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Essentializing the Experiences and Expertise of Adult Literacy Educators

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Keywords: Institutional Ethnography, adult literacy, Essential Skills, IALS, pedagogy

Abstract: Adult literacy educator expertise is being subsumed by the Essential Skills framework and IALS testing methodology as both are packaged as adult literacy pedagogy. Preliminary findings from an Institutional Ethnography illustrate how educators are becoming increasingly immersed in the discursive relations of the literacy regime as they: 1) get hooked into the discourse of the regime; 2) establish a direct link with assessments and accountability requirements; and 3) are taught to change the way they teach, discounting both research and practice based knowledge of literacy and adult learning.

My starting point for this inquiry was an incident that occurred while working in an adult literacy program in Ontario. I was provoked into questioning why we were being asked to re-vamp our approach to documenting student learning in order to align it with a federal job skills framework. Having learned a little about Institutional Ethnography (IE), I didn't simply dismiss the request as another nonsensical bureaucratic imposition. I wanted to understand why this was happening, and how something seemingly so disconnected from the actual teaching practices of adult literacy educators could enter into our work. If I could figure out how our work as adult literacy educators is coordinated beyond the actualities of everyday concerns, then maybe I could share my discoveries with colleagues to make "working experience accountable to [our]selves...rather than to the ruling apparatus of which institutions are a part" (Smith, 1987, p. 178). Although the study draws on my experience and the experiences of other educators working in Ontario, the changes seen in the province are happening elsewhere, as adult literacy education in other jurisdictions is subject to the impacts of job skills frameworks, international literacy assessments and accountability demands.

Encroaching Essential Skills and Accountability Texts

The Essential Skills, developed over a decade ago by Canada's federal employment and training ministry are a list of nine "generic, transferable and measurable skills" that are used to describe the demands of jobs requiring less than a high school education (Mair, 1997). The list¹ grew from other lists of skills—interchangeably referred to as employability skills, generic skills, or basic skills—and make an explicit connection the National Occupation Classification (NOC) system (Jones, 1993). Supporting the list of skills are complexity level descriptors that are used to assign a level of difficulty to certain skills, and job profiles that articulate the skills and complexity level descriptors to 200 entry-level jobs. The complexity levels for some of the nine skills were derived directly from the methodology developed for international adult literacy surveys (IALS). Both the Essential Skills framework and IALS methodology are being used in explicit ways in day to day teaching and learning in adult literacy programs. This is in part a result of narrowly defined federal government funding for literacy initiatives through the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES). Whereas federal funds used to cover a range of literacy

initiatives, since 2006 literacy projects—curriculum materials, assessments, and informational materials—must have a direct connection to the Essential Skills and related IALS methodology.

At the same time, as accountability requirements continue to focus on measurable outcomes and performance, the ES and related IALS methodology provide policy-makers with the ‘data-driven evidence’ they so desire to ‘demonstrate effectiveness’ and ‘efficiency’. The IALS testing regime has been critiqued for its inability to reflect actual literacy use as it claims, and treatment of culture and background knowledge as bias (Hamilton & Barton, 2000); and for its narrowly conceived conception of literacy as information-processing for the purposes of completing documentary tasks to demonstrate proficiency in a “knowledge society” (Darville, 1999). In addition, the Essential Skills have been critiqued for their inability to be teachable, learnable and ultimately transferable (Jackson, 2005). Despite these and other important critiques, both the Essential Skills and IALS testing methodology are being turned into pedagogical products for program use.

