

'I think we've done it right': The curriculum and performative discourse in adult basic education classrooms

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Adult literacy and numeracy education in England, traditionally led by humanist, learner-centred discourses, has been transformed since 2001 by the *Skills for Life* strategy and subsequent policy developments (DfES 2001; BSA 2001a; BSA 2001b; DIUS 2009; SFA 2013). These regulative discourses introduced national curricula which prescribed classroom practice and made funding dependent on achievement of qualifications, and brought with them new emphasis on marketisation and a culture of performativity (Papen 2005; Gregson et al. 2005; Coffield et al. 2007). Similar developments have been noted in adult literacy and numeracy policy worldwide (e.g. Jackson 2005; Balatti et al. 2006; Baatjes and Mathe 2004).

This chapter uses ethnographic study of adult learners' own discourses to examine the impact of this performative culture on their experiences of learning, relating the macro-structures of policy to micro-events in classroom groupwork.

I report findings at three levels: a critical analysis of policy discourse; an ethnographic account of the classroom mechanisms through which performative discourses were enacted by the learners; and a close-grained analysis of an episode of learner discussion which illustrates how curricular knowledge was evaluated in the classroom.

In particular I focus on the tensions between social-constructivist pedagogies and discourses of performativity, and how learners themselves chose to privilege the latter. This is discussed in relation to their own negotiated life and career goals within a wider performative society.

Although there have been a number of studies of teachers' experiences of performativity in this sector (e.g. Hodgson, Edward et al. 2007; O'Leary and Smith 2012; Orr 2012) there are few studies of the impact on adult *learners* themselves.

Policy background

In 1999, a report by a working group chaired by Sir Claus Moser (1999) drew on various research sources, including the International Adult Literacy Survey (OECD 1997) and longitudinal cohort studies (e.g. Bynner and Parsons 1997) to establish the scale of adult literacy and numeracy 'need' in England. The report concluded that up to seven million adults in England had difficulties with literacy and numeracy, and the impact of this on the economy and society was expressed in terms of effectiveness, efficiency and global competitiveness, with some estimates claiming that the cost to the nation could be as high as £10 billion per year (DfES 2001).

The response was a major reform of adult literacy and numeracy provision in England, branded by the Department for Education and Skills as *Skills for Life*, to 'increase these people's earnings potential, and the country's wealth and productivity, by giving them the literacy and numeracy skills they need to participate in a global, knowledge-based economy' (DfES 2001:11). Strands of the strategy included: new core curricula; nationally-recognised qualifications in literacy, language and numeracy; and subject specialist teacher qualifications (QCA 2000; BSA 2001a; BSA 2001b; FENTO 2001).

The reforms had a major impact on adult literacy and numeracy provision, with numbers of learners approximately doubling between 2001 and 2005, while numbers achieving qualifications nearly tripled (Rhys Warner and Vorhaus 2008). In a policy development which was originally resisted by teachers, but has now largely been accepted as an inevitable part of provision, all learners are required to work towards formally-recognised qualifications, with funding dependent on successful achievement of those qualifications.

While measures were welcomed which raised the profile and funding of adult literacy and numeracy provision, the strategies have been critiqued for their performative emphasis on economic effectiveness and workforce development; the deficit view presented of adult learners; and the prioritisation of funding for adults close to gaining accreditation rather than those in greatest need (for example Papen 2005; NIACE 2007; NIACE 2008; Hodgson, Steer et al. 2007). The emphasis on accreditation and the conflation of qualifications with achievement has been critiqued by Wells (2006) and Bathmaker (2007). Appleby and Bathmaker (2006:711) note the shift in emphasis from earlier discourses of entitlement, to the perceived importance of skills for a global economy:

The emphasis, and the funding that follows it, is now on providing skills for work ... rather than providing, and resourcing, community-based flexible learning opportunities for adults.

The impact of performativity on adult provision

Performativity thus came later to adult literacy and numeracy than to most areas of education in England, and this may account for there being fewer studies of performativity in this sector than in others. Nonetheless, post-compulsory education, with its traditional emphasis on vocationalism, has been noted as being ‘particularly fertile ground for performativity’ (Simmons and Thompson 2008:601). As in other sectors, studies of the impact of performativity focus largely on the ‘struggle for the soul of the teacher’ (Ball 1999:1), rather than on the experiences of learners. The tensions between creativity, professional identity, critical pedagogy and the ‘terrors’ of performativity for teachers are documented, for example, by Avis and Bathmaker (2004); Simmons and Thompson (2008); Orr (2012); and Bathmaker and Avis (2013).

