

## **Possibilities for pedagogy in Further Education: Harnessing the abundance of literacy**

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### **Introduction**

The extent and nature of students' communicative resources is a central issue in education generally and the Literacies for Learning in Further Education (LlLFE)<sup>1</sup> research project specifically. Despite crisis narratives about the decline or loss of literacy, often based on simplistic interpretations of standardised and problematic literacy test results, there are a wide range of literacy practices at play in most people's everyday lives. Indeed one might argue that the most salient factor in the contemporary communicative landscape is the sheer abundance and diversity of possibilities for literacy, as the range of artefacts and genres grow, diversify and hybridise. The threat to the educational establishment may not be students' so-called literacy 'deficit', so much as the increasing abundance of text and screen literacies and multimodal minglings, which precisely cannot be reduced to a single standard against which all else is measured.

As the semiotic landscape grows in possibilities, so the artefacts and media are taken up by people in different ways in order to make meaning. In other words, there is an inherent creativity in the ways in which people use and do literacy, which, rather than be decried as a loss of standards, can be embraced as the achievements of people making meaning for themselves and others in their lives. Thus texting, for instance, like writing shorthand, telegrams and using semaphore in different times and contexts, is not a falling away from a standard of extended prose, but a creative use of new artefacts through which to communicate and make meaning.

It is such perspectives that help to shape our understanding of literacy in the LlLFE project. Rather than working with those crisis narratives of literacy, we are interested in the pluralisation of literacy practices and the possibilities they have for pedagogic practice. For educators, the issue then becomes not a lack of literacy among students and potential students, but the relationships that can be built between their everyday literacy practices and

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<sup>1</sup> The project is part of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) in the U.K., funded for three years by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Grant no RES -139-25-0117. The research is being conducted by a team which includes David Barton, Angela Brzeski, Jim Carmichael, Zoe Fowler, Tracey Kennedy, Greg Mannion, Kate Miller and Sarah Wilcock as well as ourselves. For further details, see [www.lancs.ac.uk/lflfe](http://www.lancs.ac.uk/lflfe)

those of the curriculum. This has been the central concern for the LfLFE project - how to make the reading and writing students undertake on Further Education courses resonant with their reading and writing in other domains of their lives. This is both in order to enable the development of an education provision based on possibility and achievement rather than deficit and exclusion, and also to challenge aspects of the abstraction and decontextualisation that is part of much of that provision. The privileging of abstraction and decontextualised genres such as the essay position education as irrelevant to people's everyday lives, even as lifelong learning has become an increased requirement within policy (Edwards 2006). Drawing on the data from the project, in this paper we will point to the ways in which viewing literacy as social practice can open up possibilities for pedagogy that challenge some of the central assumptions of dominant discourses.

The paper is in three sections. First, we will outline the approach taken in the LfLFE project: the conceptual underpinnings, the research design and methodology, and the analytical framework. We will then present two case studies of changes in practice that have been undertaken by FE staff in order to draw upon students' everyday literacy practices in the curriculum. Finally, we will discuss the case studies in relation to the overall findings from the research, outlining some of the broad implications for conceptualising learning that arise from researching through the lens of literacy practices.

### **Literacies for learning in Further Education: Conceptual underpinnings**

The *Literacies for Learning in Further Education* research project involves collaboration between two universities – University of Stirling and Lancaster University - and four further education colleges, two in Scotland - Anniesland College in Glasgow and Perth College, and two in England – Lancaster and Morecambe College, and Preston College. A central concern for the project is to understand how the literacy practices required of college life and being a student relate to the wide range of students' literacy practices – the knowledge and capabilities they involve and the texts and modalities they encompass. The research focuses on the use, refinement and diversification of literacy events and practices to enhance learning across the curriculum in further education.

The premise for the project is that the literacy practices of colleges are not always fashioned to maximise the resources people bring to student life, and that students may have more resources to draw upon than is evident to many educators working in colleges. Over the three years of the project, we have been exploring different ways of mobilising students' everyday literacy practices to enhance their learning in eleven curriculum areas in further education. The intention is to achieve a critical understanding of the movement and flows of literacy

practices in people's lives: how literacy practices are ordered and re-ordered, networked, traced or overlapped across domains (home-college, virtual-real, reading-writing) and across social roles in students' lives, and what objects and practices might mediate such mobilisations. The LfLFE project explores the literacy practices that each participant has accumulated during their life-course to date, the literacy practices required by their course of study and, crucially, the potentials of the on-going developmental interaction between these literacies. In short, we explore the beneficial interaction between students' vernacular literacy practices and the literacies required by their college learning.

