

ISSN 1747-5600

Volume No. 72

Summer 2010

RaPAL

Open Edition



Journal

Open Edition

The Research and Practice in Adult Literacy Network

Who we are

RaPAL is an independent national network of learners, teachers, managers and researchers engaged in adult literacies and numeracy. Our support is generated by membership subscription only, and we are therefore completely independent in our views. RaPAL is the only national organisation focusing on the role of literacies in adult life.

What we do

- Campaign for the rights of adults to have access to the full range of literacies in their lives
- Critique current policy and practice where it is based on simplistic notions of literacy as skill
- Emphasise the importance of social context in literacy
- Encourage collaborative and reflective research
- Believe in democratic practices in adult literacy
- Create networks by organising events (including an annual conference) to contribute to national debate
- Publish a journal three times a year

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We are a friendly group - open to new members and new ideas. Please contact us with any contributions (views, comments, reports and articles) and do not be put off if you are new to the field or if you have not written for a publication before. This Journal is written by and for all learners, tutors and researchers who want to ask questions about this field of work. It does not matter if the questions have been asked before. We want to reflect the many voices within adult literacy and numeracy work and to encourage debate.

Why not join in?

Further information can be found at our website: www.rapal.org.uk

The RaPAL Journal expresses a variety of views which do not necessarily reflect those of the editorial group. The RaPAL Journal has been printed by Image Printing Co., Lumsdale, Matlock, Derbyshire. Matlock, Derbyshire.

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Editorial

Welcome to this open issue of the Journal. Collaboration has been the underpinning hallmark of this edition as contributors have worked with us to provide insight into their experience of both learning and practice. This has been a rewarding journey for us as editors, and we hope those who have contributed will have found the process a rewarding one.

Section 1

Two learners, Angela and Jerry, open the section by sharing their personal experiences of returning to the classroom. We hope you will share their contributions and encourage other learners to write for the Journal.

Issues of confidence with language are not exclusive to literacy classrooms as numeracy specialist Sally Stanton reminds us. She suggests an active approach to familiarise learners with the language of maths by building on existing knowledge and allowing individuals to learn from each other.

Hugo Kerr picks up on the topic of learner autonomy and focuses our attention at sentence level. He advocates reviewing writing sentence by sentence then prompts us, in poetic form, to think about length.

Section 2

The common denominator in this section is reflection. Cathy Clarkson shares an honest appraisal of the use of a blog and wiki for initial teacher training. We believe her experience will strike a chord with many readers starting to explore and expand their use of ICT.

Michael Atkinson considers how reflection provides space for practitioners to access different perspectives and gain deeper insights. Reassuringly, he suggests that it is not always necessary to find answers, but instead to identify gaps in our understanding.

Chris Aldred celebrates what we can learn from 'ordinary' practice, and with technology making publication possible for all, she invites us to consider what is worth saying and to whom.

From the freedoms of the Web, we move to the confines of a prison. Graham Meadows looks to informal learning to rebalance the curriculum and re-engage disengaged prisoners.

Judith Rose picks up the question of engagement from a different angle. She asks: When is an adult literacy class not an adult literacy class? Her piece considers the distinction between

literacy and social/living skills in provision for adults with learning difficulties and disabilities. Nick Shepherd, who co-authored a contribution in Volume No. 70 with Lorraine Borwick, responds to Judith Rose. We invite you to join the conversation by contributing to future editions.

Section 3

What is it like to read? Sam Duncan asks this question and shares her case study research on a reading circle. She considers the challenges of accessing and collecting first person perspectives on the experience of reading. Sam also invites us to ponder new ways of generating knowledge about adult reading development.

Reviews

We are delighted to have four reviews in this issue. The first two illustrate the relevance of historical accounts for contemporary practice and remind us of our links with colleagues abroad. Gordon Ade-Ojo takes us to Australia for his review of *Reading the Fine Print: A history of the Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council (VALBEC) 1978-2008*. Meanwhile Maxine Burton heads to Sweden with *Understanding Literacy in its Historical Contexts*.

With news headlines at home filled with budget cuts and continued talk of 'literacy levels', we come bang up to date with the other two pieces. Sam Duncan looks at *Improving reading: phonics and fluency* and Jay Derrick shares his thoughts on *Why leadership matters: putting basic skills at the heart of adult learning*.

A word of thanks

We would like to thank all the writers, referees and reviewers who have worked with us over the last few months. A special word of appreciation goes to Yvon Appleby, the Journal Co-ordinator, who mentored and supported us throughout the editorial process. We would also like to extend our thanks to Bex Ferriday for her help with sourcing images.

Please note that the views expressed by individual contributors to the Journal do not necessarily reflect those of RaPAL.

*Linda Pearce, Plymouth Parent Partnership
Julie Meredith, Croydon Adult Learning and Training (CALAT)*

Section 1 - Learning and Teaching

A Learner's Perspective Why I went back to learning

Angela Samuda

My experiences of school were a tribulation. Even though I was considered able, I lacked the motivation to apply myself. Things hadn't been good at home with my parents and the domestic fights affected my confidence and ability to be successful in school.

School for most of the time did act as a safe haven from the toxic fights from my parents. However, this toxic home life took its toll and eventually my self-destructive behaviour led to me being excluded from school and leaving without any qualifications. This left me with limited opportunities and a bitter disappointment from my parents.

Just after my sixteenth birthday I fell pregnant with my first son. This was a joyous moment in managing to achieve sometime out of my life, but my partner at the time felt I needed to achieve other things in life than becoming a mother. I knew he felt guilty, for making me become pregnant at an early age.

He insisted that I undertake a course that I felt confident in taking part in. For a while I would drift onto courses and never complete them – this was due to the lack of confidence in writing and this for a long time I denied out of embarrassment.

When I began to enter into work as a professional youth worker and now a foster carer, which requires me to write well, this became an important aspect of my quest to find myself within my professional development and at the same time this became a challenge. The challenge was not that I was not capable but the fear of failing that was hindering me from my childhood.

My light bulb moment was when I had my second son in January 2000. When he came home with his homework, my childhood fears came back again – this time I made a conscious decision to turn this on its head by attending an assessment interview for English and Maths at an adult education centre.

I started a term later, after I attended a ten week course on 'starting up your own business'. I was anxious of this because it would leave me with only fifteen weeks to take the test before the end of the year.

However, from the motivation of my second son, I needed to walk through my fear and embrace this experience to show my son that 'we can do' anything we put our mind to. My first day was an anxious one. All kinds of thoughts raced through my mind: How will others see me? Will I be able to stick this through this time? But I made up my mind that this time I would see this out.

My course I was enrolled in was entry level three in English and Maths, which at first was overwhelming. The organising of managing my personal time and completing homework was challenging, and getting to grips with the concepts of the work also took its toll.

I was not going to let this beat me so I hung in there. What was rewarding was my ability to help my son with his homework. For me there was also that personal reward of completing a course and passing my test for both subjects.

The following academic year I wanted to re-enrol for both of my courses in English and Maths. I met with some resistance from the administration as a new rule of not allowing enrolment for both courses was in place. With this I was more determined that I would enrol and complete both courses and pass them.

In September 2009 my course in English went off with a bang. I worked really well with my tutor and even excelled in my writing skills. The most wonderful moments were taking my level one exam after one term and passing, and then in the second term taking the level two exam and successfully passing that one as well.

For me this was a cornerstone in my life – for some others this may not be so much as a big thing at this level – however, I've got big plans to be able to write well and correct my work with confidence.

One of my big plans is to reapply for my MA in Youth Studies in 2012, and then go on to doing the PhD. Why? For a long time it has been my burning desire to have this academic achievement. Not for me to gain better income to improve my lifestyle but to prove to myself I can construct sentences without aid and to make my family proud for regaining what I lost in school.

A Learner's Perspective The Classroom

Jerry

Me and school were not the greatest of friends. I found the whole experience very stressful. At school I was very shy and introverted. In class if the teacher asked a question which I knew the answer to, I would be too scared to answer, for fear the other children would think I was a know-it-all. You see I was plagued with fear and self-doubt and that had a big effect on my education.

Fast forward twenty years and I decided to have a go at education again and try and improve my prospects. So I contacted my local adult education centre and went for an English and Maths assessment to see what level I was at. From there I was put on a warm-up English and Maths course.

I remember the first day, my anxiety levels were in orbit! The teacher said we were all going to take part in an ice-breaking exercise. I remember a voice in my head saying, "sod you and your ice", then I thought I'll say I need to go to the toilet and make my escape. A time comes when you have to stop running and thankfully I persuaded my legs to say put.

That short course led me onto enrolling to study for a level 1 adult literacy exam. At the time of doing this piece of writing I have passed level 1 and I am waiting for my results for level 2.¹

For me, going back into the classroom has been an extremely rewarding experience. It has lit a fire in me to want to write. With the help and support of my teacher, I have unearthed something inside me that brings me so much joy and pleasure. My teacher and my peers have been very complimentary about some of my work, which is great and has really helped my confidence.

I have been reading Stephen King's book *On Writing*. In it he says, "I don't believe writers can be made, either by circumstances or by self-will. The equipment comes with the original package." I think what he is saying is, you either got it or you don't. I won't lie to you, a part of me really hopes I've got it! But if I don't, I have found something I really enjoy which is great. That's what I have gained from returning to the dreaded classroom.

1. Editors' note: Jerry passed his Level 2.

Learning the language of numeracy

A teaching idea for conveying metric measurement facts

Sally Stanton

Sally Stanton teaches numeracy at Croydon Adult Learning and Training (CALAT) and has a particular interest in dyslexia and mathematics.

I have been teaching numeracy for the last five years and am currently undertaking my numeracy specialist training course with LLU+ at London South Bank University. One of my assignments for this course involved producing a resource to promote the use of language in the numeracy classroom. It proved so successful with my learners that I would like to share it.

In recent years there has been a growing emphasis on the importance of language and discussion in the teaching and learning of mathematics. Mathematics, like many academic subjects, relies on a large number of technical words which in some cases are unique to the subject and in others have different meanings in a maths context to those used in everyday English. This maths 'register' [Fullerton (1995), Laborde (1990) and Pimm (1991)] can seem intimidating to new learners but Pimm (1987) argues: "Acquiring control over the mathematics register is a significant part of becoming a competent mathematician – at any level."

At CALAT I teach learners from a wide variety of ethnic, cultural and educational backgrounds. I only teach day time classes and although some of my learners are young and male, the majority are female and aged between 35 and 55. Over the years I have found that one of the areas of the curriculum which causes the greatest difficulty is that of metric measurement. Many of the learners have grown up using imperial measures and are completely unfamiliar with the metric system. They complain that the measurements all sound the same and that it is impossible to remember how many of each unit is needed to make up the next unit of measure. Yet it is of course the similarity of the words which provides the code to deciphering the function and size of the units of measure!

As a result I decided to design a resource which would give my learners greater

familiarity and confidence with the specific, technical words relating to metric measurement. I made headbands out of strips of cardboard (in the same way as you would make a paper hat or crown for a child) and wrote one metric unit of measurement for length, weight and capacity on each headband. I then asked the class to give me examples of different types of measurement found in everyday life and used the results of the discussion to write the relevant categories (length, weight and capacity) on the whiteboard. Next I placed a headband on each member of the class ensuring that the learner was not able to read the unit of measure on the headband at any time. (In the event of a small class, any unused headbands were placed on a table in view of the learners).



The learners were then instructed to form small groups and ask each other questions in order to work out which unit of measure was written on their headband. All questions had to be phrased in order to elicit a yes/no response and learners were instructed not to give any information other than "yes" or "no" answers. Questions could relate to the category of measurement such as "Am I used to measure weight?" or to the relative size of the measure such as "Could I be used to measure the distance between two towns?" In the event of the learners being unsure of the correct response to a question, they were encouraged to consult other members of the class (although I did oversee the activity in order to ensure that learners were not given incorrect responses to their questions). Learners were reminded that they should not at any time use any of the words on the headbands during their

discussions as they would be asked later to identify their unit of measure.



Once the learners had identified their units of measure (or at least had identified what they measure) they were asked to group themselves according to what they measured and then line up in order of size within their measurement group (i.e. millimetre, centimetre, metre, kilometre). Any unused headbands were obviously included at this point and learners were asked where they should be placed. Several learners were still unsure of the name of their measure but once we had used the positioning of the groups to investigate the use of vocabulary within metric measurement (the first part of the word indicates the size of the measure, the end of the word shows what it measures) they were able to work out for themselves what their particular measure should be called. One learner voiced the logic of the system when asked to name her unit of measure by saying, "Well I'm used to measure small amounts of liquid so I must be a 'millilitre' –

'milli' for the small measure and 'litre' because it's liquids!"

We also discussed the uses for the different measures and I asked the learners to give me an example of something which they had seen in the supermarket which was measured using their unit of measure. With the higher level groups we also went on to discuss the roots of the words 'milli', 'centi' and 'kilo' and how these prefixes contain clues to the relative size of the measures. We also found links to other words used in the English language such as 'century' or 'millennium' and to some currencies like dollars and cents. Still in their headbands, learners were then asked to point to someone who was 10 times or 100 times or 1000 times bigger or smaller than them using their knowledge of the similar words as an aide-mémoire.

This activity was designed as an introduction to the subject of units of metric measure and to the structure of the specific vocabulary surrounding those units. However, the activity is not limited to the topic of metric measurement – a similar 'headband' approach could be used to introduce time-specific vocabulary such as 'decade' or 'century' or for discussion of the properties of shapes.