The impact of successive ‘waves of policy’ has been found to be one-way; teachers and learners are subject to policy in adult literacy and numeracy, but have no agency to influence it (Coffield et al. 2007). Cara et al. (2008) describe how teachers feel compelled to organise their work to meet targets, and compromised by ensuring that enough learners ‘achieve’ to enable provision to continue. Teachers report decreased autonomy and greater emphasis on bureaucracy and meeting targets, although also the benefits of a shared discourse and stronger sense of professional identity (Hamilton 2007; Hodgson, Edward et al. 2007; Dhillon et al. 2011; O’Leary and Smith 2012). Tusting (2012:122) explores the culture of accountability and ‘paperwork’ within the sector, reporting that many teachers found these requirements to be in conflict with their commitment to responding to learners’ needs.

The commodification of education is characterised by attempts to transform the complex and unpredictable social processes involved in teaching and learning into ‘products’ with exchange value, which can be used for comparison and competition ... Teaching quality is assessed in terms of compliance with externally prescribed models, through both internal performance appraisals and external inspection regimes.

Studies of *learners’* experiences of performativity within adult literacy and numeracy are less prevalent, and reports tend to emerge from studies of learners’ more general experiences. Goals and purposes for learners attending classes were found to be complex, with few conforming to the rhetoric of needing literacy or numeracy directly to ‘function’ in society or work. Rather, their aims tended to be to gain a qualification; to support their children’s learning; for personal satisfaction; and for the social engagement of attending classes (Swain 2005; Barton et al. 2006; 2007; Ward-Penny 2009). Rhys Warner and Vorhaus (2008) report that the new qualifications in adult literacy and numeracy were seen

by learners as motivating, and as gateways to employment or further study. However, many learners who chose to learn for enjoyment and fulfilment did not want to take tests. According to Ivanič et al. (2006:30) a teacher reported:

Gone is the sense that you can come to college because you enjoy it. Even in the non-vocational courses there is constant pressure for progression, progression.

These studies show how the focus of adult literacy and numeracy education has shifted to optimising the relationship between educational input and economic output. Lyotard comments on the goal of supplying the system with 'players capable of acceptably fulfilling their roles at the pragmatic posts required by its institutions' by offering education to 'adults who are either already working or expect to be, for the purpose of improving their skills and chances of promotion' (Lyotard 1984:48). The emphasis throughout the last decade has been on measurable outputs which claim to offer an index of global comparison and competitiveness. According to Tsatsaroni and Evans (2013:3), international studies and league tables now reflect:

a 'comparative turn' in educational policy making, and, more broadly a scientific – and thus apparently objective and neutral – approach, to political decision-making... Far from being simply descriptive, comparisons perform prescriptive and political functions, driving and justifying changes of an instrumental nature in many countries around the world.

Methodology

This study of discourse in adult numeracy classrooms examines data at three levels: discourse analysis of key policy documentation; ethnographic observations collected in two classrooms over two terms; and audio-recordings of learners' discussions during classroom groupwork (Oughton 2007; 2010).

My methodology draws on linguistic ethnography; a set of methods and epistemologies in which discourse and the social world are seen as mutually constitutive. Naturally-occurring interaction is analysed in order to learn about the social settings and structures within which it takes place, and the ways in which these structures shape, and are shaped by, discourse.

Linguistic ethnography generally holds that, to a considerable degree, language and the social world are mutually shaping, and that close analysis of the role of language can provide both fundamental and distinctive insights into the mechanisms and dynamics of social and cultural production in everyday activity. (Rampton et al. 2004:2)

Discourse is analysed both at the macro-level of policy structures and at the micro-level of classroom groupwork to observe the impact of such structures for learners and teachers. Ethnographic approaches enable us to question the oversimplifications in policy directives,

to focus on the experiences and perceptions of those who enact them in the classroom, and to 'balance attention on the sometimes minute everyday detail of individual lives with wider social structures' (Walford 2001:7). Within this underpinning epistemology, any culture of performativity would thus be recognised as being enacted, reflected and maintained through written and spoken discourse.

The fieldwork sites were two adult community education centres in the north of England, offering free literacy and numeracy provision to any adults lacking prior qualifications in those subjects. The participating numeracy classes each comprised between eight and twelve learners, aged between 20 and 55 years, most of whom were studying towards nationally-recognised qualifications in adult numeracy at Levels 1 and 2¹. All learners in these classes were attending voluntarily; their motivations included helping children with schoolwork; wanting to gain a qualification in order to gain access to employment or further study; and personal satisfaction and enjoyment. The classes were 'roll-on-roll-off' (meaning that learners could enrol or leave at any time) and attendance was non-compulsory. While I would resist the notion of a 'typical' classroom, wide experience as a teacher-educator in this sector leads me to suggest that the participating classes were not *untypical*, and ethnographic accounts of similar classrooms may be found in Appleby and Barton (2008), Rhys Warner and Vorhaus (2008) and Cara et al. (2008).