A range of initiatives are aimed at enhancing the attainment of literacy as part of the agenda for the improvement of 'basic skills', 'key skills', 'core skills', 'core competencies', or 'learning to learn'. These include the government's response to the Tomlinson Review, *Success for All* and the *Skills for Life Strategy* in England, *Higher Still* in Scotland and the competence-based frameworks for National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs). (For discussion of these issues in the Scottish policy context, see J. Smith 2005a.) Embedded in such initiatives is a focus on communication skills, computer literacy, and literacy-dependent transferable skills. These initiatives focus on the induction of people of all ages into at least so-called 'functional' literacy and numeracy.

The LfLFE project seeks to complement and inform practice and policies in relation to these initiatives. However, we do not treat literacy as an autonomous value-free attribute lying within the individual - a set of singular and transferable technical skills which can be taught, measured and tested at a level of competence. Our approach draws upon the New Literacy Studies, which offers a socially situated and constructed view of literacies as multiple, emergent and situated in particular contexts (Barton, *et al.* 2000; see also Barton 1996, Barton and Hamilton 1998, Barton, Gee 2003, Ivanič 998, Papen 2005, Scollon and Scollon 2004). This is what is referred to as a social practices approach to literacy. This approach encourages us to talk differently about how documents get read and written as embedded in the everyday activities of life. It also leads us, like others (Tuomi-Grohn and Engestrom 2003, Eraut 2004), to question a simple view that 'skills' can be 'transferred' unproblematically from context to context. To cross borders between contexts entails a disembedding and recontextualisation of practices, including literacy, which are not fully captured in autonomous models of literacy.

The key concepts in a social practices view of literacy are 'literacy event' and 'literacy practice'. The term 'literacy event' was first used by Heath (1983) to describe observable actions or groups of actions in which written text plays a role. She defined a literacy event as:

'any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretative processes' (Heath 1983: 50). Written language may be relatively constitutive of or ancillary to a literacy event, but is equally of interest whatever its position on the continuum from constitutive to ancillary. Thinking of literacy in terms of 'literacy events' leads researchers to focus not on the literacy 'skills' of individuals but on how written language is used to mediate social life: who is doing what, when, where and how, and what the participants have to say about their purposes, intentions, views of literacy, values, feelings, and reasons for doing what they are doing and for the way they are doing it.

The term 'literacy practices' extends this idea to refer to 'general cultural ways of utilising written language which people draw upon in their lives' (Barton and Hamilton 2000: 7). Each unique event, and what happens in it, is an instantiation of one or more culturally specific 'practices'. Practices are culturally recognisable ways of doing things, in terms of purposes, processes, participants, times, places, technologies and resources (as distinguished in detail in the section on 'Analysing Literacy Practices' below). Such practices have inscribed in them values and beliefs, 'possibilities for self-hood' (identities, subject positions, and potential for agency), conceptions of literacy, intentions and power relations (which may constrain 'possibilities for self-hood' for particular participants). Participation in practices contributes to the reproduction or challenging of such values, beliefs, possibilities for self-hood, and power relations. As such, literacy practices are not static and one literacy event can be invested with multiple values and intentions. This leads us to focus on differences in literacy practices from one context to another, and on the values, knowledge, and expectations which are inscribed in them, and which shape the identities of those who participate in them. Here context can be read at a variety of levels, such as life, college, subject, course, and teaching session.

The LfLFE project builds on a pilot study which found that further education students engaged in a sophisticated and complex variety of literacy practices outside the college which were not mobilised into college-related literacy events (J. Smith 2004). It was this study that led us to see the creativity in people's everyday semiotic practices, to recognise that such literacy practices can become resources for learning in the teaching and assessment associated with attainment in particular subject areas. We thus conceived our task as to support the *border crossing* of literacy practices from the vernacular and informal to act as resources for learning across the curriculum.

### **Research design and methodology**

The project was in three phases. Phase One, between January and July 2004, was an Induction period, in which we recruited university- and college-based researchers to the

project. We also used this phase to explore in breadth the literacy practices required by students in becoming a student in further education. In Phase Two, which ran until July 2005, we examined in depth the literacy practices of students on courses in eleven curriculum areas across the domains of college, work, home and community. Phase Three of the project involved developing and evaluating changes in practice based upon our initial data collection and analysis, to try and establish whether there are ways of mobilising learners' resources in terms of literacy practices to support learning, retention and achievement.

The methodology informing this project was broadly ethnographic, hermeneutic and reflexive. It was ethnographic in that we sought to describe in as much detail as possible through fieldwork the literacy practices required by the study of particular subjects, in becoming a further education student and those that learners manifest in the diverse domains of their lives. We attempted to understand the culture and rituals of further education, and the artefacts and totems through which literacy is mobilised. In order to obtain 'thick description' from the inside rather than merely act as observers from the outside, we engaged further education staff and students as partner members of the research team rather than them being simply respondents. Here our aim was to support participants in becoming ethnographers of their own experience. This resulted in a mixed method approach. Through working with clock-faces to elicit representations of days in students' lives (Satchwell 2005), photo elicitation and icon mapping (Mannion and Miller 2005, Mannion and Ivanič 2007), focus groups and individual interviews, rich and varied data has been collected about literacy practices in the lives of over 100 students. Individual and focus group interviews and observations have been conducted, artefacts collected and changes in practice undertaken and evaluated in order to understand the role of literacy practices in learning across 30 units in eleven Further Education curriculum areas.