Research by Swann (2006) has indicated that adult learners respond better to more active teaching approaches which build on pre-existing knowledge and allow them to learn from each other through discussion and problem solving. This activity was designed to teach a specific set of vocabulary, but it does so in a manner which encourages discussion and the use of other mathematical vocabulary such as comparative words like 'longer', 'heavier' etc. It also builds on learners' pre-existing knowledge and requires them to piece together the information for themselves rather than simply relying on the teacher to give it to them. It therefore encourages them to become more confident about using a maths 'register' and, perhaps more importantly, it does so in a way which proved hugely popular.

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Exploded Text

Hugo Kerr

Hugo Kerr's interests include dyslexia, the psychology of literacy acquisition and management, and the significance of consciousness in learning. He has spoken to RaPAL conferences on consciousness and literacy teaching and on developmental dyslexia. He has delivered workshops on the latter subject across Britain. He loves to debate with like minds of like enthusiasms and welcomes correspondence to hkerr@aol.com

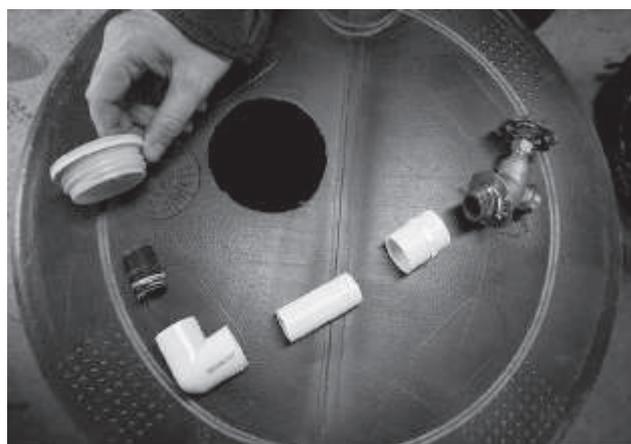
'Exploded Text' is an adaptation, a formalisation, of a Frank Smith insight – that we do well to review our writing as two absolutely distinct individuals; to examine our writing first solely as author and then solely as secretary (and in that order). I have merely added the suggestion that this be done sentence by sentence, very deliberately and very formally. It translates into a simple, portable, robust technique enabling students to own the review and perfection of their own work.



An exploded view helps us see how the separate parts make the whole.

Engineers use what they call an 'exploded view' of a mechanism. In imagination the mechanism is blown apart and frozen a split second later. This makes it easy to see where the bits all go, what they do and how they do it. What is sauce for an engineer may be sauce for us too. If we 'explode' a piece of writing both its form and the place and function of its parts may become more

clearly visible. We are aiming at confident autonomy, for students to understand a process by which they may consider and correct their own work for themselves.



The place and function of components becomes visible.

Text is 'exploded' by 'sentence' (text between full stops, anyway). Every 'sentence' is then considered absolutely separately from the rest of the text. This is not, initially, particularly easy for a student. For beginners it may help actually to cut them apart to isolate them completely. (And I wish you luck explaining the word 'sentence'. My *Shorter Oxford* flounders, eventually throwing in the towel entirely with "a piece of writing between two full stops".)

First the student interrogates the 'sentence' as its author only. Reading it purely for feel and content (preferably aloud). Attention is deliberately directed away from technical details such as spelling. The text is interrogated for its personally meaningful qualities as a piece of writing and for nothing else: Does it read well? Sound good? Do I like it? If not, how could it be done otherwise? Does it say what I want? Is it a complete utterance? Should it be broken

up? Can I cut fat from it? And so on and so on. Only when satisfied as to its beauty and truth is it permissible to move into secretarial mode. In secretarial mode focus is on nothing other than the technical detail – punctuation, capitalisation, spelling etc. Eyes are deliberately averted from writing quality as such.

The technique works in real life. It teaches how more worked, more intentional, more personally shaped writing can be independently produced. It's not esoteric. It's really only more or less what we all do. It just benefits from being theoretically understood, deliberately applied and owned.

Size Matters

Hugo Kerr

'Size' is about control. This doggerel is not itself a teaching tool; merely light accompaniment to the fundamental idea that a short sentence is far easier to control than a long one. In other words, a wise student will write in short sentences. (One less thing to worry about.) Various research has claimed that the average reader begins to struggle on sentences over twelve words. 'Keep it short' is thus Good Advice for tutor as well as student.

Average: 13 words / sentence. Range: 29 - 4. Conclusion: Could Do Better.

Size Matters

Whenever you write you should
keep this in mind –
Really clear language is
quite hard to find.
So as you are writing
you certainly ought
To attempt to control
it by keeping it short.

It's rather like football.
As you know then,
If you hold the ball close
all those horrible men
Wearing different shirts
cannot take it away
And you have some control
over whatever may
Or may not happen next.
It's a matter of reach.
And this is exactly what
I'd like to teach
With this doggerel;
that it is usually wrong

just to keep writing and writing,
inserting clauses & commas,
each one, rather than adding to meaning,
tending to distract from it until,
should any of the readers who started with
you still be reading at all,
even the most patient, persistent, and
generous of them is likely,
from linguistic exhaustion if nothing else,
to reach the deplorable conclusion that
although the subject seemed to be most
interesting a while ago
it has become, over the course
of very recent time,
suddenly and unaccountably
much less fascinating than
they at first imagined -
although they may not realise that this is
simply because you, the writer of all this,
have committed that most basic of writers'
errors which is

To let all your sentences
get far too long!

Section 2 - Developing Research and Practice

Web 2:0¹ & Teacher Education: using blogs and wikis

Cathy Clarkson

Cathy Clarkson is Teacher Education and Development Team Leader for CELTA & DTE(E)LLS at Kirklees College. She has been teaching ESOL for 9 years at the college and has a keen interest in the use of technology in the classroom. She was one of nine practitioner-researchers in the NRDC ICT Effective Practice study and was shortlisted for the BECTA ICT in Teaching Award in 2006. She has carried this enthusiasm for e-learning in the language classroom into teacher education and is keen to support and encourage trainees to reflect on the effective use of technology in their own teaching.

Introduction

From May 2008 to July 2009 three Cambridge Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA) courses ran at Kirklees College, Dewsbury Centre. This was the first time this course had been offered at the college, and the first time the trainers had led CELTA courses. All the trainers are experienced ESOL teachers and have an interest in using technology creatively with language learners. Therefore we were all keen to support the trainee teachers in exploring the use of technology in the classroom, both in terms of their own teaching and also as a tool within the CELTA course itself. Over the three courses two blogs and one wiki were set up and their effectiveness in supporting the trainees was evaluated.

The blog was set up two weeks into the first course. The first post introduced the blog to the trainees stating:

*"... I am interested how we can use a blog as part of an initial teacher training course. This blog will be:
a way to keep in touch
a place to reflect on your teaching and learning
a way to comment on each others' reflections
a place to support each other outside the Monday sessions
a place to add links to interesting sites or articles - I have a 'stash' of gr8 websites that I use within my ESOL teaching and I plan to add 1 or 2 links every couple of week (rather than linking them all NOW) to give you an opportunity to explore them in your own time."*²

The initial idea to set up a blog was decided as the trainers had successfully used them in the classroom with ESOL learners. We were familiar with how to set up a blog, its structure and layout and the nature of creating posts and the comments function. We were keen to create an online space for the trainees and trainers to communicate outside of class time and, as the college had no virtual learning environment (VLE), we felt that a blog would be suitable for this.

By the end of the first CELTA course, and half way through the second, the trainers were becoming increasingly frustrated with the limitations of the blog. Access to the college VLE was still not possible, so the idea of using a wiki was introduced. This opened up a wider range of interactive learning opportunities, such as sharing administrative materials, course materials, links, and undertaking activities within the classroom to allow trainees to create and share content. At this stage, the aim of providing a space to collaborate outside the classroom was no longer the main focus.

As with the blog, the trainers had some familiarity of using a wiki with ESOL learners, and were therefore familiar with how to set up a wiki, how to create content and upload documents. We were also keen to experiment with how the wiki could be used as a teaching and learning tool inside the classroom. Once the wiki was created, the blog was no longer used.

Therefore, over the fourteen months and three CELTA courses the first course used a blog, the second used a blog *and* a wiki, and the third used only a wiki.

1. Web 2:0 is associated with applications that facilitate interactive information sharing and collaboration. Examples of Web2:0 include social-networking sites, video-sharing sites, wikis and blogs.

2. http://dewsburycelta.blogspot.com/2008_05_01_archive.html

May 2008 – Dec 2008
<http://dewsburycelta.blogspot.com/>

Jan 2009 – July 2009
<http://dcelta.pbworks.com/>

CELTA course timeline



Oct 2008 - March 2009
<http://dewsburyeveningcelta.blogspot.com/>
 and
<http://dcelta.pbworks.com/>

The ways in which both blogs and the wiki were used have been categorised highlighting similarities and differences between the two technologies in the ESOL teacher training context. In addition, feedback from the trainees on using technology during the course was collected and journals were written by the trainers.

The Blog

There are three main areas that the blog was used for.

- 1: Trainers giving information to trainees (This was either references or websites related to input sessions or information about up coming activities.)
- 2: Setting homework/reflection tasks
- 3: Collaboration/interaction

Although a key feature of a blog is the ability to comment on posts and thus use it as an interactive space, the main use of the CELTA blog was as a space for the trainers to give information to the trainees. One trainee asked directly about whether reflection tasks were set to stimulate thought or if we expected them to comment on them on the blog. Despite clarifying that we were asking for a written response in order to encourage discussion and debate outside the classroom, this function was little used. While there was some evidence of interaction between trainees and trainers and between trainees, this was limited.

The number of people contributing to the blog was also limited. By November 2008, the second course had been running a month and one trainee had made the most

posts/comments, with only two others contributing. Five trainees had not contributed at all.

By the end of the first CELTA course in December 2008, it was becoming increasingly clear that there were limitations to the blog and therefore it was decided to explore how a wiki could be used as an alternative.

The Wiki

In January 2009 a wiki was created using PBworks. This was chosen as one of the trainers was familiar with this site and had used wikis with ESOL learners and ESOL staff.

The wiki functions were similar to that of the blog: giving information, setting homework/reflection tasks and for interaction/collaboration. It also provided additional uses:

- Administration: sharing course programmes, paperwork and other requirements.
- Classroom application: activities were created to use the wiki in the classroom as well as at home. This gave trainees the opportunity to create content as well as the trainers.
- Sharing documents: documents could be linked to the wiki.

Using the wiki to share documents and as a classroom tool was felt to be an asset to the CELTA course. Classroom tasks could be linked to the wiki, allowing an opportunity

for trainees to review tasks after the lesson.

Creating user accounts for the trainees was simpler than for the blog, however, a structure was not in place and this needed to be considered. For each input session a new wiki page was created, which allowed information to be shared, documents to be linked and activities created whereby trainees worked on the wiki in class time.

Feedback from the trainees

Feedback from the trainees reflected the wider applications available through the wiki.

I did quite a lot of language practice on the blog. I especially enjoyed the wiki, it was very informative and accessible. It had everything a student wants. It keeps us up to date.

There could have been more to do on the blog, it seemed to die a death no one really engaged with it. The wiki was better and became a really useful resource.

Didn't really use the blog for reflection
Wiki was a useful tool, however sometimes to locate information or check updates was difficult

Trainer reflections

As the third course was beginning the trainers were reflecting on the use of the blog with the first two groups. These reflections were beginning to highlight the negative aspects of the blog in terms of length of time to set accounts up and how initially trainees showed some enthusiasm for the space but as the course progressed this decreased. Setting up accounts on the

wiki was a speedier process, something that was completed during break time.

Within three weeks of the wiki being established it was clear that the wiki was providing the same functionality as the blog with added benefits - a 'Useful Books' page was created, with a suggestion that the trainees could add their own recommendations too, a function not available on the blog. Three trainees accessed the wiki before the class and completed Hot Potatoes activities that had been linked there, and there were already signs of trainees completing reflection tasks.

Conclusion

One of the biggest differences between a blog and a wiki is related to layout and structure. A blog by its very nature is linear with newer posts appearing at the top pushing older posts down the page. These old posts are then archived by month in the side bar. There is no flexibility with the structure. An analogy for a blog could be to compare it with a scroll.



However, with the wiki no such structure is provided and if not carefully thought out a wiki could become large and untidy. A wiki could be compared to a tree or shrub, something that becomes untidy if not pruned and organised effectively.



The initial change from a blog to a wiki came about while planning an input session. The limitations of the blog as a means to share and collaborate outside the classroom was becoming apparent, in addition there had been no opportunity to use the blog as a tool within the classroom. I thought about an activity that I had done previously on Word, then had trainees physically move PCs to view and amend each other's work. However, thinking about a wiki, I realised that this activity could be done on the wiki, trainees could stay at their own PCs to

work, read other's work and comment and amend, plus this work would remain visible for them to access and review in their own time.

Having a space to upload documents, such as Word, PowerPoint and Hot Potatoes, was a big advantage to the wiki. It allowed the creation of a single space to be used by trainees on different courses, who could access relevant course material in their own time. However, a disadvantage of both the blog and wiki is that neither of them shows whether pages have been viewed, only that they have been edited.

