

Literacy practices in adult learning biographies: possibilities and constraints

Ana Silva
acsilva.um@gmail.com
CIEd/Universidade do Minho

Maria de Lourdes Dionísio
mldionisio@ie.uminho.pt
CIEd/Universidade do Minho

Juliana Cunha
33.juliana@gmail.com
CIEd/Universidade do Minho

1. Literacy challenges

The answer to the social and economic challenges that it is assumed literacy (or its lack) puts to developed countries deeply concerns public policies of governments namely those of the OECD area. In the last decades, these concerns gave origin to several and diverse monitoring devices, initiatives and programmes for reading (mainly) development, putting a strong stress on education. UNESCO (2006, p. 6), for instance, assumes that the literacy challenge can only be met raising the quality of primary and secondary education and intensifying programmes explicitly oriented towards youth and adult literacy. In Portugal, this concern also echoed in public reforms that aimed at “the increasing of schooling, extending the hours in pre-schools, reducing early drop out, increasing secondary education completion rates, as well as the the overall improvement of the access to higher education” (Data Angel Policy Research Incorporated, 2009, p. 65).

One of the most representative cases of such initiatives was the programme New Opportunities (NO), and its process of Recognition, Validation and Competencies Certification (RVCC), targeted at adults over the age 18 who had not concluded the 9th grade. This New Opportunities programme aimed at the promotion of adults inclusion in formal education (OECD, 2008, p. 136). Although there are not explicit references to literacy in the normative documents of these NO and RVCC, one may say that literacy is indeed one of their goals, assuming, in the case of RVCC, a particular status: the end and the means of learning. In fact, the entire certification process is mediated by language practices, considered essential to self reflection about each one personal experience: life stories, interviews, portfolios, among others, all of them written products to serve

simultaneously as evidence and development of the skills acquired throughout life. Ultimately, as in previous policy measures, the education goal of the process is “to ensure all adults living in Portugal [...] an easy access to specific learning modalities, that may enable them to learn to read and write, to achieve a basic literacy level and to get an equivalent degree to the current compulsory education” (Melo et al., 1998, p. 16). This hypothesis about the role of literacy in the process is also confirmed in the implementation processes, as it has been observed, institute literacy as a priority area of action (Castro; Laranjeira, 2009; Gomes, 2006).

In the sense that they allow the study of the ways certain groups relate with writing and with knowledge (Charlot, 2000), these ‘new opportunities’ to learn are ideal situations to understand how participation in these processes act in the transformation of literate identities of people and how, in their life trajectories, reflect opportunities and constraints impacting on the ways they use, access and value texts (Barton, Ivanic, Appleby, Hodge, & Tusting, 2007).

“Challenging representations” about the position in the community of adults without or with scarce schooling, which tend sometimes to be considered, in a “mistaken view” (Freire, 1980, p. 73), as “socially excluded” (Hamilton; Pitt, 2011, p. 350), and suffering from the disease of “illiteracy” (Lahire, 1999), the goals of this text are, first of all, to contribute with empirical subsidies for the deep comprehension of the singular life story of adults that voluntarily or compulsory had to go back to school. Secondly, we intend to identify and characterise some social and personal factors that tend to promote or to inhibit the access to the written world, to knowledge and to life long learning, after the completion of a RVCC process.

From the combination of data gathered for two different studies (Cunha, 2012 and another Ph.D one still in progress), we characterize the learning trajectories and the literacy narratives of four adults that completed the Basic Level of the RVCC process. Besides the specificities of the adults reading and writing practices, particularly regarding the whats, the whys and wherefores, and under what circumstances they read and write, ultimately we are expecting to understand why they will keep, or not, reading and writing throughout their lives.

2. Paths to literacy: personal needs and social imposition

The data regarding four adults that we bring to discussion come, as it has been said, from two different studies: a case study of two adults with distinct motivational profiles

(Study 1) and one larger study (Study 2), involving 30 adults and, in addition to interviews, diverse methodological procedures: reading and writing tasks, questionnaires, document analysis.