Our methodology is hermeneutic in recognising the recursive role of interpretation in the understanding of social practices, and reflexive in that it entails us surfacing our own assumptions and rationales. We do not claim the outcomes of our analysis as 'findings' as the term might be understood in a more positivist paradigm. We present here what we prefer to call 'warrantable understandings': the sense we have made to date of the data as supportable by the evidence we have and the methodology of the project. The analysis is illuminative and capable of inference rather than quantifiable and capable of generalisation.

In undertaking and presenting cases studies, we aim to provide 'the force of example' (Flyvbjerg 2006, p. 228) as a source of understandings. As noted by Flyvbjerg, 'The advantage of the case study is that it can 'close in' on real-life situation and test views directly

in relation to phenomena as they unfold in practice' (ibid., p. 235). In our research we have selected our 32 cases on the principle of 'maximum variation ...to obtain information about the significance of various circumstances for case process and outcome' (ibid., p. 230). While claiming that these case studies point to general understandings about how literacies can act as resources for learning, we also aim to bring out the contextual specificity of these understandings. We show how the factors we have identified play out in particular circumstances, so that readers can see potential for recontextualising the research and its insights in their own contexts. (See also Mannion and Ivanič 2007 and Ivanič and Satchwell 2007 for further discussion of these methodological issues and consequent methods of data collection and analysis.)

### **Analysing literacy practices**

As part of the process of analysis we identified a set of constituents of a literacy practice, as shown in Figure 1. The figure shows how a literacy event or practice is a configuration of factors, each of which can be identified and is open to adjustment and change. Some of these elements are shared with all social practices: the unshaded elements in Figure 1. The elements listed in Figure 1 can be mapped on to the Activity Theory representation of an activity system: in AT, what we are calling 'Purpose(s)' is defined as 'Object/Motive' and 'Outcome'; what we are calling 'Participant(s)' is defined as 'Subject(s)' and, within the extended triangle, 'Community' and 'Division of Labour', and the rest of the elements we identify are encompassed by the AT concept of 'Mediating Means'. The AT concept of 'Rules and Norms' is, we suggest, the interface between 'events' and practices' and hence does not appear in our list of elements which constitute both: rules and norms concern the habituated, culturally recognisable characteristics of all elements in the list, and of relations among them.

	<b>Elements of literacy events and practices</b>	<b>Observable?</b>
1	Purpose(s)	<b>X</b>
2	Participant(s)	<b>Some</b>
3	Activities/Processes,	
4	Feelings	<b>X</b>
5	Space/Place	
6	Time/Timing	<b>?</b>
7	Artefacts	
8	Medium	
9	Genre/Text-type	
10	Mode	

11	Content	
12	Audience inscribed in the text	?
13	Values inscribed in the practice	X
14	Identities inscribed in the practice	X

**Figure 1: Elements of literacy events and practices**

When a social event or practice is textually mediated, as, we suggest, the majority are, many of these elements include literacy-specific characteristics. The ‘participants’ include the readers and the writers of the texts which pertain to the social practice: often but not always separated in time and/or space. The activities and processes include the semiotic processes of reading, writing, ‘intersemiotic’ meaning-making through the use of multiple semiotic modes, and talk around texts. When a social practice is a ‘literacy practice’, the ‘artefacts’ (in AT terms, the Mediating Means) which mediate social action include literacy artefacts: tools, technologies, materials and resources.

In addition, there are elements which are specific to a literacy event or practice: those shaded grey in Figure 1. Literacy artefacts, when studied in detail, can be analysed in terms of the communicative media that are being carried by them, the ‘genres’ of the text(s), the mode, and the content of the communication. Examples of ‘media’ are film, hypertext, newspaper, synchronous communication – each of which can be carried by different artefacts. The term ‘genre’ (that is ‘text-type’) refers to such things as advertisement, narrative, lab. report. The ‘modes of communication’ are verbal, visual, aural, kinaesthetic and – less relevant to our study: tactile and olfactory. ‘Content’ refers to the subject-matter of the communication, the possibilities for which are infinite. Finally, there is a special category of ‘participant’ in a literacy event: the ‘audience’ or reader(s) that are inscribed in the text(s). This is particularly relevant when analysing a writing event, since the ‘audience’ may not be present in the event itself. In terms of AT, this is a substantial expansion and specification of the detail encompassed by the concept of Mediating Means.