The main reason the blog was set up initially was to provide a space for trainees to communicate with each other, as well as the trainers, outside class. Neither the blog nor the wiki really fulfilled this criterion effectively and in hindsight maybe this was not a realistic use of this kind of space, where there are other means for trainees to communicate with each other such as swapping phone numbers and email

addresses or becoming Facebook friends. In relation to the suggested reflection tasks, CELTA is a very intensive course, and setting additional tasks on top of the assessed teaching and assignments was perhaps asking too much.

However, what was needed was a space to provide and share information, and in this respect the wiki was successful. Information came predominantly from the trainers but some content was created by the trainees during class time.

From September 2009 the college finally got access to a VLE, using Moodle, and new safeguarding measures meant that the wiki site was no longer available within the college. Initial reflections on this show that the VLE provides all the functionality of the wiki, with the added benefits of being able to see which content is being viewed, when and by which person. Therefore by the end of the next course the use of the wiki and the VLE will be able to be compared, and the VLE will provide statistics of usage.

Reflexivity and the Literacy Researcher

Michael Atkinson

Michael is an ESOL teacher to adult refugees and migrants in Victoria, Australia. His postgraduate research focused on the meaningfulness of people's participation in adult second language literacy programmes.

This paper explores the value of reflexivity in the research of a literacy programme conducted with adult ESOL students in Australia. In particular it looks at the reflexive statements that emerged from my own research (Atkinson, 2010) and how these critical reflections contributed to an authentic understanding of the research data. These reflexive statements were embedded within research which explored the broader social significance of learners' participation in a functionally orientated ESOL programme which I co-taught with other teachers. Participants were humanitarian entrants from Africa who had received minimal, if any, literacy instruction within a formal educational environment in their own language.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to both a process for questioning the construction of knowledge and a way of interpreting experience differently (D'Cruz, 2007). In encouraging people to identify their own personal narratives and those of others including the hegemonic discourse of institutions it acknowledges both the role of the self in generating knowledge and more broadly how meaning is created. In situating oneself along diverse and frequently non-linear dimensions at the same time a more complex version of socially constructed reality may be perceived and therefore understood (Schmidt, 2007). The remainder of the paper discusses the value of reflexivity in questioning my observations as a researcher and the hegemonic institutional discourse, which constructed my role as a teacher. In so doing space was created from which to arrive at a deeper insight with respect to my research findings.

The Reflexive Process and Literacy Research

During the research process I was acutely aware of the diffusiveness and also the limits of the ESOL literacy programme (hereafter referred to as the literacy programme). From an educational perspective the literacy programme was bounded by the physicality of the classroom and the particular students enrolled in the course. From a social perspective, however, the literacy programme frequently extended beyond this physical space to encompass not only these students but also the families and friends who came to visit them and also the spaces they used. I refer to my own observations to illustrate the diffuseness in the boundaries of the literacy programme where the seeming dichotomy between the educational space and the broader social space led me to question the essential nature of the programme itself.

In reality, where does the literacy programme begin and where does it end? Does it begin and end with the programme itself, or with the curriculum, and if so, which curriculum? Does it include the learnt curriculum, the delivered curriculum or just the official curriculum sitting on a shelf at my desk? Does it revolve around the teachers, extending to the tutors¹, and the receptionist who is the first to greet the students as they arrive? Is its focus the students and if so, which students? Does it include those studying part time, those suspended for health or maternal reasons, those still to come, those who have left? Does it include the husbands who have graduated and continue to play a role in the learning habits of their wives? In essence what assumptions are being taken when we talk about 'a literacy programme'? (Personal field notes 31-10-08)

Reflexively questioning my own understandings and the institutional discourse, which constructed the concept of the literacy programme, enabled me to arrive at deeper insights with respect to the margins of that programme. I began to see the programme as one whose boundaries are marked by porosity rather than precision. Where this porosity is not simply physical but extends in terms of purpose from the educational through to the social and the cultural. The more I reflected on the learners who took part in the literacy programme the more I began to understand that the literacy course wasn't simply an educational programme located in one physical space for one clearly defined reason. Rather, the programme also provided a rich social outlet for students whose own social networks had been turned upside down in the process of being a refugee and coming to Australia.

From the perspective of policy and delivery however the literacy programme was separated from the social lives of learners except where it was used as a pedagogical device to enhance literacy skills in the classroom. This lack of connection between the social and the functional is evident in the following two statements derived from my own observations. While both statements represent a 'truth', they both portray a different reality with consequences for the students enrolled in the course.

The literacy programme is a well-resourced and progressive learning programme. ... The teachers at the research site don't follow a set syllabus but create their own resources to meet student need and course requirements. Students also have the opportunity to access computers within designated computer classes. These computers have software to aid students in their acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills. There are books in the library

appropriate for a variety of literacy levels extending from the very basic, which students are encouraged to borrow, to more advanced books. The library also has computers with Internet access specifically set aside for English language learners. (Personal field notes, 11-2-09)

Looking at the same programme from a viewpoint which emphasises access to socio-cultural meanings rather than access to material resources an alternative interpretation is revealed.

There is no course book or corresponding workbook for students to own their own learning. There is neither a shared thematic approach across classes nor a set of clear guidelines regarding teaching methodology or aims...The books available for students to borrow from the library are all story-based and are culturally distant to the world of the learner. The computers are protected through a user name and password making entry difficult for many students to access and virtually impossible for those with minimal literacy skills. There are neither opportunities nor encouragement for students to learn from one another across classes or across cultures. Learning is considered to be the preserve of the classroom where it can be transferred, monitored and assessed. During breaks students frequently separate into their own ethnic or cultural group. (Personal field notes, 11-2-09)

This latter statement, derived through observation and reflection show that through reflexivity an altogether different perspective on the meanings within a literacy programme may be ascertained than that prescribed by the hegemonic discourse. It is possible to discern a programme which, although it meets key functional criteria, does not necessarily promote a sense of social belonging nor act to facilitate positive transformative

experience. Instead the social and the functional may be viewed from differing, almost opposing perspectives.

The identified tension between the programme as both a functional course and a *dysfunctional* social space led me to further question my role as a teacher/researcher. The following statements provide a further example of the reflexive process for facilitating a deeper understanding of the research focus. The passages illustrate different aspects of the same phenomena i.e. what meaningful inputs can I attach to my teaching to give positive meaning to my students and the challenges I faced (and continue to face) in teaching to students whose broader learning needs are not matched by the curriculum.

While some students have made steady progression throughout the course other students have been learning at the same level for one, even two years. While some students attend regularly others attend spasmodically appearing every now and again, or for half a day here and half a day there. While some students are actively involved in their learning others passively sit by, quick to write what I place on the board but slow to question what they are writing and why.

...In my role as a teacher of English to pre-literate students how do I justify the teaching I deliver to my students in the context of their slow rate of acquisition, their spasmodic attendance and their passive learning style? How do I present the curriculum to make literacy learning meaningful to them given their unique needs?

In my role of enabling students to understand Australian culture, what aspects of Australian culture do I share and how do I share it? Do I talk about Don Bradman and other aspects of Australian culture that appear on the Australian Citizenship Test? Do I talk about the experiences

of past refugees to Australia and their challenge in integrating into the Australian culture? Do I focus on human rights, or education, or on the need for literacy in Australian culture? How can I proactively support their journey of integration within Australian society? (Personal field notes 10-04-09)

From my experience of the reflexive process it is not necessary to find an answer to identified questions but rather identify gaps in understanding and the consequent recurring theme(s) which connect these identified gaps. Beyond the uncertainty and the doubts in the above statements there also lies a subtle recognition that I as a teacher of English language and literacy also play a role in supporting my students socially and enabling them to understand their own needs.

Through the reflective process I was able to move beyond the tension between the functional and the social and thereby move towards an understanding of the meaningfulness of the literacy programme from the perspective of learners themselves. Reflexively questioning my observations and my part in constructing these observations enabled me to view the literacy programme not in terms of student and teacher roles and institutional discourse but in terms of relationships and emerging identities which were both dependent upon the delivery and acquisition of functional skills and a sense of social connection. The following statement shows how this reflexive understanding can be used to inform further observation and reflection.

Students in class told their stories. Many of the stories were tempered with explanations for why students acted as they did, not always from the storyteller themselves. Indeed I began to realise that this was a common recursive process in the telling of many of the stories. Participants may not have known the stories but they were well aware of the feelings behind the stories, the sense of confusion and the limited

course of action the participants had, frequently due to their lack of language skills. I reflected on the feelings of confusion and desperation that many of the students must have felt. What gave the stories told by participants their power was that they expressed a sense of uncertainty and vulnerability felt by all at some point in their lives but it also reminded each of them how far they had come in their understanding of Australian society. (Personal field notes, 31-03-09)

It was within the context of this uncertainty about the broader meanings of society and also the desire to move forward in terms of their relationship to it, that I began to understand where meaningfulness could be constructed for the participants themselves. Their participation within an ESOL literacy programme was inclusive of not just functional skill acquisition and social experience but also personal integration within mainstream society dependent upon a learnt appreciation of their role within that society. As one participant stated:

I need to be quiet. I don't understand this country. If I do something I might do the wrong thing. First we must understand this country. This is why I don't say very much. I want to understand. Then we can know if we do the right thing. (Student M, Field notes, 11-03-09)

Conclusion

Reflexivity enables us to understand the constructions which frame our roles and in so doing to question them thereby arriving at new understandings. It creates the space for others to develop and express their own perspectives leading to the co-construction of new knowledge and understandings from which to frame our reality. It is this co-creation of knowledge which can contribute authenticity to research findings and importantly offer alternatives to the institutional discourse which all too often is portrayed as a single truth.

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A moment in time – reflections on ordinary literacies practice in the north of Scotland in 2009

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An Understanding Literacies course ran at the University of Aberdeen in spring 2009. Its timing coincided with what several of the participants identified as a watershed moment; adult literacies work in Scotland faced contextual and policy change. The "grand experiment" described by Juliet Merrifield (Merrifield 2005) no longer felt so grand or experimental to practitioners who were struggling to cope with more restricted funding and a new political context; the Scottish Government replaced the Scottish Executive in 2007 and its pledges to freeze council tax and give greater local autonomy changed both the financial and political climates for literacies work.¹

The course assignment directed the participants to reflect on their practice and thus focused on their 'ordinary' work – not in the sense of average or normal work, but as work that they would not have chosen to present as exceptional or 'leading edge'. To me, the descriptions and reflections on this 'ordinary' work offered an extraordinary range of insights. They revealed ongoing dilemmas without the pressure to talk about 'good' work. They came from the front line of literacies work as the ground rules were shifting and literacies work appeared to face multi-faceted threats.

The striking individual voices of the students on the course described and took a critical look at literacies from where they stood. The nine participants in the group had diverse experience: there were full and part time workers, a qualified Community Learning and Development (CLD) worker,

literacies organisers (one of whom had just taken on responsibilities for generic CLD work), a co-ordinator of a literacies partnership, people who worked with young families and parents, a researcher, a youth worker and a number of people who were tutors (many alongside other roles at work) of adult learning or literacies groups. As group facilitator, I came as a secondee to the university from an adult learning development role which had included co-ordination of a literacies partnership. Participants had varied academic backgrounds, with some starting on a first course at university and others holding degrees already.

This diversity was a great learning resource for the group. The course emphasised collaborative working and was underpinned by a social constructivist approach (e.g. Vygotsky 1962, 1978). Students were expected to develop their own understandings and meanings and compare their own work and experience with the theoretical material presented and with others' accounts of and understandings of their practice. The group only met face to face on four occasions but subgroups worked together online, by phone or face to face to produce inputs for the rest of the class between times. Three participants who travelled south to Aberdeen together described their non-stop seminars on the train. The whole group worked together really well by their fourth meeting, identifying themes which affected them all and differences in practice which were highly specific.

1. For more detail on the Scottish Government's introduction of Single Outcome Agreements please see <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Government/local-government/SOA>

The process of publication – the right place at the right time

Excited by reading the assignments, I rushed to my colleague Aileen Ackland, who had originally developed the Understanding Literacies course saying, "You must read these!" We agreed they had something important to say about where literacies work was at that time and that they could be a stimulus for discussion in the wider literacies community of practice (Wenger, cited on his website²). A conversation with Learning Connections staff, who were in regular contact with us because of our involvement in the Teaching Qualification in Adult Literacies (TQAL) project, linked my enthusiasm for making the students' work widely available with their longstanding concern about how best to encourage practitioners to report practice so that other practitioners could benefit. Resources were secured to support an experiment to publish the assignments online, having used extracts as a learning resource to encourage further accounts from the students on TQAL project programmes. The Understanding Literacies group responded positively and those members who made it through the snow to meet in December 2009 agreed draft ground rules for participation, editing and publication which were shared with the rest of the group.

'Saying it all out loud': confidence to write and share

I thought the essays were good – would the group agree? Together we examined our assumptions about what was worth saying and to whom. Participants wondered whether anyone outside our group would be interested, but supported by my enthusiasm, agreed the essays had something to say about real practice at a particular – and critical – point in time, and that they were likely to interest practitioners and others with an involvement in literacies. We were sure we needed to protect the privacy of the people we had written about. We agreed to check that where we had been critical we could substantiate our views and avoid "whining or complaining" (email to group following meeting). We also agreed explicitly that each essay remained the 'property' of its author therefore we would

not try to modify or 'improve' each others' ideas. Instead we would help each other to refine the way we expressed things, seek clarity and point out to each other possible breaches of privacy and assumptions about background knowledge or familiarity with jargon and abbreviations. Summaries or introductions could be added to assist in setting the scene.

