Great Britain, some of this hurt has been addressed through the re-popularising and re-validation of national languages, Welsh, Irish, Gaelic and Scots at political levels, through the curriculum in schools and through the works of authors and

poets, though they still do not share equal status with formal English. However their status as languages is publicly affirmed and we no longer, for example, cane children for speaking Gaelic in schools, as was the custom in the Highlands of Scotland not too many decades ago. But what status, what affirmation do we give to local, vernacular languages and dialects? Do we value and validate them in our lives and our teaching? Or do we, however unconsciously, consider them to be sub-standard English that needs to be worked upon, and if we do, does that not add to the hurt of those who use them?

Rogers and Kramer (2008) highlight the issues that being critical and valuing local languages raise for literacies tutors. They describe literacies work that has taught learners skills in the forms and usage of dominant languages but never questioned their dominance, and other literacies work that has addressed issues of power and agency, but not the technicalities of reading, writing and comprehension that would enable learners to be agentic in the public world (p.34-37). Drawing from the experience of literacy campaigns in Nicaragua, the United States, Venezuela and Brazil, the authors assert, 'that a politically empowering education without the strategies and knowledge to access the dominant codes of power of a literate society would not have been successful' (p.37), and conclude that, 'critical instruction without literacy acceleration, especially for students who have not acquired basic or full 'literacy skills', will not do in terms of [social] justice' (p.33).

But what does this mean for literacies tutors who may or may not locate their work within a social justice or equalities framework? First, it means that if we attest to basing our teaching on a social practices conception of literacies, then the critical should axiomatically be integral to it. Second, it means recognising and using three different aspects of being critical in our teaching.

They are:

1. Using and valuing learners' own languages, in all their forms, as resources in the classroom that will help value their voice (and therefore their identity) and that can also be used to explore language, power and subjugated voices.
2. Using authentic texts (bills, forms, job descriptions, mail, etc.) not just for de-coding the language, but also as a stimulus for broader, critical discussion around issues such as unemployment, employment, wage differentials, rising costs or the maintenance of poverty and so on.
3. Developing learners' abilities in formal, dominant English whilst openly recognising the arbitrary, hegemonic nature of its power. This means addressing the technical **skills** of the language, the **knowledge** of different conventions and their application, and the **understanding** of the contexts and values associated with different uses (Scottish Executive, 2000).

Three brief examples will, I hope, illustrate how aspects of the above might materialise in the classroom. The first was a project in Aberdeen, in the north east of Scotland. The local language there is Doric but over the years, many local people no longer recognised it as a language variation in its own right, and merely perceived it as slang, or bad English and believed therefore that they and their children were just not speaking 'correctly'. To counter this, literacies tutors produced a DVD with local and national celebrities talking in and about Doric, which they used in schools, in adult literacy and in family literacy groups. They discussed the words, their use of them and their feelings about them and encouraged participants to write in Doric. At the same time, they compared the Standard English equivalent and practised the one alongside the other. At the end of one session, a learner remarked that she had always chided her children for speaking rough, but would no

longer do so and instead, would encourage them to speak both languages.

A second example comes from a Dundonian (from Dundee) poet and former building site labourer that I heard speak recently. He spoke eloquently of his alienation from school where he was told he had to speak properly, but had no conception of what that meant, having been raised in a family whose language was the Dundonian dialect. He now works in adult and youth literacies groups, using his poems, all written in Dundonian, together with fun exercises to encourage reading, writing and discussion in and about dialects in order to help learners feel comfortable and confident about their language and themselves. He too does not neglect Standard English in his work, but rather weaves it into the reading, writing and talking in learners' own voices, so that the acquisition of formal skills does not denigrate those of the vernacular.

The third was a literacies class for homeless adults that I was privileged to observe over some time. Many of the learners really struggled with the literacies that they had never acquired through schooling, or had lost as a consequence of addictions. To my surprise, the tutor produced a poem that appeared, to my untutored eye, to be a mix of Scots and Glasgow dialect. Readings of the poem led to a quiz about the meaning of some local words, reminiscences amongst the group about their uses and associations, local customs associated with them, and changes in society and ways of living. The following week, several learners returned with books or copies of Scots writing (and remember that the learners were homeless or in 'half way' houses) and discussion around language, customs and culture continued. Learners were encouraged to write down their reminiscences in the 'language' of their choice and the following week, typed versions of their writings were presented back to the class to be edited or left at the learners' will. These in turn were used as learning resources for future weeks when

the emphasis shifted more towards Standard English, but always within a critical, problematising context. Later in the course, the learners were able to talk with knowledgeable pride about their own language and at the same time recognise where and why its use would be inappropriate. Their language was no longer a source of hurt to them. Nor was it for the learners in the other two contexts.

Conclusion

These three examples may resonate with readers, or they may not. They may be met with a sceptical questioning of how such methods and materials can be used in classrooms and courses that are geared towards set qualifications, vocational literacies or individualised work. I am not suggesting that they should constitute the totality of the learning, or that they should dominate content when adults' goals mostly centre around increasing fluency in Standard English. I am, however, saying that there should be a place for them in all literacies teaching because if there is not, then we do not fully adopt a social practices model of teaching and we deny part of the identity of our learners. For how we construct our identity affects our learning and our voice is an important aspect of our identity, so if our voice is silenced, constructed as wrong, or as deficit, then so is our identity – so are we. As Crowther et al (1999, p.216) reflect:

“...as long as people remain voiceless with their own experience interpreted on their behalf by others then their own meanings are rendered illegitimate.”

In contrast, Hooks (1989, p.70) affirms the power that coming to voice brings, in saying that:

“Moving from silence into speech is, for the oppressed, the colonised, the exploited and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible.”

New life and new growth are the ultimate aims of literacies learning but healing the hurt may be a necessary precondition for their flourishing. And this, as I have argued, entails being critical in all three ways so that learners value the languages (and self) that they come with as well as the language (and self) they are learning to be. I want to finish with an example that I frequently use of a literacies learner’s language that illustrates the way in which dominant language can silence voice. It is a quote that always affects me, always saddens me but always spurs me into retaining the critical in my own teaching. I have lost its exact source, but believe that it originates from Tett and Crowther’s research cited above, and hope they will forgive me for not attributing it correctly.

A man in an adult literacies group was describing an international football match that he had seen. He said:

“Whit did ah think I the gem? Ah’ll tell yi. Ah felt like greetin like a big wean. Wu’ve probly goat the best fitbaw players in the world – weet when thur playin in English jerseys that is. Ah dinnae ken whit it is, bit the meenit the lads pit oan thay blue jerseys thir like a gang I lassies thit dinnae ken whit a baw’s fur. Thir playin fitbaw bit thirs nae fire in thum. A’m staunin here – prood – wavin the flag an the tartan scarf – an whit happens? Ah’ll tell yi. The only lions about ur oan the terraces an oan the flags. Thay yins oan the pitch ur nothin bit lambs – gitten the stuffin knocked oot I thum. An efter it? Ah’m left staunin here in a dwam, watching ma hops run doon the gundy like the beer oot I that can.”

In semi translation, it reads:

// What did I think of the game? I'll tell you. I felt like crying like a big baby. We've probably got the best football players in the world – when they're playing in English jerseys, that is. I don't know what it is, but the minute the lads put on those blue jerseys, they're like a gang of lassies that don't know what a ball's for. They're playing football, but there's no fire in them. I'm standing here proud, waving the flag and the tartan scarf, and what happens? I'll tell you. The only lions about are on the terraces and on the flags. Those ones on the pitch are nothing but lambs getting the stuffing knocked out of them. And after it? I'm left standing in a daze, watching my hopes run down the gutter like the beer out of a can. **//**

On being asked to write these reflections, and presumably believing that writing should be in 'correct' English, the written version of his vivid, poetic language was:

// The international I went to on Saturday was disappointing. The Scottish team didn't play well and they didn't deserve to win. **//**

Which is the richer? But which do we value most, and what can we as literacies workers do about it?

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Mapping the literacy demands of a vocational training programme: Case study of work-in-progress

Liz McSkeane

This article gives an overview of one element of a research project which explored the initial and on-going assessment of literacy, in the context of a youth training centre for early school leavers. In January 2007, Newbridge Youth Training and Development Centre, (NYTDC) won that year's Adult and Continuing Education (ACE) award¹ for their work and research into integrating literacy into vocational education and training over a period of several years. The research proposal they presented for the award recommended identifying aspects of the centre's policies and procedures which support the integration of literacy into the work of the centre, and also, areas of their practice which could be developed further. On receipt of the award the Centre developed a research work plan working with the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) and the writer of this article as an external research consultant.