Particularly the Study 2 was designed taking into consideration the situation of the adults in two main moments of the RVCC process: the time before and after. Therefore, the adults were interviewed before starting the process and six months after concluding the certification, in order to understand how the learning process contributed to other kinds of involvement with texts in the various fields of life, including more formal situations. As in Study 1, in which the data were collected at the end of the process, the underlying goal of the interview was the need to build a solid understanding of the factors involved in the ways adults continue or not participating in formal learning events, and by extent keep (or not) being involved in more socially recognised literacy practices.

The four adults ('Pedro', 42 years old, and 'Inês', 30, from the Study 1, and 'Jorge', 58, and 'Marta', 49 years, from the Study 2) are from the district of Braga, in Portugal, and completed the RVCC for the Basic Skills Level Certification in 2012. The criteria for the constitution of this particular sample were the representativeness of gender and school degree of the adults. These adults represent a population that, living the phenomenon of unemployment, had, at the entrance of the RVCC process, low academic qualifications. They also represent different paths through education and literacy: Marta and Inês, voluntarily enrolled the process to end the 3rd cycle of Basic Education, while Pedro e Jorge "were forced" to enrol, due the imposition of the State and within a legislative framework for employment support, as they keep stressing during the interviews:

I did not sign up voluntarily, I was forced. I had no chance, I was forced. (...) for me it will not change anything at all (...) This (...) only goes to make me waste time walking back and forth, nothing else [Jorge].

Although the educational background of these two adults had not been enough for them to complete the nine years of compulsory education, Jorge, with the 5th grade, and Peter, with the 7th year, throughout their lives had relevant professional positions: before becoming unemployed, Jorge was, for several years, a successful commercial agent in the area of sales and finance and Pedro a talented sales manager at a family food trade company:

Until a few years ago, I really played choosing the jobs I wanted. That's why now forcing me to do the 9th grade, the 9th grade ... For God's sake! (...) Note that I already worked in the Post Office, I was a civil employee (...), in the express mail (...). I also worked with finances (...) no one without the 12th grade could get the job, but I did [Jorge]

By that reason, both believed that the frequency of such process would not bring them any added value, namely the development of their reading and writing skills. They were certain that during their professional trajectories, they had had the opportunity to acquire and develop literacy practices similar to those valued by the school system, such as writing reports or formal letters. On the other hand, they did not believe that the school diploma could bring them more advantages for a successful job quest. Jorge had a professional past that he used to reinforce this argument. For these two men, then, the RVCC process was, since the beginning, a kind of downgrading and disregard for their literate identities forged through engagement in multiple and diversified life contexts.

As for the women, Marta and Inês, their views on the importance of the RVCC both for their learning and their professional careers were totally different. With very short school trajectories – Marta only completed the 4th grade and Inês the 6th – due severe money difficulties of their families, the possibility to go back to school to get a certificate appeared as a dream that was going to be true, a kind of late “divine justice” :

I hope that this dream that I idealised in my head become true (...) That’s what I really expect [Marta].

Marta and Inês expected that, with the frequency of the RVCC and the certificate of Basic Education, they could, more easily, be more active professionally again and, with that, have better life conditions. Until starting the certification process these two women, had been mainly seamstresses, in textile factories. Because of these professional roles, unlike the two men, they did not have opportunities for the development of reading and writing skills as well as to be involved in more culturally valid reading and writing practices, the same, according to these women, that they should have to be really *insiders* of the dominant groups, to may be considered as holders of references shared by the literate world and, therefore, to feel authorized to say: ‘I make part of it’. Sharing such views, Marta and Inês had a “devalued vision of themselves” (Charlot, 2000; Freire, 1987), aspiring to become literate persons only after the obtention of the certificate:

You know, miss, I wanted to know more. I wanted to know more! (...) I hope, when I finish the process, I hope to get a job, to work with which I am learning in the course and later to be able to write on the computer. To be faster in everything. Given this current modern stuff, to be able to follow these technologies. Because, for us, me for instance, it is everything with the ball pen, right? For now. Whereas, if I can, then I will be able to do things by myself. Do you understand? [Marta].

Therefore, and although they read frequently, for instance, magazines and marketing brochures, and even write not only SMS but also poetry, this didn't seem to her enough to be taken as "literate persons".