We acknowledged the vulnerability we all felt about putting what we had done into the public domain and the vulnerability we felt as potential critics of each others' work in a group rather than a private, one to one context. To continue to support each other effectively, as all would have been reluctant to be the only one to publish their essay, the group agreed possible ground rules. These were then circulated to those who had not been able to meet up and all were happy with the processes agreed. We agreed not to anonymise the work or produce it all as a collective effort; participants wanted "to write as individuals but have the support of the group". We needed to say who the authors were and where we stood and to make explicit that we were valuing our personal take on reality at a particular moment in time. Reaching agreement about explicit principles against which we could suggest edits helped us to have the confidence to say when we could see potential for improvement. Clarity and comprehensibility emerged as the overriding features for the text, and trust and honesty as the touchstones of the interpersonal process.

The essays were pasted on a wiki³ so that we could put our agreements into practice. Not everyone found the wiki easy to use, but looking at the statistics provided by Wikispaces, the provider of the wiki software we used, there is clear evidence of visits and editing by group members throughout late December 2009 and January 2010. Some aspects of the wiki were helpful – the most up to date versions and comments were all in just the one place and we didn't drown in emails from each other – but some found the technology tricky and despaired of contributing directly, especially as only two student participants

2. www.ewenger.com

3. 'A website or similar online resource which allows users to add and edit content collectively' as defined by the government of Victoria, Australia 2005

had previous experience of using wikis in a course setting. With hindsight we, and especially I, should have thought more carefully about the implications of using unfamiliar technology with limited support, especially as snow prevented everyone exploring this technology together face to face. However, the use of a wiki was an opportunity for all to extend their repertoires and most were pleased to rise to the challenge.

My reflections on recording and sharing ordinary practice

The experience of involvement with this group has led me to reflect on why and how practitioners report on their work to others. The academic process was the immediate driver for participants to produce 3000 words of text, and not just any text, text which was expected to recognise the significance of articulation of practice and reflection on it.⁴ The collective process seems to have empowered participants to see that their records and comments could be of great interest to others and the group agreed early on that the originality of the individual expression we liked so much in the accounts should not be undermined by group editing.

The confidence to 'say it all out loud' by publishing work that had never been intended for publication may have come from:

- relationships of trust fostered by a history of collaboration to construct learning materials for each other
- recognising the value of others' essays and therefore their own for those who were not confident of their writing
- explicitly taking shared responsibility for quality and
- an explicit, collective concern that no-one (author or person mentioned) should be left vulnerable by the essays entering the public domain.

What do we share and how do we go about sharing?

The practicalities of disseminating accounts of practice would also have defeated us if it had not been for the resources and contacts

within the group. My university setting had given me an enhanced appreciation of the value of reflective accounts of practice. As a local authority worker my attempts to share good practice would have been confined to encouraging 'leading edge' practitioners to contribute to conferences and reports as this was perceived by me, at the time, as about effective use of resources and outcomes for participants. Where processes were reported these were described briefly unless they formed a critical component of, for example, a grant application and these were rarely shared widely. Sharing the essays became for me not just an event in itself but also a first step towards initiating a discussion in the wider community of practice in literacies in Scotland about how reporting can be made more useful, lively and accessible by conscious use of reflection.

My new setting also provided me with colleagues who saw publication as possible and desirable, who talked about sharing practice and insights gained and about how practitioners could be researchers and would be able to impact more effectively on the quality of practice if they were. Because of my contact with the TQAL project consortium, I was aware of various attempts to strengthen the community of practice with an interest in literacies work. Crucially this also meant I had access to links with Learning Connections and could use their commitment to developing research by practitioners to agree on a principle of equity. The allocation of resources to time and travel costs meant that everyone's path to continued involvement was cleared, the infrastructure to support publication was put in place and participants could be invited to attend a meeting and contribute their time whether or not employers were able to support them. In fact many employers did support the development and the actual costs of bringing the group together were considerably lower than anticipated.

Ordinary practice as inspiration - will this reporting be any use to the field?

Our aspiration is to encourage others to value and share accounts of their 'ordinary'

4. See the website for the text of the assignment task.

work and the dilemmas they face. It is too early to say if this will be an outcome of our collaboration. We would also like to see conscious development of supportive infrastructures, although not necessarily the same as the one we used, which enable practitioners to reflect and share 'ordinary' practice and collaborate to bring it to a wider audience.

There is something about the way the panorama opens up if we are prepared to share imperfect practice (Senese, 2007) which is different from the 'good practice examples' format. With hindsight, I can see that the 'good practice' focus was limiting in my previous reporting, though as is usual with limitations, it is not until you see what else there could be that you realise what assumptions you have made. Requests for accounts of practice had sent me scurrying to people whose work was recognised already and where, to paraphrase the words of self evaluation frameworks, 'strengths outweigh weaknesses'. I had never explicitly encouraged anyone to share reports on 'ordinary' work in progress unless that was a means to an explicit end (e.g. accountability/managing staff, securing funding, identifying training needs). Even when these circumstances did facilitate sharing, I perceived the personal reflection only as useful background material for individuals and not as research information or practice development per se. I certainly did not actively request accounts of continuing difficulties or uncertainties and saw these as issues to be dealt with rather than written up when others brought them to me. In my new setting, asking students to write an assignment by reflecting on *any* relevant example of their practice flushed out these ordinary dilemmas and brought to life the real decisions made, and considered on reflection, by practitioners in an imperfect world.

Thinking about the processes of producing these contributions links to Jean McNiff's (2002) ideas of "new scholarship" and new ways of judging the value of enquiry. I now want to know if working in a group is essential, how similar groups could support

members to reflect on and record ordinary practice and what the processes are which support success. Once practice is voiced, how useful will these contributions be? Will making extracts of these essays available to the 2009-10 TQAL student cohort impact on their ability to report practice? And will we stimulate any wider sharing of practice in the literacies community in Scotland and beyond? In terms of resources and equity, how can we make sure we hear sessional staff, volunteers or others who may not find it easy to access paid time or expenses to participate in supportive groups? What resources are actually required to establish systems for sharing and collaboration, and how do we make a space for reporting and sharing of reflections on 'ordinary' practice? The development of collaborative reflective practice in our writing group would bear further examination and evaluation. Our experience of using technology suggests it could be used to support geographically isolated practitioners once collaborative processes have been established in a group or community of practice.

Thinking back to my previous experience of formal reporting for a literacies partnership, which I experienced as predominantly arid and disempowering, what can we learn from the Understanding Literacies experience to enhance formal reporting processes (e.g. for partnerships, employers) by asking for other kinds of reporting of work in progress? How and why do different things come out of personal critical reflections on practice compared with more standard reporting formats? These are questions for everyone with an interest in developing literacies practice to consider investigating more deeply.

See the full collection of essays and an earlier version of this paper on <http://www.aloscotland.com/alo/viewresource.htm?id=2400>

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The Value of Informal Learning in the Curriculum, with Special Reference to Literacy in Prisons

Graham Meadows

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As a literacy practitioner who had worked in schools, colleges and commercial organisations before considering prisons, I opted to teach in the prison service because I was looking for something different. I hoped that the 'apartness' of prisons might offer ideas for practice I had not seen before, and that in turn I might learn something which might improve my teaching in the mainstream.

In particular, I was interested in how basic education in prisons tackled the question of disengagement, which correlates with the highest incidence of adults with low levels of literacy in the population as a whole, and is especially evident in prisons. Asking how disengaged prisoners might be brought to re-engage, I found myself exploring approaches that intuitively moved towards informal learning, and from this evolved the critique of the curriculum which follows. The enquiry begins with the question of disengagement itself.

Some Recent Approaches to Understanding Disengagement

A range of research has been carried out over the last four decades about levels of non-participation, including disengagement. McGivney's literature review (1993) identifies a typology of non-participants, which includes those of "minimum compulsory educational attainment", those with low socio-economic status (including some ethnic minorities), and adults whose cultural traditions have been subordinated or suppressed. All three of these groups are reflected in the prison population.

Rees et al. (2000) have in recent decades developed a study, which suggests significant links between disengagement and social background. The study looks at the historical, economic and political

processes involved, exploring the interests, attitudes and experiences of 'disengaged' learners and their communities, and emerges with verifiable evidence for these trends.

Firstly, they find that 'non-participants' constitute almost as great a cohort (31% of respondents) as participants or 'lifelong learners' (32%). Secondly, they conclude that choice is empirically linked to "the conditions in which individuals perceive opportunities and develop their ambitions" from an early age.

Rees' study establishes that patterns of participation are set up in early childhood, which form 'trajectories' into later life¹. A key outcome of the study is that intervention is needed to adjust these trajectories, in particular by attention to the long term interests and needs of the individual. Rees states: "Priority should be given to the facilitation of *lifelong progression routes* rather than focusing on *either* initial *or* continuing education and training." Thus, helping individuals to formulate their own learning outcomes is more important as a goal than the short term expedients of making them employable.

A Critique of Recent Changes in Skills for Life as They Affect Prisoners

Beginning with the laudable purpose of 'widening participation' in 2000, Skills for Life has moved from being the putative fresh start for the needy (post-Moser, 1999) to becoming an employability drive for selecting the eligible (post-Leitch, 2005). The shift is distinctly at issue with the original purposes of the project, and is now highly questionable as a basis for education because of the limited value it places on the notion of function. It also presents a major

1. These, says Rees, enable a prediction ('with 75% accuracy') of subsequent participation in education in later life, based on social background and early schooling experience.

problem for those it originally set out to assist in 2000 since, under the new arrangements, their needs are no longer met. Strongly represented among that group are prisoners, who have the added disadvantage that what is on offer is frequently of little actual use to them - long periods of custody prohibiting employment. In the meantime, the 'barriers to learning' question is peculiarly relevant to prisoners in virtue of their custodial position.

Barriers to Learning in Prisons

Elements of provision on the operational side of prison life often unintentionally create barriers to learning. These are to do with the dual character of prisons as learning environments and custodial institutions, which can be seen in a variety of ways. Firstly, control is obviously stricter than would normally be visible elsewhere because of prison security. The case for controls is here unassailable, but the finer points in terms of degree and kind are open to consideration.

The second barrier is that prisoners' needs are only seen in terms of future occupation. This is reinforced by the strictures of the curriculum itself and illustrated in a government policy document stating that "the primary objective of the Offender Learning and Skills Service (OLASS) is to increase employability, and therefore reduce re-offending" ('Meeting Needs?' OLASS/HC 310). This position fails to acknowledge that prisoners' lives have any reality in the present or that addressing emotional needs is part of their rehabilitation.

The third barrier concerns organisational boundaries. These were identified by Sfl (2002) as "a possible barrier to learning, where *planning gaps* can occur which interfere with the learners' progress". Within prisons, a powerful case in point is the failure to comprehend and accommodate the needs of literacy learners beyond the realms of custody.

Here are two examples from my own experience. A young Nigerian with a low level of literacy is detained beyond his sentence pending deportation, but this has

not been explained to him. He attempts a written statement asking for clarification of his position, but ostensibly his literacy tutor is not allowed to assist him in this. Nor do the guidelines of the curriculum support it.

Another example is that of a dyslexic prisoner who needs help with reading and writing to maintain contact with his family. Officers on the wing are unable to help because they have their own duties to perform, but the literacy tutor is not supposed to do so either. This impasse leads to considerable distress for the prisoner and, in both this and the previous case, has detrimental effects on the progress of the learner. Meanwhile, both prisoners are obliged to plug away, perhaps, at the Highway Code, even though they both possess licences.

These examples challenge the validity of any curriculum exclusively based on vocational goals. They also foreshadow inconsistencies as the new curriculum develops as a whole, specifying that Foundation Tier students should engage in learning which includes "personal and social development" as a progression pathway (Prospectus, 2008/09). Meanwhile fresh research reinforces the emotional needs of the learner as a major objective.

A Theory of Re-Engagement Based on Prison Research

Wilson (2003), for example, hints of moves towards a more liberal view of provision in prisons through her studies in the 'third space'. These studies show how prisoners naturally make a psychological space for themselves learning independently despite the strictures of prison. The third space, she says - echoing Bernstein's 'potential discursive gap' (Bernstein, 1996) - is "positioned between the practices of the prison and the outside world," enabling an identity for prisoners despite the institutional parameters of their environment. She points out, again echoing Bernstein, that the 'informal' activities involved often contain an element of resistance to the current environment, and that this is inevitable if prisoners are to have a voice, either oral or written.

Examples of this can be seen in periodicals like "Not Shut Up", which remains as yet unacknowledged as a curriculum resource.

The 'third space' experience provides grounding for the conclusion that prisons could employ already existing informal learning activities to widen participation. Only a fraction of literacy learners in prison, for instance, ever see a literacy class because of the demand for places. More imaginative solutions are therefore vital to harness available resources and to solve this problem. One answer is to change the curriculum, or at the least move further towards its 'social and emotional learning' element, closing off the employability option as an exclusive strategy.

Below is a strategy for ameliorating the curriculum. Its use could be exploratory, and reliant initially on only incremental change. Theoretically, it rests on comparison between two contrasting models of the curriculum, each embodying valid objectives, but needing elements of the other to achieve them. The current curriculum could be conceptually rebalanced, in order to achieve this.