One of the key findings of the initial stage of the study recommended refining some of the existing assessment processes, and developing any tools which might be needed to achieve this. This article presents aspects of the research carried out and attempts to show what tools help practitioners to address the literacy demands of a programme in a social practice context.

Initial assessment of learners' literacy

The rationale for carrying out this task emerged from the prior experience of the Newbridge staff in developing and successfully implementing a method of conducting their initial assessment of the young people's competence in literacy on entry to the Centre. The approach used emphasises literacy as 'practice', rather than as a simple list of specific,

1 A national award designed to recognise and disseminate research and good practice in adult literacy, supported and administered by NALA and funded by the Educational Building Society.

decontextualised skills. The concept of literacy as 'practice' emphasises that literacy

// does not simply involve the skills of encoding and decoding words, or carrying out specific tasks in isolation. Literacy involves values, attitudes and social relationships – not just skills and activities. Different literacy practices (or literacies) are associated with different domains of life – home and family, school, the workplace, communities, religious institutions, politics. //

(McCaffery et al, 2007 p.39)

In Newbridge, the staff use the context of the Induction process, which all newcomers experience during their first few days in the Centre, for the initial assessment process.

During that time, the young people get a lot of practical information about the Centre. They also learn about the way of working, the ethos, the social and personal expectations – that is, they learn about “the values, attitudes and social relationships” which are nurtured by the Centre staff. Some of this is done by working through an Induction programme which includes a substantial amount of written material. Centre staff take the opportunity to observe and note how accurately and confidently the young people handle the reading and writing tasks which arise naturally during the Induction process. In this way, initial assessment is carried out in a context which is personally relevant and important for the young people – they are finding out about their timetables, their training allowances, the rules of the Centre and so on.

The original Newbridge initial assessment process has been successful in identifying people, at a very early stage, who were likely to need the most support in their reading and writing. The staff were able to say, in a general sense, whether a young person would or would not be able at that point to meet the

standard for the communications modules offered by the Centre. They could also say what the trainee's literacy strengths and weaknesses were to some extent.

The initial research found that the Centre could get an even more detailed picture of the young people's strengths and weaknesses through systematically linking the existing assessment procedures with the National Qualifications Framework. This could happen not only at the initial stages, but also for the on-going assessment of learners' progress. An important part of that process was to analyse the modules the Newbridge Centre offers, and identify the reading and writing required in those modules. The Further Education Training Awards Council (FETAC) provides modules in Reading and Writing at Levels 1 and 2, and a module in Communications at Level 3 on the National Qualifications Framework. It was agreed that these national standards should be the reference against which the literacy demands of the Newbridge centre's programme would be mapped and described.

Developing a reference tool

The first task was to identify and create a reference tool that would give definitions and examples of reading and writing skills at the various FETAC levels. The FETAC modules in Reading, Writing and Communications would act as a reference to support the process of analysis. The practical reference tool was developed by creating a table setting out side by side the range of outcomes in reading and writing which define the three FETAC levels in reading and writing. This made it easy to see progression between the specific skills, as defined at the three levels in reading and writing.

This reference tool therefore provided an easily-negotiated document for analysing the literacy demands of the Newbridge

youth training programme. The tool could also be used to analyse the literacy demands of any programme.

The next step was to use the reference tool to identify what, precisely, are the reading and writing skills involved in the fourteen FETAC modules offered in the Newbridge Centre. Using the tool, we analysed each of the modules, outcome by outcome, to see whether the successful completion or achievement of each outcome would involve reading or writing of any kind. We then had to identify this reading and writing skill, and its corresponding FETAC level.

Analysing the FETAC modules

Once the range of reading and writing demands embedded in each of the individual FETAC modules had been identified, outcome by outcome, we could use this very detailed information to create a set of signposts to assess learners' initial literacy needs, and their progress in those particular skills. The approach was tailored to the specific requirements of the Newbridge youth training programme. We could then contextualise the expression of stand-alone literacy **skills**, as expressed in the FETAC modules, as literacy **practices** which are rooted in the particular demands of the Newbridge programme and the everyday context in which the young people study and work. This supported the main purpose of the research project: to create a set of signposts specific to the Centre's training programme which the staff could use to assess learners' initial literacy needs, and their progress on those particular skills.

The next step was to use this module-by module information to observe whether certain individual FETAC modules are more literacy-rich than others and if so, in which particular skills and at what levels. We also wanted to use the information to identify if any specific reading or writing skills were important in most

or all of the modules analysed. If so, staff could give particular attention to those specific requirements during the Induction process, and also in later performance activities carried out in the context of the Centre's work. It would alert tutors to the most frequently-recurring skills, and would also inform the design and formatting of the Centre's Induction materials and later performance activities which are used for assessment purposes in the same way.

For the purpose of this study, we decided we would get a more useful picture of the reality of the literacy demands of the FETAC modules by recording and counting each instance only once at its highest level. This approach avoids exaggerating the reality of the literacy demands of the FETAC modules by the repeated recording of sub-skills required.

We found when looking at the reading and writing demands of the modules that most had fewer requirements than expected. For example, one particular reading outcome² is embedded only ten times in the Consumer Awareness module. This is also the case in Music Appreciation where it is embedded only seven times and Craft where it is embedded just three times. Finally, if the results for all fourteen modules are combined, a total of only sixty four instances of that reading skill, at Levels 2 and 3³ combined is recorded.

Learning and limitations of the tool developed

It is important to acknowledge that a quantitative analysis of this kind is a rather blunt instrument. There are certain things that analysing the literacy content of the FETAC modules – the standards set for the achievement of a nationally recognised

² "Read familiar words that are commonly used and personally relevant," e.g. *read a list of items relating to a personal interest/sport/hobby*. This is a Reading outcome at Level 2.

³ Respond appropriately to everyday visual and written materials.

qualification – does not tell us. It does not tell us about the literacy demands which may be embedded in the teaching methods, in the materials used to deliver the modules, or in the assessment requirements. Furthermore, given that the standard of achievement expressed by the module outcomes is independent of specific content, method of delivery or context, and could be achieved through study of many different topics using many different methods, this analysis does not illuminate definitively the literacy embedded in the exact content around which the work of a module is planned and delivered.

Most of these processes – selection of precise programme content, choice of methods and materials – are decided at the level of the individual centre and often, by the individual tutor. Analysing the literacy embedded in the module outcomes will therefore not give us access to information about how much reading and writing learners actually need in order to negotiate the content, method and materials of the real-work learning situation, much of which is determined at local level. Clearly, analysis of this micro-level – the methods and materials – can only be carried out locally. Some tutors, such as those teaching in the Newbridge Centre, already do analyse the literacy content of their programmes, methods and materials as a normal part of their work. Analysis at the macro-level – that is, of the literacy embedded in the nationally-accredited modules – gives another layer of information. It provides a summary of the **non-negotiable minimum** of the reading and writing which a learner will need to use in the modules offered, regardless of the content, method and materials used, if they are to meet the basic standard set out in the outcomes.

Using the findings

Once a practitioner or a centre has this information, they can choose to use it in different ways. This may be a matter for centre policy. For example, one centre may decide to minimise,

either wholly or partly, the reading and writing demands they make of some learners, and adopt an accommodation strategy. This might involve offering FETAC modules which make the fewest reading or writing demands; and developing teaching methods and materials that involve mostly visual, verbal, action or experiential work, as alternatives to reading and writing.

This strategy could even be followed through to assessment. Many of the modules at FETAC levels 1, 2 and 3 are assessed wholly or partly by a portfolio of work gathered in the course of the teaching and learning process. If that process makes use of a wide range of teaching strategies and materials, then the evidence of achievement will also emerge in those different formats. The assessment guidelines in many of the FETAC modules stress that portfolios may be presented in a range of different mediums. The choice to present portfolios which contain mostly written work is therefore not an absolute FETAC requirement, but is made to a large extent by the centre and the tutor. This is not to say that the strategy of accommodation is necessarily the only or even the best strategy; but rather, simply to emphasise that information about the literacy content of FETAC modules can be used in different ways, for different purposes.

Learning from best practice

Since adopting a policy of integrating literacy in 1999, the Newbridge Youth Training and Development Centres has always taken a different path. Even before this study was initiated, tutors' working method included carrying out a literacy audit of their own programmes and materials.

