

UNESCO, Literacy and Leslie Limage

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Introduction

Rosie Wickert points out that, in literacy policy: ‘the stories of actors involved in policy struggles have been overlooked’ (2001: 90). The paper by Leslie Limage redresses this gap for the crucially important area of international multilateral agencies, specifically the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Her aim is to produce ‘a more clear-eyed look at how to advance the best of multilateral action in the field in which I have been involved at all levels throughout my adult life: children’s and adults’ literacy worldwide’ (Limage, 2009: 7).

Readers of *Literacy and Numeracy Studies* will be well versed in the profoundly political ways in which literacy and numeracy are conditioned, and how critical the ways to name and frame these fields of activity are for public action. Sometimes these ‘profoundly political ways’ do not involve clashes of irreconcilable ideological positions, or divergent professional orientations, instead residing in the operational nature and choices of organisations, in micro-politics of struggle, interests, prestige, career-making, identity, power and control. For a complex multilateral and multilingual agency like UNESCO, politicisation runs deep, the consequences are profound, and the work of committed individuals ultimately crucial.

Nineteen Eighty Four

During 1984 the United States, responsible for 24 per cent of the agency’s budget, announced its formal withdrawal from UNESCO, accusing it of being corrupt and anti-Western. It did not rejoin until 2003. In 1983, former Australian ambassador to UNESCO, Owen Harries (1983a), approvingly predicted the American departure in an article in the *New York Times* on December 21. Harries was previously a senior advisor to Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser and subsequently a Fellow at the conservative US Think Tank, the Heritage Foundation, where he wrote a ‘backgrounder’ (1983b) lamenting the media policies promoted by Amadou-Mahtar M’Bow UNESCO’s francophone Senegalese Director-General.

M’Bow was closely associated with the 1980 MacBride Report, the *Commission over the Problems of Communication* (Preston, Herman and

Schiller, 1989) and supported the building of the New World Information and Communication Order recommended in MacBride. In the 'backgrounder' and a hard-hitting Executive Memorandum (1983c), Harries recommended that the State Department announce United States withdrawal, believing this would force UNESCO to repair its operations, abandon its presumed anti-Western stance, and tackle corruption and inefficiency.

When the United States finally withdrew, Secretary of State George Shultz justified the action as follows: 'trends in the policy, ideological emphasis, budget and management of UNESCO were detracting from the organization's effectiveness and leading it away from the original principles of its constitution (Preston, Herman and Schiller 1989:10). The 'original principles' is a reference to the more 'civilisation-centred' ideals of the constitution contrasted with the more grounded real-world action in development promotion which had come onto UNESCO's agenda through admission of poor countries. Similar concerns to Shultz's were expressed by the United Kingdom's government and within a year of the United States departure the United Kingdom also withdrew from UNESCO.

NatCom

I was appointed to the Australian National Commission for UNESCO in that same year, 1984. The National Commission is responsible for facilitating Australia's participation in UNESCO's fields of endeavour: education, science, culture and communications. It works mostly through the Foreign Affairs and Trade Department, although the bulk of the work relates to education and science. From the moment of joining the National Commission, the devastating psychological and financial effect of the United Kingdom and United States departures was evident. It placed considerable pressure on Australia to show Anglosphere solidarity, but the Hawke and Keating governments refused to follow suit, and the United Kingdom's re-admission in 1997 eased pressure on the Howard government. However, the ever-present possibility of withdrawal coloured many of the discussions and activities during my 12 years of involvement.

Education and Literacy

During my period with NatCom my work focused on regional activities, especially with the Asia Pacific Program of Education for All, Melanesian and Polynesian activities linked to International Literacy Year (ILY) 1990, and follow up regional planning conferences, the Regional

Advisory Committee for Education for Asia and the Pacific and participation in formulating Australian policy positions on budgets, policies and activities of UNESCO. Like many Australian literacy and education personnel, I balked at the UNESCO-speak of ‘eradicating illiteracy’ and classification of people as ‘illiterates’, and occasional and all-too-ready associations made between civility, culture and formal literacy. But it is crucial to keep in mind that UNESCO is not only multilateral, it is also, in a deep way, multilingual and multicultural. All understandings of phenomena require negotiation, and while we might reject stigmatising ways to name things, and express alarm at the chasm between high-sounding declarations and paltry resources, it was always clear to Australian literacy educators that UNESCO was unique and uniquely valuable.

Even at its weakest, UNESCO commanded an authoritative high ground, derived from its universality and the elevated tone of its world mission in education, science and culture. The lofty remit was turned to practical action to support the right of girls to attend school, to bring basic education to destitute urban-dwelling adolescents and to devise creative non-formal provision of ‘street literacy’. These were possible because the high culture traditions and inheritance afforded the agency international traction in advancing an agenda of basic education and universal literacy as a shared global human right. By the late 1980s however, the full furore of the New World Information and Communication Order, combined with UNESCO’s limited means (comparable to a large Australian university), prevented it gaining traction among the quitters and held only tenuous appeal for the stayers.