Participants were audio-recorded (with their informed consent) during their usual classroom activities, most of which took the form of collaborative groupwork. In order to record discussions which were as naturalistic as possible, no intervention was requested or made to the learning activities already planned by the teacher, and no activities were included, omitted or adapted for research purposes.

Mobile phones were used as audio-recording devices, placed unobtrusively on classroom tables. Mobile phones were a familiar object in these classrooms, and participants tended to ignore them; their talk appeared to become naturalistic within a few minutes of the start of each recording. Eleven hours of recorded discussion were collected and transcribed in full, providing a rich source of data with potential for analysis from a variety of perspectives. The prevalence of performative discourse in learners' talk emerged inductively from a more general analysis of their engagement with formal and informal knowledge.

Field-notes were made during observation, and photographs and photocopies were taken of learning materials used. An ethnographic account of the weekly practices and procedures

¹ Equivalent to the target levels for 14-16 year-olds in English secondary schools.

of each classroom, based on observation, field-notes, learning materials and documentation, was used to provide a 'thick description' of context (Geertz 1973) to inform the analysis of learner discourse.

The following sections report findings from analysis of the data at the three levels described above, namely a critical analysis of policy discourse; an account of how performative culture was enacted; and a fine-grained analysis of one illustrative episode of learner discussion.

Analysis of policy discourse: the Adult Core Curricula

Policy texts are discourses which 'systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 1977:49; Ball 1993:14). The *Adult Literacy and Adult Numeracy Core Curricula* (BSA 2001a; 2001b; LSIS 2009) and their associated qualifications, the *National Certificates in Adult Numeracy and Adult Literacy* (QCA 2000)² were central to the introduction of the *Skills for Life* strategy.

The values set out in the *Adult Numeracy Core Curriculum* dominated practice in the classrooms I studied. Although the document claims not to be prescriptive, funding was dependent on the achievement of qualifications based on the same standards (QCA 2000; SFA 2013), thus making the curriculum obligatory rather than optional. As a further funding requirement, teachers were required to 'map' classroom activities to the Core Curriculum in their written planning. Simmons and Thomson (2008:607) suggest that:

Performativity leads to increasingly 'packaged' curricula in which approaches to particular areas of learning are externally (often centrally) prescribed and preapproved as 'good practice', further reducing teacher autonomy and inviting acquiescence in the world-view they contain.

The content of the Core Curriculum is described as 'building blocks' (BSA 2001a:8), and comprises discreet, measurable, specified 'elements' (ibid: passim). These elements are presented individually in numbered lists, and are labelled with codes which indicate their difficulty and curriculum area. Each page of the main section of the document states that 'Adults should be taught' these curriculum elements, a phrase which employs the passive tense and imperative mood to commodify and exteriorise knowledge and which thus serves to dissociate it from the learner-teacher relationship (Lyotard 1984; Ball 2000).

The Core Curriculum presents itself as an 'invaluable tool' to 'help' teachers (BSA 2001a:1), with a range of navigational metaphors such as 'map', 'signpost' and 'signal' to reinforce the

² The qualifications themselves were superseded by Functional Skills qualifications in 2012, but funding for provision is still dependent on the attainment of qualifications to a nationally-prescribed set of standards and specifications.

message of guidance. Throughout the document the use of declarative or imperative moods presents the content as non-negotiable, for example:

The right-hand pages also contain guidance on techniques and approaches that teachers *will* use to develop numeracy. (ibid: 6, my italics)

A pervasive message of performativity throughout the Core Curriculum is that numeracy and literacy for adults should be functional and relevant to everyday economic effectiveness. This is expressed through repeated use of terms such as ‘straightforward’, ‘everyday’, ‘familiar’ and ‘practical’ to distinguish adult basic education from higher-status academic discourses. For example, illustrations within the document include photographs representing ‘functional’ uses of mathematics, including DIY, shopping, buying petrol and reading charts of financial growth, and the accompanying text suggests that:

In everyday life we are confronted with numbers, from getting on the right bus or putting coins in a parking meter, to choosing the best deal on a mobile phone or a pension plan. (ibid: 10)

The Core Curriculum can thus be seen as a performative tool which enacts its function by: positioning the teacher as incapable of autonomous professional judgement and thus in need of direction; prescribing knowledge in commodified, measurable and exteriorised ‘building blocks’; and positioning learners as needing this knowledge in order to contribute to an economically effective, globally-competitive workforce. It is ‘performative’ both in Austin’s original sense, and in Lyotard’s sense of an educational culture which is intended to optimise the relationship between input and output (Austin 1962; Lyotard 1984).