Two Contrasting Models of the Curriculum

Cameron and Miller (2004) present a model of practice that is contrastive in form, but involves the notion of a 'continuum' in practice. This covers the need for accredited skills on the one hand, envisaging the more vocational elements of the curriculum, and on the other a policy which observes the needs of the individual learner sourced, for instance, in informal learning. Contrasting the two models in practice affords a sense of 'natural' processes at work, with possibilities mutually shared. The credential model covers, perhaps, the *yin*, with its emphasis on formality, proof and practical use, while the empowerment or nurturing model covers the *yang*, with its emphasis on the needs of the person. The point is that one side of the combined model cannot dominate without risking the failure of the other, and therefore of both.

Fowler (2005) provides witness to the

destructive effects of imbalance when she states that "Skills for Life represents an essentially *product view of literacy* [based on] a hierarchy of skills that we impose on literacy learning, *independent of learners themselves*". The implication is clear: that rebalancing of the curriculum towards nurture or empowerment is essential to restore its validity. What follows concerns the curriculum as a whole, and the importance of informal learning in safeguarding its wholeness.

Achieving Balance in the Curriculum for the Disengaged Learner

A profile of 'disengaged' learners, whether prisoners or not, is likely to include any or all of the following features: low paid work; a class divide between the 'haves and have-nots'; disaffection with schooling from an early age; a sense that your own life is of no value to anyone else; little or no voice in society; no interest in learning - therefore barriers to learning are largely meaningless; a feeling that you have no choice but to be passive and accept your limitations.

This, in reality, could be a description of almost anyone of average intelligence who is disadvantaged, of whatever culture, whether male or female and whether employable or otherwise. It is also a picture of the person the curriculum has so far failed, though the notion of informality, which respects the natural learning which everyone has, may offer some kind of solution to this.

The Principle of Informality

In their report "Informality and Formality in Learning" (LSRC, 2004), Colley, Hodkinson and Malcolm make three key claims concerning informality and learning: i) *Attributes of informality and formality are present in all learning situations.* ii) *Changing the balance between formal and informal attributes changes the nature of learning.* iii) *The contexts in which learning takes place are crucial in determining its emancipatory potential.*

Referring to non-bounded communities, Colley, Hodkinson and Malcolm (2006), say that informal learning is "located in daily

encounters and intergenerational relationships; unstructured and rarely leading to certification; often incidental rather than intentional". While these remain good practical criteria, the value of informal learning in principle is often more evidenced in settings which are - paradoxically - highly controlled. Such settings include that of the prison, a) because of the time available to learners facing sentences, and b) because of the ease with which communication becomes possible in controlled environments.

The following observations emerge from my experience as a prison tutor, with literacy projects in mind. At the time of writing, none of the initiatives described applies where I work, so their efficacy remains untested (at least by me). Nonetheless, here are some ideas of how supported informal learning could take place in a prison setting. They comprise a set of strategies and many have already been approved by a large range of staff.

Conclusion: Strategies for Widening Participation

For prisoners, literacy, in the wider sense, offers not only coping strategies for the concerns and demands of prison life, but opportunities to explore experiences and resolve problems of lifestyle and setting. Addressing such needs and interests is arguably essential to a prisoner's psychological rehabilitation because being able to cope raises self-esteem, perhaps even preventing re-offence later.

Since informality, as stated by Colley et al. (2006) is present in all learning, the best place to look initially is in the classroom itself. Breaks and intervals in lessons could be used to encourage individual work such as life writing. This could provide opportunities, in turn, for extensions beyond the classroom walls. Such activities in my experience, already prove very supportive to classroom practice, and generate relaxation and personal involvement, which would not otherwise exist. Some activities might involve writing and illustrating stories based around the week's theme, with advice and collaboration by students.

Beyond the classroom, where most widening participation through informal learning facilities could occur, similar strategies could be employed through different agencies. Peer supports - confident readers and writers trained to support the less confident - could fill a significant role as facilitators on the wing. They are in any case appropriate for the role because of their training as 1:1 classroom mentors, and their availability to help learners outside normal teaching hours. Their freedom from the usual problem of power relationships between teacher and student also makes them highly eligible as mentors.

Newsheets and magazines reflecting, and revitalizing, prison life also offer opportunities for informal learning. The fact that tutors monitor these broadsheets informally enhances their use as tools of learning. Newsheets also place learning, and the responsibility for learning, solidly in the hands of the prisoners themselves, and are therefore a powerful way of encouraging learning as a community. Complemented by prison radio, text could be broadcast, with printed versions in general circulation.

The library equally affords many opportunities. It could provide a place, for example, for peers to practise their skills with prison learners in semi-monitored conditions. It could allow new learners a space to practise uninterrupted and without embarrassment. It could host reading and discussion groups among prisoners, and it could provide prisoners with solitude where they could partake of the pleasures of reading.

Most literacy tutors, given appropriate time and encouragement, would be pleased to see their work amplified in this way. Such activities, anyway, are a natural corollary of what they do in class. Difficulties would inevitably occur in an environment of necessary protocols like that of a prison, but the opportunities are surely too great to jettison without trial. Applied incrementally, a literacy project using informal elements in this way might, quite quickly, produce good results.

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When is an adult literacy class not an adult literacy class? Can using a 'functional skills' approach mask a sort of 'social training' for some adult learners? Is the advent of Foundation Learning a chance to clarify the situation?

Judith Rose

Judith Rose worked for more than 20 years in adult education in London, starting as a volunteer at Blackfriars Settlement in the 1970s when adult literacy was first being recognised as an issue through the 'Right to Read' campaign. She qualified in Teaching Literacy Skills to Adults in 1981. From 1988 she managed the extensive 'special needs' programme at Southwark Adult Education, working with a range of partners including the Maudsley Hospital, Southwark Social Services and voluntary sector organisations, until the Inner London Education Authority was dissolved in 1990, when she was transferred to Southwark College. In 1994 she escaped to Suffolk, to join Suffolk College as Programme Co-ordinator for Learning Support, and finally became Associate Dean for Student Support at the new University Campus Suffolk from 2007. From 2001 Judith Rose was also part of the Skills for Life initiative, working independently as a researcher, trainer and facilitator, including acting as one of the team which designed and delivered the initial Level 4 Certificate for Adult Literacy Specialists in Suffolk. She retired in 2009.

Introduction

I hope that people will read this article and bear in mind the account of positive work with adults with learning difficulties¹ published in *RaPAL Journal Volume No. 70* by Nick Shepherd and Lorraine Borwick. There is no doubt that adults with learning difficulties can and do benefit hugely from involvement in literacy classes. Close co-operation, which Shepherd and Borwick describe between teachers and other people working with the learners in their case study, is a model of good practice. It is a valuable opportunity to share insights and understanding of the various roles professionals and carers play in the lives of the learners.

I believe, however, that there is a danger of literacy teachers being drawn into a programme, which concentrates, on perceived 'learning needs', which are based on the requirements of workplaces or the development of social skills. It is important in using a 'social

practice' model to consider the power relationships in these scenarios and to avoid a behaviourist approach to the teaching and learning. Constructive discussion and mutual respect between teachers and other agencies allows such distinctions to be clarified.

In this brief reflection on my own experience and the dilemmas which face practitioners I have tried to explore the implications for teachers with a background and training in adult literacy who find themselves working with adult learners who may have learning disabilities, and who have been referred to literacy classes specifically in order to acquire skills to help them to cope in the workplace or other social setting. It seems to me that the rationale behind such a situation relates to the perceived deficit in the learners identified by agencies or carers, and is not based on an understanding of the social practices theory of adult literacy. So practitioners are cast in the role of trainer, working in

1. Effective learning for adults with learning disabilities: a case study of practice (pp 20-23)

a model which may fit a limited 'functional skills' view of literacy, but does not look at the bigger picture which allows learners to explore their relationship to the world of information and self-expression in an individual and meaningful way.

The questions I'm seeking to address in this article are:

- Does current teaching practice distinguish between literacy and social/living skills and does the introduction of 'functional skills' obscure the difference?
- Are other agencies working with adults with learning disabilities aware of the difference between teaching literacy and training people in job or life skills?
- Does the training of teachers and resourcing of literacy equip us to assess cognitive development in adults with learning disabilities?
- Could a mutual discussion of Foundation Learning help to resolve the questions?

When is an adult literacy class not an adult literacy class?

I found myself asking this question as a teacher trainer delivering training or facilitating CPD under the Skills for Life banner. I was emboldened to examine the dilemma further because it might also concern others, and I read Yvonne Hillier's paper on practice and research, *Crossing Boundaries* (2006) in which she suggests "that we have to continue to force ourselves to move into the spaces where we feel uncomfortable, where we know we do not have the answers, and where we even have to question the ideas we do hold dear". I write as new structures and systems start to replace Skills for Life, but I think the concern remains.

The issue I want to highlight touches the theory and practice of adult literacy

teaching and learning. I think we are describing classroom activities as adult literacy when the rationale behind them is to address the perceived needs of people with learning disabilities, rather than starting from a literacy perspective. Teachers can feel under pressure to produce a learning programme which concentrates on the employment or 'living skills' agenda, rather than developing a truly individual literacy plan with the learner. The teacher obviously wants to focus on the learner, but it is sometimes problematic to hear the voice of the learner in this scenario. People with very little power and control in their lives will tend to agree with the suggestions put forward by the people 'in charge', especially if communicating independently is a problem. This puts the teaching practitioner in a complicated position. Of course, there is a place for looking at daily literacy usage in the workplace or supermarket, but this represents an extremely narrow understanding of how we all use and experience literacy. My anxiety is that we see the classes as 'work preparation' or 'life skills', because that is how they are presented to the learners by the social care or other agencies involved. We need to be clear that a 'social practice' approach is not the same as training learners in handling social situations. This may be a difficult distinction to make but it is one which is worth discussing with peers and colleagues. I think one way forward is to share ideas and research with colleagues (e.g. in NIACE) who have developed programmes such as 'Learning for Living', designed to support practitioners working with learners with cognitive difficulties/disabilities, and who are now looking at Foundation Learning and Functional Skills. Adult literacy practitioners can draw on a body of research and practice and have more to offer than 'functional skills'.

Two particular examples seemed to encapsulate the problem for me. One instance concerns context. I was asked to observe and assess an adult literacy teacher who needed to complete the portfolio of evidence for a full specialist certificate (now known as Level 5). The class that was most convenient to observe took place weekly in a community education building. So far, so good, but the entire class, plus helpers, was driven to the session in a mini-bus from the local Day Centre run by Social Services for adults with learning disabilities. The tutor and I discussed the position. My concern was based on NVQ thinking that the generic teaching qualification must demonstrate competence across a 'range' of situations. There is also an issue I believe about whether the 'agenda' in this situation is student-centred or a convenient Friday afternoon activity. He was willing for me to observe another group, but we agreed that the class was a legitimate reflection of his abilities as a literacy teacher. We shared our thoughts with the internal and external verifiers. Essentially we agreed that there was a range of literacy levels within the group, that the point of the class was to work with the students on literacy topics and that this applied equally in different contexts. I saw that the learners, amongst other things, were encouraged to expand their vocabularies, think about combining images and text and look critically at a range of information sources. I think we made the right decision, but I think our worry was a real one.

My second example is more about content. What about when the teaching and learning concentrate on assessing and addressing basic communication? As a trainer I felt anxious and unsure when we had to explain the 'milestones' which identified learning in the *Adult*

Pre-Entry Curriculum Framework for Literacy and Numeracy. Is it an element of literacy for a learner 'to show interest in people, events, objects' (CCo/M2a.2)? Is it the role of an adult literacy teacher to assess and plan in these subtle cognitive developmental areas?

It feels uncomfortable to express these concerns, as I am utterly committed to making education accessible to everybody, no questions about who is 'ready', or barriers based on age, cost, motivation or employability. And I fully understand the argument which says, "A flexible and coherent curriculum at pre-entry level [should] be developed to enable learners at this level to progress towards the entry-level curriculum" (*Pre-Entry Curriculum*, 2002, p1). Of course learners at every level should be taken seriously.

Could Foundation Learning help to resolve the issue?

We are moving into another phase in 2010. The 'new' concept of 'Foundation Learning' will supersede the pre-Entry curriculum. "Entry Level 1 of the new QCF (Qualifications and Credit Framework) is 'inclusive'. This means that it includes what was previously termed as pre-Entry provision and has no lower limit", states the September 2009 briefing on Entry 1 Qualifications in Personal Progress published by QCDA. The guidance helpfully goes on to say that there are thirty-two units at Entry 1, which are 'learner-referenced', meaning that "learner and provider together can choose what sort of evidence will be relevant for them to provide". In fact it turns out that there are ten 'developmental stages' identified instead of 'milestones', starting with 'Encounter', which is characterised by "presence and reflex responses". I realise that this can be interpreted as a 'learner-centred' approach, but I think it

leaves the adult literacy practitioner and student in confusion.

“In practice, views and beliefs about the learners themselves are likely to influence decisions about how to teach and what approaches to adopt” (Section 1, Dee et al, 2006) says the review, *Being, Having and Doing: Theories of Learning and Adults with Learning Difficulties*. The study concludes that “decisions about how best to teach adults with learning difficulties are likely to be influenced by attitudes and beliefs about the nature of their disability, their status as adults and their place in society”. If we consider this analysis in the light of David Barton's view, “the central point is that when literacy is talked about in terms of skills, the 'problem' or 'difficulty' is located in the individual people, who are described as having some kind of deficit”, (Barton, 2006), the parallel is striking.

