

## Considering adult literacies education as empowerment or emancipation

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### Introduction

Much of the discussion within the field of adult literacies education has taken place across a divide between functional literacies approaches versus social practice models (eg as discussed by Maddox, 2007). By considering these discussions in the context of what they imply for the *purpose* of adult literacies education, I will argue that *both* functional and social practice understandings of literacies education are orientated towards socialising students into society as it stands, where the idea of literacies education for emancipation has been neglected. When considering purpose, I am drawing upon Biesta's framework for making judgements about the purpose of education. Biesta (2010) refers to three overlapping domains of educational purpose: *qualification* which describes education that allows people do something eg fix leaky pipes or pass exams; secondly, *socialisation*, referring to education for assimilating people into the traditions and cultures of society; finally *subjectification*, which is not about fitting into the existing order, but rather, education that creates possibilities for emancipation, that encourages people to be autonomous and independent in their thinking and acting. These are conceptualised as overlapping domains of purpose, not taken to be mutually exclusive, where educational ideas and practices can be considered in three dimensions.

In this paper I consider how Biesta's framework characterises the orientation of different approaches to literacy as found in discussions in the field of adult literacies education, showing that there is already a strong tradition of questioning the purpose of adult literacies education that can be found both in its theorising (eg Luke and Freebody, 1997, Lankshear and McLaren, 1993, New London Group, 1996, Gee, 1996) as well as efforts to understand its historical and policy context (Hamilton and Hillier, 2006, Street, 1984, Lankshear, 1999). However, I also argue, in line with Biesta (2010), Williams (1993) and Lankshear (1997) that the idea of education that might serve a purpose other than socialisation is in need of attention. Here I suggest that there is a tradition amongst educators of attempting to develop literacies education that might contribute to the emancipation of students, corresponding with Biesta's domain of subjectification. But I also put forward that where emphasis has been placed on linking literacies education to notions of empowerment this has contributed to educational practices that serve the purpose of socialising students into society as it stands, allowing the idea of literacies education for emancipation to be neglected.

As I have already stated, much of the discussion in the academic field of adult literacies education is concerned with functional and social practice models of education so I shall start by considering these and what they imply for the purpose of adult literacies education.

### The purpose of literacies education

By functional approaches to literacies education I am referring to the ideas that underpin early literacies programs internationally, for example those presented by Gray under the auspices of UNESCO in the 1950s (Grey, 1956), or adult literacies policy in England. Here the purpose of literacies education is to 'normalise' people by effecting behaviours and ways of thinking that are taken to be necessary to a well functioning society (Hamilton and Pitt, 2009, 6). Early literacy teaching was associated with the circumstances of people regarded as being outside of the normal rules of society, such as teenage mothers or prisoners (Lankshear and Knobel, 2003; 4) where early contexts for teaching were the army and prisons.

An important notion here is that the learning of reading of writing was expected to have consequences beyond gaining the ability to function in a particular circumstance. Though the primary purpose of teaching a soldier to read was to improve their ability to follow military orders, there might be other predetermined repercussions. For example, reading and writing was linked directly to being able to understand abstract concepts, think sequentially, to construct arguments and so on, where the purpose of literacies education was also to achieve such outcomes. These ideas contributed to the wider understanding that mass literacy education might equate directly to societal

progress, where a high literacy rate was considered to be a precondition for economic development (Lankshear and Knobel, 2003; 4)

Emerging academic interest in literacy produced arguments grounded in empirical data or historical investigation suggesting a much more complex linkage between literacies and societal development. This suggested that the consequences of literacy education can only be understood in the societal context in which literacies are used (see Street, 1984). Landmark psycho-ethnographic research by Scribner and Cole (1981) suggested no strong linkage between literacy and specific ways of thinking, allowing the development of the first 'social practice' understanding of literacies. The key argument was that reading and writing are only meaningful in the social context in which they are used, weakening the prospect of predetermined functional outcomes for literacies education. This also implied a need for literacies teachers to understand students' culture, community and so on if they are to teach in any meaningful way, suggesting that anthropological research methods such as ethnography should be integrated into educational practices. The emerging academic field of New Literacies Studies (NLS) incorporated these understandings, with its backbone formed by anthropologists such as Brian Street and Shirley Bryce Heath. But if the definition and consequences of literacy are linked to social practices, what now is the purpose of adult literacies education?

### **Social practice model and educational purpose**

Discussions amongst researchers working within the social practice model suggest a concern to question the purpose of adult literacies education. Generally, three strands or dimensions are considered, broadly corresponding with Biesta's framework. A 'critical', 'emancipatory' or 'empowering' aspect is portrayed as the third of these and I shall return to this after considering the three strands together.