Although the Core Curriculum was written for teachers, and is thus mediated through them, its impact on learners in terms of performativity in the classroom nonetheless becomes evident in the ethnographic data collected below.

Learner identity construction

Here I describe the culture and activities of the two participating classes, and illustrate some of the mechanisms through which performative identities were constructed, maintained and reinforced. I begin by discussing the influence of the teacher and policy discourse on the performativity culture in the classroom. I then use an episode of group discussion to demonstrate how this performative culture was enacted by three learners.

Teacher influence and performative discourse influence

The classroom culture was subject to two dominant influences; the pedagogical commitment of the teacher, Elizabeth³, and the performative discourse of policy. However, it should be noted that teacher herself was heavily influenced by policy (for example, even the creative, discursive approaches she favoured were promoted by Ofsted⁴) and also that learners' access to policy discourse was mediated through the teacher.

Elizabeth, the class teacher, was committed to social-constructivist approaches to teaching numeracy, propagated through professional development campaigns and endorsed by Ofsted (DfES 2005; 2007; Ofsted 2006; 2011). She encouraged the learners in her classes to work together in groups, in which they undertook a variety of activities designed to promote mathematical discussion and conceptual engagement, such as card-sorting, card-matching, domino games and jigsaws. Such activities often featured open questions, with a focus on developing understanding and confidence rather than obtaining a single 'right answer'.

However, these pedagogical approaches sat in uneasy tension with the performative discourse of the Core Curriculum and accreditation. To prepare learners for accreditation, classroom activities therefore also included a parallel focus on more conventional approaches such as word-problems and practice papers. Learners seemed to gain equal satisfaction from both types of activities; and they even spoke of their initial discomfort, on first joining the class, at being expected to participate in groupwork. This tension between the social-constructivist pedagogies favoured by the teacher, and the culture of learner-endorsed performativity within which these pedagogies were enacted, is the focus of the episode of classroom talk analysed later in this section.

To comply with funding requirements, the lesson plans prepared by the teacher, Elizabeth, were 'mapped' to the relevant curriculum 'elements'. Each learner also had an Individual Learning Plan (ILP), drawn up in negotiation with the tutor on joining the class, in order to set 'targets' for their own learning. Although these provided some scope for learner input, and supposedly even for empowerment, teachers were again expected to 'map' the targets to Core Curriculum 'elements'. Learners were encouraged to record their activities and progress at the end of each session on their ILPs, and the discourse of the Core Curriculum appeared to have been internalised by the learners when doing so. Mathematical learning activities were labelled using the curriculum terminology as, for example, when learners Abigail and Donna are completing their ILPs at the end of a session:

³ Names of all participants are pseudonyms.

⁴ The Office for Standards in Education, the regulatory body for maintaining standards in educational provision in England.

Abigail Have we done Common Measures now?
 Teacher Yes
 Abigail What we doing next week?
 Donna We're doing –
 Teacher Area and Volume

Abigail's use of the phrase 'common measures' seems particularly telling here. Echoing curriculum terminology, it has a formal register which is very much in contrast to the usual informal style of talk in the classroom. The final line shows how this discourse is reinforced by the teacher. Even more significantly, the exchange illustrates how both learners and teacher have accepted the commodification of curricular knowledge; 'Common measures' has been 'done'; it is seen as a finite building block of knowledge to be ticked off before moving on to the next curriculum topic.

The discourse of accreditation was also prevalent. Assessment for the *National Certificate in Adult Numeracy* was via a multiple-choice paper, taken under examination conditions, and was commonly referred to by both teacher and learners as 'the National Test', or simply 'the Test'. The teacher, Elizabeth, often introduced new topics to the class by emphasising their relevance to the Test, for example:

Teacher Right, today, I want to talk about data handling - graphs and charts. Knowing often in the National Test, they'll ask you what is the best graph to use in a certain situation. So you'll need to know what different types of graphs and charts there are.