In post-school practice we have found that 'communication skills', 'key skills' and now 'functional skills' have overtaken the term 'literacy'. These terms represent an 'autonomous' skills model, which I believe has a particular significance in work with learners with learning difficulties. Hillier (2006) can help here, “Is there a clear distinction between the social practice approach and the functional literacies approach?” she asks, and answers herself: “The latter is used to enable people to *manage* their lives, often with an emphasis on being able to cope in the workplace or with families.” I think that the agenda in teaching and learning for people with a learning difficulty or disability is often exactly that.

The Skills for Life initiative injected energy and funding into teaching adult literacy, but at the same time wanted to identify the learners and target 'priority

groups'. Section 2 of the initial Skills for Life programme categorised these 'key priority' adults, including homeless people, lone parents with no qualifications and prisoners. People with learning difficulties were also mentioned as a target group. Adult literacy providers were keen to include people from all backgrounds, and managers were keen to maximise funding. Excellent work went into the *Access for All* publication (2002) and training programme designed to ensure that Skills for Life teaching was accessible to all learners. The risk is that in our drive to extend the reach of 'adult literacy' and to support colleagues anxious to validate learning opportunities for adults with learning difficulties, we lose sight of what literacy really means.

“Literacy practices are the general cultural ways of utilizing written language that people draw on in their lives,” says Barton (2006 and passim). This formula focuses on what people do and how they relate to written texts, and I believe it is the best basis for adult literacy teaching and learning. Maybe the difficulty relates to terminology and hierarchies of learning. We all need training and retraining in using ICT. We don't call it adult literacy, but we could. The difference in terms reflects the target learners. If the subject area is 'make simple requests' (*Pre-Entry Curriculum SLc/M7.3*) are we talking about adult literacy or social skills? Should we be clearer about what is going on? Foundation Learning may be an opportunity to clarify a sensitive area.

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A response from Nick Shepherd who contributed to RaPAL Journal Volume No. 70

Nick Shepherd is a literacies practitioner who has worked with adults with learning disabilities for ten years.

This article is advocating moving away from the kind of work we are doing with some adults with learning disabilities, towards a more traditional wholly text based idea of literacy. For us, this is a fundamentally different way of working. We have developed our work based on years of noticing that for the majority of adults with learning disabilities the key skill to develop is direct, real life interaction with people outside their usual social networks.

Our charity shop project came from learners themselves expressing their frustration with feeling unable to participate in voluntary work due to lack of social skills. The course aimed to boost learners' communication and confidence skills, while also improving their reading/writing skills in relation to working in a shop. The project was developed with help from some support staff, but was not led by them and all the learners independently communicated their own desire to attend.

I do know that there is some question whether literacy should encompass skills beyond text, but if it is to have social relevance then it has to be in the day to day and for many adults with learning disabilities a study of newspapers, TV or ICT based texts, while perhaps having some

personal interest, will not challenge and change the barriers that prevent many taking a fuller part as citizens. This expressed desire of some is what we are trying to realise with our work.

Judith: further discussion

I have no argument with anything Nick says except to state that I am not so much "advocating moving away from the kind of work" Nick and others are doing, as calling for a discussion and clarification of the situation we find ourselves in.

Nick makes it clear that his work is based on years of observation and experience, and I am sure that he can speak with authority in leading the project he describes. My belief is that less experienced or well-supported literacy workers are under pressure to deliver a sort of social or employment training under the guise of literacy teaching.

Editors' invitation

Judith and Nick have aired some of the tensions, paradoxes and dilemmas that face adult literacy practitioners who are working with learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in different educational settings. Do you have experience of practice in this area? We would value contributions to this discussion for future editions.

Researching the Reading Circle Experience

Sam Duncan

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Introduction

This paper describes the data collection methods for a seven-month study of a reading circle within formal adult literacy provision, which formed the basis of a doctoral thesis on adult reading development. I will argue that reading is, amongst other things, an *experience* and therefore needs to be researched by accessing the first person perspectives of readers themselves. I will then describe how I attempted to do this, analysing particular issues that arose along the way, including how participant data analysis can be a part of data collection and the ethical complexities of shifting between the roles of adult literacy teacher, researcher and reading circle member. Finally, I will argue for the integral role of reading circles for both the development and research of adult reading, before asking how else we can learn more about the experience of reading.

Rationale

There are three inter-relating aspects to the rationale behind this research. The first is my own past research on adult literacy learners' perceptions of reading, where many learners discussed how reading stories and novels developed a range of reading skills, for example, how the potentially inter-subjective processes of reading fiction (such as identifying with a character) facilitated word decoding. The above research also taught me the importance of researching reading using the perceptions of adult literacy learners, most of whom have thought a great deal about the very issues we teachers need guidance on.

However, I realised that writing of learners' "perceptions" implies a distinction between what learners perceive about their reading processes and practices and 'what is really happening'. Yet, if we remember that reading is something one experiences from

an individual subjectivity, this implied disjuncture disappears. Reading can only be what it is *for the reader*: what the reader sees, thinks and feels when reading. This is a phenomenological approach, emphasising the first person perspective, "the world as experienced" and has clear implications for research. Following Nagel's influential "What is it like to be a bat?" (1974), I wanted to know *what is it like to read?* and *what is it like to read a novel?*, and just as one can only find out 'what it is like to be a bat' by talking to a bat, one can only find out *what it is like to read* by talking to readers.

Finally, in searching for material on adult reading development and novel reading, I discovered a substantial literature on reading circles, groups of people getting together to read a novel (or other text) over a period of time, usually meeting up once a week or once a month to discuss their reading. Much of this research was from the worlds of English Language Teaching and both primary and secondary school English classes, mainly in North America and Australia, with some ethnographic/social history research on informal adult reading circles (the sorts of groups most of us have probably belonged to at some point). Yet, despite the fact that this body of research overwhelmingly found reading circles to be effective in developing a range of reading and other linguistic and social skills, I did not find any research on the use of reading circles in formal adult literacy provision. This led me to decide to use the first person perceptions of adult literacy learners in order to investigate what a reading circle approach can offer adult emergent reading development, and what adult literacy learners can tell us about novel reading.

Capturing the reading circle experience

Early on in our year together, the ten members of my evening adult literacy

workshop¹ talked of wanting to read longer texts and, after a learner-generated group discussion, decided they wanted to try to read a novel, together, as a 'book club' or 'reading circle' [see Daniels or Duncan for the varied usages of these terms] for the last 40 minutes of each week's session. The group decided how they wanted to work ("read the book at home alone," "read the book aloud together," "discuss what we have read," "discuss new words," "discuss our ideas and feelings about what we have read") and chose a novel, *Passenger* (Cowie, 2008)² through a group vote. I explained my research interest and obtained individual and group consent to use our reading circle as a case study [see for a fuller discussion of this consent process]. The reading circle started in November 2008 and disbanded (for now) when we finished *Passenger* in late April 2009.

My challenge as researcher was how to capture the experience of a reading circle. Thinking about data collection became thinking about how to define the reading circle. Is the reading circle what happens in our weekly slot? Is it the ten members? Is it the book? Is it what happens to those ten members for the duration of our communal reading process? Case study research is characterized by being an in-depth look at a particular case, which usually necessitates collecting as much data as possible, in different ways, to get as 'full' a picture of the case as possible. Cohen et al. stress the importance of multiple methods of data collection when studying "situations in which human beings interact". A reading circle involves a group of people interacting regularly over an extended period of time, a constant interplay between individual actions and ideas and communal work and consensus. I therefore decided to use multiple methods of data collection – individual interviews, with mind-mapping, observation and audio-taping of group sessions, along with researcher, participant and group note-taking – to try to achieve this more comprehensive view.

Participant observation, audio-taping and the ethics of role-switching

In terms of sheer bulk, the largest aspect of my data collection was my attempt to 'gather' the weekly reading circle sessions themselves. I did this in two ways: by taking the role of participant observer in each session and by audio-taping the sessions (video may add an interesting dimension next time, but participants felt this would have been too intrusive for this 'first go'), listening to, and transcribing them afterwards to create audio and paper versions of each session. I was therefore both living each session between 8.20 and 9pm, and eavesdropping on my own voyeurism between 10pm and midnight that same night. The dynamic between the two is significant.

Cohen et al. classify case study observation as either 'non-participant' (when the observer is sitting at the back of a room taking notes) and 'participant,' with 'participant' further divided into 'covert' (researchers joining groups without saying that they are researchers) and 'overt,' where the researcher's dual role is explicit. Robson divides overt participant observation into "the participant as observer" and "the marginal participant". The role of "participant as observer" is made explicit to the rest of the group, but she nevertheless fully participates in activities. "The marginal participant" does not participate fully, being instead "a largely passive, though completely accepted, participant". I aimed for my role in the reading circle to be that of "the marginal participant," as passive as possible to allow the learners to take ownership of the reading circle and effectively 'self-run'.

Listening to the tapes and reading the transcripts, I could note that I was veering between being "the marginal participant" (as planned) and being "the participant as observer," participating more fully. Robson states that it is common for participant-observers to take on a 'particular role' which allows them to be both accepted as a

1. This group was labelled Entry 3/Level 1 on the English *Skills for Life* system. Learners placed at this level can read shorter texts, may not be confident reading texts longer than one or two pages and may have trouble decoding longer, less familiar or less phonically regular words. There were ten learners in this group, seven women and three men, three first language speakers and seven for whom English is an additional language. All members joined the group voluntarily to develop their reading and writing.

2. *Passenger* is a 184 page novel about a forty-two year old violinist, Milan, who starts hearing a musical 'tapping' coming from inside his body. When he goes to the hospital, they find his twin embedded within him ('foetus in fetu'). The twin seems to be the source of the music. Milan names her Roma, develops a method of communicating with her, and begins to introduce her to his world.

member of the group, and clearly *different* from the others . At times I did this, taking on the 'particular role' of teacher.

It was initially extremely challenging to be a member of the reading circle when the participants knew me as their teacher and so, for example, were initially more likely to want to ask me the meaning of a word than to ask each other. Paradoxically, I had to use the teacher role to encourage them to ask and answer each other's questions, not only as autonomous learners in any classroom, but as self-managing members of a reading circle. Gradually they got used to the idea that I was playing the part of a 'marginal participant' and began to work more independently. I was able to observe and react to our shifting roles precisely because I was taping the sessions (and listening and transcribing each week) and so could hear when I was being 'too active'. Literature on participant observation discusses the problematic nature of the dual role of participant and researcher, just as literature on action research discusses the problematic nature of the dual role of teacher and researcher; here I was negotiating all three: teacher, researcher and reading circle marginal participant.

There is an ethical dimension to this role-shifting. Before starting this research, I spoke to each learner individually to obtain consent, with explicit articulation of my three roles (teacher, researcher, and marginal participant) and how and when I would shift between them. However, it is impossible to ignore the myriad of reasons why learners may agree to something their teacher suggests, including to please the teacher, to be seen as 'a good student', out of respect for a teacher's judgment, out of kindness, or out of curiosity. Therefore, I had to be confident myself that regardless of *why* participants agreed, the reading circle would be of pedagogical benefit immediately as well as over the longer term. It would not have been enough to explain the process and obtain consent; I had to also put myself in the learners' positions and judge whether it would be a good use of their valuable college time. Further, I also had to keep moving from my

roles as marginal participant and researcher back to that of teacher to make sure that students were getting educational value out of the circle at all times.

It was therefore not desirable (let alone possible) for me to completely switch from my role as teacher into that of researcher or reading circle member; for ethical reasons I had to maintain an awareness of all three roles at the same time. Similarly, the learners were also maintaining (rather than switching between) three roles: that of adult literacy learner, that of reading circle member and that of research participant. They needed to maintain an awareness of their roles as adult literacy learners in order to reflect on the relationship between the reading circle experience and their learning, and I was asking them to think about this in terms of their role as research participants, in order to communicate their reader perspectives.

Aiming for a genuinely first person perspective: data analysis within data collection

A key element of the rationale for this research, and its theoretical underpinning, is the importance of accessing the first person perspective of readers as part of reading research. However, the conventions of educational research pose some challenges to this ideal. Most educational research follows a 'data-collection, data-analysis, findings/discussion' structure and it is this very structure which lends it its credibility. For this study, for example, I collected data in the ways described above and then analysed it using a grounded theory coding model of initial (attributing codes to recurring issues or themes in the data) and axial coding (grouping codes into categories, making meaning from what they say together) , and by then pulling themes for discussion from these categories. This, like any qualitative data analysis process, involves "data reduction," "data display" and "conclusion drawing/verification" , each of which is a step in interpreting the data, or in my case, potentially repackaging the very first person perspectives I so desired. The relationship between the data and the researcher's interpretations, or findings, is

the subject of the scholarly justifications of validity and reliability, which are also a key element of the conventional research process. However, in this context of researching reading as experience, the relationship between the data and the findings also needs to be examined from the perspective of retaining an authentic first person perspective. This does not mean simply ensuring that participants' contributions are represented in the analysis, but that participants' own interpretations, own *conclusions*, are included alongside the researcher's.

I therefore aimed to incorporate an element of participant data analysis into my data collection in two ways: individual notebooks and mind-maps. At the beginning of the reading circle process, I gave each member an individual notebook to use throughout the reading circle, in any way they liked. This was purposely open and undirected; I did not want to lead participants into using their individual notebooks (or reading or thinking) in a particular way. Instead, I wanted each participant to choose how to use this notebook, and therefore, in doing so, to identify an important (for them) aspect of their reading circle experience. One woman used her notebook solely to record new items of vocabulary (some she defined in English, some in Somali, some in Arabic and some she illustrated with sentences), another used it to record 'what was going on' chapter by chapter, and yet another used it to build character profiles. In teaching terms, this was a sacrifice of teacher control for the sake of learner autonomy. In research terms, this approach sacrificed control over data collection for the sake of data authenticity, particularly the authenticity of the reader perspective. I was not able to gather data in notebook form from each participant (two did not use them at all, and two did not want to show them to me), but I do know that for one participant, the vocabulary learning experience was key, while for another it was the development of the story. These are their conclusions, not mine.