Scribner (1988) described three overlapping metaphors for literacy. Literacy as 'adaption', refers to the functional skills needed to perform effectively in daily life, whilst another metaphor is literacies as a 'state of grace', that relates to liberal notions of education, separate from workplace or economic factors. Here the written word holds intrinsic virtue where literate people safeguard intellectual traditions and associated knowledge. Literacy as 'power' is a third metaphor, strongly influenced by the ideas of Paulo Freire, where literacy is made a resource for social transformation, allowing communities engage in action for change. Scribner suggests that these three metaphors are not at odds, implying multiple educational approaches be they for functional skills, self-improvement or social power.

Three dimensions of purpose are found broadly elsewhere. For example, in their policy history of literacies in England, Hamilton and Hillier (2006: 115-116) who adhere to a social practice model, refer to three main approaches in the English tradition; 'vocational', 'liberal' and 'radical'. Freire is linked to the radical approach, inferring distinct and separate traditions rather than three overlapping dimensions. Similarly, Freebody and Lo Bianco (Hamilton et al, 2006; 5), influential in the context of Australian literacy policy development, describe three 'families' of thought about literacy: 'skills' necessary to literate practices, literacies for 'personal growth and cultural heritage', and a third 'critical, cultural' family, where once again, Freire is mentioned as an influence.

The development of the practice of literacies education in the England (see Street 1984, Hamilton and Hillier, 2006, Levine, 1986) implies the active championing of three separate and distinct streams of purpose in adult literacies education - the vocational, liberal and radical - but where this third emancipatory tradition is weaker. This is evident in the 1970s-80s when literacy was established as a significant social problem in need of government attention (Levine, 1986; 150-151). Vocational literacies education extended in the context of the decline of manufacturing industry in the 1980s, where the jobless were seen to be poorly prepared for working in the emerging service economy (Lankshear and Knobel, 2003; 6) and literacies education was funded through organisations such as the Manpower Services Commission (Hamilton and Hillier, 2006;

10). In tandem with this, literacies education was championed by organisations with a longer tradition of promoting liberal education. For example, the British Association of Settlements (BAS) settled middle-class people into working classes areas, aiming to spread the influence of liberal culture, partly driven by an anxiety to tame the possibility of oppositional responses to injustice (Waugh 2009). The BAS was also instrumental in the lobbying of the UK government that successfully achieved central funding of adult literacies education in England for the first time.

The third contributor to the development of literacies education could be taken as the advent of the academic field of literacies studies itself and here efforts have been made to develop the third, 'critical' strand (eg Lankshear and MacLaren, 1993, Luke and Freebody, 1997, Gee, 1996, New London Group, 1996). But perhaps this strand originates with teachers and fieldworkers, as the critical history of adult literacies education in England is ultimately driven by grassroots activism and commitments to social justice (Hillier, 2009; 548). It seems to me that this educational activity asserted against functional models of literacy education *before* the empirical studies of ethnographers where NLS gained authority. Here Paulo Freire holds some influence, along with Raymond Williams and others, as found in educational resources for students (eg Frost and Hoy, 1980) and in the activity of the student publishing movement (see Woodin, 2008).

### **Empowerment and emancipation**

Freire's theory of education is primarily concerned with the problem of how to distinguish between education that socialises and education that might emancipate. He assumes that the consequences of education are never neutral and that education contributes typically to the replication of oppression in society (Freire, 1972, Galloway, in press). In the context of these understandings, Freire attempts to describe how educational practices might contribute to an emancipatory education by encouraging the possibility of innovative ways of thinking and acting socially to transform society. Going back to Biesta's framework of *qualification*, *socialisation* and *subjectification*, I would argue that Freire is primarily concerned with how education that maps onto the domain of subjectification might be understood and practiced.

However, what's interesting here is that the concept of emancipation invariably goes unarticulated when the third, critical strand of literacies is discussed by researchers and educators, who prefer to describe Freire in the context of a discussion about *empowerment* or the expose of *power*. Both Scribner (1988) and Hamilton and Hillier (2006) make reference to Freire's work in this fashion, in their three dimensional descriptions of purposes. This articulation of Freire's concerns is also found in the reporting of literacies programmes around the world. For example, Oughton (2007), Rocha-Schmidt (2010) and Tagoe (2008) all introduce Freire with reference to empowerment and *not* emancipation. The same approach is also found in the theoretical underpinning of the Freirian inspired REFLECT projects, where links are made between literacy and power, which is categorised as 'government power', 'economic power' and so on (Archer, 2003). Whilst I have no wish to pass lofty judgments about how *any* of the above examples of literacy education are enacted on the ground, I do raise a concern that when the term 'empowerment' is used in this way it seems to weaken any expectation that the projects might serve an emancipatory purpose. Here I agree with Dale, that the term empowerment is invariably used to *name* the space where theoretical work is needed, rather than to *fill* that space (Dale in Lankshear, 1997, 63). This is found in documentation pertaining to recent adult literacy initiatives coordinated by UNESCO (eg 2006), where 'empowerment' is used without definition, suggesting no purpose for education other than to improve individual students' skills so that they might participate more fully within a globalised economy. Here the idea of empowerment maps directly onto Biesta's domain of socialisation, neglecting the possibility of an emancipatory education that might offer opportunities for subjectification.