Practices and discourses associated with Test entry and administration were part of the shared culture of the classroom community. Assessment could be offered 'on-demand' within each adult education centre, with the examinations administrator setting a 'Test date' when enough learners expressed a readiness to take the qualification. Once a Test date was announced, further learners would consider entering, in many cases regarding it as a target and an incentive to reach the required levels of competence in time to attempt it. At such times, the teacher presented activities such as worksheets to learners in terms of preparation for the Test:

Teacher: Right, the sheets I've got, I've got quite a lot of different ones really here
 Do Level 2 if you think... Have a go at Level 2 questions
 'Cause it's coming up in two weeks time

Mathematical learning in schools is traditionally seen as a process of enculturation into the community and discourses of academic mathematics (Bishop 1988). However, for the participants in this study, the process seemed more to be one of enculturation into the performative discourses of the adult classroom. Membership of the classroom community involved access to, and fluency in, a repertoire of discourse, practices and shared cultural

meanings which revolved more around administration procedures, accreditation procedures, and the management and structure of groupwork than they did around mathematics itself. Learners negotiated complex but clearly familiar practices such as completing individual learning plans, entering for examinations and collecting their results with very little explicit direction from the teacher.

I now focus in particular on the discourse of three learners: Abigail, Donna and Judith. These three women worked together as a group in one of the participating classrooms, and attended regularly throughout the fieldwork period. They all spoke of bad experiences learning mathematics at school, but as adults had recently successfully completed a *National Certificate in Adult Numeracy* at Level 1, and were now studying for the qualification at Level 2 with increased confidence. All three had school-age children; they frequently commented on the difficulties of juggling family, work and study, sharing the time-management strategies they needed to deploy in order to do their homework and even to attend the examinations. Judith was also volunteering as a parent-helper at the local primary school. Donna had completed an NVQ childcare the previous year; Abigail was now studying the same course and Donna offered her encouragement and practical advice on completing this qualification.

Judith and Donna, who were preparing for the Level 2 *National Certificate* throughout the fieldwork period⁵, worked particularly intensively on practice examination papers, taking a paper to work on at home at the end of each session. They were self-directed, selecting papers they had not attempted before from a file provided by the teacher, and marking them on returning to class the following week using answer sheets provided in the same file, collaborating with each other to compare answers and solution strategies.

Below, an extract from Judith, Donna and Abigail's naturally-occurring classroom discussion is used to illustrate how this culture of performativity affected the ways they evaluated knowledge. In particular I examine how they negotiated the conflict between social-constructivist and performative discourses. I focus on the learners' conflicting suggestions for categorising knowledge, and their evaluation of these suggestions as legitimate. How did the learners evaluate different types of knowledge in terms of 'use-value' and 'exchange-value', and what tensions were in evidence?

⁵ All three learners went on to successfully pass their Level 2 qualification; Judith and Donna shortly after the fieldwork period, and Abigail the following term.

Getting it 'right': Focusing on correctness

As an introduction to measurement, the teacher has given out sets of cards depicting measuring instruments (DfES 2007) (see Fig. 1 in Appendix). She has asked the class, who are working in small groups, to sort the cards into categories in any way that seems appropriate to them. She concludes her explanation with an assurance that “There isn’t a right or wrong answer” before leaving the learners to start the activity.

Abigail, Donna, and Judith are working as a group (together with a fourth learner, Sally). They begin by starting to sort the cards into groups of instruments used to measure time and weight:

- 1 Abigail: Well, obviously, the stopwatch and the clock are going to go together,
2 Aren't they?
3 Donna: Yeah, so if we put that with that stopwatch
4 And put them together
5 And then – weight –
6 Sally: What about the scales?
7 Donna: Scales – That's probably weight, right?
8 Scales [placing card]
9 Abigail: Or are we going to do it a bit different?

At this point Abigail has made an alternative suggestion (line 9); that there may be other ways to categorise the measuring instruments. However, her suggestion is quickly rejected by Donna, who evaluates their current approach as ‘fine’:

- 10 Donna: No that's fine. No that's fine
11 That petrol pump would go with that, then, wouldn't it?
12 Sally: Yeah, so would the measuring spoon
13 Donna: That one would go there
14 Pedometer would go there
15 Sally: There you go

Abigail persists with her alternative suggestions, contributing her knowledge of everyday measurement practices. She suggests that the measuring instruments might be used for ‘big amounts or small amounts’ (line 16) or that some of them are going to be ‘used for people’ (line 21):

- 16 Abigail: We don't want to do it big amounts or small amounts, do we?
17 Donna: No
18 Judith: Definitely (want to do) capacity and weight
19 Donna: [to Abigail] I know what you're saying.
20 So things that you put on, on scales. Like these
21 Abigail: They are going to be used for – for people, aren't they?
22 Donna: Yes
23 Abigail: So they could kind of be put together, couldn't they?
24 They're both going to be like, heavy amounts
25 Really, aren't they, d'you know what I mean?
26 Compared to that and that, they're going to be totally different aren't they?