Secondly, I decided to end the final individual interviews by asking each

participant to put *something* on a blank piece of paper to sum up their reading circle experience. I explained that they could use words or pictures or arrows or anything they liked. I left for five minutes and when I returned, asked for an explanation of what they had produced. In one sense, these mind-maps were providing another, and potentially less word-based, form of data collection, a different mode to provide a different communicative affordance. Yet, the mind-maps were also, and integrally, a vehicle for asking participants to analyse their own reading circle experience, and therefore to ensure that their data analyses ran alongside mine.

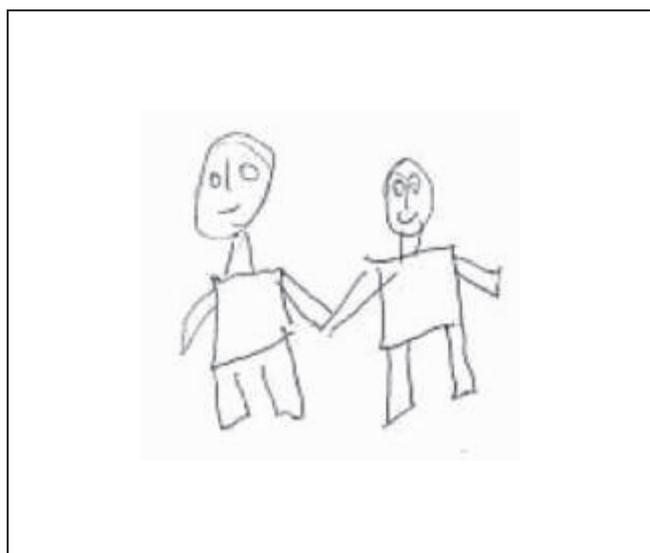
For example, one participant drew these three pictures (figure 1): "That's the notebook that I took notes down in, and that's me imagining what's going on, about Roma and things, and then that's me looking up new words in the dictionary, to learn new words. These were the main things that I was doing." She stressed what *she* was doing, in three categories.

Figure 1.



By contrast, another participant drew a picture of two people holding hands (figure 2): "It's a brother and sister thing, with arms joined [...] I think it's about compassion, all about compassion."

Figure 2.



He elaborated that he felt compassion was a central theme of *Passenger*, but more importantly (for him) that compassion, or brotherly support, was a dominant feature of his reading circle experience: helping each other read words and develop ideas, and getting to know each other better in the process. These, and the other mind-maps, became the core of my findings.

Reading circles for reading development and for research

The focus of this paper is on the data collection issues of this research process, not on the findings. However, the above examination of why and how I have collected data from a reading circle experience would not be complete without a brief indication of what this research told me about the value of reading circles for reading development and for research. Findings include that participants felt "it's nice to read in a group" for the peer-support and peer-teaching opportunities it afforded (one participant can help another decode a word, and in return she can explain what the word means, or share her real-life expertise to help with an understanding of the story); participants found reading aloud to each other, and listening to others read aloud, developed their decoding skill and confidence; that the group discussions developed their vocabularies; that a reading circle provides opportunities for self-led differentiation and

for realising a 'negotiated syllabus'. There are also findings relating to the novel, including how novel reading can provide the potentially political perspective of imagining the lives of others. These findings are explored in detail in Duncan (2010).

Yet, more than indicating the value of reading circles for adult reading development, this project also suggests the potential of reading circles as vehicles for reading research. A reading circle is an experience which progresses over time, usually several months (or years) and can therefore allow the researcher (and participants as co-researchers) to collect and analyse data over this time-span. A reading circle is also an extraordinarily rich process, an interplay of individual and communal experiences, each offering insights into that most enigmatic question: 'What is it like to read?' I would therefore use reading circles to study reading processes and practices over an extended time period.

How else can we capture reading as experience?

I have explored some of the challenges of investigating reading as experience using the conventions of educational research. This conjures up the relationship between how different disciplines conceptualise reading, how they research reading, how the value or 'trustworthiness' of this research is established, and the use, purposes or place of its findings. In this paper I have described aspects of the data collection process of a piece of research for a doctorate in education, which was, amongst other things, an apprenticeship in the conventions of qualitative educational research in the social science tradition and primarily aimed at generating knowledge for an academic community. Yet there are other ways in which I hope its findings will be used by adult literacy teachers and learners.

More importantly perhaps, there are other ways to generate knowledge about adult reading development, many of which may be better suited to understanding reading as experience. Why so much research is

done following a certain pattern is the result of what 'counts' as research, as well as where the field of adult literacy studies situates itself with regard to other disciplines, yet both of these factors can be challenged. Wordsworth and Coleridge, in their *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* discuss the role of the imagination in writing and reading poetry, using first person experience: their own. Manguel quotes from Saint Augustine's *Confessions* to relate Augustine's shock – in 4th century Milan – at seeing Ambrose reading *silently*. Murakami's fictional first person narrator of the short story "Sleep" relates her secret new life of *Anna Karenina* and brandy when she finds she no longer needs to sleep. I would challenge anyone *not* to find significant implications for adult reading development from the experience related in these texts (and so many more) from literary criticism, social history and fiction.

Perhaps we need to be reminded that education is an art as much as a social science. Perhaps we should look more often towards the arts for ideas of how we can generate new knowledge, how we could deem it 'trustworthy' or 'true' (by what appears to be a systematic coding process or by what is useful, inspiring or beautiful?), and how we can use the knowledge we generate. How could we use history, biography or song? Could documentary, animation, or dance tell us something about the experience of reading and help us help those who want to improve their reading? I am not arguing that 'anything goes' (far from it), but that we should look more widely for ways to produce, define or refine insights, to challenge our practices, and to keep us thinking.

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Reports and Reviews

From the Reviews Editor, Maxine Burton:

Reading the Fine Print. A history of the Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council (VALBEC) 1978-2008

Beverley Campbell

Victoria, Australia: VALBEC, 2009

278 pp

ISBN: 978-0-9591148-4-3

Fine Print is the name of the journal of the Australian organisation, VALBEC, formed in 1978 to establish organisational support for the growing field of adult literacy in Victoria and to raise community awareness about literacy education for adults. This publication describes 30 years of the organisation's work through the pages of its journal, with excerpts and discussion arranged thematically as well as chronologically. Although it is an account of the development of adult literacy provision in one Australian state, many of the issues described will resonate with adult literacy practitioners everywhere, especially those who have been working in the field for some time. The matter-of-fact statement from a teacher writing in a 2000 issue of the journal - '*We adult community education types teach pretty much in isolation, working from our cars, dealing with miniscule budgets and we are pretty much thrown completely on our own resources*' (p 185) - will no doubt be familiar to many of our UK readers!

Historical accounts are particularly valuable for the way they can throw new light on a wide range of issues; the following essay by Gordon Ade-Ojo, by way of an extended review, considers this book in terms of narration and of the ways in which the various 'voices' telling the 'tale' might be interpreted.

Reading the Fine Print: The Voice of the Activist Narrator

Reviewed by Gordon O. Ade-Ojo

Gordon Ade-Ojo is a principal lecturer in the department of professional learning and

development in the school of education at the University of Greenwich. He has a wide range of teaching experience spanning over 25 years in HE and FE contexts. He currently leads on the Additional Diploma programmes and teaches on various generic ITT courses at the University of Greenwich. He has published several articles in peer reviewed journals, chapters in books, and authored monographs.

Historical narratives have one thing in common: the element of story-telling which attracts with it the general characteristics of narrative writing including plot structure, introduction, rising action, climax, falling action and resolution. While Beverley Campbell's narrative in *Reading the Fine Print* offers many of these features, it assumes a significant variation from the run of the mill story-telling in that, behind the ostensive engagement with the narration of a tale, the voice of the narrator as an activist, and those of other activists in the tale-formation process continue to resonate. Unlike the strident voice of the deluded activist who gloats in success, the activist's voice in this narration is sonorous, though sometimes wary, rich and deep, yet unoffending. It is the voice of a soldier who calmly narrates the realities of battle after battle.

The concept of the activist's voice in this narrative echoes the structure presented in three existing frameworks. First, it draws from Wittner's (2001) notion of 'connectedness' where "the connected empathetic and visible narrator works alongside, not above, her subject, includes her own voice in the text and allows the subject to talk back". Thus, "knowledge is produced, not merely accessed," in this dialogue between narrator and subject and later between narrator, subject and reader. In parts of this narrative, Campbell evokes such a dialogue between the reader, herself and the events she narrates. She invites the reader in a most subtle way, to travel along with her, crystallise his/her own perception of events as they unfold in the narrative,

and draw conclusions, which she suggests, is the reader's prerogative.

Similarly, Bakhtin's concept of 'dialogics' is echoed in this narrative and is presented in contrast to the concept of 'monologic', often used by poets and songwriters, to project their own voice and worldview (Womack and Davies, 2006). In *Reading the Fine Print*, the author allows in other voices and language styles, the voices and language styles of the narrator, and other participants, each with their own worldviews implicit in their contributions. Different devices were used to allow the activists' voices to come through. In some cases, the narrator's voice takes on the inflections of other characters as the narration moves in and out of different zones. In other cases, Campbell uses excerpts from different issues of *Fine Print* as the agent for reflecting the inflections of other characters. The result is a surreptitious but continuous injection of commentaries from various participants in the construction of the narrative.

A third concept reflected in the publication's evocation of the activist's voice echoes what Ramos (1995) calls the palimpsest narrator, which describes the notion of hybridisation that sometimes manifests in narratives. The essence of palimpsestic configurations in narratives is that it allows three voices to come through to the reader: the old, the new and a hybrid of both voices. In *Reading the Fine Print*, voices of both old and contemporary activists sound through the narrative, thus creating in the reader, an impression of a hybridised creation. The overall effect is that the reader is left in no doubt that each stage of this narrative is preceded by an earlier stage and that the present would really have no significance unless it draws from the past.

The book itself is laid out in three sections with the contents of each sector thematically related. Section 1 engages with a number of issues which identify what constitutes the course-formation process. What vision underpins the work that VALBEC was doing at the time? What

options did VALBEC have available to it? One senses a battle for preferring one option to the other, and the sometimes circumstantial, and at other times, deliberate choices that were made at the early stages of the development of VALBEC and the work it has done. The narrative revisits the course formation period of VALBEC which the author refers to as the 'Bootstrap Era'. This section reflects the element of 'connectedness' and 'dialogics' through the exploration of the series of underlying dialogues that preceded decisions about the gradual evolution of the perception of literacy that was to govern the work of VALBEC, and the incidental nature of the beginning of the voice of VALBEC, *Reading the Fine Print*. In this section of the narrative, a vivid picture is painted of the interaction and dialogue leading to decisions, as illustrated by the decision on the nature and structure of *Reading the Fine Print*, the collaborative nature of which is eminently captured by the drawings from the early editions of the magazine.

Other crucial aspects of the narrative on the evolution of VALBEC as an organisation focused on promoting literacy, and included the decision about the work force: volunteers or professionals? The dialogue involved in the decision-making process here is reproduced through excerpts and letters which sometimes tell moving stories of learners and teachers and which highlight the character formation processes of VALBEC activists through dialogues with learners. Decision on the choice of pedagogy is another focus of this section. In this regard, the reader senses the element of the palimpsestic with the references made to interaction with developments in other countries with particular reference to the UK and US. The voices of learners in this dialogue are similarly articulated through the sub plot of stories like that of Jim Asimakopoulous. This flow of dialogue extends to other aspects of the course formation era of VALBEC and the debate around ideology, with a particular focus on the potential and real influence of Freirean doctrine. This also raises issues around resources and the roles of libraries, the

relationship between adult education and literacy, the dialogue around the decision on whether the organisation's role should be that of a lobby group or a voice, and the decision around the change from VALC to VALBEC. In the narration of how VALBEC navigated through the process of choices made in respect of all of these, the author employs with subtlety, voices from *Reading the Fine Print* to accentuate these dialogues.

The second section of the book presents a narrative of the process of giving voice to various policy alternatives and directional changes. For example, there is an exploration of the dialogue and ultimately, decisions made on the role and importance of assessment, and the role of the GCEA. The decision on whether a prescriptive rather than preference-based pedagogy should be upheld as epitomised by the debate around the role and importance of phonics as against other approaches to teaching reading, the debate around the use of whole language approach as against the use of the genre approach, and the relationship between literacy and ESL. Aside from looking at internal issues, this section highlights the tension generating links to other social practices. For example, there is a narrative around the tension generated by the issue of industrial relations where practitioners are concerned, and around the crucial issue of the evolution of professionalism. In the narration of all of this, the reader gets a distinct sense of connectedness between activists, their differing views on issues, and inevitably, the decisions and choices that were made.