This meant that they identified in advance exactly what reading and writing learners would have to carry out in order to manage the work of their particular subject and craft areas. However, the Centre chose not to use the information gathered from

this process to **remove** potential barriers created by the literacy demands of their programme. Instead they chose to address the barriers, and to treat those obstacles as learning opportunities, by consciously supporting students in practising the particular literacy they encounter in the normal course of their work. In this way, the subject or craft content acts as a vehicle to teach, practise and emphasise literacy in many different contexts, which can be complemented by stand-alone literacy work where necessary. Of course, in order to manage this effectively, staff must be alert to available opportunities to address particular literacy skills, which means having a clear idea of when they are likely to arise, in their own subject area and in that of their colleagues.

Clearly, a micro-analysis of session content, methods and materials gives a very full picture of the reading and writing which students actually encounter, as a result of the choices of methods and materials made at local level. What the macro-analysis described here gives is a picture of the reading and writing which students **must** encounter, regardless of the choices made at local level.

What did we learn?

The audit of the reading and writing demands of fourteen FETAC modules carried out for this research study identifies general literacy trends in and across those modules. The literacy demands are quantified by the number of times a reading or writing outcome from one of the Communications modules was counted. However, this was not a formal statistical analysis. A more formal statistical analysis would require a wide process of consultation on matters of judgement, such as the precise differentiation between the reading and writing skills as defined at the three FETAC levels. Analysis at that level of quantitative detail could possibly be useful in the future for a broader range of purposes than those addressed by the current project.

The approach adopted for this study was considered the best suited to the particular needs and overall purpose of the research.

Reading demands of the FETAC modules

The audit and analysis described here gives us a picture of reading and writing that learners must encounter in order to successfully complete the FETAC modules, regardless of choices made at local level. Many of the FETAC modules require learners to understand, interpret and recognise signs and symbols such as hazard signs, health notices, care labels and safety instructions. Some modules, such as Mathematics, demand that learners are able to find their way around different types of document formats including bills, menus, timetables, charts, graphs. Other modules, for example Computer Applications, demand a good understanding of many visual conventions that could easily be taken for granted, such as the meaning of icons and the lay-out of a desk-top.

Reading and understanding key words, and reading and understanding key symbols and document lay-out, are essentially the same processes. In both cases, learners may have to take suitable action as a result of that understanding. If we consider these four outcomes as an inter-related cluster which address the competent application of key words and symbols in a relevant context, this is the single most frequent literacy demand which is embedded throughout the content of these fourteen modules.

It is also interesting to notice which skills occur less frequently than might be expected. One example is the use of appropriate reading strategies for different purposes. While each of the three FETAC levels includes an outcome which requires a competency in reading strategies and information retrieval, for example skimming or decoding text, they are relatively

infrequent in comparison to the reading of key words and symbols.

All of this points to a rather unexpected finding: what seems to be important, in relation to literacy in the FETAC modules we analysed, is the recognition and understanding of vocabulary, rather than reading for information. This in turn supports another conclusion: that many of the literacy obstacles students encounter when they are working towards FETAC accreditation, arise not so much from reading demands which are inherent in the standard set for the module, but rather from the reading requirements of the teaching and resource used, especially in the teaching of information, facts and to some extent, procedures. This of course was a small-scale study which reviewed a relatively small selection of the available FETAC modules. However, this is a finding which merits further investigation for, if it is confirmed, it has implications for various aspects of practice and pedagogy.

Writing demands of the FETAC modules

The findings of the writing demands of the fourteen modules are even more stark. From the analysis it was quite rare to find an outcome that relates to a practice that demands a written performance. There are, of course, some exceptions: for example, one of the social practices addressed in Consumer Awareness is making a complaint, and a natural medium for this, which is specified as an outcome, is the letter of complaint. In this case, writing is clearly and indisputably embedded in the standard. In contrast, learners do not necessarily have to write anything to demonstrate that they know and understand the four conditions of the Sale of Goods and Supply of Services Act. They **may** do so by filling in a worksheet or writing a short answer question or completing a multiple choice exercise. However, they could demonstrate the same knowledge in the course of an individual or a group interview, during a role-play,

as part of an art or a video collage, in a drama improvisation or while being observed in a real-life situation in a shop.

The writing skill which is most frequently required is writing to carry out everyday tasks, such as lists or notes or filling in forms. However, even this is not required very often. In some modules, the assessment requirements include a substantial writing task, such as a research project. However, there is no requirement that all of the portfolio evidence must be presented in writing. This means that once again, the writing demands of the assessment procedures for accreditation arise, to some extent at least, from choices made at local level, rather than from requirements imposed centrally, by the awarding body.

However, assessment is by no means always carried out for the purpose of accreditation. One of the aims of the wider Newbridge research study was to link the assessment of literacy that takes place at a local level using methods that were designed for formative purposes (assessment **for** learning) to national standards that can facilitate tracking of progress and defining achievements (assessment **of** learning). There are precedents for this in projects conducted in other countries, such as 'Equipped for the Future' in the US, the 'National Reporting System' in Australia and the 'Core Skills Framework' in Scotland, where locally-developed assessments are linked to a national framework, which provides a common language for describing learners' progress in terms which are meaningful both for teaching and learning, and for accountability. In Scotland, planning and assessment of literacy and core skills is supported by the publication of a manual by the Scottish Qualifications Authority. The manual audits the occurrence of core skills across almost all of the national qualifications in Scotland, at all levels. A similar literacy audit manual for Ireland, setting out the literacy demands of the FETAC modules would be an invaluable reference tool, not only for literacy

practitioners, but for subject specialists who want to clarify the literacy demands of their own area.

Conclusion

The general conclusion suggested by this small-scale study is that the literacy demands embedded in the FETAC national standards, as distinct from the teaching and assessment process, may be much less extensive than might have previously been thought. However, there is need for more research into this important question. Judgements about the literacy content of the different module outcomes need to be validated by synthesising the views of practitioners from many different sectors and contexts, in order to arrive at a workable consensus on the literacy demands of individual modules. One concrete outcome of this valuable process could be the development of a literacy audit manual following the Scottish Qualifications Authority example above.

If this finding is confirmed by further research, this has implications not only for the assessment of literacy, but for practice and methodology of the teaching processes as well, in most or even all subjects and vocational areas. This may be particularly important in relation to the teaching of knowledge, information and procedures. If the dominance of the written portfolio can be taken as an indication of the range of methodologies used for assessment purposes, then it seems likely that the use of reading texts and writing answers is the dominant method for the actual teaching as well. If so, the interventions which would most support learners who have difficulty with aspects of reading and writing are those which would foster a wider range of teaching methods, in all subject areas, in all settings.

This is partly a question of the capacity of practitioners in all subject areas to use a wider range of teaching methods than traditional text-based, whole-group approach. Many tutors already have the capacity to do this, although some may not. However, there are many constraints to practice which tutors cannot control. These include lack of time for planning and an excessive burden of time-tabling.

This study identifies another area for future research: to clarify, from a literacy practice perspective, what precisely distinguishes the demands of the FETAC Communication modules at levels 1, 2 and 3. In terms of accreditation, this is clarified by the different types and range of evidence candidates must provide. As shown in this study, the Communications modules can also be used as a reference tool to define and express the literacy involved in practical contexts and real-life situations. However, if those modules are to be a resource for practitioners for that purpose, and not only for accreditation, there must be a clearer understanding than is currently available on the difference between the levels in relation to how these skills are applied in people's everyday lives. This will be necessary both to support judgements about learners' progress for teaching and learning – assessment **for** learning – and also for summative and accountability purposes – assessment **of** learning.

This small-scale study has generated a number of findings. It has found that there may be far fewer literacy demands in the FETAC module standards than we might first have thought. It has highlighted the implications of this for teaching practice, and noted how the link between teaching and assessment can be mobilised to connect assessment for learning, carried out at local level within a national accreditation framework.

The findings also suggest directions for future research of relevance to a wider population than the single centre in which the study took place. Future research should be informed by

consultation with practitioners from all relevant settings; it should include practitioners both of literacy, and of the subject and module areas being analysed. Attention needs to be focused not only on the literacy content of individual subjects, but also on the factors which distinguish one level of a literacy practice or skill from another.

All of this data could inform the development of a nationally-validated manual summarising the literacy content of all FETAC modules and potentially, all other qualifications as well. A manual of this kind and other supports for analysis would help practitioners to strengthen the focus of the teaching and learning process, and also of assessment on contextualised literacy practices which are located in the real lives of the learners.

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What can older literacy students teach us? A review of literacy social practice among older learners

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The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) 'Guidelines to Good Adult Literacy Work' set out and explore the philosophy, principles and approaches which underpin good adult literacy work and development. The 2005 Guidelines present NALA's belief in literacy as a social practice, a view which goes beyond an understanding of literacy as a set of universal skills and towards an ethos that places literacy in the context of how people use written and spoken language in their lives (NALA, 2005, p.14).