The tendency to orientate towards the language of power and empowerment seems to be associated with two interconnected strands of thought amongst academics concerned with the possibility of a 'critical literacies'. Firstly, the rise of literacies studies as an academic discipline can be interpreted as a move away from functional interpretations of reading and writing which are rooted in developmental psychology, and towards understandings rooted in sociology (Lankshear, 1999).

Sociological research methods such as ethnography have been useful in revealing power imbalances in education and modelling how the consequences of literacies and literacies education might contribute towards perpetuating societal inequality through hierarchies of power. Here the ideas of Bourdieu have held great sway (Lankshear, 1999; 65). Secondly, there have been influences from the field of linguistics, particularly through the work of James Paul Gee (eg 1996) who developed the notion of 'powerful literacies'. Informed by post structuralism, Gee presents critical discourse analysis as both a research tool and an educational practice in the understanding that literate practices and their contexts are instrumental in the formation of discourse which reproduces relationships of power and knowledge in society. Gee describes how literacies education might influence these reproductive processes by encouraging opportunities for students to create new discourses and in so doing author their own identities.

Academic work that focuses on a concern for a critical purpose for literacy education draws upon these interwoven influences. For example, in the Scottish tradition, where Government policy enforces social practices, Tett and MacLachlan, (2005; 7) suggest the possibility of incorporating Freire's emancipatory education into the social practice model itself. This suggests that the employment of ethnography alongside 'values of equality and activity' might contribute to a radical literacies education and 'cultural action for freedom'. This type of argument represents a strand of discussion in the academic field of adult literacies education that makes implicit arguments to the effect that social practice models are an all encompassing antidote to functional ones, short-circuiting discussions about purpose into debates across the 'functional' versus 'social practice' dichotomy.

As a second example, take the notion of 'multiliteracies', of particular influence in Australian policy. Multiliteracies incorporates and develops Gee's ideas to describe literacies education with the purpose of creating possibilities for students to design their social futures in an era of so-called 'fast capitalism' (New London Group, 1996). The problem here is that research methods like ethnography and critical discourse analysis (Gee, 1996), arising from the academic disciplines of anthropology, sociology and linguistics do not in of themselves provide a basis upon which to make judgements about the purposes and outcomes of education. Gee's work describes a critical literacies education that might empower students by teaching them how to take control over discourse and in so doing effect changes to hierarchies of power in society. The central issue is that there are no means by which to make judgements about the purpose of differing discourses or whether changes to particular relationships of power are desirable or not, indeed Gee points out this very difficulty himself (Gee, 1993; 292).

To illustrate further, I shall return once again to Freire. Freire's theorising of education incorporates a basis upon which to make judgements about the desirability of educational purposes and outcomes. In Freire's case, this is a consequence of the theory being underpinned by a definition of equality which provides a basis for oppression to be understood and discussed meaningfully in terms of the lives of students. These understandings allow Freire to develop the idea of emancipatory education as a social enactment of equality, where students create possibilities to collectively free themselves from oppression (Freire, 1972, Galloway, in press). Importantly, defining equality and oppression creates a basis upon which judgements may be made as to whether an educational practice is desirable (ie emancipatory) or oppressive, in other words, whether it corresponds to subjectification, or whether it socialises. Ethnography or critical discourse analysis cannot attempt these judgements. So, for example, when the 'multiliteracies' conceptualisation of literacies education states the purpose of achieving fulfilling employment for students (New London Group, 1996; 60), this could mean individualistic educational practices where a teacher gives a student the ability to function in the global economic system, inferring a form of functional literacies education that maps entirely onto the domain of socialisation.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I have argued that linking the purpose of adult literacies education toward notions of empowerment has contributed to an emphasis on educational practices that map onto the domain of socialisation, neglecting the possibility of an emancipatory education. Here I would also say that the association of Freire's ideas with empowerment rather than emancipation has created fewer possibilities for furthering discussions about what an emancipatory literacies education might consist of. This is indicated by how Freire continues to be of central importance in the field of adult literacies education. It seems to me that without Freire, the very idea that literacies education need *not* always contribute to the socialisation of students into the norms of society might have been lost. However, Freire's ideas and educational practice have been much criticised over the last forty years (see Galloway, in press) and Freire cannot be taken as the last word on the question of an emancipatory literacies education. There are other possibilities and bases for making judgements about literacies and emancipatory purpose, implying alternative educational practices.

In this paper I have demonstrated that there is a strong tradition of questioning the purpose of adult literacies education by those working in the social practice tradition. This debate might be furthered by moving discussions away from the functional versus social practice dichotomy and re-orientating towards the question of how educational practice might map on the domain of subjectivity. Indeed Biesta (2010: 130) has argued that engagement with this question is perhaps the point where we encounter 'the beginning of education'.

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