The third section of the book highlights what might be considered the products of the series of battles fought by VALBEC and its activists. The narrative highlights the impact of the development of literacy on various areas such as prison education; distance learning education, relevance for disability and learning, impact on employment and unemployment, impact on youth literacy and the link between literacy and indigenous education. The narrative in this section leaves the reader

with a form of the palimpsest, a kind of paradoxical configuration of the indelible yet not obviously visible. In the author's narration of what is, there is a surreptitious presentation of what was, what could have been and what was left behind. In the final section, the poets' corner, the author uses, unconsciously, I suspect, extracts from past editions of *Fine Print* as a device to flesh out the skeleton of the dialogues involved in the creation of the narrative. This evokes a sense of reality in the entire narrative, as each entry provides evidence of engagement with the various aspects and phases of VALBEC's involvement and evolution.

However, despite the vivid picture painted by the narrative in this book, the reader is left wondering at the end of it all, if there are implicit and explicit questions that it raises, but which the author, perhaps deliberately, has not provided answers to. First, as the author suggests in her final chapter, VALBEC now appears to have assumed the status of an underground movement. Why? Has the dominant, government-led perception of literacy and the inevitable marginalisation of organisations such as VALBEC taken its toll in Victoria as it has done in other places? Second, the reader, as they go through this narrative, expects a kind of final pronouncement. Has VALBEC achieved its goal? Has it lived up to its mission statement? In this respect, the author leaves us wondering.

Finally, I suspect that some readers might be feeling slightly bruised on behalf of Campbell and the other VALBEC activists. My suggestion is that such readers take comfort in the fact that VALBEC was not and is not alone, for there is a striking similarity between the processes undergone by VALBEC and its activists and those undergone by activists in other countries like the UK in particular. In this sense, and for many literacy activists, *Reading the Fine Print* presents 'the same tale', but from a different setting and by a different narrator.

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Understanding Literacy in its Historical Contexts

eds H. Graff, A. MacKinnon, B. Sandin & I. Winchester
Lund, Sweden: Nordic Academic Press (2009)
ISBN 978-91-85509-07-2
£34.95

Reviewed by Maxine Burton

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This is a collection of articles from a conference held in Sweden in 2002; its subtitle is *Socio-cultural history and the legacy of Egil Johansson*. At this point, readers may be wondering what relevance such a 'specialist' book may have for adult

literacy practitioners and researchers in the English speaking world. There is plenty to engage with here, in terms of the understanding of a unique situation in Sweden, the contribution this has made to historical studies of literacy and to adult literacy research and practice in general.

First, a background note: Egil Johansson was a Lutheran pastor in northern Sweden who stumbled in the 1960s upon some parish registers dating back to the 17th century. These were the church literacy examination records and it was Johansson's recognition of the significance of these as judgments of literacy levels of the Swedish population that helped to open up new cross-disciplinary approaches to literacy studies and methods of data gathering and analysis. These records existed thanks to a literacy campaign initiated in the 17th century; this required every adult to pass an examination in reading and bible knowledge or else be excluded from taking communion and thus from marriage. As Johansson explains in Chapter 3:

This reading campaign was forced through almost completely without the aid of proper schools. The responsibility for teaching children to read was ultimately placed on the parents. The social pressure was enormous' (p. 29).

The result, however - considerations of coercion aside - was a population with near-universal literacy (or, at least, reading ability) long before anywhere else in Europe.

The first chapter by the distinguished American historian of literacy, Harvey Graff, (*Introduction to Historical Studies of Literacy*) gives a useful overview, with a particularly helpful set of lists at the end to summarise all the areas of work covered by the field of literacy studies since the 1970s, under various headings, including *Lessons from the history of literacy*. I found the following 'lesson' particularly resonant:

Expectations and common practices of learning literacy as part of elementary education are themselves historical developments. The presumption holds

that given the availability of written texts and elementary instruction, basic abilities of reading and writing are in themselves sufficient for further developing literacy and education. Failure reflects overwhelmingly on the individual. (pp. 20-21)

The chapters in Parts I and II of the book provide commentary on aspects of the Swedish situation; Part III consists of four chapters (11-14) by English, American and Australian writers, including David Vincent, well-known for his scholarly but accessible work on the rise of popular literacy in Britain and Europe (Vincent, 1989; 2000). These four chapters repay reading for the insights – and challenges - they offer: an account of the 'gendering' of literacy and education from Pavla Miller (11); a consideration of the relationship between employment and illiteracy, based on evidence from Liverpool marriage registers 1839-1927 (Mitch, 12); a debate about the meanings of literacy and their place in the target-driven structure of the school curriculum (Vincent, 13); and a description of private writing in 18th century North America in so-called 'commonplace books' (notebooks with selections from reading) as a 'locus for the development of the modern private self' (Lockridge, 14). The volume closes with a summary by Harvey Graff of themes and questions, together with a comprehensive bibliography of books and articles on the history of literacy.

As someone who has done historical research on literacy (Burton, 2003), finding it both a fascinating study in itself and a way of illuminating present-day debates, the appeal of such a collection is self-evident. To suggest just one challenge this collection throws up, consider the implications of coercion on Swedish literacy learning, in the light of present-day initiatives (see e.g. O'Grady & Atkin, 2005). For those who remain unconvinced by historical perspectives, I quote from David Barton and Mary Hamilton, who state that 'literacy is situated socially...this means historical context as much as contemporary context' (Barton and Hamilton, 1998:4). I rest my case!

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Improving reading: phonics and fluency

- Burton, M., Davey, J., Lewis, M., Ritchie, L. and Brooks, G.
London: NRDC Publications (2008)
Available for free download at:
http://www.nrdc.org.uk/publications_details.asp?ID=156#

Reviewed by Sam Duncan
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Like all the Practitioner Guides (<http://www.nrdc.org.uk/publications.asp>), *Improving reading: phonics and fluency* keeps to its 'bridging research and practice' remit by starting with a description of its research base before presenting 'background information', teaching approaches, guidance on resources and further reading. Its title suggests a dual focus, but *Improving reading: phonics and fluency* is actually more like two texts in binding: one on the use of phonics with adult learners and the second a development of the earlier *Oral reading fluency for adults* (Burton, 2007). This is one reason I am so happy to make this recommendation: it addresses these two particular areas, both central to literacy development, and both habitually surrounded by mythology, fear or prejudice.

I would also recommend *Improving reading: phonics and fluency* because it says something about phonics and 'oral reading fluency'. It offers definitions and pedagogic guidance. As a field, adult literacy teaching has a tendency to be tentative, a largely positive by-product of a sense of its complexity and importance. Yet, this tendency also means that it's hard to get anyone to 'jump off the fence' and declare 'do this!', 'I believe this,' or even 'try this!' through fear that 'it' may not *always* be the right thing to do, with *all* learners, in *all* circumstances. Yet, most adult literacy teachers don't actually mind being presented with ideas that they may not agree with. It's lovely simply to get ideas - food for thought and experimentation. *Improving reading: phonics and fluency* does this, presenting sections on 'preparation for teachers to deliver systematic phonics' and answering questions like 'how do I cope with choral reading if they all read at different speeds?' It provides guidance on activities, case studies of sessions, references/further reading and information on resources.

Yet, the very pairing of phonics and 'oral reading fluency' which I find so seductive is also a little puzzling in its phrasing. 'Phonics' usually indicates an approach for developing phonemic awareness or decoding skill. Therefore, I would expect the second term also to indicate an approach. But rather than being an approach, 'oral reading fluency' is usually understood to be a skill, an end rather than a means. The guide itself begins with this notion of 'oral reading fluency' being the ability to "read aloud to one or more people in a rapid, accurate and expressive way" (p. 32).

But could it also be an approach? Isn't reading aloud also a means to develop connections between written words and spoken words? I have argued (Duncan 2009) that is both a *method* of improving reading and a *type* of reading, a pedagogy *and* a practice. This doubleness is never made explicit. This is a small niggle, but the controversy surrounding the role of reading aloud in adult literacy development is often

the product of confusion over just this issue. It is therefore vitally important to be clear whether we are talking about a pedagogy or a practice, and if both, to be precise about the distinction.

Similarly, the relationship between the two halves of this guide is never made explicit. An exploration of how phonics and oral reading fluency interrelate and cross-fertilize is where things get really interesting and yet is not developed.

However, these gripes are minor and the fact that *Improving reading: fluency and phonics* led me to rethink these details is a powerful demonstration of its value. Its usefulness is in my niggles and wonderings as much as in what made me holler with delight. This guide is useful to me as an adult literacy teacher, as a teacher educator and as someone fascinated by reading for all the reasons above and for one more: it reminds us to "keep your learners informed, consult them as democratic partners and let them exercise choice" (p 7). This sense of literacy teaching as a continually 'negotiated syllabus' (Breen & Littlejohn 2000), that our only curriculum is what literacy means to our learners, is in danger of being lost and needs to be screamed again and again.

Phonic decoding is a large part of the reading process for most people and as adult literacy teachers we *must* understand it (it is simply not good enough to shy away). Reading aloud can be a method to develop a range of reading skills and *is* a 'real life' reading practice that our learners may want to develop, and is therefore something we must also understand. These are our professional obligations as adult literacy teachers (and there are of course many more), *but then*, with this knowledge safely tucked in the backs of our skulls, we must have conversations with our learners to find out where to start. I am grateful to *Improving reading: phonics and fluency* for reminding me of this.

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Why leadership matters: putting basic skills at the heart of adult learning

Edited by Ursula Howard and Pip Kings
London: NRDC/Institute of Education (2010)
Available for free download at:
http://www.nrdc.org.uk/publications_details.asp?ID=166#

Reviewed by Jay Derrick
Jay Derrick runs BlueSky Learning Ltd
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This book is the result of a short development project funded jointly by the NRDC, the London Centre for Leadership and Learning (LCLL), and the Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL: now part of the Learning and Skills Improvement Service). Its heart consists of ten short papers written by practising leaders, mainly but not always the heads of a wide range of organisations offering Skills for Life ¹ (SfL) provision. These are framed by a literature review on 'Leadership of literacy, language and numeracy learning in the lifelong learning sector', a synoptic introductory chapter, and a chapter reflecting broadly on the issues raised in the various chapters.

The book in a sense constitutes a 'brain storm' on the relationship between leadership on the one hand and adult basic education provision on the other. It in no way presents a finished argument, more a collection of concepts, ideas, principles and practices offered for further consideration. This makes for an interesting and at times

highly stimulating read. For example, the introductory chapter somewhat wearily reminds us that at the present time the most important job of leadership is actually to defend adult basic education. It would be a tragic irony if, in the context of severe funding cuts, calls to adopt a 'whole organisation approach' or 'embed' all literacy, numeracy and ESOL and to cut back on discrete programmes taught by specialists, in fact contributed to such a great watering down of SfL as to take us back to the 70s in terms of opportunities for learners.

The book takes for granted that the correct leadership position in all circumstances is to support and develop adult basic education, and doesn't consider complex situations where this may be problematic. I remember arguing with a senior college manager during the late 90s who said "it wouldn't be good for our image to be seen as an ESOL college". I didn't agree with him, but I do think a good leader has to consider this possibility among many others. Many colleges are actually cutting their SfL provision as I write this: these cuts are deplorable, but so are cuts in provision for the elderly or people with learning difficulties or disabilities: learning and skills sector leaders cannot be blamed in the present financial climate for cuts in public sector funding, but steering organisations and teams through times of change, whether these are good times or bad, is why we need effective leadership, and why we need to think and learn about it.

None of the papers in the book really deals with leadership as a more general concept: where they do, they make assertions about it, often in bullet form. There is nothing wrong with this as a way of starting a discussion, but it is a pity in my view that more of the extensive literature on leadership, learning organisations, learning and innovation, and on risk society is not at least referenced here: I thought I was going to be provoked and stimulated by discussions about leadership and SfL development in the context of such ideas as 'cultural disembedding' (Giddens 1994), 'organisations as brains' (Morgan 1997),

'knowledge creation' (Nonaka 1996) or leadership, trust and social capital (eg Baron et al 2000). Lynne Sedgemore introduces the concept of 'servant leaders', and argues that they are driven by the understanding that ultimately you are there to serve the needs of those who have had the least success in their lives to date: I have a great deal of sympathy with this highly moral view of leadership, but feel uneasy about the way this seems to imply that leaders should be thinking only about the needs of a minority of people. I would have welcomed more discussion of this concept, one connected to wider conceptual discussions of leadership and social inequality, for example.

The overall tenor of the chapters tends to discuss leadership in terms of what leaders should do, or how they should work: I suggest that a discussion of appropriate dispositions for leaders in the context of SfL would have been very interesting. Ron Barnett, to take one example (1996), gives the following list: generosity, openness, serious engagement, resilience, integrity, and authenticity. Charles Handy's corresponding list (1991) is interestingly different: the need for a proper 'selfishness', ability to take responsibility, to have clear personal objectives, and the

belief they can be achieved, and also the capacity to make use of mistakes. Although the book's chapters imply agreement or disagreement with many of these ideas, the constituent parts of the book do not really engage with each other: the book does not really represent a debate, more a statement of the present state of play. I hope there is a further stage to this exploratory project, and if so, this book sets the stage for it.

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We invite contributions from anyone involved in the field of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL education to write and share ideas, practice and research with RaPAL readers. This can be writing from learners, ideas linking research and practice, comments about teaching, training or observations about policy. We welcome articles, reviews, reports, commentaries or cartoons that will stimulate interest and discussion.

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- Ethical guidelines should be followed particularly when writing about individuals or groups. Permission must be gained from those being represented and they should be represented fairly.
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This section is for descriptive and reflective pieces on teaching and learning. It is a good place to have a first go at writing for publication and can be based on experiences of learners and teachers in a range of settings. Pieces can be up to 1,000 words long.

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