This article builds on the research findings and learning from a 2008 research project carried out by NALA with older learners in four adult literacy centres in Dublin (Byrne and Lawless, 2008). The research, 'It's never too late to learn', aimed to:

- describe past experiences of education and educational attainment of the study's participants;
- investigate the coping strategies that have been most successful in disguising literacy and/or numeracy problems; and
- examine what happens when these strategies collapse or breakdown.

The research report captures how older learners experience literacy in a variety of social practice settings. It illustrates the wide range of life experiences – positive and negative – adults bring to their learning. The reflections of the research participants provide a clear picture of how literacy difficulties impact on older people's lives. Their insights also illustrate how literacy can increase the opportunity for individuals to explore new possibilities.

Drawing on the research data, this article seeks to explore what we can learn from the needs and aspirations of older learners and how this might contribute to the debate on the public value of adult learning.

How was social practice understood in the 2008 NALA study of older learners?

Literacy is a dynamic and complex concept that is interpreted in a range of different, and often contested, ways. Theories of literacy have evolved from those focused narrowly on literacy as a simple process of acquiring and using basic cognitive skills, to conceptualisations that view literacy as embedded within the social context in which it is acquired and used, to approaches that see literacy as the basis for personal and social change (UNESCO, 2005, p.147).

New literacy studies such as Street (1984), Gee (1991) and Barton and Hamilton (1998) treat adult literacy as a social practice rather than a set of technical skills to be learned in a formal school setting. This requires literacy to be studied as it occurs in social life taking account of the contexts and meanings for different groups in society (Crowther et al, 2006). The social practice literature argues that individuals can use literacy programmes to enhance their lives in tangible ways (Patel, 2005). Social practice approaches have sought to understand the multiple contexts in which learners acquire knowledge and skills rather than focus on a single context such as formal education or job related training (UNESCO, 2005). Increasingly, international research has focused on the social use of literacy and the role it plays in the context of specific social and institutional contexts such as employment, family life, and community engagement (Barton, 1994).

In Ireland, as with most western societies, it is difficult to “unpack” or separate literacy from its social practice and cultural concepts (Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic, 2000). For each individual the different contexts of everyday life present different literacy demands, leading to the term literacy being broadened to become a metaphor for many kinds of skills rooted in particular social contexts and real life practices.

What the literature says about older people and learning

International research suggests that adult learning has taken on a much higher profile in the last two decades as OECD¹ economies and ageing societies are becoming increasingly knowledge based. In an increasingly skills driven international economy a key issue is the extent to which the growing numbers of older workers are able to refresh, expand and re-deploy their job skills. Research indicates that educated workers are more likely to participate in the labour market, are less likely to be unemployed and on average earn more (Lynch, 2002). As educational attainment is the demographic characteristic with the greatest correlation to literacy this has implications for the employment chances and choices of older people.

Research from the United States suggests that older workers who received between one and two years community college training showed an increase in earnings of 6-7% of education received. The authors suggest that these results show that simply writing off older workers as 'too old to learn' may misjudge the potential benefits of substantial investment in 'displaced' older workers (Leigh, 1995). This finding is very much in line with OECD research which suggests that an older workforce is not necessarily an obsolete workforce (OECD, 1999). It is clear that learning matters in later life. It enables older learners to sustain their productiveness in the workplace and adapt their experience and skills to changing contexts.

¹ The OECD is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. It is an international organisation that helps governments tackle the economic, social and governance challenges of a globalised economy. The OECD shares expertise and exchanges with more than 100 other countries and economies, from developed westernised economies to the least developed countries.

Research focusing on the demands of formal labour market provides us with one perspective on the role of education and learning in the lives of older adults. There is also a growing interest in research exploring how the participation of adults in lifelong learning activities benefit both the individual and society in general. However, little is yet known about older learners' experiences of education and lifelong learning.

Research commissioned by the Scottish Arts Council into Lifelong Learning, the Arts and Older People suggests that the positive benefits of engaging with the Arts was a growth in self confidence, health benefits for those who suffer with dementia or stroke, and that while many Arts project are small in scale they appear to work for the individuals who engage with them. In a study of older learners in England, Aldridge and Tuckett (2007) show that more people in the later stages of working life are actively pursuing studies related to their working lives than would have been true ten years ago. The findings show that the most popular subject for all age cohorts is computer skills, with more than half the learners over the age of 65 years taking computer skills as their main subject of study. However, interest wanes among those aged over 75 years, as for them the impact of the technological revolution has arrived already, or they feel it is not for them.

Whitnall and Thompson (2007) discovered that a range of collective and individual influences interact to impact on older people's propensity to learning at different times during their lives. Their data shows that older people understand learning in a variety of ways. For example, a self-chosen learning activity undertaken in later life is viewed as qualitatively different from compulsory education undertaken in various contexts in earlier life. The study found that, overall, older people are interested in a very wide variety of topics and subjects and that they continue to learn in a range of diverse ways. The data from the study also revealed that compared to other groups, higher proportions

of those people who were retired or aged 60+ reported a positive impact of learning on their wider social and community involvement. The study concludes that although older people are now receiving more consideration in relation to the development of lifelong learning policies, there stills needs to be more understanding of the historical and social contexts of learners' lives and how these impact on later life learning decisions.

Older people and literacy

It is accepted that appropriate lifelong learning can play a positive role in promoting active citizenship among older learners; it can maintain mental and physical health, increase general well-being and self confidence, and can help combat feelings of social isolation or exclusion (Withnall, 2007; Tucket and McAuley, 2005; Katz, 2000). We also know that later educational interventions, such as adult and family literacy, can have cumulative and interactive positive impacts for the individual, their family unit and local community (Department of Education and Science, 2005).

However, to date there is little empirical or statistical data to sufficiently substantiate these arguments. While a number of studies have been conducted with older Irish people the focus of these studies has, in the main, been on older people and health issues. In Ireland, we rely on a relatively small number of studies for information and insight into the area of lifelong learning and adult literacy, and any attempt to assess trends emerging from individual studies is hampered by the absence of routinely gathered statistics.

In Ireland to date there is a dearth of research into the area of adult literacy in general. The small number of studies available pertaining to adult literacy learners indicate that there are a number of barriers to participating in adult education.

These include poverty, unemployment, bad housing conditions, financial circumstances, home and family circumstances, inaccessibility, unsuitable learning environment, narrow curriculum range, and too much emphasis on accredited or vocational learning.

Although a lack of data on access, participation and progression of adult learners engaged with adult literacy services at national level precludes a complete picture of Irish adult learners, available regional and area-specific studies do nonetheless help to provide some indication and insight into the experiences of adult learners in Ireland including learners who can be identified as 'older' learners. For example, Bailey and Coleman (1998) reported on a study of access and participation in adult literacy schemes in sixteen adult literacy schemes in Ireland. In relation to adults not in literacy programmes, the study found certain groups were under represented including the unemployed, women over the age of thirty, men over the age of fifty, and older people in general.

In 2006 the Dublin Adult Learning Centre undertook a case study with six adult literacy students, including older learners, to further the understanding of progression within the context of one to one tuition within the Centre. The research shows that significant non-accredited literacy progression takes place for students through one to one tuition. The value attributed by the students to the learning experience is in their ability to apply their new literacy skills in everyday situations.

What does IALS tell us about older learners and literacy?

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) is the most comprehensive and robust study to date on the extent of literacy difficulties worldwide. The results for the Republic of Ireland illustrate that at least 500,000 adults have literacy

difficulties. IALS shows that over 55% of those aged between 16-64 years in Ireland performed at the lowest end of literacy and numeracy knowledge and skills. Of that population only 25% had scored at level 1² and 30% at level 2³. Older people are among those who are most at risk of having literacy difficulties. The IALS authors (Morgan et al, 1997) concluded that one reason for this discrepancy was the late introduction of free second level education in Ireland.

However, while the IALS survey data suggests a direct correlation between age and literacy skills at level 1, other results show that literacy difficulties are widespread among all the age groups surveyed. For example, in prose literacy⁴, approximately 30% of adults of working age were found to perform at level 2. While the tasks at level 2 are more complex than at level 1 this finding still identifies significant literacy difficulties experienced by the 30% of the general adult population that are below the minimum expected for everyday life and work in a modern society.

The IALS data also showed that those people with the most profound literacy difficulties are the least likely to be involved in any education or training. This finding echoes those of the 1981 Commission on Adult Education which also suggested that older people were among those least likely to participate in any form of further education.