Of these, some are observable when instantiated in an event, and open to investigation through observation, while others (marked X in the ‘Observable?’ Column in Figure 1) are invisible, and only accessible through interview and inference (for discussion of the distinction between the visible and non-visible elements of literacy events and practices, see Hamilton 2000 pp 17 – 18). ‘Values’ and ‘Identities’ inscribed in the practice are more pervasive elements, associated and connected with one or more of distinct elements listed above.

While each of the elements in Figure 1 is a constituent part of a culturally recognisable literacy practice such as preparing a meal, there are also 'micro' practices supported by each element. So, for example, in relation to the 'time' element, some people's practice might be to read a recipe slowly, before going to do the shopping for ingredients for the dish, whereas other people's practice might be to reach for a recipe book after having already cut up an onion. Our analysis has shown that, in addition to the insight made by Actor-Network Theory that material objects can act as 'boundary objects', crossing borders between social domains, so can practices associated with any one of the elements listed in Figure 1 be mobilised across such borders.

This framework began to emerge from the analysis of the literacy practices in the students' everyday lives in Phase Two of the project. It was then refined and developed in Phase Three during the design, implementation and evaluation of the changes in practice. In the rest of the paper we use it to reveal the detail of what we mean by 'harnessing the abundance of literacy'.

### **Comparing literacy practices across contexts**

While there is a pervasive educational discourse in which students' literacy practices outside college are treated as either non-existent or detrimental to learning, our research indicates that they are abundant, and can be embraced as positive resources for students' success on their courses. Barton (2001) and D. Smith (1990) have argued that we live in an increasingly 'textually mediated world' in which 'the phenomenon of textually mediated communication, action and social relations...has transformed our relations to language, meaning and each other' (D. Smith 1990, p. 209-211). The research in Phase Two of the LfLFE project revealed the extent to which the lives of people who attend Further Education courses are textually mediated across a range of domains (see, for example, J. Smith 2005b, Smith and Edwards 2004, Smith and Anderson 2005, Fowler forthcoming, Fowler and Edwards forthcoming). Through our activities and interviews with students about the reading and writing they do in their everyday lives, we built up understandings of their preferred and valued practices, and of the characteristics which made them so. In addition, through observations of lessons, comprehensive collections of texts used, and interviews with students and staff, we started to understand the literacy practices required by units in the curriculum areas students were studying. Using the framework introduced above to examine students' literacy practices shows the diversity and complexity of what they can do as active participants in a textually mediated social world - very different from the picture obtained by standardised tests of literacy skills.



An example of a literacy practice valued by many students was communicating by MSN Messenger. The framework outlined above provides a way of characterising this practice so as to show its uniqueness and to enable comparison with other practices. Typically this literacy practice involves more than one *participant*, sometimes physically side-by-side, communicating with one or more other people – typically people they know in real life. The distinction between *writers* and *readers* which is typical of more traditional literacy practices is broken down: the *activity* involves both reading and writing, typing on a keyboard, looking at a screen, reading content as it appears, and responding. The *purpose* is primarily to maintain friendship groups, i.e. it has a phatic rather than referential function; hence the *content* relates to the immediate shared interests of the participants. The *place* in which it is carried out is normally someone's home – access to MSN is restricted in colleges, while the *space* in which the communication takes place could be described as virtual. Separation in *time* between writing and reading is quite minimal, but greater than in face to face interaction. Both the *time* and the *timing* or duration of the activity is determined by the individuals involved, and depends on their participation in other areas of life – eating, sleeping, going out, etc. The activity is *multimodal* in that it is likely to include sound, colour, pictures, symbols, as well as written words, and *multimedia*, involving multiple affordances of the computer, which is the main *artefact* employed. The *genre* is one that cannot be said to exist in other areas of life, as it has characteristics of both speech and writing, is co-constructed in real time, includes sound effects and movement (e.g. “nudges”) and so on (see Crystal 2001). The content is generated by the participants: although they can use pre-designed ingredients such as smiley or sad faces, ultimately the communicative message exists only when created by and for themselves. Crucially, the practice of communicating by MSN Messenger is one carried out through choice. For the participants, the *value* of the activity lies in its purpose (maintaining friendship) and also the establishment or maintenance of *identity* as part of that group.

From this description, we can see that communicating by MSN Messenger is very different from the literacy practice of reading a novel: another literacy practice which, surprisingly to some, many students also do out of choice. Reading a novel involves an artefact and text-type which is pre-existing with content provided by a distant party through the medium of paper; it is an established genre, usually without pictures or colour, in a linear format. The practice is normally be carried out alone, although many people discuss novels they are reading, or read out sections to others, creating an audience other than just the reader. The place and time of the activity is chosen by individuals in relation to the other factors in their lives, but not dependent also on the availability of friends.