- 27 Donna: I think that yeah, you could sort of separate them off like that, couldn't you, 'cause
 28 [to Judith] What do you think?
 29 Judith: A bit like capacity – liquids
 30 And then weights – solids
 31 If that makes sense

By contrast, Judith (lines 18, 29 and 30) contributes her supposition that they are expected to categorise the measuring instruments into the curriculum-based categories of weight and capacity. These are listed as specific and discrete 'elements' in the Adult Numeracy Core Curriculum:

MSS1/E3.6: Read, estimate, measure and compare weight using common and standard units
 MSS1/E3.7: Read, estimate, measure and compare capacity using common and standard units
 (BSA 2001a:60)

Abigail's contributions are made tentatively; she speaks of wider possibilities but her suggestions are presented as questions (line 9), or using question tags (lines 16, 21, 23 and 26). This may be compared with the tenor of Judith's suggestions, which are specific, declarative and, particularly in line 18, expressed with a high degree of certainty. Donna's role (and, to a lesser extent, Sally's by her complicit silence) becomes that of mediator and evaluator. Although she tactfully and diplomatically acknowledges Abigail's suggestions (lines 18 and 27), her elicitation of Judith's opinion (lines 28) suggests that she feels that Judith's contribution is more valid.

Judith's suggestion is evaluated by Donna as a 'good way' (lines 32-33), and Judith herself expresses her belief that they have 'done it right' (line 34). The discussion is eventually resolved in favour of sorting the cards according to Core Curriculum categories:

- 32 Donna: Yeah, no, yeah, I think that's a good way – er
 33 A good way of doing it
 34 Judith: I think we've done it right
 35 Donna: Yeah, she did say there was no right or wrong way
 36 It was just how we felt we could group them

Abigail's and Judith's suggestions have been in tension throughout their discussion. Abigail draws on her knowledge of everyday measuring practices; knowledge which has use-value rather than exchange-value; whereas Judith brings her recognition of curricular knowledge and its exchange-value within a culture of performativity. It can probably be assumed that Judith and Abigail *both* possess knowledge of everyday measurement; it is their different choices about whether it is legitimate or worthwhile to contribute this knowledge to the discussion which is of significance here. As Lyotard (1984:51) suggests:

The question (overt or implied) now asked by the professionalist student ... is no longer 'Is it true?' but 'What use is it?' In the context of the mercantilization of knowledge, more often than not this question is equivalent to: 'Is it saleable?'

Thus in this episode, the learners have been given the opportunity to draw on their practical knowledge of measurement to categorise the measuring instruments in any way they wanted. They have been assured by the teacher that ‘there isn’t a right or wrong answer’. Nonetheless, their negotiated response is to privilege curricular discourse, and to suppress other suggestions. Thus discourses of performativity prevail even when challenged by one or more members of the group. In the discussion below I examine possible reasons for this outcome.

Performative Maintenance

Here I discuss how a culture of performativity was enacted and maintained by adult learners in these classrooms. In particular I examine the tensions between the attempts made by the teacher to introduce social-constructivist pedagogies, and the prevailing performative discourse of curriculum and accreditation. This was exemplified by the learners’ debate about whether to privilege knowledge with exchange-value or use-value, and their decision to privilege exchange-value even when encouraged by the teacher to consider other possibilities. I consider, as a key factor, whether the learners themselves bring their own agenda of performativity to the classroom.

The numeracy skills being taught in such classrooms are perceived by policy-makers to be an essential attribute of an efficient and globally-competitive workforce (Wolf 2011; Gove 2013; Tsatsaroni and Evans 2013), even if links between classroom learning and workplace numeracy requirements are, at best, contested (e.g. FitzSimons 2013; Bakker 2014). Many employment routes in the public and private sectors in England require a Level 2 qualification in numeracy or mathematics.

Although performativity came later to the adult basic education sector in England than it did to the compulsory sector, its arrival has been described as a ‘whirlwind of change’ (Beale 2004). According to Simmons and Thompson (2008:602), these rapid developments in this ‘traditionally low-profile sector [are] ... largely due to its “discovery” by central government as a key factor in economic development’.

I have shown how developments in policy discourse such as the Core Curriculum serve to reduce teachers’ autonomy and agency; position learners as needing certain types of ‘functional’ knowledge in order to contribute to an economically-effective, globally-competitive workforce; and prescribe this knowledge in commodified, measurable and exteriorised ‘building blocks’.