2 Being at or below the IALS level 1 indicates that a person has profound literacy difficulties. At this level a person may, for example, have difficulty identifying the correct amount of medicine to take from the information found on the package.

3 Being at IALS level 2 indicates the person can deal with material that is simple, clearly laid out and in which the tasks involved are not too complex.

4 Prose literacy is the knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information from texts such as reports, brochures and instructions.

The available statistical data on older people and literacy in the Republic of Ireland is limited in its scope and provides us with a partial picture of the extent of literacy difficulties among older adults. The IALS results for the Republic of Ireland focused on participants aged 16-64 and excluded those it considered beyond working age. In Canada, however, a decision was taken to include people aged over 65 in the study. Consequently, an interesting finding from the Canadian IALS is that 80% of all seniors (over 65 years) are working with the lowest levels of literacy. Overall, the data from the Canadian IALS suggests that older people with literacy difficulties are a particularly vulnerable group in society. While we do not have comparable data, from the survey data we do have we can presume that older adults with literacy difficulties in Ireland are also at a particular disadvantage.

What do the Adult Literacy Returns⁵ tell us about older adults' participation in literacy provision?

In recent years there has been a significant increase in the numbers of learners coming into the Adult Literacy Service. That number has risen from 28,363 in 2002 to 45,813 in 2007, an increase of almost 80%. However, during this five year period, the average age of participants has fallen from 46.6 in 2002 to 39.9 in 2007. Even where there have been increases in participation rates in the older cohorts of adult learners, the number of older learners aged 65+ remains relatively small compared to increases in other age categories.

⁵ The annual Department of Education and Science adult literacy returns are the chief mechanism through which the Vocational Education Committees, the providers of the Adult Literacy Service, report on activities and provide statistics on such issues as participation, services and accreditation, as well as assessments of level.

According to the 2007 returns from the Adult Literacy Service, two thirds of all adult literacy students are under 45 years of age. It would appear that ten years on from IALS older learners are still not accessing literacy provision. To date we do not have sufficient data to determine the factors behind this under-representation. However, it can be argued that these figures require exploration as they have implications for policy and provision with regard to targeting and recruiting older people for inclusion in adult literacy services.

How does economic and educational policy in the Republic of Ireland view adult literacy?

Ireland has shown how investment in education can play a strategic role in the country's development, producing positive outcomes for the individual learner, their families and communities (OECD, 2007b) as well as society as a whole. Achievement of proficiency in literacy is a crucial objective of education. The importance of adult literacy within educational and economic policy is well recognized. The 2000 White Paper on Adult Education articulates the key role that adult literacy plays within education provision with adult literacy identified as the top priority within Further Education policy.

The recognition of the need to address specific needs of older people in Ireland has been identified and included in a number of current policy documents including 'Towards 2016' and the National Development Plan (NDP) 2007-2013. 'Towards 2016', the current social partnership agreement, commits the Government to an Ireland which:

Provides the supports, where necessary, to enable older people to maintain their health and well-being, as well as to live active and full lives, in an independent way in their own homes and communities for as long as possible (Government of Ireland, Section 32, p.60).

had missed out on opportunities for promotion, training and development in the workplace.

“I was always doing menial jobs, mediocre jobs, badly paid jobs or very unsociable jobs. It wasn’t what I wanted to be doing, but I had a family to support and I had to earn a living.”

Where literacy was required the general consensus among the older learners was that they usually devised successful and innovative ‘workarounds’ as a solution to their literacy difficulties. During interview the participants recounted how they had developed these successful workarounds and strategies in a number of work related situations.

“I was a checker in a laundry taking in stuff and when someone had a name I couldn’t spell instead of standing there like a dope I’d say ‘what did you say, could you spell that for me I can’t really hear you with all the noise’ and that’s how I got by, using your wits and using your skills.”

Other participants recalled how it was a supportive work supervisor or safe working environment that prompted them to seek literacy supports.

“I started doing Jobs Initiative and I had to write down stock and stuff and I had to ask people ‘how do you spell that’ so obviously they found out and a woman up there gave me a leaflet and a bit of encouragement. So, I came down here [adult literacy service] and got an interview and I started that September.”

“I heard about here before I came here and I was always thinking ‘God I’d love to go in and join’ but then I was thinking ‘God what if they ask me to spell something, they’ll think I’m thick ... then I got the CE and me supervisor said ‘why don’t you just give it a try’ and I did, and I tell ya I’ve never looked back.”

Literacy use in the home

The general consensus among the older learners was that literacy difficulties had the most severe impact at home. It was in this private sphere that the implications of having literacy difficulties were felt at their most personal level.

[So can you tell me a little bit about what it is you would do to avoid helping your children with their homework?]

“There was some things I could help them with, but I was always afraid that they’d ask me something I didn’t know, so I’d just try to avoid it and brush them off.”

The participants described how they experienced considerable anxiety and pressure on a daily basis from these on-going familial situations. They also reported a sense of frustration that they were unable to engage fully in their children’s formal schooling. The respondents spoke of how they felt they had ‘missed out’ on many aspects of parenting because they were unable to assist their children with their homework or indeed ‘normal stuff’ such as reading them a bed time story.

“I know, I know, it was the same with the school, you know when they needed notes for school ... my children never knew, ya see ... my husband used to write out the notes and then I’d copy them, so they never really knew.”

The participants also reported that to date their literacy difficulties were still having an impact in their everyday lives, for example, they described how when it came to interacting with their grandchildren, they still felt limited in their choice of activities. Once again they shied away from activities that involved them having to read and/or write and they avoided situations where they might be called on to help their grandchildren with school work.

“Like my grandkids would say ‘Nanny how do you spell that’ or ‘Nanny will you help me with me sums’ and I would always pass the buck and say ‘ask your Granda’.**”**

“Yeah I know, one day one of my granddaughters said to me, now she wasn’t being impertinent or anything she said ‘Granny how come when I ask you something you never answer me’ and that’s when I said ‘well to tell you the truth I don’t know the answer, I didn’t get much schooling’ but I felt very ashamed when I had to say it.**”**

Literacy use with wider family

Our data also suggests that the repercussions of literacy difficulties on home life extended beyond assisting immediate family members with schoolwork and spilled over into other areas of life involving interacting and socialising with extended family members. According to many of the respondents family occasions such as birthdays and anniversaries proved to be stressful events. The following account by a male participant conveys the feelings of fear, dread and sadness he experienced when attending joyful family occasions:

“I used to dread when me nieces or nephews had birthdays because I never got them a card. I never did ... I wouldn’t have been able to write it out. I used to just drop down to them and give them money. The worst time was when it was me Ma and Da’s Silver Wedding Anniversary and I really wanted to be able to get them a card, but I couldn’t.**”**

Literacy use in the wider community

Our data suggests that literacy difficulties also had an impact on how well the participants integrated into their local community and how they engaged with neighbours. Some of the participants described how they were reluctant to join in

community events and activities or to join local development committees or tenants associations. In some extreme cases they would also avoid engagement with their neighbours.

“The people around where I live always thought I was stuck up. I never used to come out, I’d never talk at the door or stop to talk to anyone in case I’d make a mistake or say something stupid, a stupid kind of mistake, you know.”

Our data revealed how societal changes also had an effect on the participants’ capacity to travel and as a consequence on their quality of life. Gradual changes in public transport, such as one-person operated public buses posed hitherto unknown complications and challenges for the respondents. A day trip to a friend or relative that involved travel outside of established routes was filled with the ‘fear’ of the unknown and increased their anxiety around the possibility of getting lost in unfamiliar surroundings.

“It’s the same if you want to go anywhere, you know if you had to use the railway or go on the buses, and it’s harder on the buses now cause there’s no conductor but I wouldn’t go anywhere unless someone was going with me.”

“If I need to go anywhere one of my daughters usually take me in the car. I never go anywhere on my own.”

This reliance on others in order to be able to travel freely was a source of frustration and inspired a general feeling of missed opportunities in relation to travel at home and abroad. Many of the participants reported that they had never been on holiday abroad or were always extremely reluctant to travel on what they described as ‘foreign holidays’. However, over time a small but significant number of our participants had come to the conclusion that they would no longer be bound by their literacy difficulties and made a conscious decision to start to travel before it became ‘too late’.

“ I was like that for years, but it got to the stage where I decided it wasn't going to stop me anymore. So, me and my husband, he was better at the reading than me, booked our first ever holiday and we went everywhere and just figured it out. It was the best thing I've ever done. **”**

Literacy use in leisure time

An interesting finding from the research was the impact that improved literacy had on older people's leisure time and social lives.