Data such as this revealed an extensive landscape of literacy practices in which students participated, and that literacy practices in students' everyday lives tend to have the characteristics listed in Figure 2.

- Shared, collaborative and interactive
- Clear audience
- Purposeful
- Self-determined in terms of, for example, activity, time and place
- Multi-media, i.e. involving variety, choice and/or combination of media (paper and electronic)
- Multi-modal, i.e. involving variety, choice and/or combination of modes (language, symbols, pictures, colour, and/or sound)
- Non-linear, i.e. involving complex, varied reading paths
- Generative, i.e. involving meaning-making, creativity
- Owned, i.e. the person feels a sense of ownership for the practice
- Agentic, i.e. involving an active role for the person

**Figure 2: Characteristics of students' preferred literacy practices**

Literacy practices which are required for the completion of college courses often had very different characteristics. For example, the writing of an assignment for a Travel and Tourism Level 3 course in England requires students to work alone, producing text in a linear format, using academic conventions such as referencing and bibliographies, and the activity involves reformulating and presenting information previously provided. The reader(s) for the activity is ambiguous, as different students may perceive different readers, such as the tutor, the External Verifier, or the Awarding Body. Students may view these audiences positively (for example they may like their tutor) or negatively (they may see the External Verifier as critical and demanding). Crucially, the students are unlikely to be absolutely clear about what their reader wants. The purpose may be perceived as equally ambiguous: it has a referential rather than phatic function, but the information is already known by the reader(s). Therefore it has the quality of a test, designed to establish whether the writer knows what the reader knows, but also requiring the writer to produce the information in a standard format in a specified number of words. The writing of the assignment may be carried out either at college or at home, but college sessions are often also devoted to the task, and a deadline is specified. (For further examples and discussion of pedagogic literacy practices on a wide range of

courses see Edwards and Smith 2005, Miller and Satchwell 2006, Miller et al. 2007, Satchwell 2007, Ivanič and Satchwell forthcoming)

The differences identified here may partly be attributed to the preoccupation within educational institutions with assessment and accreditation. Many of the literacy practices we observed, and among these, the majority of the writing practices were focused exclusively on the demonstration of knowledge, understanding and competence, or on the completion of log books to provide evidence of what had been learned. Whatever the reasons for these differences, the research showed that many students were disaffected by the reading and writing required of them, and were not identifying with their purposes, content or any other aspects of these practices. When asked to consider how the findings of the research might inform changes in practice to address these issues, there was a feeling amongst some of the college-based researchers that they are constrained by factors beyond their control. These include the timetable, the availability of resources in the classroom, the examining body's assessment criteria, the format of the NVQ log book, the demands on tutors' time, the lack of desk space in a staff room, and so on. All of these are legitimate and well-founded concerns within many Further Education colleges, and a by-product of our research indicates the frequency, extent and impact of some of these constraints. However, while someone who subscribes to a view of literacy as something that can be tested and quantified might expect to see included in this list of restrictions, 'the literacy levels of the students', we would argue that it is the vernacular literacies of the students that can also provide a resource to succeed on their courses.

Having established some of the differences between literacy practices preferred by students and those required by their courses, the project team investigated ways of harnessing the characteristics of the students' preferred literacy practices to enhance their learning opportunities on their college courses. In Phase 3 of the project, changes in practice were trialled to see if characteristics of everyday practices could be drawn upon or replicated in order to provide students with better access to the curriculum.

### **Harnessing literacies for learning: two case studies**

We now discuss two case studies to illustrate how these new ways of thinking about literacy in the classroom became realised. Seeing their classrooms as textually mediated communicative spaces provided possibilities for both students and tutors to bring about change. The changes in practice we describe here are attempts transform the everyday students' literacy practices into the stuff of Further Education qualifications: to make small changes in the roles of reading

and writing in learning and demonstrating knowledge, understanding and competence. The examples will then be used as a basis for presenting the overall understandings reached through the project.

### ***Harnessing literacies for learning on a Travel & Tourism course***

Our first example of a course on which the literacy practices were in need of change is the 'Tourist Destinations' unit on an English Level 3 BTEC National Diploma in Travel & Tourism, which was described as 'dry', 'academic', 'boring' by tutors and students alike. David, the tutor who worked with the project team, said:

"I do think it's a bit of a dull unit though, if I'm honest, the fact that it is academic and it is quite thorough means that it's not going to be their favourite unit. For example at the same time they were doing a unit on repping, there's a lot of standing up and taking them out on trips, doing welcome meetings which was obviously more fun and they prefer that."