OECD

A critical change in UNESCO’s fortunes and reputation in relation to literacy arose during the early 1990s, when the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) transformed the public international understanding of literacy. In place of UNESCO’s formulation of literacy as a universal human right, literacy was construed as a proxy measure for the human capital stocks of national economies. This is the marker that prevails today and this development was critical to how industrialised countries came to see both literacy and UNESCO. The former was linked to economic competitiveness based on human capital theorisations of how national wealth is generated in the context of globalised trade and lowered protection. The UNESCO paradigm of declarations to ‘eradicate’ literacy in the interests of human rights was marginalised as neo-liberal notions of literacy took hold (Lo Bianco 1999).

Today, statistical comparisons of relative literacy rates are a regular feature of contrast among developed countries as well as developing ones. Many of the developed states which were reluctant to participate in ILY in 1990, believing they had transcended literacy problems with universal compulsory education, are among the most enthusiastic participants. These comparisons have generated ever more complex procedures of measurement under the rubric of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS); a collaborative project of statistical agencies (Statistics Canada, the United States Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics and the Education Testing Service of Princeton, New Jersey), independent researchers and governments (Lo Bianco, 2004; Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL) 2008).

Commencing with *No Single Measure* (Wickert 1989), there has been a major evolution in the assessment of what is now called the Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (ALLS), implemented between mid 2006 and January 2007 across Australia. The results indicate that between 46 per cent and 70 per cent of Australian adults recorded poor or very poor skills across one or more of the five skill domains: prose and document literacy, numeracy, problem-solving and health literacy.

Whereas the 1996 IALS found that some 6.2 million lacked adequate literacy skills for the demands of everyday life and work, ALLS has documented an increase to some 7 million adults, due mostly to population increase (ACAL 2008). The involvement of the OECD has shifted the response of developed countries to their endemic literacy problems, once assumed to have been banished due to the inoculating effects of free, universal and compulsory education.

UNESCO's Universal Literacy

Limage reports a sad account of loss of focus and energy within UNESCO following the United States withdrawal. The pursuit of universal literacy followed a two-track approach of making access to primary education universally available and linking this to complementary action in both formal provision and various non-formal activities for adults and other post-schooling populations. In the Limage paper, we note a powerful iteration between the seemingly unconnected actions of individuals within UNESCO, and the conditioning forces outside it. It is not surprising that, as an insider with longstanding and meritorious service to this field, she places considerable emphasis of the critical need for a professional, international, civil service. For Limage, this professional class of civil servants, neutral of the interests and agendas of the originating countries, the Member States, who constitute

the organisation and whose ideas and ideologies provide the intellectual climate within which the insiders must operate, is indispensable to providing continuity of effort, sustained attention, coordination of action, and rigorous attention to learning from implementation. This task of continuous improvement is unimaginable in the environment Limage describes, subject to a too-direct connection with some of the most senior political figures in the world.

Recent years have witnessed a steady erosion of the focused attention and symbolic centrality literacy had commanded for some 60 years within UNESCO, though the world is still far from achieving the goal of 'eradication'. The compelling account Limage offers of UNESCO's travails since 2003, the 'return of the United States' (*The Washington Times* 2007), makes sobering reading. This is much more than mere attention to the machinations of international organisational politics and the prestige of countries. How problems are named and construed, and how they are to be tackled, constitute the way those problems become adopted as projects for state or institutional policy, and how they are represented in public life. In her discussion of a similar problematic in the Australian setting, Wickert (2001) offers an equally compelling account of the multiple agents and agencies, within various agencies and departments of state. The account by Limage is both passionate and dispassionate, engaged and 'objective'; it is an insider's account seen by someone whose new outsidership was already being forged on the inside. It shows the immense value of memory in organisation and exposes the waste and duplication that emerges when memory is dissipated.

Australian literacy educators and researchers have long been conscious of the problematic relationships between knowledge and action, advocacy and engagement, persuasion and implementation (Lo Bianco 1996). Advocacy on behalf of literacy translates into action on behalf of the opportunities and rights of particular and predictable groups of people. These groups can be understood in reference to their socio-economic status, their Indigenous status and language backgrounds. These markers of social status, political presence, and economic characteristics and ethnic attributes, constitute a major part of the story of adult literacy within industrialised, so-called developed countries. The UNESCO literacy story related by Limage, especially its more recent chapters, concludes with recommendations for 'the way forward'. We can only hope these are pursued and implemented, as it is clear that international leadership, and particularly a resumption by UNESCO of its historic championing of the human rights inherent in the cause of universal literacy, with its attendant issues of justice for some of the most marginalised and oppressed peoples, remains crucial. This occurs even in light of statistically ever more sophisticated and reliable data sets about

which social categories have what quantum of which kinds of literacy. Another good reason to take heed of ‘the stories of actors involved in policy struggles’.

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