“ I used to hate when someone would say will we go for something to eat, I was afraid of the menu you see, so when I had to go, I just used to order the same thing all the time. **”**

“ I used to say I'd pains in my stomach so that I wouldn't have to go out and I hadn't any pain at all, you know? **”**

The older learners also gave accounts of how now being able to read a book or a newspaper opened up a new world to them and helped them escape feelings of loneliness and discover the value and pleasure of engaging in an activity that previously had left them feeling anxious and terrified.

“ And it's such a pleasure reading, when you sit down and have a book, you'd never be lonely, you'd never be lonely. **”**

“ I know it's wonderful, I'm buying the newspaper for the first time now ... I think it's great, I think I'm great. **”**

“Oh the enjoyment of it, I can’t believe it now that I’m able to do it ... I was so afraid to read before I came here, I was afraid of my life I’d say to myself ‘I’m brutal, I’m no good’ but now I know that’s not true and I think that’s great.”

Conclusion

The experience of the adult learners in this study make it clear that good practice in adult literacy starts with the needs and interests of individuals. Literacy can be seen to increase the opportunity for individuals and communities to reflect on their situation, explore new possibilities and initiate change (NALA, 2005, p.3). The study also supports the view that literacy is a social practice and outlines how for this group of older learners literacy plays a key role in specific social and institutional contexts such as employment, family life, and community engagement (Barton, 1994).

This study, by providing up to date data on older learners, and by providing the views expressed by older learners themselves, has much to contribute to the small but significant body of research available in Ireland. The findings from this study can inform the planning of adult literacy interventions and policies by presenting the reality of older learners’ experiences of adult literacy and engagement in lifelong learning. Arising from this NALA has set out a series of recommendations on these issues that centre on the realities of older learners and their needs, as they themselves express them.

Linking policy to the needs and interests of older learners

The cohort of older people in this study reminds us that older learners are neither a homogenous nor static group but rather have specific needs that require targeted and careful

policy responses. For each individual the different contexts of everyday life present different literacy demands rooted in particular social contexts and real life practices.

Current education policy for older people is employment and labour market focused for the most part. Yet the majority of older learners we spoke to describe their past employment as primarily a way of supporting their family, and as a 'means to an end'. The general consensus among the participants was that, within the opportunities they had, and despite their literacy difficulties, they had led relatively successful working lives.

The older learners in this study believe their literacy difficulties impacted and was felt the most within their family and community life. In their conversations they did not discount or minimise the impact their difficulties with reading and writing had on their working lives. However, for the most part, the older learners we interviewed did not look back on their working lives with regret. Any sense of regret was reserved for missed opportunities to experience a fuller family, social and community life. If we accept the findings of this research and respect the views and experiences of the older learners, it is clear that the learning and educational needs of older people cannot be met through a narrow focus on employment related training.

If it is accepted that learning, including literacy learning, is both "lifewide", taking place in a multitude of social contexts, and "lifelong", taking place within and without formal education and continuing throughout our lives (OECD, 2007, p.10), is it time for a reassessment of the public value of adult learning?

In a society often dominated by the values of the economy, do we need to re consider how policy can be re-directed to take account of literacy development as a social practice? While literacy is explicitly linked to economic development it must be seen as more than an issue of economics and employment.

The findings illustrate clearly that improved literacy improved the lives of the people we spoke to, the lives of their families and has potential for major positive impact on their wider community and as a result Irish society.

We need to ask ourselves how we can work together to ensure that government priorities reflect the needs and aspirations of older people. It is hoped that this article makes some small contribution to that debate.

The full report of 'It's never too late to learn' is available from the NALA website www.nala.ie

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Traveller learners succeed through family learning

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Introduction

The Clare Family Learning Project recently reflected on our work involving Travellers from the year 2000 up to 2007. One of the main surprises was the number and range of classes we provided that included both the settled and the Traveller community. This integrated approach happened in a very natural way rather than forced or contrived way as groups were formed by those people who were interested in attending the courses to support their children learn. Another interesting finding was that we traced one group who started off in family learning here to find that the group were still involved in adult education five years later. Getting those people least likely to engage in education hooked into learning, while helping their children learn, is one of the aims of family learning.

Aims

In years past, due to the nomadic nature of Traveller life, children missed out on school. Traveller children who did attend school for part of the year were educated separately from settled people. Parents were unable to help their children as they themselves didn't have the skills to help. More recently, primary school attendance of Traveller children has improved and many Traveller parents are very keen that their children learn literacy, numeracy and computer skills and know about the world around them.

The transfer of Traveller children to second level education unfortunately is not so successful, (NOEAHE, 2008, p.30) and those children that do transfer tend to drop out in the first two years. Working with parents as partners in learning is one of the answers to help improve attendance in primary school and retain students in second level. If children's literacy and numeracy abilities are improved in primary school, staying in second level will be easier. Involving Traveller parents and

improving their capacity to support their children's education is a recommendation of the Traveller Education Strategy (The Stationery Office, 2006, p.19). Family learning is an ideal flexible vehicle for doing this.

Family learning programmes support parents to:

- value their role as their child's first teacher;
- value the home as a learning place;
- raise their child's achievement in school by showing interest in their child's school work;
- be positive about the role of education;
- value the importance of being able to read, write, be numerate and be digitally literate in today's world;
- have high educational expectations from their children, to complete upper second level and continue on into further education or third level;
- improve their own literacy and numeracy skills; and
- role model lifelong learning for their children and their peers.

Reviewing the work done

Family learning is offered to all parents in County Clare who have not completed upper second level education. Between the year 2000 and 2007, the Clare Family Learning Project provided a total of 54 courses to Travellers. 24 of these were Traveller only, while 29 were integrated Traveller and settled community. The project provided many other courses to settled people in addition to the above. 249 Traveller learners attended (some of these attended more than one course). A total of 723 hours of family learning provision was delivered to the integrated groups, averaging at 14 hours per course or seven two hourly sessions provided once a week. Traveller only courses initially are very important as they help build the confidence of the learners. 13 venues around the county were used, enabling us to reach people locally.

Partnership

On reflection, provision of these courses was possible due to a strong partnership approach and a lot of joined up thinking. The Clare Family Learning Project could provide tuition on their own, but without local links in the community to reach the learners and access to local venues we would not have been as successful. This follows the recommendations of the Traveller Education Strategy to build up a multi-agency approach to the issues facing Traveller education and recognising the complexity “of the factors that impact on their lives” (The Stationery Office, 2006, p.19).

People we found very useful to work with included:

- The Adult Literacy Development staff in local areas who identified parents with literacy needs. They were in an ideal situation to suggest a family learning course.
- The local learning support teacher or home school community liaison teacher in primary schools.
- Community Development staff who locally directed parents to our programme and offered childcare provision in certain locations.
- The Visiting Teacher for Travellers Service.
- The Senior Traveller Training Centre.
- The Clare Adult Learners Guidance Service who offered one to one sessions with each learner.
- Family Resource Centre staff.
- The Co-ordinator of the Back to Education Initiative who was able to provide funding supports.

Meeting the needs of the community

The people working locally were also able to help identify local needs by being in a position to meet parents informally. In one case walking down the street in a local town, meeting a parent and being able to ask what they would like to learn. Working

from where learners are at is vital to attract them into the course so that it is immediately relevant to their lives.

A range of programmes were covered over the years, all of these grew from the original Clare Family Learning Resource Guide. Some of these included 'Supporting your primary school child', 'Settling into Second Level', 'Dads and Lads' as well as a variety of themed programmes such as 'Family Learning and Active Citizenship'.

A range of tutors provided these courses at various times, some in the evenings and afternoons, with most being provided in the mornings. The Clare Family Learning Project supports Pavee Point's suggestion of building capacity amongst Traveller parents "to provide advice and support around issues that arise in relation to their children's education" (Pavee Point Traveller Centre, 2006, p.20).

Looking at one group

Being in touch with people on the ground in the community is very important. As a result The Clare Family Learning Project was able to trace one group that stayed in adult education after completing a number of family learning courses.

A group of seven mothers was identified by the local learning support teacher in the primary school as needing help with literacy skills. These mothers needed support to encourage positive views of education with their children, and to improve their children's attendance in school. They were also known to the local adult literacy development worker. Children were not attending school regularly and homework was not being completed. They were falling behind with their learning and it was felt that working with the parents would be a step forward.

The group began a family learning course in September 2002. Five were Traveller mothers and two were settled mothers. In order to get this group to attend, a lot of effort on the part of the local adult literacy development worker, learning support teacher and community development worker was invested. Mothers were reminded the day before that the class was happening, lifts were arranged with each other and childcare arrangements suggested. This continued for quite a while until confidence grew.