The students also admitted they didn't enjoy the written part of the course "like big assignments - they bore me a bit", and would prefer "more active stuff". They all said they would prefer to do a PowerPoint presentation. One said, "It would be easier because you don't have to go into details if you're doing PowerPoint." They also thought "you can talk a lot faster than what you can write". Another student added that he would prefer doing "visual presentations as well like pictures and writing on like a big piece of paper", in comparison with writing, even on a computer, which he described as "Just black and white isn't it." The students admitted that, although they could see the relevance of the assignments, they did not always think about that when they received another one. One said, "No you just think about getting it done."

When we first encountered the course, the students were required to write a series of three reports, each about tourist destinations. The two tutors involved in teaching the course both thought that the repetition that seemed to be required was unhelpful and put students off:

"they start to lose interest because they don't see the relevance of ... I mean they can probably see the relevance of doing like the first three destinations, and provided that covers all the possible transport routes you could have. Then they would feel well why do another six on top of that?"

However, the External Verifier would require this “so you’ve got to do it - there’s no flexibility on that.” Although the content of the course was specified by the Awarding Body, it was possible for material to be presented in different ways. Students indicated they preferred ‘visual’ and active work – characteristics of literacies in the other domains of their lives - and preferred talking to writing. Sarah wanted to give them variety and to make it interesting, but she acknowledged that for the students, ‘interesting’ on its own was not sufficient: the activity also had to have a clear purpose and relevance – again, characteristics of their preferred literacy practices in the rest of their lives. For students looking to a future in the tourism industry Sarah thought that the production of exhibitions and talks using PowerPoint would be nearer to the types of literacy practice that would be required in a job.

After consideration of these factors Sarah decided that, as a change in practice for this unit, she would give them a choice of producing a PowerPoint, an exhibition, or a report. These activities would tap into the resources of students whose preferred everyday literacy practices tended to be collaborative, multimodal, generative, non-linear, using multimedia, and determined by their own choice. In activities such as a presentation or an exhibition, there is a real audience, in addition to the assumed or imagined audience of the External Verifier or the Awarding Body. The exhibition was open to other members of staff and their students at a specified time and date, which, although perceived as “a bit embarrassing” by the tourism students, provided a focus and purpose for their work. Sitting or standing by their own exhibition also gave the students a real sense of ownership of their work, and their attention to this audience was notable in the beautifully presented leaflets, posters and models.

For the presentation, it was evident that, although the students had said they preferred talking to writing and they did not like writing extended texts, they still produced slides with substantial amounts of text, and wrote scripts or copious notes for themselves. This indicates that students differentiate between ‘writing’ an essay and producing a PowerPoint presentation, a distinction that has arisen in interviews with other students who see the latter as being not just “doing a piece of writing”, but engaging in “a publishing exercise” or “design work”. When the writing is part and parcel of an activity with which they identify, the clarity of the purpose is heightened and the onerousness diminished. Students we spoke to all preferred producing a PowerPoint to writing an essay, seeing it as “more visual” and “less boring”.

### ***Harnessing literacies for learning on a Multimedia course***

Our second example is the ‘*Introducing the Internet*’ unit on a Scottish SCQF Level 7 HNC Multimedia course taught by Martin. In Phase 2 of the research Martin and four of his HNC students worked together to explore the students’ everyday literacy practices. During this

phase of data collection the tutor simultaneously collected all the literacy artefacts students had to deal with inside the classroom. Adopting this approach allowed Martin and his students to build a picture of the literacy demands within the classroom and contrast them with the students' home-related literacy practices. For the first time, Martin had looked directly into his students' home literacy lives and although he previously thought he had known his students well, he had not appreciated the sheer abundance of practices the students engaged with at home.

What was more surprising for him was the restrictive and narrow set of practices with which they worked in his classroom. A difference between the perceived and the enacted curriculum became apparent. He had not appreciated that despite working in a multimedia classroom, his students spent a lot of their classroom-based time dealing with linear, one dimensional, paper-based text in an individualised way. When Martin wanted to introduce a new topic, he asked the students to sit around a desk in the centre of the room away from the 'distraction' of their PCs. He gave out comprehensive handouts, step by step tutorial guides and screen dumps. From the observations we saw that the students listened, rarely taking any notes of their own. They later explained that they did not take notes because they knew their teacher would give them very full handouts. The assignments for assessment were mainly essays, short answers to questions or brief reports which students were expected to complete on their own. Other than to pass an assessment it was unclear what the purpose of the assessment was or who the intended audience was. The performance criteria were so many and complex that students often had to remediate their work because they had missed an important point from their answer. Simultaneously, there were word restrictions on many of their essays which seemed to them bizarre. Because of internal and external verification procedures, Martin felt unable to change these assessments.