3. Literacy identities: outsiders and insiders

A social perspective on literacy sees the use of texts as human actions of a social nature. In this sense, reading and writing include all that people do with texts, in their diverse modes and formats, in the different social events in which they daily engage. Taking into consideration that, in such events the ways one use texts varies, due to the multiplicity of reading and writing purposes, literacy then does not have the same features in all life domains. In fact, in order to acquire, learn and exhibit the social languages and identities proper of those domains (Gee, 1996), people need to be socialized in several spheres, according to their norms and ideologies. It is then with the participation in several events of literacy that the shaping of the literate identity occurs.

Looking to what happened to these four adults after having participated in the RVCC, a formal learning context, characterised by specialized reading and writing practices, unfamiliar mainly to Marta and Inês, it is possible to conclude that in fact there have been more or less significative changes in the ways they viewed and engaged with texts, and in the cases of the two women, also in the ways they thought their social Id. Besides the frequent reading and writing practices that already made presence in these adults lives, after the RVCC new literacy practices became part of their daily life, mainly as a cause of their participation in new social domains.

In the case of Marta, whose reading and writing practices, before the certification process, were mainly of private nature: reading of popular and love magazines; poetry and diary writing, for instance, means to fill the unemployed time, after the RVCC, besides the reinforcement of these same practices, others, of a more formal nature, gained space de destaque in her life. Due to her new religion, she started reading quite often the Bible and other religious books. She also began to have the duty to write about what she read in order to share her learnings with others of the religious group:

I often go to the Bible and I read books, but related to the Bible. (...) I write summaries when I have the Bible study group [Marta].

Although the frequency of the certification process had not played a significative role in the decision to belong to a new social group, the certificate and the literacy skills she developed gave her confidence to participate more actively within and for the community.

It is worth noting that the literacy events of this new domain were in several aspects very similar to those Marta learned during the RVCC, as she notes:

We look for texts in the Bible, then we have books which have Bible texts, with note calls, they have those explanations and after we go to the Bible to confirm that what is said is really correct and things like this (...) Because they then ask me questions and I have to know how to answer them without going to see the book, without copying [Marta].

As for Inês, also her confidence and autonomy regarding literacy were positively affected after the certification. She makes clear that reading and writing activities became much more present in her daily life, namely those valued by the educational context, such as literary reading:

Indeed, since we talked the other day I managed to read a book to the end (...) *Burnt Alive*. It's a story... a little a bit ... even tragic. I do not know if you know the story [Inês]

If the textual worlds of Marta and Inês became larger, the same can not be said in the cases of Jorge and Pedro. For these two men, the compulsory 'schooling' did not bring the same changes. In fact, taking into account Jorge's past as text user, the literacy practices that characterised his quotidian – for instance book, journals and newspapers reading or the writing of formal letters and texts about archeological artifacts – kept the same space they already had in his life, except with the difference that some of them became associated to the use of the computer and the internet:

I use [the computer] to do things such...things like [written texts on topics that interest me]. Look, now I use Skype to talk to my daughter, who went to London (...) And I use that and I also use the internet to do, to search things and what ever more is necessary [Jorge].

To a certain extent then, the RVCC had the merit of introducing Jorge to the new literacy technologies, fact that he does not seem to value. In fact, for him (as well as for Pedro), whose reading and writing skills have always been perceived as specialised and sophisticated, perfectly serving his professional, social and personal goals – 'I do not know any other person that reads as well as I do, I mean, well, on a daily basis, I read very well. I also write very well (...) I fully understand what is written, everything I read' [Jorge] – the time spent in the RVCC was a waste, without any consequence upon them:

To be honest, I did not learn anything new [Peter].

That (the training) was useless! I always said and felt that since the beginning (...) Didn't affect me at all for good or for bad. It only made me waste my time and to spend fuel [Jorge].

This negative impact was felt since the beginning, when these men were treated almost as outsiders, and in very desumanizado ways, put outside the social system (Freire, 1980), because they didn't possess a certificate. In the case of Jorge it is possible to think that his disbelief on the RVCC was reinforced when he had to declare to the RVCC professional that he had no certificate:

- I do not have certificate of competence, I said.
- So what now? Do I put zero here? - she said with arrogance (...). I did not even reply [Jorge].