Social and Ruling Relations in Adult Literacy Education

Institutional Ethnography pays attention to the ways texts are actively put to use to organize everyday work and experience. The use of the term institution refers to complexes of organized activity geared towards specific functions such as education, healthcare and development work. Darville (2002) refers to the complex of texts, related mechanisms and activity associated with adult literacy as the *literacy regime*. It operates in the following way: “policy is fitted to the overall governing of society, programming fitted to policy, and the actual conduct of literacy work fitted to the accountability practices through which it is regulated” (p.62). IE is a *discovery* of how such a complex works, and how it is put together (Smith, 1987). It is a way of making sense of the social world that has a clearly delineated ontology guided by the the concepts *social and ruling relations*. The term social relations draws attention to the ways the object of focus, a text, is always “embedded in sequences of coordinated action” (Smith, 2005, p. 228). Ruling relations are translocal and “objectified forms of consciousness and organization, constituted externally to particular people and places, creating and relying on textually based realities” (2005, p. 227). Ruling relations are used to organize the ways in which literacy educators and learners think about and do the work of teaching and learning literacy, too often subsuming complexity, particularities and personal meaning in their effort to standardize, and make literacy learning accountable to governing institutions and economic concerns (Burgess, 2008; Darville, 1999; Hamilton, 2009).

Information for the study was collected from different sources: individual interviews with 12 educators, a group discussion about learning plans and the Essential Skills, a two day conference, and additional workshops addressing ways to use the Essential Skills and IALS methodology in teaching. I also collected hundreds of pages of documents. Using preliminary findings, the next section will provide some illustrative examples of the ways educators activate texts the texts of the Essential Skills and IALS, and engage—with enthusiasm, reluctance, puzzlement and frustration—in social and ruling relations.

Activating the Texts

I began to piece together how the work of adult literacy educators was slowly being essentialized, subsumed, and disconnected from both practice and research based understandings of adult learning and literacy pedagogy. I have organized preliminary findings into three parts to indicate increasing immersion with the discursive relations of the literacy regime: 1) getting hooked into the discourse; 2) establishing a direct link with assessments and accountability requirements; and 3) changing teaching and learning.

Getting Hooked into the Discourse

Each week I receive announcements of new and free materials produced directly by OLES or indirectly with OLES project funding. Most of the materials, whether documents, video or even video games, focus on ways that educators, learners, employers and workers can understand and use the nine Essential Skills to describe and organize their learning. Although the Essential Skills were originally conceived to describe entry-level occupations, OLES branded them as the skills needed for “work, learning and life.” Countless examples introduce the nine skills, and then relate each skill to any variety of everyday activities. For example, the nine Essential Skills have been connected to family literacy (an example of reading text is reading to your child), academic upgrading (an example of document use is completing a course registration form), and even holidays (an example of numeracy is to calculate the width of a strip of wrapping paper to cover a gift). In addition, the skills are connected to the very personal and complex lives of learners. One set of promotional documents from northern Canada builds examples around a fictitious family. Writing is exemplified when the mother of the family helps a friend write a victim impact statement, and numeracy is demonstrated when the grandmother of the family counts the number of people who visited the food bank in a week.

One educator explained why a set of materials she helped develop contains extensive information about the Essential Skills:

We don't expect people to have a specific background in the Essential Skills. We thought the more information the better so the facilitator can start using Essential Skills language in the classroom. [Then] the women can start using the Essential Skills language, thinking about what they have done in the past, how that would articulate into transferable skills, and how that would connect to work in a similar field or different field.

When the materials were being field tested with participants, the co-developer of the materials said she received very positive feedback. Learners said, “...if this is the language that employers understand, then I need to understand it so that when I go, I can talk to them and describe what I'm doing in really concrete terminology.” She recognized however that employers don't necessarily understand the Essential Skills.

... they understand that they need someone who can read well and talk to the customers. They might not call it working with others or communication skills. Well they wouldn't probably use that—document use. They wouldn't say I'm looking with someone with good document use skills. But that is what they want. Someone who can work unsupervised with a certain set of documents and do forms or reports.

Another educator, with over 20 years experience, suggested that she and her colleagues feel compelled to use the Essential Skills because it is assumed to be the language of employment. Why would an educator continue to use something that she recognized was not all that useful? What does it mean when educators take the nine Essential Skills and use them to organize the personal lives of learners? Is the attempt to associate the skills list with holidays a small act of defiance?