In contrast, in focus groups students said that they learned from being actively involved and generating their own notes rather than reading full handouts which were given to them. They tended to switch off in lessons which involved going systematically through a PowerPoint presentation or set of handouts. They told us that at home if they had a new piece of software to learn or a new game they wanted to master, they preferred to work in a collaborative and non-linear way. They went to chatrooms and forums to 'speak' with others who were learning the same game or software. They MSN'd friends, shared cheats, consulted magazines, e-zines, textbooks. They worked through on-line tutorials but not step by step. They liked to develop their own reading paths through the material and make mistakes as they went along, often switching between screens and between screen and paper. Sometimes they guessed what to do and skipped bits. Other times they read through quickly to get a gist and then tried

to work out the bits in between. Many of them wrote their own tutorials and shared them with classmates. Each of their activities had a clear purpose, clear audience and was carried out because they wanted to do it. They were likely to be involved in several tasks at the same time, moving from msn chat, emailing a distant relative, playing a game and working on a college assignment.

As a result of analysis and through discussion with his fellow practitioner researchers Martin chose to introduce a change of practice which he felt would be more resonant with the students' preferred literacy lives. (For more discussion of the nuances of the metaphor of 'resonance' we are using here, see Mannion 2006, Smith and Mannion 2007). Martin felt his refreshed understandings of students' literacy practices of joining forums, writing blogs, developing websites and entering chat-rooms, if extended into the college, could be a motivating force. Martin chose to ask his students to produce a CD of promotional and teaching material for the HNC programme. He thought that this would be an ideal way to change his practice in the directions he had identified without causing an increase in workload for the students. In addition when the students had produced the CD, he would be able to use it as an innovation with the following year's students. He felt on-line materials would allow for a more flexible approach to reading. The students were engaged in a generative activity, designing and producing a CD which is multimodal, using multimedia. They had to work together as a group and take ownership of the development of the CD. The intended audience was the new intake of students. The purpose was to help new students understand the course and to have access to materials in a non-paper-based format.

We would love to report that the classroom was transformed into a literacy wonderland. But this is no fairytale. The students did report preferring to work collaboratively. They enjoyed managing their own time, working flexibly - sometimes at home, sometimes at college, and managing their tasks in a way which allowed them to carry out lots of tasks concurrently. To communicate with one another as much as possible, one of them took out an MSN account for the first time. They preferred working with on-line materials rather than paper-based ones. They preferred being actively involved in creating something rather than listening to a presentation. They had wanted to make something they could be proud of and show to potential employers. However for the students one major drawback was they did not choose the content of the CD, nor did they value the purpose of the CD. They all felt this was more something to help Martin rather than themselves. Martin acknowledges that had the students been given some choice, this might not have been a problem and may have helped to capture the attention of the whole class. Like most of our practitioner researchers he recognises that

adopting a social practices approach within his classroom is challenging, and demands constant re-thinking.

Martin identified other challenges which he hoped to address with other groups of students. One of these was that the students could not simply transfer paper-based materials onto a CD ROM. Martin anticipated that this would involve the students making changes to the materials to suit the medium. However, this is an additional literacy demand which Martin did not make explicit to the students and had not realised that he needed to prepare them for. Martin assumed that the students would be able to change the text from a paper-based format to a multimedia format with ease. The students themselves were aware that the texts they were putting onto their CD were not meant for multimedia use but said they did not have the time or inclination to make the changes. With hindsight Martin agreed that this could be avoided if the content of the CD ROM was something the students valued and had chosen to do rather than been given to do.

### **Harnessing literacies for learning: understandings emerging from the case studies**

The examples above show how two tutors in very different curriculum areas used the understandings they had gained through involvement in the project to experiment with changes in practice which would harness characteristics of students' home literacy practices to improve their experiences of and success with learning. Our analysis of changes in practices implemented in Phase Three across all 30 courses on the project has led us to identify four interrelated concepts which provide a theoretical basis for understanding literacies for learning: design, contextualisation, identification and resonance. Here we explain each, with reference to the two case studies in the previous section.

#### ***Design***

Our research has revealed the inadequacy of focusing only on the *cognitive* (theory) and *practical* (practice) aspects of learning and provided evidence that there is a third aspect which is related to the other two: the *communicative* (literacy/discourse) aspect. Learning involves not only thinking and interacting, but also as meaning-making. Researchers in The New London Group (1996) have proposed the concept of 'design' as core to pedagogy (see also Cope and Kalantzis 2000, Kress 2003). Our case studies show how this factor plays out in practice, and how explicit attention to and awareness of the 'design' aspects of learning can lead to changes in practice which benefit learners. For example, on the *Travel and Tourism* course the changes in practice emphasised meaning-making by presenting the task as one of communicating the content to a specified audience, rather than as an 'assignment'. However,



on the *Multimedia* course the students saw the task as fulfilling the course criteria rather than the production of an artefact which they would find useful in their own future. This contributed to them paying less attention to the design element of the activity, neglecting to engage with the requirement to re-format the materials to be placed onto the CD.