The evaluations at the end of the first course showed that the learning was very useful, helping them to support their children with homework and the group were hungry to learn more. Even at this early stage the hook of family learning had taken hold. Four continued onto '**How to support your primary school child**' in January 2003.

The local Adult Literacy Development Worker kept in touch with the group and was a continual link through the years. As a result of the adult guidance service meeting the learners individually, different needs of the mothers were identified. One started '**Driver Theory**' classes and two joined a '**Beginner Computers**' group. It is important to note the milestone of moving to a new learning group as this proves that the learners' confidence was growing.

Six attended '**Cookery**' classes in June 2003 with four following on to '**Intermediate Computers**' in July. The mothers' confidence grew and two started to attend a local mother and toddler group during this time. The significance of the group attending '**Swimming Lessons**' in the local pool cannot be emphasised enough. Many participants would have been too shy to enter the hotel leisure centre prior to starting the family learning programme. Entering the hotel for swimming lessons was major confidence building exercise and six mothers attended. In 2004, four of the group requested help with their

children's maths homework and the Project provided '**Maths for parents of primary school children**'.

Life changes can cause people to drop out or join adult education classes. Two of the seven suspended their classes as they gave birth to babies. Changes can also cause people to attend family learning programmes at sensitive times. Parents want to support their children as best they can when children are starting preschool, primary school and moving into second level.

In September 2004 with the multi-agency approach, the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) was able to set up a FETAC Level 3 programme and five of the group started the two year programme and five completed it. Subjects included the three core modules of '**Maths**', '**Communications**', '**Personal Development**', with '**Child Development and Play**', '**Art**', '**Computers**', along with '**Learning Skills**' and '**Home Study Skills**' – the two Family Learning modules, locally developed by The Clare Family Learning Project.

Two participants got work placements in a local Community Employment Scheme. One person discovered she had a talent for art and painting. She was asked to support her children's school during art class, after her art work was spotted at an exhibition of the BTEI learners' work. This boosted confidence levels not only of the learners but also of their children.

With continued adult guidance and literacy support one learner has started a **Level 5 Childcare course**, another learner has started a **Level 5 Art and Design course** and another has started a **Level 5 Community Care course**.

Conclusion

The above evidence proves that bringing parents into informal family learning programmes can have long term positive effects on their own and their children's lives and education. These mothers are prime examples of parents who originally attended informal family learning programmes in order to help their children learn. They have moved onto formal accredited adult education learning for themselves. This group of parents ended up learning for their own personal needs when they had gained confidence in their own ability to learn and to support their children's learning.

The long term positive effects on their own lives and their children's lives and education are already visible:

- The school has seen a dramatic improvement in the children's attendance as the parents want to attend their own courses.
- Homework is getting done as parents are more confident in helping their children.
- Parents are more interested in what their children are doing at school.
- There is a better relationship between home and school.
- Parents act as role models for lifelong learning encouraging their children to stay in school longer, and change the negative notion of education.

Lessons learned

Informal family learning programmes do reach the hard to reach and those people least likely to engage in education, with very successful results as OFSTED has shown (2000, p.5). Changes may be slow and a number of courses may be needed in order to build up confidence in learners. In this case, participants have shown that there are already changes happening within the group and their children will hopefully stay longer in second level and complete some further education. Results are very

encouraging as it shows a continuum of uptake onto other adult education provision.

To be successful with an integrated group requires a big effort from all the agencies involved to work together in order that participants can succeed.

According to Pavee Point's Five Year Strategic Plan (2006, p.20) "more integrated educational provision is needed". The Clare Family Learning Project has been using this approach in the delivery of their programmes.

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Contributor profiles

Pauline Hensey is a writer and editor of adult literacy resource material and literacy research work. She has extensive experience in the adult literacy sector, both as a tutor and trainer. She currently works as a tutor of youth studies in a further education college. She holds a master's degree in Education. Pauline's publications include: 'Making Material Work', 'Read Write Now', Series 1 and 2, 'Advancing Reading', 'Skill Words; integrating literacy', 'Preparing learning materials', and 'Safe and Well'.

Kathy Maclachlan is Head of Postgraduate Studies in the Department of Adult and Continuing Education at the University of Glasgow. She coordinates and teaches on the Postgraduate Certificate of Adult Literacy and Numeracy and holds master's degrees in Education and Educational Research. She has been extensively involved in adult literacy and numeracy research over many years. Publications include the 'Evaluation of the Scottish Adult Literacy and Numeracy Strategy', 'Mapping Youth Literacies in Scotland', 'Understanding persistence, progress and attainment in adult literacies in Scotland' as well as developing practitioner research in adult literacy and numeracy.

Liz McSkeane has worked in education since 1981. For most of that time, she has worked in the area of educational disadvantage with a special focus on literacy and more recently core skills. Since 1998 she has carried out research and development work in literacy and related areas for many organisations including NALA, FÁS, Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT), Local Area Partnerships and in higher and further education settings. Work has included evaluations of three of the 'Read Write Now' TV series; the WIT literacy training qualifications as well as research into literacy in apprenticeships and in further education. In 2006, along

with Jim Dorgan, she was consultant to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Science in their preparation of their fourth report on 'Adult Literacy in Ireland'. She is currently consultant to the European Commission DG V cluster group on Key Competences-Curriculum Reform. Liz wrote her doctoral thesis on Core Skills.

Tina Byrne is Research Officer at the NALA. Since joining NALA Tina has co-authored, with Kerry Lawless, a report on the literacy experiences of older literacy students. Before joining NALA she worked as a researcher in the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin. Her work focused primarily on the lives and experiences of 'at risk' youth, covering areas such as sexual health, risk behavior and the social environment. Prior to moving into the area of social research Tina worked as a community worker in an inner-city Dublin community. Tina holds a master's degree in Applied Social Research from Trinity College Dublin. Her publications include 'The Free Time and Leisure Needs of Young People Living in Disadvantaged Areas' and 'A Study of the Sexual Attitudes, Behaviours and Views of Early School Leavers'. Tina has also carried out a number of evaluations and needs assessments projects.

Kerry Lawless joined NALA as Research Manager in 2007. Kerry has over 15 years experience in research and policy development at national, European and international level and has been involved in adult education for 20 years. She holds a master's degree in Political Communication from Dublin City University. Publications include 'First Steps in Community-University Partnership: Lessons from the Dublin City University Finglas for Diversity initiative', 'Equality Works - Building Equality and Social Inclusion in Fingal' and the 'The Next Step Initiative', an action research project commissioned by Ruhama. Mary Flanagan has worked in adult literacy for the past ten years. She completed a master's degree in Adult Education focusing on Family Learning. As Co-ordinator of The Clare

Family Learning Project since 2006, she has developed a wide range of diverse programmes including Family Learning and Active Citizenship. Prior to this, Mary has spent 10 years between Tanzania and Zambia working on Women's Income Generation and Health Projects, delivering ESOL to adults and primary school children.

Glossary

acquisition

Learning new skills

active citizenship

Playing a full part in society or your community, for example, by getting involved in local issues, campaigning, volunteering, or voting

assessment for learning

A way for you and your tutor to plan what you would like to learn and to agree what successful learning means for you

assessment of learning

A way to measure what you have learnt as you reach the end of a unit, a term or a year

authentic texts or materials

Examples of materials that are from real life situations where you need to read, write or work with numbers

autonomous model

A model that enables you to learn on your own or carry out the skills you have learnt without help

cognitive apprenticeship

An apprenticeship in which you learn by doing and a skilled person shows you ways of learning

cognitive processes, skills

Skills that let you understand or make sense of the world, the skills you need to do this

cohorts

A group of people in a research study who share similar characteristics, such as age, job or where they are from

collaborative activities

Activities that are done together in a group

community engagement

Working with a community to bring about change or improve the lives of people in the community

community of practice

A type of learning that happens when people with shared goals work together

complex capabilities

Abilities to do a number of different things or very difficult things

compulsory education

The period of time a person must spend in school under Irish law, currently from age 6 to 16

conceptualisations

Ways by which you arrive at a concept or general idea

consensus

Agreement between all members of a group on a particular subject

contextualised communicative skills

Skills for speaking or writing that most suit a given situation or context

contextualised literacy practices

Literacy practices that are typical of or embedded in particular social practices which in turn are embedded in particular contexts

coping strategies, workarounds

Ways of dealing with difficult situations by working around a problem and coming up with a different way to approach it

curriculum/curricula

A set of topics that make up a teaching course

decontextualised skills

Skills such as reading and writing that some people believe can be taught or learnt in a detached way rather than as skills that are embedded in a real-world context

deficit model

A model of teaching and learning that sees literacy difficulties as a 'problem' or weakness instead of acknowledging the skills a person may have

demographic characteristic

Something that is typical of a particular group of people, for example age, gender, nationality, education, or where people live

digitally literate

An ability to use computers, the internet and other digital technology

discourse communities

Groups of people involved in a discussion or debate who share similar thoughts and ideas