Learner influence – perspectives and values

Although the participating learners did not engage directly with these policy texts, a culture of performativity was nonetheless seen to pervade activities within the classroom. The impact of a prescribed curriculum on beliefs and practices in adult literacy and numeracy classrooms is noted by Ivanič and Tseng (2005:13), who describe how:

Beliefs can enter the classroom indirectly by being inscribed in the syllabuses, curriculum documents and learning/teaching resources that are used there. In this way, policymakers, commercial publishers and practitioners devising teaching materials shape classroom pedagogy and learning outcomes.

The learners thus speak the language of the curriculum; their discourse suggests that they view it as commodified and exteriorised ‘building blocks’ which can be ticked off when ‘done’. Their self-directed activities and homework are focussed on preparation for accreditation, and their discussions with each other focus on completing their qualifications quickly and with minimum disruption to families and careers. They participate willingly in classroom mechanisms such as the Individual Learning Plans, which set targets ‘mapped’ to Core Curriculum elements, and which Hamilton (2009:221) describes as ‘part of a system of performance indicators and function as a key mediating mechanism between local interactions and system goals’.

Furthermore, I suggest that adult learners like Donna, Judith and Abigail bring a performative identity *with them to the classroom*; an identity which originates outside their numeracy classrooms in the wider structures of employment and vocational training. For Donna, Judith and Abigail, numeracy learning is a means to an end; a route to satisfying the demands of potential employers in the education and childcare settings in which they wish to work. Their ‘recognition’ of their need for a numeracy qualification is an acknowledgement of the performative system in which they operate. As Lyotard (1984: 61-62) suggests:

[T]he system...must induce the adaptation of individual aspirations to its own ends. Administrative procedures should make individuals ‘want’ what the system needs in order to perform well

There is thus an element of personal expediency and pragmatism as these learners adopt and enact performative identities. As working parents, time (and energy) for their studies are scarce; they carve time for classes and homework out of the many demands placed upon them. For them, performativity in the classroom, ‘the optimisation of the relationship between input and output’ (Lyotard 1984:38) is not merely compliance; it is personally expedient.

Pragmatic Learners

Tensions between performativity and other professional discourses such as creativity and integrity have been reported across many educational sectors (e.g. Turner-Bisset 2007; Simmons and Thompson 2008; Jeffrey and Troman 2013). We have seen how in the participating classrooms, pedagogic activities appeared to be influenced by two apparently conflicting discourses: those of social-constructivist pedagogies; and the performativity associated with the Core Curriculum and accreditation. Ivanič et al. (2006) and Cara et al. (2008) describe how teachers like Elizabeth juggle these conflicting demands with a mixture of pragmatism and dedication:

We observed many instances of tutors moving skilfully between formality and informality, structure and flexibility... We noticed that in quite informal settings (such as a relaxed, friendly atmosphere at a small table) the nature of the work could be formal (such as worksheets about language forms or abstract numerical operations) (Ivanič et al. 2006:42).

The dominance of performativity over social-constructivist ideals was exemplified in the episode from classroom groupwork. The learners evaluated knowledge according to its presence in the Core Curriculum, even when given opportunities to evaluate it in different ways – and thus they prioritise its exchange-value (via the examination) over its use-value in everyday life.

Research suggests that learners in adult basic education have access to informal knowledge and practices which are not legitimated by academic qualifications, and which may not be recognised within the curriculum (e.g. Street 1984; Lave 1988; Saxe 1988; Barton and Hamilton 2000; FitzSimons 2005). However, in a classroom dominated by performativity, such informal knowledge does not have the requisite exchange-value. It does not contribute to expedient 'output' in the form of qualifications, required quickly by the learners in order to fulfil the demands of the employment market. It is perhaps no wonder that they reject the use-value of informal knowledge even when encouraged to consider it by the teacher; they are complicit in the privileging of the exchange-value of curricular knowledge. Informal or social-constructivist perspectives are subjugated to the prevailing, learner-endorsed discourses of performativity. As Lyotard contends:

Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange. Knowledge ceases to be an end in itself, it loses its 'use-value.' (Lyotard 1984:31)

It could be claimed that such a focus on performativity meets the requirements of the learners. Juggling family, work and voluntary activities, they describe their time as scarce and precious, and the two hours a week spent in their numeracy class is carved out of their

busy days. A learning culture which is focused on precise, specified elements of commodified knowledge – knowledge which can be ‘exchanged’ for widely-recognised qualifications which have currency in workplace – is expedient for them, and enables them to feel they are gaining maximum output for the input of their precious time and energy.

Certainly the learners in this study expressed considerable satisfaction with their progress, pride in their achievements, and appeared genuinely to enjoy their learning experience. They also expressed great admiration for, and trust in, their teacher. This sense of satisfaction in ‘measurable’ progress has also been found in other studies within the sector; for example Rhys Warner and Vorhaus (2008:28) report that qualifications in adult numeracy and literacy ‘provided a marker of progress both for the individuals themselves, to see how far they had come, and for others as an external measure of progression’.