### **Contextualisation**

The research has drawn attention to the importance of paying attention to the contexts and purposes for reading and writing. The literacy-related aspects of social practices interface with and co-emerge with other aspects of context, as summarised in Figure 1. By recognising and distinguishing the elements listed in Figure 1, learners, teachers and researchers can compare and contrast literacies across contexts. Recognition of the elements which constitute contextual opens up the opportunity for an infinite variety of small changes in practice which have the potential to enhance learning. The ongoing contextualisation of literacies for learning can be subtly reshaped by calibrating the elements identified in Figure 1. For example, on the *Travel and Tourism* course the tutor reviewed the purposes, the activities, the text types, the audience, the modes and media, and fine-tuned them in order to change the way in which the literacies were contextualised. The *Multimedia* course tutor also analysed the literacy practices on his course, adjusting particularly the purposes, modes of participation, artefacts, and media for communication. However, the activity was not contextualized in a way which was meaningful to the students themselves: ultimately it was serving the tutor's purposes rather than their own.

### **Identification**

The research has pinpointed the centrality of identification in affecting engagement in literacy practices (see especially Ivanič 2007). When students see literacy practices to be associated with their sense of who they are or who they want to become, they participate in them wholeheartedly. By contrast, if students associate reading and writing practices with identities which they resist, they are unlikely to engage in them. Providing students with opportunities to identify with the 'selves' held out by reading and writing activities emerged as a key to harnessing the potential of literacies to enhance learning. For example, the *Travel and Tourism* students identified with the roles inscribed in the tasks of making a Powerpoint presentation and an exhibition to inform other students and members of staff about tourist destinations, whereas the *Multimedia students* did not identify with the role of informing future students about the course.

### **Resonance**

Student learning can be supported by increasing the resonance between literacies for learning and vernacular literacies. The metaphor of resonance is taken from the realm of music and emerged from our engagement with music as one of the subject areas we examined (for elaboration on this concept, see Mannion 2006, Goodman, Mannion and Brzeski 2007). For a musical note to resonate, it will have aspects of consonance and dissonance within it i.e. things that relate to each other and things that do not. In other words, there is no one-to-one relationship, but a play of similarities and differences which produce an overall resonant effect. In relation to literacy practices this means fine-tuning pedagogic literacy practices so that they are more resonant with the characteristics listed in Figure 2. However, there does not need to be a simple one-to-one relationship between the dimensions, aspects or preferences of students' vernacular literacies and those in college. There can be harmonious and discordant parts to the overall resonance that can enable literacies to serve as a resource within the curriculum. To establish resonance then is not to apply a formula to teaching and learning, but to use one's judgement in the formulation of approaches that are evaluated on an ongoing basis for the work they do. For example, the literacies on the revised version of the *Travel and Tourism* course were largely consonant with the characteristics listed in Figure 2, thus achieving a resonance between the students' vernacular practices and those on the course, resulting in the literacy practices successfully supporting students' learning. While the literacy practices on the revised *Multimedia* course example also concurred with many of the characteristics in Figure 2, crucial elements were missing. The aspects appreciated by the students interviewed were those which resonate with their everyday literacy practices; but aspects relating to the students' ownership and agency were less well catered for. The students did not feel ownership of the activity because they felt it was more for the tutor than for themselves; they did not identify with the content of the CD-ROM, even though they appreciated the generative, 'doing' part of the task.

### **Concluding comments**

Before becoming involved in the LfLFE project, most of the college-based researchers would not have given much consideration to literacy in their classrooms, other than at the level of discussion of students' skills or lack of them. Their primary concern was with the delivery of the content of their programmes within a tight timeframe. They used their new understandings of literacy as a social practice to create the potential to transform the learning opportunities within their classrooms. The changes which they implemented were varied and situated within the context of their classroom and were influenced by the students' home related literacy practices. The process of recontextualising this experience into other curriculum areas is not straightforward. A successful change practice in one context may not work in another:

changes in practice should be situated in time and place, according to the participants and the subject-matter. Even on the same course with the same tutor it may be necessary to ‘think it out again’ in the following year with a different group of students. A related factor is that something which constitutes a change for one tutor might be another tutor’s established practice: teachers are at different places on a continuum in their development as professionals.

While it may be tempting for tutors to continue along the same path as has been trod years previously, we are suggesting that teaching could respond to changes in the factors contributing to the context, and that paths to the same end can be multiple, varied and not always predictable. Some of the factors contributing to a classroom context are students’ literacy practices outside of college. While our research was situated firmly within the contexts of thirty specific Further Education courses, we believe that the insights emerging from it are applicable not just across the whole of the FE curriculum, but to literacies for learning in all sectors of educational provision.

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