There was a striking tension between comments from an educator who made carefully considered choices about the ways she would use the Essential Skills and an educator who was involved in producing materials with project funding. The educator, who had just completed a document that would be used to help others understand how to use the Essential Skills as part of their teaching, thought educators only understood the list of nine skills and didn't really

understand the complexity levels, job profiles and methodology. This explained why they chose not to engage with more aspects of the framework.

Contradicting her perception that educators were not informed, another educator explained her judicious use of the Essential Skills:

With such limited resources, we really can't afford to waste time and money on re-thinking how we do things in Essential Skills language for no real purpose. [The list] is enough for them. They don't need to know all the details. People in the real world don't know anything about the Essential Skills. It's kind of this background thing that the government uses but no one else does.

She used the list only because it was mandated by the program funder. What is happening to educator expertise if it can be assumed that their thoughtful choices *not* to use the Essential Skills are judged as a potential lack of understanding?

Establishing a Direct Line with Assessments and Accountability Requirements

To receive project funding at the provincial and federal level, an IALS-type assessment must be used to measure the project 'outcomes.' While this is not yet a requirement for any provincially funded delivery of literacy education, it is having an impact as both educators and learners are indirectly introduced to the assessments.

One educator who received federal funding said she was initially reluctant to incorporate a standardized assessment, worried that learners would feel nervous or uncomfortable, but was forced to include it in her project proposal. "Basically they said that we will not fund you. They really wanted a pre and post test built into it." She was however surprised at the learners' reaction to the testing: "The women really liked being tested. They thought it gave them something concrete to understand about where they are at." She explained how the facilitator of the course helped the learners understand what their scores meant and how they related to specific jobs: "She made that score real for them as she started talking about the type of jobs they could get that require that level of reading or writing or document use."

The assessment she used, *Prose, Document Quantitative* (PDQ), includes a final report that relates a test-taker's assigned level with specific jobs. The same educator who was surprised at the positive reaction from learners was also puzzled by inconsistent scores in pre and post testing. She noted that many scores didn't improve, and a couple had dropped. As an explanation, she thought that perhaps it was because learner scores were already high, and the course was not designed to increase reading skills. "So if you're not specifically teaching to the test, it's not a bad thing that your reading skills haven't gone up," she explained, when recalling what she told the learners.

Another educator who used the same assessment with her students preparing to enter a health care training program complained about the disconnect between the tests and the academic application of literacy required for the training course. However, she was even more concerned about the final reports.

My students want to enter a certification program for health care, and I know that they will get there. Then they see this report that says they only have the skills to be a cleaner or a server in a long-term care facility. How insulting is that? I made sure none of my students saw those reports.

Even though it is not mandated for literacy programs, one educator thought the same final report could be used in the student training plans. The training plan records achievement and planned learning. It is used primarily for accountability purposes and is examined by the program funder during annual monitoring visits, much like an audit process. The educator was

enthusiastic about the potential connection between the assessment report and training plan because it would involve little work or effort. “It spits out a report that can be used in a training plan; it can be slipped right in. It's amazing.”

It seems inevitable that programs in Ontario will begin to use an IALS-type assessment for accountability purposes (OALC Communiqué, May 2010). More worrisome though, is the integration of the IALS methodology in the actual curriculum framework. These two moves will establish a direct and solid connection between the IALS information-processing model of literacy, program learning and accountability. What will it mean for learners and educators if literacy learning is shaped by IALS?

Changing Teaching and Learning

The third level of immersion is the most disturbing because it is designed to explicitly teach educators how to use the IALS methodology and the accompanying information-processing model of literacyⁱⁱ. Using a train the trainer format, a series of workshops based on an accessible slide presentation (Davidson, 2009) was presented to educators in communities across Canada. Participants in the workshop I attended were told that they would learn how to use “authentic materials in authentic ways” and this would apply not only to workplace documents but to any document used in the home or community. The intent was to teach “the transfer strategy” of the Essential Skills.