Conclusion

I have aimed to show how performativity dominated practices in the classrooms I studied, to such an extent that learners privileged the exchange-value of curriculum discourse and categorisations even when encouraged by to think more widely by the teacher. To what extent is this a cause for concern if it is expedient for, and endorsed by, the learners themselves?

However, to suggest that learner complicity makes this unproblematic is to ignore wider issues. Should a curriculum arbitrarily specified by policy be unquestioningly valued and privileged by teachers, learners, or indeed by their prospective employers? Even given the (debatable) argument that qualifications in adult numeracy and literacy contribute to an individual’s ability to carry out paid work more effectively, are we to accept that the only goal of education is the production of an economically-effective workforce? Does it matter that, as Lyotard (1984:51) suggests, the focus has shifted from ‘ “Is it true?” to: “Is it saleable?” ’.

Adult literacy and numeracy education traditionally emerged from liberal, humanist discourses which envisioned learning as a negotiated dialogue between teacher and learner; in which the learners’ own knowledge was valued and respected (Hamilton and Hillier 2006). The rise of performativity within this sector has profound implications which have jeopardised this tradition, and we have seen how the discourse of policy serves to commodify and exteriorise knowledge, dissociating it from the learner-teacher relationship

and recognising only its exchange-value. As Standish (2007:168) claims, performativity thus has serious consequences for education:

In the first place, there are aspects of learning that cannot easily be assessed or recorded by the kinds of tests that the system requires... Hence, one of the worst effects of performativity is its denial that anything is learned unless it can be demonstrated in clearly measurable learning outcomes. In the second place, it restricts what happens in the lesson to what is clearly specified in advance as means of realizing the learning objectives. This is objectionable because it is a part of good teaching that learning should be allowed to develop in new and unforeseen directions.

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Transcription Conventions

Transcription conventions have been kept to a minimum. Those used in the extracts reproduced in this chapter are:

Convention	Meaning
[description of gesture]	Gesture, action or other non-verbal semiosis
(.)	Pause
?	End of apparently interrogative utterance (rising intonation)
.	End of utterance (falling intonation)
–	Interrupted or broken-off utterance
<u>emphasised word</u>	Stress placed on underlined word by speaker
(guessed utterance)	Indistinct utterance; content of brackets represents 'best guess'
(...)	Untranscribable utterance; unable to make guess (usually due to overlapping talk from other speakers)
...	Lines transcribed in full transcript but not reproduced in extract for clarity or concision (usually overlapping talk from other speakers)

Appendix




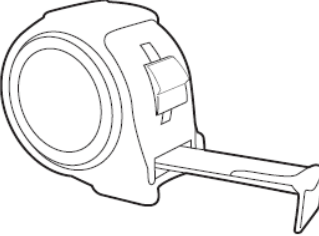
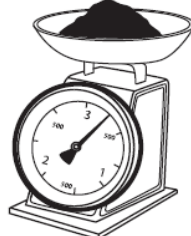



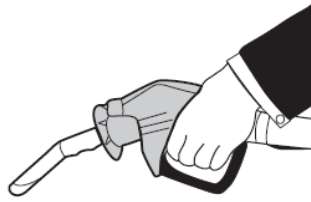
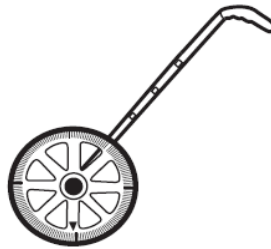

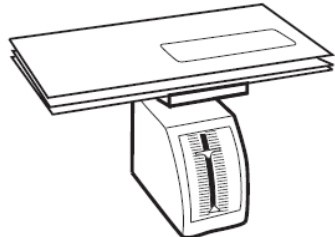
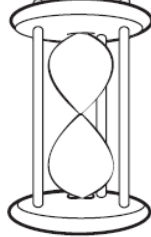


<p>Ruler</p> 	<p>Pipette</p> 	<p>Measuring spoon</p> 
<p>Tape measure</p> 	<p>Kitchen scales</p> 	<p>Measuring jug</p> 
<p>Pedometer</p> 	<p>Bathroom scales</p> 	<p>Petrol pump</p> 
<p>Trundle wheel</p> 	<p>Forklift weighing device</p> 	<p>Letter scales</p> 
<p>Egg timer</p> 	<p>Stopwatch</p> 	<p>Clock</p> 

Figure 1. Cards used for categorising measuring instruments activity (DfES 2007)