'displaced' older workers

People who are overlooked at work or removed from their job because of their age or because they lack up-to-date skills such as computer skills

double think

Believing two ideas that contradict each other, by ignoring the fact that they contradict or by applying a different set of standards to each idea

educational attainment

The level of education a person has by the time they leave school

educational interventions

Approaches or actions to help people who need support with their learning

embedded literacy

A way of teaching literacy that combines it with other skills

encoding / decoding words

Putting spoken language into a written code by spelling and writing / Reading and understanding a word or piece of writing to turn it into spoken words or thoughts

family learning

A way of teaching literacy that involves two or more generations of a family so that adults and children can learn from each other

focus group discussions

Discussions between a group of people who are brought together to talk about a particular topic

formal labour market

Workers who are in paid employment and the jobs that are available to them

formal skills

Skills that you have learnt in school or university or another formal training situation

hegemonic

A situation where a group has control over a community or country and influences its ideas and values

homogenous or static group

A group that is made up of the same type of people or where the members of the group do not change

individualised learning programme

A way of learning that is designed to suit your particular needs

informal learning

Learning that takes place through every day life at home, work or in the community rather than a formal setting such as school

initial assessment

Assessment that looks at a person's skills and level of understanding of reading, writing and working with numbers before you start learning to make sure that you learn at a level that is right for you

integrating literacy

Designing and delivering education and training programmes in a way that is effective for adults who may not be confident in literacy generally or in the specific literacy demands of a particular training or education programme

knowledge based society

A society that values knowledge and ways of creating and using information

learner centred

A way of teaching that is based on the learner's needs

learning environment

A place where you learn

literacy audit manual

A handbook to help tutors assess what literacy training is needed in a course or programme

literacy mobility

An ability to develop and use your literacy skills in a variety of situations

literacy practices

Different literacy activities and how we use our literacy skills in particular situations, for example using numeracy to work out the cost of a holiday or writing a letter of complaint

literacy supports

Supports that can help people who need to develop their

literacy skills

local adult literacy development worker, learning support

teacher, community development worker

Workers who help people to develop their literacy skills

macro level

On a large or general scale

marginalisation

A situation when you cannot play a full part in society because you lack the skills, confidence or power to do so

micro level

On a small or personal scale

modules

Parts of a learning programme that you study one at a time

non-accredited literacy progression

Improving literacy skills without getting a qualification for it

non-dominant or vernacular languages

Languages spoken by a minority of people or a community that are not understood by people outside it, such as Shelta (spoken by some of the Traveller community)

outcome

What you know, understand or are able to do by the end of a learning programme

participation

Taking part in a course or becoming active in your community

portfolio

A collection of work you have done that shows the skills you have learned

qualitative approach

A way of measuring something that looks at how good it is, for example by asking people how well they learned rather than what mark they got in an exam

quantitative analysis

A way of measuring something that looks at numbers and statistics rather than people's experiences

reading strategies

Different ways of reading information, for example skimming a train timetable or looking up a phone number

reference tool

A book or other resource, such as the internet, where you can look up things you don't understand

scaffolding

A way of teaching that offers as much support as you need when you start and gradually takes it away until you are able to learn on your own

self-chosen learning activity

An activity a learner chooses to study

settled community

People whose way of life is settled in one place, not members of the Traveller community

situated learning

A way of learning by doing or learning from watching other people, for example in a workshop or apprenticeship

social contexts

The different social circles that people mix in, such as family, friends, work or community

social endeavour

Learning as a social activity, rather than something you do on your own

social justice

The idea that fairness and equality can be achieved in every part of society

social practices

How reading, writing and numeracy are used and valued in everyday life and how literacy links with social relationships and institutions

specific social and institutional contexts

Settings in which you learn, for example home and family or school and work

stand-alone literacy work

Learning that focuses on literacy skills in isolation not as part of a wider educational or training programme

statistical analysis

Looking at numbers or statistics to work out patterns and how they apply to people

VEC

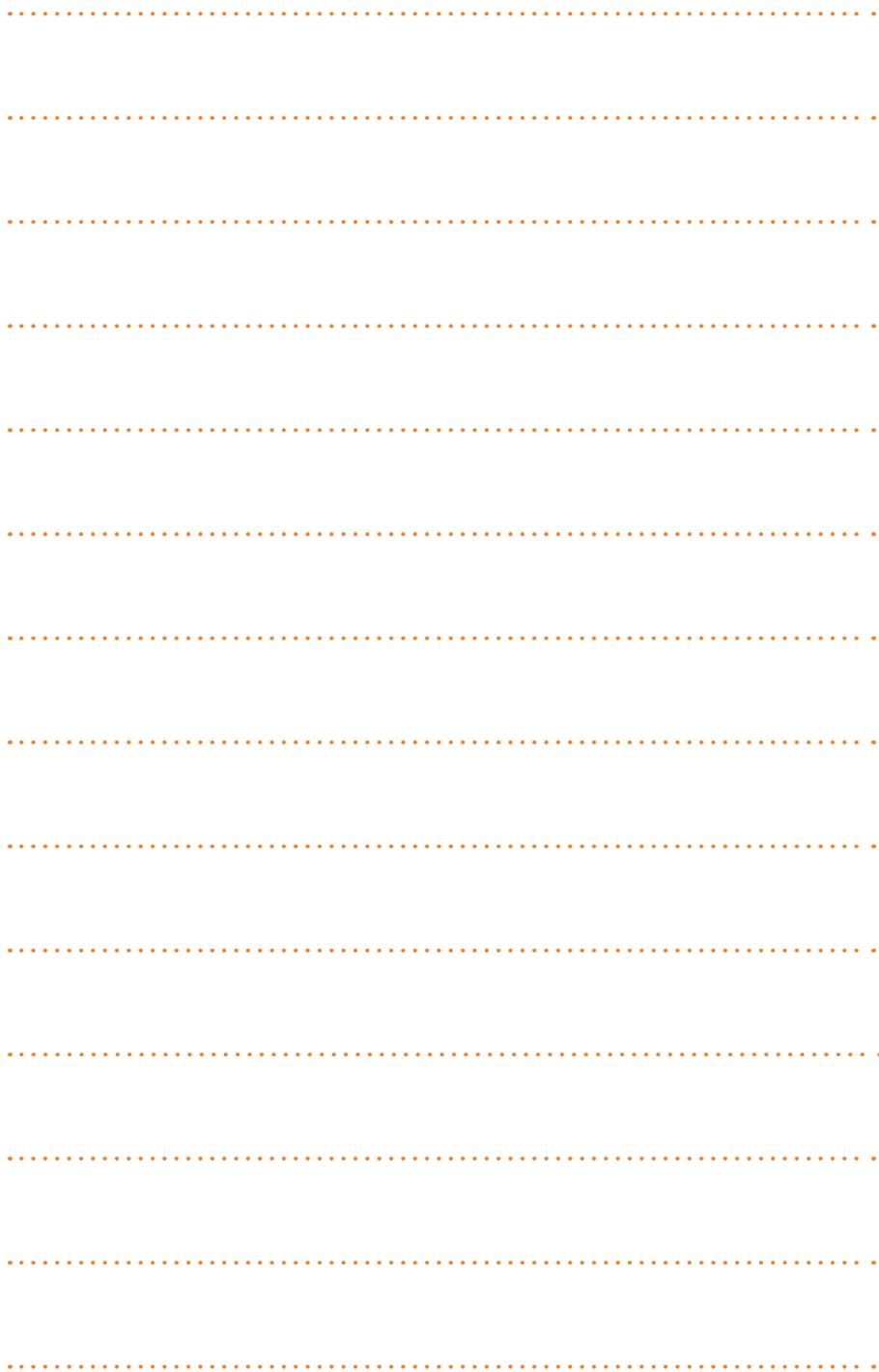
Vocational Education Committee – a committee that manages adult and further education services for each county or city

universal skills

Skills that everybody has and that can be used in any situation

visual conventions

Standards for presenting information, for example having text flow from left to right or using common symbols such as computer icons and road signs



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