As Freire (1980) says these persons without certificate “are not at the margins... they are not outside... consequently the solution to their problem is not to force them to become inner beings” (pp. 74-75). Jorge and Pedro because once they have been full members and suddenly were put off felt this as an aggression, represented in their case by the discourse of the RVCC professional. In another position are the women that do not perceive themselves as someone who “knows”, as someone that possess some kind of knowledge, not believing on themselves, embodying the devalued vision they made of themselves (Freire, 1987, p. 50)

4. **Learning and literacy lives: interruption and rediscovery**

The data discussed until now show us a clear variation in the ways men and women regard learning and literacy before and after the RVCC process. Since Jorge and Pedro have been once well succeeded insiders of the literate culture, engaged daily with literacy practices that were, to a certain extent, similar to the “dominant/school like” ones, the engagement in literacy or more specifically in learning that they foresee after the RVCC is not expected to have changed greatly or almost certainly it is not likely to continue. What seem to have really happened was the improvement of the competencies they already possessed, namely of those more standardised and formal. On the other hand although they are not able to identify changes, it is impossible to deny the change. Because, there is always

“a sense in which ‘doing’ anything, engaging in any social practice, always means ‘learning’ in the broad sense. Each time someone engages in a practice, whether that practice is brand new to them or whether they have done it many times before, there is some ‘learning’ going on, because each time you engage in a practice, you reinforce your expertise in it, and also have the possibility to change it slightly” (Barton, Ivanic, Appleby, Hodge, & Tusting, 2007, p. 25)

The opposite situation is that of Marta and Inês (oppressed since ever?), who after completing the RVCC have been seen participating with self confidence in literacy events

that demand the features of the dominant and legitimate reading and writing practices. Special life circumstances dictated this: Marta, because got involved with a religious group; Inês, because she had recently become a mother and, according to her, to be a good mother was synonymous of being able of school certified literacy practices. In the case of the women, it is indeed the overvaluation of the school like reading and writing practices, associated to the positive experience that the RVCC represented for them, that made Marta and Inês develop willingness to give continuity to their learning trajectories, keep being involved in other education situations:

Look, listen to this, I even signed up for an animation course... for seniors. But not here you know? It was in another place. And for children, for children. Something like this [Marta].

In a near future, I would like to complete the 9th grade, learn how to use the computer in order to conclude the 12^o ano [Inês]

In what respects Jorge and Pedro, the fact that the RVCC has been taken over by them as a discrediting of their literacy identities as well as an hindrance to their lives - which have been interrupted in order to learn what they already knew, but that they couldn't make proof - led to not want to participate any more in formal learning events:

[About his possible engagement with other training] No way! (...) One thing I like to do it is to make a good use of my time. And that was lost time (...) A waste of time [Jorge].

However, the break with the RVCC processes does not necessarily lead to a total discontinuity in the learning career of these adults. Taking into consideration these adults literacy biographies, it is almost certain that their long life learning careers certainly will continue, albeit informally, in other contexts of their lives.

Looking at the life trajectories of these adults, we see how literacy lives can, of course, follow different paths. Such paths crossing, at some point, formal learning contexts, such as the RVCC, may or may not have continuity, due to factors such as life circumstances and personal future prospects, as well as personal views towards the value of the written culture in the different social spheres in which these persons operate. It is also invaluable for these continuities and discontinuities the perception that each one has of himself/herself while text users and knowledge personas. The social roles that one has in the community may also determine the learning future path.

Indeed, for the men of these studies, who did not have in their future projects the return to school, and whose personal and professional involvement with textual worlds was notorious and sufficient to allow continuous learning for personal, social and institutional

purposes, the RVCC process is clearly understood as a threat to their literate identities, an interruption - or even regression - in their already sophisticated ways to use the written word.

The opposite was found in women's biographies: guided by the dream of being able to continue the educational background and having the perfect notion that only sporadically (and in a culturally undervalued mode) were able to engage with the texts, the frequency of the RVCC, more than one opportunity to have a better life, represented for them the beginning of learning careers that will certainly go far, albeit with distinct contours in the everyday of each one

For certain we have that the frequency of these processes, although, as we have seen, for disparate reasons and under different circumstances, helped to add to the identity kits of these four adults features and values that the literate communities attach to reading and writing.

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