To begin the workshop, participants examined a series of documents including a procedure for shutting down an office each night, and a product information sheet for flooring materials. Participants first discussed the readability and presentation of text in documents, and appeared to find this useful. They were then told that that it didn't matter whether or not the educators or learners were familiar with the actual content in the document. The approach and activities they were learning in the workshop didn't require background knowledge or familiarity with a particular job. Participants appeared perplexed by this information. Why bother teaching a learner something if it had nothing to do with their interests, experience or goals?

They then began to learn how to use the IALS methodology when working with documents. They were told how to formulate questions, and then rank them depending on whether they were designed to elicit concrete or abstract information. During most of this discussion, participants said little but shared occasional questioning looks. A couple participants shook their heads silently or furrowed their brows. They were then guided through a series of slides that explained how to teach learners information-processing by locating bits of information, cycling through texts to find matching bits, integrating disparate bits, and generating new information. Halfway through the two-hour session, participants became very animated when told that they couldn't use the word *you* when constructing a scenario. According to the slides, the learner is not to put him or herself in a situation to help understand the use of a particular document. Too many assumptions would be made if the learner thought about how he or she would do a job, compared to what is actually required to do the job. Or, according to another slide, learners may not be interested in the scenario because they have no personal experience with the particular job being discussed. After a short burst of conversation, in which participants attempted to understand and then dispute this rationale, they remained generally silent—most with their arms crossed—throughout the remainder of the workshop. Perhaps sensing their frustration and lack of engagement, the workshop leader ended the session early. Afterwards, a colleague said to me that the workshop was a complete waste of time and she planned to toss all materials as soon as she returned to work. But is simply ignoring such a misinformed, nonsensical, and ultimately damaging explanation of literacy enough?

Conclusion

Initial findings illustrate how literacy learning is being packaged “as an object of economic and other managerial processes” for the sole purpose of turning literacy into an institutional resource that can be fitted into regulatory policy. The IALS redesign of literacy ensures it is amenable to the production and manipulation of information (Darville, 1999). Findings also illustrate how educators are positioned in a coordinated organization of these ruling relations, and how they engage with varying degrees of resistance, confusion, frustration and enthusiasm. They illustrate how educator expertise and experience is ignored and even disregarded. In addition, a model of literacy constructed for the sole purpose of implementing large-scale assessments is being distributed through spin-off assessments and taught to educators as a viable pedagogy, discounting any sense of research-based or practice-based knowledge of adult learning and literacy development. Turning a theory of test development into pedagogy are a series of gross misconceptions and outright lies: a constructed task using a workplace document is deemed to be authentic literacy; the actual use of a document and its sociocultural context is of no consequence; the learner’s experience and knowledge is treated as bias; an ability to manipulate bits of information is the hallmark of literacy achievement; the articulation of personal skills and experiences to the Essential Skills list is deemed meaningful; and learners and educators are told that employers use the language of the Essential Skills. For any sense of integrity and actual accountability to themselves and their learners, adult literacy educators need to recognize how their work is being actively and aggressively coordinated by ruling relations. The promise of Institutional Ethnography goes beyond explanatory power; it provides both a discourse for reflection and tools for change.

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ⁱ The nine Essential Skills are reading text, document use, numeracy, writing, oral communication, working with others, thinking skills, computer use, and continuous learning.

ⁱⁱ The IALS methodology is comprised of a constructed literacy for testing purposes referred to as Item Response Theory. To complete an IALS task, a test-taker must find the correct type of match between the test question and information in the task. Both the task and the activity of searching for the information are carefully manipulated to ensure gradual increases in difficulty. Difficulty corresponds to one of the five IALS complexity levels and a specific score on a 500 point scale. Complexity is determined by the type of information that must be found, from concrete to abstract, despite the possibility of interfering bits of information intentionally embedded in a test as a distractor. In addition, the activity of finding the information is constructed to be more complex based on whether or not the test taker must locate, cycle through information a given number of times, integrate bits of information, or generate information. Texts are informational, and are not literary, subject-based, creative or experiential.